

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

Susannah Grant

28 September 2013 at BFI Southbank

Susannah Grant: It's very nice to be here. There's something a little bit unsettling about talking about screenwriting, because it implies a degree of confidence that I've honestly never, ever had when I approach it. There was only one time in my life in which I approached the writing of a screenplay with any degree of confidence: It was the first screenplay I wrote and I was nine years old.

Since I am of a certain age, as we say, that puts us deep in the United States swinging 70s. I was in fourth grade and my school was experimenting with the new open classroom trend that was all the rage then. They had us learning math by counting knots in macramé, things like that, and singing lots of Peter, Paul and Mary.

And one day my fourth grade teacher, Mrs Robinson, showed up in the classroom with two eight millimetre cameras, which now is not a big deal, but at the time was radical and revolutionary. She said she wanted us to put away all our books, she was dividing us into two groups and each group would spend the week making a movie of our own creation.

Now, as I said, this was fourth grade. You go telling a group of fourth grade girls you're dividing them into two groups and they get very, very nervous because they're already in two groups and each girl knows exactly which group she's in. You go dividing them up arbitrarily, say grouping flaxen haired Wendy Wile with the pudgy girl with the bad haircut and handmade clothes, and nothing good will come of it.

Luckily Mrs Robinson, having once been a fourth grade girl understood this and she divided us cleanly on social caste lines. So Wendy Wile and her flaxen haired cohorts went off in one direction, and I was left with the others. Which was actually a huge relief, because actually the others, these are my people, and second of all the others tend to be pretty malleable.

And malleable was what I wanted, because as soon as Mrs Robinson had announced this project I knew exactly what I needed it to be, I knew the movie I needed to make. It was as if this magnum opus had been sitting in my psyche unhatched, like a giant ball of

methane gas underground, just waiting to be erupted into the world.

I felt all I needed was 12 warm bodies willing to do exactly my bidding, and that's what I had. So day one while Wendy Wile and her friends were sitting around, just spitballing ideas, I sit down with my group with a fully realised script that I had spent all night the night before writing. This was obviously pre-computers, so all I had was my one handwritten copy, and the only way to share it with them was to do a dramatic reading.

So I began. Page one, *Smellerella* by Susannah Grant. I proceeded to read them, scene by brilliant scene, my version of the Cinderella tale in which rather than being held back by her lowly station and the cinders on her face she was afflicted with a crippling case of body odour. I don't remember the reaction of my group. If they objected at all to doing a movie about body odour they didn't tell me at the time. Naturally the success of this project lived and died upon my total control.

So I seized it, I did everything. I directed, I did costumes, I starred (naturally). It's entirely possible I could have been more generous in sharing the responsibilities, but I knew if I went and gave props to somebody else they would just do it wrong and I'd have to re-do it anyway so what was the point? And furthermore I was doing a fabulous job, I was in my element, I was in the zone, you know?

I was in that elusive creative state that all artists seek, in which every answer you have is the right one. This was it. I had found my thing. I didn't mention this was winter, well it was winter, which on the east coast of the United States is also known as cold and flu season. So on the sixth day of that week I woke up sick. And I must have been genuinely sick because my mother, who views illness as a sign of moral lassitude, actually kept me home for the day.

'That's okay', I told myself, 'we're well-rehearsed, as long as they run through it once or twice we will be absolutely fine'. So game day rolls around, I'm not 100% but the show must go on so I rallied and I go to school. I get there, and there's my prince and there are my ugly step-sisters, everybody's ready and I'm

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ready to roll and someone comes up to me and says 'Susannah?'. 'Yes, I said.

'Well, while you were gone we kind of made a few changes'. I had not, at the time, heard the term 'page one rewrite' but that is what they'd done. Left to their own devices this rag-tag bunch of social misfits had thrown away everything I'd done and replaced it with dreck. I looked at this new script and thought 'this is impossible. I can't possibly act this'. Not a problem, they had also re-cast.

I was out. So what could I do? I did what many a wounded screenwriter before and after me has done, I smiled through my pain, I blinked back my tears, I buried my rage and I went on with it. And that was my first screenwriting experience. So what on earth would possess me to consider a field that not only runs the risk of that degree of humiliation and abuse, but actually guarantees it? It's in the Writer's Guild contract. What was I thinking?

Well as with most completely irrational decisions, the answer to that can probably be found in my family of origin. Let me say up front I have a wonderful, loving family. I know what an unhappy childhood looked like; that was not what I had. However, that said, I grew up in a very WASPy American family. I don't know if you're familiar with that particular subset, but I think it's about as close as we come to English.

It's the land of good manners, bland food and very little overtly expressed emotion. The general presumption is that feelings are kind of unwieldy and unpredictable things, and unleashing them on others is kind of viewed as bad form. It's a little like letting your giant Labrador jump on them as they walk in the door. It's just not done, it makes other people uncomfortable.

The problem was, if you're a young person like myself, you actually have a lot of feelings. Huge ones. Or at least they felt huge to me. Certainly a lot huger than anything I saw expressed around me. So you kick around in a community like that for a while, and you start to feel like all these volcanoes roiling around inside of you, this pain and rage and longing and euphoria and fear are unique to you.

And that can start to make you feel weird and different and very lonely. And then, if you're me and you're 13, you go to the movies and you see this.

Clip from Network

SG: That's *Network* if anyone doesn't recognise it, and if you don't go home and watch it immediately. That movie, literally changed my life. It was like a drink of water in the desert. All of that mysterious tumult I felt inside my gut all day long was out there on display, part of the world, part of the conversation. All of the unwieldy emotions weren't being hidden, they were the point.

And I remember the feeling of sitting there in the theatre, I was alone, and I remember very clearly suddenly not feeling different or weird. Or maybe I did, but not necessarily in a bad way anymore. And although I was alone in that movie theatre, I had bought one ticket and sat down by myself, I did not feel in the least bit lonely. So I went back to movies a lot. Any movie, every movie, I was there. And I saw a lot of really, really bad movies.

