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CHAPTER ONE

This Is Your Life

Finding inspiration from within your own life is a time-honored approach in low-budget filmmaking. While anyone can scribble down funny, sad and sexy moments from their life, the real trick is finding those events in your day-to-day existence that are truly universal.

None of the four films highlighted in the chapter would be correctly labeled “biographies.” But each was taken from the writer’s life experience and then filtered through their dramatic sensibilities to create classic stories that connected with audiences around the world.



Living in Oblivion

Tom DiCillo

TITO

Why does my character have to be a dwarf?

NICK

He doesn't have to be.

TITO

Then why is he? Is that the only way you can make this a dream, to put a dwarf in it?

NICK

No, Tito, I...

TITO

Have you ever had a dream with a dwarf in it? Do you know anyone who's had a dream with a dwarf in it? No! I don't even have dreams with dwarves in them. The only place I've seen dwarves in dreams is in stupid movies like this! "Oh make it weird, put a dwarf in it!" Everyone will go "Whoa, this must be a fuckin' dream, there's a fuckin' dwarf in it!" Well I'm sick of it! You can take this dream sequence and stick it up your ass!

*You're crossing a potentially deadly minefield when you attempt to take a short film and expand it into a feature. What was once sharp and clever can quickly turn repetitive and dull if you take a wrong step or make the wrong choices. Tom DiCillo successfully navigated that minefield when he turned his short, *Living in Oblivion*, into what is unquestionably one of the classic low-budget movies of all time.*

More importantly, he also took what at first appears to be a very narrow and "inside" story — about a director nearly losing his mind while shooting his movie — and turned it into a universal story about the creative process.

(Be aware that this interview contains spoilers about key plot points.)

What was going on in your career before you made *Living in Oblivion*?

My first feature was a film called *Johnny Suede*, starring Brad Pitt. I busted my ass on that one for at least four years to get it made. The film never quite found an audience and the distribution of it was, frankly, really disappointing. It made making my second film really, really difficult.

I had written a screenplay called *Box of Moonlight* and could not get the money for it. Years and years went by, two, three, four, five, and I just reached a point of such maniacal desperation that I said, "I have to do something, no matter what." It was out of that intense frustration that *Living in Oblivion* was born.

It wasn't born out of, "Hey, I want to make a funny movie." It really came out of one of the most intense periods of anger and frustration in my career. And, ironically, it turned out to be the funniest movie I've ever made. I think in some way that is part of what makes my humor my humor: It's humor based upon real, human intensity, desperation, and foolishness.

To use a screenwriting term, what was the inciting incident that kicked off the creation of *Living in Oblivion*?

I was invited to the wedding of my wife’s cousin. It was a three-day event and on the first night — you have to understand, I was carrying with me four and a half years of frustration — I had a martini.

I had never had a martini before in my life. And I said, “Wow, if that’s how you feel after one martini, let’s have another one.” So I had two. And I said, “This is just unbelievable.” And I had three. Later I realized that I should never, ever, ever do that again.

But it was after the third martini that this guy came up to me, who I vaguely recognized from an acting class I had taken maybe four or five years earlier. And he says, “Oh, Tom, it’s great to see you, man. You’re so lucky, you made *Johnny Suede*, you made a movie. Lights, camera, action.”

And I just erupted at him. I said, “Shut the fuck up. Making a movie is one of the most tedious, frustrating, intense experiences I’ve ever had in my life. And not even just getting the money. What about when you’re getting ready to do a shot and suddenly something screws up and the actor’s moment that they’ve been working on for hours just disappears and you never get it back again?”

Well, that’s where I had the first idea. I swear, right there at that moment, I thought, “You know, that could make a little fifteen-minute film. Just confront an actor with an endless number of disruptions and see what happens.” And that’s where the idea was born.

That first half-hour just kind of jumped out of me. I went home and wrote the first half-hour as it exists, word for word, frame for frame in the final version.

So *Living in Oblivion* was essentially based on a single idea that later, completely by accident, turned into a feature film. You never quite know how something is going to turn out, and that one for some reason just all came together. I’m very proud of that movie.

What happened after you wrote the short script?

Catherine Keener was visiting us at that time and I gave her the script — it was about twenty-five pages — and I just heard her laughing in this back room that we have. She was just howling.

She came out and said, “We have to do this.” And I said, “Okay, let’s do it. Even if we have to shoot it on Super 8, let’s make this movie.”

The next thing I know, her husband, Dermot, said he would like to put in some money if he could be in it. He originally wanted to play Nick Reve, the director, but I said I had someone a little older in mind, and he immediately said, “What about Steve Buscemi?” I said, “That’s a fantastic idea. You can play Wolf, the cameraman.” He said, “That’s great.”

It was like a bunch of kids putting on a show in the garage. Anybody who wanted to be in the movie, who had a little money, got a part. That is how I cast it, I am not kidding you. Sometimes you agonize about casting, over and over for months trying to figure out which actor to choose. In this case, I never thought about it for a second. Never. And look how amazing those actors were.

So we started shooting. We had a five-day shoot in New York City and we had about \$37,000 that my wife helped raise and that everybody put in. The cast and crew were amazed at how well it was turning out. On the fourth day we realized that it was going to end and there was a kind of depression that settled in on the set. People said, “Tom, you should make a feature out of this.” And I went, “How? How? How would I ever do that?”

But it turned out so well that I thought, I have to somehow find a way to take this magical accident and develop it.

What steps did you take to do that?

After it was finished, I submitted it to the Cannes short-film festival, I tried a number of things, and I realized that as a short it wasn’t going to go anywhere. First of all, it was too long. It was just under half an hour.

So I began to think about what was developed in the first section, the first third of the film? What ideas were kind of lurking in the background? And one of the ideas was that there was a relationship developing between the director and his leading actress. Another thing that seemed to be developing was a relationship between the cameraman and the First AD.

And I began thinking about, “What’s the one fantasy that I’ve always thought about?” And that is having the lead actor and the director get into a fist-fight on the set. And so that’s how I came up with the idea of Chad Palomino and how he disrupts the shoot — this Hollywood guy entering this little, dusty world of Nick Reve’s independent film and totally screwing it up. So I had Part Two.

So then I said, “Where the hell is it going to go from here?”

And my wife, very astutely, said, “Listen, Part One is a dream. Part Two is a dream. Why don’t you have Part Three be them making a dream sequence?” And I went, “Oh my God, that is so fantastic.” Instantly, in an instant, I thought of Tito, the dwarf, erupting on set, “You stupid morons! Is that the only way you can make a dream sequence, by putting a dwarf in it?”

The two new segments evolve perfectly out of Part One. The movie never feels like a short with stuff added to turn it into a feature.

I put so much work into that screenplay. I wanted no one to think that it was just a short with two other segments tacked on to it. I wanted it to feel like it was seamless. And it took a lot of work to make that progression, to make that movement happen in the screenplay.

It sounds like you really drew from personal experience to write the script.

I’ve had a lot of experience of being on a number of sets. Even when I was going to film school, when you’re on the set of a student film, it’s just the most insane chaos that you can imagine. Even

then I noticed that the drama that was happening just off the side of the camera was a million times more interesting than the stale scene that everybody was so intensely focused on. I noticed that even then.

And I swear to God, the very first time that I experienced room tone, everybody standing there like these living statues in this forced silence, I said, “I’m going to put that in a movie one day. It’s just so bizarre, I’m going to put that in a movie.”

I’ve always been fascinated with the stuff that happens on the set. Not that I’m trying to say that just because it’s a film set it’s interesting. I don’t feel that. But I do feel like there’s a real crazy drama that happens when you get a group of people trying to do a task together.

I’m in love with filmmaking, but at the same time I also have moments where I absolutely despise it. The medium itself seems designed to thwart you whenever you really want to try to do something. Just when you’re about to get a shot, a light goes off or a train goes by, a car alarm goes off, something. Everything is so fragile in the business. So I wanted to take my rage out on that, because it can be so frustrating at times. It was so liberating and freeing to do that.

It must have been bizarre, making a good movie about a movie where everything is going wrong.

I swear the first time I had the actor intentionally drop the microphone into the shot, they didn’t want to do it. They didn’t want to do it because everything that we’ve been taught is to keep the microphone out of the frame. Don’t put it in.

I wanted to try to really peel back that curtain about what it’s like to be on the set and the real struggle, because I think that struggle is what is interesting to me — the struggle to somehow capture something on film.

