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MINISTRY OF CULTURE

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INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

MASTERCLASS

JOHN SAYLES



Despina Mouzaki – Director of the Thessaloniki International Film Festival.

Good Morning. I would like to ask you to please turn off your mobiles. We are very happy to have John Sayles, Maggie Renzi, Danny Glover and his wife with us today.

John Sayles will speak to us about his work. How much could his example teach us, I wonder? Instead of following along the paths trodden by many others in American cinema, he preferred making his own way. Together with his constant companion, Maggie Renzi, they managed to give the word “independent” real meaning in an age where the price for this independence seemed too harsh.

Along the way, they managed to create their own production model and a truly different cinema. Their journey is fascinating and their experience valuable to us. This is why today’s opportunity is both rare and significant. Let’s enjoy today’s masterclass and not simply take a lesson on cinema, but a lesson about life itself. Thank you.

John Sayles

Hi. Thank you for coming. I’m going to talk for half an hour and then answer questions, if anybody has questions. Maybe I’ll talk for more than half an hour.

I write novels and every once in a while I get to write and direct a movie and I’ve always considered myself a storyteller; when people ask me what part of filmmaking I like the most, the writing, the directing or the editing -because I also edit my own movies- I always say the editing, but that’s because it’s the final part of the storytelling.

When you are writing a movie and you are a low-budget independent director, you very often don’t know if you are going to get to make it or not. You don’t know if you are going to be able to raise the money. So, sometimes you can feel like a real jerk, like “I’m writing this thing and I’ll never get to make it, so who am I kidding?”

When you are directing, it’s a lot of fun, because you are working with actors, with the crew and with the composer, but every day on the set you’re worried about the sun that’s going down; or that in half an hour the crew has to eat or you pay a penalty or the horse won’t do what it’s supposed to do and a million other things. So, it’s a little like trying to write while there’s a taxi meter next to you and every two seconds it makes another click and that’s another thousand dollars. So, there’s a lot of pressure on you while you’re shooting.

While you’re editing, it doesn’t matter if the sun is in the sky, or if it’s raining. You know you’re going to get to make the movie now. You’ve already gone that far in the process so you don’t feel like a jerk anymore, until you see your footage and it’s not what you wanted it to be.

But, for me, it’s not separate from the writing; it’s not separate from the directing. When I’m editing, I’m still rewriting the story, I’m moving things around, I’m taking lines out, I’m tightening things, the way that I do when I write a novel and I write the third draft. I’m giving it more rhythm, I’m making it clearer, I’m moving things around to make the story flow better and I’m still working with the actors, even though they are not there. A movie performance is collaboration between the writer, the actor, the director and the editor.

What I try to do is create an environment where the actors give me a lot. They give me a lot of choices in the editing room and then I try to use their best work, the stuff where they really nailed it even if it makes it an uncomfortable cut -because of the nature of our movies. Believing those characters is more important sometimes than every cut being a beautiful one. So, very often I’ll sacrifice a beautiful cut for what I think is stronger acting.

And then you can emphasize things in the editing from those actors. You can have an actor who has given you a lot of choices but the hardest thing about movie acting is that you don’t do it in order. You don’t do the first scene, then the second one and then the third one; you may do the fourth scene first and then you may do the last scene in the movie next and then you may do the

second scene. You may be on the last day of shooting doing the first scene in the movie where you meet the girl that you fall in love with.

The director and the actor have to keep that in mind; they have to think about where they are, if the character changes throughout the movie, where they are within that change. For example, am I mad at this person? Am I happy with this person? Do I understand the situation I am in? Am I more or less frightened? Am I more or less angry?

So, the director and the editor also need to keep track of that and what you find is that actors who give you a range of things, when you come into the editing room, they are in better shape because then, as an editor, you can say "I don't want to reveal this about this character in scene No3". But if I wanted to, I have a take from this actor that does reveal this about his character, that they are afraid or very angry about something. I don't want to reveal it in the arc of this movie now into scene 5; and when you work with good actors, they'll give you that ammunition. They'll give you those possibilities to shape the arc of that performance.

Every once in a while you run into a brilliant actor who only gives you a little bit. There's a famous story about Al Pacino and "The Godfather". After about three weeks of shooting "The Godfather", the studio called Francis Coppola and said, "We're thinking about replacing this young guy who's playing Michael Corleone because he's doing nothing. His face is just there, he's doing nothing. Marlon Brando is brilliant, he's all over the place, he's exciting to watch, but as for this Pacino guy, I'm sorry, you made a mistake; we've got to replace him". He said "No, no, I think he's doing good stuff; it's just subtle; you'll see", and he was hoping this was true.

When they got into the editing room, what they found is that Al Pacino had been keeping very good track of what was happening with his character. He was very slowly getting harder, getting stronger and in fact freezing. Each time you put something in order, you realize that it was a guy who starts like this and very slowly, by the end of the movie, becomes this. They couldn't see it all split up but when they put it in order, it was there. That's great if an actor can do that.

Usually you have to help them, and one of the ways that you help them as a director and eventually as an editor is by sometimes asking for a range. "I don't know how I want this played yet, play it this way and then play it that way. Play it one time so that you show how upset you are; play it another time so that you are upset and we can feel it inside you, but you don't show it, especially to the other characters; or maybe show it a little to the audience but not to the other characters". When you have those two things going into the editing room, then, as a storyteller, you say "This is the perfect moment to reveal that about this character".

Let me talk a little bit about my process of figuring out how I tell a story. I think there are two basic kinds of stories that we see in movies. One is about vicarious experience and it's like when your parents tell you a scary story and you like the fact that they are telling you a scary story because you are safe in your bed and your parents are there and you know that really nothing too bad can happen to you; there's no real risk involved, but you do get involved in the story.

Your average James Bond thriller is a vicarious story where you start to identify with James Bond. You go through all these adventures, you get to hang out with these beautiful women, the bad guys shoot at you but they never really hit you and you can defeat those bad guys. It's very adventurous and it's very exciting and at the end of it you've had an exciting vicarious experience. Sometimes you're worried that one of his friends will get killed; you know that he's never going to get killed because he's James Bond. This is one of the biggest parts of the movie business. I think people have always told these kinds of stories.

And there's another kind of story where you use the story to organize experience so it's more understandable. People started thinking about what happens in their lives when they started evolving from baboons; they started saying "Why does this happen? And especially, "if it happened this

time, will it happen again? Every night, it's scary; the sun disappears but then it comes back again. Wow! Is it going to come back tomorrow? Wow! It did again!" After a while they start to notice that, for example, the seasons are different, that sometimes there is a lot of sun and very little night and sometimes there is a lot of night and very little sun. "Is there a pattern to this?"

I think people started it because they didn't have science yet; they had the primitive science where "I'm going to hit my brother with a stick and if he yells, that's probably not a good idea" or "I'm going to hit myself, that's really not a good idea", or "Let's go and find somebody we don't like and hit him on the head with a stick and maybe we're doing something". That's scientific, that's experimentation, but it was pretty crude. Instead, what they did was make up a story.

We traveled around Macedonia in the last couple of days with a very good guide who was telling us stories from the ancient Greeks; at some point somebody had decided "I know why there's four months where there's very little sun". It was because there was this woman who was kidnapped by the god of the dead; he took her away and her mother was very sad -the mother was the goddess who was in charge of growing things. So nothing grew; there were no leaves on the trees, the grass didn't grow, the crops didn't grow and all the people were dying.

So, one of the other gods went and talked to the god of the dead and said "You have to let this woman back". And he said, "Wait a minute! I don't want to let her go". He said, "No, you have to let her go". So, he said, "Here's the deal. Anything that she has eaten while she was down here will be counted against her when she comes back". So, this woman comes back and she eats four seeds of the pomegranate as she was leaving, because she finally got hungry; so, there are four months where she has to go down and live with the god of the dead.

A fairly complicated story, but even if everybody who heard that story didn't literally believe it was true, it was a way of explaining things. It was a way to tell your children "You're going to notice something as the years go by; there are these four months and they are going to come and you'd better have food laid by because nothing is going to grow in those four months". It's a useful story even if it's not literally true.