The 70s and 80s are viewed, rightly, as kind of a golden era in American cinema but there were some truly dreadful movies made at the same time. There was an entire genre of disco movies, and I saw them all, and I *loved* them all. I loved and still love everything about the moviegoing experience.

I love the little metal thing you have to talk through to ask for your ticket. I love the little vests that the popcorn men wear. I love that little sound your feet make on the floor because it's so sticky and dirty. I actually prefer a dirty theatre to a clean one. I like knowing, in a tangible way, that I'm sharing that movie not just with the strangers around me but with the really sloppy stranger who spilled his Coke on the floor before me.

And I know that talking about movies in the context of the moviegoing experience can feel a little bit dated now because of course people watch movies on a million different devices. I watch movies on a million different devices. And yet so far none of those other media has killed the theatre going experience,

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and I think that points to what I like best about movies.

I think when you're buying a ticket to a movie, when you're buying a ticket to *Fast & Furious 37*, or whatever, you're buying a race and you're buying a thrill and a few laughs, and you're buying Vin Diesel's remarkable biceps and all that. But beneath that I think what you're really buying is a collective emotional experience that's increasingly hard to come by in our culture.

And as a young person that's what kept me going back night after night after night. So that became a tangible dream for me, a life in movies, and from where I lived in rural Connecticut at the time, it was a thoroughly impractical, impossible dream. There was nobody... I had not seen one person who had a life anything like this. But I had seen *Working Girl*, and *An Officer And A Gentleman*, and *Breaking Away* and *Star Wars* and *Tootsie* and *The Graduate* and *Hoosiers*... I did know how stories like this could end.

There was the small issue of my one attempt at it having been an absolute, abject and total failure. But here's a secret I have learned in 20 years as a screenwriter. Failure is constant for everyone. And I mean it, everybody fails at this all the time. Not just screenwriters, but I think anyone who tries to illuminate the human experience in an authentic way.

Many years ago I saw a television interview with Paul Simon, a truly great songwriter. And he talked about how scared he gets when he writes, because – as he put it – there is nothing more embarrassing than writing a bad love song. It took me years to realise that the only way Paul Simon would know the feeling of embarrassment at writing a bad love song is if he had actually done it.

This is a guy who has written more beautiful lyrics than I can imagine and he had also written a bad love song. And if that was the case then I think everyone has the permission to fail a little. In fact I think that freefalling feeling you get right on the knife edge of total disaster may in fact be an essential ingredient to doing anything worthwhile at all.

So the question then is: How do you reel yourself back from failure in a public way? How do you fall on the right side of that knife edge? And I guess what you need is a little bit of wisdom and honesty to look at something you've written that feels false, or boring or derivative, or in poor taste, or bullshit, or inauthentic to you, and just plain not good enough. And say to yourself 'I bet I can do better'.

And then you sit yourself down and try to do better, and then once you've done better decide it can still be better. And when you've made it better take another crack at it, to see if you can improve it even more. You have to be clear, you have to be simpler, and richer. And that's difficult.

A really good tool for that, I've found, is working with good people. Film is, of course, a collaborative art and yes, sometimes those collaborations are like shotgun weddings of mismatched souls; the whole thing goes awry and everyone walks off in a huff vowing never to talk to each other. That can definitely happen.

But what can also happen is that you end up working with enormously gifted collaborators whose input elevates your writing above and beyond what it would have been had you just been working on your own. Nora Ephron had a great analogy for this, and since I wouldn't dream of trying to improve on Nora Ephron I'll simply paraphrase her. She likened it to making a pizza.

She said the screenwriter makes the dough, the sauce and the cheese and says 'look I made a pizza'. The director comes along and says 'hey that's a great pizza, I wonder what it would be like if we added some pepperoni'. And you add the pepperoni. And then a couple of actors come along and they say 'you know what else would be really good – some tomatoes and maybe some peppers'. And it goes on like that.

I have been very lucky to have had some great condiments added to my pizza over the years. I want to share with you one of my favourites, it's a scene from *Erin Brockovich*.

Clip from Erin Brockovich

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SG: Okay, arguably not a poorly written scene. However Aaron Eckhart's falling to his knees and then on his face at the end, to me, is my favourite moment in the script and that was all him. That is what you get when you work with people. I do have one other thing I want to say about screenwriting, and maybe it's not just about screenwriting, and that is that everyone has a unique voice. Everyone has his or her own personal penguin song. And maybe that song is one that millions of people will respond to and find interesting, and if that's the case you'll go on to be JJ Abrams and that's wonderful.

Or maybe it will only captivate a few, and that is wonderful too. The popularity of your unique voice is not what matters. What matters is staying true to it, writing in the voice that is uniquely yours, not selling it out chasing some amorphous public's idea of what you should sound like or be like to be profitable. There is enough of that in the world, there is certainly enough of it in entertainment.

There's a letter Martha Graham wrote to Agnes De Mille that I keep in my office, in which she talks about this unique expression. She writes 'if you block it it will never exist through any other medium, and be lost. The world will not have it, it is not your business to determine how good it is, nor how valuable it is, nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open'. And my favourite part of the letter she says 'there is no satisfaction at any time, there's only a queer, divine dissatisfaction, a blessed unrest'.

I mentioned gratitude a moment ago, and I know it's a word that's probably overused these days; it's tossed around yoga studios and carved into little rocks people put on their desks, but I'm going to use it anyway; I do feel enormous gratitude for the privilege of being a writer, for being able to exist in that state of divine dissatisfaction. It is an enormous blessing that I do not for one moment take for granted. Thank you.

APPLAUSE

Briony Hanson: Susannah thank you so much, that was fantastic, not least for the idea that

your scripts are really condiments, pizzas etc. That was absolutely wonderful. I want to ask you a lot actually, but I will leave some space for you to ask questions. You talked there about the unique voice, and that's what comes through in all of your work, I wonder if you write films – given the eclectic nature of your films – I wonder if you write films that you want to see?