I also wanted to show the director in a way that I had never seen portrayed. I was really concerned about that. Most of the time the

independent director, and directors in general, are shown wearing leather jackets and smoking cigarettes, brooding in a corner with sunglasses. Most directors that I've ever seen on a set of any movie look so desperate, so frustrated, so neurotic. So I wanted to address that and still let the director have some sort of dignity.

I think Nick Reve is not a total fool, but the struggles that he faces are really, I think, rather archetypical: How do you get what you want in a business that is all about pretension and ego? The way he has to deal with Chad Palomino is a monumental struggle. Here's a guy where all you really want to do is beat the shit out of him, but you can't. You have to say, "Oh, yeah, man, you did a great take. Great take."

Part One ended up being the idea of the technical desperation and screw-ups. Then I wanted to see what would happen if you drop emotional complications in and that served to be the core of the movement for Part Two. It's all about how emotional entanglements happening off the set can affect what's being captured on film.

For Part Three, I really wanted to bring the director to the point where he gave up. After all this frustration, I realized he would really get to that point. To me it was interesting to drive him to that point where he could not proceed — he really felt like he was failing and that he was not a director — and to see what would happen to him, to see how he would respond.

One of the things that makes the script so strong is that all the obstacles that you put in Nick's way are real obstacles that you've experienced in that position.

Whatever you write, you have to tap into something personal for yourself. I used to have an acting teacher who said to me, "If it ain't personal, it ain't no good." There's something to be said for that.

But at the same time, I don't want to ever make it seem like when I write that it's just about me. I'm not interested in that. Even with my first film, *Johnny Suede* — sure, I put a lot of myself into that character — but I also was very clearly trying to find a way

to make it more objective, more universal, something that other people could relate to.

I absolutely believe that if you can find a way to tap into something that's very personal and then make a creative leap from there, that's the best way to do it. Anger by itself is not enough. You have to have the creative imagination coming into play as well.

How helpful was it to have Part One all shot when trying to get the money for Part Two and Part Three?

I took Part One all the way to the point of a finished print, with a mix, with titles, music, everything. I began screening that for people after I had written Part Two and Part Three, thinking that people wouldn't get a sense of what I was trying to do if they only read the screenplay. So therefore, having Part One all finished, I thought it would be perfect, because they can see exactly the characters, the actors, the humor, everything.

Well, it didn't happen. I had several conversations with all of the independent companies, and they all passed on the movie at the script stage. Completely. I offered it to Miramax for nothing and they said no.

Did they give reasons why they were passing?

They didn't get it. I'm not complaining, because I'm probably guilty of the same thing, but until something literally comes up and kicks you in the head and tells you what it is, no one knows anything.

They looked at this movie and said, "Why? Why should we put money into this movie?" And it's just bizarre to me, because most of the most impressive films — the ones that really have stuck in the minds and consciousness of audiences — are the ones that are absolutely original and have never been made before. Even *Star Wars*, for God's sake. He couldn't make that movie for years.

So, what happened was, I had put my wife's cousin and her husband, Hillary and Michael, in Part One — Hillary played the script supervisor and her husband Michael played Speedo, the sound man

— and at the last minute Hillary called me and said, “We’d like to put up the rest of the money and make the film as a feature.”

And so they put up almost \$500,000 of their own money and we were able to go off on our own, once again, and make the film.

This may be an apocryphal story, but I have heard that at the same time they offered you the money, you were on the phone with someone who had the money but with whom you didn’t want to work.

Yes, exactly. He was being a real prick. He was this completely ego-driven guy. He was going to own everybody, he was going to tell everybody who to cast, all that stuff. Completely antithetical to the way the film had been created.

I was just about to make my travel arrangements to go out to L.A. to sign the deal with him, when my Call Waiting clicked in and it was Hillary and Michael. They were so apologetic — “Would you mind if we suggested putting up the money?” I said, “You’ve got to be kidding?!”

It was one of the most magical experiences, from beginning to end, really.

In Part One, how did you work with Catherine on the different levels of her performance? How did you map out the range she had to go through, from being just okay to being really good?

I was concerned about that. I actually numbered the takes; I think there’s twelve takes. Number one, on the scale of one to ten, should be a seven. Number two should be a five. We did something like that, but eventually what it came down to the two of us deciding what the degree of distraction she was feeling at that time. That’s basically how it came about.

How much rehearsal did you have?

None. Absolutely none.

I don't like to rehearse, anyway. My style of working is to just talk to people, get the costumes correct, talk a little bit about the character, and then just find it as the camera is rolling.

What was so fascinating to me was that none of these actors auditioned and they were almost instantaneously their parts.

Many people think *Living in Oblivion* is completely improvised, but there's only one scene that was improvised. That's the scene where Steve erupts at the crew at the end of Part One. Everything else was completely scripted.

What's your favorite memory of working on *Living in Oblivion*?

Oh, man, there are millions. I think I would have to say that it was the look on people's faces the first time Peter Dinklage, who plays Tito, erupted into his tirade against the director.

Most of the crew that we hired had not read the script, because we weren't paying anybody. And so we were getting people working for free and they might work one or two days a week. And so this crew was just standing by the lights, doing whatever they were doing, and all of a sudden Peter Dinklage, during a take, says, "I'm sick of this crap." He just erupted and everybody just turned and looked with their jaws open. They thought he was really saying it.

Then the laughter that erupted when they realized that it was just part of the movie, it was a fantastic feeling. It made me really feel that I had stumbled upon something and it was working.

Were there any things you learned writing that script that you still use today?

Yeah. I have a tendency, if I'm going to write a joke, I set it up with a one, two, three punch. But I realized that most of the time, when I get in the editing room, I usually only end up using the one or the two, never the one, two, three. That's kind of an interesting lesson to learn: if you're going to tell a joke, just tell the joke. Don't do three jokes.

I also learned the idea of setting in motion something that, once it's in motion it has a life of its own and people are really instantaneously eager to find out what's going to happen. That's a crucial thing.

Many screenwriting teachers will say a screenplay is all about tension and conflict. And, in some ways, that is absolutely true. But if that tension and conflict doesn't arouse enough interest to have people really want to know what's going to happen next, then you're screwed. I think *Johnny Suede* suffered from that a bit. It was my first screenplay and there's very little real dramatic tension in it.

I like the idea of setting something in motion — like a cart rolling down a hill — that once it's going, you can't stop it.

How do you make that happen while you're writing the script?

If it keeps me excited, if I kind of surprise myself and go, “Okay, what would be the conventional, expected way to do something?” I stop and think, “What if you just took a detour and went here? How the hell would you get out of that situation?” I find that really exciting. It prompts me to think of unexpected things.

What's your writing process?

Usually when I sit down to write a script, the first three days is the hardest. Literally, going into the room, turning on the computer and starting.

Usually what I do is I compile a notebook of notes for months, sometimes years, in advance. I did notes for *Living in Oblivion* years in advance; same thing with *Box of Moonlight*.

Once I actually sit down and get through the first day, then I just can't wait to get into the room. What I do is I get up early in the morning, turn everything off, make sure nobody's here, and work solidly from about 9:30 until about three in the afternoon. I just love it. The concentration is fantastic. I love the discipline. Even sometimes, when it's not working, you just take a ten-minute break and come back.

I love writing. To me it's a magical part of this business. It's the one time when you can be free to go wherever you want to go. The actors do whatever you want them to do. You get whatever location you want.

Do you have any self-imposed rules, like a certain number of pages per day?

I try to give myself goals, definitely. Writing is a very tricky thing. You have to have discipline, but at the same time you have to keep yourself excited. That's the thing that I find for myself: If I'm not excited, I can feel it, so what I do is I stop. And I say, "You have to get to a place, Tom, where you are re-excited about what you're doing." And when I am, the day goes by in about twenty seconds.

Sometimes you struggle with things and you have to literally take a day or two off, and when you do that, then sometimes, wow, the idea hits you and you can't wait to get back in there and get to work.

Do you ever put something in a drawer and come back to it months later?

Not when I actually sit down and start the writing process. If I'm still in the conception stages, then yes.

For example, my new script that I just finished shooting and am editing now, I had the idea years ago. And maybe once every two months I'd sit down and sketch out some ideas. And I started a whole folder just of ideas, putting some pressure on myself, saying, "Sooner or later, Tom, you're going to have to sit down and write this, man." But I just got to the point where the ideas were just building and building, until finally this thing started to write itself. But sometimes three months would go by and I wouldn't put a single note in.

What's the best piece of advice about writing that you've ever received?

