Collected Screenplays

Christopher Hampton

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Extract

CHRISTOPHER HAMPTON

Collected Screenplays

Dangerous Liaisons
Carrington
Mary Reilly
A Bright Shining Lie
The Custom Of The Country

Introduced by the Author

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INTRODUCTION

DANGEROUS LIAISONS

My Dinner with Miloš

What follows is a brief account of how my play *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, which opened at The Other Place (now sadly defunct) in Stratford in September 1985 for a scheduled twenty-three performances, eventually (and somewhat miraculously) led on to the Warner Brothers' film *Dangerous Liaisons*, which opened in America in December 1988. It was a far from straightforward journey, with more than its fair share of diversions, blind alleys and reckless driving, during which a little of Laclos's military training might often have come in handy: I shall try to confine myself to the principal landmarks.

I sold the film rights to my first play in 1967; since when the bidding for film rights to my work has hardly been brisk. However, in this case, offers for the rights had begun to arrive even before the Royal Shakespeare Company brought the play in to The Pit in January 1986, and in the course of the year, despite the RSC's absent-minded dropping of the play from its schedule for three months, the bids proliferated. I was busy with other things. Still, there seemed to be plenty of time, and I thought it was simply a matter of weighing up the various options and making a careful choice. As it turned out, this naive way of thinking contained a number of important errors.

Not that the film rights could have been sold before the disposition of the New York rights. A management putting an English play on (or off) Broadway traditionally shares with the London management forty per cent of any film or TV sales; and the cost of mounting a play in New York is now so alarming that the absence of these ancillary rights rules out any possibility of a production. There's a corollary to this: any proposal for a film which seeks to keep costs down by suggesting profit participation rather than a large up-front payment (and there were one or two interesting approaches along these lines) is unlikely to be approved of by the theatre managers or their investors.

In fact, the New York rights had been disposed of, without my knowledge, before the play had even opened. The RSC had an arrangement with an American producer, James Nederlander, whereby, in return for a certain amount of money, he had first option on any new play the RSC presented. As it turned out, Mr Nederlander had a genuine love for the play and proved more than reasonable, allowing for example the director, Howard Davies, and myself to persuade him, against what I suspect was his commercial instinct, to bring over the British company, rather than recasting with American actors: all the same, the arrangement itself is hardly one of which an author could be expected to approve. And one of its consequences was to put any decision about the film on ice until the Broadway opening in April 1987.

The play's first preview at the Music Box Theatre on 45th St was a more than usually ghastly occasion. During the day the temperature rose steeply and in the course of the afternoon it was discovered that the delicate amplification necessary in so large a house had not been balanced against the air-conditioning, which effectively drowned it. A dispute between the rival claims of art and comfort was decided in favour of the former more or less as the audience filed in. Within a few days, the cast had adjusted to the dimensions of the theatre and were giving as good an account of the play as it had ever received: but there simply had not been enough time to prepare, and on this occasion the performance was muted and tentative. Nevertheless, alongside the representatives from the major studios and other perspiring celebrities, the three chief executives from the Lorimar film division, Bernie Brillstein, Peter Chernin and Ileen Maisel, decided they wanted to acquire the film rights.

Peter and Ileen came to see me the following day. Ileen had been told about the play by Norma Heyman, the English producer for whom I had written a film based on *The Honorary Consul*. The film hadn't turned out quite as we'd hoped, for a variety of reasons, but I'd been very impressed with Norma's commitment, tenacity and attention to detail. One of Lorimar's proposals was that I should co-produce the film (with Norma); obviously, in addition to working with someone I knew well, this would give me the advantage of having some say in the choice of director, cast and so on. Just as important, however, was the fact that I immediately liked

Ileen and Peter (and, when I subsequently met him, Bernie) and felt they were to be trusted. I came back to England, deciding to follow my instinct and relieved that the much-deferred disposal of the film rights could finally be made.

Easier said than done. Lorimar, I was assured, was not offering enough money. Furthermore, the company was on the brink of bankruptcy. Various incomprehensible articles to this effect in the trade papers began to arrive weekly in my mail. Most seriously of all, the RSC refused to agree to countersign my contract.

Reading contracts is not one of my skills and I had failed to notice that the RSC had reserved this unlikely right of veto. It was also my understanding that they had handed over ninety per cent of their participation in the film rights to Frank and Woji Gero as part of the West End transfer negotiations. They were therefore entitled to two per cent of the film rights. This meant that for them to achieve an extra thousand pounds the basic offer would need to increase by the best part of a hundred thousand dollars. Nevertheless they were adamant. Complete stalemate ensued.