SG: Well, the problem is I want to see every movie, so that's not really fair. But you know what I think I do, I think I write myself into everything. I can't believe nobody's called me out on this yet, probably because they're always played by different actresses and the scenarios are different, but I've just really written myself over and over in lives I want to live. It's just fantasy.

I think I write the things I want to experience, because for six hours a day you're by yourself, you're in the room, that's your reality. It's like this bonus life, you get a whole second existence and then on the next one you get a third existence.

I remember being furious when I was young that I only got one life when there were so many interesting other ones in the human experience. This is kind of as close as I can get to that, so I think that's probably closer to what is my way in.

BH: But given that you work a lot within the studio system, and you are making films for particular demographics – different particular demographics, sometimes children, sometimes adults etc – do you think there's any cynicism in what you do, in that you're looking for an audience?

SG: You know you can't be naive about the business, of course, because corporations are turning a large amount of money over to you and they don't expect it to be charity. But I try to make that calculation before I write. Often the one calculation I make is 'is it castable?'. 'Am I writing parts that I can fill with actors that will inspire enough confidence to get people to cut that cheque?'

I feel fairly confident that I can write the character well enough to attract an actor, but if it's a five year old girl who's your lead and on screen all the time, well that's going to be

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harder. Which isn't to say that isn't an absolutely valid movie to make, but it's definitely more challenging from the business side. So that's where I think about that, but I really try not to think about it at all once I've decided that it's a worthwhile endeavour.

BH: Do you have favourites in your back catalogue?

SG: Favourites of my own? I like them all, you can't call anyone out. I wish *28 Days* had come out a bit differently, that had some loveliness in it that didn't necessarily get on the screen. That's the only thing you look back on, the things that disappoint. The one I directed [*Catch and Release*] had problems for very specific reasons, and got haywire in the story. I wish I had approached that differently. Any time I've protected my job more than the script I've regretted it. Those are the two instances when I did that. I protected my job as a writer and I protected my job as a director, and both movies suffered for it.

BH: Tell us more about the distinction between the writer and the director. You've worked with some incredible directors, we'll come back to the one you directed yourself in a moment....

SG: I've been extremely fortunate with my collaborators, yes.

BH: But with all of them do you have a different way of writing? If you're writing for Joe Wright, if you're writing for Curtis Hanson, if you're writing for [Steven] Soderbergh, is it a different process, do you feel differently about it, or do you just write and hand [it] over?

SG: No, the dance is being collaborative, being open and also being protective of what you've written. I actually think it's a very smart thing when you start working with someone to really write down your intentions with the movie, and keep them. Because you're going to get a million ideas, and a lot of them will be good, and some very good ideas might divert you from that original intention if you really don't have it firmly in your head.

It can be blinding, you know, you can be working with someone who's made 20 brilliant movies, so it's very important to remember that your job is to protect that script and to protect

that story while being open to the opportunity that it could get better. And will get better. It's a dance, it's a tightrope walk.

BH: And is the process different with each of them? Is there ever a point when you literally write the script and then hand it over and walk away, or are you always more involved than that?

SG: Well once you get toward production it's more about the stages, you know. When you're developing it and they're casting it you'll sort of do something that's a draft. Once you really get close to production it's a matter of scenes, you know. The whole thing just ends up going back and forth a lot.

And there are production concerns, location concerns, page count concerns and you end up having to consolidate and adapt for very real production reasons.

BH: And going back to the pizza idea, are there things that you can pick out for us on particular titles that took you by surprise, that you didn't expect to be there, that made something so much better? Particularly from a director rather than from an actor.

SG: Well Joe Wright directed a script I wrote called *The Soloist*, and he brought a very different sensibility to it. I live in Los Angeles, and he doesn't – although I think he may have moved there, actually – he didn't at the time. The movie is a lot about some very real social problems, mental health issues, homelessness. And the outsider perspective is a valid perspective, and the insider perspective is a valid perspective. I think the movie has a little of both. I really like the movie, it doesn't look like I thought it was going to, it has more of a... I think it's a bit more set back from the story than I had imagined it, and yet I think it's beautiful, I really like it.

BH: What do you mean by more set back?

SG: There are some parts that feel almost operatic, I mean beautiful. He does this in a lot of his movies, it's remarkable what he does with the camera. And there's a whole sequence of the folks downtown in Los Angeles, which is where a lot of the people who are homeless live, that... operatic is the best way to describe

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it I think. But at the same time the performances of those guys are very tangible and emotional, so you do feel it. I don't think he sacrificed that, but I hadn't seen it that way. I had sort of imagined it grittier and more on the ground with it all.

I had just come off directing something and the producer said to me 'do you want to be one of the people we consider for directing this?'. And there was a whole component of that script that was about mental illness, and I knew very well that there were other directors who could communicate that on screen better than I could with just one movie under my belt. So I said no, and I think that aspect he found a way into. It was a whole world visually that I never would have been able to execute myself.

BH: Interestingly the elements you're talking about, it sounds like the bits where he draws the camera right back and it's almost a kind of pattern on screen, where you're looking down. Did he interfere with, add to, your dialogue, the kind of conversations that you had written between the two leads particularly?

SG: Not really, not really. We had a long debate in that movie, this may be boring to people who haven't seen it, but it's based on the columns of a writer in Los Angeles named Steve Lopez. Steve is married, and in all the scripts until Joe came around, his wife was in the script. She was not really serving a purpose in the story, and he rightly pointed out that the character was kind of a little bit of deadweight.

I kept arguing that he's really married, so we can't make him not married because he's a real person. We just have to find a way to feed the dramatic momentum more. But this [was] a very practical concern, there was a writers' strike looming. We were in pre-production, but the strike was going to happen before production started. So we just needed to decide. I said 'we're not going to solve this argument, we're just going to keep disagreeing.

'I will do a draft without her, and that way we will at least be comparing two things, not just an idea versus what's tangible'. And I did the draft and it was actually a fighter screenplay, it was a better screenplay. I remain uncomfortable that we cut her out, and yet I

didn't solve the problem of having her in, so it's not like I can blame anybody else. I didn't solve the problem, we cut her out, it was better, I went on strike and that was that.

