

Bob Sherrin/ INTERVIEW WITH ESTA SPALDING

BS You mentioned that there was an instinctual response on your part to *Falling Angels* — and with you and Scott Smith, the director, in talking about how you might approach the screenplay. Can you give me a sense of what that instinct was?

ES We both had responded to particular visual elements in the book. We were talking about it in terms of films we'd seen, adaptations we both loved that not many other people loved. We really responded to *Jesus's Son*, an adaptation of Denis Johnson's novella, and our response to *Falling Angels* was that it should follow a chapter-like approach and be Lou's story, Lou being the central character. That approach couldn't be more different from what we ended up doing. But I think the important thing about that first meeting is not what we thought we were going to do — because we were both just starting out. What mattered was that we really enjoyed each other's ideas and way of approaching the adaptation and talking about character.

BS That seems to be a key difference between screenwriting and just about any other genre — the element of collaboration. I guess in some cases screenwriters write and then the collaboration goes further, but in this case it's obvious that the collaboration was there right from the start.

ES I think it's a different thing if you're writing an original screenplay; but in adaptation work where you're responding to something that's already there and your take on something that's already there, it can be more collaborative from the beginning. It can happen in fiction writing. There's that stage in novel writing where you bring an editor into the collaboration to help you figure out what is working, what in your vision you

are and aren't articulating. But it's never as completely as collaborative screenwriting is.

BS There are obviously things in *Falling Angels* that aren't in the screenplay. In my reading of the book first and then the screenplay what struck me is the problem of deciding: how do I tell this whole story or can I tell the full story? What do I shed?

ES Yeah, unless you are going to do a television miniseries, unless you're going to do eight hours of the thing. A fellow screenwriter once said: you have to find the short story in the novel. Find the kernel of the thing. Film says a lot just with the visual and the gestural, but a novel needs language and tone for that. I guess they really have two very different vocabularies. It's really hard I think to translate a novel's tone, its voice, onto the screen. There isn't really an equivalent of voice on screen. Gowdy's book *Falling Angels* is so dark but funny. How do you make something really, really dark not translate into just heartbreak and pathos? One of the real challenges with this adaptation was to make it funny. I don't know if I succeeded. I think the humour's something we can push even more as we begin working with actors.

BS My experience in reading the script is that it is funny. But back to a related point that you were making: my word for it is narrator. Gowdy creates the voice for her book, an intelligence that shapes what we see and hear and even visualize. And obviously in a good film that happens too, this notion of writing or creating a document that's a kind of plan I suppose, but it's bedded almost entirely in dialogue.

ES I would totally disagree with you about it being bedded in dialogue. The dialogue is sometimes, I hope, actually sleight-of-hand. The gesture and the visuals reveal who the characters really are and what they feel. In the book, the three sisters are unconscious of their own motives. For instance, Lou believes herself to be incredibly fierce, and we see her as being

completely vulnerable. So how do you have this character who is always angry, always cynical, and reveal her to be a vulnerable character? The way it happens in the script is a conflict between what's spoken and what's unspoken. But you're right, it's very hard to create a narrative tone in a screenplay. I think that's why so many adaptations fall back on voiceover. And it was the one thing Barbara Gowdy said. She took me aside and said, "I don't care what you include. I don't care if any of the plot that happens in the book happens in the movie. All I care about is that the characters are true to the characters and that there is no voiceover." Oh God, no voiceover. That takes away one of your essential tools of adaptation. But I think that challenge of not using voiceover has forced me to be even more clear in the visual and gestural world of the characters. Because they don't do what, for instance, Christina Ricci's character does in *The Opposite of Sex* which is tell you what she's thinking all the time in ironic counterpoint to what you're seeing. There's a little bit of voiceover in the draft that you read, but now even that's gone.

BS Some of the visuals in the draft could be considered as a kind of dialogue. I'm wondering if that's something you see yourself, whether those gestures are the unheard part of the script.

ES It is crucial to use gesture in creating a screenplay, rather than ascribe motives to character. The easy thing to do is to say, "She says this angrily because she feels such and such." To write in the screenplay the emotion of the character and the sort of reasoning behind the emotion. Someone reading the script will understand the characters in the scene. But the litmus test is if that scene is shot, can the audience who doesn't have "because she feels such and such" there in the script actually arrive at the understanding of what the character is doing and why? Because you want the audience to be aware of what the character's not aware of, right? So it's imperative to find active and gestural ways, and it's imperative whether you're working in adaptation or any kind of screenwriting to find active gestural ways to embody the emotional states of the characters. For me that was

the huge challenge of this movie because so much of the energy and anger in the novel is carried in the voice of the novel, and not in what the characters actually do. Lou's doing a lot of raging in her head and she can do that in a novel and it's very funny. But in the film she has to actually throw herself in front of Tom's truck in order for us to understand the self-destructive nature of her love for him. That was the really tricky thing, to get these emotional states to become active states.