Adjacent or sideways to this was the matter of Miloš Forman. He had been sighted early on in the run of the play at The Pit, more than once by all accounts. He was pointed out to me at the première in New York. Now, a friend of Mr Nederlander's, Salah Hassanein, at this time head of distribution for United Artists, declared an interest in acquiring the rights for Mr Forman, with whom he had attended a screening of Roger Vadim's 1959 film *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* in New York. Would I go with him to meet Mr Forman in Paris? Unfortunately, I was very busy and couldn't get away. In that case, could we all meet the following weekend in London? Of course.

Mr Hassanein and I arrived at Mr Forman's hotel at the appointed hour on Saturday 30 May. He had not checked in. We waited a while, then moved on to a restaurant, where we enjoyed an excellent meal. We reminisced about a school we had both attended in Alexandria. The atmosphere was convivial. Mr Forman, however, failed to join us. I went home.

The stalemate persisted through the summer. I went on holiday with my family to Crete. There, I was telephoned by my agent, who told me that Miloš Forman had announced his intention to

make a film based on *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. It would be called *Valmont* and it would have nothing to do with my play. The good news was that the RSC had been sufficiently galvanised by this information to countersign the contract with Lorimar. Too late, I said. I was convinced that in these circumstances no one would ever go ahead with our film.

I returned to New York in September in a melancholy frame of mind. The British cast had completed its Equity-permitted twenty weeks on Broadway and the play closed, breaking the theatre's house record in its final week. The air was thick with valediction. However, Lorimar seemed as optimistic as ever. They were still talking to Miloš Forman's agents and lawyers (the man himself being notably hard to come by); indeed they were talking to all kinds of people. I should go back to England and stand by.

A month passed; then, in the manner of films, forced inactivity was suddenly transformed into frantic haste. Mr Forman was sitting with his writer in Connecticut, beavering away. We were now months behind. Unless we caught up with, not to say overtook, the opposition, all was lost. The first draft was written in less than a month and delivered on Thanksgiving weekend, 1987. It was enthusiastically received, but my sense is that the following three weeks or so were the most perilous of the entire saga. Fortunately, I know no details of what went on and all that can be said in retrospect is that Bernie Brillstein managed to overcome whatever doubts and difficulties remained; at last, the questions of director and cast, the subject of endless theoretical discussions, could be addressed in some concrete way.

Lorimar had one instinct in common with all the other companies who had negotiated for the rights: a disinclination to cast anyone connected with the play. They didn't ask for big stars; they didn't even demand American actors; they simply wanted a fresh start. I often wondered whether their decision had anything to do with the circumstances of that first preview in New York; they denied this and insisted, however hard I argued, that what they felt was necessary was a cast who would arrive on the set not carrying any kind of baggage.

An actor whose name began to surface frequently in our discussions was John Malkovich; so, in the week before Christmas, I went

back to New York and saw the play in which he was appearing, Lanford Wilson's *Burn This*. The performance was an astonishing tour de force. Afterwards, I went backstage, knocked on his dressing room door, introduced myself and handed him the script. His immediate acceptance of the part of Valmont felt like a great breakthrough: finally, we were up and running.

At the same time I persuaded Lorimar to let me show the script to Stephen Frears. Such reluctance as they had displayed was entirely to do with the fact that he had never before made a large-budget film. It's always seemed to me more logical to be wary of a man who has never made a small-budget film, but there we are. Anyway, back in London, I went round to hand him the script on New Year's Day 1988.

He seemed to like it. And so, a few weeks later, it was back to New York for Stephen to meet Bernie Brillstein. The atmosphere at lunch was initially somewhat strained and Stephen, who to mark the solemnity of the occasion had invested in a new pair of sneakers, was asked how soon he was able to begin work. After an impressive pause for reflection, he said, 'Tuesday.' He then proposed a five-week trial period, during which he and I could work on the script, while he investigated the feasibility of the budget and timetable and began to assemble a team. As to the casting, he was more than happy with John Malkovich and before his stay in New York was over and a delighted Lorimar could realistically contemplate the prospect of beginning shooting in a little over three months, he had agreed to offer the part of the Marquise de Merteuil to Glenn Close.

I had met Glenn the year before with Howard Davies, when we had asked her to head the American company we had expected to take over the play on Broadway when the RSC's permitted time was up. She had accepted and had then, no doubt, been as startled as we were when the management decided not to extend the run. Apart from any other considerations, it therefore seemed only just that the part should eventually come to her.

