

A PINEWOOD DIALOGUE WITH GLENN CLOSE

Glenn Close's Academy Award-nominated performance as the vengeful siren Alex Forrest in the 1987 thriller *Fatal Attraction* ranks among one of the most memorable villains in screen history, and is the definitive depiction of the fury of a woman scorned. The hit film, directed by Adrian Lyne, captured the popular imagination and changed the cultural landscape with its terrifying take on modern sexual warfare. Glenn Close, a five-time Oscar nominee and three-time Tony Award winner, spoke at the Museum about her harrowing performance as Alex, and about how she overcame her shyness to forge her remarkable career on stage and screen.

Pinewood Dialogue following a screening of *Fatal Attraction*, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (September 22, 2005):

DAVID SCHWARTZ: Could you tell us about getting this role? I understand that you really wanted this role, you really went after the role of Alex Forrest.

GLENN CLOSE: Well, kind of yes and no. I read the script, and I couldn't put it down. It was a really good read. But I was kind of put off by the bunny boiling. (Laughter) I didn't think it was real, I thought it was exploitive, and you know, kind of far out. But then I couldn't get it out of my mind. I couldn't get the story out of my mind, and I kept thinking of that character. And then I think after a couple days, I told my agent, "I think I'd like to go for this." And I met Stanley Jaffe—who was with Sherry Lansing, one of the producers—and I met him in a hotel in New York. It was summer, and I had this little summer dress on, and I think I even had a little hat on... (Laughter) I can't remember. And I must have said something that intrigued him, but...

The next thing I had to do was go to California and do a session on video with Adrian Lyne and Michael Douglas, which, for an actor, is just death. It's just awful. You walk into a room and there's a video camera, and you want to kill yourself. (Laughter) And I didn't know what to wear. My hair was actually long at the time. I did go out and buy a great black cotton dress. And it was the eighties, so it had big shoulders. (Laughter) And it had a big, very cool elastic belt on the waist that made you look like you had a very small waist. So I had these

big shoulders and a small waist and kind of flared skirt. And I didn't know what to do with my hair. I *never* know what to do with my hair, obviously. And I thought, "Oh, should I straighten it or put it back?" And I said, "Oh, just let it go wild." And so I went there, and I had actually had some surgery, and was still in a little bit of pain. I was very, very nervous. And I took some valium. (Laughter) And I do not do well doing things like that. Now, I remember kind of staggering across the parking lot to get to this audition, thinking, "This is going to be a total disaster." And I walked in—and I think on the director's version DVD you can actually see what they say is a rehearsal, but it's actually my audition on video for the film.

SCHWARTZ: Now, the legend was that there was skepticism that this was the right role for Glenn Close, because you had played more wholesome characters. Could you talk about that?

CLOSE: Oh, yeah! I mean, I'd done Jenny Fields [in *The World According to Garp*]; (Laughter) and I had done *The Big Chill*, who was the mother figure; and I'd done *The Natural*, who was the angelic good woman. And Hollywood being Hollywood, they wondered if I could be sexy. And to me, it was just such a silly question. I just had never played a role where they had asked to be sexy. So I think in their minds, that was a big, big question.

SCHWARTZ: Talk about the process of making this character realistic. She's an outrageous character, but I don't think the film would work, if you didn't believe it in some way.

CLOSE: When I got the part, I went back to the bunny thing, which still was a problem. And so what I decided to do was to give the script to two psychiatrists, because I wanted to know, first of all, if that behavior was possible? And then if it was possible, what would create that kind of behavior? And I've never done as rigorous research on a character. And I ended up loving her. I don't think I ever asked the writer, but both of these doctors that I talked to said it was basically textbook behavior for a woman who had been incested pre-memory, at a very, very early age. And the damage that's done to women that that has happened to was *exactly* her behavior.

They changed the ending. Originally she didn't get a knife in her hand. Originally, she cut her throat. She killed herself. She was self-destructive. And that's who that character was.

SCHWARTZ: And that ending was—just didn't test well, or was not satisfying to audiences? Why was that ending changed?

