

Screenwriters. On Screenwriting.

The BAFTA and BFI Screenwriters' Lecture Series in association with The JJ Charitable Trust

Scott Frank

1 October 2012 at BFI Southbank

Scott Frank: In my hotel room, the room service menu is in a binder just like this one, and when I got here tonight, I was worried that I'd brought that with me instead of this speech. And no matter how good you are, it's very difficult to riff on boiled eggs and soldiers for an hour.

Thank you, thank you for having me. I wish we were doing this back in 1984, when I was 24 years old and just beginning my career, because back then I knew everything. But somehow since then I seem to have forgotten it all. So tonight, with that in mind, I thought what I'd do is share with you the few things that I still just barely remember. The things that still work for me, or still mean something to me. I do really see this as a really selfish way to help me preserve what's left, or at the very least jog my memory so that I can maybe remember why I once loved writing movies so much. Of course, it's hard to love anything after 28 years without the benefit of a little therapy. Couples counselling, rekindling of the spark, as it were. If my career is like my marriage, then, tonight is date night. A little time away. A little alone time for just my work and me. So that at the end of the evening, when I go back home and sit at my desk, maybe I'll get lucky.

And again, because this is a purely selfish exercise, I won't try to teach you anything, so much as recount a few things that I've picked up along the way. As you're about to see, I'm not the person to be teaching anyone anything. And I know that writers have stood up here at podiums like this one, and declared their hatred for all things craft, and then there are writers - other writers - who delight in the presentation of tips and shortcuts, and the discussion of how they did this or how they did that. The writers who blog. I probably fall somewhere in the middle. I'm not a big believer in writing tips, because when you get down to it, it's all so personal, and whenever someone gives me a tip, it just makes me feel like I've been doing it all wrong. And since my default position, as you're about to see, is the deep belief in my own lack of ability, it's a dangerous thing for me to hear, what others are

doing or how they've been doing it. I am, as they say, highly suggestible, or as my father once described me, a couch personality, in that I bear the imprint of the last asshole who sat on me. Having said that, I do have my own, ultra-secret, until this evening, ultra-secret list of, I guess, what I'd have to call 'The Rules'; rules that are really just for me; rules that I follow, or try to follow, or used to follow. And since the point of flying me over here, and putting me up in a nice hotel, is so that I can impart something other than fear and self-loathing, I feel like I should maybe share a few of these with you. I should give you something for your ten pounds. And for those of you who got in here for free, well, certainly tonight you'll get your money's worth.

Now, as I said, these secret rules have been just for me, and they're not even rules so much as cautions or common sense. I certainly don't pretend that they'll work for everyone. In fact, their usefulness to anyone, including me, is most likely negligible at best. For we all know, rules are something to cling to when ideas fail. So with that caveat, I will throughout our little chat throw out these little bits of gained experience disguised as wisdom. And feel free to do with them what you will, just so long as you remember I don't really stand by any of them. And tonight remember one other thing, and this is probably the most important thing of all. Remember, I really don't know what I'm talking about. Seriously. I'm a bit of a hack, and I always have been. This is true. My scripts have not altered anyone's thinking, have certainly not led to any discussion or debate of any sort, have not led to any refashioning of the aesthetic of cinema. I'm not known for, say, my sense of irony, or my great ability to limb a political idea. David Thomson will never give me so much as a sentence. And no critic, to my knowledge, has ever used the adjective 'Frankesque'. Someday, hopefully far in the future, when someone stumbles on my obituary, they will be struck by the fact that the same nitwit who wrote *Minority Report* also wrote *Marley & Me*. Certainly, they will wonder, how is such a thing possible?

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Once upon a time, back when I knew everything, I would have generously called myself a 'writer's writer'. But now, in reality, I know that I'm really just a very lucky guy, who happened to accept a lot of writing jobs. And this is something we should talk about, why we write what we write. How is it that frequently the things that we think are going to be meaningful, that are going to win awards, and become significant in the cinematic pantheon, turn out so shitty. Meanwhile, the things we do just because they were handy, or we simply needed the money, turned out to be the thing that changes our lives? I wrote *Out of Sight* because I had three kids living in the same bedroom, and I needed a bigger house, and that was the job that was dangled in front of me. I had no aspiration beyond the desire to have my own bathroom. *Out of Sight* remains, for me, my favourite and the single most satisfying experience I've had in 28 years of writing screenplays. I was even nominated for an Oscar. I say this not to ham-handedly drop in the fact that I was nominated for an Oscar. After all, you've had several actual winners up here before. No, I mention it only because why you do something doesn't necessarily matter. How you do it is everything. Maybe the only thing. At least I tell myself that. We spend far too much time agonising over the 'why'. We are told, by people like me who stand up here at podiums like this one, to only write this kind of movie or that kind of movie, and stupidly we believe these people. We begin, right at the beginning by judging ourselves. We are told to write only things that are emotionally honest or true or have some socio-political content or something with depth or whatever. What if we have no depth? What if we just like robot movies?

I mean, I guess the answer would be to write a robot movie that's emotionally honest. To try and write a really good one. But who sets out to write a bad movie? Let me tell you something. I say this from experience. The bad movies are just as hard to write as the good ones. And the more one works, the more one's experience and body of work become factors in how and what we

choose to do. Our decision-making matrix changes as we grow, as we fail, and most detrimentally, as we succeed. What happens in our business and ever since someone like Lorenzo de Medici, it is a business, a business that at its best strives to make lasting art, and at its worst makes really good posters - what happens in our business is that, with success and especially awards, film-makers often develop a case of what I like to call 'the importance'. All of a sudden, they feel the world watching them, waiting for them to decide. And every film they make from that point on must be important. Some time ago, an Academy Award-winning director was thinking about directing a script of mine, let's call him John Smith. And as I sat and listened as he was debating with himself over the phone about whether or not to do it, he said something incredible to me. He said, 'I have to be careful, Scott. I have to think about what would John Smith do?' Of course, my immediate response should have been 'well, John Smith certainly wouldn't think of himself in the third person'. But I was too stunned by this bald declaration of just how important he thought he'd become. It was all about making the right move, not the right movie. And nothing kills a career faster than an obsession with what's important, with what will keep the awards flowing. Thankfully, I don't have this problem.

So I caution us all against taking the argument for this movie or that movie too seriously. In the past few years, my two favourite films have been *The Town* and *A Separation*. One is about bank robbers in Boston; the other is about everything else. And nothing links these two films in my mind other than they're both really well done. Both achieve what they set out to achieve. Both are really well made, well told, cinematic. So one of my rules is; it's OK to write something for the money, it's OK to write something just because you want to. The writing process is hard enough without the added burden of having to locate your movie ahead of time in some arbitrary historical context.

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So please go ahead and write your robot movie; or the superhero movie. Or whatever movie you want to. Just don't write it because you think I or anyone else is waiting for you to do it. All right, we got that out of the way. Let's move on.

I have always been obsessed with the way movies open, and I don't mean the opening weekend, I mean the opening scene. The first scene in the movie, I collect them. So, before we go on, if you'll indulge me, we're going to watch in a minute or two the opening scene from *Dog Day Afternoon*, written by the great Frank Pierson, who we lost this year. To me, this is the perfect opening scene to a perfect movie, written during the 13 year time span when most or all of my favourite movies were written, 1962 to about 1975. Most important of all, this was the movie that made me want to write movies. I was 14 years old the year it came out. It was R rated, which meant that I had to have my mom buy me a ticket, and I had to sneak into the theatre to watch it. Most importantly for our purposes, this is one of the ballsiest scripts ever written. It's a movie that starts out as a movie about a couple of hapless bank robbers, and evolves into a movie that becomes about, among other things, how love drives us all insane. There is no score, no music at all beyond the Elton John over the opening credits. It's all about the words. And in five minutes, you fall in love with these words, and with everyone you see. So, if you'll just let me, let's just have a quick look at the first few minutes of *Dog Day Afternoon*.