The very first thing that comes to my mind is less about writing than it is about the creative process itself.

It was an experience I had when I went to Sundance, to the Director's Lab with my first screenplay for *Johnny Suede*. I had worked very hard on it and had just come from a rather negative experience at NYU, when I was there getting my Master's degree in directing. It was a very destructive process at NYU in terms of how they would critique you. Even though I did very well there, I still was quite aware of just how destructive it was and I was gun shy of that stuff.

So when I went out to Sundance for the Director's Lab, some of the more traditional guys out there were Hollywood, conventional guys, and they started giving me notes about the script that really bothered me and which were, again, destructive.

And then I had a meeting with Buck Henry, who was one of the advisors. He'd read my script and he sat down and just looked at me — this was the first time I'd met him — and all he said was, "Hey man, you're on to something. Go for it."

Now that wasn't specific, but what it completely did was just open me up to the fact that whatever you're doing, if you're trying something, just try it. Just try it. Things don't have to be instantaneously perfect or whatever, but if you really are trying something, then trust it and just try it.

And I would say that to any aspiring writer: It's a combination of confidence and innocence at the same time. You have to have both; you have to have absolute determination, but you have to be an innocent in the utmost sense of that word, where you are completely free and open to anything happening and that everything around you supports you and loves you, like the world of an infant.

Because if you don't have that, this world is so brutal to any sort of creative failure — Arthur Miller wrote a beautiful essay about how American culture deals with failure — and that's a struggle that we all face. Everybody faces it: giving yourself the creative and imaginative playground just to go ahead and try your idea for God's sake. Try it.

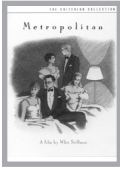
How do you make yourself do that every day?

It's a discipline. It's hard.

There are some days you just go, "Fuck. I can't do this anymore." Or you start getting angry, you start getting bitter, because you feel like you've done good work and nobody recognizes it or whatever. But it's not about that; you can buy into that crap so quickly.

Our whole entertainment industry is really about celebrity, for everybody, the directors included. It's the most destructive aspect of our entertainment culture; it's less about the work than it is about the celebrity.

So what I constantly do is say, "Listen, am I proud of this movie?" That's what it's about. Ten years from now, am I watching this movie and going, "Jesus Christ, man, you put your soul into that and that's all that matters."



Metropolitan

Whit Stillman

NICK

The titled aristocracy are the scum of the earth.

SALLY FOWLER

You always say "titled" aristocrats. What about "untitled" aristocrats?

NICK

Well, I could hardly despise them, could I? That would be self-hatred.

Whit Stillman's Metropolitan exists in a timeless New York past brimming with debutante balls and ultra-classy cocktail parties. His clever examination of this universe is set primarily at after-parties, allowing him to comment on the upper class without going to the expense of recreating their soirées.

This true comedy of manners, based on Stillman's own experience of skirting the upper crust, put him on the map as a filmmaker to watch and resulted in a well-deserved Academy Award nomination for his literate and witty screenplay.

What was going on in your life and your career before *Metropolitan*?

I was in transition. I had a journalism job; it was for a publication where they overpaid us a bit and they went out of business. So I was left in 1980 with some savings and I wanted to get into the film business.

On a trip to Spain, I read a *Variety* special issue on the Spanish film industry, which showed that there were opportunities to sell Spanish films in the United States. I met a few Spanish filmmakers on my trip, talked to them about the opportunities to sell their films in the United States, and I ended up within a year being a sales agent for a lot of really good Spanish films.

So I did that from 1980 until 1983 and that was when it really started paying off, in the sense that one of the filmmakers, Fernando Colomo, came to New York to make his own film, *Skyline*, and I helped him on it. It was made for nothing, with a four-person crew and one comic actor brought over from Spain.

We re-enacted Fernando Colomo's real experiences in New York, so I was in the film in an analogous role to my real role with Fernando. The film turned out really well; it was in the New Directors series at the Museum of Modern Art and got a release and good reviews and did really well in Spain.

That same summer, another filmmaker I was representing, Fernando Trueba, who did the film *Belle Époque* that later won the Oscar, made his second film, and I was hired to play the Stupid American, an annoying character. I was in Madrid quite a bit that summer — since I was an unimportant guy they could schedule around me — so I had long weeks of waiting. With the per diems, I made more money than I think I ever did as a foreign sales agent for Spanish films. It was right before that shoot that I started to write the script for *Barcelona*. And I realized, as time went on, it was too big and ambitious a project to do first.

In the summer of 1984 I had an idea of a film I could do cheaply, which was *Metropolitan*. So I put aside the work I'd done on

Barcelona and started working on that. Also, I had to take over a family business — an uncle’s illustration agency, representing artists and illustrators in New York — and that became my day job. That anchored me to Manhattan and I started thinking of this Manhattan idea for a cheap film that would look good.

From childhood I remembered a production of Shaw’s *Don Juan in Hell*, which all took place in one room and I thought that this was, theoretically, a film that could be shot in a room. You’d just have people all dressed up in some fancy room and there it is.

Of course, in writing the script it went different places, but that was the premise.

Were you drawing on your own experience to create those characters and those situations?

I was, but it was long enough ago that it was shrouded in the mists of time. But the idea of the group was sort of based on a group, the rat pack was based on the rat pack, there was a funny, snobbish character who was like the Chris Eigeman character, Nick Smith. But really it was fictional, it was all made up. There were some people who were sort of like someone or other, but it had to be created anew and that’s what always takes me a long time.

You’ve used the phrase “social pornography” to describe the movie. Can you define what you mean by that?

What I mean by that is that it’s a taboo to talk about this kind of society in the United States; it’s not supposed to exist. And there’s a feeling of disgust and excitement in talking about the idea of Americans who camouflage themselves as upper middle class but really think of themselves as upper class.

On the surface, the idea doesn’t really lend itself to a low-budget treatment: a lot of characters, a lot of short scenes, a lot of locations — some of them high-end — and plus it’s

a quasi-period piece. Did you consider any of those issues while you were writing?

Well, I remembered how cheap it was for me to go to those parties. It didn't cost me a dime, it was the least expensive part of my life. And so I thought, in a way, the film could be done the same way. If people donated tuxedos and a location, it would look rich but it's not.

I knew that for a very minimal amount of money you could get permits to shoot on the streets of New York, so you had a beautiful set for free. And moving around doesn't really cost that much. In a way, it's more expensive to stay in one place, because you really need to lock down the location and not have a chance of losing it.

One of our rules was that we wouldn't shoot in any apartment where we couldn't finish the scene in that day, because we assumed we'd be kicked out of the place. The lengthier apartment sequences were actually done in townhouses faked to look like apartment buildings.

One of the eureka moments for deciding to do the project, if I can use that term, was the director of one of the Spanish films I sold was talking about the actual cash budget for the film he had done was \$50,000. And at that time I knew that — if we bought our rental apartment at an insider price, held it for a year and later resold it — theoretically we could make \$50,000 on our apartment. That number encouraged me, because I knew I could write a script for that money. To finish it, I'd need other people's money, but I could start it with my own.

What was your writing process like on *Metropolitan*?

I actually dreaded the thought of writing alone. I had written short stories and gotten some good reaction; I'd been commissioned by *Harper's* to write a story and people like them. Tom Wolfe was quoted as liking one of the stories. But I hated the solitary writing process.

So I actually started writing *Metropolitan* with a college friend — not exactly a college friend, a fellow who hung around college

without actually going there. We sat around, talking about ideas, for about three hours and I realized that wasn't going to work. And so I went and wrote the script.

It was good because I had this interesting job that was sort of challenging, representing artists, and I liked the vicarious work of being an agent for people whose work I liked. It was a social job, where you had lunch with people and saw a lot of people and it was a good day job while I was writing the script. It meant that I could take two weeks without writing anything and then I'd get in an intense mode, then I'd have vacation where I'd expect to write all the time but instead I'd get excited about another topic and write a stupid article for a newspaper. It allowed time to pass and let me reconsider what I was doing.

At a certain point I decided that the Tom Townsend character really wasn't sympathetic, because he was in love with the girl he shouldn't have been in love with and he ignored the girl he should have liked, and that really the sympathetic character was the Audrey Rouget character and the film should be about her. I tried to make the film about her, but I realized that too much is involved in the Tom Townsend character, I'd done too much of that and was too attached to it. So I gave up making it explicitly Audrey's film, but a lot of what remains having tried to make it Audrey's film is still in the movie.

