## Interview with Jeff Arch

**Did you have any idea that *Sleepless in Seattle* would be such a major hit?**

This is going to sound arrogant, or something like arrogant if not exactly that – but the night I got the idea, the story sort of all dropped down into place piece by piece. And then, the minute I thought of the title, I knew it. I remember thinking to myself, if I pull this off it's going to be a monster. I just had this really strong sense that the right people were going to come along and steer it, and that also the wrong people were going to show up too, but the thing would be strong enough to shake them off. And that if any negative elements remained, they'd be like barnacles on a ship – a hassle, and something that needs to be dealt with, but nothing that can stop the momentum.

This all happened in the space of about an hour or two, on a freezing cold January night. I was living in Virginia at the time, and I was looking up through a skylight and the stars were just amazing that night. And I told myself, "for every star in the sky there's a good idea." And then, I am not kidding, it was like one at a time, these shooting stars would come right down through that skylight and land in another part of the story. I have never had a single experience as exciting as whatever was going on that night. "Exciting" can't even begin to describe it. And then later on, for the entire time I was writing the movie, that same feeling was there - something was going on that was way bigger than I was. I know I'm making this sound like I had discovered the Theory of Relativity or something, and obviously this was a lot less world-shaking than that. But I'm not Einstein, and for me this was just as big. I felt so lucky to be the one that got that idea – I felt like anybody else that had been up that night might have gotten it instead if I hadn't been there – but as it was, I had this sense that I was being trusted with something, and that I had better not mess it up. Where my head was at the time, I wanted to send a valentine out to the whole world.

**Do you now feel confident about what works in a story?**

I feel confident about what works or doesn't work in a story. I've been writing all my life, and writing movies for something like 25 years now – if I had been building furniture all that time instead of writing, I'd know a hell of a lot about furniture building by now. Which means with stories it's sort of the same.

**But is every new idea and script still like starting over?**

If I get an idea, there's a definite advantage to knowing what works and what doesn't work, in terms of can this idea go the distance – but it doesn't make writing the damn thing any easier. It's never easier. I keep promising myself whenever I'm writing something, that the next one will be easier, and it never is, and even though I hate that, that's probably the way it ought to be. We're supposed to grow. We're supposed to challenge ourselves. Yet, as high and mighty as all of that may sound, I would still beg and plead and even steal from my neighbor sometimes, if whatever I'm writing at the time would only be easier. This is a hard job, and everybody had better know that. It's a major trick of nature that a really well-written script will appear effortless, yet nothing could be further from the truth. Ask anybody if it's easy. If they say yes, they're lying. It can't be, and it shouldn't be.

**You've said that you didn't always agree with how Nora Ephron directed *Sleepless*, but that you admired her authority, consistency and articulacy. What is the writer-director relationship like from your perspective?**

Well there's what it is, and there's what it should be. In the case of *Sleepless*, Nora and her sister Delia were the writers of record during production, so their writer-director relationship was sort of self-contained. But in other situations, where someone writes the script and someone else directs it, my answer would be that the relationship between the director and the writer shouldn't be any different than the relationship between the director and the cinematographer, or the sound mixer, or the production designer – yet somehow, in way too many cases, it's not like that at all. If the director has a problem with the lighting in a scene, he or she will say hold on a second, and talk to the cinematographer, and then leave it to the cinematographer and lighting crew to sort it out.

Yet somehow when it comes to writing, people will go to anyone except the writer. I don't know why that is. Nobody knows the story like the writer does. Nobody else knows how everything is related to everything else, and that every element you fool around with is going to have an effect somewhere else in the story, and that you can't change this without dealing with that. And since the writer is the one that got you there in the first place, why in the world would anyone consider not having that person on hand, or at least reachable, when there's a problem?

But in movies they do it this way. And the only answer I've ever heard to that, is that well sometimes these writers, you know they have personalities. They can get weird, and they're a pain in the ass to have to handle. And maybe some of them are – but all of them? And is someone trying to say that other people on a movie set don't have personalities? I have to tell you, I've never heard of a movie losing a whole day of production because the director had to talk the writer out of his or her trailer because he or she was feeling bloated that day, or something came out in a tabloid about how they had a baby with ten different aliens. A movie set is a cauldron of personalities. There are egos like you wouldn't believe, and to think that by keeping the writer out of the equation is going to mean that now you've got a smooth sailing ship, is insane.

