

A PINEWOOD DIALOGUE WITH BUCK HENRY

In the mid-1970s, every young hipster knew Buck Henry—dressed in big glasses, chinos, and baseball cap—from his appearances on *Saturday Night Live*. Henry had already defined the 1960s by writing the screenplay for Mike Nichols's landmark film *The Graduate*. He also adapted *Catch-22* for Nichols and wrote the brilliant screwball comedy *What's Up, Doc?* for Peter Bogdanovich. In 1989, he helped define the satire of yet another generation with his screenplay for Gus Van Sant's film *To Die For*. This talk, following a screening of *The Graduate*, captures Henry's cool wit and his incisive approach to satire.

A Pinewood Dialogue following a screening of *The Graduate*, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (June 22, 1996):

SCHWARTZ: Please welcome Buck Henry.
(Applause)

First thing I want to ask is what it was like for you to see *The Graduate* again. What was this screening like?

HENRY: It was really interesting because I haven't seen it for fifteen or twenty years. I've seen pieces of it from time to time on television and at screenings where the prints were so bad you could barely see the characters. So it was remarkable to see a print this good. It's dimmed down a little, but it's in pretty good shape. There were a lot of things I forgot about it. A few things I wish I'd forgotten. (Laughter) But by and large, it was interesting to see it, and I think it's still pretty good.

SCHWARTZ: Are there people here who had not seen it before? Okay, a few people who've never seen it.

HENRY: That one group! That one, strange group! Foreigners! (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: It was, when it came out, the most profitable movie that had ever been released. It was really a phenomenon at the time. Could you talk a little bit about when you realized that was going to happen?

HENRY: (Laughter) There are two sides to this story. One is what one expects from early reactions. Usually after a film is finished, the filmmaker, the director, has a screening for his friends, his or her friends. The "friends' screening," as we like to think of it, usually with a shudder. It's traditional to let your pals see it before anybody else. In this case, because it was Mike's friends, each of them was more famous than anyone you know. And so about, oh, 100 or 150 people were assembled at Paramount to see this, to have people see it for the first time.

Most of them came out—well not most of them—a lot of them came out saying basically the same thing, "Oh, Mike, it's wonderful. It's so beautifully made. It's so marvelously shot. It's really interesting. It's got such clever—it's a shame about the boy [Dustin Hoffman], isn't it? (Laughter) I mean he's interesting, he's got that interesting look—but he's also got that big—there must be something he can do about that if he plans to have a career in films." (Laughter) So the friends' screening is one to avoid, because it's very misleading and very confusing.

I went away immediately after that. I went to Europe to work on another picture. And when I came back, *The Graduate* had been open for about, oh I don't know, a month or two. And I had heard it was a success, but I went to a theater to see it on 57th Street. I was amazed, even a little appalled, at the fact that not only was the theater filled with people, but it was filled with people who had already seen it and knew the lines! (Laughter)

So I was sitting, I think, on the steps, because it was an overflow crowd, and all the key lines, the gag lines, were being spoken about ten seconds before they came up! So it was bizarre, to sit there and hear 500 or 600 people saying “plastics” all at once. (Laughter) “Can you wait for a moment? Can you just wait and hear it?” I realized what a success it was because people had seen it a number of times, which was before the tradition of kids seeing hit films over and over again really had started.

Larry Turman bought the novel in the mid-1960s and brought it to Mike. He might even have had a script done of it first, but I don't remember. He brought it to Nichols, and then with that as a package, he took it to the studios, all five of which turned it down—even with Nichols, who had just done [*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*], which was quite a big hit. They just didn't see it. Nobody wanted to finance it, until Joe Levine.

I assume you know who Joe Levine is, but if you don't I'll tell you. Joe Levine is this great character who owned an outfit called Embassy [Pictures], and he made his fortune by double-booking films in his theater in Boston that he thought had related themes. Mostly their themes were like, he would show the two Hercules films. (Laughter) Hard to believe people would see two Hercules films in one sitting. It's hard to believe they'd see one Hercules film in a sitting. But in this case, they packed his theater for years seeing these dopey movies, and he made a fortune. And he decided to get into real movies. So he financed this and made another fortune. Then he made a series of other films, which were not quite so successful. But without Joe there wouldn't have been *The Graduate*.

Then, when it was cast—even then people were reluctant to consider the fact that it might be a hit, because who did it star? It starred Anne Bancroft, who was a very well thought-of actress and had done some extraordinary work, both on the stage and in films, but she wasn't a money actress, and this kid with the big nose, and a lot of unknown people. And it was shot in—Mike wanted, insisted on Panavision, which he loved. He just liked framing in Panavision. And that was considered a kind of iffy proposition. Because Panavision was good for westerns, for films in which people rode great distances from right to left and left to right. It was a big screen, and you had to fill it with

something! And it was not the practice of most directors to fill wide screens with people doing comedy or romance. So all these factors gave it a kind of look that audiences were unused to but obviously liked.

SCHWARTZ: I'm just wondering, both you and Mike Nichols had backgrounds in improvisational comedy and in writing for television comedy, and I am wondering what you learned in terms of scene construction, in terms of pacing and timing of scenes, from television and from those improv experiences.

HENRY: I don't know that we learned anything from television. I don't think that I've ever learned anything from television. Yeah, I had done a lot of work in television. Mike hadn't really done much except doing stuff with Elaine that he did on TV.

SCHWARTZ: But the improvisational—

HENRY: But improvisational, certainly. I mean there are all sorts of gags and tags to scenes in there that come out of improvisational scenes that—Mike even borrowed a couple of things he and Elaine had done. Anne blowing out the smoke after the kiss was something he and Elaine had done in a sketch years before. It's interesting to me to see how long some of the scenes take. In some cases a little too long, for me, now. Certainly by today's standards, where films have to crank up the volume every few minutes to keep the audience satisfied, it's interesting to see that this film takes its time.