And then I thought the important thing in film is how you end it. So the challenging thing was where was all of this going to go? And so I started writing the end of the movie. I had a process where I had the first three-fifths of the movie and the last fifth of the movie and I had to attach them at some point. For me, it was like the transcontinental railway and finding where would the golden spike be to attach these two ends of the narrative.

How did you do that?

I can't remember exactly, but there was a year where the tracks would never quite sync up. It ended up working.

How was that process different from how you work now on studio projects?

I think it was good writing a film that wasn't in the development process, because I'm not sure it's very helpful having a lot of voices in on the creation of a script. I think they try to smooth things and homogenize things and explain things. It's better making it a kind of goofy voyage and ride, when you have to just be honest with yourself about what you're doing and where your mistakes are and what isn't working.

On *Metropolitan*, I found the least helpful comments were from people who thought they were in the film business. Unsuccessful screenwriter friends, who were very, very critical of certain things, while my sociology professor/godfather was very, very supportive and loved the things that the screenwriter friends said were breaking the rules.

Do you remember what their criticisms were?

I remember I had this long monologue that the Chris Eigeman character recites about this girl, Polly Perkins. It went on for pages and pages. My screenwriter friend was indignant about how terrible that was and my sociology professor/godfather thought it was a wonderful story.

What I found when we shot the film was that there were long speeches that didn't work, but they were the sociological speeches by the Charlie character, played by Taylor Nichols. If it was a very long sociological speech, we really had to fight hard to whittle those down and make them pertinent, while the long narrative about Polly Perkins, although it's just one guy talking, actually works perfectly fine. It's a story. People are interested in hearing a story. And film is so wonderful in the sense that you can have people's reaction.

How long was the whole writing process and how long were the gaps where you just let it gestate?

I would say the gaps would be a month or two. It was slightly more than a four-year process. I started in the middle of the summer of 1984. I finished four years later in August of 1988 and went out to try to find people to produce or invest in the film. I think I did another draft where I cut things, to try to make it more production friendly. But the actors had already seen the older script, so often we'd restore stuff.

How long was the script?

It was very, very long.

Also, I didn't really get into film formatting too much; I didn't really see the point of centering the dialogue, because my computer skills in those days weren't so good as to have to re-tab all that. I remember a woman at the Tisch School refusing to help us with casting because it wasn't in proper screenplay format, therefore we weren't serious.

That's why I don't take people very seriously when they criticize a script for being too long. I don't think we cut any scenes but one — it's a very brief phone conversation between Tom Townsend and his father, and it came off as mawkish. The line producer, Brian Breenbaum, made a very funny, cutting remark about it: He said, "Put it in an envelope and mail it to your father."

The other cutting we did was cutting within scenes, to try to whittle things down and pick up the pace. And of course we cut out all the improv stuff. We came up with some jokes that we thought were funny on set and we ended up cutting them out.

Did the actors have any problems with the long speeches and the heightened language?

Nope. It's good for them, I think. I think it's good for actors to have a lot of words to say, they seem to like it.

Did you do any readings of the script before you finished it?

There was a casting reading of it — after we had done most of the casting we had a read-through.

It was odd, because I had had the Charlie character have something of a stutter in the script. And then I thought, “This is too hard. We’ve got so many hard things to do, let’s not have another hard thing with a guy stuttering through all this dialogue.” And I thought it might sound fake, someone acting a stutter.

And then, in the read through, Taylor stuttered a couple of times, and there was one moment when it was a little bit too much. And I stopped the reading and said, “Actually, the idea of this character is he should stutter, so if you can do that, it’s great.” Taylor completely dominates his stammer, he can do a flawless performance. But he did have a stammer in childhood, and he brought it out for that part. I found it fantastic; somehow a stammer is like when an actor eats. Eating and food and business of that kind in a film is usually wonderful, people are relaxed. And the stammer was kind of the same, it made things really real and unrehearsed.

One of the great things about the script was that these characters are very likeable, even at those times when they may not be behaving in a likeable manner. Was that planned?

That was the intention. I think we give them their problems. They do have that reality in their sad-sack qualities and a lot of it is the success of the performance by the actor. It’s a thing I’ve noticed: Some actors can do a technically perfect performance of scripted lines, but there can be a warmth that’s lacking, a human quality, that takes away from what’s intended. In this case, our cast delivered the warmth.

Did you write with any actors in mind?

Yeah. I wrote with Audrey Hepburn in mind. The Audrey character is Audrey Hepburn. I did not write with known actors in mind.

I knew that known actors wouldn't do it. It didn't occur to me which known actors would do it; only actors from the past — like Audrey Hepburn — who is the aunt of the actual Sally Fowler.

Although it's a talky film, you also made good use of just showing us things, without commenting on them. For example, when Tom Townsend finds his childhood toys have been thrown out by his father. We never see him come back for the toys, but they simply show up in his room in later scenes. Those scenes could have been painful to watch ...

It was painful to watch; we actually cut some stuff out there. We had a mawkish scene, going back to the box. We shot it and cut it out.

Why did you choose to set the movie in a sort of timeless past?

Well, in my head it was in the past and I couldn't afford to set it in a specific past. So I had to just try to do the best we could for a past identity to the film by trying to exclude what we could exclude and include what we could include, without stating anything too explicitly.

Did that choice help during production?

It didn't hurt us. It was helpful for production because we weren't specifically doing period, so that freed people up not to go crazy with things. It was the guiding principle to make it seem past.

How would you define the theme of *Metropolitan*?

I can't nail down themes. It gets me in trouble now when people ask me about my new script. Unfortunately, I answer when I should say, "Well, I don't know. Draw your own conclusions."

How did you know when you were done with the script?

That's odd. It happened faster than I thought — that sounds funny for a four-year project! I thought it was interminable, I thought it would never end. And suddenly it seemed like, whoa, we're ending. This is it. This is the film. And so it was a bit of a surprise.

I find that generally happens in an interminable scriptwriting process — suddenly you're close to the end or at the end before you even thought it was possible.

What's your writing schedule?

Well, it changed completely from the *Metropolitan* period to subsequently, because at the time of *Metropolitan* I had a day job, and so I would have dinner and I'd go back to writing after dinner. So I was drinking coffee late at night and often I would be at the computer at 1:00 a.m., really dreamy and half-awake and my mind wandering into dreams and I'd usually keep at it until 2:00. So it was a very strange process writing from 11:00 p.m. until 2:00.

Was there anything you learned writing *Metropolitan* that you still use today?

Pretty much everything. I changed the time of day, but everything else is pretty much the same as that process. I still don't use the screenwriting programs and cheat a little bit on the formatting, so it doesn't look as long.

What was it like to get an Academy Award nomination for *Metropolitan*?

I have to confess that I was always terribly, terribly anti-Academy Awards — until I got nominated for one. But as a want-to-be or not-yet-successful filmmaker, there's something terribly disheartening about that spectacle. But then you're nominated and — it's great, even losing.

Virtually the entire cast came and, with Line Producer Brian Greenbaum as ring-leader, we had a blast. But after I quickly

reverted to anti-Oscars mode (the exception being 1995, when Mira Sorvino won hers and a lot of films I loved were nominated).

So many interesting, likable and sometimes great films are getting no — or next to no — coverage on their theatrical release, while madly expensive campaigns and over-the-top coverage is devoted to a handful of films (and not normally the ones I'd most like). It just seems to get more and more extreme and disconnected from the honest pleasure of going to the movies and discovering ones you like.

I now get a sort of early winter depression from the screeners Academy members are sent. You feel obliged to watch a lot of them, but very often they are not the films you'd ever go to see on your own and you end up seeing so many images you wish you never knew about. I can't believe that so many intelligent film journalists get caught up in covering this horse race — which must lead to an abdication of coverage for many untrumpeted releases.

The modern age's motto in the arts seems to be: "More recognition, less achievement." So many of the great cinema milestones date from the thirty years before there were film festivals or highly touted awards (such as the Oscars at their start). It'd be fascinating to see what a three-year awards and festivals hiatus might be like. Or at least to stop, or sharply tone down, the campaigning for awards.

Did you use any tools to get yourself up to speed as a screenwriter?

It was terribly helpful that I found a version of *The Big Chill* screenplay, in screenplay format. One publisher had the wise idea of issuing a screenplay-size edition of various screenplays, including *The Big Chill*. I used that to crib format from, to try to get close to film format. And it was actually a good script to have around, because it's an ensemble piece. And the *She's Gotta Have It* production book that Spike Lee did was very helpful.

