

Extract from the *Where Have All the Auteurs Gone* transcript

MASTERCLASS PARTICIPANT

I wanted to ask about actor and writer relationships. Some months ago I listened to Jeremy Irons speak in a master class and he was absolutely against the concept of a writer/director, he preferred to have a writer and director in the same room. But from my experience I find it quite enjoyable to bring what I've written to collaborating with actors who sometimes give you what you didn't expect and that's better. So I'd like to get your thoughts on that?

SALLY POTTER

It's a really crucial question you've just brought up and there are several subjects within it. How can I approach this question? The actors that you choose to work with and the relationship that you build with them is the exact extent to which your writing or your directing is going to work on the screen in the end.

Because the actor is the embodiment of your work, is the vessel, is the reality, not the idea you thought you had about how it might be. They are always going to be different in practice than the abstract image that you had when you were writing, or as a director when you are reading a script and before you've cast: at that moment of thinking about how it's going to manifest and become real you're crossing that magic line from a kind of perfect or platonic ideal of the realisation of the script to what some people often describe as just the beginning of a long series of disappointments, a kind of letting go of that ideal.

I don't experience it as disappointment, actually, but rather as a moment of transformation, sometimes a quite ecstatic moment, from the abstract to the real, from a thought to a real person. What I didn't understand at the beginning of my working life was how much time and energy; psychic and physical, actual and emotional you have to invest in your relationship with the actor in order for it to work, and how much respect you must have for the actor's process and what it really consists of. I did not know how much understanding you must have in order for your writing or your directing to come alive, and to work. I think that a great many - a surprisingly large number of directors and writers - really have almost no understanding of the actors' work, of what they're doing, what it takes for them to do it; to deliver or why they behave the way they do sometimes, what to expect in the rehearsal room or on the set if you can't rehearse and what that whole relationship is about; and it's a really worthy subject to explore, whether you are a writer, a director, a writer/director, how you're going to connect with the world of the performer.

A lot of directors, even quite experienced directors actually, who have already made many films are afraid of actors. They walk onto the set or into the room really afraid that their performance of being a director is not going to be up to scratch. They're much more concerned about their own performance than they are about the performance of the actor. And any actor who's worth their salt is going to sniff that out immediately. First of all they're going to see a really bad performance in front of them, this bad performance of being a really serious, meaningful director, who's got lots of ideas and knows exactly what they're doing straight away and is going to tell them what to do and that sort of thing. It's all rubbish. What you need to do as a director when you walk through the door is to make a relationship, to see who they are, to have some understanding of what actors are going to do, to be open about what you do know and what you don't know, to share your hopes, and above all to look and listen. Because you, as the director/writer, in that beginning moment are creating a role together with the actor, its manifestation.

You are going to be the first audience for that actor. You are the first night, whether you're alone in a room in broad daylight or whatever. For the actor they're standing alone on an enormous stage and there's one person in the audience and it's you. And you have to look at them with the understanding of the terror of the moment for them and the exposure. And with the pair of eyes that is looking not just at how they are in that moment or the problems they might be having, or the fact that they've got a cold or not feeling too good about their hair that day or some other physical manifestation (very important by the way, hair and stuff, it's all part of the vessel of the performance) but at what they can become, what they're longing for, what they're reaching for, the limits they want to overcome, the performance of a lifetime that they want to get to. They want to see in your eyes that you are genuinely seeing them, not just pretending to look because you're so preoccupied with what you should be doing next or something. You're really looking at them, who they are, and what they can give and what they might be able to give or do in the future.

Once you can get into that way of looking, which is a look of, in a way, unconditional respect and love, whether you've only just met the person or not - that look of unconditional regard, the first and best audience that the person has ever had - you're on to a winner. If you can establish that bond you're quite quickly going to build the necessary trust with the actor that will take your writing and your directing into a very exciting realm that you couldn't quite have predicted before; that you hope you've predicted, created, written, constructed in some sense; which is a kind of ghost shape, a spirit which this person is going to inflame and fill in and manifest and become in the relationship.

Now if you're a writer/director in the journey from that very first meeting through to when you're shooting the film and later editing it, you have one enormous advantage, which is that you can change things when they don't work without referring to somebody else. Without having to turn to the writer to discuss 'look I know you've worked on this line for 6 years and it's really incredible on the page, but really it's rubbish'. You can't say that to a writer because you've also got to turn your unconditional regard and respect on that writer - meanwhile you've lost your actor, by the way, because you're not looking at him. So if you're the writer/director you can take responsibility for that change. You may not be able to do it there and then, unless you're a very speedy writer, but you can note that it needs changing, and the part of you that is the writer part knows that you can go away and make it work for this actor, so you are a kind of unified channel of all those writing and directing decisions that will then help to work with and for the actor.