The next three months sped by in a blur. Exhaustive script discussions took place (mostly in aeroplanes) and I wrote two more drafts; the enormous apparatus of pre-production trundled forward; location hunts established, to general relief, that it was scarcely more expensive to shoot in France than in Eastern Europe

or elsewhere; rehearsals took place at Glenn's house in the country (she was about to have a baby). A good deal of time was devoted to the casting of Madame de Tourvel, and Stephen and I met some impressive candidates both in New York and Los Angeles. We decided to offer the part to Michelle Pfeiffer. A mysterious silence ensued. Subsequently it turned out that she had simultaneously been offered the part of Madame de Merteuil in Miloš Forman's film. For a week, as everyone at our end hyperventilated, she had been driving to work (she was shooting *Tequila Sunrise*) with both scripts on the seat beside her. Eventually, to our great good fortune, she made her choice.

At last, we were standing, soon after dawn, inadequately protected from the drizzle, outside Château Maisons-Lafitte, a grandiose pile playing the part of Madame de Rosemonde's country house. There were still a good many surprises in store, not the least of which was that in that first week of shooting, the film was bought lock, stock and barrel by Warner Brothers, in a deal separate from their interminable negotiations to buy Lorimar. We were to suffer none of the interference often associated with big studios and they proved exemplary custodians of the film: which now began, as John Malkovich paused at the top of a flight of stone steps, silhouetted against a leaden sky, and slapped his boot with his glove. It was 30 May: a year to the day since I'd failed to have dinner with Miloš Forman.

Published screenplays often consist of the writer's final draft or shooting script. The inevitable differences between such a text and the finished film can be fascinating, but seem sometimes to imply a kind of reproach or criticism. In this case, since the film was a genuinely collaborative venture, I wanted the screenplay to resemble the final cut as closely as possible. It follows that I owe thanks to all those who contributed to the final shape of the film, principally, of course, Stephen Frears, but also the actors, the editing room, the camera team, designers, continuity, the sound department, fellow producers, executives, preview audiences in Pasadena and just about anybody who put a head round the door and lobbed in a suggestion. I'm extremely grateful.

CARRINGTON

The White Elephant

The gestation period of *Carrington* (more or less eighteen years) was so grossly excessive and its halting progress so convoluted and strewn with landmines, it seemed worth attempting an account, especially in view of the fact that its entirely unexpected conclusion has brought about a radical alteration in my life.

As far as I recall, it was Barry Krost, then a London-based agent, who in the mid-seventies gave me Michael Holroyd's monumental and ground-breaking biography of Lytton Strachey. He was convinced there was some sort of film to be derived from it and had already suggested this to his friend and future client John Osborne, who had sensibly declined, although he was sufficiently impressed by the strange story of Lytton and Carrington to use elements of it in his underrated play of that year *Watch It Come Down*. I was less prudent: I was so shaken and haunted by Holroyd's devastating book that I told Barry if he could find some credible source of finance for what was obviously an unconventional subject, I'd be more than happy to take it on, even though I had no clear idea how I might extrapolate from this mass of material some manageable narrative.

A year or so later, I was working with Stephen Frears, rehearsing my first original play for television, when Barry called to say that an executive from Warner Brothers was in London and was expressing some interest in commissioning a script which might in some way encompass the nebulous but then fashionable subject of Bloomsbury. Could I lunch with him? I should add that the mid-seventies sprouted one of the very occasional oases in the featureless desert which is the British film industry of the last thirty years. These brief periods of relief always baffled and angered the government of the day, which would eventually devise some countermeasure, the closure, say, of some harmless tax loophole or the threatened penalisation of potential foreign investors or even some entirely illogical and unhelpful strengthening of the currency. Anything, in short, to put a stop to the embarrassing prospect of producing in any given year more than the usual dribble of Poverty

Row features. In 1976, then, someone at the Department of Trade and Industry had nodded; the dollar was strong, and things British became fleetingly attractive to the Hollywood studios.

A car came to collect me from the Acton Hilton (the BBC rehearsal rooms) and whisked me into the West End. According to the piece of paper someone had handed me, I was to lunch with a Mr Elephant, which seemed, like most things I associated with Hollywood, unlikely but not impossible. Mr Elephant greeted me warmly, a man more bearish than owlish, and, in traditional fashion, chatted affably of this and that, not uttering the word 'Bloomsbury' until the arrival of coffee, and even then with an apologetic intonation. I admitted that I had little or no interest in Bloomsbury as such, but that I was touched and fascinated by the story of Carrington, which I proceeded to relate to him. He listened in a thoughtful and sympathetic manner and pronounced himself very interested; I explained I had to get back to my rehearsals and thanked him for an excellent lunch, addressing him as 'Mr Elephant', which he gave every appearance of taking on the chin. Only as the car pulled away and I looked back at the restaurant did it seem likely that some clerical error had occurred: we'd been lunching at The White Elephant.