Characters are allowed to sit there and stand there and walk there, so that you can assess their mood and begin to feel the way the character feels—since the theme from the beginning was, what is it like to live under water? What's the feeling like? What's the alienated feeling that, if not all of us, a large percentage of us feel when we're 18, 19, 20 years old and have to talk to adults who live in a different world that we don't understand and really don't want to, and that everything comes through a kind of barrier? So, the little guy in the fish tank is sort of a theme for the way the hero and the way ostensibly we feel, that feeling of being isolated from social behavior that's accepted. And also then it gives the excuse for the peculiar dialogue that's seventy or eighty percent of the time just a little off what people really say. It's not deconstructed so

much as—I don't know what the word is. It's like, it's almost like it's translated.

Obviously, I improvise when I'm writing; everybody does. Every writer does. You improvise and hope that you are getting to the punchline at some distant point. Mike Nichols rehearses a lot. And this was very rehearsed. There are only two or three things in the whole film that weren't written down or pre-set in some way. And they stayed in the film partly because they're great and partly because Nichols shoots in long masters and doesn't like to cut it up except where he's planned to cut it up.

It's a drag to have to go shoot a whole master again because somebody's done a little blip that you didn't figure for. Like Dustin when he says his name when Murray Hamilton can't quite come up with his name in the scene in the lanai, when he is talking to Ben, and he says, "I just told him." And Dustin waited about four seconds then, which was just a moment. It was very funny. He thought of it at that moment and it stayed in, probably partly because that was the best take of that master.

SCHWARTZ: When did you come into the project? This was based on a novel by Charles Webb. It had three different writers. And I know that you are credited as working with Calder Willingham, but you in fact were the third writer hired?

HENRY: The Writers Guild determines all credits. If you bring me a script and you think you deserve credit, you request it or you sue for it. (Laughter) Willingham, whom I had never met, and William Hanley, a well-known playwright and writer, and possibly somebody else, had written scripts before I got there. I actually wasn't aware that they had written scripts until I got through. And then Willingham sued for credit.

The Guild determines credits based on three things: plot, characters, and dialogue. If two people are adapting screenplays from the same book, the odds are they are going to use the same characters and the same plot. (Laughter) The secret of avoiding having to share credit with someone who had nothing to do with the actual script you write is of course to change all the characters' names—which is kind of petty—and/or change the plot so fundamentally that it doesn't relate in any way to previous scripts, which is hard to do.

And of course we both used chunks of dialogue from the book, so Willingham easily got credit, which, I'm perfectly willing to admit, pissed me off. But I'm sure he came to think that he had written the script, or part of it. He was a very, very good novelist. But actually he had a peculiar reputation for suing for credit on several films and winning. And a lot of writers have made a lot of money doing that. Is sort of churning out first scripts, having them thrown away if they are adaptations, and then suing for credit and getting it. Then there is participation in the moneys that come in from television and ancillary rights. So it's a good deal financially to have your name on as many films as possible, whether you've actually written them or not. So that's the answer to that.

SCHWARTZ: (Laughter) And what was your relationship with Mike Nichols? For example, you talked about the theme, the underwater theme, which you see in the visuals in the film, you see coming in, in a lot of ways. Is this something that you and Mike discussed before you actually started writing a draft?

HENRY: You know, I don't remember. At one time or another we discussed everything—I think there were about three drafts—the final draft we went over together, point by point, and worked very hard on certain aspects of it, like the montage sequence where simultaneously Dustin and Anne are having their affair, and he's home lying around. It's an interesting piece of filmmaking, because it's really very hard to do. Because you can't just say, "Well, he goes in this room, and then he's in another room." You have to, of course, figure out visually how he gets into that other room. You know, when you first look at it, the first shot of it is: Dustin leaves the pool and walks inside. And you have every right to think, "Why is he putting on a white shirt when he's all wet?" Well, it's so he can appear in a white shirt in the next scene in the hotel. And then each one has to tie into the next. We actually talked about it. It seemed like three weeks as we fiddled around with how the shots would go one from another, and then finally when it was put together it didn't work. And Sam O'Steen, the editor, came in and made a cut and saved the whole thing. So you never know quite who is responsible for the final grammar of the sequence.

SCHWARTZ: You talked about Dustin Hoffman's casting. It's also true with *To Die For* with Nicole Kidman, where you find an actor who just seems so perfect in that role that then you can't imagine anybody else ever doing it now. But if you go back and read the novel *The Graduate*, I mean, it's something else completely different.

HENRY: Totally. And we had a totally different idea of it. We used to call them—the characters, and the actors that we had contemplated—we used to call them “surfboards.” They were real, what we thought of as Southern California people. As you know, good Hasidic Jews can move from New York to Southern California, and in one generation their children are tall and blond. (Laughter) No one knows why. It's some kind of genetic deformation out of smog and dimwitted conversation. And it's quite true that you can go, and you can see miles and miles of them on any beach. And that's what we thought everyone would look like.

So our ideal cast was, as father and mother, Ronald Reagan and Doris Day, (Laughter) and then maybe [Robert] Redford and Candy Bergen as Elaine and Benjamin. Actually, there were tests made, and Redford and Candy both made a test. About six different couples tested. Some of them surfboards, some of them not. But when it came right down to it, the surfboards were never as interesting as what we considered to be the real actors. And so that idea was sacrificed in the name of getting better actors.

