Screenwriters On Screenwriting.
The BAFTA and BFI Screenwriters' Lecture Series in association with The JJ Charitable Trust
William Nicholson
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William Nicholson: [commenting on a quote from Gladiator ("I will have my vengeance, in this life or the next.") that's projected on stage] *Gladiator* was written by John Logan, who will be speaking later in the series. The rewrite game is one of the things we have to struggle with as writers. In case you're wondering which bit I added, it was 'in this life or the next' which is not the best bit so I'm sorry about that.

I did actually persuade myself I'd written the whole speech and I've sometimes told people I've written the whole speech. Then I remembered I was going to be talking at a lecture series where John Logan was also going to be talking and I'd better get it right.

So I went back into the scripts and I found – to my humiliation – I had not written that speech. What I did with *Gladiator* (I did a lot of things) but I stuck in an afterlife. So I do know I wrote 'in this life or the next' because that was not there.

That gives you some notion of what a mess this whole business of screenwriting is. Now I've got my thoughts written in very large print, because I haven't got glasses. But really what I'm going to do is to start off by making some fairly big claims.

Then, so you can judge me and my claims, I'm going to run five clips from my works and talk you through how those came to be written. Then I'm going to depress you all with some stories about what the industry is really like. Then I'm going to tell those of you who are wannabe screenwriters how to succeed, so you can leave here and go out and do a great deal better than I have done – which is not hard, because let me tell you, the standard is very low. I see a lot of scripts, and any producers here will tell you it's a depressing experience.

Most screenplays that come in are really crappy. I get sent stuff to rewrite and I think, 'How did this ever get to the stage that they're thinking of making this film?' So those of you, and I'm sure there are many here who are very talented and can do brilliant work, they [producers] are longing for you and are out there waiting for you. That's the good news. The bad news is coming later.

Now for the big claims. Screenwriters do not write dialogue. This is a misunderstanding. People often say, 'Which lines did you write?' Of course we do write dialogue, but that's not the big thing we write. We write story, we create stories. You can have an entire movie without a single line of dialogue and every moment has been written by a screenwriter.

The screenwriter imagines what's going to happen, puts it on paper and some minor functionary called a director comes and actually makes it happen. We write what you see; it's all there on paper. There's a whole extra argument to be had, which I expect we will have, which is, 'How come nobody's heard of us?' That's another matter.

I am here to tell you we write story and that's important because stories matter like hell. Screenwriting matters like hell. Why? Because stories form our culture. I profoundly believe that. The storytelling impulse is built into us and it's the way we explain and describe our entire lives, all the time.

Think back to Victorian times. Imagine all those strange stories in which the gentleman always behaved like a gentleman and wouldn't kick a man when he's down. Where you play up and you play the game, all these bizarre codes that were built into how you ought to behave in Victorian times.

We look back at that and at the books that peddled that and we think that's so preachy, that's so propagandist. We are doing exactly the same thing today. Every time we write a story we are in fact creating a moral structure and that moral structure is influencing the people who see that film.

And they add up, all these films, to a sense of what is acceptable in life and what is not. So we have an enormous power, particularly the movies that are widely seen. You may think if they're pure entertainment there is no moral message in it, but that is not true.

Imagine every film you ever saw exalted people with guns and said: 'The people with guns win because they've got guns, and everybody who hasn't got a gun is a pathetic loser.' We would develop as a society – perhaps we are

developing as a society – where people want guns in order not to be losers.

In fact, that's not what the movies say. They nearly always show that the person who has right on their side has the 'best gun' if you like. I know that is a bit pathetic, but there is a moral story operating there. So we are conditioning our society all the time and we should take responsibility for that.

There's another reason why we should care about this a great deal. What is it that makes movies really great? If they're really great, a lot of people are going to go and see them, and they're going to spend a lot of money and you, the screenwriter, gets rich. Which is nice.

So what is it that makes movies great? We really want to know this. I'll tell you in three steps. The first step is the structure. The structure of a story has got to mirror the reality that the audience is familiar with. Very, very important this.

If you have a series of random events that don't seem to connect, what people do doesn't seem to follow on from anything they've done before and it throws you out of the story. You don't feel involved. What happens when you watch a story is you think, 'Yes, if somebody acted like that the following would happen, that's true, that matches my sense of reality.'

So we actually have to have a sense of – I like to call it truth, but that sounds a bit grand – a sense of truth in order to make the structure work. The ending has to be earned. It's no good having somebody swan around saying, 'I'm the greatest' and then getting into a fight at the end, like that scene in *Indiana Jones* where the guy comes at him with a sword and he's shot with a gun. It's funny for a gag but you couldn't build a whole movie on ending like that.

That somebody just happens to win because he happens to be the one who's got a gun and nobody else has. That hasn't got any moral structure; we sense that that is not a meaningful thing to say. So the overall structure has got to relate to our lived experience of the world that we all share.

Now, there's an interesting thing here, a lot of people say, 'What do I do to become a good screenwriter? Should I go to college, should I study, should I do courses?' I've never done any course on screenwriting, and probably that's my problem, that may be why my screenplays aren't as good as they should be.

But what I want to say is... you know what? A screenwriter is an author. An author needs authority. So how do you get authority? You've actually got to learn stuff. You've got to get out there and live. So if you are somebody who wants to be a screenwriter and you're not breaking through, and you're having to work at something else, rejoice in that.

You would be astounded, down the line, you'll be writing a screenplay about that burger bar that you've been working in, or whatever it is. If all you've ever done is watch movies the only movies you can write are movies that recycle the contents of other movies. And God knows there are enough of them. But we don't want that. We want reality, we want truth. That's where the power lies. So you've got to structure your story in accordance with the real world.

The second thing you've got to do is to have characters that we actually recognise. This is very important because if you recognise the characters as being true people you can care about them.

Step number two in what makes a great movie in my opinion is caring about the characters, particularly about the central character. Think of how many movies you've seen where it was kind of great, but you didn't care, you were never ever engaged by the plight or the longings of the central character. That is dead in the water.

Think of other movies you've seen where they probably didn't make a lot of sense and were a bit of a mess, but you really loved that central person. Then they're going to work even if they're messy.

Caring about characters generates the third step in the process which is, in my opinion, the gold of moviemaking: which is emotion. We are in the business of generating emotion. That's why people go to the cinema. They want to be

frightened, they want to be thrilled, they want to be filled with wonder, they want to laugh, and they want to cry.

Obviously, we all know that, but people kind of forget it. That is the game we are in, the generation of emotion. And I don't believe you can generate decent emotion without true characters in a true story. So that, in a nutshell, is what I think makes great screenplays.

Now, what I'm going to do so that you can point to me the complete abject failure of my theory when it comes to practice, is I'm going to show you some clips from my works over the years. Five clips. I'll talk you into them and tell you about how I came to make them, then we'll show the clip.

I hope I can demonstrate what I've been talking about. The first clip I'm going to show you goes some way back in my career. I should say for those of you who don't know – and why should you know? – I didn't ever intend to be a screenwriter.

I intended to be a novelist. I was a failed novelist working in the BBC and my colleagues discovered that I was getting up in the morning and writing all these failed novels, and said to me – in fact one of them my boss had to read because it was going to be published, the only one that was published – and he read it and said, 'Do you know what? Your dialogue is quite good.' He needed a cheap writer (by cheap I mean a writer he didn't have to pay) so he said, 'Would you help out with this project?' So I did, not really taking it all that seriously, and it was a revelation to me writing for the screen.

