

## **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 best to do this kind of thing in – and when I say “we”, usually I’m working with the producer or it’s someone higher up like an executive producer.

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.

So – staying with it or handing it over? Yes, I’m hoping that what I see on the screen will be what I imagined, or something even better. I hope it’s going to be something even better, because they’re bringing different skills and expertise that I haven’t got, and their own kind of bright ideas and creative input, and that when they’ve done all the shooting and they’ve got the kind of rough assembly or an edit of an episode, I’ll get to see it at that point usually, and I’ll get the opportunity to make comments, which are often really to do about the pacing of something – or about – say when a major character makes his first appearance in the thing. I like that bleeding obvious thing when you get a big close-up on the screen so that the audience can sit up and take notice and say this guy or this woman is going to be important. So, yeah, I’ll either go to a sort of tiny screening of – you know – six people, or they’ll send me a tape and I’ll comment.

PS *Talking about the process of structuring an adaptation, do you have any consciousness ever that you’re starting in a particular way? That there are certain plums that you want to pull out of the original and they’ve got to be there as a sort of nucleus to build around? Or is it something rather different from that?*

AD No, I think – I think certain things in the book either leap out or they don’t leap out, and if nothing leaps out, I don’t want to do the thing. Very often there’s a certain kind of major scene or a certain thing that I think is really very powerful. You imagine what you’re going to see on screen: that’s very important. And also it might be if it’s a great classic that you kind of feel what is the real essence of this book, and

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 and just changed them to be much darker and Jacobean. And then another one I wrote (actually with somebody else - with Bernadette Davis) was a thing called *Wilderness*, about a woman who turned into a wolf. I was working there (or we were working there) with a really pretty crummy novel - American novel actually, set in LA and Canada - and we transposed it to London and Scotland, and made her work in a university library, because the thought of a full-grown wolf in a university library in the middle of the night is just such a sexy notion, and we were thinking that the book should have been like that and that in a way the whole thing was a kind of metaphor for - for – women's sexuality. And so, you get these kind of ideas about a book, and they kind of seize you with a bit of a passion really. You let yourself in for a lot of hard work, and unless you've got some kind of conviction about it, it's just going to be a dull slog.

PS *You mentioned the kind of dialogue that goes on between you and the producer, say, or the executive producer, or the whole production team. What about casting? To what extent are you influenced by who may be seen as ideal for the part? Would it be big names - or faces you can impose on a blank screen?*

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 only very rarely that I'll have a particular actor in mind. It will happen occasionally, though. An example of that is Graham Crowther in *A Very Peculiar Practice* - right from the beginning. I'd seen him years and years before in Lindsay Anderson's film "If". He was playing a part in that - one of the teachers - and I just thought, yes, he'd be wonderful in this. But normally I just have these sort of phantoms in my head, so it's a shock when the real actor turns up. Ian Richardson in *House of Cards* was an example of that. I'd imagined Francis Urquhart - because he's so powerful, partly - as a big, heavy, strong, back-slapping, very physical sort of guy, and when Ian Richardson, who's almost kind of bloodless and very delicately built (although very strong in another way with a sort of fierce intensity) appeared, it was a big shock, and it took me a while to realise it could still work..

PS *Did you find that you needed to rewrite at all with this - sort of - more ascetic, cerebral figure in mind?*

AD No, not at all, although there were bits that seemed to me a little bit improbable for him to do, because - I mean - the girl in it (what was she called - the actress?), Susanna Harker, was actually probably heavier than Ian....

PS *And wouldn't go very easily off a tower!*

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. But - I mean - her way of getting blokes was kind of draw them in, and as a person she speaks rather quietly, and has a rather knowing smile - like she understands just how you're feeling. It was like a different way of playing Becky, but strangely enough, even though I hadn't imagined the lines as being spoken in that way, it worked just as well with those lines, and so it was really a nice surprise. In fact when people ask me what's my favourite of the adaptations, I generally say it's *Vanity Fair*, simply because I was constantly being surprised. The director kept doing things I just didn't expect to happen at all, but they worked! And Natasha was so different from what I'd imagined, so I was fascinated all the time to see what she was going to do. Whereas something like *Pride and Prejudice*, even though I suppose Colin Firth's performance (and if anybody's overdue for an Emmy it's him) - was a consummate delivery of all that I'd hoped, except in a few details, it wasn't utterly surprising. He didn't go in a different direction, even though what was there was great.

