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MASTERCLASS

DAVID STRATHAIRN - CHRIS COOPER



Introduction by Despina Mouzaki, TIFF's director, and Georges Corraface, TIFF's president and discussion's moderator.

Georges Corraface

Welcome from me too. It's a pleasure to have this opportunity to talk about nuts and bolts. I just thought that we would show some clips from scenes before we start the masterclass. But apparently we cannot show everything together; we have to make stops. So, it would be random. We'll have moments of showing clips and then we'll have a conversation on the clips. Anyway, it will be a little improvised but I'm sure we're up to it. So, let's start with a clip from one of the many films that you have done together with John Sayles and then we can talk about how it feels to have this kind of over-the-years developing artistic friendship and collaboration with an independent filmmaker. Let's look at "Matewan".

(Screening)

So, this is a bit like a home movie for you. I remember the friends and this entire ensemble, which is almost like a theatre company working over and over with the same filmmaker, producer, and some members of the cast.

David Strathairn

Yeah, it is. It becomes familiar. The people become familiar. It feels safe, it feels known and it makes for a kind of trust and relaxation. There's nothing better than an ensemble of people that you know and you've worked with before. It's a safe and comfortable place to be.

Chris Cooper

And if I remember correctly, things may have changed a lot over the years but, for the most part, I think that so many of these actors came from a strong theatre background. Mary McDonnell and Ken Jenkins that I had worked with at Actors Theatre in Louisville for a couple of seasons on and off, and, of course, James Earl Jones and Joe Grifasi, so many people from strong theatre backgrounds.

Georges Corraface

I'd like to take this into the typecasting problem that exists very often, which does not exist much in theatre and somehow it does not exist in that kind of relationship where people know that you have a huge range and give you the opportunities to go out of what your "type" usually is.

David Strathairn

Typecasting is part of the landscape for sure. I feel it's a reduction and a trap and it's a problem for actors who want to explore their craft. We are one person in ourselves but when we become actors we become messengers for all of us and, if you are given the opportunity to be more than just one person all the time, it's great. But there is a problem in the industry that you get known for what you did the last time because it's safe; the producers and the directors remember you only for what you've done before and very often they don't want to take a risk in putting you in something that you haven't done before. But, as a theatre actor, you're trained to do whatever the part is.

Georges Corraface

So, there's always theatre to come back to.

David Strathairn

There's always theatre to come back to.

Georges Corraface

Or John Sayles.

David Strathairn

Or John Sayles.

Georges Corraface

Or similar type of relationships.

David Strathairn

Yes and John, in particular, writes for a company of people. His stories are about many people and those people are all part of the puzzle. That's the nature of his storytelling business, about a small community.

Chris Cooper

As far as being typecast, it's become sort of a running joke as far as I'm concerned, going back several years to a film "October Sky" that was a father-son relationship film; just for the next year all the scripts that came my way were mean fathers. And then, more recently, it's been a lot of military men or government men, FBI, CIA, and perhaps that's the slot that people like David and I, perhaps when we reached this age, that's the material that comes our way. And I have sort of put, I hope I stick with it, a sort of moratorium on mean fathers, government men and military men.

David Strathairn

The choices that you are given as an actor and perhaps even as a director and sometimes as a writer in the business are only as good as your last scene. But if you want to continue working, you are faced with a choice: "Okay, they want me to be the military man, or the confused father, or the man with the suit". So, do you choose to do that over and over again -which you are given the opportunity to do- or do you say no to that and "No, I'm in for something that's different", so I can prove to them again that actors do other things. So, it's a tricky balance in choosing how you want to go about your life as an actor. As a writer, too, and it's one of the conditions of the business.

Chris Cooper

I'll add to that; since "Seabiscuit", where I played an older man who is the trainer of Seabiscuit, a number of scripts have come my way where these characters are sometimes thin and 15 years older than myself. That's a little bit of pigeonholing.

Georges Corraface

Sometimes typecasting can provide us with a part that has depth, a whole other side to it, like in "American Beauty", which was full of surprises for the audience. I think we are ready to show this excerpt from "American Beauty". Another very strict father.

(Screening)

Indeed the surprise, indeed earnestness completely included in the character that we've seen before because there's a surprise and then at the same time you realize it, because, in the end, it was all there. How do you research for parts? Let's talk about research. Let's talk about the present time, the news. How much do you watch the news and how much do you use the general atmosphere of what is going on today in the research for your parts?

