

A PINWOOD DIALOGUE WITH KENNETH BRANAGH AND MICHAEL CAINE

The prolific and legendary actor Michael Caine starred in both the 2007 film version of *Sleuth* (opposite Jude Law) and the 1972 version (opposite Laurence Olivier). In the new version, an actors' tour de force directed by Kenneth Branagh and adapted by playwright Harold Pinter, Caine took the role originally played by Olivier. A riveting tale of deception and deadly games, this thriller about an aging crime novelist and a young actor in love with the same woman is essentially about the mysteries of acting and writing. In this discussion, Branagh and Caine discussed their collaboration after a special preview screening.

A Pinewood Dialogue following a screening of *Sleuth*, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (October 3, 2007):

MICHAEL CAINE: (Applause)
Good evening.

KENNETH BRANAGH: Good evening.

DAVID SCHWARTZ: Welcome and congratulations on a riveting, very entertaining movie.

BRANAGH: Thank you.

CAINE: Thank you.

SCHWARTZ: Could you tell us... (Laughs) I feel far away from you.

CAINE: I only do what he does.

BRANAGH: I do exactly what he does, as well.

CAINE: He keeps telling me what to do...

BRANAGH: And then I do what I'm told.

SCHWARTZ: Well, this is a film about directing and acting, and we see the director usually wins, so...

BRANAGH: Not in this case, believe me. (Laughter)

CAINE: Right... it's also about a director who's a better actor than the boys who are acting. (Laughs)

BRANAGH: Rubbish, of course. Rubbish.

SCHWARTZ: Well, we'll see, we'll see. Tell us about how this project came about. It's an interesting pedigree, because in a way, it's a new version, an adaptation, of a play. It seems like it's going to be a remake of the film, but Harold Pinter, of course, is the author here.

BRANAGH: As you may have seen from the credits, one of the producers is Jude Law. He was the one who had the idea of making a new version, and it was his idea to bring onboard a man he thought he'd never get to do it, but Nobel Prize-winning Harold Pinter very kindly agreed to do it.

Harold Pinter was an actor before he became a writer, and he appeared as an actor in many, many thrillers. And I think—although he told me during this, "I don't do plot. I don't do plot!"—he loves *inheriting* plot. So he took the theatrical mechanics of the brilliant original from Anthony Schaffer and then he, you know, put his own very, very particular spin on it. And then the second inspired—well, the third inspired idea from Jude—first the project, second Harold Pinter, and the third inspired idea was to, you know, to ask Michael. You might want to take up the story from there, Michael.

CAINE: Jude asked me if I'd do this script, and because it was by Harold Pinter, I said yes. I would never have remade the Anthony Schaffer script, because I think what Joe Mankiewicz and Larry [Laurence Olivier] and Schaffer and I did with the first one was good enough; there was

really no point in remaking it. Where were you going to go with it?

But what happened was that Jude took this to Harold—who had never seen the film or the play, because Harold lives in a very separate world; I mean, he probably wasn't aware of what any of this was—he just got a script and a stage play. Jude took the stage play and said, "Could you write a screenplay of this?" He looked at it and he said, "Well, I'll take the plot. I like the plot. But then I'll write a completely new screenplay."

So what you just saw was not a remake of *Sleuth*, because there isn't a single line of the original movie in this screenplay. It's completely different. Also there are other things which are there. This sort of homoerotic thing at the end was never in the other one.

BRANAGH: The other thing that had a nice sort of circularity about it—and please jump in, Michael—was that some years ago Michael appeared as an actor...

CAINE: Oh, that's right; yes.

BRANAGH: Do tell, Michael.

CAINE: Well, I knew Harold. He was an actor called David Baron, and he told me he was going to write plays under his own real name. I said, "What's your real name?" He said, "My real name's Harold Pinter."

He eventually wrote a one-act play called *The Room*, and I did that at the Royal Court. That was another reason I wanted to do the script: because I did his very first play. Anything that he wrote was... *The Room*, and I did it in the Royal Court.

And then for fifty years, he wrote all this great stuff, and I was never offered any again! (Laughter) You know, I felt like saying, "I made you, I could break you!" (Laughter) But nobody ever offered me anything!

So when, finally, Jude came and he said, first of all, he said, "How do you feel about remaking *Sleuth*?" Well, I didn't want to be rude... (Laughter) So I said, "That sounds like a good idea, Jude..." you know. (Laughter) We were having dinner;

near the end of the meal, I thought, I can hold him off for dessert and I'll be out of here. (Laughter) Then I said, "But, you know, that script by Anthony Schaffer was pretty good." He said, "I have a script by Harold Pinter." And I went, "Ah, that's different..." which is why I'm here tonight.