**Would it be different if you were directing?**

In the case of the only movie I've directed so far, the *Guide to Guys*, I was also the writer, so if there were any changes to be made on the fly, I made them. And it never took very long because as the writer, I knew where everything was and how it related to everything else. But if I am ever directing someone else's script, that person is going to be there, or be where I can get hold of them. I'm going to have other stuff to do, and just like lighting or sound or costumes, I'm going to go to the person whose department it is, communicate the situation, and let them do their job.

**Romantic comedy is notoriously difficult to do well, and can be something of a derided genre. Which are your favourite romantic comedies?**

Aw, man. Here's the thing with lists, for every title on the list there's going to be one that I forget, and that's going to be somebody's favourite – or, I'll list one that I liked but they thought was garbage, and there goes all my credibility. So what I'll do is name four of the most recent movies that come to mind, that I think were absolute state of the art, and which not only influenced me greatly, but I wished to

hell that I wrote them. And those four would be *Jerry Maguire*, *Dave*, *Wonder Boys* and your very own *Notting Hill*. Now I've been in England three times in the last 12 months, and I have witnessed this sort of backlash or dismissal of *Notting Hill*, which I guess is coming from Londoners who felt that their city was mis-portrayed, or more specifically, for current or would-be residents of Notting Hill who would like to kill Richard Curtis for what he did to real estate values there.

But for anyone who's willing to step back and have an open look**,** *Notting Hill* started with a wonderful premise, it had an airtight script – and I mean airtight – the casting was perfect, the directing was totally on the money, it had a great look, and the Elvis Costello song was dead on**.** I really felt for the characters and believed the story – and that's often the hardest part of a romantic comedy, coming up with and maintaining a story you can actually believe – and what else… everything else, I guess. Everything has to work if you want to be at the top of the heap.

**How do you approach writing romantic comedy?**

I can give you four words to describe it: **total panic, have faith**. Because it's true, there's nothing harder than romantic comedy. Because in real life, two people either get together because they like each other, or they don't get together because they don't – and none of this generally takes a very long time. We usually do go by our first impressions with people, for better or worse – so if a guy approaches a girl and she's not interested, it isn't really going to help anything if he shows up at her office the next day in a gorilla suit. Yet in romantic comedy this kind of thing happens all the time, whether it makes a whole lot of sense or not, or whether it reflects real life or not – and the audience is very accepting of this and there's no reason why they shouldn't be – you don't go into a romantic comedy to learn how bad things are in Rwanda, you go to escape for a while into a world where everybody has exciting jobs, money to spend, clean clothes and really cool places to live – and their only problem, gosh darn it, is that the girl they love is going to marry the wrong guy (meaning, not the hero), and everybody had better get in different cars right away and all race out to the airport so he can stop her. And as long as someone does this with integrity and not cheap shots, I'm along for the ride as much as anyone else. Because I want to be caught up in it too.

But for anyone to write the kind that lasts, they have to come up with something that's not only real but sustainable – and that, to me, is the biggest problem. There are lots of setups out there, and they can all look great on the movie poster, but very few of those setups can keep going for the 90 or 100 minutes that you have people sitting there, and still be believable. A lot of them can pull off charm, and charm is a thoroughly necessary quality, just like flour is a thoroughly necessary quality if you're baking a cake. But to be something that lasts forever, you need all the ingredients and not just some of them. And that is unbelievably difficult. When I see one that works, I celebrate it like crazy. And when I see one that doesn't work, especially if it makes money anyway, I am a very hard person to be around.

I have to say something about one that I forgot, and that's *There's Something About Mary*. That movie not only took the entire idea of romantic comedy and just ripped it to shreds, but it did that while being a superior romantic comedy at the same time. Somehow it had it both ways. It was possibly the funniest one ever in terms of pure comedy, but also it was one of the sweetest and most genuine. So you can bet I am jealous of that one.

**You've written both original work and adaptations - does the process of writing them differ?**

No matter which one I'm writing, the other one looks more attractive. With an original, I find myself wishing someone had already done a lot of the work for me by establishing the premise, the characters, and the general forward motion of the story, and those are all great and helpful guidelines. When I'm doing an adaptation, I find myself wishing to God that I wasn't being confined to all this stuff that somebody thought out ahead of time and could just make something up of my own instead.