Chris Cooper

If it's for the present day, films like "Syriana" or anything that's present, there are plenty of sources to do your research. For this piece, I remember there were two books in particular that I read. One was "Things they carried with them" -the title was something like that-, which was about day-to-day current life in Vietnam. Also, I had an acquaintance in my hometown that had a career in the military. Colonel Fitts has a room that is his study and nobody in the house is allowed in that area and it was very important for me to get in that room and experience the military feel at his desk: where he would place his little flag, his showcase of weapons and so on and so forth. I worked all

that out with this acquaintance of mine. I mean, you go anywhere and everywhere to find as much information as you can when doing research.

Georges Corraface

What was your most pleasant research, whether it was expected or not? For what film did you do research that really touched upon a great deal of something that you didn't have a clue before?

David Strathairn

All research is always, for me, sometimes the most enjoyable because you take a bath in everything possible that relates to not only the character but to the story. If it's a different time of history, that's an opportunity to learn things set, for example, in Russia in 1906, if it's a period piece. That sometimes is the most exciting: immersing yourself in the clothing, the language, the political atmosphere, and the psychology and culture of people living at a different time. All those are amazingly informative and you distil all that down to what is and becomes a series of moments in a film. In theatre, research has always been the most exciting thing and that's why I think theatre and film, if the research is done well, not necessarily by the actors but by the whole production, become an education for the audience and you're telling them things that they may not know about. That's why we go to the cinema and that's why we go to the theatre.

Georges Corraface

In the details.

David Strathairn

Yes, in the details, in the architecture, the way they spoke, what they believed in; that's what we did it for, it's sort of a mirror of our nation throughout history. So, it's always really exciting to do research.

Georges Corraface

Chris, do you use dreams in your research? Do you use the present moment, the random that is not random? Do you believe that you are aware in this different way because you are working on the character and there are messages for you in the script, in the phone calls that arrive in your real life?

Chris Cooper

It's rather uncanny that you mentioned dreams. I can think of a number of times where the night before production started -I remember it happened with "Matewan"- and it was such an involved lengthy dream that whatever time it was, 2 or 3 in the morning, this was one dream that I had to write down and it was epic. What it told me as far as working on "Matewan", I'd have to go back to the dream, but very specifically in another job -I believe it was a film called "Guilty by Suspicion"- that dream told me to settle down, relax, not to make too much of this job that I was about to get into. It was great advice but when you are involved with the character and during the shoot -and certainly I'd like to get my scripts as early as possible, 3 months before, whatever- I think your antenna is out 24 hours a day for anything that can feed you. So, help can come from anywhere.

David Strathairn

These are dreams. They are created from someone's imagination and film, I think, also works on us at a subconscious level, so basically we're in a dream and when you allow yourself to unconsciously experience things, it's great. The challenge is to bring those unconscious moments to life and that's the magic of filmmaking and filmmakers and of acting; you study and you study and you have this whole range of tools that you can use and basically what you're trying to do is try to find something underneath all that and capture the subconscious of an audience. So, yes, dreams are great. And if you are lucky enough to have them and then you're working on them, then you say, "I'm not that crazy. Something's happening".

Georges Corraface

I'd like to ask you if you both recall the most inspiring clue that you got either from a teacher in your formative years or from purely a life experience or from professionals or from a fellow actor -or maybe an older actor.

David Strathairn

My first clue as to what theatre was when my sister was in a pageant of her school and I was playing around outside while this was going on -I was very young- and I came to the front of the building and I was just hanging out in the lobby and this person came running -I was actually looking at a textbook. So, this person came running from this door dressed with a big feathery hat and had a sword tied at his side and a big nose. He was panicking. He saw this book, he grabbed the book from me and he went off this way. I said, "What's wrong? Why are you taking my book?" He went through the door and I followed him. So, he came onto the stage and obviously he had forgotten his book -he was looking for his book, which happened to be like this, let's say it was the Bible. For me, it was just a book. So, he went out on stage and he started reading from this book things that were not in the book and I'm thinking, "You're lying! You're basically lying to all these people out there and that's my book!" That was my introduction to the façade of theatre.