And Dustin tested with Katharine, and the test he did made everybody else seem really uninteresting. And they are all good actors. Redford was one, Tony Bill was one. Charles Grodin, who gave perhaps the best and funniest reading for the part of any reading I've ever heard an actor give for anything, tested, but he too was wiped out. I know that in his book Chuck thinks he was offered the role and turned it down. (Laughter) Almost every actor thinks they were offered the role and turned it down, ten, fifteen years later. But it isn't true. He may have refused to sign the pre-test contract, which stipulated salary, should he be chosen, because they were really cheap. It didn't pay a lot of money.

But he was not offered the role, and nobody would have been after Dustin, because it was just clear

that he was more interesting. He was more interesting, he was unique, and his weird look only added to it. So what the compromise we made in our heads—we rationalized that he was a genetic throwback, that the surfboards had somehow a grandfather who was from someplace else and Dustin looked like him. (Laughter) So that's how we got to Dustin. I don't think that cheap was a factor. And a lot of people said, “You can't. He's too short. He's too funny-looking. His voice is too weird.” All of which was, of course, was perfect.

SCHWARTZ: Was it a role that he very aggressively went after?

HENRY: I don't think so. I think I was the only one that actually had seen Dustin perform and knew how really interesting he was. He had been in a play at the American place... old American Place Theatre in New York, a play called *Harry, Noon and Night*, by Ronald Ribman. Really interesting play in which Dustin played a crippled transsexual German. And if you had come upon him without any preamble—I knew who he was because we vaguely worked in the theater together a couple of years before that—but if you didn't know who he was, you would be convinced that he was crippled, German, and a transsexual. Transvestite. So I knew that he could become a lot of things that he wasn't. I wasn't convinced that he could become this sort of surfboard until I saw the test.

Dustin was extremely careful, very well behaved, I think fairly nervous about this as a big-break opportunity, as who wouldn't be? And understood immediately, I mean, he does a lot of Nichols in the film. The “hmm” is a Nichols habit, which he didn't appropriate so much as I think Mike gave it to him. And a lot of the sort of disaffected readings are the way Nichols talks sometimes. Maybe in the present-day world he does it a few too many times, but it's not like anything else. It doesn't copy any other role, so it's interesting. He was good, he was filled with ideas, and he was great fun to work with.

SCHWARTZ: The novel that was the source is a very spare book. It's a lot of dialogue and very little description. And it doesn't have quite the tone that you achieved in the film. I was just wondering, how did the film get the flavor that it has, and how did you work from the novel in doing the screenplay?

HENRY: You know, I haven't read the book since I worked on it. So I don't know. I think it's true to the tone of the book as I remember it. The book has a remarkable sound to it, and Charles Webb, who wrote it, himself has a remarkable sound and has had a strange, eventful life. It actually—I think Webb writes that kind of dialogue thinking it is really the way people talk. So my job was to find a way to take it and extend it and add characters and add scenes that play the theme out. We actually started—this may be of interest, or it may be of no interest at all; you be the judge—we started with a sequence that we thought would actually be a thematic statement. Started with the idea that we were going to shoot a huge college graduation—*The Graduate*, right? And there would be this big graduation ceremony in an amphitheater somewhere (I don't know where we were going to find this place), and there would be thousands of people waiting to hear the valedictorian's speech. And Dustin would be giving that speech in his cap and gown, and he would be standing there up on the lectern with his speech. We extrapolated this next bit from Robert Frost's poem at the Kennedy inauguration when the wind blew Frost's pages away, which was a remarkable moment on television. And while he [Hoffman] was talking, the wind would begin to blow the words away through the microphone. You wouldn't hear them until—and he didn't know what he was saying; he couldn't find the words, couldn't find what to say about that moment, that impressive moment. And then he would wake up from this dream in the airplane. Well, we saved a million dollars by not shooting that sequence. (Laughter) And of course we didn't need it because it's apparent what's happening from the beginning, I think. All those voices coming in, the hideous airplane voices and the ghastly terminal voices, and all that stuff.

[Lawrence] Turman, and Nichols, and then I all responded to the book the same way: that it made a direct impression on what we thought people like us felt like around graduation time. Alienation, confusion about goals, and what the poets call anomie, that sort of distracted feeling that you have now gone through the first third—you've taken the first important step of your life, and everything after seems to be going to be an anticlimax. We were taken to task by a couple of critics later on for not dealing with the important topics—Vietnam, which of course had simply nothing to do with it. And

other lesser important things like driving the wrong way across the Golden Gate Bridge, which is really stupid.

But also it's specific. It is very Southern California. Its lifestyle and its concerns and everything about the film of course would be and was thoroughly disliked by anyone with a tendency toward Marxism. (Laughter) Actually, Haskell Wexler, who shot *Virginia Woolf*, refused to shoot this one, because he read the script and said something like, "I can't attend to this kind of bourgeois bullshit." (Laughter) I saw his point. I mean, I know where he was coming from. But then he went on to shoot *The Thomas Crown Affair*, so I felt, "I don't know, Haskell. I know what you mean, but did they offer you more money?" (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: At the same time, it did reach a counterculture movement. It reached an incredible youth audience.

HENRY: Yeah, its main audience was a youth audience. I think it speaks to concerns about the way people feel. It also has what every writer looks for, what every filmmaker looks for. It has a bedrock story. You know, boy has affair with woman, falls in love with daughter. Bottom line, that's it. Hard to beat. No writer, no matter how jaded, could fail to construct some sort of story out of that. So it's always great to have that at your shoulder.

SCHWARTZ: The little bit we saw from *The Player*—about the sequel—I wonder how realistic that was. Because of the success of *The Graduate*, were there offers?

HENRY: Down through the years, both professionals and total strangers on the street have insisted that a sequel be made. (Laughter) So I'll tell you the story of this—and they won't stop, either. They won't stop until we're all dead! (Laughter) [Robert] Altman called and said, "Would you come over? I'm making a movie. Come over with some other writers and pitch a story." And I said, "Okay." And he says, "Well, what are you going to pitch?" I said, "I'm not going to tell you. I'll tell you when I get there." So the shot at the beginning of *The Player* took a day to rehearse and a day to shoot. An afternoon to rehearse and an afternoon to shoot. And I thought, "Well, I'm not going to tell him till the first take." Like I had this dopey idea that I would get what we used to call a band laugh in television.