So, I think the reason why a lot of human beings tell stories is to make sense of chaotic things, to make connections. Those connections may be total lies. They may be a story you tell about yourself to know why you are a nation, to know why you are Greek and they are not, why you are American and they are not, why you're Irish and they are not. And those self-defining stories become national myths and they are very important. There's also often a lot of bullshit in them that's not true but it's important to the story to make you feel good about yourself, to make you feel better or separate from somebody else.

I'm more interested in telling those stories; but I'm truly interested in telling those stories when they are complex and they make you really think about "Well, this is the official story, this is the story we've already heard, but is there a deeper story? Is there something else going on here that is maybe not so easy and doesn't make us feel so good but it's important to understand?"

Let me make up a story to give you an example. The other day, we went to the grave of Philip of Macedonia and heard the story of Alexander the Great. There have been a bunch of movies made about Alexander the Great. Recently, Oliver Stone made one and there was one in the '60s, I believe, that had Richard Burton. It's been done a half dozen times. Not more, because it's very expensive; it's Alexander the Great and you need a lot of guys with sandals and sorts. That's expensive. But let's say the opening shot of the movie is this beautiful-looking guy and he's obviously incredible and charismatic; he is a warrior and he is the head of all these troops; he's obviously the leader and he's played by Brad Pitt, let's say; he rides by without a word and we see the power of this guy, everybody is hanging on his every word and we say "That must be him", because we've read the title of the movie "Alexander the Great".

Now, in the bushes there is a shepherd who's probably 30 years old. He sees these guys and he looks scared. He runs back to his village and says "Alexander the asshole, who's a murderer, is coming" because that's how the people in his wake thought of him before they were conquered. "What are we going to do? What are we going to do?" And the head of his village says, "We are going to resist him; thanks for the information but you know that everybody who resists him either they defeat him or they die. If we don't resist him, we'll become part of his kingdom and your male children will have to fight under him and we'll have to pay tribute and he may take your wife away from you to be a plaything for his men. So, it's worth fighting. Here's the spear, here's the sword, you're in the army now and you are going to fight against him".

Already -because I've left Brad Pitt on the horse- we're getting into something a little more complex. The story of Alexander the Great can be very complex. What I am interested in is that shepherd. Now I've got all this wonderful history that's been written down -and some of it is true and some of it is legend- and I can use that legend, but also talk about people who are in the army or who are drafted into the army, who have very mixed feelings about this. This guy would rather just be a shepherd but now he can't.

He's got these two bad choices. He's going to have to go out and either learn to be a good enough soldier to defeat Alexander and his armies or he's going to be killed or he is going to have to give up and maybe see his children and his wife taken away and for the rest of his life he will live in a state that is a slave to Macedonia. So, he has three bad choices. Already, there is a complexity here, this guy who has three bad choices in this community that has three bad choices.

And then, let's say, we see a battle scene, a very brutal battle scene and most of his friends, the people that he's grown up with, are slaughtered in front of his eyes and he's only slightly wounded. And at the last minute, when they are surrounded by Macedonians, Alexander comes up and says "These ten guys fought bravely. I'm going to give them a chance. They can either be executed by us or they can join our forces because they are obviously good fighters".

So, he's thinking, "He's just slaughtered all my friends, I don't want to become a fighter for him", but he says, "If you spare me, will you also spare my wife and children?" And Alexander says "Okay, deal". So, he saves his wife and children but he agrees to go and fight for this guy who has just murdered all of his friends. Already you have another layer of complexity; somebody who has agreed -not willingly, but because he's in a bad situation- to be a warrior, to be a killer for this guy who's killed most of his friends but he's done it for a good reason.

And then, let's say, he spends three or four more years in a montage -that's a montage of battles, because he's working for Alexander- and he's become a better soldier and he's killing people and he doesn't even know the names of the people he's killing. He's just another soldier and we follow his life in the soldier camp. And he's not feeling heroic; he's just feeling like "I'm going to survive another day and I have to kill this guy before he kills me. I have to do what Alexander says".

And we see Alexander every once in a while and he's still played by Brad Pitt and this guy [the shepherd/soldier] is not that attractive, he's just a character actor, nobody in the audience knows who he is. You like him, but he's not a famous guy. And in the beginning he has a couple of chances; he's close enough to Alexander to kill him but he doesn't because, if he kills him, they'll go back to kill his wife and children and he'll never see them again. So, even though he hates this guy and everything he does, he's not going to kill him.

But we have those moments of decision. "I could do the world a big favor by killing this guy. I'm not going to do it because of my personal problems. I have decided that my life and my family's life are more important than the future of the world". You could replace Alexander with Hitler and think of the same thing, of somebody who's close enough to kill Hitler but then he decides "I don't want to die yet; I don't want my family to die; too bad for the world, too bad for the millions who

will die if Hitler lives”.

And, let’s say, that even at the end of three or four years of battle, by this point he’s gotten very cynical and he’s raping and pillaging even though his heart isn’t in it and then he’s once again wounded in battle and he sees destruction around him and he decides “I can’t be part of this anymore” and he crawls away, hides and makes his way back home. On his way back home, he goes through all the lands that Alexander has conquered and some of them, the first ones, are still burning and people are burying their dead; and as he goes back further and further, he sees what the reign of Alexander has done and he’s not so crazy about it. People are bitter and they are rebellious but they are afraid to rebel because in any rebellion they are killed right away.

And then, he finally gets back to his own village and his son who was 12 years old when he left is now 16 years old and he expects him to greet him with open arms. Instead, his son says, “How could you have deserted?” Because, while he was gone, his son had been recruited into the Hitler youth of that time: Alexander’s young people who say, “We are going to become his soldiers for his next campaign”. For his son now, the greatest person in the world is Alexander the Great and his father is lucky to have been just a foot soldier among them. So, now you have to deal with this father and son.

That to me is complexity and each one of those moments is a complex moment and, as I write, I have this decision to make of which way this character is going to go. And what you hope is that the audience is going to get involved with this character and each time the character has a decision to make, either they say “Make this decision, it’s a noble decision, it’s a wonderful decision” and maybe he makes the other one. Or, “What would I do?” and what I hope to get to by the end of the movie is that the audience identifies with this guy so much on a human level that they start to make some connections about this whole period and say “Oh, my God, what must it have been to have been just a regular person in those times! How difficult the decisions must have been! Life or death decisions no matter what you believe”.

And then maybe even “What must the decisions of the person he’s fighting at this moment be? That person might have had to make the same decisions at some point in this montage of battles. What if he’s fighting against somebody who he recognizes? This is just a simple shepherd and he just wants to protect his land, he just wants to herd his sheep, he just wants to keep his wife and children alive, but I have to kill him”.

If you can get the audience to that point, you’ve done a really rare thing in the movies. You’ve made a movie that is not just engaging in the sense of a vicarious story of all these adventures, but you’ve also made the audience start to make all those connections and start to explain what life must have been like then, not in the heroic sense but in the human sense.

The next thing I want to talk about just briefly is, as a storyteller, what I do differently when I’m making a movie and writing a novel. In a novel, I feel I can do anything that I can do in a movie except it has to come through the head first. In a movie, you have this other thing, which is, when you see a movie and it’s a good movie, there are things that you don’t think about, you just feel them. There’s a visceral part; that doesn’t really happen with a novel. It has to be interpreted with your brain. You may cry when you’re reading a novel, you may feel scared or excited, but it has to go through your brain first.

Think of a movie like “Jaws”. There are great moments in “Jaws” that are not going through your head; they are going straight to your spine and stomach; we have some instincts that don’t have to go through the head first. You’re jumping out of your seat and it’s not because you think “Sharks: they are dangerous. It would be really bad to be eaten by a shark. I think there’s a bad situation for Richard Dreyfuss”. You are scared just like he is when the shark jumps out.

So, you have that potential in movies. Basically, when you start to write a movie, to direct a movie,

to edit a movie, you start with this blank thing -this thing behind me-and what do you put in that? One of the things that you have to realize is that everything that goes up there and everything that people hear is part of the storytelling. It's not just the dialogue; it's not even just the action.