Nevertheless and somewhat to my amazement, a contract very soon arrived and I retired to my house in Oxfordshire, a Georgian rectory within walking distance of the spot where Carrington began her campaign to seduce Gerald Brenan in 1921, and settled down for what was very probably the most enjoyable year of my writing life. It was the first time I'd worked for one of the big studios and I found them endlessly accommodating. No sooner did you make an enquiry about the entire Lytton–Carrington correspondence stored on microfiche in the British Museum than a truck would arrive with cartons and cartons of photocopies. After the tropical rigours of 1976, the summer of '77 was the full buzzing and humming genuine British article (very similar, in fact, to the summer of 1994, when the film was eventually shot), and I strung a hammock between the trees at the top of the garden (there was a new baby in the house) and immersed myself in another world. Six months of planning gave way to three months' writing through the height of the summer and a first draft completed by

the middle of September. I knew it was about twice as long as it should be, but I was pleased with the script and confident that a good director would know where to apply the machete.

I imagine the delivery of the *Carrington* script must have caused some consternation at Warner Brothers. Certainly Mr Elephant (whose real name turned out to be Marty Elfand, so not too much of a clerical error) had long since been released and whoever inherited the project must have been more than a little bewildered. Nevertheless, they buckled down to it, and within four or five months I was asked if I could go over to Los Angeles and spend a couple of weeks working with the designated director, Herbert Ross. By all means, I said, provided they were able to cope with the fact that I couldn't drive.

It turned out that the only hotel within walking distance of Herb Ross's house was one of the most expensive in Beverly Hills. Indeed, the suite they installed me in was so extensive I couldn't at first find the bed and it was only when I was settling down on the sofa that I finally spotted the discreet staircase which led up to the three bedrooms above. Mr Ross had a play in preview and a film in pre-production, both by his usual collaborator, Neil Simon, so he was a little distracted, but I was happy to get back to the hotel in time for the daily distribution of free caviar at six p.m. in the Roof Bar, and our script discussions were extremely straightforward and constructive. Finally, on the last day, Barry Krost hosted a lunch in a private room at Mr Chow's. I was sitting between Herb Ross and his wife, the late Nora Kaye, a formidable and celebrated ex-ballet dancer and principal of the American Ballet Theater. The two of them were soon engaged in a ferocious argument about China: during a frosty silence I turned to Nora and, thinking a change of subject might be helpful, asked her if she had read the script. 'I read some of it,' she said.

Her tone was unambiguous, but for some reason I persisted and asked her what she thought of it. She told me she didn't like it. How much of it had she read? I asked. Nine pages, she admitted. Perhaps, I suggested, it wasn't fair to judge it quite so definitively on so short an extract and she should give it another chance. She looked straight at me. 'I don't want to read about a lot of pissy English people,' she remarked.

I looked at Barry Krost: he had gone white. At this point, the door burst open and a girl in hot pants erupted into the room. She was carrying a cake which said *Carrington* in pink icing. The next day I flew back to London and never heard another word.

1980 was Lytton Strachey's centenary and the *South Bank Show* asked Michael Holroyd to write a programme about him. In the course of our mutual vicissitudes, Michael and I had become friends and he suggested that extracts from my script might be used to illustrate the programme. Warner Brothers kindly consented to a maximum of eight minutes from the script being used, and so it was that Joanna David, Edward Petherbridge and the late Geoffrey Burridge were the first to incarnate scenes from the script. The programme was well received, won a prize in America and was seen by my friend Peter Gill, who, three or four years later, asked if he could use the script for actors' exercises in the National Theatre Studio, which he ran at that time.

Sometime in 1984, Peter rang me to say that he had decided to give a staged reading of *Carrington* as one of his studio nights at the Cottesloe. It was done with a couple of dozen actors (some reading the stage directions) sitting on plain chairs on the Cottesloe stage. The theatre was full and the occasion was, for me, a full seven years after completing the script, extremely moving. And the following day I had two enquiries from television companies. One of these was from Linda Agran at Thames TV who, with enormous determination, eventually persuaded the company to buy back the rights from Warner Bros. at a mere seven times my original salary (perhaps the caviar had not, after all, been free). No sooner had this transaction been completed than Linda, following some pattern I had begun to recognise as inevitable, lost her job. Her successor, however, an ebullient New Zealander called Andrew Brown, liked the script very much, as did his colleague John Hambley, the head of Thames TV's film division, Euston. There seemed no reason on earth why the film should not now smoothly proceed to production.