PS *Has there been anything that you've found yourself unable to adapt?*

AD Well, I have been offered some things that I didn't want to do. For example, while there have been some successful film versions of Henry James, James is somebody that I didn't really get on with in the books, and so he's one example. Nobody's ever offered me a Virginia Woolf to adapt, and if they did, I'd turn it down. Oddly enough ("oddly", probably because there *are* some very powerful scenes) I feel uneasy about D. H. Lawrence somehow: I'm not quite sure why. It's very easy to make him bleeding obvious, I suppose!

But it's mostly things with good stories I go for. It's interesting that so many people regard - with justice - Martin Amis as our leading contemporary novelist, yet nobody thinks of adapting him for television because the characters aren't real characters and the story is never a proper story. He manages to be a major novelist without creating characters that feel like real people or a story that would make more than half an episode. So really your standard nineteenth-century: your great canon of nineteenth-century novelists, English, French, Russian - I don't think anyone in the twentieth century is old-fashioned enough to think that sort of thing is still worth writing. But they launch a story. They get a grip on you, and keep you; they have characters that grow, and develop, and change, and make you want to know what's going to happen to them. So those are the kind of things that one likes to do.

PS *Is there a temptation for you? Is there something you've always very much wanted to adapt and - for one reason or another - never got round to writing?*

AD Well, I've been very lucky and got to do a lot of my favourite things. I would have liked to have done a *Sense and Sensibility*, but - of course.... In fact I was very miffed about Emma Thompson. I mean, what are these bloody actresses doing

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* there were things that really exercised me that meant I passionately wanted, I might almost say needed to write both those books.

I suppose I'm quite pleased - although it's kind of adaptation - that I've done something that's very close to an original, which is a modern take on *Othello*, in which he's the first black Commissioner of Police, so all I've taken from Shakespeare really is the bare bones of the plot and the notion of a really intelligent man in the power of that raging sexual jealousy - although in a way you don't need Shakespeare for that because most of us have experienced it from time to time. So I suppose I would like to - it would be interesting see what I could come up with if I could take the time and come up and write something wholly original. But another thing too is that I've never been the sort of writer, I suppose, who spins fabulous things out of imagination. Most of the stuff I have written has had its roots somewhere in my own life, and I've always thought that how a lot of writers decline is simply through being writers. Fuck all happens to them! The life of a writer - forget it! Obsessive - boring - it's all about writing! It's terrible!

PS *You've ended up writing a lot of prose, but an awful lot of that prose has co-existed with - supported and been supported by - visual images. Where did that come from?*

AD I think it might - it might just be an accident of opportunities, because I became a real writer through writing radio plays, simply because that was what I was able to sell in the early days - very early days. And I find you learn most writing

drama - I suppose the poor bloody novelists don't get the opportunity to work with other people - but you do learn most as a dramatist that way: you work with producers and you soon find out what works and what doesn't. I had a very good producer who produced a number of my radio plays, and he just sat me down and showed me how with a page of quite good dialogue that I'd written most of it was redundant, and how you could make the scene work within about three or four lines, which was a bit dashing, you know, when he first did it, but it was a lesson.

So, anyway, I went from radio to.... We got a telly when we started having kids, really, because we thought our life was closing down a bit, but in a nice way, and this was 1963 and there was *The Wednesday Play* in all its glory, and I thought: "Christ! I want to write one of those!" And that was how I got into television, and when I discovered that television was paying about ten times as much as radio, I thought, "I think I'll keep going with this if I can," although it was difficult. I did keep the radio plays going, because you could never be quite sure of getting television plays accepted. It was to do with things like patronage in a way, almost. In television in the Seventies, which was the time when I kind of got established and got to the state when I could have actually gone full-time (although I didn't really want to), producers had far more autonomy, and two producers, one called Louis Marks and the other called Rosemary Hill, just liked my work a lot, and so, as it were, they were kind of bringing me on. And various people spread the word about how good I was and how cheap I still was, and gradually I sort of became known as a good thing.

Why am I visual? Well I just am that sort of a person, so when I read a book I see pictures, and if I'm telling somebody a story, I'll certainly be imagining certain quite specific and vivid things. I used to be good at art in school, and keen on it.