Pretty much in my books, in my fiction, I don't do a lot of editorializing; I don't do a lot of saying "and he thought this". I let or make the reader of the book figure out what the people are thinking by observing what they are saying and doing. So there's a lot of dialogue and description. Sometimes the description is written in the point of view or in the style of the person who is the character, who is experiencing it. So, the writing -if it's a 10-year-old child observing something or living through something- will be different than if it's an 80-year-old man who's observing and living through that same thing. But, finally, I just have those words and the way that they are put together in order to create this thing.

In a movie, you have so many other things that you are using to tell the story and even if you don't want to be using them, you'd better be aware of them. For instance, think of this room, that this is a movie scene and I'm up here and you're there and there are a few people moving around at the back and there are some people with cameras. First of all, there's the point of view. When we're telling the story of me doing this lecture, whose point of view is it from? If it's from my point of view, the camera is back here generally and depending on what I'm thinking, it might just be a general omniscient wide shot and there's not as much light in the back, so those people aren't clear and the people in the front are clear but everybody is fairly equal.

If there's somebody I'm trying to impress, maybe there are some shots from here to that person who is the only one in focus. Or the camera angle narrows very much so that you only see that person. Maybe -if I think that person has come to assassinate me, if it's a different kind of movie and I realize it- the camera moves in on that person or maybe the camera searches through the audience saying "I hope that person is not here" and then it passes them and it comes back to them. So, all of a sudden, just from the point of view, from where the camera is and how it's looking at what it's looking, you've made a choice of what you're seeing.

What are the people wearing? If you were what I was putting in front of the camera, I would say that this is some kind of modern day Greece and these are the kind of people who would go to a film festival. If you were all wearing mechanics' uniforms, I would say that this is a gathering of mechanics that have come right after work- with the grease still on their clothes from working on cars; and why is this guy talking about movies? He should be talking about auto mechanics. If you were all in uniforms, the first thing I would say is as a director is that they look awfully relaxed for a bunch of guys in uniforms -you there! Straighten up! And I might be General Patton, I might be their commanding officer and all of a sudden that same shot, because of what you are wearing, because of the attitude of the bodies, has changed totally. If you are all in togas and those are benches instead of very nice seats, immediately the audience says that we are in ancient Rome or Greece; it's not today.

That's very simple stuff; and then you get into the subtleties of it. How is your character, the person that you are zooming in on, dressed? Do they have a Mohawk haircut? Are they in a military jacket? Are they in really expensive -carrying a Gucci bag- and really sexy clothes that really cost a lot of money? Everything that somebody wears in a movie is part of the storytelling.

Then, you say "Okay, we know what they are wearing; we might even know the fabrics. What color is it?" Woody Allen did a movie that was about a very dysfunctional family and the father remarries after the mother -who was a very hard person- dies and his new girlfriend always wears red. She's the only person who wears red in the movie. Everybody else wears very dark clothes. So, this woman, who's very aggressive and loud and actually fun and full of life, comes into this movie with these people who, even when they are not in mourning, look like they are in mourning. This makes

a statement, not a subtle one but a big one, because she's the only one wearing red in the whole movie.

But when we make a movie, I talk about the movie as a whole to my costume person and each scene as a separate element. We talk about what the colors of it are, what the palette is, as if you were a painter. There are painters who you look at their paintings and you say, "There's no blue in this painting" or "There's no red in this painting" or maybe "There's no white, it's very dark, but there's one really bright piece of white over here". That white stands out more because everything else is dark. So, you have to be aware of the contrast of the colors.

One of the things that I discussed with Haskell Wexler is that when we think of this period, the pictures we have of this period are all in black and white and sometimes when I see these period movies, they look like a Walt Disney movie; they look too much like a pretty picture postcard. So, what we wanted to try to do is what cinematographers call black and white in color; you are making a color movie but you control the palette of the colors, you control the filters on the camera, you can even do things afterwards to the tonality of the colors in the printing of the film to take the vibrancy of the colors out. But I didn't want to do what they did in something like "McCabe & Mrs. Miller" or "The Godfather" where they pre-fogged the film, [i.e.] they put a slight sepia color over the whole thing which damp stained the light and the color so it looked like a faded daguerreotype -an early photograph. I wanted to have the film clear but have that same feeling.

So, a lot of what we did was to make sure that the clothing that the people wore had faded colors -especially the coalminers. These are colors that even when not dirty, have been made dirty and black with coal dust and then washed in lye soap a thousand times and that takes a lot out of the color of them, takes the edge of the colors, so everything that went in front of the cameras was faded. Except, every once in a while, when you saw the Italian miners where one of them had a red thing around his neck -but even that was faded as well. We controlled everything that went in front of the camera and maybe put one density filter in there; we didn't put color in the movie but we made sure that what went in front of the lens was a little bit muted.

The same thing applies to the music, which is playing behind a scene. If there was heavy metal playing behind me now and I was ignoring it, it would change your perception of what I was saying. For one thing, you'd have to listen a lot harder and for another thing, it might put an edge in what I was saying because it is heavy metal; especially if I had a boom box here and I turned it on. If it were beautiful classical music, not only would it affect what I'm saying, it might affect the way that I say it. I might get into some kind of slow rhythm with that music.

What if there is no music but we're expecting it? Sometimes people do a very effective thing, which is that there is a score and it might be a big score with violence, timpani and drums and all kinds of horns and all of a sudden you have a scene and there is no music. And because you got used to that bombastic music through the whole thing, you say, "What was that?" It's like a train that is going by; it's like a loud noise that has silenced all of a sudden so, you pay a different kind of attention and the tension in the scene is different because of that lack of music.

We created almost like we had an artist palette choice with [the music for] "Matewan", which was set in 1920 in the West Virginia Hills. We listened to the music of that period in that place, which is very interesting and we said that it is very beautiful and has a certain character; we are going to keep everything about it in the music that we write, except for the banjo.

The banjo has a harder, more energetic, plangent thing; we wanted a slower, more deliberate movie. The banjo had also gotten associated in American movie goers with "Bonnie and Clyde" -it was very driving in that movie and that was like a period a little bit later- and by taking the banjo out of that music we changed the tone of that music from a tone that's major with some minors in it to a minor tone throughout the whole movie. There is always something mournful in the music [of this

film]. It's a movie where you can feel that something bad is going to happen and part of the reason that you feel that is because we've taken one color out of the musical palette. You've heard that music before but when you take the banjo out of it, it gives it a tone.

Camera angle. Is the camera moving or not? The minute the camera starts moving, it changes the dynamic between people. What is the lens? There is a very simple example that I use often -a civil war movie about the American Civil War. You know what they say about the American Civil War; it was brother versus brother. So, you have a lot of these movies where on the Confederate side, wearing grey, is one brother and on the Union side, wearing blue, is another brother.

The basic way that you would tell that simple story of these two sides meeting and maybe the brothers seeing each other is that the first thing you see is an omniscient shot, which means you are not seeing it through anybody's point of view, you are almost seeing it like you are a bird in the air and there are these two lines coming together to fight each other on a battlefield, one grey and one blue. And then you might cut into a close-up of the Union soldier who's in the blue uniform; he's marching and he's looking. Then you cut behind him and this is his first point of view which is very wide -it's a wide lens. It shows all the troops coming toward him.

Then, you make a cut back to him again and he's still looking and now, instead of just a wide shot, it's a moving shot. It's marching forward with them but at the same time it's going like this and it can only see ten people at a time instead of the whole line. Then you cut back to him and you realize he's looking for his brother and he's coming closer to him. Then, the next shot might be even tighter on him. He stops looking this way and he fixes on something; at the next shot from behind him, you've changed the lens -instead of being wide, instead of being tighter and moving, it's fixed; it's moving forward which would be a tracking shot, but now it's now a very long lens because still the two troops are very far from each other, but this time what we see is just his brother marching toward him.