On the plus side we also had the enthusiastic support of Jeremy Isaacs and David Rose at Channel 4; Andrew Brown brought in Mike Newell, for whom I had already written a screenplay from

Peter Prince's novel *The Good Father*; and we had made contact with two French companies which were extremely interested in the project: Pyramide, run by Francis Boespflug and Fabienne Vonier and Noréa, which was Phillipe Carcassonne's shingle. But every positive was to be undone by some over-achieving negative. The powers-that-were at Thames had some deep objection to the script (its cost perhaps), which caused them to declare that, while they had no fundamental objection to the film being made, they were certainly not going to put any money into it themselves; hardly a confidence-inspiring posture in the eyes of potential investors. Then David Rose's successor at Channel 4, David Aukin, finally admitted his blanket aversion to so-called 'period drama'; Andrew Brown convinced himself, when the money was finally all in place, that Mike, who was editing *The Enchanted April*, would not have sufficient time for pre-production, and unilaterally appointed another director, which caused the French investors to withdraw at once and finally, to put the old tin lid on it, Thames lost its franchise.

I have an office in Notting Hill Gate where friends occasionally come and stay: one such is Ronnie Shedlo, who had bought the film rights of my first play in the mid-sixties and has been a friend ever since. Rooting around during a bout of insomnia, he found a script of *Carrington*, with which he proceeded to fall in love. He and his English partner, John McGrath, also an old friend, took up the cause and began painstakingly to try to reglue what had so comprehensively fallen part. Needless to say, they initially encountered the established pattern of setbacks and rejections, but within a mere eighteen months came a couple of decisive strokes of luck: Emma Thompson, who had given a memorably good screen test back in the days when she was only just known, agreed at once, when reapproached, to play Carrington; and Polygram, who had taken a share in Phillipe Carcassonne's company, suddenly agreed to put up all the necessary finance to make the film.

It seemed scarcely believable: only sixteen years after the delivery of the script, and here it was, set to go forward. Mike cast Jonathan Pryce and a date was agreed for the summer of 1994 when both actors were available. At which point, I received a phone call

from Mike. He was dispirited about the prospects of the film he was then editing. 'It's just a little English film,' he said. 'It won't do anything. I can't go straight into another little English film. I have to go to Hollywood and make a proper movie.' He was unpersuadable, adamantine. The film he was working on was called *Four Weddings and a Funeral.*

All kinds of directors were frantically canvassed. They were all unavailable, uninterested or unfinanceable. And eventually, late one evening, Phillipe Carcassonne called to say that in France it was not unprecedented for the writer to direct his script. 'Oh, no,' I said. 'I've never wanted to do that.' And I hadn't. But on the other hand, if I let the opportunity slip, who was to say it wouldn't be another decade or two before the actors, the dates and the money were there? So that when Emma rang a couple of days later and made the same suggestion, I was already weakening. And then, the strangest thing: like a virgin in a pornographic novel, having resisted so staunchly for so long, I found I couldn't get enough of it. And Carrington, who specialised in changing men's lives, had now changed mine.

Carrington has passed, over the years, through a minimum of eight or nine drafts, reducing, in the process, to not much more than half its original length. The final cuts were made, painfully, after the completion of the film. It seemed right, however, to print here a text as close to the finished film as might be; and this is what will be found in the following pages.

MARY REILLY

More Blood

After the rigours of *A Bright Shining Lie*, *Mary Reilly*, adapted from Valerie Martin's poignant and haunting novel, came as a great relief; so much so that I was able to write a first draft in no more than a week. It was received at TriStar (and this perhaps is where the first warning bells should have sounded for me) with tremendous enthusiasm; indeed, I can't remember anything I've ever written being more fervently welcomed. A modest feeding frenzy began

immediately among actresses; and the director was already attached: the distinctive and imaginative Tim Burton. Tim was shooting *Batman Returns*, so early meetings tended to take place on a vast refrigerated set in Burbank, surrounded by electronic penguins and a pervasive smell of fish. Working with Tim was a fascinating process; but early on he fell into a dispute with Sony, who wanted him to make *Ed Wood* (if he insisted on making it at all) in colour, rather than the burnished black-and-white he eventually achieved: and they dumped him.

I learned of this in a call from Stephen Frears, whom the studio had approached to take over. The prospect of working with him again (and Norma Heyman, whom Stephen had proposed as our producer) was, of course, extremely exciting; and we began the business of re-examining the script and casting the film. Stephen, no doubt thinking to protect himself against the possible interference of the studio, decided to add a powerful American producer to the mix: Ned Tanen, who had run Paramount during its glory days, and who brought with him, as a third producer, his wife, Nancy Graham Tanen. And so, in October 1993, a mere two years after the completion of the first draft, Stephen and I found ourselves flying to Chicago to meet Julia Roberts, who struck me as being as intelligent as she was beautiful, an opinion I've since found no reason to revise. In short: so far, so good.