The fact is they're all hard. If you're doing your job right, they are all blood-draining, bone-crunching hard. And that's why even though there are a lot of really popular ones, there are so few that are also really truly good.

**In *Dave Barry's Guide to Guys* you have written, directed, adapted, and even cast the original author. First, how did you find a narrative in a non-narrative book?**

Adapting a book that didn't have a story was a bit of a challenge, if I am permitted to borrow the British gift for understatement. It took about five months before I had a script I wanted to show anybody, especially Dave Barry, and then maybe another two or three passes to get it into something we could shoot. But yeah, without a story there, without actual characters, that meant I had to come up with something new that wasn't out there already, some kind of structure or framework totally from scratch, that would only be good for this one movie and nothing else. It was like the space program: there are rockets you can re-use, and rockets you can't.

On the other hand it was very freeing, because without being able to rely on all the other story models that are out there, I really only had two rules to work with: keep it funny, and keep it moving. So what I did was I went to Amsterdam and locked myself in a room for three or four days, and I went through every page of the book and wrote down how I'd make a scene out of it. And after a while some patterns emerged, and they would lead to questions, and the questions would lead to answers and that would lead the way to being able to decide which patterns to begin to rely on and how to get them to relate to each other.

One big, major, huge question came somewhere in the second day – and that came from knowing that there's no such thing as a comedy that's funny every single moment, because they can't be. It can't all be punchlines, there has to be an ebb and flow – you can't have waves going in without waves going out. So I had to ask myself, the comedy is more or less covered, because Dave is so damn funny. But when it's not being funny, what is it going to be? And then I freaked out a little bit, and thought of other comedies: action comedies have action, horror comedies have scary stuff, but I don't generally move in those circles. But then I asked what circles <u>do</u> I move in, and then it hit me, hey stupid person, try something you're familiar with, and make it romantic. So that's when two characters, who appeared in one scene in Dave's book, became central characters that I could weave in and out of the whole thing. Once that happened, the other elements started to fall into place and became easier to select and organize. Plus I made two friends for them, because it's a rule in many romantic comedies that the couple has to have best friends. The other main element, of course, was Dave, and I set it up so that he had the ability to be anywhere.

**And how did it feel to be behind the camera?**

I almost don't want to tell you how cool that was. I never had more fun in my life, and I'll bet that most of the people who worked on the movie would say the same thing, or at least something close. We had a small crew, we shot an ungodly amount of material in a short period of time, everybody got into the spirit of playfulness and got to do stuff they didn't get to do on other movies – plus, let's face it, we weren't doing *Medea* or anything. The very nature of the whole thing was funny, so it was not only easy to keep things loose, it was also pretty much mandatory.

When it came to directing Dave, I wasn't worried about his acting because I wasn't asking him to act. I was asking him to be himself. But just as there were different styles and components in the movie, there were also different directing challenges when it came to the actors. There were a lot of people who we only see once, who have one line or speech, and that's a certain kind of directing. Then there were the leads, which we cast in L.A. and they were in lots of scenes, and there was a progression and continuity to those scenes. Then there were extended cameos. Then there was Dan Marino, a Hall of Fame football player – one of the true legends of the game – playing himself. Then there was John Cleese – who we only had for one day, because we knew that one day was all we could afford. But I had written the cameos so that they could be shot that way.

**How did you find working with John Cleese?**

With all due respect to everyone else on the movie - because they were all wonderful and vastly talented - they were not John Cleese. If you want an experience in being nervous – shaking in your sneakers nervous – then just try directing comedy, for the first time, with the Funniest Man in the World. Try doing five scenes with him, all in one day, which is actually half a day, because by the time you'd gotten to John you had already wrapped up shooting the first half of the day in another location, and moved the whole company to where John's scenes were. Then try doing all these scenes in the same room, which had to serve as four different rooms, which meant lighting and sound and set changes had to happen at hyper-speed, meanwhile I am reminding you that he is the Funniest Man in the World and he is also nearly a foot taller than I am and believe me there is a whole extra dynamic in that.