CLOSE: Because being America, we like the family to stay intact, we like happy endings. (Laughter) And I think she was so upsetting. It was a time, in the eighties, that this film became a phenomenon because it touched a very raw, unexpressed, hidden nerve, having to do with gender; with men and women. And I think she upset people so much, that they didn't like the fact that she even got away through suicide. They needed revenge. They needed that catharsis. So they basically came back to me and said, "We're going to kill you." I mean, basically, the audience wanted my blood, and the re-shoot gave them my blood. It was terrible for me, and I think a total betrayal of who that woman was.

SCHWARTZ: What about the response to the film? Because the film—A) it was a great box office success; but it also sparked a lot of debate. There were, I'm sure, people who felt that Alex was portrayed as the villain and was a negative portrayal of a strong, sexy woman.

CLOSE: Well, see, I never thought of her as a villain. I was just trying to portray this certain, very specific character that I had grown to love very much. In your wildest dreams, you can't imagine that anything would have that kind of response. So that was thrilling. What was shocking to me were the

feminists who hated her, and the terrible violent reaction. It was shocking to me, because they said this was not good for single working women. (Laughter) And I said, "Well, she's not every single working woman. (Laughter) She's a very specific woman." So that kind of was shocking to me. And yet, when I went to the Oscars, there was this huge phalanx of women with Alex Forrest hair (Laughter) screaming for her. So she became, in some ways, this hero to some people.

SCHWARTZ: I don't know if it's just over time, but she really seems like the most dynamic and alive character in the film. I mean, she's the most sympathetic character, in a way.

CLOSE: I find her very [sympathetic]. I find her heartbreaking, because I understood—even with the ending, with the new ending—I still think she was a character in great pain.

It's funny: in the process of filmmaking, as an actor, you really have no control. You're very much at the mercy of the final edit, and sometimes finance... For example, there's a scene that occurs quite early on in the film, where I'm sitting on the floor turning the lamp on and off. That was a scene which came about because I went to Adrian Lyne, kind of two-thirds of the way through the film, saying, "I'm afraid the audience is going to forget that this is a human being in pain." And we shot that scene to be at the very end of the movie. But where they put it in was where a scene had been written where you saw me at the opera, with an empty seat next to me, listening to *Madame Butterfly*, [who] of course, is the jilted woman who kills herself. And I kept saying to Stanley, "When are we going to shoot that? When are we going to shoot that?" And he said, "Oh, no, we'll do it, we'll do it." Well, of course, they ran out of money, and they never shot it. So during the bowling game, they put this other scene, that actually had been for the end of the movie, in the beginning of the movie. And it killed me. Because it made her crazy much too soon—just out of control and desperate. That whole thing was not meant to be in the beginning of the movie. But you know, obviously, I had no control over it.

SCHWARTZ: I would think one of the fun things about doing this role was that it's sort of about acting, in a way. I love the scene early on when—after Michael Douglas fakes a heart attack, and then you come

and tell that story about seeing your father die. And it's just an act. And these constant switches that go on, and unexpected changes—I'm assuming that was a lot of fun to do.

CLOSE: That was fun, but it's also... Well, my secret story was that the father that she talks about is the one who had abused her. He's a very problematic figure for her. And he finds out at the very end that her father is indeed dead, because then she says, "No, he didn't die." But he's obviously somebody that she cannot come to terms with—it's probably [he who] who haunts her. And she makes jokes about it, and yet you find out at the end—he [Michael Douglas] sees the article, the newspaper article—that he's actually dead already.

SCHWARTZ: So in terms of your process, then, you really keep these stories and thoughts... I think I read in one interview with you that you have thoughts that the character would, that might not be expressed in dialogue, but they're just running through your head.

CLOSE: Right.

SCHWARTZ: And that comes across, I guess.

CLOSE: Starting out in theater, I was very intimidated when I first was given the opportunity to be in film. It was *The World According to Garp*. And I didn't know what to do with my energy, which I had been used to projecting to the back of the theater. If you do that on film, you'll blow the camera out, you know. So I felt very in limbo. And then you tend to kind of do too little. It took me a while. It was actually during *The Big Chill*, during a scene with JoBeth Williams, who I'm talking to about Alex (the character that's killed himself), when I started having an inkling of how powerful thought is on camera. If it's captured in your eyes—if the director has put the camera in the right place—a true thought is as powerful as dialogue. And silence and all that can be extremely powerful. And I think it's good to have secrets. Alex is not explained. Her behavior is not explained at all. They went to great lengths to try to make Michael as sympathetic as possible. (Laughter) And they didn't do much for me. (Laughter) But that was okay. That was the premise from the beginning.