However, I'm not sure that Stephen had considered the possibility that, as an ex-studio boss, Ned might be *plus royaliste que le roi*. In any event, anxieties about the script were beginning to present themselves ever more insistently: it was too hermetic ('Couldn't we have some, like, dinner parties?'), too enigmatic ('Shouldn't there be a voice-over, so we know where she's coming from?') and, above all, too restrained ('I think it just needs more blood'). This was difficult, since what I had ringing in my mind was Nabokov's injunction: 'Please completely forget, disremember, obliterate, unlearn, consign to oblivion any notion you may have had that *Jekyll and Hyde* is some kind of a mystery story, a detective story or movie.'

I resisted as best I could, clinging to my quietist, atmospheric psychological drama. I found myself wanting to quote Mallarmé ('the ideal is to *suggest*') in script meetings, never a good idea. But slowly, inexorably, the blood began to flow. First, Sir Danvers Carew, MP,

was elaborately murdered on camera, rather than described over the kitchen sink; then Mary was sent on an errand with Hyde, charged with securing organs from both an abattoir (streets foaming with blood) and a hospital operating-room; thirdly, Mrs Faraday, the brothel-keeper, met a gruesome end; next the obligatory transformation scene (which I had mischievously transferred to the end of the story, defying convention by showing Hyde turn into Jekyll instead of vice-versa) became an affair of deliquescing muscles and splitting flesh; finally (and here I drew the line, though the scene was, nevertheless, most ingeniously shot) Mary's appalling father had his throat cut by Hyde in a graveyard. Mr. Hyde, I kept protesting, is not a social worker; he murders for pleasure, not like some conscientious neighbourhood vigilante. But it was a losing battle. Finally, a suite was taken for me at the Lanesborough Hotel; I tried to point out that I actually lived in London, but to no avail: Ned and Nancy wanted me continually on hand so that I might be available at any moment to commit some new atrocity or kill off yet another hapless character in our story. I used to slip off home at the end of the day and return at dawn, and to my knowledge nobody ever noticed; but those days in that chintzy suite were the low-point of pre-production.

Unusually among directors, Stephen Frears likes and, if possible, insists upon the presence of the writer on the set; but by some malign destiny, having waited six years for a film to start after *Dangerous Liaisons*, I found that *Mary Reilly* was to begin shooting the same week as *Carrington*. Stephen was so put out by this, he kindly offered, if we postponed, to direct *Carrington* himself; but plans were too far advanced to make this a practical solution. So I was only able to visit Pinewood on Saturdays (whenever he had a six-day week and I didn't) and at the very end of shooting; and my contributions were more or less confined to a few rewrites faxed in the evenings from whichever location I found myself, as I trundled round the country.

Nobody (including myself) had ever been very happy with the script's ending; and when filming came to a rather abrupt end in August 1994 (because of the stars' schedules), it was on the understanding that we would all reconvene to deal with the problem. Unfortunately, it was six months before this could happen, which

gave time for me to be cajoled into providing no fewer than two dozen alternative endings, of which, I believe, three were eventually shot. The basic concept, namely that Hyde (like Valmont in *Dangerous Liaisons*) is destroyed by his one uncharacteristically decent impulse (in Valmont's case, falling in love; in Hyde's, refraining from his usual orgy of rape and murder), remained consistent, but it was given so many different variants I imagine we were all fairly bewildered by the time it came to choose one of them.

Eventually, one horrible spring day in 1995, I flew from Paris to London, met Stephen, flew on to Los Angeles and then, in the Sony jet, to some pink mall in San Diego, where large numbers of people in shorts failed to take very much interest in the travails of poor Mary. The scores, in short, were no better than average.

Over the next year, the struggle intensified. A second cut, two weeks later, seemed to be less good than the first (I told Stephen I thought this, resulting in our one moment of *froideur*) and indeed scored less well at the preview. The score continued to slide, as further cuts were shown. The studio begged Stephen to fire me and find a new writer (a plea I was by then enthusiastically seconding) but he remained adamant. Finally, a new editor was brought in over Stephen's head, a young and evidently lively presence, who re-syncopated Victorian Edinburgh (another minor source of confusion, since the script had been set in London) to the more restless and familiar rhythms of a music video. Sadly, this version scored the lowest of all, whereupon the studio threw its hands up and asked Stephen to return: which he agreed to do, on the condition that his next version would be regarded, previews or no previews, as the final cut. Something of the studio's annoyance at all this inevitably seeped out; and when the film finally received its perfunctory release in, I think, May 1996, it was patronised and dismissed by the American critics, a response parrotted in the customary way by their British counterparts.

