

Roundtable: Feature screenwriters

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THR: Are writers better treated in England, Ron?

Ronald Harwood: No, we don't get as much. This is much bigger money here -- much.

Haggis: But you keep your copyright in England, do you not?

Harwood: No.

THR: As a member of both the British and American guilds, can you write for British companies?

Harwood: I don't know, but at the moment I don't want to do anything. I'm writing my autobiography and I'm enjoying it. And I'm very old, so there's a long story to tell. Lots of American writers might write now for the theater. If it's a long strike, they might write plays.

THR: David, are you writing a play?

David Benioff: I have a novel coming out in May that I am in the middle of editing.

Harwood: It's fun, that, isn't it? After the pressures of screenplays?

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THR: What's the novel called?

Benioff: "City of Thieves." It's set during the Siege of Leningrad. All the characters are Russian.

THR: What is the most difficult thing about doing a novel, compared to a screenplay?

Benioff: It's a solitary endeavor. You get so used to working as a collaborator on a screenplay -- you're working on your own for the first part of it, but then you're working with directors, with producers, with the whole group of people. Which can be really rewarding --

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THR: Do you approach screenwriting in a different way than Americans?

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Cody: Because you'll feel compelled to return to it?

Harwood: No, because you know what to return to. So you don't have those sleepless nights.

Haggis: It's just physics. If something rolls, it continues to move.

THR: Was it hard to get "Elah" rolling?

Haggis: Well, I purposely chose a character I didn't understand. I was writing about the Iraq war and I decided it was much too easy to tell that story from my point of view, so I looked for a man who's quite antithetical. But here's what I didn't know was going to happen: I said, "Halfway through, I'm going to change genres. I'm going to say it's a murder mystery and then halfway through, I'm going to say that doesn't matter any more."

THR: Has the experience of directing changed your approach to writing?

Haggis: Yes. You trust the actors more, and you try to explain a lot less.

Affleck: The lesson it taught me was, it made me want to write less. The actors do so much of it, you don't need to do all that writing.

THR: Did any of you go into writing as a means to directing?

Haggis: I think so. I liked writing, but I always felt as a filmmaker that you wrote and directed it.

Affleck: I went into writing as a means to acting.

THR: What is the hardest thing about writing?

Cody: For me, it's the discipline. I really have trouble sticking to a routine. Just the mechanics of actually sitting down and writing is a challenge for me. Getting started is usually the fun part, when you have a fresh idea and you're in the honeymoon period where your mind is racing and the possibilities are all out there in front of you. And then once you get into it, and you start writing yourself into these labyrinthine corridors, it gets a little more difficult.

Haggis: For me the most difficult thing is getting started every day. I'll plan an hour of email, and then phone calls, and then rechecking my emails. So I'll spend the first three hours doing that. I really wait until I feel so ill that I haven't written that I'm forced to continue writing. Then every single sequence I get to, I say, "That's impossible. I can't write that."

THR: Do you have people you go to for advice?

Haggis: My wife's the only one I trust, because I think -- I'm such a cynical bastard -- anyone I give my script to, they're going to lie to me and say, "It's lovely," when it's not.

Harwood: That's what I want!

THR: Is there anything you'd really love to write that you haven't done?

Harwood: This is going to sound very pompous: I'd love to write something good. And I mean that in the most basic sense. I mean something nobody interferes with, where nothing is changed.

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Cody: Because you'll feel compelled to return to it?

Harwood: No, because you know what to return to. So you don't have those sleepless nights.

Haggis: It's just physics. If something rolls, it continues to move.

THR: Was it hard to get "Elah" rolling?

Haggis: Well, I purposely chose a character I didn't understand. I was writing about the Iraq war and I decided it was much too easy to tell that story from my point of view, so I looked for a man who's quite antithetical. But here's what I didn't know was going to happen: I said, "Halfway through, I'm going to change genres. I'm going to say it's a murder mystery and then halfway through, I'm going to say that doesn't matter any more."

THR: Has the experience of directing changed your approach to writing?

Haggis: Yes. You trust the actors more, and you try to explain a lot less.

Affleck: The lesson it taught me was, it made me want to write less. The actors do so much of it, you don't need to do all that writing.

THR: Did any of you go into writing as a means to directing?

Haggis: I think so. I liked writing, but I always felt as a filmmaker that you wrote and directed it.

Affleck: I went into writing as a means to acting.

THR: What is the hardest thing about writing?

Cody: For me, it's the discipline. I really have trouble sticking to a routine. Just the mechanics of actually sitting down and writing is a challenge for me. Getting started is usually the fun part, when you have a fresh idea and you're in the honeymoon period where your mind is racing and the possibilities are all out there in front of you. And then once you get into it, and you start writing yourself into these labyrinthine corridors, it gets a little more difficult.

Haggis: For me the most difficult thing is getting started every day. I'll plan an hour of email, and then phone calls, and then rechecking my emails. So I'll spend the first three hours doing that. I really wait until I feel so ill that I haven't written that I'm forced to continue writing. Then every single sequence I get to, I say, "That's impossible. I can't write that."

THR: Do you have people you go to for advice?

Haggis: My wife's the only one I trust, because I think -- I'm such a cynical bastard -- anyone I give my script to, they're going to lie to me and say, "It's lovely," when it's not.

Harwood: That's what I want!

THR: Is there anything you'd really love to write that you haven't done?

Harwood: This is going to sound very pompous: I'd love to write something good. And I mean that in the most basic sense. I mean something nobody interferes with, where nothing is changed.

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