Now there's a caveat to this: occasionally when you're working a scene or a line or a part or a line an actor will come up with a protest or a resistance. 'I don't want to say this', or 'This really doesn't feel right for the character', or a look or an expression will pass across the actor's face that you know something's gone wrong. What to do? For many directors panic is the internal sensation, you feel it, you don't know how to put it into words but you know something's gone horribly wrong and you don't know what to do about it. This is the moment when the different parts of the brain have to come into action simultaneously. One is the intuitive and the other is the analytical (broadly speaking).

The analytical might be to say 'Ok this actor is actually teaching me that this line is an unsay-able line, excellent'. The correct response to this - whether you say it out loud or not - is to thank the person because they're teaching you something from their perspective that you could never learn in a room by yourself. If you would think that process through logically then the correct thing to do at that point is to ask the actor 'What is it that isn't working about this? Can you tell me? Can you help me to understand what it is that's wrong here and how you think it might be better? Is it that this isn't consistent with the character we've set up? Is it something to do with the physical position you're being asked to speak in? Is it the relationship in the room? Is it something else completely? Did you

have a horrible time with the makeup person this morning in the trailer'? You use your analytical ability to find the root of the problem together with the actor, and if it turns out that genuinely the root of the problem is that there is something wrong with the writing then you say 'Ok I'm going to rewrite that, I'm either going to stop the shoot right now and rewrite it or I'm going to reschedule. Or we'll do what we can with it'. You find a solution analytically.

And then another is a kind of intuitive thing. Which is: 'Is this actor resistant to this because it's going to take them past their limits, or their own perceived set limits of what they can manage? Is it this resistance or negativity really an expression of their own fear? In which case is my job to reassure the person that they can do it? And help them go through the pain barrier?' If I do that, what are the consequences, this is intuitive: 'Is this person going to hate me forever?' They may. They may hate me for today but love me tomorrow, that's ok. It doesn't even matter if they hate me forever if it's going to help them do the best performance of their life and make the scene work and make the film work. It really doesn't matter if they hate me for that. Or are we going to have to go through a kind of baptism of fire together? Does this person actually need to weep for an hour alone in a room with me, because this line, this scene is pushing them to a place that they can't get to without shedding those tears. So then you have to go into a different mode as a writer/director. You have to be the person who is holding the actor, psychically and emotionally and understanding their process and respecting it. So, to be unafraid or at least acting unafraid that you will go into that room with them, you will go over the precipice with them, you will go through the fire with them to arrive at the line which was actually fine. The line, the scene, whatever you asked them to do, was actually fine. It's just that it's really asking a lot of this person to get there.

Now all this is in a split second maybe, on the set, with tons of people around you, hundreds of people around you if it's a big budget set, or maybe just one or two if it's a small budget thing. But whatever it is, time is precious, and the pressure to panic, gloss over, make a bad decision, not acknowledge what's happening in front of your eyes is very, very great. That's the point at which you have to discriminate between these parts of your mind which will be fighting with each other. The only rule I know that works absolutely under such circumstances, and under which as a director or writer/director there is this temptation to panic yourself, is first of all, don't blame anybody or anything. Blame is absolutely useless and takes you absolutely nowhere. If there's one job definition as a director, as a writer/director, it's that you are completely and absolutely responsible for absolutely everything. It's great relief actually when you figure that out. Because there is nobody else to blame, and the earlier on that one practices that responsibility the better.

If that sense is in the writing room when you're by yourself - whatever your writing room is - a café, a table, a kitchen table, a dedicated space, a train, wherever the space that you create in order to write, if you know that you can't blame your laptop going wrong, you can't blame that it's the wrong kind of pencil, it's the wrong colour of paper, that it's the wrong weather, that you didn't have enough coffee this morning, or that you had too much, or you had a row with somebody, or nobody gave you any money to write, or never will give you any money to write, or your parents didn't encourage you enough when you were 2, 6, 20, or boyfriend, or girlfriend, partner, or whatever. Chuck the lot away; if you're going to be a director, it's all down to you.

Now that doesn't necessarily mean that you are God, and you are omnipotent and you have caused everything that happens in the room. One can swing that way too, you can go too far in that direction. People also bring their own dynamics, their own responsibilities as well. The people you work with are all adult individuals, unless of course you're working with children (they're usually more adult than the adults by the way) and they bring their

own responsibilities with them. But if you can model taking absolute responsibility and never blaming anybody for anything that goes wrong, you are going to go a very, very, very long way to winning the trust of the actor and everybody else that works with you.

MASTERCLASS PARTICIPANT

If you are a writer/director then you obviously, pretty much lay down the parts you've been writing and you've got a fair idea of what you want to see on the screen, but the actors, their job is to interpret as well. I was wondering about the relationship you have with the actors as a director and if they're asking you too many questions about their role, if you stop and let them find their own reality with it.

SALLY POTTER

I try to be very pragmatic with actors and very, very individual. So there's no system, there's just observation about what works with the individual and what seems to be helping them to really get to the place that I feel they need to get to for the role, for the part, for the whatever they care to express. I think it's important to state that, because there's a lot of systematized prescriptive ways of writing, of directing, or working with actors floating around as if these laws and rules are really going to do anything at all. I think that they often do more harm than good. Actors are completely individual human beings who are trying to find a way of doing what they need to do and trying to figure out what you want, they're trying to please you actually; they hope that you're not going to make them look like a banana on the screen.