Then have two of John's scenes with Dave Barry - who, if you believe the New York Times and millions of newspaper and book readers and the Pulitzer Prize people, is merely the Funniest Man in America, and put them in this really crowded room where all of us, including Dave, are two and a half feet away from John while he takes these scenes, winds up and lets loose with them – take all of that, and if I had a hundred more paragraphs I still couldn't even begin to give you a sense of what that day was like. Let's just say that I now understand the rule in America that everyone who directs a movie is required to wear a baseball cap, and that it has nothing to do with style or statement. That cap's true purpose is to take an entire lifetime's worth of nervous perspiration and absorb it until the end of the day, when you can then wring it out and fill two or three wine barrels – and do it while nobody's looking because the last thing you can do is let them see how freaked out you are.

Having said all that I can still swear to you that for the entire time we were shooting that movie, I would wake up in the morning more excited than I had ever been in

my life, because here was another day when I was going to get to be a movie director. There is nothing, nothing like it.

**Has the experience of directing *Guide to Guys* changed you as a writer?**

It took me out of writing for almost two years, and it made it hard as hell to go back. Up until the *Guide to Guys* went into pre-production, I had spent something like 18 years writing movie after movie after movie, finishing one on a Friday and starting the next one on Monday – or not even that, just having them overlap and run into each other. It's kind of like if you were a marathon runner, and you broke your leg or something and couldn't run for two years, and now it's time to run again. Well in your head, you want to go out and start running at the pace where you left off, you want to go right back to the kind of momentum you had gotten used to – and good luck just trying to do that. So in my case, I had gone from something where I had 10 or 12 hours of isolation a day, to something where there are people around constantly, either in your face or on the phone, and to get some time alone is virtually impossible. And now what I'm facing is trying to find that 10 or 12 hours a day again – and at the same time I'm wondering, how the hell did I do that for 18 years?

**How do you see the British film industry?**

I don't really know a whole lot about the industry over here in any kind of detail. I know that Britain's contribution to the world of Cinema is unshakably profound, in terms of the movies you've made, and the actors and writers and directors who have come from the UK. But in terms of the industry itself, all I know is that it's cyclical, and cyclical in a different way than it is in the States. So, from time to time I'll hear it's a good time to be making movies in England, and then from time to time I'll hear it isn't. Financing and support, wherever it comes from, seems to come and go during different periods, and it ends up being either boom or gloom – whereas in America they seem to always find money, only all too often they go and spend it on utter crap. It never seems to occur to the studios to look at which things succeed and which things don't, and how that relates to how much money each one cost. I'm not saying that every expensive movie is bad and every tightly-budgeted one is good. It's not so much about how much they spend, but where they spend it. You want to shake them by the shoulders sometimes and say that a great story is always more important than a great CGI effect. And then what they'll say back is that an *Aeon Flux* can make more money than a *Crash*, any day of the week, and with both hands tied behind its back - and after that the argument's over with them.

But back to Britain, it seems like you got a real shot in the arm when Woody Allen came over to do *Match Point* – because not only did he make a movie in England for the first time, but he also did interviews and press for the first time, and both of those events made news and swung a huge spotlight over your way. On radio, on TV and in print, here is one of the world's most famous directors and a notorious recluse, and suddenly he's all over the place singing rhapsodies about everything from the financing to the weather. So in the same year, you guys got the Olympics and a reputation for good weather. A hearty well done for that one.

**And you too have a forthcoming project set in the UK?**

I picked the UK to set it in basically because I really like it over here and I wanted to have great excuses to keep coming back lots of times. It started about six years

ago when I got this very vague idea in my head that had something to do with an American who kept wishing he was Dylan Thomas - and I'm embarrassed to say that at the time, I only knew about three things about Dylan Thomas, and one of them was that he came from Wales. So last year I went to Wales, I went to Swansea and spent a couple days at the Dylan Thomas Museum, and I went to Laugharne and saw the Boathouse where he wrote *Under Milk Wood* and a whole lot of other works, and I learned a lot about his life that as a writer I should have known about him anyway. I also learned that I didn't have enough of a story to set it all in Wales and have it be about a guy who wished he was Dylan Thomas - but before I got too tremendously panicked about that, I thought about London – and suddenly the idea opened up and before too long I had a story that could actually be a movie and not just a hazy idea. This was a huge relief, because now I suddenly knew that I hadn't spent all this time and money and effort to come over to Wales for nothing.