BS Is it a fair perception on my part that this kind of shift to the visual is absolutely paramount? You talk about gesture — however it's achieved it's visual.

ES That's the thing that I find people don't understand about screenwriting. When you ask them about it they really do think "Oh, that book is so full of great lines." But if all Lou and her sisters do is sit around a table and talk about how mad they are at their dad, we're going to stay interested in them for about five minutes. They never voice things to each other — that's the other thing, this family never actually voices true things to each other. So they have to act it out. How do they do that? How do we know that Norma is obsessed with her dead brother? In the book she thinks about him. In the screenplay, well, she builds a shrine to him. That becomes an active thing.

BS In the novel the characters are in some ways concealed. Also, they have concealed things that are about to be revealed, and Gowdy sets you up in various ways for that revelation. But I noticed in the script that visual set-ups exist throughout, and only at the very end do I realize that this is the moment where all these things pop together on an image and a line that Lou speaks about how far the throw has to be.

ES One of the things that happened in the course of the adaptation is that we shifted the structure of the book. The book begins with us knowing that this woman Mary threw her baby off of Niagara Falls. We learn this when the sisters find a newspaper

clipping. But we wanted there to be mystery about why this baby was haunting this family. We didn't want people to know at the beginning. There was a draft that opened with the scene of Mary at the Falls. You didn't know if she had thrown the baby or dropped it, but you knew that the baby had gone over. We lost that because we thought it's actually a lovely mystery: What are these people so caught up about? What is it that they're so scared of talking about? Now we discover two-thirds of the way through the screenplay that Lou and Norma know this about their mother and discovered this clipping when they were kids; that's what a lot of the rage and anxiety in this family is about. It's about infanticide. Did our mother throw the baby or not? In the book all three of the sisters find the clipping, but in the movie, Sandy, the youngest, is oblivious. We use Sandy's discovery of her mother's crime as a way to propel all three of the sisters towards the Falls at the end of the movie. So it's really structured differently. The movie takes place in the last year of the mother's life and the book takes place over a 10 year period.

One of the things that people love about this book, that they invariably say to me when they hear I'm working on it is, "Oh my God, that scene in the bomb shelter is so incredible." There is this set piece in the middle of the book, in the first third of the book, a series of scenes, a short story really which takes place in the bomb shelter. A bunch of little girls stuck in a bomb shelter with their father who won't let them out and their mother who's drinking herself to death. This was one of the big questions in approaching the adaptation: how to treat the material in the bomb shelter. And there were drafts which didn't include anything in the bomb shelter — in the past, in flashbacks, or anything. We just left it out because what happens in there is so altogether complicated that if you walk in, you're in there for half an hour of a 90 minute film. You're stuck with child-actors who won't be the same actors as the teenage sisters, and you're with them for far too long. That's what the movie becomes. What we finally settled on, and this is one of the great things in terms of how collaboration works: in a conversation between Robin (the producer) and Scott (the director) and I, we decided to

make the culmination of this horrible time in the bomb shelter be Lou and Norma's discovery of the newspaper clipping. Suddenly the bomb shelter isn't just this horrible thing that happens in the past, but it is that moment when the family is trapped together and truths come out. So, putting together the discovery of clipping and the bomb shelter means the bomb shelter serves a purpose in the screenplay.

BS It becomes Lou's refuge. She's rejected by her father. As he says, "It's mine. Get out of here." But it's also a thing underground, it's the thing buried.

ES It's the buried thing, it's the wound. I really see this father as a man who wants so badly to do right and is so wrong-headed in how he goes about it. He wants to protect the family, so he builds a bomb shelter, and he ends up totally fucking them up. He couldn't be more wrong in his approach but in general his gesture is quite generous. It's the gesture of a boy, of a child who is not really thinking.

BS The other thing I particularly noted in the difference between the book and the adaptation is that the father's womanizing disappears, and the reader or the viewer has to begin to think about his activities more around what he does in the house because we see him mainly inside. An interesting character that I look forward to seeing on the screen because I know there's so much work there for an actor.