This is a long parenthesis: When we used to work on *The Steve Allen Show*, we would do all the jokes—the punch lines—in double-talk when we rehearsed, so that the band would actually laugh out loud when we did it on air because they had never heard it before. So we could depend on these thirty depraved musicians to laugh at the joke and lead the audience. So it was, “Who was that woman I saw you with?” “Well, that was no woman, that was a [inaudible].” And we would do a whole rehearsal like that, which is hell for actors who really like to hear themselves rehearsing. But it worked for the band.

So I thought I was going to get a nice hot laugh for *The Graduate* pitch, forgetting of course that we would be doing takes all day long, and it wouldn't matter around take two or three. So I gave him *The Graduate* thing, and he said, “Yeah, that makes sense.” We changed it a little for each take. I think the one he finally took was take eight because there was so much going on, obviously. All the takes were very different. And then he had a big opening. He had a big opening—Altman had a big showing of it at the Ziegfeld theater a year later, whenever it was finished, and everybody laughed at the gag because they were all studio people and insiders and thought it was really funny, blah, blah, blah.

When the film was over, I walked into the lobby, and a guy comes up to me and says, “Hi, I'm so and so, I'm at Universal. It was very funny, but listen. Just between you and me, don't you think there's a shot that we take as a sequel to *The Graduate*?” (Laughter) So the myth dies hard, and they'll be pursuing a sequel forever! Even Dustin had an idea for a sequel a few years ago. So you never know. Offer me enough money—no. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: *To Die For* seemed to me one of the few recent movies that really offers a satirical look at the culture, in the kind of way it fills the same sort of role that *The Graduate* did at the time, and it made me realize how few movies are like that now in current Hollywood—movies directed at that sort of youth audience. I was wondering what your thoughts are about the time between *The Graduate* and *To Die For*, about those sort of satirical films being made—how hard it is to get those made. How the audience has changed or how the perceived audience has changed?

HENRY: Well, films cost much more money. It's much harder for them to get their money back. So the chances that are taken are far fewer. Except, of course, in independent films, where they are cheaper and where there are people with bigger hearts and/or less experience to take shots at stories, at actors, at directors who haven't got, who aren't going to make huge expensive films that have chancy aspects to them.

There is no solution to it. I don't see it as getting any better, except that there are a lot of good independent films made. Satire has never been a word that anybody in a studio wants to hear. The doors shut real fast. You can hear slamming all the way down the hall if somebody says, “He's coming in with a satire.”

But then I'm not quite sure about the categorization of films anyway. I was always surprised because I never thought of *The Graduate*—and this may seem really dopey—but I never thought of *The Graduate* necessarily as a comedy. I thought of it as a love story that had comedy things about it. I mean, the difference between *The Graduate*, which is a pretty powerful love story and a complicated one, and, say a movie like, forgive me, *Love Story*, is only—the difference is that the characters in *Love Story* don't have any sense of humor at all. (Laughter) I don't really know. I don't know why when at award time films like *The Graduate* or *To Die For* are talked about as comedies. I don't see *To Die For* as a comedy. I see it as a melodrama with a kind of sardonic eye.

But who am I to judge? (Laughter)

It's hard to make that tone viable because you have to be very, very specific with the actors, you have to have a director who understands it, and, ideally, you have to have a studio that knows how to market it. And it's much harder for a studio in their marketing division to advertise and promote a film whose tone cannot be described in terms that are directly understandable by a farm couple in Iowa. Nothing wrong with a farm couple in Iowa, but they have to target the lowest common denominator and work their way up. And it's killed a lot of good ideas.

SCHWARTZ: We'll see *To Die For* later. I don't want to talk too much about it now, but since you

mentioned this idea of a complex tone, that's a movie that has a very complex tone. Because you can on one hand say that it's a satire and that everyone's interested in the media and how media has taken over, but there's a real sympathy for characters you might not normally find that sympathetic.

HENRY: I think so. And it's interesting that you said that. A lot of other people don't. A lot of people—I don't know a lot—but a number of people have thought that the film is condescending to some of the characters. The cliché reaction to anything that has a dark side to its leading characters is that it's just dark and ugly. But yeah, I don't think you can do a good film about people if you don't respond to something in them, if you don't like them in some way.

Obviously, the great writers have loved their villains. If Shakespeare hadn't loved Iago, then he wouldn't have been such an interesting character and a great one. And in a lot of cases, the villains of course are infinitely more interesting than the nice folks. So yeah, I have to like the people. I have to be interested in the people as I am writing them. I think all writers do. The darker they are and the more crooked they are and the more weird they are, the more I tend to like them. But that's a flaw in my character, not so much having to do with writing itself.

SCHWARTZ: We talked about what I'm calling satires as not being made. Another kind of comedy that seems to not be made these days is the classically constructed farce, like *What's Up, Doc?* Which is not pretending at all to be social satire, has slapstick gags, but also has a sense of construction from the classic Hollywood period, so many of the popular comedies today seem to be much broader.

HENRY: Yeah. Well, farce may be the hardest kind of comedy of everything to write, because it's all strategy. It's all about how you get everybody from these places into those places, and why you do it and when. And timing of course is everything. So it falls really flat when it's not done well. And there have been very few farces made, very few American farces made since the 1930s. *What's Up, Doc?* makes me totally happy in a way that the other films I've written don't, because Bogdanovich

was so good at doing that tone. I have no qualms about any sequence in it. They all seem to me to work on their own level. It's a very cartoony, superficial level, but it's also very complicated technically. And it's interesting to see it work out. It's great fun. It's very hard to do but it's great fun to do. And when it works it's kind of a revelation. But yeah, I really like the film.