Literally, that's not the way our eyes see. But mentally, my eyes can focus on something. Yes, they can rack focus a little like a lens but they can't narrow like that; but my mind can. I can just say "I'm going to look at this guy in the blue shirt. I see everybody else but really, mentally, I'm just seeing him, I'm in a close-up now". So, every time you put a lens on a camera, every time you decide if this is static or moving, this is telling us something.

When you shoot action, do you want to emphasize or deemphasize the action? A long lens tends to deemphasize action. If any of you saw "The Graduate", at the end of it there is a shot of Dustin Hoffman who's trying to stop the marriage of this girl he's in love with and he's running across the bridge toward us. But they got way on the far side of the bridge with a very long lens and he's running toward us and he doesn't change in size and he is running and he doesn't even seem to be moving. His legs are moving; he's not that small in the frame because it's a long lens but he doesn't seem to be getting anywhere. And what that shot is about is trying to make us feel like he does, because we want him to get there and stop the wedding before his girlfriend marries some other schmuck. And he's running as fast as he can, but he's never going to get there. If he stays in that lens, it's going to take him 15 minutes to get across the Golden Gate Bridge.

On the other hand, if you want to emphasize action, you put a wide lens on something. You'll see this in boxing movies very often where they want to have an effect where you feel like you are getting punched; they put a wide lens on, because in a wide lens, if I put my fist like this and the camera is here, it looks very small. But if I go like this, it fills the frame very suddenly, so it accentuates action.

When you are shooting action scenes, once again you have to worry about point of view. Who is seeing this? Are we just caught in the battle? Are we hoping for a certain person not to get killed? Or are we seeing through his eyes? Are we kind of neutral there, but see a slaughter around us from

his eyes? Do you do it in slow motion, which many people do? What does that do? Do you speed up the motion? If you see old westerns, they were always speeding up the horses. Whenever there was a horse and a chase, the horses go fast and if you notice the trees are also going by like they are on drugs.

You can do all that stuff. And in my movie "Eight Men Out", which some of you have seen, most of the actors who play ball players are pretty good athletes -not all of them are ball players- but only one of them, Charlie Sheen, really throws as hard as the major league pitcher would throw. If you take one or two frames out from here to here without noticing it, it makes the arm get forward faster and it makes the guy look like he's pitching the ball a lot faster. It's 24 frames a second but if you take 2 frames out and it takes maybe 18 frames for the ball to get from the pitcher's hand to the catcher's glove. If you take those 2 frames out, you are speeding that ball quite a bit; you're making it go from a 16-mile an hour fastball to an 80-mile an hour fastball. All those little things, every one of those is a choice of something that you can do to help tell the story.

I wrote a book after we made "Matewan", called "Thinking and Pictures" and one of the things that you have to do when you are writing a screenplay is indicate. You don't have to write every little detail down, but indicate for the people you are going to work with later, for your cinematographer, for your production designer, art director, for your costumer, even for your make-up people, some of the things that they are going to do with you to help tell the story.

The example that I use is that you don't write everything down because then the script would then be 500 pages long with all those details. The Italians used to do -and they may still- the dialogue on one side and the description on the other. In American screenplays, it's kind of mixed together. Also, if you describe too much to the people who are reading it -the actors you want to attract to the project and the investors- it won't read well, it won't move because there's too much description of how you are going to shoot it.

There is a story about the American detective writer Raymond Chandler -and it has my favorite use of selected detail to give you an idea of something without too much detail to bog it down. He goes to meet some guy in an office and the guy is a dentist, or something like that, and his line is "He gave me a drink of warm gin in a dirty glass". Just from that little description, you have an idea of what this office must look like. Warm gin and a dirty glass. It tells you a lot about the character and the place that he's in without saying "and he had a chair and the upholstery was cracked and the window hadn't been cleaned in a long time and when he moved his swivel chair, it squeaked".

In my screenplay I say, he gave him a drink of warm gin in a dirty glass. Then, when I sit down later on with my production designer, I say let's have really ratty furniture and let's not clean the window and let's have him have a messy desk. And then I'll say to the guy who does my sound effects whenever he moves his swivel chair, make it squeak. Every one of those things, even down to a sound effect, those are things that help tell the story. I may not have all of them when I write the script but each time I go through it with the people that are going to work with me -including the actors- there's stuff coming back to me that ends up telling the story. That's what I do.

If there are any questions, I'm going to put this thing on and hope that I understand them.

From the audience

As far as themes are concerned, your films cover an unbelievable array of thing, different characters, different cities, different countries, and different times. How do you go to a story? How does a story begin?

John Sayles

I think a lot of it begins with interest and knowing enough about something to be more interested in it and then wanting to know more; wanting to see a situation and say "Wow! That's pretty heavy! What is going on there?" and then having questions about it, which is -the basic one, is always "If

people are acting this way, what can possibly be going through their heads? Why are they acting this way? Why can't they get along? How do they see the world?" And whenever I write characters, I do that. In acting classes they talk a lot about what your motivation is, what you want in a scene. And that may be as simple as "I'm Alexander of Macedonia and I want the rest of the world and the rest of the world doesn't want me to have it". It may be just a thing that both people want.

More complicated and more interesting to me is that people may come into a situation and they don't see the world in the same way. They have totally different perceptions of what is going on and they have to do something to gather or share something and not only do they not want the same thing, but they don't even think it is the same thing. Somebody said recently of American politics that we not only have Red states and Blue states, Republican states and Democratic states, we now have Red facts and Blue facts. A fact is supposed to be something that is true and if it's not true, it's not a fact. How can you have two different sets of facts if people interpret the same phenomenon in totally different ways?

Think of somebody from the time of Alexander the Great coming today and watching one of our wars. He would have a very different analysis of it than somebody who you and I might know -his idea of proper behavior. In those days, when you defeated somebody, you cut their head off and stuck it on a stake and you brought it back home to show everybody and they cheered you for that. Even our most aggressive nations today don't even show you the body bags. They keep the press from showing you the dead bodies. They certainly don't cut their heads off, bring them back and show them, unless they are Saddam Hussein's sons and then they do it in a photograph, but they don't actually bring the head back.

But he would think "What's wrong with these people? Don't they know how to wage war? Don't they enjoy what they are doing? They've totally lost the point", whereas we would say "Oh my God, what a monster! Not only does he kill these people, he cuts their heads off and parades them around town on a spear". So, a lot of it is that I see a place, I see a situation and I get interested in it or I think of a human situation and that situation could take place in a lot of places and I think "Here's a human situation that takes place all over the world. Where should I set it?" Because, once again, talking about everything adds to the storytelling, the place adds to the storytelling.

If we were out in a natural amphitheatre and I was sitting on a rock and you were up on the side of a hill, and the wind was blowing and there was a storm in the distance, it would change that scene between us. It would change the tone and the story that would be told by filming what we are doing right here. If we were doing this in a very repressive regime and there were people at the door worried that the authorities were going to hear that we are talking freely about films that we weren't supposed to be seeing, that would add an edge to what we were saying. It wouldn't be so relaxed. So, one of the things is that first of all there are places and incidents and activities that interest me and I want to know more about them. And that gets me to the story. Or it's just that a human story and I say, "What would really add to that human story? What place, what culture, what time would really add to that human story and make it even more interesting?"

"Passion Fish", which is an idea I had for a long time; I used to work in hospitals as an orderly and I was around a lot of people with spinal cord injuries, a lot of people who were on wheelchairs for the rest of their lives. I had also seen Ingmar Bergman's "Persona", which is about a woman who is a very well known actress who goes mute one day on stage. She can't talk anymore, or she won't talk anymore, and she's given this nurse companion who's from a lower class than her, who admires her as a glamorous actress; they spend all this time together and their personalities clash at first and then start to alternate with each other. They even change personalities every once in a while. When I saw that, with my years working in the hospital, I felt that it would be a very interesting American version of that story but the nurse would be black and the woman in the wheelchair would be white and it would be in some community where being black and white had some weight to it.

