

American Film Institute

A Dialogue With George Cukor

Question: We've been inundated lately with articles on the return of women's films and the rise of new young actresses. In fact, you're at work yourself on a film about a woman. But in all this barrage of print, too little credit is given to you for the extraordinary number of fine performances you've drawn from actresses in your films over the years. Do you regard yourself as a woman's director?

George Cukor: Oh, that's such a cliché. Among other things, I did direct a picture called *The Women*, with nothing but women in the cast. But I must point out that I've directed some men, too, among them Jack Barrymore, Spencer Tracy, Ronald Colman, Jack Lemmon. The point is that I made many pictures when the studios were promoting the idea of the movie queens, when there were a number of distinguished and exciting actresses working in films. I became associated with several of these ladies—Katharine Hepburn and Greta Garbo, to name two—and I suppose the label has stuck ever since.

Now there's a new spate of so-called women's pictures, which do contain some marvelous roles for actresses. But I deplore this labeling; there really is no such thing as a woman's picture or a woman's director. Pictures like *Julia* and *The Turning Point* are about the human heart, the human experience. What is dismaying is how women have been shunted aside for so long in films, how they've been assigned such limited roles.

Question: Have you had any specific problems in working with actresses?

Cukor: As a matter of fact, women are much more realistic than men. I'd rather handle 10 women than 10 men, because they have less vanity, curiously enough. They're perfectly realistic, and they're tougher, too, in a way.

Question: Could you describe your working relationship with such actresses as Katharine Hepburn or Greta Garbo or Maggie Smith?

Cukor: That's a whole story. I'd be here 10 weeks. I think every director has certain ways of coping with things. You have to treat every actress differently. Mind you, these three ladies are enormously accomplished. The director has to know how much to say and when to shut up and what influence he has. They have to respect you, and they have to believe what you say. Then, too, you have to have a grip on the whole film, and you have to deliver the goods. There should be no bullying on either side. And I think they should trust you, so that when you say something they don't question it. They should know that you're a very sympathetic and intelligent audience. Sometimes these ladies, great as they are, are stuck, and you can unravel certain things. It's not the same working with an absolutely inexperienced actress; you have to use different methods. You are, in a sense, coaching. A lot of wonderful directors aren't interested in that and they can't do it, but I rather like working with young people.

Question: Could you compare working for, say, MGM in the '30s with the industry today?

Cukor: Have you got a week? I want to tell you something in principle. There are all sorts of very authoritative-sounding books about how it was in those days, written by people who were not there. There's this cliché in their writing: "Oh, how could you live in that factory? How awful it was! You had no freedom of expression. They were crass and commercial. Now we can express ourselves with no restraints." Well, I do want to say something for the studio system, and I was not a company boy. I think the producers and studio executives were very smart showmen. They provided you with all kinds of things. You could have the best stories, the best actors, the best technicians, the best scripts. You were helped enormously.

Also, there were intelligent restraints: people were not allowed to indulge themselves. A director couldn't say to a producer, "Get out of here! I'm going to do this my way! I don't want to see you at all!" I think those relationships with people you respected were very salutary. That's all gone. It's in the past; it'll never happen again. But I do want to say that

when people think about the studio system they should realize it was not a prison; it was not full of buttonhole makers, people who didn't know anything, who were crass, who crushed artists into the ground. That was not the case. It was tough, but certainly no tougher than it is now.

I worked with these tycoons, and if you had anything at all to give they encouraged you. Why? Because it was to their advantage. They realized that talent was the coin of the realm, and they were very sympathetic to it. Irving Thalberg, if he had any faith in someone, would go with them a long, long way. I find nowadays it's a little too opportunistic. "You're a genius. You're wonderful"--and then, if things don't go well, you're thrown to the dogs.

Question: Have you had to change the ways you used to work? Do you enjoy working in the industry today as much as you did in those days?