And it was a revelation for a whole lot of reasons. I wrote fast. My novels took years; I agonised over them, these were the great thought-provoking modern versions of Proust or possibly Tolstoy or a combination of the two. And of course they weren't working at all because I was being pretentious and trying show off and be a great writer, which is the kiss of death for any writing.

You don't want to be a great writer, you want to be somebody who sits in a room with people and does a bit of good work. That's what happened with my first television script. I was working fast and working on material that I had not devised myself. They were historical subjects. I just thought I'd do the best I can, and I found it worked. Suddenly I was able to write stuff which people were paying me for. The second and third scripts I wrote for television both won the BAFTA Best Drama in their year – I'm not going to show you clips from those – and then this one came up because by now I was an established television writer, I'd won the Royal Television Society's Television Writer Award.

In 1988 the BBC Drama Department – and this is just how things happen – had a gap in the schedules. They'd had a project that was supposed to go into a studio. The script had come in and wasn't any good and they'd left it too late, and suddenly they had all this studio space and nothing to put in it.

The then boss of BBC Drama, a man called Peter Goodchild who knew me, asked if I would cook up something fast and cheap that would fill this 70 minute slot. So I said if it was going to be fast and cheap it couldn't have many actors, so it was basically two people in a room talking. And if it's two people in a room talking why should we care?

And this comes back to what I was saying earlier; characters caring about characters. So I thought to myself we were in 1988, we'd all been frightened by the AIDS virus, we were just at the point where we'd discovered that AIDS is transmissible between heterosexual couples – what about a very simple story about a husband and wife who have a child?

They have a perfectly good marriage and he has to come back and say to his wife, 'I am HIV positive, I had an affair – a heterosexual affair – some time back, she's just contacted me and told me to get myself tested. I've been and got myself tested, I am HIV positive.'

The wife then has to deal with (a) that her husband might die, (b) she might die, (c) what the hell's he doing fucking somebody else? You know? I thought this was good, this is a simple, strong story that I could put a lot of pressure on.

So I wrote it. It's called *Sweet As You Are*. It's directed sublimely by Angela Pope and it starred Miranda Richardson and Liam Neeson. These are

good actors. How come these good actors came into this piddly little non-existent television thing? Because it was a very good script. It was very strong and intense.

I've always been very proud of it. Of course it doesn't exist anymore, because it's a BBC production and all BBC productions are buried in that deep hole that they'll never come out of again. But BAFTA and the BFI have managed to drag out a rather battered Betamax copy, and I'm going to show you a clip now.

This is what I think of as 'show the train crash.' By that I mean, if you write a story in which there's a train crash I don't want somebody to come on and say, 'Boy, that was a hell of a train crash the other day.' I want to be there when that train crashes, and emotionally I want to show the train crash.

I want to see that moment. This is a moment in the story where they've already been through the first agony of discovery about the fact that he's had an affair, about the fact that he's HIV positive, about the fact that she has now got to go and get herself tested.

The story runs for five days, because that's how long it then took to get tested, and she's going to end up finding out whether she has, as it were, been murdered by her husband. Now although it's about AIDs, actually I wasn't interested in AIDS. What I was interested in was male/female-differing views of sexuality.

I was interested in wanting to say, 'You know what? Men do this and it's not such a big deal,' because that's what one feels as a man. I wanted to dramatize that. So the bit you see is after they've had a few of their first rows over it. They're both exhausted. He's staying up, he hasn't gone to bed. She emerges exhausted, unable to sleep and she wants to learn a bit more about what has happened.

It's not a very good picture; Liam Neeson is doing something odd that you may not understand, he's cleaning records, discs, little 45s.

[*Clip from* Sweet As You Are]

So that's me attempting to generate, out of very simple materials, some very strong feelings by the simplest device of all, which is to have people confront something that most of us perhaps have to confront or fear confronting, and to watch it played out in front of our eyes.

It's a very simple thing to do. It's only two people talking, but I think it's underrated as a powerful element in films today where people are a little over obsessed with the action and the cinematic.

In the second clip that I'm going to show you, which is from the film version of *Shadowlands*, the task that faced me was a task that faces many screenwriters, in many screenplays.

That is what the Americans call 'meet cute.' It's the moment at which the hero and the heroine meet. It's perhaps not the first meeting but it's the moment at which the spark flies, the moment at which you realise these two people are going to fall in love.

It's an extremely important moment, and most films that posit a love affair fail, in my opinion. They assert it, they show you a close up of a beautiful woman and a close up of a beautiful man, and they play the kind of music that makes out that they're loving each other and they try to persuade you, 'Look it's happening!'

In fact, when I was beginning to work on *Shadowlands* it was originally going to be directed by Sydney Pollack. [In the end] it was directed by Richard Attenborough, beautifully. Anyway, Sydney Pollack was going to do it, it was bought by Columbia for him, and his original idea was that the two parts would be played by Sean Connery and Barbra Streisand.

I was actually in one of the canteens in a Hollywood studio where Sean Connery was, and he came over to me and he said, 'I should have had that part.' He was very upset about missing it, and subsequently I was asked to write a part for him in which his instruction was, 'I want to be a professor. I want people to know I'm clever,' which happens a lot. I was once asked to write a part for Jack Nicholson and the brief was, 'He wants to be a general.'

Anyway, Sydney Pollack – when he was working with me – told me a story about *Sabrina*. He made a remake of the Billy Wilder film, which had Humphrey Bogart and Audrey Hepburn in. The late great Sydney Pollack was a stickler for motivation, and on *Sabrina* – this is his story – he couldn't work out why the Bogart character fell in love. He said, 'What is it? What's his motivation? What's happening?' In effect he was saying, 'Where's the scene that persuades me that this would happen?'

And it occurred to him that Billy Wilder was still alive, in retirement in Florida. So he rang him up and said, 'Billy this is Sydney, you know I'm remaking your wonderful film *Sabrina*.' I've no idea what Wilder made of that. But then Sydney said, 'I'd just like to know, why does Bogart fall in love?' And Wilder said, 'Because it's Audrey Hepburn.'

Sydney told that as a story against himself, but I think he's right and Wilder is wrong, which is a heretical thing to say. I don't think that is enough, just to be a gorgeous charismatic person. I think you need to see the wheels turning; you need to see that moment when one attitude shifts to another attitude. You have to write that and you have to think, 'How can I write that?'

In *Shadowlands* I had a middle aged don, a crusty bachelor don, very [defensive]. And I had a divorced Jewish woman who's a fan of his, who's read all his works, who's not exactly stalking him but she's clearly interested in him.

I have to write a scene; they've already met once, now he's invited her for tea because he feels it's polite. He hasn't got anywhere beyond that. All that he knows about this woman who's called Joy – Debra Winger – and all that I knew, because these are real people, is that she wrote poetry.

I got hold of her [Joy Gresham's] book of poetry and I found one poem. I didn't know anything else, I didn't know what happened between them, how the sparks flew. I had to create a scene in which what you actually witness happening is the guy waking up to the possibility that there's something in this woman that's special.

What I'm really saying is you're going to have to write those scenes. If you watch this, you'll see how I attempted to solve it. You can judge it for yourself. Just for your information it begins with [C.S.] Lewis's brother, who's another crusty old bachelor called Warnie, taking away Joy's little boy.