But I walked around with this story in my head for a long time until one day Maggie and I woke up next to a lake in Louisiana and she said, "This is the place for the story of the nurse". And I said "Absolutely". There was something about that place, something seductive about that place that would not allow a person to just roll into a ball and forget about the world. That place would pull you out of where you were and you would have to deal with the world again.

So, it's a combination of those things. And a lot of it is really just curiosity. This is why I don't do the same kind of project time after time. It would be really hard for me to make another baseball movie after having made "Eight Men Out". It would be really hard for me to make another movie set in Texas, after having made "Lone Star". I might come back there and do another one but I feel like I've done my exploration into that world for a while and I'm going to go to some other places before I come back there again.

From the audience

People in cinema nowadays witness a revolution, the digital cinema, the do-it-yourself cinema. All of us here could be prospective directors. I would like to have your thoughts on digital cinema or do-it-yourself cinema.

John Sayles

It's always do-it-yourself cinema but you have a lot of people doing it with you. There is a very funny statement made by Ingmar Bergman, the Swedish director, who, when asked why he didn't work in Hollywood, he said "in my country, we make movies with 20 of our friends, in your country you make movies with 100 of your enemies". They don't have to be enemies but whom are you working with? Who has the power in the movie? Who gets to control the final story? Who gets to control the final cut? Who financed the film? Who just has the power of personality to tell the story? All these are questions that you have to ask.

There are people who very successfully work in the studio system and make movies that they like and they are proud of and some of them are very good movies, from people who manage to work with the studios. And they work with everybody else and it is do-it-yourself; they have to come up with the idea. They have to tell the story. They have to deal with all the politics of the studio and all the economic problems of making a movie that costs 80 million dollars and has investors who want to make that money back into profit.

What we do is something that in some ways is easier. We try to make good movies with the money and time that we can raise to make them and attract enough people to make that money back and a little profit maybe; maybe more if we get very lucky and the times are right. But we are not trying to please everybody in America. So, in some ways, those filmmakers who are working in the studio system, they too are still trying to make good movies, are still trying to tell an honest story, are still fighting not to sell their movie out just in order to get it made.

There was a very famous statement during the Vietnam War by a major -I think- who said "We had to destroy the village in order to save it". I think of that very often when I see Hollywood movies. At some point they had to destroy the movie in order to make it. And it might have been as early as a casting decision, it might have been during the final cut, it may have been at any one point, but the movie they wanted to make isn't there anymore, but they did get to make the movie.

So, for us, it starts with the story, it starts with me writing a story, writing a screenplay, sometimes sensibly, sometimes less sensibly as far as the scope of the story is concerned. Then I read it over and if I like it, the next question is "How, in God's name, are we going to raise the money to make this movie? Is there anything that I can do and tell the story that I want but make it cheaper?" So, I might go through it one time and cut down on the scale, cut down on the pages. It's much better to cut something in the script than to cut it in the editing room. If you cut it in the script, you cut ten pages in a script. That may be a week of shooting, or even half a week of shooting; that could be

anywhere from 50,000 to a million dollars that you've just cut by hitting a button on your computer, which is a very cheap thing to do and nobody else gets involved, nothing gets left in the editing room floor. If you cut it later on, it doesn't show up in the screen but you had to pay for it. People had to work on it. You spend time and money doing it.

So, one of the things for do-it-yourself filmmakers is really, really, you have to be able to imagine, read that script and say, "I'm on the set, I'm directing it. I'm in the audience, I'm watching this. Is there anything I don't need as the audience? Is there any information that I could wait a bit longer before I find it out? Is there anything that seems like a big scene? Well, it doesn't have to be such a big scene; I would get the point if this was a smaller scene, if it had fewer people in it, if it had less scope in what you see in the camera".

And then, as a director, you have to be honest and say, "I am probably going to have four weeks, maybe five, to direct this movie. That's all we'll be able to afford. I'm reading the script; I'm on the set. Is there any way that I can possibly do this? Let me think about the day of shooting. How would I shoot? Five pages a day? Six pages a day? If it's a long script, how would I shoot that?" And when you start to get specific -"Yes, I can shoot that this way"- then you are starting to be a do-it-yourself filmmaker. And you may come to the point where you say, "There's no way I can do this. I need another week". And then you get into the very practical part of filmmaking, which is "Can you afford another week?" You talk with your producer, you may do some research in the set, "What can we do? How much will this cost?" and then you come back and the answer may be "No, we can't afford another week".

And then you either have to say -and we have done this a couple of times- "We are not ready to make this movie; we can't raise enough money now to make this movie". I made "Eight Men Out", which I mentioned before, 11 years after I wrote the screenplay. I made "Matewan" 7 years after I wrote the screenplay because we had some money but not enough to do a good job with that script. So, sometimes you just have to abandon that project and write another one. Or sometimes you have to go back to the script and say, "What can I do to make this less ambitious in terms of money? What costs money and what can we just do with intelligence and good acting?"

So, as a do-it-yourself filmmaker, one of the things you have to do is be a little bit of a producer. You have to have some sense of what costs money and what doesn't, you can't just indulge yourself and say, "I've written this thing and it's perfect and that's the only way to tell this story". You have to be a very strict editor with yourself and you have to be an editor before you even shoot the movie, even for simple things. Like in the union roles in the United States for the screen actors, if you have an actor work for a couple of days and then you have nothing for them to do for 5, 6, or even 7 days, and then bring them back, you also have to pay them for that time in between. But if they are gone for 8 days, you don't.

So, sometimes you realize "I have one character coming back to do one line 8 days or 7 days later and I'm going to have to pay him not for one day but for a whole week. That's money that doesn't go to other actors, that's money that doesn't go to the production designer, that's money that doesn't go on the screen. Either we should reschedule it so that he gets that line out before that scene that has one line, do it one or 2 days later so that he's gone long enough so we don't have to pay him for that whole week, or maybe he's just shouting something from a crowd of guys, so, maybe I'll just give his line to this other guy and then he's not even in that scene and it's not a problem".

Day shooting is generally cheaper than night shooting. So, maybe you go through and you say, "Well, does this have to happen at night? Maybe it could happen at the daytime" or "It's an interior, we'll shoot it in the day, we'll put something in the windows and it will look like night. We've just saved 50,000 dollars". So, this is also about the ability to think creatively as a writer so that you are not hurting the story, you're just telling it in a different way. Roger Corman, who I work with and is a

famous producer and director of horror movies, always said "You can make "Lawrence of Arabia" for half a million dollars but you never leave the tent". You hear the wind outside whenever you open the tent flap, some sand blows in, you hear a camel bray, but you never see a camel and people just keep coming in and Lawrence goes out and he comes back and it's more like a play.

You could tell a good story that way and it would be about Lawrence of Arabia but it wouldn't be David Lean's "Lawrence of Arabia". And if you've only got 500,000 dollars and the script that you've got is David Lean's "Lawrence of Arabia", you're not ready to make that movie. You're ready to make the Roger Corman version and you have to ask yourself that question as a do-it-yourself filmmaker: "Is there still an interesting movie I can tell in that tent or do I want to wait until I've made four very little movies and Hollywood wants to do anything I want to do and finally they say "Why don't you make a movie like this?"

From the audience (inaudible)

John Sayles

I don't really think that it's versus. I think you could make a Dogma David Lean movie on wide-screen. It wouldn't be a period movie; you could make a very big movie that followed all those Dogma rules. I don't think they are opposed to each other. I just think they are different kind of stories and there's room in movies both for audiences and for all kinds of stories. As a filmmaker you have to say, be honest with yourself and say, "How much money can I attract? How much money do I have?" I always tell film students the first thing they should do if they want to make movies is be born a multi-millionaire. If you're born a multi-millionaire, it makes everything a lot easier. If you've forgotten to do that, things are going to be harder.

I write all kinds of stories in fiction. Some of them are big historical stories; some of them are small contemporary stories; the same thing you have to do as a filmmaker. You have to just say, "What is the story about? Is there another story that can be told that I could make right now?" David Lean's first movies are not that ambitious; they are not that big. Some of them are very modest. Only later when he got very successful was he able to paint on a larger canvas. I think the same filmmaker could make a Dogma movie and a David Lean big screen period movie. It's just a different story that you are telling.