Georges Corraface

This story just sounds like a dream. An extra's dream. And you, Chris?

Chris Cooper

Early things that happened that inspired me?

Georges Corraface

Yes.

Chris Cooper

I have something to tell folks about how film can affect a child or anybody. I used to go to films with my mother. My mother would not take me to children's films and cartoons; she would take me to films that she wanted to see. This was when I was 4 years old in Houston, Texas and this particular film so stayed with me, that many years later I asked her about a scene. I described the scene and I said that there was this young boy sitting on a curb of the street and he was looking out at us and the sidewalk was behind him and from his left this woman in a hat, in a veil, in period turn of the century, 1910, 1915 costume, walked the sidewalk behind him and then he turned to her and she was about 20 paces down the sidewalk and he rose and began to follow her.

And they went to this beach area with beach grass and in the distance there was this house and the woman entered the house and the young boy picked up rocks and threw them at the house. I was 4 years old and years later, I'm probably 8 or 9 because I'm trying to describe this scene, and my mother said, "Oh, that was "East of Eden". That was Jimmy Dean". And of course, I knew nothing about James Dean and I didn't know anything about Elia Kazan's works but I thought that was terrific how film can strike your emotions and what an impact great filmmaking, great photography can have on you but that was one of the kernels that something started to grow there.

Georges Corraface

Let's see another clip and then we'll talk about impersonating real life and characters that have existed and still exist. Let's watch "Good Night and Good Luck".

(screening)

David Strathairn

There is a particular challenge in doing a real person. In this instance, he was a piece and still remains a piece of the American culture. It's completely different than creating or giving voice to a

character that is the result of the imagination of the writer. In many ways, it's easier because you have evidence of who this person was. In this case, I had all the broadcasts where I could see them and volumes of literature and personal testimony written about this man. So, there I had my reference library alive and through photo and through personal testimony and reading, I could make a kind of a hologram, an image, a tangible image of the man.

The responsibility of doing something like that, the tricky thing, is to try to find the thing inside that person that the story is trying to evoke, what he was about, whether it was Edward R. Murrow or a sports figure or any historical figure. My challenge was to find the essence of the man that the story is talking about. That's where it becomes dreamlike. But in this case, the challenge was to respect this person because so many people knew him, had seen him, had been with him and what he represented was so vital to that moment in history and thereafter to our culture. So, it was the responsibility to get as close as possible to that essence. The other challenge was, in this case, to smoke, which is an occupational hazard sometimes; you are asked to do things that you don't. It's a lot different doing a historical figure than creating an original character.

Georges Corraface

And since it is in the frame of fiction, sometimes you have to share your loyalty to your perception of the character and the dramatic writing. Sometimes you have to make some concessions or adaptations.

David Strathairn

Yes, in that case there were no concessions or adaptations because the script and the history were sort of solid and I was walking into a form already cut out for me. And it felt scary, because you were so welded to that cardboard cutout that you felt there was a constraint. But if everything is brought to the table, the clothing, the cinematography and the story, you enter a world that is quite freeing.

Georges Corraface

On the other hand, Chris, there are some real life people that are in the news a lot that could serve as inspiration for a character, like the President.

Chris Cooper

Sure, I mean, I have indeed played a handful of characters, and -I'd second what David said- in my case was the character Alvin Dewey in the film "Capote". He was the investigator of the Clutter family murder. This happened in my community when I grew up, in Kansas City. I was very familiar with the case and remember the news coverage very clearly. And, of course, the production company gathered that coverage; we had all the clips and what became very clear to me was bringing Alvin Dewey's dignity as a man and a representative of his community. I just talked with a gentleman last night that found very odd that in that film Alvin Dewey didn't strike out at Capote and didn't rage that Capote felt so unconcerned about this murder and unconcerned about the community's feeling, but rage would have been the wrong choice for this character. There was great dignity in this man from a small country community and certainly something I wanted to bring to the character.

On the other hand, I recently played Robert Hanssen in a film called "Breach"; he was one of the greatest spies in US history. In that instance, I had no audio, no video to go by other than 15 seconds of FBI footage before he was captured. This man was 6ft 3 or 4, he had a very slow and deliberate speech pattern and I presented that at the first day of filming and Billy Ray, the director, said "You know, if you keep this up, we're going to have a four-hour film". So, you've got to make some changes and, to make a long story short, you try to bring truth to the character and have as many elements of that character as you can, but sometimes...