Warnie and Lewis have joked beforehand about Joy and her poetry, about how embarrassing it's going to be because she's a poetess, what could be worse? So his opening remark is a little tease against Lewis before he leaves Lewis in this embarrassing situation. My intention in this scene was to turn this embarrassing situation into the birth of love.

Now it's a pretty modest birth of love, don't expect too much.

[*Clip from* Shadowlands]

I consciously structured that story around – as you can tell from that clip – the notion of pain and the value of pain. When I was first asked to write it (I didn't want to write it at all, I didn't like C.S. Lewis), I thought there is something here that's about pain and love; about fear of losing love; causing one not to have love.

Those of you who know the story will know I haven't shown you all of the heart-breaking cancer death scenes, which I've spared you. That's what interested me about the story. And it's worth noting, I spoke at the beginning about creating a structure, I think when you write a screenplay it's like building a house; you have to engineer the structure first before you start adding all the detail.

You really have to get that structure in place. I always know when I begin a screenplay where it's going to end. Not everybody does. I find that very valuable. So a little moment like that is actually part of a journey about pain and the value of pain.

The next clip I'm going to show you is from the only film that I have written and directed myself. I am going to advise you very strongly at the end of this talk to become a writer-director if you want to be a writer.

I have done it, and this puts me in a good position to say two things: Being a director is easier than you think. I was always in awe of directors – rightly by the way, many directors are geniuses. However quite a few directors are completely hopeless and you really could have made the whole film without them present.

In fact, I've been on one film where the director might as well have just stayed away. You can make a film as a director because you get an amazing team around you – you get a cinematographer who knows what he's doing, a designer who knows what he's doing, a first assistant who knows what he's doing...

All they want from you is to know what results to produce. And if you're a writer you know that, so don't be frightened of directing. I loved it. The bad news is that when you've made your film they torture you to death for several years.

It's the distribution process and it is horrible. This is where you have test screenings, this is where nobody understands your film, this is where you get made to change it. I was so bruised by the end of this process with this one film of mine that I've never done another that I've directed myself since.

But I'm glad I did it. It's made me respect directors even more which is good. But it's also made me aware, as you'll see from this clip, I'm not a great director but I'm adequate. I can do what needs to be done.

I had small children at the time I wrote this story, and if I was going to write and direct it I thought I'd better be close to home. So I wrote a story that could all be shot 15 minutes from home. It's a 19th century tale, quite a melodrama really, about the lord of a mansion (the mansion was next door to us. We took it over and stripped it). This lord has a sick wife and can't therefore have a child and he wants an heir.

So he goes to a surrogate mother, he hires a woman in France because he doesn't want it to be known about, to bear a child. And the child when it's born is immediately whipped away from the surrogate mother and brought back to his house.

The surrogate mother regrets this, spends seven years trying to find her own child and finally traces where they're living. By this time the child has become a brat, and is in need of a new governess because every other one has left because she's so brattish.

The surrogate mother applies to be governess while the lord of the manor, the father of the child, is away. She is taken on. Then the lord comes back to discover that the woman he had secret sex with to produce the child is installed as the governess of his brattish child.

Now there comes a moment – in a sense this is another 'meet cute' – where you need to demonstrate the sexual excitement going to happen between your two stars. In this clip what you'll see is how I decided to indicate this, and it's a bit less wordy than some of my other stuff.

It has a dual purpose this scene. It's to make you realise that both characters are turning each other on, because of course that's where the story is going. And secondly, it's a little bit of free parenting advice by me. I had three young children at the time so I was very interested in parenting.

Since the film they've been sent back to the props department of course, but it was very useful to look at that as a father, and it is really a film about parenting to be honest, although there's a lot of sex in it. Which I'm not going to show you, this isn't the sexy bit.

I insisted on my own casting. As a result I didn't have a star, as a result it was deemed to be an art movie, as a result I didn't get proper distribution so I was thoroughly punished for my pig-headedness. But they're both very good actors, and I must say I've been served astonishingly by actors, as you've seen from the clips.

So Sophie Marceau was the French governess, and Stephen Dillane was the young lord of the manor. My instruction to them was that I wanted to know as I watched this scene unfold that the two of them were going to want to have sex.

[CLIP from Firelight*]*

So as you can gather those two are going to start grappling in a slightly more naked way, a little further on into the movie. And also there you have my entire theory of parenting; you want her to love you, I want her to be loved.

That ties in with what I was saying right at the beginning about an author having authority. There's going to come a point in the stuff you write where you've got to write something that's of some value. How do you get that value? You get it through living.

So you can't just spend your entire time writing. You've got to get out there and learn and live and have experiences and have relationships and process them all through your screenwriting.

So now I'm going to show you a clip from *Gladiator*, and it's not going to be one of the battles, or one of the gladiatorial combats, because I had nothing to do with any of those. They were all storyboarded before I even came on board. On *Gladiator* I was the third writer. The second writer was John Logan who will be speaking in this series in a little while. The first writer, David Franzoni, came up with the idea and started it off.

The re-writing game in Hollywood is like serial marriage; you marry one wife and then you tire of her and you chuck her out with a divorce settlement and then you marry again and tire of her and chuck her out, and then you marry again.

The wives never meet. The first wife and the third wife quite often get on, but the first and second hate each other and the second and third hate each other. You don't meet these people. Everybody thinks you sit in a room and bat ideas around. No way.

All that happens is you receive a script, in my case they were two weeks off shooting, Russell Crowe had walked out of the read through saying, 'This script sucks, it's not working,' in which he was wrong by the way. The script that John Logan had delivered was brilliant in all sorts of ways. Of course it could be improved and of course I improved it. That was my job.

I was asked initially to simply solve the problem of making Russell Crowe a more attractive character, because as you gather, character is my thing. Character and emotion. What I said was, 'This is a fantastic project but I don't like Maximus and I don't like him because he's a killer and I don't like killers.'

Probably a lot of people do like killers, but I don't. In fact I like men who love their wives and children, because that's me. So why don't we make this big, butch tough general a guy who wants to be a farmer, not a soldier and loves his wife and children.

Now there's one slight wrinkle here and that is his wife and child are going to die. That was in the plot, I couldn't change that. So I said no problem, we will have an afterlife hence, '…in this life or the next.' So we're going to make this guy go through this entire film to get to his wife.

He's not going through this entire film to kill the bad guy; he's going through it to do something loving. And that decision alone, I believe, doubled the receipts of that film because it meant that women liked the film. Women went to the film because here was a hero who is dead butch and can protect you against baddies, but he's tender and a family man. That is not Russell Crowe, that is me. And you know and I know he's never done anything as good since has he?

So that's the background story. The clip I'm going to show you does not have Russell Crowe in it, not because I'm anti-Russell Crowe, I truly think he is a sublimely good actor. He's been cast in the film I'm working in at present, which is the film version of *Les Miserables*, and I'm absolutely thrilled. I think he is sensationally good, so I am not here to disrespect a very fine actor.

But he's not in the clip I'm going to show you. This is the clip in which Commodus murders his father, Marcus Aurelius [played by] Joaquin Phoenix and Richard Harris. I want to show you this because I want to tell you a little bit about this re-writing process.