**So it is a real risk that an idea might come to nothing at great personal cost?**

It's important to remember, for writers anyway, that every bit of this came out of a sense of panic that I was going to blow it – which to me would have been totally unacceptable. And that this kind of thing has happened time and time again, yet it always brings a good result. And what's interesting about that, is that when you're writing stories, this is what you're doing to your main characters – you send them off with some specific kind of purpose, then you set up one blind alley after another for them to go into, until they get to the last one, and all hope is lost – this is called the end of the second act – where their backs are against the wall, the shadows are creeping closer, and if they don't do something quick they're going to be completely done in. If it's an action film, then the hero needs to come up with some action thing or else he's going to die - which would mean that the bad guy wins, and that everybody else in the movie that was counting on the hero, is now totally screwed. If it's a love story, the hero also has to come up with something big, emotionally, or he's going to lose the girl to this totally undeserving cad of a rival who's going to be sleeping with her forever.

In both cases – in all cases – the solution springs from the panic of imminent death. If not actual physical death, then always, always the death of everything the hero holds dear. And that in every case, what the hero needs to do to get away from that wall, is to dig deeper than ever, down to the one place inside where they have always been afraid to go, and finally face the truth of who they are, and what their situation is, and what they have to do, or become, so that they can get out of there and get a happy ending**.** It always involves sacrifice – enormous sacrifice - and it always comes when there's absolutely nothing else that will work. And they're convinced of this because they've spent the whole movie trying everything else and it didn't, and that's why they're here.

The panic of coming back empty-handed was genuine, the need for a solution was just as strong, and the relief that I found one was just as satisfying.

**The 2006 Oscars have seen a crop of 'serious' films celebrated. Does this mark a change in viewers' tastes? Or is it just part of a never ending cycle?**

From the beginning of time, viewers' tastes have never changed: they want a good story. They don't care if you draw it in the sand with a stick – they want a good

story, they know one when they see it, and if you rip them off they will definitely let you know. They might not know why something didn't work, only that it didn't, and you took their money and now they're mad.

What's changed about all that is the internet. Because before, if you didn't like something and you wanted to tell the whole world about it, you were still basically limited to everyone you knew, or maybe everybody at the office or the pub or the street corner who would listen. Whereas now, if you want to tell the whole world you actually can. The good news is it freaks the studios out and makes them crazy. The bad news is it can do the same thing to me, and that's not fair!

**Do you think the big studios will get freaked out enough to change what they do?**

Well, also from the beginning of time – movie time, anyway - Hollywood's taste has never changed: they want to make money. If they think something will make money, they'll do it. If they don't think it will make money, they pass. Nobody made *Philadelphia* because they wanted to sensitise the world to an aspect of AIDS that people might not have considered before. That might have been a nice side effect, and everybody could pat themselves on the back for what good and noble human beings they were – but *Philadelphia* got made because Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington said they'd do it. Jonathan Demme is a great director and Ron Nyswaner wrote a great script, and it did enlighten and sensitise the world to an aspect of AIDS that people might not have considered before – but without Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington, you have a great director and a great writer with no studio behind them, no guaranteed distribution with millions committed to advertising, no solid ground under their feet at all - and now if they want to sensitise the world, they have to find the best actors they can, sell off all the foreign rights in advance, trim the budget down by about 75% and raise the rest of the money from about 50 different places and cobble it all together, and see if they can win at Sundance and get a distribution deal. At the end of the day, Hollywood might even give them an Oscar for all that - but if they want any money for their next one, they'd better come back with stars. Or explosions. Or even better, stars and explosions too.

What you're seeing now, is a real division between the studios and the independents. Not just in terms of quality, because the quality's all over the place in both camps. But in approach: the studios run on fear, and the independents run on passion. For the studios, it's about playing it safe and doing whatever you can to cover your bases, and all too often they're paralysed – or at least vastly compromised – by the fear of making the wrong decision. They have too many people to answer to – stockholders, boards of directors, parent companies, pressure from outside groups – plus they have this directive that everything they make has to play equally in Tacoma and in Thailand. And with independents, they're making one movie at a time, there's no tomorrow for them if they screw it up so they damn well better believe in what they're doing and take it seriously. It's not like they don't want money too, it's just that to make the money their philosophy is to make the best movie possible given their resources, and find a distributor who will be careful and intelligent about how they open it. And if they start getting angry letters and protests from whatever coalition or religious or political group that they happened to piss off, then they know they did their job right and thanks for the free publicity.