SCHWARTZ: Well, you made ninety films during those fifty years, so it's possible you might have been busy when Harold Pinter called you.

CAINE: Yes; there was a time when Harold might have offered me something, but I was always busy, yes.

SCHWARTZ: So talk a bit about working with Pinter's dialogue? Since we're talking about Harold Pinter so much, it's so spare and there's so much there, with such simplicity.

CAINE: From an actor's point of view, Pinter's dialogue: you have to be like a straight man with a comedian. If you see a comedy duo, the straight man must stay straight. Otherwise it's not funny, because he's the contrast to the comedian, who is doing things which are not what we would normally do.

With Pinter, you have to stay absolutely straight and natural. You say these things as though you were speaking ordinary things, and everybody goes, "Oh, my God, what's happening? He never took any notice of that. He said that, it went right by." And so you get to a situation in him where someone will come into a room—and Pinter uses [this]; I've seen it many times—and say good evening, and everybody looks at each other and goes, "What does he mean by that?" (Laughter)

You mustn't try to be sinister, you mustn't try to be funny; you *must* be real. That also applies to movie comedy. You know, very often I've flipped through the television—so you've not got the sound on, you know—and I can see movies and people are going, "That's a comedy." I shouldn't be able to see that, they should look like real people. I know that at that moment that it's not only a comedy, it's a very bad one. (Laughter) Because I can see without the dialogue that people are not acting like real human beings. The basic thing is stay straight, and Harold will take care of you. It's him, all of it.

SCHWARTZ: What was the production like? I know that the original *Sleuth* was a longer film, but also a longer production. You had just come off of making *The Magic Flute* (2006), a much bigger film.

BRANAGH: Well, we took about a quarter of the time to shoot the film, but the difference—that Michael took for the one in 1972. But we rehearsed for a very long time. We had a read-through with all four of us in Twickenham Film Studios, where we shot the movie, in an empty sound stage, where we showed up and Michael said, “Oh, I remember this place. I did *Alfie* (1966) here, I did *Zulu* (1964) here.” Harold Pinter came in, he said, “Oh, I like this place. I did *The Servant* (1963) here, I did *Accident* (1967), I did *The Quiller Memorandum* (1966).” And Jude and I looked at each other and said, “Well, I did a couple of voice-overs here last week, but... (Laughter) You might have heard them.”

We started there and then we, over the course of—that was the first process of, as Shakespeare would say, “hearing the play.” We heard it out loud for the first time, and we got a sense that it could be very funny, very darkly funny. Then we decided that we would—the boys very patiently put up with me meeting with them every two or three weeks. We’d have lunch together, we’d talk about the covers for the books that Michael’s character would write, the outside of the house; everything, every piece of information that helped to have the boys be very prepared when they arrived. Then we had a week’s rehearsal a month ahead of shooting; and some more rehearsal; and a week ahead of actual shooting, we rehearsed. But then we actually shot it in consecutive order—for everything, absolutely; day one was scene one, all the way through to the end—over a period of twenty-three days. It was a twenty-three day shoot. Sometimes...

CAINE: The original was sixteen weeks. This was four weeks.

BRANAGH: Yes; sometimes we do...

CAINE: I’ve been trying to find out what we did for the other twelve weeks, Larry and I? (Laughter) What the hell were we doing? You know, because it was so fast, wasn’t it?

BRANAGH: Yes it was; and sometimes it was eight, nine pages of dialogue a day. Multi-coverage; I think we had two cameras at all times. But that intensity was very important, I think. The rehearsal got us very, very ready. We felt very prepared. But also partly, to do exactly what Michael’s talking about—which he’s an undisputed master of; and Jude, also terrific—at producing a kind of spontaneous quality on the day. A curious paradox, when it’s all about preparation up to that point; but the point of the preparation is to be entirely free and relaxed and natural and responsive and behavioral on the day. Not acting.

CAINE: It’s a contradiction really, because you spend a *great* deal of work and time trying to look like you’re not doing anything. You know, you’re just... I come from the Stanislavski school of drama, and the basis of that is: the rehearsal is the work, and the performance is the relaxation. So by the time I’ve said quite a simple sentence on screen, I’ve already said it at home a thousand times—because it has to become so second nature. You are a real human being.