SCHWARTZ: You've said you wrote that very quickly.

HENRY: I wrote it very quickly because Bogdanovich—what happened was, it was a script that he and [Robert] Benton and [David] Newman had written, had wrid, had wroted, and I don't think they finished it. (Laughter) And Peter didn't much like it. And he said, "Is there something you can do with this?" And he gave it to me, and I said, "Yeah." He said, "But I have to start shooting in, like, five weeks." And I said, "Well, maybe." So their script hinged on thousands of movie jokes. Now, I don't like to do movie jokes in movies. I've done a few, but I'm generally against them. So I said, "Can I take all the movie jokes out?" And he said, "Well, you can try." So I took all of them out. He put one back which was the little *Casablanca* bit with Barbra singing "[As] Time Goes By" to Ryan [O'Neal].

And then, as I got into it, I said, "What I would like to do is add another suitcase." There were three suitcases—a story of three suitcases, where they go and why. I said, "It needs a fourth." I was improvising. I had no idea what I was talking about. (Laughter) He said, "OK, put a fourth in," so I put a fourth in, and then I went berserk for three weeks. I did nothing but figure out where these suitcases were going, and it made me crazy. I used to call him in the middle of the night and say, "I lost the suitcase, and I don't think I can ever find it again. Is there any way you can make another film while we're waiting?" (Laughter) And then, finally, I did it. And as a coda to this and to what I said a moment ago, of course, I lied. I ended the film with a movie joke that I bitterly regret. A little quotation from *Love Story* that was a huge laugh in that year, but this year I wish it had another ending.

SCHWARTZ: I want to open it up to questions in the audience, and an obvious question I forgot to ask you was the one word, the famous word, [plastics], in *The Graduate*.

HENRY: Which is now in the compendium of quotes. Bartlett's.

SCHWARTZ: How did that line, because that line is not in the book. It's one thing that's not in the book.

HENRY: No, I just thought—I was improvising that dialogue, and plastics seemed to be—actually, it's funny, because a couple months after the plastics scene was written, after the first draft was written, or the second or the third, I said to Mike, "Plastics, does it seem a little old-fashioned to you?" And he said, "Well, I don't know, what do you think?" I said, "Well, you know, computers are coming in. There's germanium tubes, or whatever the hell was going on in that year. Maybe there is something else." And I thought, and I couldn't find anything else for it. And it had come into my head—that idea of plastics standing for a generation's concerns—because I had a professor in college who used to fulminate about the plastic world we live in. So that gave me the idea for it.

And it worked immediately, I mean beyond my wildest dreams. It never occurred to me that it would be quoted and that people would applaud it. And then a year or so after the film was made, the best kind of compliment was given it. The Peace Corps did a commercial in which they recreated the party from the moment Dustin comes down the stairs to the moment the dialogue is finished about plastics, and the guy says, "Plastics, they're plastics. 'Nuff said. Think about it." And it froze, with actors looking exactly like the people in the movie. And it said, "Why not try the Peace Corps?" (Laughter) It was a great, great commercial.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: You were talking about when you wrote the script with Nichols, the final draft. Were you also an observer on the set or were you busy doing something else at the time?

HENRY: I was on the set. I've been on the set in every film except *What's Up, Doc?* I'm always there to do—I don't know, to hang around. It keeps me from having to work on something else. But [also] because now and then there are actual rewrites. And if I don't do them, someone will. (Laughter)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: What did you learn from the process? That wasn't the first movie that you were on set, or was that the first?

HENRY: No, I'd been on set before, and it's not that different from being on television sets. I'd done a lot of film and TV work, so I had been on a lot of sets. I don't know what I learned. I never do know what I learned on a set. I just sort of like the environment. It's funny, because I hate other people's sets. I won't go near them, if I can help it. But it's very restful being on the set. And it also—if you're on the set as a writer, you then don't get the rude shock when the film comes out of seeing something completely unsuspected. You sort of know what's there. But I tend—almost every film I've written is for a director who's a friend of mine. So we do things along the way. I've always been involved in casting and sometimes suggesting a re-shoot or a shot or something.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I was just curious, after seeing the film today, what did you see in Katharine Ross?

HENRY: (Laughter) She's still the most beautiful girl of her generation. I mean, she is the schoolboy's dream. And it's very interesting because Mike wasn't sure he could get certain things out of her. I think she was nervous about this show. And also it's hard to do some of this slightly stilted dialogue. It's not easy to do a lot of it. He used a lot of his patented Nichols tricks. Like, in the sequence in the bedroom up in Berkeley where she slams into the room and accuses him of various things, he keeps her moving back and forth across the room. It looks like an interesting visual idea. Basically, he did it for her. He did it because he wanted to keep her energy up and to keep our eye going with her, and maybe not paying that close attention to the quality of the dialogue. What interested me today is how well she does it. There is no problem. She knew what she was about. She plays both the shock and ingenuousness at a perfect level. I think she's really good. And maybe I didn't think she was that good twenty years ago, but I do now. I can't imagine anybody else doing it.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: The movie is a breakthrough in terms of its themes, but also in terms of the music. It was the first movie that had a popular-music soundtrack. And I was wondering if you could shed some light on Mike's decision to use Simon and Garfunkel in the movie. And also the reaction.

HENRY: My reaction?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: The studio's reaction.