BH: And it all ended happily.

SG: And it all ended happily.

BH: Is there a conflict for you when you're adapting from real life, as you have done memorably with Erin Brockovich and with The Soloist, do you feel a kind of constraint from the fact that you're dealing with somebody's real life and you can't kind of mess with the facts? Or are you okay with dramatising a story?

SG: It was a hard thing to learn, and I learned it on Erin. I had spent a fair amount of time with her and come to like her immensely. Then I sat down to write her, and having only written fictional characters up until then I suddenly didn't feel the freedom you need to feel. I didn't feel like God with this character, I didn't feel I could do whatever I wanted because there was somebody who knew her better, and I really feel I needed to know her better than anybody else.

I felt so hamstrung, and tight and nervous. You can get through about a quarter of a page like that before you go and make yourself a milkshake or something. I finally decided I have to think there are two Erins. There's the real Erin, and then I'm making up this Erin, and I will just take in on faith that my respect and affection and understanding of her will make them pretty close to each other. That worked pretty well.

I felt like I could do anything. You really have to know your subject to feel that flexibility and still be honest. Fact is a funny thing, because facts are not dramatically interesting, often. But I've found that if you decide you're going to be very truthful as opposed to very factual you're going to end up with a better script. There is a real difference between being truthful and being factual, at times.

A good example in that movie is she missed everything with her kids. She missed their birthdays, she missed their plays, she missed everything she was working so hard. My first draft of it I thought 'well here's a sequence where she's missing this, missing that, missing

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that' and any time when you're writing and you find yourself writing a montage, stop and think of a better way because that's not the right way.

So I came up with a scene that's in the movie in which she misses hearing her daughter's first word. That hadn't happened but the emotional impact of it was so much stronger than if I had just lined up all the actual things she did miss. So that's the kind of difference between fact and truth, I think.

BH: And she was heavily involved, when you were...

SG: She was not that involved, no. She was, actually, in the movie, but not while I was writing. I would just ride shotgun with her when she went out, driving all over the country and we'd talk for a long time. But once I wrote the script she left me alone. I would occasionally ask her questions, but she was very hands off.

BH: But you didn't feel it was your responsibility to say 'well listen, I've done this, I haven't included that'?

SG: No. No, no, no. I was very nervous when I sent her the script, very nervous, but she was very pleased with it.

BH: Okay. Just going back to what I was saying before about working with specific directors, you know you've given us a good example there and you've alluded to a slightly bad example perhaps with *28 Days*. Can you talk a little bit about what happens when something isn't realised in the way that you had it on paper and you had imagined it was going to work?

SG: Well, you know, it's a funny thing because I was actually on the set a lot on *28 Days*. I was the only writer on the movie, I was in every conversation, I was very involved. But the funny thing about the movie is that you're all talking about something that only exists in your imaginations. And there's absolutely no way of knowing, really for sure – I mean you can have drawings and you can look at storyboards, and you can do table reads, but until you actually make the thing it's hard to know if that wavelength is the same. If you're all really seeing the same thing.

I'd like to think that I'm better at sensing it earlier now than I was 12 years ago, 11 years ago whenever that was. But you really never know. And I'm also kind of a pathological optimist; I'm always going into every situation thinking 'this is going to be great' so it takes me a while sometimes to sniff out something that isn't... a shorter and shorter time because I'm getting better at it.

BH: Tell us about your experience directing, because you've only done it once...

SG: Yes, I did it once in television and once in features.

BH: Why only once?

SG: Actually largely for just personal reasons. I have two kids, and for two years I was the very busy one, and my husband works, and we said 'okay, the next two years you can be the very busy one.'. And then it was middle school, I didn't want to be working those hours – there's a lot going on in your kids' lives. I thought I can wait another couple of years. So that's the really practical reason I've waited to try it again.

BH: But was it a good experience for you?

SG: It was a very good experience, it was a tough movie. Amy Pascal, who is enormously good at championing female filmmakers, and a really great executive, liked my script and said 'let's make this, I'll give you \$30 million to go make this movie'. I remember thinking 'God, I wonder when they're going to realise they gave me \$30 million to make what should be a \$5 million movie? Boy, I've really gotten away with something'.

The answer was about two weeks before you start production is when they realise they've got \$30 million and a \$5 million movie. So we spent a lot of time trying to bridge that gap during production. I did a lot of re-writing, trying to turn it into the romantic comedy they thought they could sell. And it was stupid, you know, I should have said right at the get-go 'we're not seeing this right'.

If I were to do it again today I would say that right away and say I would go take this

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somewhere else, and find this \$5 million and make what it should be which is a very small movie about a group of friends trying to figure out who this person is that they've lost. Instead it turned into this strange, quasi-romantic comedy which it was never meant to be.

But you know, everybody is still friends, we're still working together, we just didn't have our eye on the ball at the right time. But I really liked directing, the idea of being able to complete the storytelling process is really fun.

BH: And did it make you a different writer?

SG: You know, I think it maybe made me ultimately more economical. I'm not an economical writer. I have a file that runs parallel to the file I'm writing of scenes I've written and deleted. And it's always the trash pile. The finished script is usually 118, 120 pages. My trash pile is usually more than 200 pages long, so I overwrite so much.

That's sort of how I find what the story is, it's kind of an excavation process. I wish that doing that had made me able to be more concise from the get-go, but that's just not my way. I think it's made me a little bit clearer about how specific and economical you can be.

BH: Have you changed your process as you've got older and got more experienced?

SG: It's not about experience, it's just about life, it's just about having children in the house who have to go to school. When I was just on my own I would start writing around 11 o'clock at night, I'd draw all the shades in the house and I'd write until I fell asleep and then I'd wake up and I'd keep writing, and I would exist in this sort of nether world of zero stimulation except the script. And I loved it.