Cukor: Yes, I do. That's the happy thing. When I was doing *The Blue Bird*, the press was asking all these rather silly questions, and they said, "Have you found your bluebird?" I thought, that's rather corny and then suddenly I said, "Yes, I have, I found two bluebirds." I said that when I was very young I had a notion of what I wanted to be, not in the movies but in the theater. I wanted to have some connection to the theater. What, I did not know. And I became passionately interested in the theater and in my work. Now, at my advanced age, with my blood vessels bursting and everything, I am still as interested. Every time I go to a studio, every time I do a picture, every time I have a conference of any kind, I'm interested. Second, I have the luxury, if I know when I don't want to do something, of saying no. The luxury of choice is a great luxury. In all my studio pictures, they never forced me to do anything. I also turned down some very good things rather in the wrong way, but it is still important to have that freedom of choice.

From time to time I admire pictures that I would simply not be very good at directing myself. The important thing, however, is that you imagine that what you are doing is

unique in some way and that you're fitted for it. Mind you, we do get limited and we are all amused by different things. And sometimes we get stereotyped.

When I first came to Hollywood from New York, I was regarded as one of those witty, cynical theater types. Maybe I was wisecracking a bit too much, but for whatever reason I got this reputation as a director with no heart. Then I did some pictures like *Little Women* and *David Copperfield*, and suddenly I became known as a director of costume pictures. Now I'm known as a woman's director because I've been fortunate to work with several great ladies. You see how it works?

We do have limitations, but some of them are imposed. As a woman's director, I'm not expected to be able to do a Western, but I did do a Western—of a kind. That was *Heller in Pink Tights*.

Question: Have you encountered more problems in working outside the studio system?

Cukor: You're all on your own, which is in a sense a very good thing. You can't just telephone and have a department send up this and clear all the rights to that. You were pampered, and now you haven't got everything at your fingertips and you have to fend for yourself. Some of that can be very stimulating.

I'll tell you what is sad. The studios had the most wonderful technicians. They created 75 years of absolute technical perfection. Well, these people have retired and died. I'm sure there are all kinds of new ones, but the studio people were of a dazzling brilliance. Also, they had something in their spirit, which was wonderful. They had a stake in the picture; they wanted the picture to be right; and they were with you all the time.

Question: You spoke before of the changes in American acting over your 40 years in films. Do your views also apply to the film scene in general?

Cukor: It's changed. I deplore that it's limited. I deplore the enormous vulgarity and monotony of it. I think using four-letter words is not very witty. It doesn't reveal much of the range of human experience. There are so few films made today that deal with hope or heroism, with admirable things. All of that has been replaced with a cheap brand of cynicism. Humanity has been replaced with melodrama. That's best exemplified in "disaster" pictures.

I've been reading something about the very early movies, and I've come to realize that those people tried every damn thing in the world. Those films had such a range! Now we're trying to play it safe, which is apparently what the audience wants. They want *Star Wars*, but they'll soon get fed up with that and want something else. I think that films are, in a sense, dehumanized now. You're rarely caught up in the affairs of the heart, which are so important.

Question: It's been said that you're a director who accepts assignments and executes them as well as he can without deep personal involvement.

Cukor: I don't see how you can do a picture without personal involvement. I don't see how it's possible. Maybe you delude yourself, but you must put some feeling into your work. Otherwise you become some kind of routine mechanic.

Question: But is it possible to become too closely involved with a project? Perhaps this is a problem for directors who also write their scripts, who lose a sense of proportion about their film.

Cukor: There should be some discipline so that you don't believe that your film is the second coming of Christ. I am not a writer. I influence the writing on my films; I'm full of cheap advice. I've always tried to work on material that has some sort of class but that I sign.

Question: Do you feel that the kind of writing you worked with during the '30s and '40s—from authors such as Philip Barry and John Collier—is missing from today's films?