HENRY: I don't know what the studio's reaction was, so I can't answer that. But Nichols knew he wanted to use Paul's music before we started, before I started. He had been listening to that particular record that had "The Sound of Silence" on it, and he was crazy about it, and he thought that it had the perfect tone for the story. My response to it was that I really liked "The Sound of Silence." I wasn't then, and I'm still not now, quite as enthusiastic about one or two of the other songs. But I love "The Sound of Silence," and I think it's a perfect metaphor. So he laid it in on the working track. He laid it in on the working track, as a scratch track when we were working on the film, on the first cuts, and so Paul went off to write other music. Those were just temps, to give it a kind of sound. And then Paul was going to write a whole new score. And he wrote some songs, and nothing could ever replace "The Sound of Silence." So I think the only new music he wrote for it was obviously "Mrs. Robinson."

Now, there are certain things that bother me in some places in the film about it. Why Dustin should be whistling "Mrs. Robinson" is utterly beyond me. (Laughter) I don't think he was actually whistling the tune. I think he's whistling soundlessly and then Mike put in the whistle of "Mrs. Robinson" over it. But I've never understood and I can't remember what his answer was when I asked him about it. It seems really weird.

The other thing I don't like is the break in the montage, where "The Sound of Silence" turns into "April Come She Will," which is a song that should never follow "The Sound of Silence." It's just much too overwhelming a song in its tone and its sound for this sort of weedy little song to follow it. And I don't like the breaks anyway, because the montage should have one piece of music over it that begins and ends it. But what do I know? So nothing could ever replace the music that Paul had already written, in Mike's mind, and that's how all that stuff stayed in the film. And then of course they fed each other. The film sold millions of records, and then the record in turn sold the film, ad infinitum.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I was just wondering if you could describe your process of writing, whether you work on characters first or whatever, how you work

on a particular project. And the second question; if I brought the book *The Graduate* to you now, any idea of how you would do it today as opposed to the way you did it then?

HENRY: I have no idea what I would do if you brought *The Graduate* to me now. I don't know. It's too speculative.

As far as my work process is concerned, I put it off as long as I can, filling in the hours I should be working with every kind of event known to man, up to and including this very one we're indulging ourselves in today. This event allowed me to kill probably three days. I had to go from California to New York, I had to come out here, and after this I'm going to have to rest up for a day. (Laughter) Then I might turn the machine on and think about working. I have no good process at all. I am driven to it ultimately by anxiety and fear. And shame. (Laughter) But the process in terms of actual words—I'm not sure I can answer this.

I improvise my way into it. I have to know three things. I have to know what the beginning is, I have to know what the end is, and I have to know some big piece in the middle that I want to get to, that I really want to write, so that I can be motivated after the opening to get there. And then the last piece I have to know about so I have an end in sight, no matter how many miles or months away. Often, of course, one's idea changes about the beginning and that wonderful piece in the middle, and the end. But not that often for me. I think I always have the beginning and end that I started with. Then I try and bust it into pieces.

Ideally, there should be no scene that one writes that doesn't connect in some way to what goes before it. This is of course, in practical terms, not always true. I end up with very, very long first drafts because I tend to write a lot of dialogue, because dialogue is the easiest thing for me. Story is the hardest. Not plot so much as story. And sometimes it gets so complicated that I have to sort of back to the beginning.

There was an interview some years ago with Harold Pinter in which he made an interesting statement. He said he was writing, and he was going along with these two characters that were the main part of

the play, and suddenly to his surprise, a window opened up and a guy climbed through and started talking to them. And for three or four days, Pinter says, these three characters talked about junk that he had no interest in whatever until he could convince the guy to go back out the window. I'm paraphrasing, but basically what happens it's what happens, is that people come in the windows. And you tend to fall in love with the people who come in the windows because they are so interesting and have absolutely nothing to do with the story at all.

And where you're compelled to try to boil down a few ideas into roughly 120 pages and convince a studio that a story can be built out of those pages that will hold an audience for 90 to 120 minutes, there are problems in strategy. They don't have as much to do with—novelists are so lucky. Somebody walks over and tells a story, and the story can go on for 240 pages. And then the other story can start again. You can't do it in a film. I don't know whether that answered your question.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Were there any different endings for *The Graduate*?

HENRY: Never. It always ended at the church and on the bus, and then the sort of ambiguous emotional ending was something that just happened. That is to say, Mike didn't tell them what he wanted them to do, Dustin and Katharine. "Just sit down there, and you're thrilled, and then we'll just ride for a while." Because he knew he wanted to run the reel out on that shot, so the credits could come over it. So he sat the camera there and he ran it on them, and I don't know whether it was one, two, or three takes, but they were pretty tired of doing it. And they sat down, and they did their laugh, and then after a while, I think, they're thinking, "Is he going to say cut? (Laughter) Is he ever going to end this? Are we going to go all the way to Bakersfield? What the hell is going on?" So we get credit for suggesting that they are looking into the future and seeing perhaps the downside, perhaps the upside, but certainly not all black and white and grays, and all that crap. (Laughter) They are just exhausted. They're tired. They have nothing left to act. Those are God's little gifts.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I'm one of the "foreigners" who's seeing the movie for the first time.

HENRY: Oh, yeah?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: What I wanted to know—like Ben, I was bothered through the whole movie by Mrs. Robinson's motivation to not have him see her daughter. What was up with that? Can you enlighten me? Why didn't she?

HENRY: Because I suspect that—if you sort of think about the 1960s particularly, on the verge of the sexual revolution, a woman who has probably not had her first affair with a kid or somebody from around town, and thinks of herself as a sort of low-life and has contaminated this kid with it. I think she wants to keep her daughter away from him. She does not want her contamination to move on to her child. But I don't know. I don't totally know what her feelings are. Nor do I have to, for me.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: That's fine; I have my own opinion, and your opinion—

HENRY: And yours may be much better than mine! I think you're right. It's a perfectly good question. It's a sort of mystery, maybe, but too often in Hollywood films they answer all those questions. And they don't leave room for the mysteries. And they always suggest that there is a reason for everything, that everyone does everything for a reason. And as you and I know, nobody does anything for a reason. We do everything for thousands of reasons, half of which we're not aware of. I'm not sure. I can always cop out and say because it's in her nature, which is an answer I like.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: That's a good enough answer for me.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I have a question about *Catch-22*. That was one of my favorite works of yours. Because the cast was mostly from—seemed like from the improvisational circles, comedy circles—did that make it a looser atmosphere in the script, for the set?