Also, more importantly, character and caring. Caring about characters does not just apply to your hero, it applies to your baddie as well. I believe that a baddie [who] you understand why

they're a baddie is a better baddie. You're more interested, you're more engaged. You believe the baddie more.

A baddie who just twirls his moustache and says he wants to torture everybody doesn't interest me. I want to know where that baddie is coming from. So my task in re-writing this scene, I mean I re-wrote everything, but in re-writing this scene was to make Commodus somebody you could relate to.

The scene as it arrived to me consisted of Commodus sitting by the bed on which his father Marcus Aurelius is lying, and he's speaking about his father, and kind of moaning about how his father doesn't love him. And then you realise that his father's dead and you guess that he has killed him.

My reaction to this is that is not the train crash. I want to see the train crash; I want to see him kill his father. So I re-wrote the scene, bringing his father back to life. I wanted to actually see that interaction between them.

I wrote some speeches in which Commodus attempts to explain himself to his father and basically to the audience, so that even though he's still a bad guy you think, 'Do you know what? I can kind of understand where he's coming from.' I then had the idea that his desire for his father to love him, which is the emotional engine of the scene, would become the energy with which he murders his father. In other words he would hug him to death. I thought, 'Wow, that puts the button on it in the most amazing way – why don't you love me? Crunch, crunch.' Great, great stuff.

I thought I'd made that up, but I was talking about this lecture and my son said, 'You do know, don't you, that in Blade Runner there's a scene in which exactly the same thing happens?' Rutger Hauer gets his maker and holds him in his arms and I think twists his neck and kills him. But it's very, very similar. The minute my son said that I thought, 'I can't have made that up, that must have come from Ridley Scott.' So it shows how your memory deceives you, and your desire to be glorious and for everybody to love you and all the rest of it.

I think that must have come from Ridley, and I think Ridley must have said to me, 'Okay, you want to bring Marcus Aurelius back to life for the scene, you want to see him kill him, let's do it this way.'

Now as part of the intricacy of the re-writing process, when you do a rewrite, you do not chuck out other people's work if it's good. If it's good, grab it and use it. There's one speech in the middle of this scene which is pure John Logan. I'll tell you when it starts and finishes, just so you can see which bits I wrote, which bits John wrote and how they go together.

The real reason I'm showing you this is once again to talk about the delivery of emotion through character which I think is the core of all screenwriting.

[*CLIP from* Gladiator*]*

I think that's a really cool way to kill somebody. So that was *Gladiator*. I've got one more clip to show you. It's from *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*, not an entirely successful film. I'll just tell you very briefly the concept I had, because it gives you an idea of how my mind works in constructing screenplays.

It's a film about Elizabeth I. The Queen cannot marry because if she married, the husband would be superior religiously and you can't have a superior if you're Queen. So you can't marry. You can't have a child. But you want to be loved, of course you do, and she wants to be loved by Walter Raleigh, so what's she going to do?

I devised a triangle. She decides, because she's a grown up woman, she's a mature woman, she's not somebody who can be pettily jealous, that her favourite lady-in-waiting, Bess, who's very pretty, can provide the physical side of the love with Walter Raleigh, she can provide the spiritual side of it, the emotional side of it, the intimacy.

And the three of them all loving each other, because she loves Bess, can make something greater than the sum of their parts. That's her idea. And she sets this up in the course of the film, and they play along with it because she is the Queen.

That I found extremely interesting, to put my main character in this situation because you just know, when you see that starting, it ain't going to work. Why is it not going to work? Not because she says, 'Oh, I hear you've been sleeping with Bess,' or indeed like Miranda Richardson [in Sweet As You Are], 'What was she like, was she different to me?'

You're not going to have any of that; she's the Queen, she's bigger than that. But the thing that blows her apart is when Bess gets pregnant and suddenly she's confronted with the physical reality of the thing she will never have – a baby.

You may notice a parenting theme creeping through here. We've had a father and son, we had it in *Firelight*, we have it here again, that's okay, you go with what you've got. She, Elizabeth, can't handle emotionally the reality that there's going to be a baby that the man she loves is the father and that she is not the mother. This tells her everything that is her failure as a woman.

I structured most of the film around that. Unfortunately there was a whole lot of battle stuff, and you may have gathered by now that I'm not big on battles. That, for me, got in the way but never mind about that, these things happen.

So there I was, thinking 'How am I going to resolve this situation?' Obviously we're going to have an 'explosion'; she's been so gracious, so in control, so magnificent and suddenly she goes crazy when she knows Bess is pregnant. She hits her, she behaves badly, and all of the control vanishes.

How do we end the movie from there? It seemed to me that this whole story was about a woman discovering that there's more to life than having a child.

So what you're about to see is the end of the movie. This is an interesting example of what I said at the beginning; know your ending before you begin, know where you are going because it's going to influence every single stage as you construct that story. What happens at the end is she goes to see the baby; this is her act of reconciliation; to hold the baby, Raleigh's baby, Bess's baby, in her arms.

It was a scene that took many, many takes as you can imagine, because babies can't be guaranteed to do the right thing. They eventually got a take which is absolutely perfect as you will see, and what I then faced was the idea of how to indicate what she's feeling at the end?

What I opted for, and the production accepted, was a piece of voiceover which is widely known as a director's mistake, but this was planned. I think it works really powerfully.

This is a declaration by Elizabeth that, in my dreams, I imagine women all over the world echoing. Nobody I've noticed has echoed it at all, but never mind. That was the plan. So we'll run that clip and then I'm going to tell you some more practical stuff.

[CLIP from Elizabeth: The Golden Age*]*

By the way, I was talking about how screenwriters write story; that look to camera was written by me, it was in the screenplay. That is what you do as a screenwriter. You imagine the entire effect, and that's the only time in the entire movie that she looks straight at camera. I wanted that to deliver the final punch: 'I have transcended the limitations of my situation, God give me strength to bear this mighty freedom. I am myself.' It's a rallying cry, isn't it?

The shot that followed I thought was rubbish, but that's also the thing that happens. It's sort of like a funny insect trailing around. It was so strong up to that point.

Now I've completely overrun myself, I was going to give you an awful lot of practical advice and I'm absolutely running out of time. So I'm going to run through this very, very quickly now.

If you want to be a screenwriter I'm going to say that you need three things. You need talent obviously – and by the way, talent can be learned, I truly believe that. As a screenwriter you have to be this fountain of ideas all the time.

You've got to be confident; you need self-confidence tempered by self-criticism. That's my little kind of summary of it. If you don't criticise your work and you don't let other people criticise it you will go to hell. If you have no confidence, you will produce nothing. So you want this very difficult balance. If you've got that, you will be

able to do it. You've just got to keep working, and that's the second thing, discipline.

If you haven't got discipline, forget it. This is not a game that you do like an essay at university, where you stay up all night on black coffee at the last minute. Maybe some people do, I don't believe it.

You do it every day. You do it systematically. You don't let yourself stop. You make yourself write even when you don't want to write. You make yourself write even when people have criticised you and you feel like hell. You just keep going.

Now okay, there are going to be times when you can't, I understand that. There's a little trick that I've got, if you actually do get blocked and you find it's not happening. Say to yourself – because that's the critic on your shoulder saying, 'You're crap, you've always been crap,' and you've got to shut that critic up – say, 'I'm not writing now, I'm just making notes. I'm just going to jot down a few notes about the way the scene will develop. It's not the real thing. Don't comment on it, critic on my shoulder.' And you start writing notes and I swear to you in five minutes you'll be writing again. It's always this balance between self-criticism and self-confidence.