Georges Corraface

... You have to change something. We can watch a clip from "Breach".

(screening)

So, how much are you involved in the morals of what a project is about? How much -I don't want to use the word politics but there's always a moral issue and a social issue in a movie - do you think that it is a value you are getting involved in it?

David Strathairn

It's tricky, I'm not sure I know exactly what you mean.

Georges Corraface

If you had to choose between a film that has very good artistic potential and not very much social content and a film that has more social content and less artistic mastery potentially, which one would you go for?

Chris Cooper

I have a quick answer for that. I do usually 3-1, I do 3 films for the heart and the other film I call my "whore job".

Georges Corraface

Still, how much of a "whore job"? I'm sure you've got your limit also.

Chris Cooper

Yeah.

Georges Corraface

How would you rate your ratio?

David Strathairn

My ratio? It's like what I said before, the pigeonholing thing, you have to do certain things to survive really, but mostly you want to do things you believe in and if you're lucky to have worked with someone like John 5 or 6 times, you don't have to walk the streets. Your roof won't have any tingles, but you'll feel really good for what you've done. But in terms of morals or ethics or politics as they apply to your character, your character is only a piece of the whole puzzle, the whole picture. You may choose a picture because it's talking about something that you want to be a part of, but the ethics or the morals or the ideology or the person of your character is only a piece of that presentation.

Georges Corraface

I was talking about your decision to get involved. Like playing a role that is completely the opposite of your beliefs in order to serve the story.

David Strathairn

Right, to serve the thing. That's what we do; we serve the story. One particular case of mine was the film called "Dolores Claiborne" in which I had to play a very damaged man who abuses his daughter and it was a very uncomfortable prospect to go there, to think about what that is and actually depict that, but it was part of a story that was so much more. The relationship between the mother and the daughter and the character was essentially just a smaller catalyst for a bigger picture, but I felt it was important. Sometimes you have to go down some dark alleys while the main story is bringing light to something else.

Chris Cooper

Essentially, I think that's where we want to go as actors, to some scary places and dig deep; for the character in "American Beauty", I was getting more and more discouraged. The more I read the script, the more it took me to a darker and darker and darker place and I said "I don't know if I want to go there". And thank goodness for my wife Marianne, who said, "When you're as frightened of taking on that character, chances are you should go there". So thank goodness.

Georges Corraface

Have you had a similar scary choice? Have you felt scared to death to say yes to a project?

David Strathairn

Most of them. They are all very scary.

Georges Corraface

Were you about to say no and then someone or something happened and thank god you said yes to a project?

David Strathairn

The really scary thing is when you say, "No, I don't want to go there" and then someone convinces you to do this part and then you realize it was really a mistake. That's frightening because you question your own judgment at that time and you feel "I've listened to someone else before I've listened to myself" and often you're not comfortable.

Georges Corraface

We can open the questions to the public. We already have one here. Can we have microphones?

From the audience

For David. I was wondering if you would care to give an example of a role that was a bad decision to accept, but you did it anyway and how this affected your role.

David Strathairn

It's not something that's been seen, so I don't want to say that this was a mistake yet.

From the audience

Hello. Two days ago, Mr. Malkovich told us that it's extremely easy for him to get in and out of a character, he's filming and then he just goes back to being John Malkovich, has a cigarette or something like that. I was wondering, after seeing those clips of "American Beauty" and other such complex characters, was it easy for you to just go in and out of these characters? Or do you have to prepare psychologically to get in and then just take some time to go back to being your usual selves?

Chris Cooper

Yes, it's partially yes. I feel I can drop the character, say like this one, Robert Hannsen, who is very strong in my memory. Very concentrated, good long days of work. What made me feel confident in working with the director Billy Ray was that if there was one line that he wasn't completely certain it came from me, we would do it until we got it. So, I left the set each day confident that I did the best work that I possibly could. So, I go home, I go to the hotel, I have my meal. There's certainly a portion of it I can drop. I don't go round my hotel room stamping and freaking out. But you have the next day's work and you have scenes to shoot for the next day and you cannot drop your concentration on that character. It's a very strong feeling. When you take that flight, to wherever you go, whatever location you go to, and this is the time to work, it's not the time -I just can't imagine it- to party after a day's work. You go home and you prepare for the next day. And it's not that I carry that baggage home with me, but yes, that character is on my mind all the time. But I can live a pretty normal life. From the beginning to the end.

