Adaptation for the Screen

In 2000 the director Fred Schepisi brought together a remarkable cast of stars to make a film of *Last Orders*, premiered at the London Film Festival in 2001. Graham Swift looks back on the process.

Filming Again, With Fred: Canterbury Cathedral, 2000

One morning in the late autumn of 2000 I walked through the gateway that leads to Canterbury Cathedral, to be greeted by a terse little notice: 'The Cathedral is closed today.' Several other members of the public who'd unluckily chosen this day to take a look round the cathedral were staring at the notice in puzzlement and disappointment. Weren't churches, let alone cathedrals, always supposed to be open? What calamity or exceptional ecclesiastical event could have caused Canterbury Cathedral to shut its doors?

Looking further along the Cathedral Yard, they would have seen the concentration of trucks, trailers, twisting cables and generators that mark the presence of a film crew. I felt I should apologize to the thwarted tourists. In a sense, it was all my fault. This was roughly halfway through the eight-week shooting of the film of *Last Orders* and one of the more graphic instances of the movie world's powers of physical annexation.

A few years before, I'd walked through that same gateway with the aim of just looking around Canterbury Cathedral myself, though I wasn't, if no one would have known it, an entirely casual visitor. I'd wanted to see if the scenes set in Canterbury Cathedral in the novel I was then writing—I had a clear idea of these scenes in my

head—'worked' in actual practice. Whether, for example, some characters standing by the tomb of the Black Prince, east of the choir, would in fact be able to see another character seated in another part of the church.

I'm a reluctant, illogical and rather foolhardy researcher. I rely on guesswork, imagination or sheer wishful thinking in order to write the thing first, then check it up later. Sometimes this can result in some challenging reversals of what I'd envisaged. With my novel almost completed, I'd been spending some time on this checking-up; and Canterbury made a nice day out. It never occurred to me as I confirmed the positions and sight-lines of my characters that I was doing exactly the same thing as a film director might do to construct a scene—or, indeed, that *Last Orders* would ever be filmed. Canterbury Cathedral was the last place you could imagine being turned into a film set.

For a novelist, setting a scene in Canterbury Cathedral is nothing. It requires no special audacity and, of course, affects the material world not one bit. Film-making logistics are quite different. To have your book turned into a film is to undergo a weird process of being taken literally. Your unpresuming mental choices are, sometimes quite disarmingly, flung back at you. So, you wanted Canterbury Cathedral, did you?

It's not just that novels happen inside the skull and films don't. 'Mental choices' is itself an all-too-finite term. In my novel four men transport the ashes of a fifth man from South London to Margate to observe the dead man's mysterious last wish. This is the premise for what I always knew would be a complicated journey, in time and memory as well as space. I felt the book would be rife with detours, but I really didn't know what all the detours would be. The Canterbury chapters occur because, late in the journey, one of the characters suggests, as a joke, that as there have been so many detours already, they may as well take the ashes round Canterbury Cathedral too. Yet the joke gets acted on, with serious as well as comic effect.

As with the character, so with the author. The Canterbury scenes were for me too, once, just a quirk, a whim, a tempting possibility in my head. All novelists know these little flickers that can lead on to something bigger. I followed my whim. But now here I was outside Canterbury Cathedral, which they'd closed, as it were, specially for me. It was the first time, I'd already learnt, that a crew had been allowed inside to shoot scenes for a feature film. The Dean, if not the Archbishop, had had to read my novel and had judged that the scenes in the cathedral were integral to the story. Integral? Well, of course they were *now*.

Films begin more tangibly than novels, if still very tenuously. Some three years before they closed Canterbury Cathedral I'd been approached by a producer working with the Australian director Fred Schepisi, who was apparently eager to film my novel. This was not the only approach to make the film around this time, but eventually I went with Fred.

I was impressed by his distinguished career (*A Cry in the Dark*, *Plenty*, *Six Degrees of Separation*), even more impressed, when I met him, by his genuine respect for writers, not a common trait among film directors. There were also the winning reserves of irreverent Aussie humour. The novelist Tom Keneally, with whom Fred had worked, once described him to me as 'one of the wild men of Australia'. So not only was the first-ever shooting of a feature film taking place inside Canterbury Cathedral, but it was being done by a wild man of Australia.

Waterland had been filmed by an American director and (though the script was by a British writer) large parts of the book had been unfortunately transposed to the States. Approving an Australian director now for *Last Orders* might have seemed an ill-advised and perverse move. But there was no fear that Fred was going to shift my novel to New South Wales. In fact, he kept scrupulously to its topography, in some cases literally to the square yard.

Simon Mein

Graham Swift and Fred Schepisi in Peckham, 2000.

Moreover, Australian humour may have its own distinct tang, but it's not so vastly different from British humour, from the underdog humour of the characters in my book. Between the Australians and the Brits there may be a regular, chafing mutual suspicion—it's part of the humour—but there's also a great deal of mutual recognition. By the time I met Fred I'd been to Australia a number of times. I admit to a warm affection for the place. So my approval was in part a sentimental vote.