BRANAGH: One of the interesting things about this was actually watching that technique in Michael and Jude. Endless, endless rehearsal; some of which was to do with us trying to find the kind of camera angles and the sort of visual vocabulary that would allow, from the beginning of the picture, the audience to be unsettled. To be away from them; to be shooting through glasses; where a glass of whiskey is already poured by someone who hasn’t yet asked the question, “What drink would you like?” or had the answer.

So that in this film, the first close-up doesn’t occur till about twelve minutes in, and it’s when Michael says (I shall paraphrase): “I understand you’re sleeping with my wife,” or words to that effect. It’s the first time we get to a close-up. Finding that through rehearsal, but also watching repetition; rehearsal that was to do with putting a flame under the character to try and have the marination process happen so that...

I just remember on Day One, it took on a new quality. Although Michael and Jude got on like a house on fire, they’d not worked together before, and shooting in chronological order meant that in

the first few days, (which represented the first few minutes of the film) the beginnings of their getting to know each other very well was working for the picture. Then you really saw the rehearsal suddenly become this sort of very, very natural and spontaneous technique.

SCHWARTZ: The idea of relaxation, I think, is so important. What I love about the performance is that you let the audience do a lot of work. You're not projecting too much, and we're seeing this really...

CAINE: No, you should—my view of movie acting is you should be a real person. If you're sitting watching this movie and you turn to your partner or someone sitting next to you and you said, "Isn't that Michael Caine a good actor?" then I have failed. You shouldn't be seeing Michael Caine, the good actor. You should be seeing [character] Andrew Wyke, and I should hold your attention until the end. If you want to say I'm a good actor at the end, that's okay; I don't mind. (Laughter)

BRANAGH: Yeah, please do that.

CAINE: But not during! (Laughter)

BRANAGH: Although I have to say—I'll contradict you Michael, and I rarely do, but I will—I remember on the day, a favorite moment of mine. When people ask, "Ooh, you know, that theater piece being transferred to the screen, how do you make that cinematic?" You could argue it's two men in a room arguing about a woman who's not there. How cinematic is that?

Well, I think it can be very cinematic, or some pretty interesting hybrid. But a cinematic moment for me is watching His Nibs here. When he fires the gun at the end of the first act at Jude Law, we hold Michael in a close-up, a profile close up, as he watches what he's just shot at. There's no music, it's just us watching a very massive close-up, in profile, of Michael Caine *looking*. I think it's one of the most riveting things I've ever seen. It's twenty-four seconds long. I remember saying to you on the day, "Don't—until your instinct absolutely tells you to—don't walk away." I also saw in his eyes a real relish. I could see a movie actor who really, master of his craft, knew a great moment in the drama. He appears to do nothing,

but it's so utterly riveting to me, and that seemed to me one of the things that actually makes the movie.

CAINE: Well, that's the thing, you see: "appears" to do nothing.

BRANAGH: "Appears" to.

CAINE: Real people don't do anything, do they? They talk to each other and they listen, and that's what you want to get, that feeling. The tree outside the window is real, so you'd better be real. The minute you start to act, you're in the toilet... or you get great reviews from bad critics. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: But the interesting complication about this play, and this material, I is that both of the characters are acting all the time. And so you're, as an audience...

CAINE: Oh, the whole thing is a performance, because he set everything up. So what it is, you're actually watching a writer (who is an amateur actor) giving the performance for another guy (who's also an amateur actor) and making the most of it, you know? These are real people, they're not professional actors. That's what you have... We're getting too far into the double thing. (Laughter) I'm beginning to get like Pinter, explaining this stuff. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: The directing style is very playful. I mean, you kind of announce that right at the beginning, in terms of camera angles and what you're doing. Could you talk about sort of the atmosphere of doing that on the set? Was it very thought out? Was there spontaneity in how you shot? And did that...?

BRANAGH: Well, I mean, you're always hoping to leave a bit of room for the great new idea on the day, but because of the tight shooting schedule I talked about, we had to be very prepared. Prepared through rehearsal that tried to accommodate everything that the boys were after, everything that Harold was after; but also trying to offer a visual landscape that let the audience be part of the game.

I mentioned the whiskey glass earlier on but also, for instance, right at the front, where a surveillance camera top shot in black and white in the day time sees this first meeting. The doorbell rings, and Jude talks to Michael, but we only see a hand come up. Michael's arm comes up. He will not move to the other character. I always had this image of Michael wearing the house; wearing it like a backpack. He's part of the walls; this house was an extension of his personality, both in that shot and also once we got inside. That all the art that you see on the walls; the sort of wire man sculptures by Antony Gormley, a very famous British sculptor... all of that was to try and create this kind of gladiatorial environment in which the actors could be very real, but create an atmosphere where the audience were in the game.