I tend to not have a style. I tend to change my camera style and my visual style and storytelling style depending on the story. I do that in fiction as well. I have a short stories collection out and each story is in a slightly different style. It has a different rhythm, it has a different vocabulary, it's told from different points of view, it has a bigger or smaller scale, and it has a different size.

So, I don't think they are opposed to each other. Lars von Trier always likes to have a manifesto when he brings a movie out and when he came out with his manifesto about the Dogma films I realized "I've made about four of those already". All it means is that I didn't have any money. So, I made the best movie I could with no money, which meant that it was contemporary; it meant that there are certain things that are not in it. But I didn't start with those things. I started with a story and I said I could tell this story well, even without those things.

One of the interesting and difficult things about movie making is that it's not fiction writing. The great thing about fiction writing is that even if I don't get it published, I can make the thing itself; I can sit down with no money and write a book, write a story. And then I can try to get it published. Either it gets published or it doesn't, but I can do the thing itself. The difficult thing about working in movies or theatre even is that it doesn't really come alive, it's not finished until you have that play on the stage, until you have that movie on the screen. So, the writing is only one little part of it; it's only the plan for what you're going to do. Even the play; it doesn't become literature unless it's done a bunch of times, until it's had a bunch of productions and people decide "We should just read this thing, but wouldn't it be even cooler if we could just see it on the stage?"

From the audience

Good afternoon and congratulations on your work. Regarding the complicated moments you mentioned, I would like to ask whether you try to pass on some message in your films, or just leave the audience to question itself.

John Sayles

What I think I do when I set up a situation like that in a movie is not necessarily tell the audience what is right or wrong, but I also don't just present undigested information, or information that is not formed in any way. I think of it more like being the lawyer in a criminal law case where you present evidence. And sometimes because I make complex movies, I'm the lawyer for the prosecution and the lawyer for the defense. So, I come out and, as clearly as I can, I present evidence. And when you present evidence you don't just say anything that comes into your head, you don't just say every single thing that happened; you choose what you say. You leave out certain things, you put other things; you arrange them in a dramatic way so that the people in the jury come to a conclusion slowly and get excited and emotional about it. And then you sit down and the other lawyer gets up and he presents his case.

So, very often I feel like I'm being an advocate, a lawyer for some kind of truth. But then I often see three sides of any question; I'm also the lawyer for the other side and those two people may be talking at the same time, but they are presenting evidence, which is very different than just putting a situation in front of people and letting them figure it out. Once again you're making choices and you say "I want you to see this; I want you to see that but not yet".

I think when movies push you too much, you may not believe in them. If a lawyer comes up and says "My client is innocent. Look at his face. Can't you tell he's innocent?" and that's all you hear, you may say, "You say so. I don't necessarily know that yet". This is why people watch Court TV. They just watch trials because this argument between these lawyers entertains them, and I think that an audience wants to get entertained by the evidence. They don't know they want to be the judge; they don't want to make up their minds right away. And one of the things that a successful movie does, and especially a successful movie that is complex, is that the jury is out until pretty much the end. And sometimes you can have a good movie where half the audience says he's innocent and the other half says he's guilty, that there still might be that much doubt in your mind or you may say "He's guilty but he shouldn't be punished" or "He's innocent technically but he should be punished". So, sometimes what you're going for is a complex reaction from the audience.

Our movie "Limbo" is about risk. I didn't want to make the usual movie where people are put in peril and you hope that they are saved and then it looks like they are not going to be saved but then the last minute they are going to be saved, because the audience then has the illusion of risk but no real risk. I wanted to make a movie where the characters and the audience had to risk something. So, the movie ends with a sound of an airplane coming, and you don't know if the airplane is coming to kill them or to save them. But what you do know is that this young girl who is with them is going to die if she doesn't get off that island. They can't just hide. So, they walk out into the open and they risk, they put their lives at the mercy of fate, or other people; there's nothing they can do anymore.

So, the audience goes out of the theatre -sometimes very pissed off- but they realize that this is a movie called "Limbo" for a reason; it's a consumer warning. You are going to be at risk in this movie, you are not going to go in the movie and know that nothing very bad is going to happen to the people we learn to care about.

From the audience

Do you believe that a great book, e.g. a classic masterpiece, can be made into a great movie, or is there an inconsistency between these arts? Give us some examples.

John Sayles

One of the things that I do for a living is that I am a screenwriter and very often I am asked to adapt books into movies. The difficulty is that there is a kind of artificial commercial limit to how long movies can be and there is also probably a physiological limit to how long they can be, which has to do with how long you can sit in one place without your behind falling to sleep and your mind starting to drift off.

So, very often, what you have to do with a novel is to condense it, take one part of the story or condense the story. I've done this very often and I've done the best job that I possibly could and the people who hired me to do it say "Oh, my God, you've adapted this novel very faithfully and you've made it into a movie; we realize now that it doesn't probably make a very good movie. We have to change the story, not just change the length of it, and not just compress it, but in order to make a movie we are going to have to change the story". And they make it to the point where they say "We made a mistake; we shouldn't have bought this novel. We should have just read this novel, get a screenwriter to read it and say "we want to make a movie something like this novel" but this novel, the plot and the complexity of this novel get in the way of a good movie".

Usually the best movies adapted from literary sources are the ones where the filmmaker, the screenwriter, the director found a way to take the essence of the plot and the characters of that novel and make them into a movie without being literally faithful to every scene; or they are based on very simple shorter books, detective novels or short stories. Two of my movies have been based on things that appeared in my fiction, but both of them were based on four-page sections of either a novel or a short story. One little idea from that novel got me interested and then expanded it into a whole movie.

When I write a novel and I sell it, I tell the publishers "If you have any idea of this turning into a movie, forget it; I don't think it would make a good movie and I don't want it to be made into a bad movie, so I'm not selling the movie rights, I'm just selling the book rights". So, they are very two different things. But I often think that you can make a very good movie inspired by a book, inspired by those characters. They can even have the same name but it's not going to be the novel. If you want to read the novel, if you want to read Kazantzakis' "Last Temptation of Christ", read the book. If you want to see Martin Scorsese's "Last Temptation of Christ", which is a movie I really like, see the movie. They are related to each other but they have to be different things.

From the audience

Is there room anymore in America for new directors and actors and generally for the existence of a new culture under the suffocating presence of Hollywood, and what do you believe will remain in ten years of the work of new artists, not just in cinema but the wider art field in general?

John Sayles

The question is how hard it is for new actors and new directors under the stifling atmosphere of Hollywood, which is kind of like under the yoke of the Turks to me. It's not that stifling. They actually don't come to your home and say, "What are you writing there? That's not commercial enough!" and carry it out of your typewriter or pull your computer out of the wall. It's a choice that you make in Hollywood and the good thing I think has happened since we started working is that there is this alternate.

It's not an easy alternate, but they have not been able to pass a law saying that only Hollywood movies can exist; that only Hollywood movies can be on the screen. They do what they do and they are a big commercial industry and they capture the imagination of most of the people who go to the movies to the point where if they see a movie that's not like a Hollywood movie, they are not sure that it is even a movie. They are impatient, they are confused, but that doesn't mean that you can't make a movie, that you can't write something; that you can't act in a movie that's not a

Hollywood movie.

One nice phenomenon that has happened pretty much in the last 15 years is that very good actors, very well known actors choose to take union-scale (very much less) money than they usually make as a professional actor and go do something interesting or go do a play. And if you do a play, you're usually lucky if you break even and don't lose money as an actor. They take time out from their schedule as a well-paid actor to try a part that they wouldn't get to play in Hollywood; to sometimes do a comedy because Hollywood never thinks of them as comic actors, but an independent filmmaker has said "I'd like to see you in a comedy" so they get to try that. And maybe they do it so well that when they go back to Hollywood, they say, "We didn't know. You can be funny" and they get a chance to do that in Hollywood as well. Or, maybe it's a comic actor who gets to do a serious part. Or, maybe it's somebody who has never got to kiss the girl because Hollywood doesn't think that they are the leading man type, but they do it in a smaller movie.