And there's a book called *The Craft of the Screenwriter* by John Brady which has interviews with people like Ernest Lehman and Paul Shrader. I found that a very helpful book. I thought it was terrific.



Grief

Richard Glatzer

PAULA

Isn't it a year this Thursday since he died?

MARK

I should have known you'd remember. When Kenny went into ICU, Jeremy came down to the hospital and we went to get something to eat. I was sort of crazy, you know, over this idea that we'd had so many great times, Kenny and I, and I was like the custodian of everything. I mean, I have such bad memory and I felt like it would be this major crime if I forgot even one minute. But I was forgetting; I was forgetting all the time. Jeremy said to me, "What's the matter, don't you remember your Proust?" All those memories, just because you can't call them up, doesn't mean that they won't come back, that they aren't there.

There's a well-worn adage that says you should "write what you know." That's what Richard Glatzer did when he decided to make his first feature film. He took his experiences as a writer/producer of the TV show Divorce Court, and combined it with the loss he had recently suffered after the death of his partner.

The subsequent film — filled with such indie stalwarts as Craig Chester, Illeana Douglas, Alexis Arquette, Paul Bartel and Mary Woronov — is really a quintessential independent film: funny, sad, personal and in its own way, universal.

What was going on in your career before you wrote *Grief*?

I had sold some scripts to Disney and had written afternoon specials for ABC — one of which actually got produced — but mostly I found that I was making some money as a writer and getting very frustrated at never seeing any of my words come to life. I basically had given up on the idea of doing anything in Hollywood; I was doing a nightclub one night a week and just goofing off, after having produced *Divorce Court* for a couple years.

Producer Ruth Charney suggested that we work on a movie together. I said I had no interest in doing anything unless it was a movie that we could make on as little money as anyone could make a movie. Otherwise it wasn't going to get done. I had enough experience trying to get things done through more conventional channels. So I thought if I conceive of a movie that's basically one location, and think of it as an independent, independent, independent film, then maybe we can actually do it.

She suggested that I do something inspired by my experiences working on *Divorce Court*. I thought about it and thought I didn't want to do some *Soap Dish*-y thing; that I wanted it to have other stuff going on. A lot of the film is autobiographical, and I had been dealing with my lover dying at the time I was working on that show. And I thought that would make it more interesting than if it were just some sort of satire of *Divorce Court*.

So then the idea of it began to take shape. To me, that became more interesting, if you limited it to one location. To conceive of a film from the outset as ultra-low budget is the way to do it. You don't start with a bigger idea and then whittle it down.

Let's back up. How did you get into producing *Divorce Court*?

I sold these two scripts to Disney, when there was a different group of people in charge there. And then one of them ended up as the producer-story editor for *Divorce Court*. I was still living in New York at the time and thinking about going to L.A. I spoke to the guy who had been the head of the studio and he said I should talk to

this woman who's over at *Divorce Court* and see if she can get me some work there. And I thought, "Oh my god — *Divorce Court*." But it ended up being more regular employment and more fun than anything else I ever worked on. I thought I'd be there for a week and it ended up being five years. I ended up producing the thing.

Once you had the idea, how long did it take to write *Grief*?

I wrote it quickly; it was the easiest script I've written. I usually don't keep journals, but I happened to write down in a little notebook the day that Ruth suggested thinking about this. It was the end of October in '91, and I had a draft of the script by early January '92; and I hadn't even started thinking about it at the end of October '91. So it was pretty fast.

How did you go about funding the movie?

I had about \$20,000 saved and we raised another \$20,000 from people who were willing to put up \$5,000 investments — none of which was easy.

I think the gay content helped a little bit, that people felt that it was some sort of community function or something. But it also, obviously, limited the film in terms of people thinking they were ever going to see a lot of money coming back. Ruth put up \$5,000. It was mostly little bits and pieces, mostly from friends.

We raised \$40,000, and at the same time we were doing that, I put together my cast just by going to Sundance and seeing Craig Chester in *Swoon* and meeting people at parties or wherever.

That's where I met Ileana Douglas. Just as I was leaving — I hadn't even spoken to her, really — and I got my coat and was on the way out the door, it suddenly clicked that she was perfect for Leslie. I just went up to her and said, "Hey, you wouldn't by any chance do some low-budget, independent fag film, would you?"

And she said, "I bet you're the kind of guy who loves Edgar Ulmer movies." And I was a big Edgar Ulmer fan, so within a day or two she said, "I'll do your movie," as soon as I got her the script.

So I assembled the cast and felt like I had this really great group of people. We'd all been hoping to get more money than \$40,000, but there was nothing coming.

Did you write the script with particular actors in mind?

No. I knew Alexis Arquette and Jackie Beat from this club I was doing; they both performed there. I was thinking of them as I was writing the script; not from the outset, but as I was writing it, I started to realize that I was hearing Jackie Beat saying these lines. So by the time I finished the script I definitely had them in mind for those two roles. But it wasn't like from the beginning I was going to write a role for Jackie Beat or write a role for Alexis.

How long did you shoot?

We shot for ten days. It was ten days for the bulk of the shooting and then we did an extra half day in the courtroom. That was our big production value, which of course we made look like shit by deteriorating it. We shot it on film and it looked really good and then we went and shot it off a monitor.

At the time we didn't know how it was going to work. I thought if I shoot it on film, I have the option to use it on film and if I shoot it on video, then I'm stuck with video. It was basically a half day; we were out of there at three, three thirty.

Did the script change much during shooting?

It was an ongoing process; I was always scrutinizing it and always fiddling with it. Then working with the actors was really helpful.

We did have a week of rehearsal and that was really great and crucial, especially for doing a movie that fast — and one like this, which was so character and performance oriented. I felt that was the highest value of the film, the quality group of people I put together and I wanted to make sure that the parts really came alive.

Did you change the script after the week of rehearsal?

There was a lot of re-writing in rehearsal and throughout the whole process — in the editing room as well. The finished movie is maybe 75% of what was in the original script, but there are little things tweaked here and there.

This was especially true of emotional stuff; you'd see it and think, "Wait a minute, there's not enough here, it's not sounding right." So I would scribble things down on slips of paper and hand them to them. Later I had to get a continuity script together for TV stations and I was like, "Oh my God, where did I put that scene?"

It's not really like I threw the script out, it's not that. It's basically about three-fourths of what was in the script. It's trying to make all of it right. It was just constantly fiddling with it.

And I felt really good about that, because I think everyone's hesitation about a writer-director is that you're going to think that every word is sacrosanct. I felt like I was very able to put the writing behind me and just listen to it and watch it and see if it was working or not.

My actors were a really smart group of people, so I could trust them, if they said "Wait a minute" about their character. Most of the time they were right and that was really good, because it was a great sounding board. Actors are always like that, but I think some actors are better able to see what's missing, or know when something's not sounding right, than other actors are. I credit them with a lot of that.

Then also, in the editing room, I thought, "Oh, everything's fine," and then you'd put it together and realize, "Wait a minute, there's a beat missing here," or you've got to move this thing before that thing or it doesn't pay off. Just all that kind of stuff.

So you were re-writing even while you were editing?

I shot the bulk of the movie in ten-and-a-half days, but six months down the line — after I had a rough cut of the movie — I realized

that there were some important emotional beats that were missing. So we went back and shot an extra day's worth of stuff.

These were pretty crucial scenes. There are other scenes they replaced. All the stuff that was taking place near the stage — because we couldn't have access to our original location again.

The big scene where Jackie Beat talks about being fat and the scene where Illeana asks Craig to marry her, that was done somewhere else and we just made it look like it was part of the sound stage in that same building.

There were things that were replaced by those scenes, but those new scenes were really crucial.

***The Love Judge* scenes were very funny. Did you ever intend to include more of them?**

I wish I'd had money to really do the whole shooting of *The Love Judge*, rather than just do scenes from the episodes — to actually see the judge carrying on, to see the actors have the scripts re-written under their noses, and all that kind of stuff. I thought that could have really been fun.

But it just seemed like then we'd have to rent real video cameras and real lights and all that stuff that we didn't have a budget for. That was the closest we could get to it.

Since you lost your original set for the re-shoots, how did you come up with the idea to set the scenes backstage at the show?

It was just a way for us to make up for not being able to re-shoot in the original location. I don't know if I would have even tried that if we'd had access to the original location. So it turned out to be a blessing that we didn't have access to it, because it let us fake it. And all that set was, was a stage at this place called Lace, which is a performance art theater/gallery downtown. There was nothing there, it was this black, empty space. So we made it work.