The third thing is you are going to have to have a very particular kind of temperament. This is because the life of a screenwriter is unmitigated hell. You may not have picked this up from what I've said so far but it really, really is.

Everything you write will be ripped to pieces by other people who are not fools. It would be easy if they were fools, you could despise them, but they're not. They're smart people. Every time they rip your script apart you think, 'Why didn't I see that, it's so obvious?' You feel like you are nothing at the end of every session with notes and you've somehow got to drag yourself up again and go back to work.

You have to do that repeatedly, and after you've done it, draft after draft, in comes a director who seems to think that the script is an early sketch that he can do what he likes with. And then along come actors who say, 'Oh, I think we'll do something different.'

You cannot be a shrinking violet with a passionate sense of your own voice. They don't want your voice. They don't want you, they just want a job done. And that's okay, they're paying you. If you want to do your own thing, go and write poetry. If you want to work as a screenwriter you are working for somebody else and you have got to deliver.

And that is painful because they don't hang around being nice to you. They'll be nice to you briefly; you'll get this, 'Yes it's great, we've really made some forward steps here.' 'We' you notice the 'we'? 'But I think we have perhaps got the central character a little wrong, I think basically we've made our central character boring.'

And you want to die, because 'we' is 'you' isn't it? So it's extremely tough and it will continue to be tough. You will be sacked and you won't know why. And they won't phone you up to say why you've been sacked because they don't like making those phone calls.

They leave that to the agent to do. You hear it on the grapevine, 'What? Somebody else is writing my script? How did that happen?' It's absolutely humiliating. So what you have to be is somebody who is able to cope with that. You've got to have an armoured ego. You've got to come back into every new script conference fresh as a daisy, gushing with enthusiasm and new ideas.

Because what else are you doing there if you haven't? And every single time you get criticised, a part of you thinks, 'Do you know what? I no longer know what's right and wrong. I no longer know what's good and bad.' This happens to you. And what happens then? You start doing what you're told. Your producer or your development executive says, 'We need this, we need that,' and you say, 'I'll do that, I'll do that.' You no longer know, you're an automaton, so of course you do rubbish work.

That's why what you have to do, and it's really hard, is take all the criticism, understand what hasn't worked, tell the team, 'I hear you, I know it hasn't worked, let me solve it. Don't tell me what to do, I will solve that. That's my job, but I have heard you.'

And you need to have heard them as well, you need to have taken notes. Endless producers have said to me, 'I've had a writer listen to me, take all the notes, go away and come back and they've not done anything. They don't get it, what's going on? Wasn't he awake in that meeting?' And the answer is he's frozen, poor chap.

So be aware, this is what this life is going to be like. I want very quickly to say a word to any of you here in production who are on the other side of this. I have been on the other side of this; I was a producer briefly at the BBC. I commissioned scripts. The scripts came in and they were dreadful.

I know what it's like, I feel your pain, I really do, you producers. I know how you yearn for a writer to produce a great work and in comes dross time after time. All I want to say to you is reverse what I've been saying to the writers. Create a cradle of confidence around your writers. Make them feel they can take risks and you'll get much better work out of them.

Most producers and development executives don't do this, what they do is they create fear. They don't even know they're doing it, but they create fear because they're afraid. They want it to work. Their job's on the line, so there's fear going down the line. And what you have to do is the exact opposite. You have to create an atmosphere of such trust that the writer says, 'Hey I've got this wacky idea, how about it?'

Half those wacky ideas will be no good, and half of them might be brilliant. And that is what is going to produce great work, so I would urge those producer executives among you to change your ways, avoid your current habit of never ever responding rapidly to scripts; start being aware that the writer is even now in the attic with the noose, waiting for your phone call.

At the very least tell him when you're going to respond and when you sack him do it yourself. It's not that hard. Please. That's just a word to the production people. I've been sacked three times. Never have I heard of it from the production team. Never have they said a single thing to me after it. We all act like that didn't happen. Somebody farted but let's not talk about it.

The last thing I'm going to say, because I'm terribly sorry I've gone on a bit too long, is what are you to do now, those of you who want to write screenplays? Three things: If you possibly can, be a writer-director. You will then have power. If you're just a writer you have no power and you will suffer. You'll get paid – it's nice, I like being paid – but I don't like not having control.

I do like collaboration. I don't like having things taken away from me and being made to feel powerless. If you're a writer-director you're in the hot seat and, as I said to you earlier about directing, it's easier than you think. You can make a movie on your iPhone. Show what you can do. Actually make the movie, because screenwriting is moviemaking, it's not writing dialogue. So I would say be a writer-director if you possibly can.

Second, don't go to Hollywood. You think Hollywood is the dream, it's the ultimate, it's where you're going to hit the big time. Go there and you will be tortured to death. You'll make money but you will be tortured to death. You will piss your talent away and I have done a lot of that so I speak to you as a reformed sinner. Don't go to Hollywood. Stay here in London, there are grand films being made here that are global stage films. *The King's Speech* has gone everywhere but that's not a Hollywood film.

You don't have to go to Hollywood to be a big cheese. And here you will be respected more. It's true you won't get paid as much, by a very big margin actually. But that's another thing, the minute you start getting paid Hollywood money you're in the trap. From then on you have to go on. You're like an addict, you need your fix. So don't start. Stay here.

Thirdly, write your best stuff. Don't write what you're just offered, don't say, 'I'm waiting to hear what I've been offered, oh I've got to do Fast & Furious 7, fine I'll do that.' Write the best you've got in you, because at the end of the day your life is going to end and you want to leave behind your best work. And all of that time you say, 'Well, I'm just doing it for the money,' is wasted.

Finally be Zen. What I mean by that is do all your work with all your heart and passion. Every stupid little bit of it; every rewrite, every revision. Put all of

yourself into it. Don't begrudge it, don't be cynical. Be as wholehearted and as talented and as passionate as you can.

At every single stage, you owe it to yourself. You owe it to your craft to deliver at that level. So do that and then let it go. Wave it goodbye, it's gone. The minute you click send and your script goes off to the production team, put it out of your mind and start something else.

That's the only way you will not go insane in this strange business. Okay I'm stopping there now; we've got time for some questions. Thank you very much.

APPLAUSE

Q&A

Tanya Seghatchian: Bill, thanks so much for being so candid, honest and illuminating.

I'm very interested in what you're saying about re-writing, particularly when you say that all you did [on *Gladiator*] was stick in an afterlife. Obviously just sticking in an afterlife brought so much more, but enriching a text when the story is there, the characters are there and yet something is missing and you're against the clock... How easy is it to find that multi-layer?

WN: It's very difficult. It's easy to say, 'This is what it needs,' and it's easy to do a page one rewrite where you chuck away the thing and start again. What's difficult is when you're told, 'Actually, we're shooting and we like that bit and we want to keep it,' and you have to do this complicated tapestry. That is very difficult.

You can't do it alone, you're helped. I was helped by the director Ridley Scott, by the producer Doug Wick, by the executive producer Walter Parkes. My work was being sent back to Walter in LA every evening. Every lunchtime I was with Ridley and Doug going over it, so it's extremely collaborative when you're at that stage.