HENRY: Well, no. Actually, other than Mike and myself and Peter Bonerz and [Alan] Arkin, I don't think anyone else was from improvisational theater. Arkin was always in our heads, because he just seemed to be Yossarian. And we never considered another actor.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Did that help any?

HENRY: The improvisational background helps because it gives, among other things, a lot of tricks to writers, to directors, and actors if they've shared the experience of improvisational theater, which, as you probably know, isn't just getting up and being glib, but involves an enormous number of techniques and theater games as they are sometimes called. If two people have come from that background, they can use them. There's a kind of shorthand about how to get at certain things. Nichols does it all the time when he directs actors.

As any of you who have been involved in improvisational theater know, there's almost always a task involved in any scene. The other people don't have to know it, but you have to know that your task is to get that bottle and get out that door. And your task—and this person doesn't know it—is to kill him if he goes near the door or goes near your bottle. Those kinds of tricks, playing an entire part with a stomachache which is never expressed, just used, are things you use from acting class and from improvisational theater that people like Arkin and Nichols and others are used to.

But I would think the only improvising that was done in *Catch-22* was in the last sequence, when we got stuck in the long hospital sequence, and Mike shut down the shoot for about three days, and the guys improvised in the set. And it came to nothing because the improvisation just didn't sound like anything else in the film, as improvisations usually don't. The trick is to get it to match the style of the dialogue and the behavior in the rest of the movie. And it's a difficult trick to negotiate. My feeling is, I can always tell any sequence that's improvised in any film, and it jolts me momentarily out of the film.

Warren [Beatty] and I improvised a scene in *Heaven Can Wait*, and it always jolts me. I'm so aware that we are improvising—because the rhythm is different from the rest of the film—that it bothers me, even though it's a successful scene. In Altman's films, which use improvised and written stuff, he's very tricky about it. He's very canny about it, and he understands that. And he usually changes the pattern of his shooting to match an improvised sequence, so that they seem to go together in a way that the different pattern goes with

pre-scripted sequences. There's a trick in it, which I won't give away, and I may be wrong about. [John] Cassavetes' films do the same thing. I mean, sometimes of course the improvising is agonizing in its length and its sort of weirdness. But when it works it's spectacular. We couldn't do it on *Catch-22*. It was too complicated and too specific.

SCHWARTZ: Is this more difficult for you to write? *Catch-22* and *To Die For* are both very complex, intricate narrative structures, whereas a film like *The Owl and the Pussycat*—you said you basically started writing and improvised it. Is it harder for you to write one way versus the other?

HENRY: No, it's the same tactical problem regardless of what the tone is. You've got to know how to get to there from here. And it's hard to do.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I was just wondering, what's the advice that you can give regarding how to deal with people in the business who may want to compromise your vision on your particular screenplay?

HENRY: Like who? Which people are we talking about?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Like studio people or just a director or anyone who wants to take a cut out of what you have just written.

HENRY: Well, you know, if you write film, if you write screenplays, you've got to know already that you are being paid, one hopes, to do a certain amount of compromising. Because the screenplay is not the film. You are writing something that the—and also my feeling is, even though I bitterly resent it sometimes: it's their money. It's their money. They get their say. And ultimately, at the end of the day, their say counts more than mine does. I may be pretty unhappy about it afterwards, I may have an argument with somebody, but it is their money. So then if you don't like that, you've got to go somewhere else. You've got to find a new career, or you've got to find a new patron. Because ultimately, the way you see the film you've written on the page isn't going to be the film that emerges. No matter what the circumstances are.

When it works, I now believe that this is exactly the way I saw it [*The Graduate*]. But I don't think that's

true. (Laughter) In some cases, the compromises help. In some cases, they're right. You can only believe you are right as long as your money holds out, which is a cynical way of looking at it, but basically true. The director is going to change it, the actors are going to change it, the studio is going to change it, the editor is going to change it, the cameraman is going to make it look different than you ever thought it would, the advertising isn't going to be to your liking, your name will be too small, somebody else will get your credit, and the audience will misunderstand what they're looking at.

So, you know, changes happen all the way down the line. I don't know practically what one can say about dealing with the compromises except you've got to know that they're there and you're going to have to make them.

SCHWARTZ: You've said in past interviews that you can do more in film as opposed to television, that there is more compromise in television. Today, a lot of people think there's actually better-quality writing on television.

HENRY: Yeah, I don't think that's true. Although I've seen a lot of made-for-television movies, not on networks but on cable stations, that are just as good and in many cases much better than our huge important features. But then, I don't much like our huge important features, so I don't really know what it's about. The formulas are working harder than ever. The studios are making things to formula more so than they ever did in any decade. The gags, the continual gags in Hollywood about having to describe the film as so-and-so meets so-and-so. *The Third Man* meets *King Kong*. (Laughter) That's particularly old-fashioned. Today it would have to be *Dumb and Dumber* meets—why *Dumb and Dumber* would meet anybody, I don't know, but you know what I'm saying. It is the language now. And it's unashamed.

Every studio executive, I think, believes that he or she has a bit of an artist in them. Total hogwash. There's no artist in any of them. They wouldn't be studio executives if they were. So you have to—talking about compromise—you have to know that when you go in to talk to a guy or woman in a studio, you're going to hear at least one thing that will make you crazy. And so you have to smile. "I

see what you're saying, that's very interesting. (Laughter) Yes. We'll turn the hero into a woman, and we'll have it take place in a volcano. Let me think about it."