ES It's interesting, that question of what you can do with the characters in a novel that you can't do in a film. I think it's very similar to that idea of finding the short story in the novel. In the sense that in the book there's the complexity and the time to experience Jim Field as a womanizer. You still find him in many ways sympathetic. But if we spend time on developing him as a womanizer — in the film — that's time we don't spend developing his relationship to his family. In a movie, there's not enough room for every character to have all those different

shades. Also I felt very strongly that if we saw him with another woman, it had to be from the girls' point of view because the film really is only what the girls see. There's a few moments of Mary alone, a few moments of Jim alone, but really we need time to feel the girls' point of view and particularly to feel that it is Lou's point of view. At the end, I think that Lou and Norma have taken the wheel of the car and are driving things and are saying to their father, "We can be a family but it's going to be on new terms."

BS In the book the car's used as a way to manipulate someone, undermine her as a person, yet it's also the vehicle of their redemption, because it is part of that redemptive gesture.

ES That's another case where in the book Jim really does try to molest Norma, comes on to her, has growing sexual feelings for her. In the film it felt stronger to me as a piece if we saw Jim as somebody so desperate for some kind of connection that he tries to connect inappropriately with his daughter. It's a reiteration of that sense in which he was always trying to trying to build things — build the home, build the bombshelter — but in the process of he ends up kicking them out and beating them up.

I read an interview with Sue Swan about the adaptation of *The Wives of Bath*, and she said, "Film, you don't need the extremes because you're watching something visually." If this guy was hitting his kids as much in the film as he does in the book, we would never be able to empathize with him. So we have to cut back on that in order to make him a character that draws any kind of empathy.

I've heard Barbara Gowdy talk about the book, about what war does to men and what men do to women as a result. She really feels it's a book that came out of World War II. But we don't have that span of time, so one way to embed war into the screenplay was to set it in 1969, in the later part of what's in the book, and to include the world of the Vietnam War a bit more. One of the things I did was to make Tom an American instead of an Englishman. This is the guy that Lou falls in love with. He

becomes an emblem of rebellion and resistance and the kind of radical response to the father from the 50s that came out of WW II. I made Tom an American who drives this milk truck covered with anti-war slogans — one of the slogans on his truck is “make love not war”. It sounds so clichéd, but I keep thinking that that’s the one thing that Lou needs to learn. And it’s the thing maybe she begins to come to learn by the end of the film. There’s something about the screenplay, reducing the characters to simple phrases, that becomes complicated in the grammar of the screenplay, but, it can be helpful actually.

BS And the grammar of the screenplay gets played out on the screen. I was going to ask you about the restrictions on the screenplay. In terms of time, money, budget, all that. Is that how you and your collaborators approached the script, or is that just part of the background?

ES Of course every page costs money. So the longer the thing is, the bigger the budget’s going to be. Plus the reality is that people don’t want to sit through very long movies. Unless its *Lawrence of Arabia* or *The English Patient* or something epic. But here, we’re talking about a family drama. One thing I find interesting, and Walter Murch, the editor, talked about this. Movies of a single point of view tend to have to be shorter. Movies with multiple points of view can be longer. The audience has more patience when they’re looking through the eyes of different characters. *Falling Angels* is a movie with multiple points of view, so we’ve got a bit more time to play with — 2 hours, somewhere between 90 and 120 pages. *Falling Angels* comes in at about 108 pages. It would be nice if we could lose ten pages of it. And I’m sure we will, but we can’t see yet what those pages are.

BS So part of the challenge and opportunity as the process continues still involves saying, “Okay, here we’ve got a novel, that in at least one edition is 200 pages long, and we’re going to operate at about 100 pages ourselves. What do we do?”

ES Where do we cut, what do we lose. And my training in television actually has been really good for that. When I worked as a writer on *Da Vinci's*, we were shooting 13 episodes a year, so we were shooting beginning of July through beginning of November, and every seven working days we had to have another script. The scripts were going into production for the week before they started shooting, and you would've written this script that was all about somebody throwing himself off the Burrard bridge. Then you get the call two days before you're supposed to shoot: oh, we can't get the Burrard Bridge. In fact, we can't get any bridge. That didn't actually happen, but that kind of thing does, and you'd say, "Okay, this is now a story about a man who stubs his toe," and you had to come up with whatever the next thing was and adapt to that. I loved that part of television, loved the adrenaline of that kind of challenge. It takes the same mental gymnastics as doing a crossword puzzle: these things have to be put together and you've got these letters here. So maybe if we shifted this thing on page 2 over here and put this scene in the office. You were always figuring out imaginative ways to do things. Or even just the restrictions on what you could see in terms of violence. You know you want to make something that's really scary, but it has to be achieved totally through what you suggest imaginatively, not through what is actually seen. I found that a wonderful challenge. I say this now, of course, but I'm sure I'll be pulling my hair out if I'm ever told we can't shoot at Niagara Falls. I can't see us saying, "Well, we'll build in the studio."