CAINE: Well, that was another thing with the set. In the first movie, you've got a lovely old English country house. You go inside, you've got a lovely old English interior, with bits and bobs, and lovely things, and cushions, and everything. In this one, you've got a lovely old English country house; you go in, you've got glass, steel and marble, you know. You're now in Pinter country. And Pinter (Kenny could tell you better than me) but Pinter only mentioned that it was very spare, in his script, inside. It wasn't "wood" and "glass". But it was Kenneth and the designer who actually made another character of the house—and a rather sinister one, at that, you know?—which was great.

BRANAGH: It was definitely one of the things to do with trying to make the cinema of it was to create the house as another character, and to create the woman we don't see as a very, very vivid extra character, as well. And you know, of course, Pinter appears in the film. For those who are not aware of what he looks like, Harold Pinter is the character in the television extract from one of Andrew's books, who suddenly appears to say, "Shut up, shut up!" and then slaps the other actor, who is me... and slapped me regularly over a series of long takes. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: So what can you tell us about the woman we don't see? Do you do the American style of acting where you have her whole biography imagined and...?

CAINE: Oh, you would have a back story with your own character. I always thought it was Nicole Kidman. (Laughter) Why not?

SCHWARTZ: Why not, yeah?

CAINE: I was going to ask her to do it. (Laughter) But we cut her out, so...

SCHWARTZ: The technology becomes—the house is a character in the film and the technology, I guess. What was it like, playing that?

CAINE: Well, the technology showed what a control freak this guy was. But that's another difference with the first movie, inasmuch as none of those things were invented in 1972, when we did that movie. If you think in terms of the way that (if you've seen the movie) the character that Larry played, if you brought a computer to him, he would be a person who'd say, "Oh, don't bring that near me. I'm not technical; I can't do that at all."

So it was that kind of thing which was the difference, and while I'm on that subject, there was also another thing. There was a tremendous class difference in the first one. There was a great deal to do with the separation of the class; him looking down his nose at someone who was working class. That was not only on screen in that one, it was in real life, because Larry was a lord, Lord Olivier. And he actually—I'd never met him before we started rehearsal, and before I did, he wrote me a letter saying, "You may be wondering how to address me when we meet." (Laughter) I hadn't been wondering that, but I thought, "This guy..." (Laughter) Never occurred to me!

SCHWARTZ: After receiving that letter you did...

CAINE: Never occurred to me! And he said, "From the moment we meet, you must call me Larry," which he always was. But I mean, that was, you know, it's a tremendous class thing, which Americans might not sort of understand, even; that someone would be given to thinking that I wouldn't know.

But if you cut to our one from the point of view of class, I am Sir Michael Caine, like he was a lord. But I wouldn't think of writing a letter to Jude

saying, "You may be wondering how to address me!" (Laughter) I might have got a rather nasty answer, you know. (Laughter) But do you know what I'm saying? Everything had changed so much, and this adaptation by Harold is so much of this time. It really is.

SCHWARTZ: You've talked a lot about the difference between this and the 1972 film, but did it mean anything to you that you were now playing the role, in a way, that Lawrence Olivier played, and that you were playing against...?

CAINE: Yes, it was great, and very important to me, because right from the start when I did the first one, I thought that Olivier's part was better than mine. Now I was playing it, so I was fine; I was very happy! (Laughter)

But Larry had a problem in rehearsals because he'd just been fired from the National Theatre, and was having a nervous breakdown, you know. So we screwed up a lot of rehearsals, and then he got into trouble, and then suddenly one day said to me, "I can't act with my own face," is what he said. "I can't act with my own face." And the next day he came in with a matchbox. He got the matchbox and opened the matchbox, and he got out a little moustache and he put it on; and that's the moustache you see on him in the movie. Suddenly, he was Andrew Wyke, and it was quite amazing. It was sort of like some kind of miracle thing. He went, "Bang!" and there he was. I thought to myself, "My God, he's got it. I'm in trouble." (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Is there an equivalent for you? Something that you find will just give you the character; that will let you inhabit the character? A physical thing?

CAINE: I was thinking of how I should dress in this film, and it was a rehearsal, to which Harold Pinter himself had come. Harold was sitting there in a black shirt, black tie and a black suit. I went, "That's me." (Laughter) And that was me. It's someone who is well-studied, without wanting to draw attention to himself—unless you were shrewd enough to really look, and you'd go, "Uh-oh, there's a guy in his own home waiting to meet me, and he's got a black suit, a black tie, and a

black shirt on. Is there something coming?" (Laughter) And there was.