And I'm producing this shower of ideas and they're saying 'We'll have that one, we'll have that one, put that one in, we like this bit, keep this...' and the designer is saying to me, 'Is there a bathhouse scene? I'm building a bathhouse,' and I'm saying, 'I haven't written a bathhouse,' so it's a funny, crafty sort of thing.

TS: That creative collaboration is something I'm very interested in; the alchemy between the writer, director and producer. Early on do you need it, do you miss it if you don't have it, or is being a writer precisely having all those things going on in your head without other voices helping you at the early stages?

WN: I think it's fantastic. My ideal way to write a screenplay would be to know in advance who my director was and to work from the beginning. That's what film is. I don't want to do it all by myself. If I want to do it all by myself I'll write a novel.

I have always found that things have improved, but you must have trust. You can't have a competitive situation where people are jockeying to say, 'But that's my bit, and that's my bit.' We were so lucky on *Gladiator* because they were spending half a million dollars a day on shooting it and they were absolutely shitting themselves. So there was no messing around; we had to get this baby rolling and we had to make it work fast. That stripped the entire ego out of it. That was actually great.

TS: Did you find when you were starting out in television that that empty screen was the same propulsion of having to fill the slot and therefore you had to do it? And the film business is so slow if you don't know there's a slot to fill?

WN: Yes, very much so. I loved the television work; I only stopped doing it because I got greedy and wanted more money. It's absolutely wonderful, the television work. I was working with a director I loved and a producer I loved, and the three of us were doing it all together and I was there on the set and in the editing room.

It's just brilliant, and I must just tighten my belt and go back to that because creatively that's the best.

TS: And this lure of filthy lucre that Hollywood offers; fast and cheap. Do you get what you pay for?

WN: Do you mean if you pay the writer more do you get better work? Not at all. There's no connection whatsoever. It's all completely mad, some of the money that's paid. On *Gladiator* I was being paid like a taxi, but an extremely expensive taxi, by the week.

And when they got to a million dollars they said, 'We can't pay you any more, honestly.' So I said, 'Alright,' and I just went on working because I was totally engaged. Now, it's no sacrifice to [keep] working when you've already been paid a million dollars so I can't claim any glory for that. But there is no relation at all between the amount you pay a writer and the results you get out of it.

Except that the better you get as a writer, the more you can charge, so I suppose there is some correlation. The better writers are more expensive. But I'm interested now in playing a slightly different role, which is saying maybe I should be more involved in the project and get the back end, if there is a back end – which means the proceeds afterwards – rather than being paid a lot up front.

When I said, 'Don't go to Hollywood,' one of the things I meant is if you are asked to work on a very big, expensive film that's going to be budgeted at over a hundred million dollars it's very hard to get those films rolling and the chances are it won't happen.

So although they've got a big enough budget to pay you your million dollars plus, it'll probably not happen. Whereas a little cheap film that they're making for three million dollars, and they're only paying you £30,000 – one can live on £30,000 – that'll probably get made. Am I right?

TS: Absolutely. And also how important is it to see your work filmed?

WN: Absolutely vital.

TS: For writers starting off, obviously you learn from the experience of seeing the mistakes you made and that the director makes.

WN: It's like having a still born child. I have 11 screenplays into which I've poured all my passion, and they are sitting on studio shelves. I don't think they're ever going to come out again.

I have a failure rate. I worked it out. If you include the television work, one in three has never been made. That's not bad but I'm cheating a little bit because I'm including the television in that, and television tends to get made. But these are my still born babies, it's horrible.

Q (from the floor): I'm writing a TV drama and I just wanted to ask your advice because character seems to be your speciality: I've got six characters and I'm worried that by having so many the audience is going to lose the connection with them, rather than just having one main protagonist. So I just wanted to ask if there was any advice you have for writing numerous characters?

WN: You're quite right that it's much easier to track a single protagonist. You're doing television. In most movies there is one central character who, if you watch it, is almost never off screen. It's quite shocking actually how linear the average movie is, and that the hero is where the focus of our attention goes.

Of course you can do six, particularly if you have multiple episodes. We can think of endless examples of television where we gradually get to know all six, and they are all equal. I've never done it. I think it's difficult. I can only think that what you're going to have to do is very rapidly get us a fix on each of your six in your first episode.

It's a very challenging thing to do. Once you've got the thing rolling you can rely on people knowing that one of your characters is pining for a baby and another of your characters is a secret porn addict, or whatever.

That will play into the scenes you subsequently write, but at the beginning, when you're establishing it, it's very hard to do. And it's very interesting to look at some of the great American TV series and to look at their first episode. They're sometimes astonishingly good.

In the first episode of *The West Wing*, you just are in awe of the people who can do this. You look at the devices they used to anchor each character in a distinct way at the beginning. The other thing I would say, if you have got a bit of a run, is maybe you can allow some of your six not to

come to the fore for another episode. Maybe you can say you're going to concentrate on three a little bit more.

TS: You do work predominantly with triangles, don't you?

WN: I do, yes.

TS: Is it a perfect dramatic shape?

WN: In a way. With a couple you've got nowhere to go. You would need to introduce the grit in the oyster. But it's true; when you mention that, why not work with a foursome or more than that? Maybe I'm just taking the easy way.

TS: *Life Story* was the first thing of yours that I saw...

WN: That was four.

TS: That's one of the reasons I brought that up, because I liked the fact that there were more than three characters in there. Another question.

Q (from the floor): I was just wondering how much time you actually spend on set, if any? And when you're there, whether you're welcomed or scorned?

WN: It varies a great deal. In my early days in television, and with the *Shadowlands* film, I was very welcomed and was around a great deal. Increasingly what happens is, as a writer, you get busy and you're not on set if you're not needed. If you're needed they call for you and you'll be there.

With *Gladiator* I was there the whole time. I was in a caravan out the back, pumping out the next scene. But I wasn't physically on the set. Usually, to be honest, the minute they start shooting you bugger off and write your next script and earn a bit more money.

So they don't want you and you don't want to be there. I think that's a bit of a shame. In an ideal world the director would be constantly working with the writer and saying, 'This scene isn't quite working, what can we do?'

That was how it was in my early days in television and I did love it. It involves a lot of trust between director and writer, and most directors are a bit frightened of their writers. They think their writers know more than they do about the story, which is of course true.

They think their writer has got ideas, and they don't want that because they've got ideas. And they think the writer will steal their credit. We're trying, but we don't manage to. So on the whole I don't spend a lot of time on set. To be honest I've been on set and I've found it so painful, and watched things going so wrong and being done so stupidly, I just have to bite my tongue because I'm not powerful enough to tell them to do what I want.

TS: But given how passionate you've been about the right of a writer to have the credit, to have the control, why are you advising everyone in the room to be a writer-director?

WN: So they can have the control. Exactly that, so they can follow their baby through and direct it. The only reason people aren't directors is because they think they can't do it. Once you realise you can, why not do it? Actually there are a couple of reasons not to do it. With proper movies it will probably take you at least two years, if you're a writer-director.

If you're a writer you can pump out seven scripts in that time and get paid for each one of them. So really we writers are cowards, we're sitting taking the money and then whining and bleating in a corner because people don't pay us enough attention. If we would get out there and shoulder the burden as a writer-director, fine, then you're entitled to get the credit.