I happened to be in Tahiti when the film was released, and went to see it, dubbed euphoniously into French, at the Papeete Odeon, where the Saturday night crowd was hushed and appreciative. And I remain extremely fond of *Mary Reilly*; and pleased that discerning judges like David Thomson and *Cahiers du Cinéma* have begun to speak up in its favour. It does perhaps seem unwise, in retrospect,

to spend forty-two million dollars on a story about two people in a house; and not necessarily an advantage to be able to fly the director and the writer on a day return on the Concorde to discuss three lines of dialogue. But the text printed here, although it does retain some features of that bloodless early draft, is sufficiently close to Stephen's final version (and its eventually selected ending) to act, I hope, as an endorsement of the finished film: which, at the very least, must be the only studio picture of recent years to contain a significant number of hidden quotations from Baudelaire.

A BRIGHT SHINING LIE

Blaming the Vietnamese

At the very end of the eighties, Allyn Stewart, who was at that time working at Warner Bros., sent me a vast doorstop of a book by Neil Sheehan, the former *New York Times* correspondent and unveiler of the Pentagon Papers. Despite its Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award, I may have opened *A Bright Shining Lie* a shade reluctantly; but I was almost immediately immersed in what was nothing less ambitious than an attempt (successful, I believe) to embody the complex catastrophe of the Vietnam War within the biography of a single untypical, indeed remarkable American, Lt. Col. John Paul Vann. For sixteen years, ever since attending Vann's dramatically polarised funeral, Mr Sheehan had been grappling with a mountain of confusing and often contradictory material, in the ill-lit basement of his Washington home: and the result, in many people's opinion, was *the* book of America's disastrous adventure in Vietnam.

Vann arrived in Vietnam early on, as one of President Kennedy's 1962 batch of advisers; he died in a helicopter crash ten years later, by which time he was, effectively, the only civilian general in American military history. Most unusually among Americans, he not only understood the Vietnamese, but actually loved them; which, of course, put him in a perfect position to yield finally to an irresistible temptation: which was to betray them. As I read on with growing excitement, I could see that the subject offered a matchless opportunity to do something which no previous Vietnam film,

however admirable, had managed to achieve: namely, to give an account of that brutal and unnecessary conflict, which did not, either directly or by implication, lay the blame for the war squarely on the shoulders of the Vietnamese.

It took about a year of enjoyably absorbing research and quarrying to carve out the unwieldy shape of a bulky first draft. The usual conversations then ensued with various Warner Bros. executives; with the producers, Lois Bonfiglio and Jane Fonda, whose then husband, Ted Turner, memorably attended one of our discussions, on the grounds that he'd never been at a script meeting before; and, most usefully for me, with Neil Sheehan. My greatest anxiety had been writing dialogue for a largely American cast of characters and I had spent inordinate amounts of time studying the turns of phrase of the interviewees on the sackful of tapes Neil Sheehan had kindly handed over to me, which also included a number of lectures delivered to Vietnam rookies in the harsh, clipped tones of Vann himself: time well spent, it seemed, since no one ever said a word about the language, confining themselves instead to unfathomable (at least, to me) subjects, such as whether or not the character of Vann was too unsympathetic to be acceptable to this or that celebrated actor.

Clearly what was needed at this juncture was a director: and I was delighted when the choice adventurously fell on Phil Joanou, still in his twenties, whose new film, *State of Grace*, about a policeman infiltrating a Hell's Kitchen gang, took a familiar subject and made it into something extraordinary and fresh. He turned out to be extremely lucid and easy to work with and we hacked away at the shapeless heap of material, working in Los Angeles, in Atlanta (where Phil was shooting a U2 video) and in New York, until we had the version of the screenplay printed here, with which everybody seemed reasonably pleased.

That August I was in Paris, enjoying the absence of Parisians, when I received a call from Lucy Fisher of Warner Bros. She said she had good news. This turned out to be that Oliver Stone had passed through the office, picked up the script and liked it enough to say he would direct it. 'What are the ethics of this?' I remember stupidly saying, at which Lucy was obliged patiently to explain certain obvious realities. 'At least your film will get made', she ended by saying.

A few months later I was waiting in the Santa Monica offices of Oliver Stone while he finished up a conference call. I couldn't help noticing that one wall was lined with enormous cartoons, labelled, I saw as I drifted irresistibly towards them, 'NVA boots' or 'ARVN helmets'. Obviously I'd come to the right shop. Oliver, when he appeared, though a little *distrait* (he was editing two films simultaneously, *Heaven and Earth* and *Natural Born Killers*), was admirably clear and straightforward: his notes basically consisted of a number of scenes he liked in the book which I'd left out in the screenplay. I said I thought the length of the script was already probably up around three hours: to which he replied I was to let him worry about that. All this seemed fair enough: the only point at which I balked somewhat was when he asked for a voice-over narration; it seemed to me that Vann was nothing if not entirely unself-conscious. Then pick someone else to narrate, he said. I could never work this out and eventually rather impudently suggested he write the narration himself.