I'm going to take some random examples that are absolutely not a system but which apply to individuals. Some female actors are very, very hampered by a constant low level drone of anxiety about what they're going to look like on the screen; that their nose looks too big from this angle or their hair is going to stick up there or they saw themselves once in ugly light or another thing, or some critic wrote that they had a big bum, you know blah blah blah. And they fight it and it's an agony and it's an un-admitted agony, so all the issues to do with hair, makeup, lighting, costume, all the kind of physical exterior details are not trivia. They link in to that woman as an individual with some of her deepest fears about her values as a human being on Earth, and it's a horror to admit it, but it's how the actor manifests the greater horror of how we're all judged by our looks and the cult of plastic surgery and ageing and how you're never the right age, right shape, right anything, everyone's a bit wrong, even the greatest beauties of all time hate something about themselves.

So how do you deal with this in this instance when it's in front of you and you suddenly realize that you're trying to talk about the deeper motivations of a character or the huge arcs of a global theme and the person in front of you is worrying about the shine on the end of their nose. Ok, the situation, when you sense that that's happening, is first of all to have an attitude of the biggest possible frame of reference of deep compassion about this. This is not some vain diva worrying, it's an actor linking in to this deep, deep psychic current that goes back to the Greeks and beyond about beauty, about proportion, about exterior/interior life and so on. This manifestation of the shine on the end of the nose or the bit of hair or whatever it may be has its roots in everything to do with their trade and what you're trying to do. So you try and look at it first of all as an issue deserving of time and respect, secondly of human compassion for this person and the suffering that's going into it, and thirdly of something you've just got to deal with and reassure the person that you are going to pay attention to and deal with so that you can go to that other thing that you want to go to with them.

Nobody writes about this stuff but this is what you actually have to do. This isn't a system, this is about observing what's in the way for this person, what's in the way of them delivering the performance of their life and bringing this film alive. So what do you do? What do I do? In this instance I might say to the person, if I sense that this is an issue, I say 'let's spend some hours just talking about your hair'. Relief, you see a look of relief if you've hit the right note. So then you realize you've hit it and then you have to honour that commitment. You say 'let's look at whether your hair should be a bit blonder. A bit darker. Should it be a bit shorter? Let's look at it a bit curly, let's look at it a bit straighter, let's do some tests, let me take some photographs of it and of you and let's talk about it together'. You know you try everything, every which way to know that this issue is deserving of respect and attention, and it's a detail that may be the key to unlock that other thing - which may be a text about issues of global importance - that you want to go to with the person, which if you keep hammering on about it you're never going to get to, because this little thing is in the way, this little impediment.

So you might say to that person 'You know what, I'm going to take responsibility for your physical beauty on the screen. I'm never going to let go of that, I'm always going to be aware of it, and I'm going to have a team of people being aware of it so that you can forget it, so that you can totally relax and forget it, and I promise you I will never let a frame of film go up that doesn't honour that commitment to you'. It may be necessary to say that, I've said that to one actor. You can imagine for yourself the different ways that you can deal with that.

That might be one person. But another actor can be completely impatient with all the stuff to do with physical appearance. They just want to get on and you know that there's something else that they need to do. Maybe they need to be reassured about what your political position is in relation to this character. 'Are you trying to mock this character in your writing? Are you trying to support this character? What do you think about the Middle East? What are your views on what's happening with Israel, Palestine?' You know there's some issue that you've got to deal with with them for them to be able to trust and fly.

There's another person who might need to know the entire back story of that character to be able to walk through the door of the room with conviction. This fictitious character who's been invented, they might want to know where they've been born, what their mother was, what their father was, what they ate for dinner the previous night. Fine, then you go on that journey with them, you work it up with them or you imagine it if you haven't already written it which I often do; write lots and lots of notes that often aren't in the script that I can draw on.

Another actor you might notice that once you start talking and analyzing they start glazing over and actually verbal communication is useless and that it's about getting really practical in a really physical way. So then with that person it might be ok let's walk through this, let's find a walk or let's see how should this person be sitting, you know something very, very physical and practical. So in other words it's all about the very first thing I was talking about before about what you do with an actor; you are their audience. You have to be incredibly observant, you have to really look and really listen in a way that as a person they might never have been looked at and listened to before, and you have to observe the effect of what you do on them.

If talking to the person makes them glaze over then talking isn't going to get you very far. If they light up when you talk about their hair or something then you know that's going to be this kind of weird secret key. Or if actually the prospect of going out to dinner with you that night is what's required, because what the person really wants is they just want some private time with you to get to know you as a person, then that's what you do. You observe

what works, and then take it from there. And that means giving the relationship its due, giving the person their due, and knowing that there are no rules, but there is cause and effect and you are part of the chain of cause and effect.