SCHWARTZ: Now, you've said—we were talking a bit upstairs about how one of the important parts of your process is costumes; sort of finding your character through externals and through costumes. Could you talk about that—maybe in general, but also specifically with this film—how that helped you?

CLOSE: (Chuckles) I go around in blue jeans and old T-shirts, and I wouldn't even know where to shop for Alex Forrest. I find in film especially, where you don't have much of a rehearsal process—if any—that the initial sessions with the costumer and the fittings are—literally, you kind of see the character coming together, and I use it as a way to get into who this person is. One fabulous thing about *Fatal Attraction*, for me, was Adrian Lyne's passion for Alex Forrest and for her look. He had—for months, even before I was cast—been taking out pictures from magazines or wherever he could find them, that would have who he thought Alex was. So we spent a lot of time testing, doing different looks with hair, and subtle makeup. And it's wonderful to have a director care that much, because usually they don't. Funnily enough—you would think they would—but usually, they don't care who's doing your hair or your makeup, and they very—you know, every now and then, might come into the makeup trailer. But Adrian was passionate about it.

It's a very simple and little thing, but we felt that we had found her on the day that we filled in the dip in my lip, and it made her have this very sad upper lip. And it's a very subtle thing; we filled it in with a little pencil. And all of a sudden, you say, "There she is. She's here." And it was that one little thing that we finally—besides the hair and all that—it was that little subtle thing with the lip.

SCHWARTZ: Could you talk a bit about your choices, what you look for in choosing a role? And one thing I wanted to ask you about is the sense of risk. You've taken on some very adventurous, flamboyant roles, some great villains, great difficult roles. To do Norma Desmond onstage—to even take on that challenge of doing that role, where you can only imagine the film [*Sunset Boulevard*] and Gloria Swanson—but to take on such a big, flamboyant role... Could you talk about what you look for? What's your process like in picking roles?

CLOSE: I look for what I can only say is kind of elegant writing that has a certain kind of sparseness to it—that is about behavior. I think a lot of times, people—everybody sitting in this room—we're absolute geniuses in hiding 99% of what's going on in our lives. And the little hints that you get of what's really going on are usually—and sometimes, somebody's behavior could be the most unexpected thing—but it's rooted in something that usually ends up being very truthful, as far as human behavior.

I don't like people talking too much or explaining too much. I like writing that leaves, again, secrets—that you can have secrets, and those secrets can have resonance, even if it's subliminal, with the audience. And I think ultimately, I want to connect emotionally. I think I'm seduced by parts that I think have that potential to have a great emotional connection. And then you can only hope that—especially with film—that the camera will be in the right place.

SCHWARTZ: Okay, thanks. I do want to give the audience a chance to ask questions, so if you want to ask either about what we just saw, or any work, go ahead. (Repeats audience question) Did you or Michael Douglas sustain any injuries during those brutal fight scenes or love scenes?

CLOSE: Yeah, I had a minor concussion. Two things: the scene where he's strangling me, there was one take where he kind of forgot himself, and I thought I was going to pass out. And it was very frightening to me, because I think my main fear is to suffocate, and I'm very claustrophobic. So that was very traumatic for me. And then in the ending, when he smashes me against the medicine cabinet, I think it gave me a bit of a concussion. And the whole thing in the bathtub was very difficult.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Okay, two questions: would the film have the same impact if it was released today? And a comment on the hair: We all wore Alex Forrest's hair—[it was] a very influential film.

CLOSE: I don't know what impact it would have today, because I think it came out in such a perfect time... you know, in the context of the times, I can't answer that question, not being a sociologist or whatever it is. Everybody seems much more aware

of film and much more jaded, I would think. (Laughs) But I don't know. I can't answer that. And the hair was—just as I was saying—it was the passion of Adrian Lyne. I happen to have naturally wavy hair, and it was long and unkempt, and he liked it. Lynie Quiyou did my hair, who I'd known since beginning in theater. I had a body perm, and she gave order to some of it, with these great spiral things that she would put in my hair. But I think that was Adrian, really, who just let it be.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I wonder if the producers would let you do your own stunts if you were shooting it today?