The key difference from *Waterland* was that Stephen Gyllenhaal was brought in at the last minute to make that film, while the wish to make *Last Orders* came directly from Fred. But, for the sentimental record, there is an Antipodean touch to the novel itself. One of the characters has a wish, a fantasy, of flying to Australia. We never quite know if it's going to be fulfilled. So a genuine Australian link exists, and it's one that's alluded to slyly and deftly by Fred in the opening sequence of the film.

All other factors apart, I felt when I first met Fred that, if he made the film, some fun and frank sharing of minds might be had along the way. They were. Among

my best memories of the filming are the many conversations I had with him in which we both seemed to acknowledge that, different as film directors and novelists are, our abiding obsession was the same: the mysteries of how best to tell a story, of how best to impart information and emotion. These conversations brought back the ones I'd had with Stephen Gyllenhaal at Twickenham Studios years before, but a crucial difference was that Fred had written the script, so I'd got to know him during that process, long before the cameras rolled and indeed before anyone, Fred included, knew whether they ever would.

The scriptwriting was originally offered to me, but I said no, quickly enough. I'm not a screenwriter, and there seemed to me to be benefits in keeping the creative vision all inside one head. That said, Fred was obligingly open to suggestions and I couldn't help being a little possessive. I had a constant look-in on his drafts and was irritatingly free with comments and notes. Fred would thank me for them and usually say: 'Some of them I liked—some of them' (strong Australian cadence) 'I didn't.'

I didn't talk that much with him during actual shooting. Aware of the pressures he was under, I tried to keep out of his way. I wouldn't be a film director for the world—it's colossally stressful. Nonetheless, I'd often feel that I was the only one on set thinking like he was. I shared his anxiety—his baby was also my baby—and I knew that while everyone else had a particular job to do, Fred was the only one who had to keep the whole edifice in his head. It's exactly the same, without the trucks, trailers and scores of attendant people, when you write a novel.

Much more important, in any case, than my rapport with Fred was his with the actors. The film's wonderful cast (on a hardly lavish budget) was largely down to him. It was clear to me at an early stage that actors *wanted* to work with him. I could never have asked Helen Mirren to play a pensioner. On the dream cast-list, there'd simply

been no one else for the part of Jack, the butcher, but Michael Caine. Fred's story, here, was that at the first approach Caine had turned down the role on the basis that he wasn't ready to play an old codger. At the second, he'd agreed, saying he'd always known that one day he'd end up playing his father. (Caine's father had been a Billingsgate porter and, like the novel's Jack, had died in St Thomas's Hospital.)

That the cast would all pull together became clear, one morning in Soho, at the first read-through of the script, when the stars met a set of junior actors who would play their younger selves in the film's many flashbacks. One might have thought that, while the juniors could be forgiven for being overawed, the veteran stars would have gathered for a read-through without a hint of trepidation. But I was given a trenchant, whispered insight into the dynamics of such occasions by the drily knowing Bill Nighy, on hand just for the day to read various as yet uncast parts: 'They're all nervous as shit. They're all watching each other.' The read-through was a great success.

In the weeks that followed I never saw anyone being a prima donna, never witnessed a tantrum, never heard a lofty put-down. 'Mucking in' would be the appropriate phrase, often suiting the physical conditions (one of the wettest autumns on record turned the sets to farmyard quags) as well as the cheerfully scabrous off-camera repartee. Film-making is a profoundly unglamorous activity—slow, repetitive, uncomfortable—and on a film set even stars forgo glamour and become ordinary people getting on with a job. That said, during the shooting no less than two members of the cast were knighted—or knew they were going to be. Sir Michael and Sir Tom.

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And they closed Canterbury Cathedral just for us.

The author's role in it all defies definition—partly because in truth you have no role, *your* work is done.

You are vital to the whole enterprise (the megalomaniac inside you can say: all this is happening because of *me*) yet you are also redundant. On set you feel like a visiting ghost, never quite sure if you're there to maintain some regal scrutiny or just to gawp.

The memories you retain also have an uncanny, larger-than-life quality, pitched between the real and the fabricated. Film-making may be tedious, but at its heart is a dressing-up joy, and while the thrill in the cinema is of seeing something made to look real, the delight during the making is of watching the world turn into fiction. On my first visit to the derelict factory in Peckham used as office and studio (Peckham International Screen Studios, or PISS, as some of the crew called it) they were shooting a scene set in a Cairo brothel and the place was crawling with prostitutes. There was talk of bringing a camel to Peckham. Less colourfully, I went several times to a pub (also derelict) in Clapham that served as the novel's Coach and Horses in Bermondsey, so that it became like popping into some genuine local – except that I had the privilege of seeing the place undergo extraordinary overnight historical changes, from the 1940s right through to the 1980s.