[Clip from *Dog Day Afternoon*]

There's a great moment, where he opens the briefcase, and his gun's inside the briefcase, and the manager has the best reaction ever-; he puts the cap back on his pen. I love that. I think a lot about these opening scenes, because contained within them you can see so much promise. The beginning of a movie automatically excites me. And in that way, I think that openings are better than movie trailers. In fact, if you notice, studios now post the opening five, ten minutes of their movie in lieu of, or to augment

their movie trailers. I don't watch a movie for the first time if I've missed the opening. And unless you're at a Hollywood premiere, the opening scene is the only part of the movie you watch full of nothing but good faith. I have no idea how to write them. They take me forever, and I can't move forward until I've written my opening scene. I spend more time on the opening than any scene in the script by far. I'll stall; I'll literally take months writing my opening. I'll take notes, I'll do research - do anything other than actually start writing, because I need to know exactly what it is I'm going to be fading in on. I can't begin until I know that. What is that first line of dialogue? Is it over black? I do that a lot, I have someone say something, then fade in. I don't know why, I just have, it's a way to trick myself that I've done something good. I just like the way it looks on the page, starting with dialogue rather than description.

The novelist Elmore Leonard said 'never begin a book with weather', and, by the same token, I guess this is another rule I have for myself: never begin a screenplay with set design. There's nothing worse than opening a script, only to be confronted by a page, or worse, pages of description - usually of somebody's bedroom! The person in it is usually hung-over, or late for work, or in high school, or all three. It's the room that gets all the attention: the clock radio, the posters, the family photos. Really, who gives a shit? It's not to say that we can't describe anything in our scripts, but I try, myself, whenever possible, to punt, to do it later, to do it on the fly, when I absolutely have to. If the clock radio, or the lamp, whatever, is so important, I have someone comment on how dark it's getting, and then turn it on, or better yet knock it over. I don't know, this is a lame example. But I hate to tell anybody exactly how to write. But I also hate reading that stuff. I want story! I want to get hooked! Or, at the very least, interested. And no one has ever hooked me with a description of furniture. I honestly don't know what the good ingredients for a good opening scene are. The possibilities are infinite. The first scene in *The Godfather* is just as arresting to me as the first scene in *Boogie*

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Nights, or *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. I could watch the opening scene of *Inglourious Basterds* every day for the rest of my life. *Jaws*, *Patton*, they're all different. But when I've read those scripts, and I've read all of them, I couldn't help but notice that they don't spend much time at the top describing rooms or set design or backgrounds. They start with the story; they start immediately telling the story. One of the things I loved about the opening of *Dog Day Afternoon* was that it was very low-tech, the thieves weren't organised, they didn't wear masks, no one was timing anything, no alarms had to be breached - they just walked in and fumbled their way through. And, of course, we also got to know these guys in the first two minutes of the movie. We didn't care about what the bank looked like, we didn't care where the plants were; we didn't care about anything. But we knew these guys. Of course, I ripped this off in *Out of Sight*. I took a scene that was buried somewhere in the middle of the book, and thought that it might make a decent opening, but it also changed the story a bit, it made the movie about him, the bank robber, and not about her, the federal marshal that's chasing him. The book was about her, and she was a great character, but she didn't really change much. She ended up in the same place as she started. But Jack Foley, George Clooney's character, was much more interesting to me. He was much sadder. Everything he did was about the road not taken. And this little throwaway mention of a bank robbery in the middle of the book, seemed to hint at that, and I liked it. And I thought that was a great way to open the movie, even though I knew I would be borrowing heavily from Frank Pierson, and also maybe a little bit from *Shampoo*, but we can talk about that later. Anyway, just take a look at this opening. It's not long, I promise.

[Clip from *Out of Sight*]

A woman at the first test screening we had raised her hand, she was about 60 years old, and she said 'George Clooney could rob my bank any time'. As with everything I've ever done, I got a lot of help on this script, first from the producers,

Jersey Films - Stacey Sher, Danny DeVito, Michael Shamberg, they're amazing people - but then the director, Steven Soderbergh, and I spent a couple of weeks going over the script, literally reading every scene out loud to each other, and coming up with more dialogue and a lot more scenes. There's no doubt in my mind that it all got a lot better during that time, and I mention this because I'm trying to figure out an elegant way to segue into my next section here, talking about collaboration, because more than any other form of writing, screenwriting, for better or for worse, is collaborative. And the truth is, it's a drag sometimes for us to work with other people. It's tough for anyone spending all of this time and blood on this script to then go into a room and listen to a studio executive take your script apart, while various low-level functionaries take notes. Notes that you know when you receive them will begin with something like 'while we like much of what you've done here', and then go downhill from there. It's hard to listen and it's hard not to be defensive, especially when, more and more often, the notes we get have nothing to do with deepening story and character, but with making it more marketable.

Here's a note I got not too long ago: 'If you could change this action sequence from night to day, it would read better in the TV spots'. Here's another one: 'we don't like our leading men to have beards, please don't mention any facial hair in your description. Our concern is that once the actor reads it, he'll become fixated'. Again, these are actual notes that I've gotten. My all-time favourite was 'this script needs to have a bit more vitamins and minerals'. I don't even know what that means. So, yes, collaboration, it's tough for me or anyone to go into a room and defend our work. I spend so much time; do so many drafts for myself or my producers, before I ever turn it into the studio. It's so hard to hear, let alone accept, that I still have to do more work. Also, as I mentioned earlier, I'm very suggestible, so I tend to agree with everything I hear - at least at first. I'm a people pleaser, the quintessential 'good boy'. I just want everyone to be happy. I want

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everyone in the room to say what a nice person I am when I leave. I want to keep working.

This is why I have this next rule, and that is: invariably, the second draft will be worse than the first draft. Be ready for it, don't panic, but it will reek. I get all this input and I think 'yes, I can do that, that's a good idea, too! No beard, lots of daylight, more vitamins. I can do all of that and still preserve my original intent!' Wrong. As the saying goes, if you try to please everyone, you please no one. What happens is I do this draft; I listen to this person, or that person. I rewrite for an actor who doesn't commit. I rewrite for a budget that's made up. I rewrite based on the notes that the studio heads scribbled while they read my script in the midst of 11 or 12 others. I have my own problems with the script that I'm trying to fix. The producer gets a last minute thought. I try that, I try everything, I put it all in there and it's awful. And then a strange thing happens to me, every single time, and has for 28 years. Rather than get depressed, I always, without fail, get angry; at myself, for being so fucking weak and pathetic. For not having the conversation when we were having the conversation. And then I start a new file and I call it 'My Draft'. And everybody's ideas, everybody's thoughts, everybody else's things they want me to try, all get pushed aside. They all become like the radio in the next room: I can hear them, I'm aware of them, but they're not distracting me. I wish I could skip the second draft altogether. I wish there was some way to magically go from a first draft to a third draft. I wish I could better defend my work in the room. And I wish I could be smarter. Like Christopher Hampton, or Peter Morgan or Steven Knight. Basically, everyone who writes scripts over here. But I'm not that smart, so instead I've realised, in my case, that this might actually be a good thing. Somehow, I've made a career out of, more often than not, actually being the dumbest guy in the room.