The fact of the matter, of course, is that Oliver never made the film. The financial failure of *Heaven and Earth* (a very interesting film about culture shock which, to be fair, certainly didn't blame the Vietnamese) and the added blow that Tom Cruise respectfully declined the role of Vann, discouraged him and caused him to back away; whereupon, after a long silence, Warner Bros. decided to hand the whole project over to HBO, which they had recently acquired, to make a Cable TV movie.

This is a brief account: but I'd now been involved in the material for more than five years and found myself writing to Jane Fonda as follows:

> . . . while I certainly have nothing against made-for-TV films, having perpetrated a good many of them myself in the past, I can't help feeling that the *scale* of our enterprise is not really one which would lend itself very comfortably to a TV format.
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> I've always thought that the essential line of our story . . . is uniquely equipped to illuminate the whole sorry business (of the war) from both an American and (which is important, because so rarely considered) a Vietnamese perspective; it's the trajectory of *Lawrence of Arabia*, and I see no reason why it

shouldn't be possible to make a film of equal size and importance, with the added advantage that it deals with a series of events embedded in the public consciousness . . .

The year 2000 is the twenty-fifth anniversary of the end of the war: wouldn't that be a good moment to bring out an ambitious film . . . which would deal distinctively with one of the central turning-points in American history? So many treatments of the subject in the past have, whatever their virtues, been narrowly nationalistic; but it seems to me that Vann, with all his flaws and complexities a genuine tragic hero, illustrates both the conduct of the war and the reasons for its inevitable failure . . .

I'm well aware that these decisions are made for hard-headed, pragmatic reasons which are really none of my business: but of all the many and various projects I've worked on, none has ever engaged me as passionately or seemed as worthwhile (and potentially universal). So I hope you'll forgive me for sending out the deathbed appeal.

I can't say I really expected an answer; and none came. Ron Hutchinson, to my pleasant surprise, made an astute and careful compression of the script for HBO; at which point the whole project took the kind of turn these things so often do: an entirely new script was written (by the director) in a matter of weeks. Sometimes contractual subtleties make it impossible to take one's name off a script: but, in this case, in an unusual act of clemency, the Writers' Guild of America did it for me. And the finished film did at least find one intriguing variant from the norm: it blamed the South Vietnamese.

THE CUSTOM OF THE COUNTRY

Girl Behaving Badly

I was sent Edith Wharton's great novel by two New York producers, Joan Kramer and David Heeley; and immediately fell in love with it. Wharton's greatest success, achieving sales which made Henry James blanch with envy, it is one of those rare masterpieces (like *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*) which deals with the run-up

to a pivotal moment in history (in this case, the turn of the twentieth century, when America decided to slough off its ill-founded belief in European moral and cultural superiority and forge its own brand of world leadership) by telling a story of attractive people (in this case, a spectacularly beautiful young woman) exploiting the contradictions of an imploding social system by behaving very badly. This is a novel Margaret Mitchell must have studied with some care before sitting down to write *Gone with the Wind*; and, as a supreme social comedy, I felt it was far more readily dramatisable than some of Wharton's more tragic and subtly gradated pieces.

What was needed was obviously the precisely correct actress to play the magnificently named Undine Spragg; and so I suggested that we send the novel to Michelle Pfeiffer. It took her some time to read it, but when she did, she responded with great enthusiasm and joined us as a producer, together with her partner Kate Guinzberg. And in 1992, the year after *Mary Reilly*, the first draft was written.

Timing was against us: while we were searching for a director, Michelle was offered another Wharton project, the very different *Age of Innocence*, directed by Martin Scorsese. In my view, the result was a marvellously textured and beautifully acted film; but it was far from profitable; and the studio (once again, it was Sony) wavered. The success, the following year, of *Sense and Sensibility* briefly renewed their faith in period pictures; but then the relative failure (I speak in purely commercial terms) of Jane Campion's *Portrait of a Lady* brought back all their feelings of insecurity: and at around this time, Michelle, though remaining with us as an executive producer, tactfully withdrew from the role of Undine; and we slid back into what is often described as development hell, but which more closely resembles the lulling waters of the Bermuda Triangle.

I shall leave it there: it is a constitutional requirement in this area of my profession that one remains unreasonably but permanently crazed with optimism; and it is in this spirit that I venture to hope that one day, sooner or later, I shall be able to make this film.

CHRISTOPHER HAMPTON