Then noon would roll around and I'd open the shades and look at the world out there. I loved that. But then when you have a spouse and children that doesn't work very well, so now I get up very early before them and I get a couple of hours in before anyone else is up so that I'm concentrating deeply before you have to make lunch.

BH: Do you like the process?

SG: Oh yes, it's funny, it's kind of like exercise in that before you kind of think 'ughh, I don't really want to do this' and as soon as you're doing it you're like 'wait, I love this!'. And literally every day I go through it, I don't know why but I do. 'Oh really?' and then 'oh, look at that'.

BH: That doesn't sound like exercise to me! You talked a bit about never feeling confident...

SG: Literally I have a crying jag in every script, I have one friend I call up and 'I really don't know what I'm doing' and she says 'page 85?' and I say 'well yes, it's page 85 but this time it's real, it's really not going to work'. It's page 85 every time. But you know, early on in my writing career... Alvin Sargent is a brilliant American screenwriter and my aunt knew him, she was married to his brother.

I think I was in film school and she said – I think this was after two Academy Awards – 'oh God, every time Alvin writes a script he calls up Herb' who's his brother, 'and says 'oh God, I've got to give the money back, I can't do this one. I cannot do this one'. And I remembered that, because if Alvin Sargent really thinks he can't do it, maybe that horrible feeling is part of it. And I really do believe it is.

BH: And has this got better or worse?

SG: It's always terrible, it's just terrible, it's awful. It's not gotten better.

BH: But you had really surreal beginnings, your first screenplay, your first produced screenplay was for a Disney film [*Pocahontas*].

SG: Right, well that's different, that's a whole different process. There were three of us, that's like boot camp. I think there's a little sign outside Disney that says 'check your personal artistic ambitions at the door, you are making a Disney product here. Do not forget we gotta sell a lot of plush [toys]'. That's a very different experience.

But let me say it was great. It was hard work; we rewrote every scene a minimum of 35 times, it was just over and over and over. So it was great experience, I don't mean to talk it down, but it was definitely building a Disney product

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28 September 2013 at BFI Southbank

as opposed to feeling like you are bringing your own creative expression to something.

BH: You came to that from TV, and I read an article about you that said you had to unlearn a lot of things that you knew from TV when you first got to feature films.

SG: Well, I did *Pocahontas* and then I did TV, and I loved TV. I've done a series since, I'm gonna do another pilot this year, I love it. You do feel some muscles starting to atrophy, because it's a different rhythm and there's something in the 45 to 50 page script that is just a different animal. You don't have page 85 for instance.

So whatever muscle gets exercised by getting over that hideous... and maybe that's just me, but it is a different animal. And tremendous writing, much better writing on American television as a rule than film these days. So I'm not saying one is easier than the other.

BH: In the article you said that you thought that TV had a particular formula, downbeat, bullshit...

SG: Oh no, that was a joke on our show [*Party of Five*]. You have to do it so fast, we did 24 episodes and we had a writing staff of four, maybe five people. You're going so fast. You get the outline and you don't stop and say 'aah, I wonder if...' you get one outline, and there was one guy on the staff who would always say 'look it's just downbeat, bullshit, button and you're out'. But, you know, the best TV is much better than that.

BH: Are you a researcher?

SG: Oh yes, to a fault. Sometimes you realise you don't have to do this much research anymore, it's just time to get to work. But yes, I think the thing is you've got to feel like you know something so well that you can kind of find yourself in it. I read a bunch of books about schizophrenia, I read a few written from people who struggled with schizophrenia, because the idea of writing a 55 year old African-American schizophrenic musician, there is no cross section between him and me on paper.

And yet, until you can find that place where you and the character are the same I find it

hard to write it. So I just did lots and lots of reading until I felt like 'oh wait, I can kind of feel what that might feel like'. And it's just a matter of digging around until somebody articulates it in a way that resonates with me. And then I feel like I can write it with some authority.

BH: And does that particularly come up with something like the monologues, when he talks and talks and talks?

SG: Yeah, that was just spending a lot of time with him and finding the music and the rhythm of his language and his way of expressing himself.

BH: Do you keep lots of projects on the go at one time?

SG: No, I wish I could, I really can't. The one time I tried it I didn't feel like either ended up as good as it should have been. I always have one I'm concentrating on all the time, and then I have what I like to think of as my mistress, you know. The one that's going to be so good and hot and not give me any hassle, you know? But I also know she's going to be just as big a drag as this one ultimately, when I really get to know her. I don't know why I'm putting that in terms like I was a heterosexual man, because men have more mistresses maybe. Maybe that's a myth too. So no, I write one at a time.

BH: And are you always looking around for new subjects? Are you one of those people who walks round with a notebook, or are you now in a position that ideas come to you?

SG: I wish I remembered to write down as much as I should. But yeah, it's probably not entirely healthy to go into situation thinking 'that would be a good story'. I think there's a little bit of detachment that happens all the time when you do that.

BH: And your friends probably stop talking to you.

SG: I have a bunch of friends who, immediately they tell a story, they say 'writer dibs, you can't use this'.

BH: Of the things that get sent to you, the projects that come across your desk, do you

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recognise a sort of through line in them? Do they often feel familiar?

SG: Well, you know I will often see the female protagonists [there]; there's a solid handful of women screenwriters who get sent those, but I honestly don't look that much because I don't like to look for something while I'm working. I tend to find something pretty quickly that interests me thereafter, so I'm not really aware of what's out there.

I don't really do that, I kind of do my own thing, which sometimes puts me in some weird ghetto where I'm working on something that nobody else is interested in. But I really try... I don't pay much attention to the vicissitudes of the business too much. Probably not a great thing, but...

BH: The female protagonist thing is interesting, because of course up until *The Soloist* all your films have female protagonists, this was the first time you'd done a film which was basically about two guys. Did you find that a really different experience?

SG: Not at all, I wouldn't have said 'oh I only write one gender protagonist movies', I certainly didn't think of it that way. I don't think that there's any real difference in writing men, it just seemed like an arbitrary distinction. Actually, that's not true, early on when I was just starting I just had a little... it was one of my few canny career thoughts.