David Strathairn

I totally agree with what Chris said but there are some cases where the characteristics of the character, let's say an accent, is so distant from your own that sometimes it helps to keep that going. It's a muscle, so you keep that muscle awake and you walk around in some city and you're the only person who sounds like that, and you're talking to people with your accent -because, for me it's difficult, they slip away quickly so I need to keep it present. I think of it much like an athlete. You play a game and you leave it all on the court. Then you go home but you are still an athlete. You still have to be aware that in three days you may be playing another game. But in this case, it's sometimes the next day and the next day, so you have to keep your instrument tuned up and, yes, it's always with you; you've done all this preparation and your

pockets are full and you walk around like that for the time it takes to do the job. Going in and out of the character is just a frame of mind, just a bit of a focus “okay, I’m going to focus on eating” but it’s there, it’s always there.

From the audience

I’d like to ask if there was a role or a line or a thought from all the projects that you have done so far that had an impact on your own character, on your own personal life, that has changed your views.

David Strathairn

It’s wonderful to find your character saying something that you believe in. Usually saying it better; that’s why writers are writers. Or when your character says something, or when you are studying or researching a character that is completely foreign or something new that opens a window into a different psychology. Yes, that’s a wonderful thing. In my one case, it was when I did “Day One”, it was about the making of the atomic bomb and I was playing Robert Oppenheimer. Studying that man was extraordinary and the one line that did something to me and for me was when he actually witnessed the explosion of the atomic bomb and he quoted from the Bhagavad-Gita “We have become death”.

From the audience

And a role or an idea or a line that changed your life or personally you, your thoughts?

Chris Cooper

I think David put it really well, that a writer can put in a better way something that you have thought or said. In another respect, say, I had a close relationship with cattle and horses as a young boy, so it becomes a very strong emotional link to the character when you have lived that life experience, say in “Seabiscuit” where I’m the trainer of this marvelous race horse who’s having some trouble because he’s been treated poorly and trained poorly. And a simple line like “He just has to learn how to be a horse again”, that’s a really strong connection. Through the career there are a number of instances like that. Sure.

From the audience

Καλημέρα. Στα ελληνικά θέλω να ρωτήσω. Έχετε αναφερθεί κυρίως στο παρελθόν και οι δύο σε κάποιο συμπυκνωμένο ψυχολογικό βιογραφικό που σας δίνει ο κ. Sayles για τη μελέτη των ρόλων που είναι να υποδυθείτε. Κατά πόσο αυτό σας διευκολύνει, σας ανακουφίζει στη μελέτη και προσέγγιση των ρόλων, αν έχει λειτουργήσει καμιά φορά ανασταλτικά και αν το έχετε συναντήσει και με άλλους σκηνοθέτες που έχετε συνεργαστεί.

Chris Cooper

From my experience, this is something unique that John Sayles brings to his actors. John gave me my first film job in “Matewan” and I remember along with the script came probably a 2-page single space outline and background and history of the character, Joe Kenehan. It was terrific help, absolutely terrific help. You’re going to do your character work as an actor anyway and your research, but I think of it nothing more than a wonderful shortcut that John has given the actors. He is giving you a great outline of this character to start with and of course you are going to expand and add to that character but it was nothing but very helpful.

David Strathairn

It’s very rare that this happens. Actually, I think I’ve only had it in one other case but not in the same form. It was with the “Good Night and Good Luck” project where George Clooney said “Don’t worry about this man’s life from childhood to death. Don’t worry, we’re not doing a biography of this man, we’re doing a particular moment in the history of journalism in which this man figured this way”. So, he basically said “This is the focus of the picture”. So, it made it quite clear as to what I had to focus on. But, really, if you’re lucky, you can have a dialogue with the director and you can have an

idea of how he sees the story and if you're really lucky, you get to talk with the writer and if you're really really lucky, the writer is the director. And in the case of John, we're incredibly fortunate that we have the source right there.

Georges Corraface

In the case of John, you're even more fortunate because he's an actor too.