And that's become one of my rules: always, whenever possible, be the dumbest guy in the room. Now, to some of you, that may seem counterintuitive, but it's actually the one rule I

have that I know for certain reaps the most benefit. We're too often afraid of collaboration. That, as I mentioned with *Out of Sight*, the right sort of collaboration leads to a blend of what I can only describe as magic and physics that's only seen in film-making. The right director with the right writer; the right director with the right actor; the right actor with the right material. Suddenly, one and one is three. And as writers we shouldn't be afraid of that, we should seek it out, because we can't do it by ourselves. The fact is, movies just aren't made that way. We have to collaborate with somebody at some point. Ben Heck famously once said that 'a movie is only as good as the least talented person associated with its creation'. I try hard to make sure that, whenever possible, that person is me. But going back to that 'good boy' thing, this has to be a conversation. It can't be me pretending to collaborate when I'm really just trying to make everybody happy. This happens not because people in the room with me aren't smart, it happens because I'm being lazy. Nobody wants us to take dictation. We think they do, but they don't. And as much as we're all reluctant to answer the hard questions, working with people who ask them challenges us. It leads us to a better process - I know this for a fact. And, I guess this is my next rule, which is: the process is everything. The process is everything. In my experience, if the process is bad, the work is bad. And I know some people thrive on conflict and chaos - I'm definitely not one of them. I like all of my conflict on the page. What complicates things is money, and there's often a lot of it at stake. And therefore other people's careers are at stake. And so they're naturally going to have a little bit of input, and when there's a lot of money at stake, it can be tough to keep the focus purely on storytelling. All I can do is try to keep everyone talking about the story, and only the story, for as long as I can, if I can. And it's not always easy.

There was a few months when David Fincher was going to direct my script for a movie called *The Lookout*. It was, as it was with Steven Soderbergh on *Out of Sight*, a very productive few months. Again, on that movie, I also had a wealth of

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talented producers, who helped me for years on the script. But those few months with Fincher made me see the script as a movie, not just a story. He didn't end up directing the film, but when I directed it myself, I shot the script that I wrote for Fincher. I wanted to show you the opening scene of *The Lookout* for no other reason than I kinda like it, if you don't mind all these clips. Thank you. Why don't we have a look at *The Lookout*...?

[Clip from *The Lookout*]

For all of you parents of teenage kids, a little light opening. Since we're talking tonight about openings, here's the opening from Dashiell Hammett's novel *Red Harvest*. 'I first heard Personville called Poisonville by a red haired mucker named Hickey Dewey in The Big Ship in Butte. He also called his shirt 'a shoit'. I didn't think anything of what he had done to the city's name. Later I heard men who could manage their 'r's give it the same pronunciation. I still didn't see anything in it but the meaningless sort of humour that used to make 'richardsnary' the thieves' word for dictionary. A few years later I went to Personville and learned better.'

I just love that paragraph; you literally can't stop reading it. You read these opening sentences and you keep reading. We could play this game a lot with all sorts of novels, and it's the trick, or the challenge I guess, of getting you to read, or stay in tune with anything - a movie, a book, anything. No weather, no furniture, and I know these books are not movies but it's sort of a clumsy way for me to talk about another rule I have for myself, which is 'always be reading something'. Especially something that inspires you, as opposed to something you have to read, or feel like you should read.

If you prefer Dan Brown to Leo Tolstoy knock yourself out. I think having fun leads to inspiration faster than doing homework, for me anyway. And I'm embarrassed to list all the books that I haven't read or that I should have. It's an extensive catalogue. But I do love to read and

reading novels has always taught me more about writing than reading screenplays.

You spend too much time reading screenplays, and the book that taught me more about writing scripts than any other was, in fact, *Red Harvest*. Not only is it perfectly structured, it's a lesson in saying a lot with a little; which, for me at least, is the key to writing a good script. There's only so much real estate in a screenplay. How can you set the scene with the fewest words? How can you create a complicated structure without gaping plot holes? *Red Harvest* shows you how. Skip Robert McKee and instead spend a weekend re-typing *Red Harvest*. You will learn all you ever need to know.

And, if you think I'm crazy, read and, if you can, re-type, *Red Harvest*. It's not that long, and you will learn everything about saying a lot with a little.

Let's talk about digression, because now seems as good a time as any. I'm afraid of digression; I worry that even with the most artfully described side trips or flashbacks that I'm indulging my audience's patience. I worry that the very tentative pact we made in those opening scenes will be broken if I suddenly ask the audience to invest in a new and seemingly unrelated story.

This is why the first scene of any sort of flashback, or change in narrative tack, has to contain the same sort of premise that your opening scene does. You can't simply say to your audience 'OK, just go with me here while I give you all this information I know you need in order to understand the end of my movie. Just hang on for just a second.'

These are the scenes where you cut to the newly minted couple out to dinner at a fancy restaurant; you know the scene where they start talking about themselves over glasses of wine: red for him, white for her. These are often the scenes where the editors put the reel change, you can feel it, the story's been humming along and then all of a sudden it cuts to some scene

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where the girl, and I say girl because all too often that is the sole defining characteristic, where the girl asks our hero 'so how did you get involved in police work?' or whatever.

And then he tells her a story about how, when he was a kid, he wasn't able to save his mother/brother/sister from some terrible something, but now that he's a cop he can, blah blah blah blah. If digress you must I suggest hooking your audience in the way you might in your opening scene. It's OK to disorient, 'where are we, are we still in the present?' It's OK to throw them off or confuse them, but make them feel like they have to stay put. They have to know this crucial piece of information, as opposed to setting off your audience's highly tuned 'trope alarm' which, I might add, is directly connected to their bladder. As soon as we see the couple sitting in the restaurant with wine in front of them we have to go to the bathroom. A signal, in the form of subtle pressure, is sent to the brain. 'You know what? Now is probably a good time to go and unload that 32 ounce Pepsi.' This is when you see people getting up at test screenings, when the movie stops to just unload backstory.

My father was a pilot, and liked to take me flying in his Cessna. And so it was, one day at 16 years old when my father had a heart attack, I found myself at the controls of the plane; moments away from crashing into the Santa Cruz mountains. It was then that I first began to think about writing. OK, that's not actually true. That never happened but we're all paying attention to my artfully described digression.

My father was, though, in fact a pilot and he would take me flying in his Cessna and once we would reach altitude he would always ask me the same thing. 'Scott, if I had a heart attack right now and you had to land right now, where would you land?' This is, I suppose, a perfectly reasonable thing to ask a 13 year old when you're teaching them how to fly. But with a sensitive soul like me, it can be somewhat traumatising and lead to a life where one is always looking for a safe place to land.

And in fact my career has been defined by what I can only describe as a consistent failure of nerve. If there's been one constant it's been that. It's not that I look back with any sort of regret on the work I've done, it's more about the work I haven't done. When I described myself earlier as a people pleaser it's because it's easier to be that way. To hide behind giving other people what they want instead of giving yourself what you need.

And this brings me back to what I was talking about early on, about the 'why' of our choices. Very early on I wanted to write, and only write, original scripts. I wrote *Little Man Tate* when I was still in college, I was 19 years old. The thought of fashioning novels or other source material into movies never occurred to me. Around that time I remember reading an interview with the great screenwriter Stirling Silliphant, the Academy Award winning writer of *In the Heat of the Night*. It was later in his career, and he'd been spending a lot of his time writing sequels to *Shaft*. Among other things he did *Shaft in Africa* and, I don't know, they made a bunch of *Shaft* movies.