I was watching the movie *M*A*S*H*, and I thought 'this movie's great'. It is entirely from the male point of view, and I am laughing along with the men and very aware of the perspective. I thought about when I was really watching tons and tons of movies, there was an era when the American movie business could simultaneously support vibrant healthy careers of Meryl Streep, Teri Garr, Jessica Lange, Glenn Close, Sissy Spacek – you could go on, you could probably name 10 huge stars off the top of your head who had full careers for years.

And I remember thinking 'okay, the actresses today are every bit those actresses' – this was probably the mid 90s – 'I bet if I just write a good part for them it will get made, because we've got the actresses, they're good and

they want to work'. So I did actually think, 'this seems like a good thing to do'. I think there's more good work out there, for women. There was a real dry valley there for a bit in the early, mid 90s.

BH: We have the illusion that it's getting better, though I was just talking to somebody before about this summer there was only one movie – *The Heat*, the Sandra Bullock film – which has two female leads. Anyway, never mind. We're going to take some questions from the audience, and just while the lights are going up and people are running round with microphones, let me just ask you one more thing.

Aline Brosh McKenna, who is one of our guests here this evening, who wrote the wonderful *The Devil Wears Prada*, was doing one of these screenwriters' lectures a couple of years ago, and somebody asked if there was a magic formula to screenwriting. And she said the very memorable 'yes it's ass in chair'.

SG: I have quoted her many times.

BH: As in you sit for long enough and the script will get there. Do you have a similar formula, or a similar secret tip you can give us?

SG: Well the problem of ass meet chair is that it makes ass way too big to just be sitting in chair. So Aline said to me not too long ago, 'well what I've done, I've got a standing desk' and I said 'well hell I've got to get myself a standing desk if Aline has one'. So I quickly ordered the standing desk, and now we're both standing at our desks feeling 'alright, so I'm not dying and calcifying and turning my ass into a giant pillow'.

And then I went her one better and I got a treadmill under my desk. So now I walk five miles a day writing the whole time. And then in the evening of course you need to add a glass of wine to it, so my husband came into my office and he hadn't seen the treadmill. He came in, and I also work in total darkness, and all he could see was the glow of the screen, me walking in pyjamas and running shoes, drinking a glass of wine. 'DON'T BOTHER ME, I'M WORKING!'. He said 'you realise this is a crazy person. I just want to let you know that'. You outed me.

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BH: Just to be serious about it, it's interesting because in these Screenwriters' Series there is often a combination of American writers and British writers and there is definitely a sense – particularly with comments like ass meets chair – that with American writers you have a feeling that if you work for long enough, and you work hard enough, you can do a good screenplay. With the British writers there is often more of a sense that you're a genius, you either have it or you don't.

SG: If you're Tom Stoppard you're right, you know. No matter what amount of genius you have you then have to work hard enough and long enough. I don't know, I know a number of writers. I don't know anyone who comes up with something really wonderful without a lot of hard work. You know, there's the occasional one that somebody writes in two weeks, but it's been sitting there.

I was talking to Billy Ray recently about one, and he did write a script in two weeks, and I know Billy and it's probably great. But it was something he was thinking about his whole life, it is a very personal story, so I actually think he's been working on it for decades while not actually putting hands on keys.

But I don't know. I love the script of *Juno*, and she [Diablo Cody] said she wrote that really fast, so there may be other ways of doing it. I can only speak about myself and all the writers who agonise with me. Agony isn't the right word, it's just work. It's not a hard life, I know what a hard life is, it's not that. But it is work, you have to keep at it, you have to be hard on yourself.

I have a great friend, she's wonderful and just horribly vindictive and always has a list that she calls her 'Back Up list', they're the people that if she drove over them she would put the car in reverse and back up to make sure they were dead. She reads through, and she finishes a script she actually puts the title page, she rewrites the title page – same title – by whoever the arch enemy of the moment is, and reads through the script as if it's written by someone she wants to fail so badly.

Looking for the things she can pick apart, and if it's something she can read through pretending

it's written by her enemy, and she's can't hate it, she thinks it's probably good enough. That's how hard you have to be on yourself, I think.

BH: These tips are coming fast and furious.

SG: Write it down it works.

BH: Okay, let's have some questions please, I believe there are some microphones.

Question: I just wanted to ask you about *Ever After*, and I wondered when you got that gig or came up with that idea were you thinking 'yes, it's fourth grade all over again!'

SG: I had totally forgotten about *Smellerella* entirely when I did that one. No, I think I have a little Cinderella complex thing, it's a good one. That one was the people at Fox came to me and said they wanted to do a Cinderella....

[Recording ends here, there are some words missing before it picks up again]

SG: ... felt like a Merchant Ivory film. I sort of thought, the thing I like about that was making Leonardo Da Vinci the fairy godmother, and the idea of the magic being that which is not impossible but possible and we just haven't thought of [it] yet.

Question: *In Her Shoes* is actually one of my favourite films in that it's the perfect marriage – it seems to me anyway – between a light hearted tone and in-depth drama. Could you maybe talk us through a little bit your process of adapting the book, which I believe is very different, and also how Curtis Hanson as the director was involved and how you worked with him also during production.

SG: Sure, yeah. Curtis was absolutely divine to work with. He knew that I was planning on directing. He probably would have kept me involved anyway because we got on very well, but he was very good about... he would just call me up and say 'there's a scene you should see we're shooting today, come on down'. But that's later. In terms of adapting it's a very big book, it was too big, it goes a million different places and it wouldn't have worked [as] a straight adaptation.

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So when that's the case you just find out what's important for the character, I don't know if you're all familiar with the movie but Cameron Diaz's character goes on a bit of a journey. And there's a long chunk in the book in which she goes back to college, so you just say to yourself 'okay, we don't have time to put in that whole college sequence'. What's important about that, what happens to her there? What does she learn there? And then how can I fold it into the part of the story that works. I think it ended up being that guy in the nursing home, which I really loved, how that relationship came about.