Cukor: Yes, because that style of writing is not in fashion today. I have recently seen some glorious pictures written from a very unique point of view. Woody Allen, for example, has become a marvelous writer and director as well. *Annie Hall* is a comedy of ideas, but it's done with such a light touch.

I'll tell you what I don't believe in: improvisation. I think it's a lot of crap, because I can always tell when people are improvising. I believe firmly in the text.

Question: That attitude may come as a surprise to those who know about your affection for the films of Paul Morrissey, which are, after all, largely improvised.

Cukor: I admire Morrissey's films because I don't know how he does them. You see how this improvisation drives me mad. Mind you, I think Morrissey's work is much more disciplined than he gives out. I think he's awfully shrewd about the people he selects for his films.

But on the subject of improvisation, once the text has been completed I regard it as being absolutely immovable. That doesn't mean you can't place an implant where needed, but if you want to get any kind of tempo, any kind of distinction, it's awfully important to stick to the text and make it look like an improvisation.

Judy Holliday was special in that regard. I watched her work in *Born Yesterday* and *The Marrying Kind*, and if Garson Kanin had written in so much as a question mark then she read it as a question. She stuck to every "if," "and" or "but," but it came out as fresh as if it had never been written. The point is, if you do have distinguished material like *My Fair Lady*, you're not going to do a lot of wandering.

Question: Many of your films have been adaptations of successful plays, such as *My Fair Lady*. In directing for film, were you conscious of "opening up" the story?

Cukor: You can't pull the play apart or make it something quite different. But you do have to move it, sometimes very subtly. On the stage, *Born Yesterday* took place in one room. In the film, we shot at the Washington Monument and the Library of Congress, but we were also careful not to discombobulate the whole thing. In the film *My Fair Lady*, as Eliza and the maids sing "I Could Have Danced All Night," Eliza dances up the stairs, and the maids put her to bed. On the stage, the scene had been confined to the set, and she fell asleep on the couch. There can be certain movement without violating the scene or the play. *The Philadelphia Story* was another adaptation in which some adjustments were made. Although the play contained no scenes in the library, we shot some there and in other portions of the house to give the film some movement.

Question: In *Camille*, it seemed that every dress Greta Garbo wore said something about the scene. Do you approve the costumes for each scene?

Cukor: The choices are submitted, and I know what scenes we are to play in them. I do have something to say about them. Certain costumes can ruin a scene if they're inappropriate. I saw a good picture with Anne Bancroft, in which she wore a big fur coat. She didn't seem to realize that she had to play long, long scenes in it, and that fur coat became so intrusive. So you do have to know what costume is going to work in each scene.

Question: Was the use of the handkerchief in *Camille* something you thought of?

Cukor: No, but when you're dying of TB it's a handy thing to have. The key to Garbo's performance was her ability to suggest that she was dying of some fatal disease. When you first saw her she had this dry, little cough, and she'd clear her throat. You knew something was wrong, because she was such an imaginative actress. There was only one

scene where she had difficulty catching her breath, but she was very discreet about the whole thing. She suggested that with her own personality, and she did it with taste.

Question: How did you come to direct *Camille*?

Cukor: Garbo had two more pictures to do under her contract to MGM. The studio asked me whether I preferred *Pani Walewska* or *The Lady of the Camellias*. I wanted to do *The Lady of the Camellias*, although even at that time it was very old-fashioned. But it was a great part for Garbo; she was born to play it.

Question: The story seemed valid enough, but the dialogue was very stilted.

Cukor: I don't agree with you. It was written by a very fine author, Zoe Akins, and she developed a language for that tradition of drama. The film would have lost some of its impact if it hadn't used that language. And I thought it had a kind of wit.

Question: I wasn't convinced by the ease with which Armand's father talked Marguerite into giving his son up.