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?*

AD I think it is possible to teach people how to write. There are two kinds of ways in which you can approach teaching creative writing, and I think they both have quite different outcomes, although sometimes the one can become the other. What I mean really is that, whether you're teaching kids or adults who have dabbled as amateurs, there's often a very strong impulse to go on a course and do this, and part of the reason is they've got some very powerful life material which they just want to express, and it's important for them to express it. It's a kind of therapy really, and the end result may or may not be wonderful, or saleable, or have the same effect on other people that it has on the writer, but usually to write something like that, and get it out of your system, and say, "Right, there it is!" is enormously helpful in helping people just to understand their lives, and come to terms with them, and achieve "closure". At least, everybody says that! So there's that kind, and I've taught on non-selective creative writing courses - first come first served - and I've done it on a Greek island where people sign up really for a holiday, where they can get pissed and swim in the sea. And there my aim is to just encourage people and free them up and give them permission to write without worrying about the quality. The other sort, which of course still has elements of the therapeutic and the "just let go and express yourself" about it, is the sort of course I've taught at Warwick University - creative writing for

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 guarantee. I used to say: "I guarantee that you'll do something that'll pass – that'll satisfy the requirements, just like writing an essay - but no more." And what I find with that - I mean, can you teach it or not - is that there are certain technical senses in which you can teach it, but if somebody is just an appalling person and just accepts the cliches without looking for themselves, it's very hard to teach them to look and to come up with an individual viewpoint. And - and I'm sure this is true of lots and lots of things - somebody who's very good already you can teach a lot to and they'll learn very quickly, and the most casual thing you offer will just inspire them and fire off lots of ideas. Whereas, with people who are not much good, you can work your bloody arse off telling them stuff and it just doesn't sink in or they understand it in the wrong way, or whatever, which is I think one reason why I won't do non-selective courses any more - at least except on another Greek island, and then the attraction would be the sun and the bars and so on rather than the actual teaching, because in almost every group there's one problem personality who just can't write and is really aggrieved because of this and takes it out on everybody else, and it's just terribly hard to deal with them really. In a way what you want to say is, "Try to be nicer and more interesting, and fucking well listen! And look, instead of just moaning about yourself all the time!" I do try to be patient, but when you're stuck with somebody for a whole fucking week and you're drinking as well, usually there's some point at the end of the week when I find myself saying something like that, which doesn't go down at all well really - makes me feel very ashamed afterwards! The sad thing of course is that in one of these random groups there are usually one or two people who are unexpectedly really, really interesting, but there again I feel guilty about hanging out

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 Well, there's a batch of things that have been done and haven't been screened yet. There's this version of *Othello*, which is a two-hour, one-off ITV drama, which is being shown this Autumn, and there's a straightforward adaptation of a Trollope, called *The Way We Live Now*. Do you know it?

PS *Yeah, I do.*

AD Because it's not at all what I thought of as being a typical Trollope. I mean, I'm not really a great follower of Trollope, but this is a great story, and it's got David Suchet doing the performance of a lifetime. That's going to be on on BBC in November. What I'm doing now is finishing the first drafts of.... I've been doing some very scary things. *Othello* has been very scary, but it's turned out well, and I've finished the first draft of another TV adaptation of *Dr Zhivago* (which again was daunting because everyone wonders how you can do better than the David Lean film).

PS *But again it fulfils all your main criteria.*

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 us know *Dr Zhivago* or remember it, even if we've read the book, more from the movie, which has got terrific structure, but the book itself is very much a poet's book, and it's very elusive and wispy, and he never writes the scenes that you think he ought to write, so I've got a greater respect for Robert Bolt than I had before, which was already enormous. But there's stuff in the book that he didn't really explore very much, which I've been able to. It's very much a book that enables you to take your own line - although of course it's got some terrific characters. Lara is a terrific character. Zhivago himself is a great problem, because although in a novel it's good to have the passive-observer-type hero, a hero who sort of gets swept along in the flux of life isn't really very good in a movie, or you try to find opportunities for him to be a bit more positive and active, instead of just having things happen.. Things just sort of fade away in the end. It's strange! It's strange! He gets married again, to some complete nonentity - and I thought you bloody can't have that! And then he just drops dead.

So it is problematic, but I think it's going to be all right, and everybody's been pleased with the script. Christ knows how they'll be able to do it! Actually, Granada, who are doing it, have always been stingy about budgets, and you can't do *Zhivago* without trains and snow and armies and stuff. There's a limit to what you can do with close-ups! But the script is looking good!