So, I think that there are actually more movies getting made now in the United States than everywhere in the history of time. The Sundance Film Festival gets over 5,000 features a year and there is only 365 days in the year. You would have to watch 5 movies a day every single day to even come close to the number of features that are being made. The bigger question is how you get those movies seen and that's a very difficult thing. It's like standing out on the corner in the middle of Athens or Thessaloniki, with a flyer saying, "Check it out! Read this! Read this!", while everything else is going on, while the traffic is going by, while the people are going to work. At the same time, there is a really good band playing behind you and another guy who's preaching from something and a comedian on the other corner telling funny jokes. Why are they going to look at your piece of paper if they've never heard you before?

So, for me, the unfortunate thing is that absolutely you can make movies, absolutely you can be some sort of artist, but if you want to share that thing with other people, you also have to somehow learn how to be a promoter, an advertiser; I was lucky that I started as an actor so I'm not that uncomfortable talking in front of people. There are directors who are sub-verbal, who can barely talk to their actors, who have to do an interview and they freeze; they don't know what to say. To continue making movies, they'll have to get over it; they'll have to learn how to perform and get their movie seen by the force of their personality when they get their two little minutes of opportunity to explain what their movie is about.

From the audience

Could you talk a little bit about the difference of approach as a writer when writing for another director rather than for yourself? The second question is you are an American screenwriter so right now you are on strike. Would you please talk a little bit about how important this is, not only for writers, but also for directors and actors and all creative people in the business? Thank you very much.

John Sayles

The first part of it is that as a screenwriter for hire, I'm often hired to write, to adapt a book, to flesh out an idea, to rewrite a script even before the director has been chosen. Sometimes the director is in on the project, usually not. Usually, they are still trying to attract a director so I'm working with lower level producers who have started an idea, bought a book, started a screenplay and they want me to come in and help them tell their story. And that's the first big thing about it. I'm an employee; I'm helping them tell their story. So, I use every skill I have that I use when I'm writing for myself. I actually work harder; I do more drafts of it when I'm working for them to try to please them but also make something that I would want to go see and that I think is good.

What I don't do is I don't get as emotionally involved in it and I don't protect story points the way that I would as if it was my own. I once was working for a great American director called John Fran-

kenheimer and I was brought in and there was a script set in China about Chinese people. It was pretty good but they wanted it to be better, so I was talking to John Frankenheimer about it and he said "by the way, I can get Toshiro Mifune to be in this film, so change all the people to Japanese people". And I said, "You know that Japanese and Chinese culture, Japanese and Chinese martial arts are very different from each other. Chinese martial arts are circular; Japanese martial arts are straightforward and the cultures are enormously different", but he said "Yeah, but I can get Toshiro Mifune so change them all to be Japanese people".

I had three days to do this because there was a Writers' Guild strike that was going to happen, so I had to hand in the screenplay in three days. So, I changed them to Japanese. I said, "This will affect the story but, fine, if you want them to be Japanese, I'll make them Japanese". If that was my project, I would say "I'm sorry; I'm making this movie about Chinese people" and go on to another financier or try to make it later on with somebody who didn't mind them being Chinese instead of Japanese. That's the biggest thing; that you are working for them, you're telling their story.

As far as the strike is concerned, the main thing as I understand it is that the writers are striking for the following: the movie business has changed very much in the last 15 years and the bulk of the money that the studios are making, more than 50%, is not from people going to a theatre and watching films, which is very traceable -people buy tickets, you send that number in, it adds up, that's the theatrical gross of the movie- and the writers are given 2-2.5% of that theatrical profit, not gross, but after all the expenses are taken away.

Nowadays, most of the money, more than 50%, maybe 65% or more, is made from DVD sales, from sales to TV, from sales to foreign countries, from media yet to be invented, from people watching things on their computers, downloading them. And all of us can sense this in the air; within 5 years, an awful lot of people are going to be just watching movies at home and they are going to download it from some source and those studios will be making 60, 65, 70% of their money on that media yet to be invented. And what the Writers' Guild is saying and what the Directors' Guild will say when it's their turn to come to contract and what the Actors' Guild will say when it's their turn to come to contract is "Just as we ask for this small percentage of royalties if you make a profit on your theatrical -if you make a profit, not if you don't, on these new media- we want that same small percentage of it".

Just as if you are a writer and you write an article for a local newspaper; if that newspaper sells it to 60 other newspapers, you should probably get at least a percentage, not just what you got paid for that one article. You are replacing 60 other writers in that space; you should get some percentage of each time that it's downloaded -and it's much more possible and quicker to do for a journalist than it used to be.

So, that's basically what the strike is about. And for the studios, I think they are sitting where they are, they say "We don't make any profit on this, you don't know, you don't do the books, you don't know how hard it is to make a profit" and I always say "Why don't you send us the money first and we'll hire the accountants and if there's any profit, we'll take our 2.5% out and then we'll send it over to the Directors' Guild and they'll have their accountants go over it and they'll take their percentage out and then they'll send it to the Actors' Guild and they'll take their percentage out and what's left, we'll send to you and tomorrow we can stop the strike".

From the audience

When you are writing a script, how easy do you find it to stay focused on just one script and not let it interfere with other situations of your everyday life?

John Sayles

I think this is different for different people, but I'm very lucky -and it may be a form of schizophrenia- because the minute I enter the world of the movie -and every movie has a different world with a

different rhythm, its different rules- I'm in that world. And I have to -just because of making a living- write screenplays both for other people and for myself basically at the same time. So, usually what happens is that I'll hand in a draft for a screenplay that I'm writing for a Hollywood studio and that day I'll hurry back to the screenplay that I'm writing for myself, write for a couple of weeks until they come back to me with their notes on that screenplay and I have to do a second or a third draft.

Sometimes I end up writing two or three things at the same time and, depending on the deadline, I may write one in the morning and one in the afternoon. While I'm here and on strike as a screenwriter, I'm also writing a novel and when I can't sleep at night -because I still have a little jet lag- I get up and I've written probably 15 pages of a novel here in Greece. I'm very lucky. The minute I read three words, I say "I'm in the world of the hobbits and that world of the hobbits is as different from the world of human beings as anything" and I know, this is the world of the hobbits; they are short and certain rules apply to them. It's like that.

Daily life is more difficult. There are times when people talk to me and I see their lips moving but I'm still in the world of the hobbits and that can be a problem. But, you know, people do different things. When I first started writing short stories, I worked in factories and the great thing about factory work is that you do the same thing over and over and over again and after a while your body will do it even if you are asleep mentally. Instead of being asleep mentally, I would think about what I was going to write when I went home. So, I would make stories up in my head as I was making plastic things on an assembly line. People are used to carrying a couple of things in their head, what they are thinking, what they are saying to the people that they are saying to, maybe they are listening to the lyrics of a song or to the conversation at the next booth at the café. I'm lucky in that I have the focus that when I go into a writing world, I'm in that world absolutely and no other world exists.

From the audience

Could you tell us something about your transition from being an actor to directing and also what is it for you to also perform in some of your movies?

John Sayles

I think this is an interesting thing, which is that every director, even if they have no desire to be an actor, should take some acting courses and do some scene work, actually play a scene without a director once or twice and then once or twice with a director. I find that my having been an actor is helpful when I come to be a director in that having been an actor, I can think about "What would be helpful to me if I had to play this part? What have I ever got from a director?" And it may not even be a single thing that they say, it may just be an attitude, it may even be more important than the whole production, the movie production. "How was I greeted? How did I get into the day? How did they keep information coming to me about when I was going to go on?"

And I usually do day-player things. And as a day player, people come to you all day long and they say "We're not quite ready for you yet, we're not quite ready for you yet" and then they come "Where are you?" and they grab you and they throw you in front of the camera. And you just get used to that. What's the best way for a whole production to treat the actors so they can do their best work? One thing that I try to do is to think about my actors at the beginning of the day "What kind of day are they going to have? Is this an actor who takes a while to wake up or to speed up or is this an actor who's good right away?" All actors get tired. So, I worked with a couple of actors whose questions are about "What time are we shooting? When is lunch?" because they have to pace themselves. They want to know "Should I eat a little bit now? Am I going to act right away? I don't want to act with a full stomach. I'm starting to get tired".