SCHWARTZ: Since you've brought it up and it's so apparent in the film: the homoerotic element in that relationship is critical to this film. It creates a kind of vulnerability in your characters. Could you talk about playing that?

CAINE: Well, Harold wrote that, and it wasn't in the first film. I was wondering how far to take this, and I was slightly at sea a little bit about where I should go with this, and I told Kenny about my fears. The next day he brought in a real psychological tract—or treatise or whatever it was—on a psychological condition called "morbid jealousy". It went through murder; and then those who couldn't murder were trying to think of another way to humiliate the wife, would be to engage—and they quoted two or three cases of men who were not homosexuals, either of them—engaging in a final homosexual act, in order to put the woman right down. I thought that was...

Harold hadn't read that tract. He'd just invented that. So but if you look at it, in the first one, as we got on, Larry got camper and camper, you know. He sort of... his hand movements were more feminine, and it sort of came out sort of naturally when he was doing things like, "I think you're very nice, you're my type of person." You know? And if you get into that kind of relationship, it's very, very deep; with the hatred and the things that they did to each other. You know, shooting him, him putting the jewels on me and everything, and the humiliation of it. They're really into some rock bottom stuff that's going on here, you know?

BRANAGH: That kind of theme of—it seems that Harold is very, very interested in this story—about humiliation. The humiliation in Act One and Act Two that finally results in one set all between the two men. Then this potential humiliation may be the result of a genuine kind of homosexual disposition, in this case, in inviting Jude's character to live with him, or is it potentially the forerunner of some yet greater humiliation? Or is a humiliation simply if he takes the bait of Maggie?

It's one of the distinguishing features of this version, Harold's fascination with the idea of the

desire in competition—perhaps particularly between men—once the apparent sophistication has been stripped away, you know. First it is about loving the woman; then it's about possessing the woman; then it's about winning a fight; and then it seems to be about destroying or humiliating another human being when led astray by the irrational behavior that is produced in the wake of sexual jealousy or sexual humiliation. Humiliation seems to be a very key part of what fascinates him about the story.

SCHWARTZ: Now this is something—I know we just have a few minutes left, but I just wanted to ask, maybe to wrap up, for both of you—this material is so much, as I've said before, about acting and writing, directing. You've done all three; and you've acted, as I've said, in around a hundred films. What did doing this material, what did doing *Sleuth* teach you or make you think about these things?

BRANAGH: Well, I think you're right. It's a very, very Shakespearean theme, this idea of what is real, what is seeming, what is acting, and is it required by human beings, in order to function through life? During the course of this film, it seems layers are stripped off until perhaps you might argue what is real for the Andrew character is what he says at the end of the first act: "She's my wife, I'm her husband. You can't have her." And what Jude says at the end of the second act, when he gets his revenge and says, "You see, it was all a game. I thought you'd enjoy it. It was all a game." Are these the real moments? Or is the real moment in Act Three?

But along the way—certainly, from my point of view as a director—working with two excellent actors (and in this case, a sort of master of the art) to watch them peel those layers away and be

vulnerable, and be passionate, and be witty, be throw-away, be still, be direct, be quick, be slow, be ultra-sensitive to this very, very finely wrought language. As a director, it was an honor to be part of trying to guide it in some way; but actually selfishly, with my other hat on, to be able to watch, with *this* material, *these* people work as actors, meant that I felt I was involved in a sort of acting master class. I was just in receipt of it in very close quarters. So it's been a complete and utter privilege, in that way.

CAINE: Well, for me, a long time ago I read, by a famous writer whose name escapes me, he said, "Never compete with your predecessors and your contemporaries. Compete with yourself." This, for me, was something that was so deep and complex that I could really... It's very difficult competing with yourself. It's so hard to do things better than you did the last time. This was an opportunity to do something as well as I had ever done anything. Whether I did that, I don't know, but it was an incredible challenge for me, fighting against everything that I'd done before. It was tremendously satisfying to do something like that. The whole film was an adrenaline rush; but the exhaustion at the end of it was extraordinary. Neither Jude, Ken, nor I had anything left to give. I went home, and I don't think I spoke to anybody for two days because I didn't have anything to say. I was quite emotionally exhausted. I'd given myself, I thought, a very good run for my money. (Laughter and applause)

CAINE: Thank you very much.

SCHWARTZ: Thanks a lot.

BRANAGH: Thanks everyone, thank you. (Applause)

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