CLOSE: No, I think they would. I like doing my stunts as much as possible, because I just think... you don't think somebody moves the way you do. And again, my dad is a doctor, and all through my career, I've called him up about [questions like]: "If somebody's trying to strangle you in the bathtub, (Laughter) what really happens? And what would your body do?" And I found out from him that your throat actually constricts, and you pass out; and then when you come to, you can have these epileptic feelings. So all that is in the movie.

SCHWARTZ: So you asked him how long you could stay underwater, until you're nearly dead?

CLOSE: Yeah, that's the one lie of the film. She'd be dead if she was under [there]. And it's not natural. Your body would come up, and you'd break the surface, and you'd come to. And I think it was Adrian's homage to that movie...

SCHWARTZ: *Diabolique*.

CLOSE: *Diabolique*, where they're consciously keeping themselves down. They're not passed out, like she is. So I kept saying, "Adrian, it's not real! What difference does it make if my nose comes through the water?" But no, he didn't want it.

I did have a stunt girl. The only thing I couldn't do was to have him take my neck and go like this. (Laughter) So she's doing that. But I worked my way into doing everything else.

They had several bathtubs. They had one bathtub with an acrylic side that they could shoot through. They had this phenomenal bathtub—they soldered

together two bathtubs and made them very deep, so that the cameramen could lie on the bottom of the tub with a camera looking up. And then they had the regular set, which for the... It's very funny, actually. We started shooting the second ending [at a studio] in the sixties on the West Side. And we went over, and they kicked us out. We ended up shooting my death and all that in the basement of the Unitarian church in Bedford, New York. (Laughter) Really. I kept saying, "Do they know what we're doing down here?" (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) The question about the death of Jenny Fields [Close's character in *The World According to Garp*, who is assassinated at a political rally]—were you truly distraught by that, and how did that compare [to *Fatal Attraction*]?

CLOSE: There were days with Alex Forrest that they had to carry me to the car, because it was just so physically demanding. It was different for Jenny, because John Lennon had been assassinated just months before. And I was playing a character who is assassinated. And it just freaked me out. I could do the first take. They rig you up with a little squib, and you feel this little kind of thing on your chest. If you ever see the film again, you only see a kind of mid-shot. You never get a close-up, because I couldn't do it again. I started going like that (Gestures, laughs) because it was so freaky knowing that somewhere in that crowd—even if it was the prop guy—that somebody was pointing a gun at me. That was hard. I just couldn't keep my face from... I was anticipating it too much.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: How did you prepare yourself for the sex scenes? Was it very difficult for you?

CLOSE: I worked out a lot. (Laughter) I'm of the theory that if you work out and your body looks great, who cares? (Laughter) So I was really buff. I was doing like five pull-ups, and I'm very muscular naturally. And I remember the wonderful day when Adrian Lyne said, "I think you've lost enough weight." (Laughter) He said, "You're losing weight, you're losing weight," and then, "Don't lose any more weight."

You just don't think about it. But that scene in the kitchen was something that Adrian didn't shoot for a long time, because he didn't know how to shoot

it; he hadn't come up with his inspiration for it. And he wanted it to be different; he wanted it to be sexy. And then I remember one day, he said, "Kitchen sink, kitchen sink." You know, "We'll do it in the kitchen sink. There'll be pigeons; we'll keep pigeons in the window." (Laughter) And that was fun, because it was not run-of-the-mill, and it made it comic as well as kind of real; it was kind of awkward and silly and, you know... So it was fun.

But it's a strange dynamic that happens on a movie set if you're with people whose talent you really respect and [whom] you're asked *instantly* to trust. And as an actor, there are ways that you can be looking into someone's eyes and at the same time say, "It's okay. You can love me, and I'll be okay. You can trust, and you can go as far as you want, and it will be okay." And I think in a scene like that, it was a fantastic crew. You knew that you were in a protected space, even though you were exposed.