Cukor: That is the phoniest scene in the whole movie and the most difficult thing for modern audiences to swallow--"you've been a bad woman, and therefore you've been consigned to the outer reaches of hell." But it was not the dialogue; it was the scene. I'm amazed we got away with it. *Camille* is a true and tried piece of work that can seem hackneyed unless the actress is really gifted and there's a happy meeting of the actress and the part.

Question: And Garbo gave an extraordinary performance. How did you bring that out? Did you leave that in her hands?

Cukor: With Garbo you must create a climate in which she trusts you. Before he died, Irving Thalberg saw a couple of days' rushes and said, "She's awfully good. She's never

been this good." I said, "Irving, she's just sitting there." He said, "But she is relaxed, she's open." There was a kind of gaiety in this particular performance, a kind of unguarded quality that is missing from a great many of her performances.

I'm always suspicious of these schools where young actors are told, "Oh, we'll train you how to feel things." Well, if they can't feel anything they should not be actors; they should stop acting. I don't think anybody has to teach you that. A school may be able to teach how to express feelings more expertly, but you cannot teach an actor how to feel; that is absolute nonsense.

Question: The race scene in *My Fair Lady*—was that deliberately stagy? It's extraordinary.

Cukor: That was the intent. It wasn't to be realistic.

Question: Did you ever consider shooting it any other way?

Cukor: No. I think it would have violated the style of the thing. The whole scene was as stylized as "On the Street Where You Live." It has its own kind of realism. I grabbed as much as I could from the stage, and that's also a trick: to take something from the stage and not make it stodgy, to make it flow. But this scene had a kind of slightly artificial style. The songs were written that way. We had scenes in Covent Garden which were more or less realistic, and then the horseracing scene was like a ballet.

Question: Is there anybody that you haven't directed that you think you might like to?

Cukor: Yes, yes, yes. I think there are a lot of very talented young actors and actresses around. I think American actors are the most talented in the world, but they have very little training. That's the sad part of it. But they have physical looks and a special kind of temperament.

Question: I was thinking of contemporaries of yours, like Bette Davis.

Cukor: Bette Davis I did direct—disastrously. I had a stock company in Rochester during the '20s. She was a young actress, but apparently she was too young for the parts and was fired. Well, that became a big trauma for her. I met her years later, and I said, "For heaven's sake, Bette, don't always talk about how I fired you. We've all been fired, and we all will be before we're through." Katharine Hepburn was talking to Dick Cavett a couple of years ago, and he said, "You've never worked with Laurence Olivier." And she said, "No, but we're not dead yet. " And then, of course, they did *Love Among the Ruins*. I'll say the same thing about Bette Davis. She may try to escape me, but you never know what happens.

Question: Was *Love Among the Ruins* your first film for television?

Cukor: Yes, that was my first and only one. I had a very happy experience with it. I asked the people at ABC, "How does one film for television?" They said, "Shoot it just the way you would shoot a picture." So that's the way I did it.

The script had originally been written for the Lunts. James Costigan, a very gifted man, had written it about seven years ago, but the Lunts decided they weren't going to work anymore, so it was eventually sent to Kate Hepburn, and she rather liked it. She sent it to me, and I liked it, and then she said—she was very clever—she said, "You know, the male part must be played by somebody in the public's eye, someone very, very important." Then we eliminated this actor and that actor, and I finally went to Europe and gave the script to Olivier. Although I'd known him for all these years—so had she—we never worked together. It turned out to be a most happy combination. If you hear of any more television offers, send them over to me.

Question: You didn't modify your style in any way?

Cukor: Not at all. Costigan had written it for television. There were no battlefields. Much of it was set in a courtroom. You didn't feel restricted, and it was discreet in its movement.

Question: Hasn't Costigan written the screenplay for your new film, *Vicky*?

Cukor: Yes. It's about Victoria Woodhull, who was something of a nineteenth-century adventuress. It's a Cinderella story: she was born to a very poor family, educated herself, and eventually became involved with all sorts of social causes, including women's rights.