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I know Dustin wasn't that surfboard, that he didn't have that surfboard quality that you were looking for, and I guess the irony is that he is from L.A., right? Wasn't he born and bred in Los Angeles?

HENRY: Yeah. And named Dustin for Dustin Farnum, the great cowboy actor, whom his mother liked.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I was curious. He brought so much of that New York quote, unquote whatever it is, that angst to the part. I was wondering, how much did Mike and you really just bring that out in terms of the script? Did you envision that in Dustin, or was it kind of—I mean, because it's hard to see Robert Redford evoking that kind of angst.

HENRY: Any kind of angst! (Laughter) I know exactly what you mean, and I don't know what the answer is. That is to say, there was quite a long rehearsal period—at least three weeks, which is a long time for a movie—during which I'm sure they worked stuff out that I don't remember anymore. But Dustin, I think, got it right away—he knew exactly where it was going, what the point of the character was. And he is an extraordinary mimic, as a lot of good actors are, so that he can—as I said before, I think he picked up a lot of stuff from Nichols, who does have kind of angst-related behavioral traits. No, I can't imagine.

Well you know it would be great to make a movie and make four simultaneous casts and to have all sorts of different people doing the scenes. It would be wonderful to see what would happen. Or awful. In this case, I don't know what Dustin was drawing from, except he got a new haircut, and he was wearing a kind of clothing he had never worn before. He looked really good. He worked out. He was in great shape. And if you lie out on a pool on one of those floats for any length of time, you become that thing. (Laughter) That's my theory, anyway.

We also had this dopey notion that we were going to start in the plane, and as the plane flew over Los

Angeles we were going look down and see first 1 swimming pool as it crossed over from Colorado, and then 2, and then 100, and then 600 swimming pools, until finally it was nothing but a giant swimming pool. I don't know what the hell we were talking about! (Laughter) Maybe we were drunk or stoned or something. This idea that we would envision this country of swimming pools, that they would all come together in one huge thing.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Was your role as the clerk written into the script, or did you just decide at the last minute to assume that role? And how did you feel about it?

HENRY: It was written into the script. And I played it because, as I remember, I used to do it in the readings, which is how I got almost all the roles in films that I've written. (Laughter) I just—I did the reading either so beautifully or so loud that no other voice would dare shut mine out, so then I played it. How did I feel about it? Oh, I loved doing it. I had a great time.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: You spoke earlier of the increasing pace of films today and how films of the past were slower and took their time more. Is this attributed more to the decreasing attention span of audiences, or are these (Laughs) attention spans decreasing because of this pace?

HENRY: Ah! What a conundrum! Television is the fast and easy answer, and I think it's true. Generations, what? Three, four generations of television we've had now? And commercial television, which is really to blame, where you have to crank up the action before every commercial. And there used to be one, two, three, four commercial block breaks per half-hour. The rule, the law, was you had to get the audience to jolt, to push the button on the test meters just before you went to commercial to keep them sitting there, to make them incapable mentally of changing the channel. I think it affected films.

The amazing thing to me is that there is anywhere to go anymore! I went to see *The Rock* the other day, which has, you know—I've seen worse. It's got some things actually to recommend it. But it's an amazing example of pumping up the volume. It starts with a chase that should have killed everyone in San Francisco. (Laughter) And proceeds there,

like the guy in the studio says, to go straight up. It never stops. And so that while you're thinking, "God, this is amazing." You're also thinking, "What kind of job is this, to sit in a room and think, Now we have to do something that is even bigger to keep the attention span up, to keep the audience awake and thinking that they are seeing something important?" And they do, they just keep doing it. I'm not recommending it, but it is the formula for films. Obviously, it doesn't work for every film, and there are real movies that have the both the sublime as well as the ridiculous, but they're further and farther between, I think.

SCHWARTZ: On that note we are going to have to break. We will be back in fifteen minutes for *To Die For*.

[Break]

SCHWARTZ: We are pleased to show a studio print of *To Die For*. And please welcome back, to introduce *To Die For*, Buck Henry.

HENRY: Thank you. What can I tell you? You are going to see *To Die For*. I hope you like it. It's adapted from a book, a successful novel, which in turn was extrapolated from an actual murder case that took place in New England some years ago, we're pretty far removed from the actual facts of that case. I'm sorry I won't be able to answer questions about it afterwards, because I am sure there will be a few about various things that took place, both in shooting and in the editing, and I don't know what the hell I'm talking about! I hope you like it. It's got some great things in it, and it's got a particularly great performance by Nicole Kidman.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: How did you get involved with the project?

HENRY: An executive at Columbia who was working with the producer of the film, Laura Ziskin, said to me one day, "Would you like to work with Gus Van Sant?" I said, "Yeah." Gus and I had worked on a project for about ten minutes some years before. We were going to do a version of *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine[-Flake Streamline Baby]*, the Tom Wolfe book about Ken Kesey's amazing drug-ridden bus ride. And after one meeting in a studio about it, I was convinced that it would be a really

bad idea to try and make this film. Not only because it dealt with so many taboo subjects, but I always feel that it's bad enough to have one original writer on your case. In this case it'd be two. Kesey and Tom Wolfe, who would resent whatever I might try to do to their story. So I said, "No, no, this is too much trouble."

But I did want to work with Gus. I loved *Drugstore Cowboy* and thought it was a great film, and I thought it would be interesting to work with him. And I also had read the book and liked it a lot, Joyce Maynard being a particularly adept writer of social peculiarities and its particularly having to do with crime and weirdness, or "C&W," as we call it. Goodbye. (Applause)

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