What will never change is this: audiences want stories, and studios want money. When the two meet, it can be sublime - and it happens just enough times to keep everyone trying. Because there's nothing like it when a studio gets one right. No storytelling vehicle is more powerful and influential than a big Hollywood movie done well, when all the elements come together just right. They're wrong more than they're right, but that doesn't change things. You don't get *The Godfather* from an independent. You don't get *Chinatown* because a small group of plucky filmmakers begged and borrowed and pooled their credit cards together. On the other hand, you won't get a *Napoleon Dynamite* out of Paramount or Universal or Sony - and all that movie did was cost something like $400,000, and bring in over $50 million so far. This is the stuff that makes people crazy.

**What would be your three most important tips for 'aspiring' writers of feature films?**

First – and right away, without even a moment's delay – take the word 'aspiring' out of your personal dictionary. I guarantee you, no movie you've ever seen was written by an aspiring writer. Same with TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, books, comic strips or holiday gift cards. These things were written by writers. Period. Even if they were writers who had never been published or produced before, they had to have come into a mindset, whether they were aware of it or not, that they weren't aspiring – they were <u>doing</u>.

This might sound like nothing more than fun with words, but it's a serious business. Do you go to a supermarket as an aspiring shopper, or do you go there to buy food? Do you get on the Tube every day as an aspiring commuter, or are you going there so you can take a train and get to work? It's a mindset. The entire culture has got everyone hypnotised to think that you're not a professional writer until you get paid. WRONG. If you think that way too you will never get paid.

But if you consider yourself a writer – if you read like one, think like one, see the world the way a writer does – and if you actually sit down and write, on whatever schedule you are able to fashion given the present circumstances of your life, and if you do it with the expectation that you're going to do whatever it takes to get better at it every day, then sooner or later you're going to get something of value, and that's what it's about. How much value in terms of dollars or pounds or Euros, that's one thing. But you have to write and write and write. And you also have to be listening, and watching, all the time – observing the world, making connections between this thing and that, staying curious, asking questions, taking walks, looking out the window, zoning out when someone's trying to talk to you – all of that is writing, and if you do it like a professional then you are one, and what you write has value the minute somebody reads it and has a response, whether it's positive or not, and whether or not any money changes hands. And the minute you go back into it because you thought of something that will make it better, then you're definitely a writer – and anybody who tries to tell you different can go to hell, for the crime of being smug and discouraging.

Your greatest weapon will always be your curiosity. If you stay curious, you'll never get old and you'll never be bored. Keep asking "What if," and keep saying "I wonder" - because whenever you're doing that you're also being present in the world and you're staying engaged. It's a bigger blessing to wonder about things than it is to know them. Einstein wonders what it would be like to ride out in front of a light beam, and look what came from that. This one won't mean a lot in the UK - but

whoever wondered what it would taste like if you put chocolate and peanut butter in the same candy bar, I want to thank them from the bottom of my heart. The Reese's Peanut Butter Cup was an astounding breakthrough in the snack world – and all kidding aside (although I'm not kidding), it came from someone looking at two separate concepts and wondering what they'd be like if you put them together. Do the same thing with a script idea, and if you do it right you can end up in movie heaven.

Second: study the masters. A lot of scripts are published nowadays, and just about every script out there is available over the internet in some form or another. But don't stop with just scripts – read books, read plays, read anything you can get your hands on, as long as it's well written and has something to say. It helps a little to read the kind of stuff you're writing at the time – if you're writing comedy then read comedy. But as long as you're spending lots of time with the written word, written by the great storytellers of our time and of all time, you're going to be in good shape. It also helps to watch movies and plays and TV shows, but you're probably doing a lot of that anyway – and besides, there's no substitute for the written word. You need to see how they did it on paper – even if you can't articulate it or put a name on what it is that they're doing, if you're immersed in great writing, you're going to absorb it intuitively, and your own writing will be better for it.

I often hear people giving the advice that you should read really bad scripts and watch really bad movies, so that then you'll know what not to do. I think it's going to be pretty difficult to come up with lousier advice than that. How many master chefs do you think are out there going to terrible restaurants on purpose so that they can learn to be better chefs? Don't listen to that stuff. Next time somebody tells you that, ask them that if they had to have a triple heart bypass, would they rather have a doctor who went to a terrible medical school, or one who trained with the best?