Do you think there were any advantages to not having a larger budget?

I set out to make a movie in one location for financial reasons. I think the whole idea of grieving and the fact that Mark's dealing with the death of his boyfriend, to me is so much more interesting indirectly and seen only in the office.

I think if we'd had money to go shoot Mark crying at home, or something — just because we maybe had the money, and you'd think, "Oh, we have to cover that" — to me the movie gained its identity and meaning from giving him that sense of privacy and from being limited to the office. That was a budgetary limitation that ended up working in the movie's favor.

Of course, it probably would have been distributed wider and seen as a more mainstream movie if we'd had more locations — a lot of running around and all that stuff.

Did you write the scenes from *The Love Judge* for an existing set?

No. My producer, Yoram Mandel, made phone calls to see what he could get cheap. The people liked him over the phone; he explained how there was no money in this film, and they said, "We'll let you have the set for \$500," which by L.A. standards for a day is great. The only thing they said was that we had to go with their schedule and I never knew from one day to the next when it would be available.

So we only had two days' notice to get up there. I had Tim Roth and a couple other people who were going to do cameos in those scenes and they couldn't because of the last-minute scheduling. But I was thrilled that Paul Bartel and Mary Woronov were willing to do it.

How long did it take to finish the movie?

It took forever to post it. We didn't have enough money; the \$40,000 was to shoot it, but we didn't have anything left to do any

of the post. We were trying to raise money and trying to find freebie stuff. There was this UCLA student who had this KEM deck at home and she was synching dailies for us. She let us in there to cut some stuff.

It's so frustrating when you've got this in the can and you want to work on it and you can't. It took us about a year to edit the thing, getting a few bucks here, a few bucks there and begging favors everywhere. There was a post house near me, an editing facility that would let us go in there for free. They were sympathetic and trying to help us out.

And really the only reason it ever got finished was because Mark Finch, who was the head of the Gay & Lesbian Film Festival in San Francisco, saw a rough cut of the film and loved it and said he would give us the closing night if we could finish. So then it was this panic to finish it.

I put up more money — fool that I was — in order to finish it. No one was coming up with any money. I made him a personal guarantee that I was going to get the film done and we had two or three months and there was no money and so I finally just put the money up.

Did that festival help?

It was a partial success story. It was a huge hit there and it was like a dream come true to be there. It's a 1,500 seat theater and that town's just insane. These people go there and they have these wild opinions — they either love it or they hate it — and luckily with me they loved it. They just decided very early on that they loved this movie and they were screaming and carrying on throughout the whole movie.

Then we got a great review in *Variety* and all of a sudden all these festivals wanted the film and there was this big Hollywood producer who had to meet with me and who loved the film. It just felt like, oh, now everything's happening.

Festival-wise, the film did really, really well. It played everywhere.

St. Petersburg, New Zealand, Jerusalem, just every corner of the globe I could think of, it's been.

Most of the time I went with it; a lot of these people can't afford to fly you all around. But I went to Australia with it and I went to Berlin with it and I went to Italy and London a whole bunch of times. I could have gone to Hong Kong if I wanted to pay half my airfare, but I said no. I also could have gone to Jerusalem and I stupidly didn't. It was right when it was with all these Italian festivals and I would have had a day here and a day there and it just seemed like, what's the point?

I traveled with the film for about a year and a half, which was fun.

How was your Sundance experience?

Not very good. The film had been to Toronto and to Vancouver and to the Gay & Lesbian Festival in San Francisco and in Los Angeles. Most Sundance films are pretty new to the public, so by the time the film got there, it was sort of considered old news. I heard that in the first half audiences were pretty good, but by the time the second half happened, it was all these Hollywoody people. And they'd literally walk out during the opening credits.

I've talked to a lot of people who have had similar experiences. And then we didn't win any prizes and however stupid that is, you still want it. And you have to keep reminding yourself that Sundance prizes don't really mean a hell of a lot. It's usually the audience award that seems to indicate something about any commercial success. But nothing else seems to indicate anything.

I guess for my film, Sundance wasn't that important. I've seen my film with audiences, like in Germany where the film was not subtitled, where they loved the film. Or in Toronto, where the film went over really, really well.

And then I was there at Sundance and it felt like a total bomb. The audience, those Hollywood people, were completely inattentive and didn't get it and didn't give a shit and it just felt really bad.

That's not the festival's fault, but that's who's going there these days. And they go there wanting the new Tarantino or something. My film is very quiet and you have to pay attention and stick with it. And I definitely don't think Sundance is the place for a film where you have to stick with it. Because they just don't; they get up and they leave after five minutes. So that wasn't fun.

What have been the positive effects of writing and shooting *Grief*?

Creatively, it's the most gratifying thing I've ever done. No question. And financially, not. If I had it to over again, I would absolutely do it.

It's been an amazing thing to me, just really amazing to think how many thousands of people have seen this thing around the world and that it's really moved some people and really gotten to some people and that I've gotten to meet so many people, filmmakers, through this.

I really feel that there's this great community of independent filmmakers, which is so unlike the Hollywood community and which has a real integrity to it. I'm just amazed how open filmmakers are. I've met so many people — and I hope I'm this way, too — who really are encouraging with other independent filmmakers. There's no sense of competition, there's only support. That's been fantastic.

You meet so many different people from different aspects, from the people at Channel 4 in London, to the people who run the festivals, to the filmmakers themselves. On that level, I haven't been disappointed at all.

There really is a great deal in common; I've formed really strong friendships with people. That whole thing felt great. Especially living in L.A., you feel like, "Who are these fuckers who are making movies? God, get me out of here." And then, to do the festival circuit is such another perspective on film and so different from the Hollywood perspective on film and so much more valid.

What were the downsides?

The financial, really. Because of the financial thing, at times I'll get down. I'll see a film like *Go Fish*, which I really enjoyed, but which to me was like, that film, there was such a hoopla over it, such a huge amount of money given to them and such huge distribution for it. And I would think, "Is my movie not as good as *Go Fish* and why can't my movie get that kind of release?"

And I get resentful — not toward Rose, who's great, and not because of the film, because I really enjoyed the film — but because of that sense that the marketing thing, that this is the first hip lesbian movie and so it's going to get this big send-off and my movie's just not.

I've always fought with myself not to be resentful — especially over films I like — but still there is such a freaky quality to what's hot and what's not. It doesn't have anything to do with the reviews, because my film was really well reviewed. It doesn't have anything to do with anything but how we can market this film and we can't market that film or somebody at one of the distribution companies suddenly gets really worked up over something or whatever.

It's hard to be satisfied. At one point I would have been satisfied just to finish the film, because I thought we'd never get the money to finish the film and I thought, "Oh, if I can only finish it — it doesn't matter if it's distributed, if only I can finish it."

Then you get it finished and then you see it received well, and then you're like, "Oh, well now I want more and I want more and I want more." And then you think of all the films, independent films, that never get finished or never get out there or get to two festivals and then they disappear. I was so much luckier than that.

Mostly, I'm really grateful for the whole thing and feel like — absolutely — if I had it to do over again, I would do it over again, because it was a really great experience.

Would you do things differently?

Yeah. Not so much creatively. There's a million things wrong with that movie, but give me some money and I'll fix them.

I think the big thing that I would do differently was the way we tried to sell the film. That's what I really think about. We were so desperate for \$5,000 investments or whatever, that we took the film in various stages to all the big distributors and showed them rough cuts. I had no perspective on it. I didn't realize that it was going to look really stodgy and static and that they weren't going to get it. And they didn't.

We should never have shown them a rough cut. We should never have let any of them see the film except with an audience, because it was working with an audience. When you say what mistakes did you make, that's the big thing.

You get so desperate and you think your film's so good and it's like, "I've got to show it to them and they're going to love it and they're going to give us money," but I think it's really important to realize as a filmmaker you are able to see the finished product more than what's in front of your eyes and other people won't necessarily respond to it.

I would say be damn sure that you're getting the same kind of enthusiasm from other people. If not, hold out and don't show it to them.

Especially if it's a comedy. You need that kind of audience response to convince them that it's working and if you're showing it to them with just a few people in a screening room, they're never going to get it. Or, worse yet, a rough cut on a video tape — forget it. It would have to be really an unusual film to work as a rough cut on a video tape.

One last question: Am I nuts, or is the actor who plays *The Love Judge* doing an impression of Lionel Barrymore?