But one every two years is tough because if it fails, suddenly your career is down the toilet. And a lot of directors, you watch, they'll do an acclaimed first film, they'll do a second film that tanks and you never hear of them again. It's actually very brutal for directors.

TS: Simon Beaufoy in this [Lecture] series last year however, said on the subject of having been a writer and a director, that he found being able to rewrite the decision – which is what you do as a writer – but having to make the decision on set as a director was something that he discovered he didn't like doing so much. He liked having the

choice of being able to write it as red and then write it as blue as part of his creative process.

WN: You mean he didn't want to be in a position where he finally had to opt for red or blue? No, that's not something I feel, I'll happily opt for red or blue. I remember when I was directing *Firelight*, I was taken by the designer into one of the rooms who said they'd done the furniture.

I looked at it and said, 'That sofa is too heavy...' I had a very strong vision of it all. So he said, 'OK, fine' and I went back to shooting my next scene and about two hours later he said, 'Come out,' and outside there were 20 sofas lined up and he said, 'Pick a sofa.' So I said, 'That one' and in it went.

It so happened we were buying a sofa for our house at that time, from John Lewis. They said, 'That'll be six weeks delivery.' I said, 'Six weeks? I want it in an hour! I'm a director.' I like that, it's nice.

TS: That's the confidence, not the self-criticism.

Q (from the floor): You've written some really fantastic children's books, some of which I've read. I don't know how you found time to write them with all the screenplays. Have you ever considered, or in fact written, screenplay versions of any of your children's books? They are very filmic, very visual and epic. I'd just love to see some of them in film, especially the *Wind On Fire* series.

WN: Thank you for that. I would love to see them as films as well. I'll tell you what happened there. When I did my film *Firelight* and when it basically failed I said, 'OK, I'm not going to be able to make a career as a writer-director, I'm going back into the hell of being a screenwriter, so I must have something that is mine on the side. I will write a book.'

I'd written all these pompous novels before. I thought I had to de-pompous myself. I'd write for kids. You can't write pompous stuff for kids. So I wrote a children's book which was *The Wind Singer* and it was very successful.
3
I said to my agent, 'I am making good money writing films. This is a book. I don't want this to be an early draft of a film; the book must live in its own right. I want my child readers to read this and design and shoot the film in their heads, long before any film comes out. I'm going to write a trilogy, wait until all three books are out in paperback which will take about six years, and then we'll release the film rights.'

They said, 'Fine.' So six years go by, all my books are out, I say to the agent, 'You may now throw open the doors to the waiting throng,' and there was no-one out there. Nobody has come asking to make films out of them, they would be a little bit expensive so it can't just be anybody but nobody has come. They all assume that the rights have gone.

The way it works in Hollywood, as Tanya will know very well, in fact as Tanya did with *Harry Potter*, you get it practically in manuscript. You sneak it to a studio saying, 'This is red hot, make a decision in 10 minutes or we're taking it away,' and they wet themselves over that. And they say they'll do it. But when it's been around for a long time [they] think nobody else seems to want it, it must be no good. Am I right?

TS: I think the 'must be no good' thing is something that does happen. It has its moment, there's a heat and then the heat disappears. It's got nothing necessarily to do with the project itself. Although it happens the other way around as well; you can use the hype to make something which is hopeless seem terribly good and then two years down the line you're brought in to rewrite it thinking, 'How did this ever get commissioned?'

WN: I hope one day *The Wind On Fire* will be made into films, believe you me, if anybody out there wants it, it's there.

Q (from the floor): If you've got a handful of scripts which you think are ready and you want to send out there, but you've got zero contacts whatsoever in the industry, what would you recommend?

WN: Essentially you are going to have to get an agent. Without an agent it's very difficult because they aren't going to really pay any attention to them. Even with an agent it's hard, but at least if it

comes from an agent who says, 'I truly think this is the next hot writer,' it makes a big difference.

So that means sending them to an agent and that's difficult, because how do you get them to pay attention? All I can tell you is that there truly is a demand for great scripts. There really, really is. There aren't that many around. If you have written a great script, keep sending it out to agents, I think that's the best way to go.

Or you can send it to some company like Working Title which has a slush pile, and they have some wretched intern ploughing through them. It's all a bit miserable, but it's a chance so give it a go. But remember, if you're unknown, you've got to do the business in the first three, four, five pages.

And if, when you describe your project, you find yourself spending half an hour explaining the plot it's not going to happen. Your first one has got to be the most brilliant thing that's ever come out of you. And once you get that through and you become famous you can go on writing dreck for the rest of your life and they'll pay you for it.

But you've got to break through with that brilliant thing. It can be done, you've just got to keep sending it out, but there's a second thing you've got to do; you have to get better. Don't say, 'I've got six scripts, now I'll just carry on.' Get on to number seven and make it better.

TS: You did have this wonderful thing where you had a collective of writers reading each other's work in order to dispel the myth that everything is good and to enable people to help each other get it better. Are you still doing it, can you talk a bit about it?

WN: We didn't quite do that. It was a group of screenwriters and really the point of it was that we could all get together for a bitch and moan and tell each other what an awful life we were having. Which is extremely valuable, because you do think you're the only one who suffers these things.

You say, 'Has anybody else delivered a script and had nobody say anything for three months?' And they all put up their hands and say, 'Yeah, that happened to me, that Tanya Seghatchian, she didn't answer for three months,' or whatever. So it was partly that.

The helping each other happened a little bit but the awful truth is it's quite a commitment to read somebody's script. In the end, none of us quite had the energy to keep that group going, and I wish somebody would create an infrastructure. It was the infrastructure that defeated us; where to meet, you know? Maybe somebody will come up with that.

TS: We were actually trying to do that at the Film Council before it was abolished, but to do it partly online, so it might happen at the BFI. Then people can engage in a different form of peer to peer review, so we'll see what happens.

Q (from the floor): When you come into a job as a crafts person where you're rewriting or adapting and it's not your original material, presumably you look for something you can latch onto that you feel passionate about, that intrigues and inspires you. Have you ever done a job where you haven't found that but did it anyway? Or where you found out later on that it wasn't what inspired the producer or the director and that you're working at crossed purposes? Have you ever walked away from a job as a result of that particular sort of fire going out?

WN: Yes, the answer to all three is yes. I have done many jobs where I was offered it and I looked at it. Usually I say no, but if I look at it and I think yes there's something here that works for me, because not everybody can write everything. You have to know what you're good at.

I can't write a thriller, I'm just not good at it. So I don't take on thrillers. But yes, I find the thing in it that I can give, and then I always tell the company, 'This is what I would do to your project if you hire me' and I tell them in a lot of detail.

In fact I had exactly this happen recently. There's a film called *Pompeii* going into production and I was sent the script. It's about the explosion of the volcano. I didn't think it was good, although I thought it had a lot of potential. I said, 'There's something here that really interests me,' and what interested me was that they had a mythic character in it. It was the idea that two lovers can be told they are destined for each other by a prophet.

They haven't yet met but they've seen each other in a vision telling them this is going to be their one true love and they are going to love each other for all eternity. You then spend the first third of the film knowing that they're going to meet, and they haven't yet met. They're looking for each other and finally they meet, and the twist is they are the couple who are melted by the volcanic ash and found in an embrace at the beginning of the movie when you visit the real Pompeii and you see a couple embraced. It's their story.