He just realised that he'd somehow wasted a good portion of his life, and wanted to get back to the things that mattered to him. A year later he died. I thought to myself that if I ever got the chance to actually write movies that won't be me. My early projects, *Little Man Tate*, *Dead Again*, they were both original screenplays.

But also, very early on, I began rewriting other people's scripts. It was much easier for me, and much more lucrative. And, if nothing else, it was a very easy way to get props for my work. After I did one or two of those rewrites though I told myself that I would just do maybe one or two more. At last count I've rewritten nearly 40 movies.

There really is only one reason for this. It's not that I've always needed the money. It's not that I didn't have my own ideas, or didn't have books that I loved that I wanted to adapt, it wasn't that I wasn't good enough. There was only one

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reason I would drop something I cared about to work on something I didn't. Fear.

Every day of every month I wrestle with it. But unlike some writers who bravely channel their fear into very personal, original pieces I tend to back away. So like Stirling Silliphant I wake up, and suddenly I'm a cautionary tale. I'm certainly grateful for any success, and I can point to one or two pieces I'm very proud of. And I'm appreciative of how much I've learned on the journey, as it were, because in our everyday life learning is the process and the process, as I've said, is everything.

And though I've always known that I was on the right train I worried sometimes that I was on the wrong track. I've thought a lot about this, for a long time. And then I turned 50 and all of a sudden I realised that life isn't necessarily supposed to give you everything. And that no matter what I'd done or what I was doing I'd be wishing I'd done it differently; or had done more. And that's a bad place to be, particularly when nothing is especially wrong with my life.

Fifty is the perfect age, I decided, to stop being so afraid. Of course fear is everywhere in the business. In Los Angeles it's in the bottled water. There's no escaping it, there's only managing it. If you will; yet another radio in another room. And with that in mind, the managing of fear, let's talk a little bit about marketing. Because marketing, if you think about it, is all about fear.

Fear of losing money, and therefore fear of offending the consumer. If 'first do no harm,' is the physician's creed, then 'first take no risk,' is the creed of the marketing executive. And this is a problem with marketing driven film-making. Basically most of what comes out of the major studios.

I'm not talking about the films they acquire, or have a limited financial stake in. I'm talking about movies studios now develop. There's no place for a conversation about how to sell a story when you're busy trying to figure out how to tell

one. You simply can't do both things at the same time. The same way you can't edit and create at the same time. It's too inhibiting.

Of course, we all want our films to be seen, but we don't want the cost of that exposure to be the neutering of our ideas in order to fit some predetermined formula. 'They don't like westerns in Japan,' 'women won't see violent films,' 'films have to be PG-13 in order to justify their cost, except for R rated comedies,' 'films that cost between \$30 and 50 million just aren't worth it,' 'nobody goes to see dramas,' 'if you can't get Brad Pitt, forget it,' 'if you can't get Meryl Streep, forget it,' 'if you can't get Brad Pitt and Meryl Streep, forget it,' 'Johnny Depp is only a star in pirate movies,' 'Will Smith is a star in anything,' 'audiences don't like dark, except for The Dark Knight,' 'only pre-branded material is worth the expense' 'I don't understand what happened, it tested well.'

These are sentences spoken every day, and yes some of them contradict each other but they make perfect sense to the marketer. There is, however, a big difference between playability and marketability, certain kinds of movies always play well and therefore always test well. Movies about sports triumphs, race relations, inspirational teachers and so on. Audiences know they're supposed to like these movies, and so they say they do. But, that doesn't always translate into that same audience actually showing up and buying tickets.

Is testing good? Yes, I think it's great; for some things. There's nothing like watching your movie with an audience. You can see when they're bored, you can see when they don't laugh at what's supposed to be funny, and you can see when they do laugh at what's not. Afterwards you can ask them if and when they were confused by anything. But if you ask too many questions you get too many answers.

Is a sad ending satisfying, or is it a downer? Is something dark or grim? These are differences that testing doesn't, that testing can't interpret.

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Sad or emotional, this can be good. People can die at the end of a film and it can be emotional and satisfying. A downer for me is when you get up from your seat not sure why you just went through all that. Was it just an exercise in something. Dark is good, I love dark; relentlessly grim is tough for me. These are my rules, I don't know that they're right, but I know that they reflect my taste. Period. My taste.

It's part of what makes me care, but a marketer isn't wondering whether or not you'll care, they're wondering whether or not you'll get your ass to the theatre in the first place. They don't care about the positives; they care about the negatives, the things that might keep you away. So they have formulas. And for a while these formulas work; stay away from this, make sure you include that, no action scenes at night because you can't see them in a TV spot, etc.

There's a lot of talk also today about branding, creating a brand. But it's only a half-step from brand to 'all the same,' That's the thing about formulas, especially if everyone embraces the same one; movies start to look the same, and then before you know it they are all the same and now your brand has become synonymous with shit, and your formula becomes the snake that eats its own tail.

Most of the quality movies are now financed independently but distributed by the studios. And no wonder, because the average cost to market a movie is now around, I think, \$35 million. In many cases the marketing costs more than the movies themselves. It used to be, you made your movie and the marketing department then figured out how to sell it. Now they're figuring out how to sell it while you're writing it. And again, I repeat, it's very hard to talk about selling a movie at the same time you're trying to figure out how to tell one.

It's impossible. And it's not that the studio marketers don't want the movie to be good, they just don't necessarily need it to be good. In truth, and this bears out, the movie just has to be

good enough to sell. Sometimes it seems that if the idea or the concept is strong enough the movie just has to be in focus. People are going to show up, no matter what.

And now that we publish the grosses each week, now that we've made a sport out of movie marketing, people want to be part of the phenomenon. 'We don't want to miss out, we want to see what everyone else is seeing, so that we can talk about it too.' The opening weekend grosses have themselves become a marketing tool. And [it's] not just people in Hollywood [who] understand this. My sister in Montana once asked me if I thought my movie 'had legs'.

Marketing, like fear and because of fear, is everywhere. But to all of us who work on movies I have to say 'so what?' This should not affect what we write. Trying to guess what people want is a fool's errand, because the minute you figure it out they don't want it anymore, they're onto the next thing. Worse, deciding what to write based on what you think people want makes you a hack. But I'm the last person to give advice in that regard.

I think the important thing here is don't fight before you have to, and by the same token don't give up before you begin. Don't assume the marketing machine is going to eat your work, you'll end up writing defensively; you'll pull all your punches. You'll neuter yourself. Worse, you'll be angry all the time, you'll be one of those people.

There've always been patrons; artists have always had to please someone other than themselves. It's just a fact of what we do if we write movies. It's just part of it. But we shouldn't be thinking about that. Fear, marketing, critics, all those negative voices, we have to treat them again like that radio in the next room. And just to beat this analogy into the ground, we hear them but they do no bug us enough to stop us.

Let's, very briefly, just talk about the state of writing in Hollywood. What's happening now to

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writers, particularly to young writers; this is a little bit about the process. It's interesting, because your writers right now expect to be rewritten and this, to me, says everything. The average time given in a contract for a first draft is ten weeks. I find that hilarious. I have never written anything in ten weeks. I'm being serious, never. I don't think I can write a title page in ten weeks, but there it is this presumption that above all else we want it fast. And because most deals are now a single step, many younger writers feel as though they're there just to break the story for someone else to then come and fix.

While older writers feel they have to play it safe if they only have one step, have only one shot to get it right. I sometimes get calls from the studio where they'll say 'we have a script coming in in a month, and we're wondering if you'll be available to rewrite it?' To which I answer 'well you haven't read it yet,' 'no, but we've always known that this writer would eventually have to be rewritten.' Now, there's plenty of valid reasons for why movies really need do another writer to come on.