David Strathairn

And also that John is an actor. He doesn't necessarily say "On this line, this is what you mean". He writes these pieces, which are kind of a dreamscape of your character. So, it's very rare and that's big.

From the audience

I'd like to ask what the primary appeal of acting for you was, whether it was finding out about yourself, finding out about other people or just make-believe or even something else. What was the primary appeal that satisfied you so much that you still get that out of it?

Chris Cooper

During my childhood I was always very taken by actors -I was very selective. There were a handful of performers, actors in film work primarily, that as a young boy I was very attracted to and I didn't watch these films to be entertained, I watched them so these films, these particular films, these performances took me on a trip. And then, I started volunteering my time at theatre, regional, or what they call "resident theatre" and that meant literally sweeping ticket stubs at the end of a performance, standing in the wings and shifting scenery, keeping an eye on the actors and then working my way up to the shop and building sets. From there I went on to another theatre and became shop foreman, I built sets and painted. I got such a great education about theatre, learning the lights, running the light board and so on and so forth. And then knew I wanted to move on to acting but I got very irritated with myself because my shyness was so profound and I thought that if I can just audition at university and try this thing, acting, I'd get out of the slump. I was irritated. I had things to express, I knew I had things to express but I had a, there was a cork inside me and -I lost my train of thought.

David Strathairn

As Chris said, I was too building a lot of sets and working on the shop with something real. The reason I got into theatre, quite frankly, was because it was the only building on campus that was open all night and you could go hang out and play with pirate tools and for the first few years of my college experience, it was a men's school and the theatre was the only place where there were women. So, pirate tools and women got me into the theatre. But also, as Chris said, I became seduced by the community; I saw a place where people were expressing themselves and discovering themselves through that expression of someone running around naked with a towel around your waist on a pile of dirt with a spear. Maybe I did that when I was a little kid, sure, but dressing up and clothes that were strange and speaking in a different way, and some eccentric friends, this became a world of education for me which was not being offered in the classroom except maybe in one piece, but the theatre encompassed all as well as being been a place where you could express yourself and discover "Oh, Wow!", you know, pirate tools and then that.

From the audience

Θα ήθελα να ρωτήσω. Παρακολούθησαμε μια εκπομπή κινηματογράφου στην τηλεόραση και είδα ένα κλιπάκι από μια ταινία που πρωταγωνιστούσε ο Chris Cooper, στην οποία δολοφονεί μια έγχρωμη γυναίκα. Μετά από το συγκεκριμένο κλιπ υπήρχε ο σχολιασμός ότι κάποιοι άνθρωποι οδηγήθηκαν σε ακραίες συμπεριφορές, για παράδειγμα αντέγραψαν τον τρόπο εμφάνισης, δηλαδή πώς ντυνόταν -είχε μακρύ μαλλί και καμπαρτίνα- και οδηγήθηκαν σε βίαιες συμπεριφορές. Θα ήθελα να ρωτήσω πώς αισθάνθηκε όταν έμαθε αυτή την πληροφορία.

Chris Cooper

Yeah, that film was called "Money Train". Indeed there were previous acts of torching token booths years before; when that film was made, production and the powers in that film went to the Manhattan Transit Authority to make sure that this would not happen again because the token booth had been changed. The original token booths had been down there for I don't know how many decades, they had been changed over to more modern, more secure token booths but indeed there was, as I understand, a copycat of that incident. I remember it very clearly and it shook me up terrifically and I remember one of our Senators, Senator Bob Dole, standing up and saying what a horrible thing that was and indeed to copy that was horrible. Do I feel responsible? I have to take some responsibility for it. But I was assured before we shot that film that security measures in the subways of New York had been taken care of.

From the audience

How did the Oscars affect your career and maybe your lives? And Oscar nominations as well.

David Strathairn

People ask me a lot more questions now. They want your opinion and for a while it was weird, but ultimately I don't feel that it's changed me and the perception of the industry, or people perceive me as changed because it has happened briefly, it's happened after 25 years of doing this. If that one moment is going to change 25 years, what does that mean? It really hasn't. It was a bizarre feloniesque dance into that world for a moment.

Chris Cooper

I dare say that David and I had similar careers. I think it's been a very slow and gradual time from theatre to independent film and then working on some studio films, so, we've got this wonderful recognition for some pieces of work in our mid-life. I don't know how I could have handled it if I had received the recognition that I did when I was much younger, but I would agree with David; we don't live in the community of Hollywood, we live on the East Coast, we've always come from East Coast, from theatre. The recognition was great, the evening was very memorable; and it hasn't changed my life by any means.