Some will even ask, "How many takes are we going to do of this?" Because if it's something very emotional, they have to think about "How many times am I going to have to dig inside and make

that emotion new?" Usually, if it's something very emotional, I'll go to the actor beforehand and say "Look, I'm going to try to do this very simply with the camera and maybe twice. After the first time, we'll talk about it and I'll give you some time to get back to where you are". There's a scene in "Matewan" with Jo Henderson who plays the mother of a boy who's had his throat cut and she's just found him. And I said to her "How many times do you think you can do this?" and she said, "How many times do you want me to do this?" and I said "How about two?" and she said, "I think I can handle that. I'll tell you when I'm ready for the second one".

So, we just planned the shot very carefully with the technicians; you make sure they are not going to run out of film, you walk it through with somebody else a couple of times, you walk it through with her once with no emotion so the lighting guys get to see what they're doing, the people moving the camera; all the technical things are not going to be a problem and then you say "Okay, ready everybody?" And then she did it. And she wailed and she keened like a woman in an Irish play, like somebody in an ancient myth. And then I said "Okay, everybody. We're going to take I don't know how long". And Jo Henderson came to me ten minutes later and said, "Okay, I'm ready to do another one". And we did another one.

It might have been half an hour but we had planned everything out and it was so important to the thing. Another time, if it's just someone walking to the door and saying "Is anybody home?" you're not going to give the actor half an hour to get ready for the second take. You might even just say "You know what? This is a very simple thing. Instead of saying "Cut" and "Action" -because you always lose some film and time when you do it- I'm going to have you step in and say "Is anybody home?", step out, keep the camera rolling, step in again, do it in a slightly different way.

In "Return of the Secaucus 7", which some of you have seen, Maggie Renzi is in a scene where you keep cutting back to her and each time you cut back to her, other things have happened in between. She's a little bit drunker and her face is a little more flushed and she has a bigger smile on her face and 3-5 minutes had gone by between each of these times. We had only 26 hours to shoot 11 pages in this bar and then we were going to lose this bar forever. It was the day off for the bar.

So, I said to Maggie at this point "We don't have time to keep coming back later in the night for you to think about this. In fact, we don't have much film left. So, I'm going to ask you to step up to the bar and do it a couple of times as if it's the beginning of the night, step back, step up, it's halfway through the night, step back, step up. So, we did one take and each time, she would get a little more red in the face, get a little drunker and her smile would get a little bigger until the last one where you can say "This person is really wrecked". But it was one take. That's what acting is. If it were something about her son being killed, I wouldn't have asked her to do that. That experience as an actor is what I bring as a director.

I think the other important thing in having been an actor is that it really affects the way that I write. I talked before about people who see the world in a different way. The first thing that an actor does when they prepare for a part is think, "How does my character see this situation? How do they see the world? Is this somebody educated? Is this somebody emotional? Is this somebody who's been married and divorced five times? Or is this somebody who's in their first relationship and they think, "I have to hold on to this; this is going to last forever or else I'm a failure".

They think themselves into the character and what I always like to say is that good actors inhabit their character so they can drift -like I can drift into a story- into that character very quickly. Yes, they might get an emergency call from home because the babysitter didn't show up, but the minute they put that phone down and I say "We're ready to go again", they can drift back into the point of view of that character who doesn't even know that babysitter and that situation exists; they only know what's directly in front of them.

So, as a writer, when I write a character, one thing is that all characters don't see the world the same;

all characters don't think the same; all characters don't speak the same. All characters don't even speak the same in different situations. So, I have characters who within a movie, how they present themselves to their friends is very different from how they present themselves to their mother, to their teacher, to a policeman, to somebody when they are angry. So, I play every part as I'm writing it. Not that I would be right or good for every part but I think as I'm writing that if I had to play this character, would I have enough to be a three-dimensional person? What do I know about myself? And so, as I go through rewriting, I say as an actor "I'm lost here. I need something else to hang on to" and maybe I'll add something for that character; just a little something, tie them in some other way.

Finally, as I said before, the hardest thing about movie acting is to keep track of any emotional arc you have; if you have to change during the movie. It's hard enough to direct a movie without being in it. I think most of the people who have been very successful over a length of time acting in big parts or in the lead in movies that they also direct have been people who play a persona: Charlie Chaplin, Clint Eastwood, Woody Allen. Woody Allen does not have a huge range in his acting.

When I play character parts in my movies, I play people who have no range, no arc. They are the same guy at the beginning of the movie as they are at the ending. Sometimes it's just one scene. Sometimes, it's a couple of scenes but that person doesn't change. The situation changes and I react as that person to the situation but I'm the same guy as I was. So, when I step in front of the camera, I know who I am. I don't even have to know what number scene this is, I'm just that guy. My favorite part and the perfect part for a director was the preacher in "Matewan". I just got to talk and everybody say "Amen". What director wouldn't like that?

From the audience

Given the fact that we live in interesting and complex times, and I believe you are a capable, a very gifted storyteller, why do you think there aren't enough storytellers in Hollywood to talk about the political issues of the day and their complexities? Isn't this a challenge?

John Sayles

I actually think there are plenty of good storytellers and there are a lot of people trying to get at what is going on. People ask me if I think movies can make a difference in the world. I think that any one movie probably doesn't make that much difference but I think that movies are part of a cultural conversation. They are part of how we think of ourselves, how we think of the world and they are very important in that way.

I just take the example of the United States and relations between the races in the United States. I think for the first 50 years of the history of movies, movies were part of the problem: the way that they presented relationships between the races, the way they presented the African American people, Mexican people. We're part of the problem. They increased the stereotyping, they increased the prejudice; probably starting in the mid '50s, gradually they became part of the solution. And one of the reasons I think race relations are better in the United States is because sometimes movies got there first; that people who had never considered somebody from the other race as a human being saw that person in a movie first and said "I could hang out with that guy. I didn't know that they thought about those things, I didn't know that they were three-dimensional people. I thought they just were whatever the stereotype was" and then prepared by that movie maybe in their real life the next time they encountered some person, they were a little more open-minded.

One of the great things about this festival is that you have movies from all over the world here and going to those movies you get to meet people from those parts of the world without going there. You get to see a little bit into their lives and the better the movie, the more you see into their lives without going there and you say, "That person could actually be a friend of mine. We don't speak the same language but I would hang out with that guy; maybe not that guy, but that guy. I could

find my way into that society. It may seem foreign and strange to me but there is something that we share", before you even meet somebody from there.

So, I do think that there are those people. I think the problem is not that they are not good storytellers, good filmmakers; it's again that you are on that very noisy street corner and there are so much other stuff going on. Most of it is really just meant to be commercial entertainment and unfortunately most commercial entertainment, the first thing they care about is to be popular. One Hollywood studio does test marketing with people. The first question they ask is "Did you like this movie? Did you like this character?" not "Did you understand it? Did you learn something from it? Did you feel something?"; but "Did you like it? Would you recommend it to your friends?"

It's a popularity contest. To be popular, usually what you do if you are a politician or a Hollywood studio is you tell people what they want to hear. You reinforce their stereotypes; you make them feel good about themselves, whether they should feel good about themselves or not. And that's a totally legitimate thing to do but what it tends to do is make a lot of noise, it takes up a lot of space and it doesn't move the conversation forward. That's always going to be with us, it's always going to be the loudest voice in the room; it's going to be the most voices in the room.

And so the challenge for anybody who wants to tell stories that go a little bit deeper is "How do I get people to listen to this little thing that I'm saying, that maybe is not popular, that maybe is not something that makes you feel good about yourselves but makes you think about yourselves and makes you leave the theatre wondering rather than knowing "Oh, I'm wonderful"?" That's always the challenge and I think it probably has been since the beginning of storytelling.

Anyway, thanks so much for coming and listening to all of this.