Not every script is perfect – I know that's hard to believe. Sometimes the writer very cynically takes the job, sometimes the writer burns out; I know I've burned out on many things over the years. Sometimes the studio or director gets another idea, wants to go a different way, and the first writer is no longer right for it. Sometimes the first writer is no longer available. Keep in mind we're not talking about original scripts, we're talking about scripts that begin life as assignments.

Let me explain how it works. A producer, or more likely someone who works for him or her, has an idea for a movie. An article, a book, a title song, and brings it to the studio who bring in a dozen writers to pitch and then write treatments for free. And maybe even write a few pages of a script for free just to see if they're any good. And then together the studio and the producer pick one of those writers and ask them to write an outline, for free, that they will later ask the writer to stick to even though any writer can tell you that if you

write real characters the movie's going to change as it goes.

But they insist that he stick to the outline anyway. And then he turns in a script to some lower level development exec' who works for the producer right out of Wesleyan and who gives the writer notes and sends him off again with the notes and the writer dutifully executes these notes. And then the young development exec' suggests a couple more things based on how one of their other scripts was received recently at the studio. And the writer makes these changes, and then the development exec' finally hands the script in to the producer who hasn't been in a single story meeting since they sold the idea to the studio but is in lots of meetings at the Producer's Guild where he's on the board and they're busy trying to limit the number of producing credits on movies to only those who actually produce – anyway, I digress.

The producer reads the script and asks 'what is this? This is a whole other movie, we can't turn this in to the studio,' and the development exec' goes back to the writer and says 'the producer hated it and wants it to be more like what we pitched,' and the writer says 'but I followed the outline and made all of your changes,' and the development exec' says 'yeah, I know, but he wants a new script.'

And the writer asks, timidly, his voice barely above a whisper, if he can possibly be paid for the delivery of the work he's done. And the development exec' explains, that in order for that to happen, they'd have to turn the script in to the studio and the studio doesn't want to do that now and fuck up his chances, because the first impression is everything. Everything. Everything.

The writer says 'but I'm broke, and I need the money, so can I take another job?' And the development exec' says 'no way, we've been waiting nine weeks for this, as it is,' And the writer says 'then I have to turn it in to the studio so I can get paid,' And so now the producer, who's not

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bothered to talk to the writer or been in any meetings up to this point calls the writer's agent and says 'your client's being difficult, if he keeps this up he's not going to work in this hemisphere ever again. Certainly not for me.'

And the agent, who is very young and also a bit of a pussy and just wants to keep it all flowing, asks the writer, can't he just do a quick draft of what they want, because if he doesn't no one will work with him. And so the writer does the best he can, not really sure what he's doing because he's well and truly on his own. But he does the best he can because his wife is going to have a baby and he doesn't want to be perceived as difficult.

So he turns in this new draft which the producer, after two more drafts from the writer, finally signs off on. And they turn it in to the mid level studio exec' assigned to the project who reads it and says she likes a lot of it, but it's not really what they agreed to and can they have a meeting to go over it.

So they bring the writer in for a meeting with the mid level studio exec', a junior studio exec' with a pad, the producer, the development exec' who works for the producer and anyone else who happens to be in the building. And they go over the script and they tell the writer that they can't turn the script in to the Head of the Studio because they know he'll hate it as written.

But if the writer makes a few small but key changes they think it has a good shot. And the writer, who's stunned, calls his agent from the parking lot and says can't he get paid for delivery now? And the agent says 'you've got to do this if you want your movie made, and if you get your movie made you're going to be worth a lot more than what you're owed right now. So consider this an investment in yourself.'

And so the writer dutifully executes all the notes, and turns the script in yet again and the studio exec' hands it upstairs to the Head of the Studio without reading it, because the lower level studio

exec' read it and assured her that all was fine, thus covering the mid level studio exec's ass, and the Head of the Studio who only reads scripts on Sunday between 11am and 3pm, reads it and says he loves the idea for the movie, but hates the script, and who's available to replace the writer? I think that's all we need to say about that.

Studio formatting, what is that and why do we, very briefly, need to talk about it? If you're like me you agonise over everything, down to how the words look on the page; where the white spaces are, where the lines break, all of it, because there's a way to create a rhythm on the page that one is able to feel from reading. So you sweat your format.

But now, many of the studios take your script and retype it into the same standardised format. The thinking is, because we're all cheating, the only way to really know how long a script actually is, is by making them all look the same. Same margins, same double or triple spaces even. This also simplifies things in terms of production; it makes it easy to feed a script into a budget programme and so on.

The mere fact that this practice exists is a not so tacit admission that the participating studios have given up all pretence that scripts are written as opposed to built. Now, more often than not, the first question you get when you turn something in is 'how long is it?' Now, when you've worked on a script for six months and the first question the creative executive asks before even having read a fucking word is 'how long is it?' I promise you that, like in *The Godfather* when Don Corleone tells Michael that the person who suggests the meeting is the person who has betrayed you, you can be sure that the person who asks you right off the bat about your page count is not the person who will help you make your script better.

All right, let's just talk for one second about money, the thing you're never supposed to talk about but everyone wants to talk about. Do

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screenwriters deserve to get paid a lot? Who knows? Personally I do not feel bad about how much I get paid. As long as pro bowlers get paid for what they do I don't feel bad about getting paid for what I do. I've talked a lot, and enough I think. I'm not quite sure how to stop. So I think what I'm going to do is I'm just going to show you the very last, and very short scene from *Out of Sight*.

It's my favourite scene in the movie for a couple of reasons. I'd been stuck on how to end the script for months, and in a moment of desperation I called up the novelist Elmore Leonard and asked him if he had any ideas. I just couldn't end the movie the way his novel did, where the Federal Marshal shoots the bank robber she's just slept with, and then heads back home to Florida.

Elmore told me he liked the way the book ended just fine, but that he'd think about it. But right now he said he had to hang up the phone because he was about to talk to a guy from Texas who'd broken out of prison over a dozen times. I said 'wait, what? Who?' So we talked a little more, and then I wrote this scene. Enjoy the clip, and thank you for listening. I hope this has been as helpful for you as it has been for me, and I'd like to apologise to Jeremy Brock and Tricia Tuttle and everyone else at BAFTA for vitiating what has up until this point been a very classy series of salons. If there's any way I can make it up to you, now you know that I say yes to everything. Anyway, here's the last scene from *Out of Sight* – enjoy.

[Clip from *Out of Sight*]

Mark Salisbury: Well, thank you Scott. I think you've depressed a lot of young writers out there. *Out of Sight*, based on the novel by Elmore Leonard. You've adapted many, many books over the years, what is the key to adapting a novel? Because a novel and a film are very different. Some people try to adapt the book completely: the *Harry Potter* films are pretty much

word-for-word on the screen. What is the key for you?

Scott Frank: Sometimes you can do that word-for-word, it works with some judicious editing. *The Silence of the Lambs* – which I think is a genius adaptation because he [Ted Tally] knew exactly where to cut and what to keep – is very close to the book. But you very rarely get those kind of things. Usually the key for me is to figure out what it's about, for me. You have to make it your own.

I was saying this to someone earlier today: frequently because you love the book you really want to protect the book. And so you spend a lot of time just putting the book through what I call the 'movie machine', turning it into a movie. And what you end up with is a very trivialised version of nothing. It's not the movie, it's not the book – because you haven't made choices. You haven't made hard choices.