Perhaps most uncanny of all is the memory of standing at the end of a rainswept and freezing Margate Pier for the final ash-throwing scene. Once again, as with Canterbury Cathedral, I was present at a real and precise place (and I'd been here before too, to check out the ash-throwing possibilities) that was at the same time a scene in a film and a place in a book, though it had all been once just a notion in my brain. Not the real place, of course; that existed. Though even here, there was an uncanny twist.

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I can confess now, with reference to my lax methods of research, that when I conceived the scene while writing the book

I'd never been to Margate. I'd pictured 'Margate Pier' like any other seaside pier—a boardwalked affair on iron struts with white filigree structures on top—not knowing at all that the real Margate Pier, as in finished book and film, is just a rough, grim harbour wall. Margate had never had a 'pier' in the stereotypical sense, though it had had something that looked like it, destroyed by a storm in the 1970s, called the Jetty.

Fortunately, I managed to turn this novel-confounding discovery to eventual advantage. The Jetty–Pier confusion becomes a confusion (or a complication in their memories) that the characters themselves share. It adds, I hope, to the tissue of the novel rather than wrecking it. But as I stood on the very real and very wet Margate Pier I had the fleeting, private thought that the scene I was now 'in' was not, in fact, as I'd once, erroneously, pictured it. I'd arrived here at Margate Pier by my own novel-writing detour.

But there was more than one personal detour involved on that pier. When I'd gone in the 1960s to see David Hemmings in *Blowup*, I could never have imagined he'd one day star in a film of a book of mine, but even less could I have imagined that I'd one day find myself talking to him at the end of a miserably exposed harbour wall. Life and the imagination stage some strange surprises. It was while we chatted at the end of Margate Pier that he told me that his own career had really begun, a long time before, in Margate, or rather in Cliftonville, just next door. In those days he'd been a boy singer, but then his voice had broken and he'd gone into acting instead.

As we talked, the rain (it was December) sluiced down. I was in full waterproof gear while David was in the ordinary clothes required by his part, and completely soaked. He scorned going into the tent-like structure, with a heater inside, reserved for the actors when they weren't required—claiming that this only made you feel colder when you came out and it took you 'out' of your part. He'd also, I'd noticed, been taking a keen and curious interest, between takes, in the seagulls that were

swooping around, sometimes flapping his arms towards them as if offering them something. He had to remind me that in my book when the ashes are thrown, some seagulls momentarily dive towards them, imagining they might be food. He was trying to get the seagulls to perform *their* part.

It was very strange to be talking to the former boy singer and star of *Blowup* at a place on his own personal map that had brought him full circle. It would have been even more eerily, and sadly, strange if I'd known that after the acting renaissance he was enjoying at the time—he'd recently been seen in *Gladiator*— this would effectively be David's last big-screen role.

The seagulls never quite obliged in being faithful to the book, but the actors obliged to the hilt. Another Margate-Pier memory that will stay with me is of seeing, after one of the last takes, all four actors, Hemmings, Courtenay, Hoskins and Winstone, all thoroughly drenched but high on the moment, huddle round the monitor to watch the replay. Without their knowing it, their huddling simply carried on their on-screen grouping. The monitor might have been the jar of ashes. 'It's a blinder!' they yelled through the lashing rain and their chattering teeth. 'It's a blinder!'

To come back to that (dry) day in Canterbury. During breaks in shooting we were put in the remarkable situation of being able to wander freely round the otherwise empty cathedral as no regular visitor can. Film sets hardly come grander and, lit by a low November sun, there was the technicolour glamour of the stained glass. On one of my moochings, I looked across and saw Bob Hoskins, just mooching and gazing too, having a quiet moment. In the film—poignant and funny as Ray, the close friend of Jack who is now ashes—he also has a special, quiet moment in the cathedral. Reality matching fiction again. And it was to check that moment of Ray's, among other things, that I'd made that preliminary novelist's visit to Canterbury.

What they say to you on set is: 'What's it like, seeing

your book come alive?' I always wanted to reply, a little indignantly: It already is alive, it's already come alive, in readers' heads. That's what fiction is, a coming-alive. It's the film—if you don't mind— that borrows life from the book. But while that is fundamentally and undeniably true and while for me the page will always be bigger and better than any screen, the actual experience of seeing your book filmed, or at least such a fortunate experience as mine with *Last Orders*, can't be nearly so neatly predicated. It's an experience all in itself, quite separate from the experience of the audience watching the finished film, and in itself it can be a lesson in something that every writer of fiction will be familiar with and even trust in: the remarkable and unpredictable way in which fact and fiction, reality and imagination can collide, collude and conspire.

That's what fiction is, a coming-alive

(This article is taken from *Making an Elephant: Writing from Within*, a collection of Graham Swift's non-fiction pieces about his life and work, published by Picador in 2009.)