Yes, the Love Judge is doing Lionel Barrymore. You're the only person who's ever figured that out.

The actor, Mickey Cottrell (the clean freak in *My Own Private Idaho*) loves to do shtick. That morning, when we were at the location of the courtroom scene and he's getting dressed, he said, "You know, I do a really mean Lionel Barrymore." I said, "Let me hear it." And he did his Lionel Barrymore. And I said, "That's perfect, just do that."

It was perfect, it was just what I wanted — a curmudgeonly character. But no one else has picked up on it. That's so funny.



Venice/Venice

Henry Jaglom

JEANNE

What are you thinking?

DEAN

I was thinking, what if this is all a movie that I'm making? What if you're all actors in a movie that I'm making? Then what? What if the camera's there? There. Does that make this less real?

Henry Jaglom's style of filmmaking was probably best described by his dear friend, Orson Welles, who said of Henry's films, "You have a different way of making movies than almost anybody else." Not to question Mr. Welles' judgment, but that's actually a bit of an understatement.

Jaglom's films are at once deeply personal and completely universal. He looks at big themes, but only as they affect people individually.

In his film Venice/Venice, he examines how movies influence our perceptions of reality and romance. To bring that examination to life, he uses improvisation, bits of reality, semi-structured scenes, and on-camera interviews by a wide array of real people, providing a larger framework for his small story. And in the process, he also delivers one of the most surprising and enlightening "twist" endings in the history of movies.

(Be aware that this interview contains spoilers about key plot points.)

When did you start using improvisation in your movies?

To make my first movie, *A Safe Place*, I had to write a script to get the money from Columbia Pictures. I had written a play called *A Safe Place*, so I adapted it into a very funny screenplay. It was a more hip version of a Neil Simon thing. The studio loved it, everybody loved it.

It starred my two friends, Jack Nicolson and Tuesday Weld. I knew them extremely well and I'd written this wonderful scene and I'd done it on the stage and it worked beautifully. So I had them do the scene, and they're tremendous actors, but there was something missing and I didn't know what.

So I said, "Okay, let's do it again." And I did about five takes, and I said, "This is really strange. This isn't as interesting to me as Tuesday actually is or as Jack actually is in life."

So I said to them, "Look, just forget what I wrote. You know what has to be accomplished in this scene. Just get through that, but don't worry about my words."

And it was magical. And I didn't look at the script for the entire rest of that movie, to the horror of Columbia Pictures.

What did that experience teach you?

The biggest lesson that I got was that actors are to be encouraged to delve into their own lives and into their own expression and their own language and their own memory, because they will come up with fresh and extraordinary things that you could never in a million years create.

And all you have to do is get that to happen once on film and then figure out how to put it together with the next moment. For me, that was it. I never looked at my script again. I drove the crew crazy, but I made the movie I wanted to make.

Your process is a little less conventional than most filmmakers.

It's a lot less conventional.

But it works for you.

I think it works great. I never thought that "conventional" was connected with something that worked and "unconventional" not. I don't think there's any relationship there.

At what point did you start using on-camera interviews as part of your process?

That was on *Someone to Love*.

And why did you continue to use that technique on later films?

A really simple reason: I found that every movie by definition tells a story of one, two, three people. In some of them you might learn about four people's stories. But it's very unusual that it's more than three people.

When I'm doing a film like *Someone to Love*, it's a thematic film rather than about a particular individual. The point of the film was to cover the whole range of the theme. I wanted to enlarge the canvas. I wanted to be able to make a film that doesn't just tell you the story of two or three people.

If it's about two or three people, you're always able to say to yourself, "Well, that's these particular two or three people." When you have a large tapestry of individuals, relating their specific experiences connected to that theme, it's much harder to dismiss it as just an aberrant story about one or two particular people who have this issue.

So each time I've used on-camera interviews, there's been a very central reason for it, in terms of expanding the canvas and creating a tapestry which would reverberate around the theme and give it

more heft. Give it more variety and make it harder for people to just say, “Well, this is one particular story about one or two people who are going through something.”

What inspired the theme of *Venice/Venice*?

My movies are always in direct relationship to what’s going on in my life.

I was invited to be, strangely enough, the American representative at the film festival in Venice with my film *New Year’s Day*. It was the only film from America that was in the official competition.

Certainly from the conventional point of view, my films are not the traditional fare that comes out. And festivals, no matter how creative and art-oriented they are, seem to like to support themselves with big, commercial, mainstream films.

In any case, I was stunned that I was invited to be the American representative. *New Year’s Day* had gotten very good reviews in America and had a nice little run, but there was no reason to expect that anybody would take it on that kind of a level. But the Europeans really liked it and they invited it to the festival with all the hoopla that goes along with being an official invitee, representing of all things the United States.

I’m such a counter-cultural figure here, I thought it would be a really interesting opportunity to make a film about a counter-cultural figure like myself, someone who’s far from the mainstream, being invited to represent his country at this oldest and most prestigious of film festivals.

So I made it a condition of accepting their nice honor that anyone who interviewed me, I could interview them at the same time. I would have a crew with me. The festival people were all too happy to do it, they thought it was fascinating.

I brought no crew from America. My cinematographer, who’s Israeli, I brought from Israel. He put together a five or six-person crew of Italians in Venice.

I had three actors come: My star, Nelly Alard, came from France. My friend Suzanne Bertish, came from London. And against my wishes and without my economic support, Daphna Kastner, an actress who I'd used in *Eating*. I had told her, "I'm sorry, I can't afford to bring anyone over for this, it's all going to be shot there," so she got on a plane and came by herself anyway. So I cast her as my assistant that I could annoy and drive crazy.

And that was it. David Duchovny was there, because David was in *New Year's Day*. So I said to David, "Okay, I want you play a little part in this as well," and he said, "Sure."

I decided I would make it up as I went along, based upon what was happening to me, because that would give a sense of what happens to somebody who comes to the film festival.

Then I thought that the second half will take place in California. I structured that half to reflect my feelings about Venice, America, movies, real life and all of that.

And that's the part where I did the interviews in my office, and for that part I wrote a much more structured script and brought several of the characters into it who had been in the European half.

The movie has an amazing twist, where at the end we find out that the first half of the movie — in Venice, Italy — is not actually reality, but is the movie that you're talking about making in the second half of the film. At what point did you decide to make that switch?

As I was doing this, I realized that one of my main themes was the effect of movies on our sense of reality and on our romantic dreams, and that this whole movie was kind of a romantic dream. I'm meeting this extraordinary creature, this journalist who falls in love with me and who I fail to attract because I'm being such an asshole and she's expecting the person I am in the movies and all of that. So I thought, that really sounds like a movie.

I didn't think about it while I was shooting the movie in Italy. I just shot it the way I would have shot it anyway. I shot it for its

own reality. But when I came back I realized that the Italy segment should be the film that I'm making.

That film does reflect more profoundly, for me, my sense of what my life is like. It really captures in some way, deeply for me, my own interior sense of life. So that's why I'm very attached to it.

Did you go to Italy with any structure in mind?

Absolutely none. Absolutely none. I didn't have a script. I decided that I would just see what happens to a person who goes to a festival. I'd been to several — Cannes and Rotterdam and Berlin and other film festivals — but I'd never gone to Venice. So I just decided I would go and see what it was like, with a film crew. And that's exactly how I did it.

How much backstory did you provide to the actors?

I gave Nelly her backstory — she's a journalist, from Paris — but not much, because she had been in America and she had done a documentary on me for French television. So I said, "Okay, you're a journalist who's here because of an obsession with me and with what you think is this sensitive male that you've gotten from my performances in the movies you've seen." That's all I told her.

I said to Suzanne Bertish, my friend from England, a really wonderful actress, "You play an ex-girlfriend of mine who I run into there." She said, "Fine."

I said to the guy who was my escort from Germany who was arranging for distribution of foreign sales, I said, "You're going to play my foreign sales rep."

I said to Daphna Kastner who showed up without my permission, "Okay, you're my assistant and I'm really going to treat you like shit." She said, "That's nothing new."

You made good use of Nelly's background in physics, particularly when she compares moviemaking and movie watching to the principles that Heisenberg developed.

I always do this with my actors, if they have a particularly interesting bio. So I said to her, "Listen, the most important scene in this movie is going to be a scene — and you're not going to know when it's going to take place — but it's going to be a scene where I'm pointing out that this feels like a movie I'm making."