When I first wrote that script I had a dual voiceover going. I loved both *Casino* and *About A Boy*, two movies that do that really beautifully. That was the first version of it. Then I started working with Curtis and he said 'here's the thing, when we start shooting the scene obviously we won't have the voiceover. Let's see how many of these scenes will work on their own. On the day we're only going to know if it works, if it works there. We don't want to think oh well we'll need to rely on the voiceover to save this'.

So I pulled out as much as I could, and actually ended up pulling out most of it, and he subsequently told me that was just his politic way of saying 'oh for God's sake, lose the voiceovers'. But he was wonderful and included me in rehearsals, and was really a fabulous mentor and good friend.

BH: Does it make you anxious when you get on set and see what people are doing?

SG: Not that because I was really involved. I had been at all the rehearsals, so the thing you get a little bit nervous about is the rogue actor... I've actually hidden from actors on set. But everybody was really on the same page on that one. Everybody was working the same programme, making the same movie clearly.

Question: You made a very interesting point when you said the standard of writing in TV is often better than in film. Given that, it seems to me, most mainstream movies seem to be either biopics or sequels, what hope is there for anyone trying to write an original screenplay these days?

SG: Well, here's the thing. The business is definitely, definitely changing and the studios are... I don't know if I could get *In Her Shoes* made today. I don't think *28 Days* would get made today.

BH: Why not?

SG: It's just a little too risky I think, I think it is. [For] a studio. That said I've seen so much... I saw *Mud*, I thought *Mud* was fantastic. I thought *Stories We Tell* was fantastic. There are a lot of movies that are finding financing, the thing is they just are at a more conservative economic scale. So studios seem to be wholly out of that game, except Paramount I think has a five million dollar pool that they use once a year for their small movie that they're sort of gambling on.

And yet there are enough financiers interested... everyone went into movies because they love movies. There aren't that many people who went into movies because they wanted just to make money. Those people are Hedge Fund bankers, and they're doing quite well at that. But again I think there is a kernel... again, pathological optimist so don't necessarily believe me, but I think there is a kernel in everyone of wanting to actually make a movie you feel good about, that you can go out there and everyone will say 'oh man, I love that movie' and start that conversation.

When they are run by these huge multinational corporations there isn't the flexibility. And then you've got Amy Pascal who will throw herself on her sword for *Julie & Julia*, which was great that she did that. There are people who will use that power for that every now and then. But it's harder. The whole way of communicating and storytelling is in such flux now, I would just say be open. Who knows how people will be sharing stories in 10 years.

It's getting cheaper, the equipment. I could make one on my phone and that's delightful. Obviously not of the quality that people go to the theatres to see, but I just think being really open to the evolving landscape of storytelling is the way to go.

BH: Do you think you now are perceptive enough to know the scale of a film that you are writing?

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SG: Yes, I think I've just sort of got that in my gut now, yes. I'm doing now, I'm writing a movie about a 16 year old girl who's just looking for her five year old brother. That's what the movie is. And it would be small, except it is in a huge dystopian, end of the world setting. So I have what I really like in it, which is this great, personal story, and then there's all this really fun dressing around it that's great too. So you can find those. I think movies like those only work if you do have that germ of the emotional connection to the character.

BH: And this one's been talked about in franchise terms.

SG: It has.

BH: And how does that make you feel?

SG: Fine, great. I'm just thinking about getting through page 85, really.

Question: I'm curious to know, you get a lot of writers who admit that their characters are based on an actor or something. Do you ever do that and how does it effect the pre-casting and post-casting?

SG: You know I don't. I intentionally don't, I think it's partly just pure ego, I just want it to be mine all mine for a certain amount of time. I feel sort of greedy about that, that will come soon enough. And then also... most actors I know or have met are eager to do something different than what they've just done. Like a lot of writers are eager to do something than what they've just done. So I think maybe writing to what someone has done, if you were writing for Sandra Bullock you probably wouldn't write *Gravity*, you know? And yet that's what she's gone for, so no I never do. I try very hard not to.

Question: I'd just like to congratulate you first of all for the work you've done. I've got two questions, my first question is people often say about this industry it's about who you know. So what advice would you give to first time screenwriters that have no credits to their name, and they don't know anybody in the industry to help them let their work go out? What would they do to get the best directors and people help them get it out there?

SG: Well, there are a lot of screenwriting contests, and I think those are probably very good to enter because if you do do well in those... the Academy in the US gives five fellowships a year. They get 6,000 sent and they pick five and so people sit up and notice and they read those five.

There are a number of contests like that, I was on that committee for a number of years and that's a really nice way if you can really get in the upper ranks of one of those contests it helps to have people read it. And then the other things I would say, I didn't have, obviously I wasn't born with an agent either. I had this script and the phrase I think to keep in mind is polite persistence. It is good to be persistent, and it's alright to call every two weeks, and learn the assistant's name and say 'thank you so much for taking my call, I'm just wondering if he's had a chance to read it yet'. You know, good work will find its way through, but you do have to be persistent and you do have to be polite, because nobody wants to talk to somebody unpleasant on the phone.

Questioner: My other question was, do you think it's more likely to be successful if you lived in Los Angeles than in London?

SG: I know nothing about the British film community, except for these lovely people. They seem great. I'm sorry, I have no idea.

Question: I just wanted to ask you, I think we touched on this earlier but I'm not sure you answered the question, I suspect now you get most of your work from directors who approach you and want to work with you. But I wondered whether you ever read novels and think 'that would make an amazing script' or just come up with an idea and then do it off the cuff and try and sell it? I suspect you've done that at some point.

SG: Yeah, I do, I was actually halfway through a script of my own when I started this other [one]. I was fully committed to finishing it, but then this story came along and I thought 'I really like this, I can always finish the one I'm working on [later]'. It may still be half finished in five years, who knows.

But I try not to read thinking 'how would this be as a movie?', I like reading too much. And the

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truth is most books I love don't really... I try to read away from where my mind is at work. I tend not to read that much fiction when I'm writing, because you sort of go to bed thinking and I read very slowly if I'm trying to read anything while I'm writing. And then I go on a big reading binge once I've finished a draft.