And the only way I can make choices is to really write it for myself: what is it about for me? And as I said *Out of Sight*, I was more interested in him than her and that helped me adapt the book. Sometimes it's something thematic: you latch on to this thematic idea, and then you cull everything that doesn't speak to it when you're adapting. There are all sorts of ways. But the real trick is making it mean something to yourself, as opposed to simply refashioning it as a movie.

MS: So what's the process? Take us through the process of a book. I think William Goldman says he spends three or four months reading the book over and over and over again, with different colour pens highlighting dialogue. How do you do it? It would be great for the audience to know how Scott Frank adapts a book.

SF: I do something similar. I read the book a lot. I read it once through when I'm given it just to read it. But then you can't help as you read it the first time thinking about it as a movie. And so I might fold back some pages that I'm thinking about. And then I read it again, and I do begin underlining and scribbling notes in the margins,

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and this is really important because it's my first impression. And your first impression is usually the best, because it's where you bump on something; it's where something speaks to you. And so I go through and I make notes and I think that maybe the scene can come later or earlier, or we could lose this character or combine these characters.

And I then go through and I create a document for myself just as a tool, which is an outline of the book as written. It's just sort of a map that I have that's sort of a paragraph of what each chapter is. And then I begin writing notes about what the movie's going to be. I set both of those things aside and I start writing my own document, as I would if I were writing an original script. I just start writing about it; I start writing about the characters; I start writing about scenes I know have to be in it. Scenes that are already in the book but scenes that I love and have thought about that might not be in the book, and I just start scribbling for a long time.

And that document, bizarrely, always begins to develop or acquire its own shape. It becomes a kind of outline for me. I don't outline a lot – I may outline the first section of the script – but as I said if you have characters that are fully fleshed out characters, your outline changes. Once you're into it, if you're trying to be true to those characters, what you've planned no longer works.

The other thing that happens, which is gold, what I like to call 'the happy accident' – that's what the real writing is. You're just making yourself available for happy accidents. The scene you didn't know you were going to write, the scene you didn't plan or the line of dialogue, sometimes those scenes tell you what the whole movie is going to be. And so that note-taking process that I do sort of tills the earth for that. And then I start writing, and I often stop after 15 or 20 pages. I'm not the writer who can go all the way to the end. I know a lot of people can write that dirty draft; I wish I could. I've been trying for 28 years to do

that. I've never been able to go all the way through to the end.

If something's bothering me ahead of what I've just written I have to go back and fix it. And that's why the first 40 pages of my script are always the most rewritten. And a strange thing happens too: I keep going back and I keep going back. And oftentimes I'm inching along and I'm very slow – for an original script sometimes it's a year. But bizarrely this process, in the last two months, sometimes I change everything and most of the script gets written in those last two months. I know, for me at least, if I hadn't done all that other stuff it wouldn't have come tumbling the way it did. I would have been rewriting the whole script over and over again.

MS: Do you have to know the end? There's a great line in *The Lookout*, where Jeff Daniels says, 'start at the end of a story, you can't write a good story unless you know the ending.'

SF: I have to know the ending. I have to know the ending because hopefully the ending is one of the six great scenes in the script. And so I want to set it up properly. Screenplays are unique in that way: there are a lot of set-ups and pay-offs, and so if I know the ending I can also plant things and do all sorts of things.

It's very hard for me to write something without knowing the ending, and frequently when I'm re-writing scripts for hire I'm working on a movie that has no ending, and it's very difficult because it's sort of rambling, there's no structure to it, because it doesn't know what it's building toward.

Oftentimes a movie has an ending that doesn't work because the beginning doesn't work. It's not set up properly, or the characters aren't that interesting. You don't have enough dough to roll out with them to get all the way to the end.

MS: Somebody once said that the only thing that matters is the first 12 pages of the screenplay, and the last 10 minutes of the movie. It was

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probably some Hollywood executive. Do you think there's any truth in that?

SF: It depends on first 12 and the last 10. If they're spectacular I guess maybe you can forget the middle but I don't know. And I don't think that should be a goal, certainly.

MS: And what kind of relationship do you have with your author when you're adapting? Obviously Elmore Leonard is somebody that you've worked with on two films. You show him drafts: is that unique or is that something you like to do – bring the author into the process?

SF: I do because, again, my personality, is I don't want to piss anybody off. And I don't want them to be surprised in a bad way. I don't think it's good when that happens – for lack of a better word – 'karmically' speaking. You want them to be happy. So I do discuss it with them. Sometimes they don't want to read the script, sometimes they don't care, it all depends.

But I just try to make them feel a part of it, because I would imagine as an author it would be a very strange thing to have somebody take your work away and begin, you know, refashioning it.

MS: You say *Out of Sight* is the most creative experience you've had, yet *Dead Again* was the experience you learned the most on. Can you talk about why that is the case? Is that to do with the Writers' Room at Paramount, and being there for four years? I don't know if the audience know about this, it's fascinating.

SF: When I started in the mid-80s – Jesus – Paramount had just done... it was actually of all people Jeffrey Katzenberg, before he left Paramount, they created a writers' floor. And they wanted to do what they used to do in the old days, and keep all the writers in the same place. And it was kind of great, because I was 24 years old, and I got to be on this floor with all these very experienced guys who'd been working on scripts for a long time.

If you were stuck you could go wander in to someone's room and get help. There was a lot of drinking, and a lot of Nerf basketball, and stuff like that, but it was also a great way to learn. I ended up being there longer than anyone who was ever on the writers' floor. I was there quite a long time – it was five or six years by the time I left. That was my real university.

There was a studio executive there called Lindsay Doran, who's a producer now, and she taught me how to write. That's where I learned how to write. I wrote a movie for them, it became quite a bad movie, called *Plain Clothes*, but it was a terrific education. Then on *Dead Again* I learned how to write. The co-producer was a screenwriter I'd met on the floor named Dennis Feldman, and I remember wandering into his office one day saying 'I have this ridiculous title, and the barest notion of a movie...'

I started talking to him about it and in 15 minutes, together, we sort of figured out the bare bones of what would become *Dead Again*. It was a really great experience for me. As I said it was hugely educational, and so I learned a lot on that movie. I learned so much. It took me a long time: two or three years by the time I finished that script, I think. It was a very slow process.

MS: One thing that Jeremy is very keen on here, is to acknowledge that a screenplay can be a piece of art, and that's something that you subscribe to as well. Do you think that you've written a piece of art? Is there a screenplay that you can point to that is art, that aspiring screenwriters should look at?

SF: I don't know if that's for me to decide. I'm very wary of someone who would describe their own work as art. I think I aspire to art, so the process is imbued with that ambition. No matter what you're writing you want it to be artistic. It is a document that's going to be around, that people are going to read. Not a lot of people, but there it is. And so I don't think of them in the way that many people do, just as maps. I think they should read great, you should read them

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and you should want to keep reading, and it should feel like a great yarn. It's just that you have that terrible format you have to wrestle with.

It's very difficult when you're only describing sight and sound to begin with, and then you have to put it in that format with interior, exterior and all of that. So it's a challenge, but they should read great if you can help it. Sometimes it's difficult. It depends on the kind of movie it is, but that's the challenge. *Minority Report* was a very difficult screenplay to write because it was loaded with so much technical detail. But still, I said to myself I wanted it to read like a good story, and that has to be the challenge because that's how you sell it. That's how you get people involved with it, and actors wanting to be in it. So it is a trick.