I tell you that one of the hardest scenes I have ever had to film was the one where I said, "I will not be ignored." And I think back on that, and it was agony for me. At one point, I couldn't find it; I felt really uncomfortable. I remember we stopped, and Adrian had all the crew go out. I think we worked on some of the lines, I think we cut some stuff. And looking back on it, I think I was feeling—I was in that teddy, it's not the kind of thing I kind of go around wearing all the time—I felt incredibly vulnerable and exposed as an actor. And it was what was the scene was. So looking at the scene now, I think it's something that people remember, because it kind of has a truth to it. But it was very hard for me to separate myself from the character. Funnily, it wasn't [being] naked—it was wearing that flimsy piece of underwear. It made me even feel almost more exposed.

SCHWARTZ: Was it maybe a rawer scene? I mean, some of the other scenes did have this little bit of comedy that might have helped cut some tension—Michael struggling with his pants around his ankles...

CLOSE: Yeah, yeah.

SCHWARTZ: Over here. (Repeats audience question) Okay, you're reading...

CLOSE: ...Harold Guskin's book. He's a wonderful coach, an acting coach.

SCHWARTZ: [Guskin] says that you're a shy person, but how do you...

CLOSE: Well, / say I'm a shy person. (Laughs)

SCHWARTZ: Okay, *you* say you're a shy person, but you don't seem to be onscreen.

CLOSE: No, it's really interesting, A lot of the actors that I know, whose talent I respect, I would say are shy people. It's kind of this weird thing that you can't do in a room with three people what you can do in a theater full of hundreds, or on a movie set, you know, with lights and cameras. I'm not sure what that is, but why I went to Harold initially was, first of all, I was terrible at auditioning, and I got sick of that. So I wanted his help in that. But also in the initial reading of a character, I could feel shy in front of that character. And I needed help in just screwing up my courage in a room with one person and saying those words, and owning those words, and slowly kind of getting myself under their skin.

The Marquise de Merteuil in *Dangerous Liaisons* terrified me. And yet I had to play her. And it's like meeting another human being: it's not an instant thing. I've learned to give myself time. It's like knowing someone else. And then you hope that you can find some unexpected little window—some little key to whom that person is, or where that connection will happen. And a lot of times, you don't know what that's going to be, [whether it's] where you put your voice, or how they walk, or whatever. But what I love about actors—about *all* actors, about acting as a profession—is I think they're some of the bravest people I've ever seen. And even bad actors are brave. (Laughter) Because it takes guts to go out there and do what actors do. And I used Harold to kind of get brave, because sometimes I needed that.

SCHWARTZ: One description I read about your process was that you jump out a window, and then sort of figure it out on your way down—or jump into it, and let the character define you somehow.

CLOSE: Did I say that?

SCHWARTZ: I think so. (Laughter) Or it was said that you said that. Or I think, actually, [it was] a friend of yours describing how you work—making a leap. Also, I think another way that it was put was that you don't define your character, that you let the character define you—that you don't "do" Glenn Close. I don't know if you think it's true that you "lose yourself" in a character, or what the best way to put that is?

CLOSE: I think if you lost yourself in the character, you'd end up in Bellevue. (Laughter) But yes. I mean, it's really different, stage and screen. The main difference for me is the rehearsal process for theater is a fantastic working out of the whole universe where the character is; and then you learn how to kind of move around in that. And I'm rehearsing, I'm always very distracted, and thinking all the time, just thinking.

For me, film is one long rehearsal. It's *all* rehearsal. And so I'm distracted most of the time. In theater, you get to a point where you can kind of forget it, and then you come in the theater, you do the performance, and it's there. You know the territory. [In] film, you don't do a complete performance every day—it's a section of it. And you hope, you only hope, that you can find it. The great thing about film is that you only need one good take. The terrible panic is when you feel that you don't have it, and time is ticking away. And that's when you hope that you have a director who somehow can whisper something in your ear, and give you a little tiny direction or idea that will just say, "Oh!" And then all of a sudden, it's there. But that's a terrifying feeling.