But yeah, stories come in all kinds of ways. I'm very lucky that interesting ones tend to come my way from employers, but when they don't I usually have something else I'm working on as well.

BH: Are there particular directors that you wished you'd worked with, or would like to be working with?

SG: I developed a movie with Sydney Pollack that we didn't make, which was too bad.

Question: If you don't mind going back to *The Soloist* really quickly, you said that your last draft before the writers' strike didn't have the wife in it, but she is in the film, so I was just wondering whether you came back into the project and brought her back in or whether the decision was made without you?

SG: Actually Catherine Keener's character is his ex-wife. Steve Lopez is married to his second wife, so in the movie he did have an ex-wife and he had a child by that wife and the child was a character, and he had the wife he was married to. The ex-wife was not a character. There was also his editor, who was also a woman, so basically we combined those three characters into one, which is a very good, smart dramatic choice that I'm still uncomfortable with. But yeah, Catherine plays his ex-wife.

Question: I'm just wondering if you could say anything about having children, the creative process as a mother just briefly and particularly with the unpredictable interruptions. How do you manage that?

SG: My daughter's here, maybe she should answer. I would like to say 'oh, it's nothing', the truth is I think parenting is a very creative act and I obviously would never wish not to have my kids but it does gobble up in a very gratifying, wonderful way, a tremendous amount of your creativity. I have an office

that's separate, my children have never hung out in my office. They've occasionally come and silently done their homework there, but it's its own space, it's its own zone.

For a while I had them on my screen saver, and I had to change my screen saver which felt kind of cruel. But it would just, you know, it's my own little space you know? We get a lot of time together, the wonderful thing about being a writer is that you're in charge of your own schedule. I can get a lot of work done while my children are sleeping.

BH: Therapy for years for your daughter, 'she took meggie that n off her screen saver'.

SG: Exactly, I took you off my screen saver.

BH: Okay, time for one or two more questions.

Question: I just wondered whether you were able to say any more about the television project you said you were thinking about?

SG: Oh no, not yet, sorry.

BH: Do you want to say something about the one that already exists, *A Gifted Man*, particularly?

SG: That was so much fun, we had the best time on that pilot, it was such great people and Jonathan Demme is just a crazy joy to be around. And you know, a pilot is great, you do it so fast and then you blink and you'd done it. This one I was really pleased with how it came out. I went into it knowing I was not going to run the show, because running a show is a big commitment time wise, more of a commitment time wise than I was willing to make a couple of years ago. I think I would do it now.

I would do it now, I can say it affirmatively, because there's something in handing off projects, especially that, it was a weird show. I couldn't believe CBS let us make it, and then I really couldn't believe they put it on the air. I couldn't even describe it to people, but I loved it. And then it sort of morphed into something else that reflected the vision of the person who ran it, and it wasn't what I was interested in anymore. So that had its frustrations, but that's what I signed up for, that's what I committed to, so I couldn't complain. Well, I did, but I

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wasn't supposed to. So yes, going back again I will only do TV if I get to stay with it, if I decide to stay with it.

Question: Hi, do you have any advice for dealing with notes and producer feedback?

SG: Yes, I say be open to them. It's a hard thing because a lot of notes are good and a lot of them are bad, and it's often hard to tell in the moment which they are. I mean, some really bad ones just glare at you. But the thing I try to do with the ones that are bad, or that just feel like 'ooh, what are you even reading that that's your suggestion?' is I try to talk the person through their process of reading that led them to give that note.

Because you've got to figure the person was reading and something rung wrong for them, something felt awry. So if you can back the person up to that feeling, and I really will say 'when did you first start feeling this in the script, where did your mind start to wander? Let's go there and literally open the script and say 'was it on this page? Start feeling bad here? What did you feel – was there a line that sent you awry?'

Ask them just to say how they were feeling, and if that person feels heard well enough, then you can say 'aahhh, I see, I tell you what, I know another way of solving it but I totally hear and respect the problem'. And then you can go solve it your own way.

If you're working with idiots there's nothing you can do. But if you're not, then you can usually backtrack and find your way to something you can work with and [it] will often be helpful.

Question: I know it's somewhat different for different writers, and it's different for different stories and scripts. But in general can you talk about at what stage in the writing and the rewriting process you move from hating your script to maybe starting to love it?

SG: Ohhh, I don't ever really hate them I gotta say. Here's the thing, I wasn't lying, this really was me as a kid, I would close the door to my bedroom and sit on my bed immobile and just daydream. That was pleasurable to me, that was my favourite part of the day, you know? And it still is, only I get to actually write it down

or sometimes I have to write it down. But it is such a natural instinct for me, I can't ever remember not doing it. I think if I didn't do it I would probably be much less pleasant to be around. So I don't ever dislike my script.

There was one script I took, purely for the money, it was a rewrite. They were offering me too much money to rewrite this script, I couldn't believe it, I said 'YES! I will rewrite that script'. I didn't like the script, but I'll get through it. And that was icky. I was really unhappy, and then I was sort of mad at myself because I had taken this thing that I love, that is just pleasurable to me, and whored it out. So that was sort of gross. I try not to do that anymore. But I really don't hate them.

BH: That's probably a very good place to end it, but before we do let me just ask you one thing. This is something that comes up a lot during this series, and this is the idea of the possessory credit. 'A film by Steven Soderbergh', a 'A film by Curtis Hanson'. You talk very generously about screenwriting being collaborative, what do you think of the possessory credit?

SG: As a director I would never take one, I think it's an ego credit. But I'm not going to get all bent out of shape about somebody else's ego really. Whatever you need to do, it doesn't make any difference. There's this saying in diplomacy that if you don't worry about who gets the credit it's amazing what you can accomplish. Really, who cares, I don't want to spend time worrying about it.

BH: Perfect, that's where we'll leave it, thank you so much Susannah Grant.

APPLAUSE

SG: Thank you.