BS That's the other — advantage isn't the word — of a screenplay or a visual medium: what's embedded in its surface. Sometimes I think, rightly or wrongly, of the camera as a kind of narrator or the visual presence of the film as a narrator — its tone or voice. Because so much can be done with light and so much can be done with single characters.

ES If there is an equivalent to the voice in a novel, it's the director's writing and camerawork, the visual sensibility of film. It's a visual

voice, you experience it visually. Film works and sustains itself because there's a visual language and grammar created. It tells you what kind of tale it is.

BS This seems a rare opportunity, that you as a writer will likely, if the project goes ahead, find yourself right down there on the sound stage, on set.

ES I think it happens a lot in Canadian film. For instance, Noel Baker is the wonderful screenwriter who wrote the screenplay of *Hard Core Logo*. He has a whole book about that project. Every day he was on set, writing and rewriting dialogue. I do think that's more the norm in Canadian film. As I was immersing myself in the adaptation, I was also at work on a book of poetry and I was also finishing up a collaborative novel that came out this year. And I realized, because I was juggling these three different forms, that in fact poetry and screenwriting are much closer to each other than novel writing. Perhaps that's what's so difficult about adaptation: poetry and screenwriting have a similar grammar; I find fiction writing really difficult. I don't sit down at my computer with the same joy. You have to describe everything on every wall in fiction, find that original voice in tone—you know, your character walks into a room with a coffee cup and she has to do something with it. And you have to try to find an interesting way to say he-said she-said; there are so few routes you can take. What I love about screenwriting is that you cut into a scene really late, you get out of it as early as you want, you get the bare bones. It really is dreamlike, a kind of fantasy. Life doesn't take place at all like it does in the movies, cutting in and cutting out, leaps, going back in time, going forward, dream states. Film can be so inventive and strange. This is so much like poetry, except that in poetry you're driven by language rather than by action.

BS My own experience in the screenplay form and dramatic stage form is finding myself right down there on every line weighing each word, wanting to make it quick, to the point, trying to find

the voice of the character that's speaking, but realizing, my God, the economy here is really tight. Which is really wonderful because there's all this open space. I was thinking also about your long poem *Anchoress*, which is almost a novel.

ES I've always thought of it as a slideshow. These moments between the sisters and this boyfriend who becomes the lover of both of them, and you see visual moments between them. Actually, it's much more like a screenplay than it is like a novel. Because it sort of leaps from one moment to something six months later then to something in the past .

BS It's very visual, too, which is another thing that struck me about the screenplay. Even though I used the word dialogue, I wasn't reading it as dialogue. I was feeling the animation of these individuals because the direction in a sense has already been provided.

ES Dialogue is really difficult. I don't have a great ear for how people talk, for phrasing, the way a teenager talks. I'd love to run the dialogue past Barbara Gowdy because she does have an extraordinary ear. She remembers exactly how she said things: "Well no, in 1970 we would've said this, but in 1968 we'd have said this." So yeah, it's funny to be a screenwriter with a kind of dead ear. Maybe that's why I turned to adaptations —because you have something to draw on from the book in terms of dialogue.

BS Sometimes when I read a screenplay, I flip through it very quickly and get the drift, but the more I listen, the more I watch, and as I listened I thought this script has an interesting verbal and visual pace to it.

ES One thing I've been really trying to train myself to do is watch the screenplay in my head as I'm writing it. It's best to do this when I'm revising. When I'm writing it's okay because I'm writing and the images in my head are moving the story forward,

but when I'm revising, I have to actually make myself think of it as a movie playing in my head, instead of thinking of it as a document on a page. It doesn't matter whether the script is reading well or not. Screenplays aren't written to be read. It has to play well in the movie of my brain. I think the very best directors take what's on the page and see it as a movie in their heads, and they say, "You know, this thing isn't working, this dynamic is wonky." I tend to look at the rhythms on the page. It's probably why I will never be a director. Because I find it quite difficult to make the script stand up in three dimensions. I always think that the best screenplays have a subterranean river flowing through, and that subterranean river has the real information about the characters and what they're going through. The real story should be totally subterranean, and when you're writing the story you can't put any of that on the page. So it's like you're digging these underground canals which lead the river of the story. If you're going to move something from one place to another it better fit into that canal structure and lead the water under the surface of the thing in the right way. It's very strange work, but in the best films you walk away thinking, "He said that but that's not what he meant, what he meant was this." And you know what he meant because of that underground river. Because what's on the surface isn't what's underneath.