Question: Wasn't she an advocate of free love?

Cukor: She not only advocated it but she practiced it very generously. She was also the first woman to run for president. Faye Dunaway is playing her.

Question: Would you talk about your experience working in the Soviet Union on *The Blue Bird*?

Cukor: I liked the Russians personally, but they were not very well organized. In fact, the project might have been more carefully prepared from the American side as well. I found that Russian filmmakers work much more slowly than we're used to. Time seemed to mean nothing to them.

We did encounter some intolerable working conditions. We had difficulty in obtaining the right equipment, for one thing. Certain performers had other commitments, and they could be on the set for only a limited number of days. I never had the full use of the cast at any one time. It was a long and sometimes painful experience, but a very interesting one nevertheless.

Question: Can one learn to be a good director?

Cukor: I think you have to have an instinct for it, a gift for it, and then you can train yourself. Life trains you, and experience trains you. I think Arthur Rubinstein said, "First you have to have talent." But, curiously, talent is not always obvious. I think you can learn to be a director, but I don't think you can learn to be a very good director.

I don't think you should limit yourself to certain genres or milieus. I think you should try to experiment. You should not limit yourself or you become stultified. Be adventurous, but, of course, with some sense of reality. You shouldn't say, "There's nothing I can't do," because you know damn well there are things you can't. You can do it all in a very routine way. But when you try to do something you should think, "I think I can do this as well as anybody, maybe even better."

Question: Can you think of a particular directorial problem you have had in any film which you solved in a very effective way?

Cukor: There are problems everywhere. Let's say automatically there are problems. You get to solve them sometimes, and other times they defeat you. In *Love Among the Ruins*, there was a scene near the end, and I thought Hepburn did it too tearfully in an early take. I said, "You're going to cry eventually. Don't cry now, don't break here." And she said, "Well, I'll do it, but with grave doubts." She came in matter-of-factly and cried exactly on cue. And the scene worked. You've got to know where an actor is inclined to do this wrong and see how you can talk them out of that. She very often would say, "Well, if you think so." And when she tries it, I'm always right.

Question: Are you aware that Jacques Demy's films, like *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, seem almost like a tribute to a certain kind of Hollywood film that you made?

Cukor: I don't put myself in a class with Jacques Demy. Why don't you ask Mr. Demy some questions?

Jacques Demy: I didn't hear the question.

Question: Are your films an homage to Mr. Cukor?

Cukor: Oh, no, no.

Demy: Oh, yes. Mr. Cukor is absolutely loved in France, and there is a sort of cult of his films. At the French Cinémathèque we see all of them.

Cukor: Even the bad ones?

Demy: Everything.

Cukor: Well, everybody is influenced by everybody else. Now, maybe when Jacques was a baby in his mother's arms he saw certain pictures I did.

Demy: I saw *Camille* when I was 9 years old.

Cukor: It changed your life, yes?

Question: For you, is there a George Cukor style?

Demy: Certainly, certainly. In all the works you've discussed, it's true what has been said about elegance and character and his being a woman's director. In your films, women are really exceptional.

Cukor: They're not bad in your films.

Demy: But on the question of style, there is definitely a Cukor film. Whoever the writer, the actor or whatever, it is a Cukor film, with a special feel and look to it.

Cukor: I'm not aware of that. I just do a day's work. I'm not thinking, "Oh, this one's going to knock 'em dead," although I hope it will. But you do whatever you can. It's all filtered through one's sensibilities, what you think is funny, what you think is touching, those things. All of you, when you work, you'll find that out. I just try to tell the story as best I can.

I wish you all the luck in the world. Don't be too highbrow. Just get in there and work. If you can get jobs and get experience, that is the greatest thing. There are an awful lot of kicks in the ass as you go up the hill, and just have courage. It's not an easy life. It's a happy life, not an easy life.

For this dialogue, Cukor was joined briefly by the French director Jacques Demy.

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