A lot of people overwrite their scripts too: it's full of purple prose and things that shouldn't be in a screenplay. It's ridiculous. They over-describe things. You've all read these scripts where you get two paragraphs of description about a character. They're telling you, 'she was jilted, and so she's bitter' – the audience in the theatre doesn't get that; they get everything through behaviour, and so that also becomes the challenge. The art also comes through in how that behaviour comes through. I think writing scripts that read well – I think it's very difficult.

MS: You mentioned that you've rewritten 40 movies, and I know a few: *Dawn of the Dead*, *Private Ryan*, *Entrapment* – do you approach rewriting, polishing the same way as you do an original adaptation? How do you get yourself into that story? I think you used the expression about the red dress...

SF: Putting on the red dress, yes. It's always different, and when you're rewriting something that isn't working or you're rewriting something just for the ending, it's always different. It's very hard to get myself into it because even if I'm excited about the job – because I get to work with a director I've always wanted to work with and I've never had the chance – there's always

something else I was doing that I've had to leave.

And so it's a little tough. What I have to tell myself with those jobs, with rewriting jobs in particular – because the muscles are the same as adaptation or writing originally – you're just fixing a story, you're telling a story. But the approach for me, the way to stay interested, is I tell myself: this is going to be an exercise. I've never written this kind of movie. This is the challenge: I'm going to write a horror movie, a superhero movie or a war movie or what have you. And I'm going to figure out how to bring to bear all the things I say belong in good storytelling no matter what the concept is, and see if that's possible to do.

MS: And are you the character man? Is that your kind of remit?

SF: Sometimes. You'd be surprised what you're brought in for. Listen, let's talk about *Marley & Me* for a few minutes. If you would have asked me 10 years ago if I ever would written a movie like that I would have laughed in your face. And when they called me up and asked me to write it, I laughed in their face. I said I know that book, because at the time my 15 year old daughter had read it. We used to take our dog for a walk at night together, because it was the only way I could fool her into talking to me. If she knew we were just walking the dog and not trying to have a talk she would actually talk to me.

My mom had sent her a copy of the book, she loved the book and was telling me chapters of the book. So I knew the book quite well. When the studio called, this great woman named Elizabeth Gabler (who runs Fox 2000) said, 'we're having trouble with this script, the original writer Don Roos is going to go and make his own movie so he can't finish the script. Can you come and work on the script for us?'

I said, 'I know this book, I am so not the guy for you. I don't know how to write a movie like that at all.' And she said, 'well I think you do; you should just have a look at it,' and so I read Don's

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script, and I realised it was about me. It wasn't about the dog; it was about the history of a marriage told through the life of this dog. I love dogs, and I have three kids and I had two of them very close together, and all the sorts of struggles I began to think about, the chaos and the messiness of a marriage and of a life, the dog sort of became a metaphor for me.

And I went from 'this is not for me' to 'I have to do this – I can't let go of this, I love this idea.' And it's a silly little movie, but I think it's effective. I have a big soft spot for it, I really like it. I don't know that I could do that again. There was something personal in it for me.

MS: Mmm. I cried at the end. Have you ever been asked to rewrite a movie that didn't need rewriting? And in that case what would you do?

SF: Once or twice I've been asked to rewrite a movie that didn't need rewriting. They were very special scripts, and I didn't do it. I just said 'I don't know what to do: what you've got is a great script, and I don't know what to do.' Those movies weren't made; they were tough movies anyway to get made. But not often. This sounds terrible, I know, but 99% of the time what you get sent you're actually surprised they're making it. You're actually surprised that somebody wants to make it. There's no love in there, nobody's loved this thing.

And again, we're talking about assignments, not original scripts for the most part. Not something that somebody created on their own and worked on, because those movies usually get written by one person. There's usually only one name associated with really original material. But the stuff that's sort of developed, you see that people have just sort of come and gone, and nobody's really taken care of anything or really thought about it.

I recognise how arrogant that sounds, but it's interesting. And why they're making it often has nothing to do with the values we all care about in the story.

MS: We're going to throw it open to you, so if you have a question...

Question: I just wondered how you might structure a typical working week, or month, especially if you have more than one project going on?

SF: I try not to have more than one going on. This year I've had a lot, but usually I try to just work on one thing at a time if I can. If that's possible. I usually get up very early. When my kids were at home I would take them to school and then go to the office and I would work most intensely in the morning. Everybody has their time of day that they're the most productive, so for a few hours before lunch I would work. And then the middle of the day is useless to me – for whatever reason I can't work during the middle of the day, so I'll return phone calls or I'll run errands or I'll read something I want to read, or whatever.

And then around four thirty, five o'clock, when I have to start thinking about going home, and I realise I haven't written anything, I panic. There's about a 45 minute period of time where the sun's going down where I get all my work done. It's amazing, it's like magic. All of a sudden the best work gets done right before I leave. Every day it works that way.

If I'm rewriting something, if I'm doing something and I have only three or four or five weeks to finish it because they're going into production, I work all the through the day. I'll stop and take breaks and take a nap. But most of the time I'm working all through the day. It's very hard. I know some writers can work all day, although I suspect they're lying. I think it's very hard to write for eight hours a day. I start to do great damage to my work, really, after a couple of hours.

MS: And you rewrite the next day the previous day's work?

SF: I begin the day by rewriting what I did the day before. I rewrite everything I did the day before.

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and then at the very end of the day I add another little brick that I'll rewrite the next day.

Question: As far as I understand there were a few writing teams involved in *The Interpreter*, and I was wondering if you could talk about your involvement in that – when you came in, and so on?

SF: *The Interpreter* was an interesting experience because Sydney Pollack was my mentor for many, many years. He was one of the producers on *Dead Again*, but we'd never actually worked together as writer and director. I begged him to direct *The Lookout*, I so wanted him to direct *The Lookout*, and he thought about it. I thought I might have had him for a while, but he didn't want to do it.

He got this script for *The Interpreter*, which was pretty good – actually a really good script – the problem was there was a period of time when every movie had a surprise ending, after *The Sixth Sense*. Every movie, no matter what the genre, had some sort of twist at the end. I'm convinced that if *The Hangover* had come out during that period there would have been a twist at the end. Everything, no matter what. And this movie had one of those at the end, there was some sort of thing where you realised you'd been fooled the whole time, and Sydney recognised that you couldn't make that version of the movie.

But what he liked very much was the idea that nobody's talking about diplomacy very much, we're just talking about war. We were right in the thick of what was going on in the Middle East. And he liked the idea that a woman who was the biggest advocate for diplomacy ends up with a gun in her hand, and the irony about that, and how that would work. He asked me if I would come on and rewrite this script.

I was just about to start writing this western that I'd been researching for two years and was desperate to write. I said I didn't have time because I was going away in four weeks, so I couldn't do it for him because I was going to be

leaving. He said, 'even if you could just give me four weeks' – because he wanted to write a whole new script. I said 'I don't think we could write a whole new script in four weeks.' He said 'whatever you can give me will be great, even if we end up with 20 pages. I don't care. I just want four weeks.'

I had four of the best weeks of my life with Sydney Pollack, where we would sometimes talk about the script. Sometimes he would take a book down from the shelf; he would read Tom Stoppard's cricket bat speech [from *The Real Thing*]. We would talk about all sorts of things, and every now and then we would talk about the script. I realised time was ticking away and we had to have something, and so we started to write the script. I think I wrote the first 40 or 50 pages, and then I left.