I said, "What I would like to do then is for you to bring in Heisenberg, because it becomes this whole metaphor for films and how we see them and seeing them affects our perception of reality and all of that." She said, "Great."

It's like in *Can She Bake a Cherry Pie?* and the guy with the pigeon. He throws the pigeon and the pigeon keeps coming back to him. That guy happened to have a trick pigeon. It was his pet. So I turned it into a metaphor for a guy who mistreats women and they keep coming back to him.

To me it's just a question of finding out what the actor's equipment is, what special aspects they might have handy, that might further help explicate a point in the thematic intention. That's why we used the Heisenberg Principle. It worked very nicely.

How much time was there between shooting in Venice, Italy and Venice, California?

I think we had six or seven months.

How structured was the California segment?

Very. The story was very structured; within the story I always encourage the actors to come up with their own dialogue.

We happened to shoot at this guy's house in Venice; he happened to be a songwriter. I didn't plan that. So I had him play the part of somebody who's trying to convince me to use his song in the movie.

The relationship with my local girlfriend, played by Melissa Leo, and her reaction to Nelly coming there, all of that was very planned.

I show them the structure, scene by scene: “In this scene, you’re sitting with her, talking about this guy you’re both involved with, my character. Nelly, you know me, you’ve come from Venice to see why I haven’t followed up on the relationship. Melissa, you’ve learned enough from our relationship that you’re ready to move on and hand me over, and you’re also responding in whatever real way you respond to her.”

Do they know the full arc of the story or just on a scene-by-scene basis?

The main characters know the arc of the story and they know where they are in that arc; they have to know that as good actors, I feel. But not the smaller characters, people standing around at the party. They don’t know anything that they don’t need to know.

The last time we spoke, we talked about how you hate rehearsals —

I don’t hate rehearsal; I’m *terrified* of rehearsal.

Why?

Because the worst thing that can happen to me is a great moment that’s not on film, because I know it’s not going to happen again.

It might be that wonderful actors after a lot of work and takes might be able to recreate it fairly well. But I’m a great, great believer in inspiration and moment-to-moment reality. I come out of the Actors Studio, that’s my background. I think that the more open and available a person is to the moment, and the less restricted he or she is, the more they’re going to come up with completely fresh, surprising behavior, some of which is going to be wonderfully useable.

I just like the surprise. I also know that the surprise means that the other actor in the scene will be surprised and you will get really

true behavior. And when I'm surprised by my actors I know the audience is going to be surprised.

That's why so many people say of my films — sometimes positively, sometimes negatively — that they don't feel like they're watching a movie, they feel like they're almost eavesdropping on something very personal and private. For me, that's the goal, to take down that fourth wall to such a degree that they're not completely sure what's real and what isn't.

Life is not rehearsed and I don't think movies should be rehearsed.

Do you shoot the scenes more than once?

Oh, of course! But I shoot them differently and I don't say "Use the same words," unless I need a close-up or something. I just say, "Okay, that was good. Let's do that again." If I'm not in the scene I stand behind the cameraman and whisper to him, "Go to her. Pull back. Do a two-shot." Because I'm also thinking about how I can cut the scene while it's happening.

Some scenes just happen once, but many scenes are created in the editing. I might do ten, twelve takes sometimes, but they're not the same dialogue. They're the same intentions and they have to get to the same place, but they're completely different.

Do you show rough cuts to people for feedback while you're editing?

Oh my God, yes. I'm sort of famous for my rough cut screenings. They start when the movie's about three-quarters finished. I have twenty or thirty people come to the screening room on Sunset, and I do it at least fifty or sixty times as I'm finishing the movie.

What I do is I ask people afterwards, "What worked, what didn't work, what bothered you ...?" I really listen to audiences. I like to do that, that's a big part of the process.

What advice would you give to a filmmaker who wanted to make a movie like yours?

It's really simple: Don't do my kind of movie, do your kind of movie. Figure out what your kind of movie is, not my kind of movie. That would be my advice.

And once you've figured out what your kind of movie is, don't let anybody tell you that anything about it is wrong. Don't let anybody diminish your enthusiasm or excitement about it. And insist that you know what you're doing, even if you don't know what you're doing, because you will find out what you're doing as you go along.

Try as much as you can to tell your own particular truth on film. Insist on not letting anybody change your mind about what your truth is, what your goal is, how you should convey it. You can learn all kinds of technical things and become very proficient, but most people lose the impetus that made them want to be filmmakers to begin with, because they learn all kinds of things that people tell them you shouldn't do or you can't do.

When I was shooting my first film, I had a crew and a cameraman that came from *Love Story*. *Love Story* was a huge hit. Columbia Pictures assigned them to me because they didn't know exactly what to do with me and they were a little scared, so they assigned this very conventional crew. It was during the Vietnam War, I had long hair and white capezio shoes and I was totally weird to them, so they showed up wearing American Flag pins in their lapels the next day. They were rather hostile toward me.

I was trying to invent my own style. And seeing Tuesday and Jack be so good at being themselves made me throw away my script. And the crew kept getting more and more irritated. But mainly they said, "It won't cut. It won't cut. It won't cut. You can't shoot that, it won't cut."

And it was driving me crazy. So at lunch I said to Orson Welles, "What am I going to do? They're driving me crazy. Everything I try that's different, they tell me it won't cut."

And he said, “Tell them it’s a dream sequence.” I said, “What?” He said, “Just tell them it’s a dream.” I said, “Why?” He said, “Never mind, just tell them that.”

So after lunch, sure enough on the first shot I said, “I’d like the camera to go from here down to here.” The DP said, “The camera go from here to here? How are you going to cut that? That’s can’t possibly cut.”

I said, “It’s a dream sequence.”

“Oh, a dream sequence! How about this?” And he got down on his back on the floor and said, “Look, I could shoot it up against the sky ...” And I said, “Great, great.” And I had no problem for the rest of the movie with anything I said, because I kept saying it was a dream sequence.

I went to Orson that night and said, “What the fuck is this? I don’t understand, why did this change everything?”

He said, “Most people — a crew is very much like average people, not artists, but good technicians — they think life has rules. And life has order. And life has structure. The only place in their life where they know there are no rules, no order, no structure, is in their dreams. When they dream, they know things jump around, things aren’t logical, and they accept that, because that’s a dream.

“So if you tell them this is a dream sequence, they are freed from all the conventional requirements or the logical, structured, technologically-adept way of doing things. And the artist in them is suddenly freed.”

There’s not a single movie since then that I haven’t used that on somebody. Even on actors, who say, “I don’t understand why this person would do that,” and I say, “It’s a dream sequence.” “Oh! Oh, okay!”

You mentioned how people either love your films or hate them. There seems to be no middle ground. And the critics

are the same way. Do you remember the headline for the review of *Venice/Venice* in *The Rocky Mountain News*?

Yes. “Jaglom on Jaglom. Again. Who Cares?”

And the first paragraph is something like “Henry Jaglom has made the single worst movie in the history of cinema.” Not just in the 1990s or in recent memory, but in the history of cinema.

I collect those. I love them.

People who don't like your films seem to be particularly vocal about it. People (and critics) seem to take your movies personally.

That's because my films are so personal.

People magazine said of *Sitting Ducks*, “If this film were a horse, you'd shoot it.” On *Can She Bake A Cherry Pie?*, *People* magazine said, “Some people look forward each year to their root canal. That's how I feel about my yearly Henry Jaglom film.”

To a lot of people, the airing of your emotional dirty laundry is so terrifying that they hate you. I run into men like that a lot. Women very rarely; women are very responsive to the films, and men who are artists and creative men. But there are a lot of men who just think I'm just the devil, the absolute devil.

You seem to have no problem with getting bad reviews.

I love them. From the beginning, when I got a bad review — a fun one, like a real attack — I just copied them and sent them to all my friends. I thought it was just hysterical that people would get so upset about somebody else's playing with paint brushes. I've always enjoyed it.

I found, on *A Safe Place*, because I violated all of those rules on my first movie, the anger started right there. I remember *Time* magazine saying “this movie looks like he threw the pieces of the film up in the air and it landed totally at random in a mixmaster.”

People really expose themselves in my movies. And a lot of people don't want to see that. It's understandable. I'm never surprised by the negative reactions. I'm always surprised and delighted by the degree of openness with which so many people are willing to receive and accept the films.

And those people who do like them, they really do become a part of their lives. I get these incredible letters with very touching things about terribly sad and painful moments in these people's lives when the films were really helpful. They feel less alone, they feel less isolated, which is really the goal for me of making films like this.