

## **PETER SMITH**

### **“The Script is Looking Good”: an interview with Andrew Davies**

PS *Before coming to talk to you, I asked my colleagues what they would most like to ask you, and more than one wanted to know how tight a brief a writer tends to be given when adapting for TV or cinema.*

AD Right – well, usually when I start something, it’s – first of all, it’s either going to be a one-off or it’s going to be an episode. If it’s for television and it’s going to be in episodes, usually I’m given, or we work out by mutual agreement, the number of episodes that would be

For instance, I do a lot of work with the woman who's Head of Drama at the BBC. This is one of the good things about having been around for a long time; I knew her when she was a script editor. She was a very good script editor, and I suppose what I'm working round to is there's not usually a lot of disagreement about it. If she says "I think it would make three" or "I think it would make four" or whatever it is, I usually think she's right. Occasionally, you find that there's a difference, but generally people will go with what I say these days. And of course fashions change over the years, because – I mean – *Brideshead Revisited* is a novel of about 400-odd pages probably, maybe 500-odd, and the TV adaptation doesn't leave many of them out. And with that kind of long, leisurely pace.... I mean – Jeremy Irons practically recited the whole book, and then we had acting as well! You just wouldn't do that nowadays. Just about the longest you seem to get is six episodes.

So, yes, there's usually a pretty firm brief, but generally I get to decide the most important bits, like how to chop it up and where the episode ends.

PS *So does there come a point where you are happy with the overall structure and feel you can hand your baby over completely, or does your input continue into and beyond filming, as a sort of ongoing collaboration?*

AD Yeah, I like to have a continuing input after the filming process. When I'm writing the script, I'm writing what I hope I'll see on the screen. People imagine that my job is simply writing dialogue, but in fact it is a lot more than that, because one of the film writer's maxims is if you can do it in an image you should do. So a lot of the time I'm writing down shots – not in the technical language of cinematography but just saying what I would like to see, and I will write something like "Lara's face fills

the screen” – something which indicates that I want a close-up, but I avoid using the language of the director or the cinematographer, because I find that annoys them a lot.

especially if it's something that's been done before. Often you'll feel it hadn't been done right, or, it was done right for the 1950s or 1960s but a book appeals to us in a different way now. You'll want to bring that out. Or sometimes, if it's not such a good book (and this is very arrogant, obviously), I try to write what this book could and should have been but somehow wasn't. There was one.... A couple of examples of that were those books by Michael Dobbs, called *House of Cards*, *To Play the King* and so on, because he was not really a writer but he had some bright ideas of plots, and so I was really reinventing characters

AD Almost not at all. I find, when I'm writing a script, that I do actually see somebody in my mind's eye, but he or she doesn't have a face that I recognise. It's

AD Ha! Yeah! I thought she'd take some throwing over a parapet. But in fact he's just such a convincing actor that nobody queried it, so, no: there was no rewriting for the actor at all really.

No, sometimes you get - oh, what...? In *Vanity Fair*, I'd always imagined Becky Sharp as really (there's an awful word, "feisty", that's almost impossible to avoid these days!) very forceful, and little, and energetic, and spiky, and so on, and I was quite surprised they cast Natasha Little. I was surprised by her style of doing it, because she's very beautiful and rather serene, and doesn't apparently do an awful lot.

AD Well, I have b

stealing our jobs! I mean, I didn't go along and audition for the female lead in *Howard's End*, did I? So why can't she lay off scripts? *Sense and Sensibility* – I'd like to do a very pro-Marianne *Sense and Sensibility*., and everybody always does a pro-Elinor one - you know, because everybody's so fucking sensible all the time!

Anyway - yes - so sometimes things that other people have done annoy me - because, when something's been fairly recently done, you know nobody else can really do it for ten years or so, and so by the time I get a chance to do my *Sense and Sensibility* I probably shan't have enough energy left!

PS *What you've been talking about probably makes my next question redundant, because you've been talking about adaptation as a creative, personal process. I had wondered, though, whether you had found any tension between the television and film work that has been coming your way - not exactly easily perhaps but regularly, and bringing a fairly assured income - and your own original work. The adaptations, I know, are original work too, but do you ever feel they've threatened your own original work?*

AD Yeah, what I do feel is - although not all the time - a certain sense of guilt that I should be turning down some of these things, and making some time, and writing something original, and I think: "Why don't I do it?" It may be partly because I do still find adaptation genuinely exciting: I mean, I want to read, and I want to transmit the book or whatever as I see it. And the other reason might be something to do with age and less happening in my life as it were - less Sturm und Drang and all that kind of thing - no love affairs or career crises. So if I were writing something original it would probably be something a bit more remote. I suppose I'm saying there's nothing



burning a hole in me that I've got to write, which was.... I think you almost need that sort of edge to write something like a novel. They take a long time to write, so with *Getting Hurt* or *B. Monkey*



Whether that is relevant or not, unless you can see things visually you're not going to be any good as a writer for films.

PS *You've talked a lot about ways in which you've collaborated with people - ways in which you've been taught how to write. You've got a teaching background yourself. Can creative writing courses work, and, if so, how?*

credit - where a certain amount of achievement is called for. I always used to try to discourage people who were trying to get Firsts overall. There's just no fucking

with them because you feel you need to give everybody equal chances. But I used to enjoy teaching creative writing at university. I think young and intelligent people - which they all are obviously or they wouldn't be at university - are always okay to teach. They always seemed to have an understanding that there were no guarantees and we were just doing this for a bit of fun, and if they got a good grade then it was a bonus.

PS *So what's the next project for you.*

AD Oh, you mean powerful story, clear structure, credible characters and all that?  
Well, in a sense it does and in a sense it doesn't. They're all there potentially, but most of