I spend several months of the year in Massachusetts so I went to go and be with my family and work on the western. When I was there in Massachusetts Sydney would call me every day, and say, what do you think about this idea, or that idea. And I would say 'I think that's a perfectly fine idea, but Sydney: who's writing the script?' He said 'well, I am.' I said 'oh, OK.' I said 'but don't you think you should get a writer to come in and work on the script with you?' He said 'I'm fine, I'm just going to take a crack at it myself.' My wife said to me, after one of those calls, 'he's going to ask you to come back on the movie.' I said, 'he knows I can't, he knows I'm busy – he's not going to ask me to come back on the movie.' And she said, in the way only a wife can say, 'he's going to ask you to come back on the movie – and you're going to say yes!'

So September rolls around and I come back to California, and I get a phone call and Sydney says to me, 'Scott, you're the only person who can write this script, you have to come back, you have to do this.' And I said yes! But now we couldn't fuck around anymore, we couldn't talk about Tom Stoppard, we had to write the script because they were going to go into production.

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And because he's Sydney Pollack he had a cast, and 50 pages of script. So we began working on the script, and it was very difficult because Sydney was so smart and he had a very tortured way of working, and I have a very tortured way of working, so frequently that was one and one equals zero. Sometimes with Sydney every idea you present to him is instantly transparent.

He could see right through it. He could say, 'well, that doesn't make sense, that's not logical,' and sometimes what you have to do when you're creating something is say 'if that's not logical then maybe we have to change the character, maybe it has to be a different character.' So this went on for a while and we weren't getting through it, and I realised I didn't believe the ending; I couldn't make the ending work. The work for me was very perfunctory, and I was really unhappy. I'd spent four or five months on a script that I didn't believe I was making better for him. And, what was worse, it was for my mentor, it was for Sydney Pollack. It was very, very difficult for me to keep working.

I would ask friends of mine who were also friends of his, what do I do? And they said 'you can't leave.' I said, 'but I'm not happy.' I'd been in New York for six weeks with Sydney because he was prepping the movie, and we would sit in his apartment and David Rayfiel would work with him too, who was a lovely, lovely writer who worked on all of Sydney's movies writing dialogue for him. He wrote great lines of dialogue, very poetic things, but he didn't do structure.

And so I would have to remind him every day what the story was, and we'd sit around Sydney's computer with Sydney typing: I'm on one side and David's on the other side, and we were arguing over punctuation. Trying to affect my voice in that situation was like picking a lock with a wet noodle. It was very, very frustrating, so I said to Sydney: 'I have to go home. I have to go home and I'll try and work at home.' He said 'OK, but you can't quit.' I said 'I don't think I will, but it's too hard here. You're typing,' and he goes, 'well you can type.' I said, 'but I

don't want to type: I need to do my own thing.' I said 'you know in Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid? When they go to Bolivia and they try to get a job from Strother Martin guarding the payroll?'

The Sundance Kid is this great gunman and Strother Martin is running the mine and asks how good a shot he is, and he says 'pretty good'. So Strother Martin takes a plug of tobacco and throws it 20 feet away and says 'hit that'. The Sundance Kid fires at it a few times and he misses, and Strother Martin says 'I thought you were good.' And the Sundance Kid says 'can I move?', and he draws both his guns and he moves all over the place and he hits the tobacco every time. I said to Sydney, 'you've got to let me move. I can't move when I'm sitting here with you.'

He said OK, and so I went home, and this is the only time this has ever happened to me, but I went home and for about four weeks I could not write a single word. I didn't believe what I was writing. I didn't believe the ending. I didn't believe the movie. I believed what it was about, but I just couldn't make it work. Then one day my whole family, all five of us, had the stomach flu. Everybody was sick in that way you are with the stomach flu. Except, I was really sick but it was interesting: nothing was coming out of me at all. I was just sick, and all I was thinking about was the fucking *Interpreter*.

I thought this was a sign of some sort. And so I called Sydney the next day and said 'I can't do this anymore, you have to bring on someone else to finish the movie.' He said 'but you're so close, you're so close!' I said, 'I'm not that close, you need more work and I can't do it, I don't think I'll ever be able to do it. I don't know what's wrong with me but nothing is coming out of me – literally!'

So he let me go, and for a long time he was very, very mad at me and then Steve Zaillian came on and he wrote the end of the movie. He was able to come in and cleaned up a lot of stuff that we

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couldn't finish, and he finished the movie. I guess that's a lot more information than you wanted or needed.

Question: I just wondered if you could talk a little bit about theme please.

SF: This I can be brief on. I try not to think about theme until later. If I'm adapting a book I'll extract a theme if I can from something that's already written, but if I'm writing something I don't say, 'oh, here's the theme.' I feel like the movie feels – this word I keep using – it feels 'built' if you start with the theme ahead of time. If you arrive at a theme that's great. If there are themes you know you love, that's great. But for me, if I start writing it seems it doesn't matter to me early on. I know there are certain themes I automatically always go to, but it's not anything conscious.

I think it's very dangerous to think too much. I think about the characters: that's what I obsess about, and if there's some thematic idea that unifies them that's great. Especially for later, when I begin doing other drafts. Later, if I have a theme that helps me focus the script, great. But while I'm creating something I don't think 'I'd like to explore this or that theme.' I'm just not the kind of person that can do that well.

MS: On the subject of directors, what's Spielberg's notes like, for *Minority Report*? Because that's a very dark story, incredibly dark, especially for a film released by Fox.

SF: A different Fox, back then.

MS: Is he visual, is he character...?

SF: He's everything. The thing about his notes are that he has access to everything and everyone. So frequently he'll be talking to some director and they will suggest something, he'll meet someone or see something, he has a lot of ideas. There are tons and tons of ideas. But the greatest thing about him, the surprising thing, is he wants

you to do your own thing. He doesn't want you to write what you think he wants.

He wants you very much to create your own story and he told me very early on, 'I don't like mysteries, I don't do them, and there are two mysteries running through the heart of *Minority Report*. He went for it, he has tons of ideas; he's a great reactor to things, so getting notes from him you're just getting a lot, because he has a lot of ideas. And he can be very specific, but the greatest thing is that he wants to set you free in a great way. He wants you to be the racehorse, and that was a nice thing. But he also has his own point of view, and he's also very aware of the movie he wants to make, so after a while you start to begin to bring it in toward his own vision.

Question: You talked a lot about the opening scene and how important it is. I recently watched the film *A Royal Affair* with Mads Mikkelsen, and I had the same feeling after the opening scene, I just knew it was a great film. How do you decide on the opening scene?

SF: I don't know. The opening scene is so tough. I will say this: on *The Lookout* I realised I had an opening scene but I didn't have an opening image. I realised what directors must wrestle with, even if they know what the scene is: what's the first thing you're going to fade in on? You can keep making it smaller and smaller and focussing in; I think it's an instinctive thing. I think you just know when you get something that makes you want to write more.

That's really what it is. This is something I know for a fact: if it feels boring or perfunctory to you I promise you it will feel worse to anyone who reads it. So if there's a scene that you're writing and you go, 'I know, if they could just get through this scene, it'll be good,' they won't just get through that scene, they'll hate that scene or they'll be bored with that scene.

And so the opening: what is it doing to pull you into the next scene? What is it doing? How are you starting a story? Once upon a time, what?

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How are you keeping someone interesting? How are you keeping yourself interested? It should almost be easy, it's almost like you come up with something and then you keep writing – you realise that's the way to keep going.

You don't have to explain a lot to do this scene, it's very simple and clear and clean. I don't know how to do it, I just eventually arrive at something, and I know when it doesn't work. I know when there's too much there, and I'm not drawing you in, there's too much information and it's not working. The opening is everything, it's the key of the song you're humming and it's very tricky.

MS: On that we must fade out, so Scott Frank thank you very much indeed.

SF: Thank you, very nice.

APPLAUSE