I pitched this, and I think they were very interested and excited but it was so much more than they'd asked for that they walked away. Another one, I was going to do a Michael Mann story and I won't go into all the details but I pitched my version of it to him and his producer, Akiva Goldsman, was very excited by it.

We then went to Hollywood and I pitched it to Michael and he said, 'Actually, I want it to be something else.' We were about to go into the Warner Bros. meeting and I thought I have to be a good soldier, I would have to pitch what the director wanted. So I pitched his version, which I didn't like. I did my best. The top brass at Warner Bros. [asked] 'but what about the ending?' which I didn't like. 'Isn't that a problem?'

Michael Mann said it would be alright, and as we walked out of the room I said to him, 'I can't do this, I just can't do this.' It would have been a very big payday for me, but I thought this is mad, I am trying to become him, and I can't do that, so I walked away from it. So you have to know what you can do. You have to be prepared not to take the money.

If you're so desperate you must be paid, well OK then be paid. Do it and do it as well as you can. But ideally be able to say no if you know you are not in tune with it, because different people have different tunes, you know?

Q (from the floor): I've never really heard a good answer to this question, but given the eloquence of your lecture I'd be very interested to hear you give it a go. It's something that all creative people seem to struggle with which is the 'In hindsight and retrospect, what on Earth was I thinking?' Are there any tips you have for how you avoid those moments of, 'What on Earth came over me?' and how you become better at avoiding them and seeing them when they appear in your thought processes.

WN: Yes, the screenwriting process is both micro and macro and while you're writing it's imperative to have before you the entire arc of your story, even when you're working on an individual little scene.

I would say what goes wrong with most screenplays is the screenwriter gets absorbed in the minutiae of a particular sequence of events and doesn't see what effect it's going to have on the overall story.

In fact directors are very prone to this error. They'll see an amazingly powerful scene, and it will be a powerful scene, but it may actually take that character in a wrong direction. So you as a writer have to have a very strong sense of that macro shape. I do it by writing, when I structure a film to start with, I literally write it down on a single piece of paper, what that structure is.

Then as I'm working it will quite often change and I'll change that single piece of paper, but I'm always looking back to see where am I in that journey. That doesn't mean I avoid the problem you describe. The problem I have most often is, every time I go into a production meeting, a lot of highly intelligent people have worked over my script and said, 'We don't think this quite works,' and, 'What about that?'

Usually my reaction is, 'What an idiot I am, why didn't I see that?' The only consolation I can offer is that you don't see it because you're solving problem A and as problem A is solved problem B comes to light. Your eye is on the solution to problem A – they spot that problem B has come to light.

That's the process, so you can't take it to heart. Finally the answer to your question is you let other people help you. Very important. Other people who come to it cold, there's nothing like a cold reading of a script to expose these obvious things.

TS: And an honest answer I suppose.

WN: Yes, yes.

Q (from the floor): Several of those clips were very important musical moments as well and I wondered, as a screenwriter, how much contribution the music will make and sometimes the idea that you definitely do not want music at that moment.

WN: You're completely right, I can't think of a single great movie that doesn't have a great score. I consciously write a sequence which I know will have music on it. It will be visual and musical, it won't have dialogue and it'll perform a function at that point in the movie.

May be it will give us a rest. Maybe it will excite us, maybe it'll work us up, whatever. I obviously don't write the music, nor do I write what the music does, although sometimes I will. Sometimes I'll say, 'We begin a tune here which will tie together the next seven scenes and will climax at the end of the seventh,' – I might write that.

Which is a bit of a cheek really, because it's not what you're supposed to do, but I think music is so important and it can transform something and you need to know that when you're writing. You need to write with music in mind. I listen to a lot of music when I'm dreaming up my ideas, though not when I'm writing.

I spend a lot of time lying on a sofa listening to Classic FM and I'll get this random selection of different pieces of emotive music floating by and each one will trigger a new sequence of emotions in me and I'll suddenly think, 'Of course, he loves his brother, that's what it's about, I want that scene where he turns around and sees his brother.'

So I think music is incredibly important. I, as a writer, have no control over that and it upsets me when I see music being misused in a film I've worked on. There's precious little I can do about it, alas, unless I'm the writer-director.

And on my own film, I worked tremendously on the music with a wonderful composer, Chris Gunning, who delivered a fantastic score which won an Ivor Novello Award. It just thrilled me to bits, that whole process.

Q (from the floor): I've been waiting 16 or 17 years to ask this question. I didn't know who to ask it to but now I know. Why love if losing hurts so much? That scene from *Shadowlands* has such incredible words, but I have to ask, are they your words or are they C.S. Lewis's words?

WN: I hope I'm not going to shock you now. There isn't a word of C.S. Lewis's in the entire movie, it's all me. With two exceptions. The thing you heard, 'Pain is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world.' I don't write rubbish like that, that's C.S. Lewis.

And I think that's the only one, every other bit is me. It's like the Russell Crowe story, the pain is my pain, the love is my love, the fear of commitment is my fear of commitment. That's why I identified... I was 35 when I wrote that, I'm 63 now, and I was going through a time when I was definitely avoiding emotional commitment because of fear of being hurt and I channelled all that through C.S. Lewis.

There's nothing that happens in that film that exists outside the film, apart from the outline of the story, which did happen. We don't know how they fell in love, we don't know what they said to each other. Well I know, because I wrote it, it's all me.

Including a line which you'll find on the internet quoted all over the place saying C.S. Lewis, sometimes they say Anthony Hopkins actually, which shows how stupid people are, which is 'We read to know we're not alone.'

Which was a line I wrote for the film, when I added a different plot line in, the plot line with James Frain in it, the student, and Lewis says to him, 'We read to know we're not alone.' Which is my profound belief as well. It's all me, this is what I want to say about we screenwriters. We do it. Why aren't we being recognised?

Q (from the floor): One thing you said that really fascinated me was what you felt you could offer to a screenplay and a story, almost seems like a voice you can give to a story. Is that something you always felt that you had from the beginning or is it something you developed after an amount of time writing screenplays?

WN: I'm not sure I do feel I have a voice to offer. I wish I could offer the voice, I don't think anybody wants my voice in films to be honest with you. What I think I can increasingly offer, as my career has gone along, is an insight into what happens between people when they hurt each other and love each other and so forth.

And I've kind of specialised in that, so when I get to work on a film I'll usually deepen a character and make their responses more truthful. That's what I'm trying to do anyway. Anybody can do that, but I can do it as well, and I think how do you learn to do that? You don't learn to do it by going to screenwriting school. You learn to do it by screwing up your own love life a great deal. By talking to people, by knowing about the pain there is in the world. By living through it yourself. I've not lived through an enormous amount of pain. I've never been to war for example, I wish I had. If I had, like Tolstoy went to war and god he could write about war, so I think this does really emphasise what I want to say.

Your greatness as a writer is your greatness as a human being. That's why it's such a wonderful thing to do. I think we writers, and I know there are many writers here today, we writers are so fortunate because we live our lives twice. We live it through our experience and then we live it through the reflection on that experience that comes through our writing, which then deepens our subsequent experience.

So we are the people who are going through this life awake, and we're surrounded by people in a sort of trance state. But luckily they're the people who pay the money to go to the cinema.

TS: Well Bill, I think that's an amazing way of summing up the beauty of being a writer actually. To live your life twice is something we all want. It's a form of immortality. Thank you for sharing yours with us.

WN: Thank you very much.