From the audience

Coming from the safe side, when "Good Night and Good Luck" got out, I thought the timing was crucial with the political situation there. How much did you as an actor feel that you were commenting on the witch-hunt that was going on with terrorism and the media supporting Bush's regime to allow Bush to say "they have nuclear weapons" and say "well, maybe they have nuclear weapons" and they all were deconstructing what he was really saying and criticizing him? Did you feel yourself not only playing a part but also preaching out against the political situation at the moment of the movie being made?

David Strathairn

No question. We all knew going into this film that it had parallels and that there would be a lot of attention because of that. The timing was great. Very often a film does not come to fruition when dealing with something past. We all knew that this wasn't the case. And it was great to be a part of the film that related to what was going on in this administration and the regime in the United States. Someone needed to go "Hey! Look! Has it happened before? Is it going to happen again? It's it happening now!" To awaken the people to it, to remind them that there are things like this and what was done before. It was a tremendous opportunity.

Cinema can influence society but, for the most part, it's a reflection because if you're a genius, 5 years from now something might be happening that you want to make your statement about, so you start your production now and it happens; but usually what happens in reality is reflected maybe 2,3,4,5 years on, in many cases, years past the event. So, that's what we do in this artistic

form. It's a reflection of everything that's happened and we make a statement about it. In the case of "Good Night and Good Luck", it was great and there's a testament to George Clooney's putting all this together so quickly. He came from a journalist's family so this has been part of his life as a child. So, yes, cinema can influence us, actually it educates us.

Georges Corraface

Or it's therapy.

David Strathairn

Yes.

Georges Corraface

Very preventative. As a whole, like a lot of therapy can be preventative.

David Strathairn

You hope that it will be preventative for the next time, but we tend to forget.

From the audience

This question is both for Chris and David. What are the three main questions you would like to ask the director before you start reading the script in order to build a character?

Chris Cooper

As I said before, I like to get my material, my script, as early as possible and often the case is you won't see the director until you're at the set. As far as many of my jobs are concerned, you may take a trip to the location, you may have dinner with the director, you start to work that day and you must just come prepared having done your homework, open to alternatives, open to suggestions coming from the director. I think the directors cast you because they think you are capable of bringing something to this character, or they've seen your work before and there are some parallels; my idea and usually the fact is I just come with the character planning to be open to different options, different takes on a scene, whatever, on occasion, I've had the luxury the director taking a trip to come and see me and we've done a line by line work of the script just to make sure we're on the same track but as for the questions to the director, I put my faith to the director -again coming from the theatre background- I always assume that the director is the one that has the complete concept of the production, so I put my complete trust in his hands.

David Strathairn

The questions that I ask -I don't really ask but if I were to put to him three questions-, do you really believe I'm the right person for this role? Seriously, because they see in you one thing that's maybe different and they may not know you and they may have been told "Get this guy". So, am I the right person for this role? Why? If the director hasn't written it, what do you think of the script? Why did you pick this job? And in this question is "What do you want to say by directing this particular story?" So, then you know what he's thinking. You trust that he knows what he's thinking. You hope. And if they can answer those questions clearly, I know where I'm at.

From the audience

Looking back to the past, which do you consider is the biggest sacrifice you had to make both in your personal lives and as actors and also are there any sacrifices you regret you haven't made to achieve the things you have achieved today?

Chris Cooper

I guess the greatest sacrifice is that you're away from your family for good lengths of time. Some films can be shot in a short time, like 6 weeks, but I've been now involved in some that have gone for as long as 5 months. Depending on the family situation where your loved ones can't come to you and you can't go to them, you may be separated for that long a period. That's no doubt the biggest sacrifice that immediately comes to mind.

David Strathairn

And the other sacrifice, which I think, is in proportion to that quite miniscule is that you sacrifice your privacy, your private life. Here we are, me talking and all these people asking you stuff which I find very difficult to answer. You feel skinned a lot, you feel flayed a lot, and that's one of the sacrifices apart from being away from your family, being away from your life, really.

Georges Corraface

Thank you very much for this sacrifice.