My wonderful friend István Szabó, who's a Hungarian director—I was doing a difficult scene with him once, and I was really starting to panic, losing my courage a little—I *have* learned you have to keep jumping off the cliff; you can't lose your courage—and he came up, and he said, "Not to worry, not to worry. We're waiting for the angel." (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: One thing that you do is you really have moved in your career between roles where you're really out front and center as the star, the main character; and then you've done a lot of wonderful ensemble films and ensemble work, including the television show that you just did; your new movie, *Nine Lives*, which is a wonderful ensemble piece; of

course, *The Big Chill*. So what is the difference for you? Or do you see a difference?

CLOSE: Well, usually in an ensemble piece, you have a smaller part. (Laughter) So you don't have to worry about carrying the whole movie. (Laughs) What is the question?

SCHWARTZ: Well, just if it's a different process for you when you're doing a project like *Nine Lives*, for example?

CLOSE: Well, our director of *Nine Lives* is here tonight, Rodrigo Garcia. [The film has] nine different stories. Each story is told in one continuous take. And, you know, I only did my little story, and saw everyone else's work at Sundance this year; and it was one of the things that really made me proud to be an actor. Sissy Spacek, Aidan Quinn, Kathy Baker, Holly Hunter, Joe Mantegna. It's just incredible work, because of Rodrigo and his words. But anyway, I would much rather be in an ensemble, surrounded by fabulous people, than have to carry something myself. I think acting is reflection, and reflecting *off* of somebody, and certainly, collaborative. So some of my best, most fun times have been with a group.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Okay, what inspired you to become an actress, and what advice would you give to these aspiring actors down in front?

CLOSE: I wanted to be an actress since I was really young. [I] didn't see a lot of film—didn't see theater at all. Mostly watched Walt Disney (Laughs)—and, you know, *Old Yeller* and *Littlest Outlaw* and *Snow White*—some of those great classics. We lived in the country. We ran around, a little gang of us, pretending we were cowboys... I was just talking to Rodrigo tonight. I think I was very lucky that I was compelled to do it. And why? I don't know—it might [have been] genetic. I had two fabulous grandmothers who should've been actresses.

My advice? That's a toughie. I don't know if I have any advice. You know, everyone's life is different. It's tough. You have to have that crazy, unreasonable belief in yourself; and yet you still have to kind of have an objectivity about what you need, and where to go and... Just try to find work. I know how hard that is, so... good luck.

SCHWARTZ: The last question, right here. (Repeats audience question) Okay, so just specifically about the working process with Adrian; sort of shooting a scene, and if there's anything that makes him unique as a director?

CLOSE: Well, I don't know if I can do that, because it was a while ago. I don't know if I can do kind of a beat-by-beat thing. But what Adrian did... He was so on his game. Wildly creative. He also—which I think was important in the whole chemistry of the set—he had two very strong producers supporting him, and pulling him back when he needed to be pulled back. They gave him a strong structure, and if he had to knock heads with somebody, they were there. We never knew, if there *were* any fights, what they were about—it had nothing to do with us. I think it really helped Adrian to have some really strong producers around him.

He just, for me, was able to help me out of—help me find the truth. The scene where I have slit my wrists, and you don't discover it until you see it on his face—I remember there was a certain stage direction in the script that, I think, said she laughed. I try to make everything that the writer writes work, and I was trying to make that moment work, laughing. And it just wasn't hacking it. You know, again, you think, "Where to go?" Or, "What's going on here?" And then I think he glommed onto that, and he said, "Don't—throw that all out—don't worry about that." And the truth of that moment is that she's terrified. She has just cut her wrists; it's a desperate attempt to get help. When I didn't have to worry about the fulfilling this one little [stage direction]—sometimes I can get really stupid about that—all of a sudden I felt very free to let the moment happen.

My friend Chris Walken, the first thing he does is just get a big fat black Sharpie, and he scores out all the stage directions—and the punctuation. (Laughter) So it's just little tiny things like that that can really be difficult. And yet, you know... Adrian can help—he helped me out of it. He helped me get over the hump. That's not [answering] your question, because I don't know if I can really do that.

SCHWARTZ: What's amazing is that this film has certainly stood the test of time, because this is a vibrant, powerful performance today, eighteen

years later, after it came out. So thanks for being with us to share it and to talk about it. (Applause)

CLOSE: Thank you.

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