Third: remember, at all times, that nobody's making you do this. Nobody's got a gun to your head or is threatening to harm your family unless you sit there and turn out quality pages. You're not going down into a coal mine every day, or plucking the feathers off chickens in a factory – you're sitting at a computer, you get unlimited bathroom breaks, and you can go to the refrigerator as many times as you want, whether there's anything in there or not – and when you get back from the refrigerator or the bathroom, you can sit down at the computer again, and work on your script about a coal miner who falls in love with a girl who plucks chickens in a factory. And if you succeed at it, congratulations – you're in the movie business, which is nothing less than exactly where you wanted to be.

So don't whine, don't bitch and don't complain - about anything. People might pretend to care, but they don't – and why should they? Nobody wants to hear about how those brainless mercenary ratbags at the studio made you change your coal miner to a race car driver, and your chicken plucker to a foreign correspondent with ties to the CIA. So if it doesn't work out this time, then sit down and write another one, and maybe the next time a couple more flags will fly in your direction.

But get this in your head, and never forget it: if you're a writer, then you have only one job, and that is to get better at what you do. That's the only part of this whole maddening and exhilarating enterprise that you have any control over at all – your own ability, your own stamina, and your own creativity. You can, and you should, be improving on those qualities every day. It's called character – and you're going to

need it. Because more things hurt than don't, no matter where you are on the ladder – and you can know it for sure that the higher up you go, the thinner the air gets, and the harder people will fight to get their share of what's left. And a lot of them fight dirty – dirtier than you could ever imagine.

But that's not your problem. Writing is your problem – and if you're a writer, it's also your solution. Just don't complain about it. Give your friends and loved ones a break.

**Which five great and indispensable 'master' scripts would you recommend reading?**

I'd say that everyone should pick the five movies that inspired them the most, and read those.

There. A short answer. Bet you didn't think I had it in me.

**You have expressed in the past how you realised the power of words at a young age. Is the pen still mightier than the sword in this world?**

Well look at how mighty a one-panel cartoon in a small Danish newspaper can be. Or think back to the 1980's, and all those banners with the word "Solidarity" on them. The cartoon triggered riots and destruction all over the world, and became a flash point for everything that divides the western world from fanatics who want to see us all dead. And the Solidarity thing, well all that did was bring about the collapse of European Communism and the end of the Cold War.

So, yeah, I think I still believe in the power of the pen. As for the spoken word, try this little experiment: I'll give you ten seconds, and I bet you can come up with three childhood insults that you never forgot - and no matter how old you are and how many brilliant things you've accomplished in your life, it still hurts when you think of them. That's words for you. That's power.

**You are writing the book for a Broadway musical, *Color My World*, about the group Chicago. How are you finding the difference between stage and screen?**

In terms of what it's like to write for the stage, and for a musical, it's not really a whole lot different than a movie. I mean a story's a story – and whatever format or template you use, the architecture of a story doesn't change. It goes from status quo, to problem, to crisis and then resolution – simple, right? You start with a main character and a desire line, you make it so that everything he does towards getting his goal only takes him farther away instead, then you break him down completely until he sees what he's made of and fights his way back. In the case of this particular show, especially with Chicago's catalog, it's going to be a love story or it's going to be nothing. And if there are three main stages of being in love – find each other, lose each other, get each other back – then Chicago only has about seven thousand songs that go with each stage.

**Has music always been an inspiration?**

I'd have to say I've had no better writing teachers than Lennon & McCartney, Jagger & Richard, Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, and Simon & Garfunkel – these were people who

took words and music and did things to them that dozens of scholarly books can describe a whole lot better than I can. I just know they influenced me, and I got a tremendous education from them – about phrasing, about brevity, about imagery and simplicity and the rhythm of syllables and lines, and then taking all of that and combining it to grab your entire spirit and never let go. I'm not saying I can write like these people, or that I can even get close. Just that I was influenced by what they did and tried to put it into whatever I was doing.

With Chicago, here's a group that came out in a very big way in the late 60's and early 70's. A rock band with a horn section was a pretty revolutionary thing at the time. And even though they're on their like 400th album by now, and have had several personnel changes, the core of the band is still there, and they're still great. I first heard them when I was about 14, they had this song "Beginnings" on their first album and it was coming out of somebody's radio and I literally stopped in my tracks. I had never heard anything like it, and all I wanted to do was hear more of it. And since they never stopped touring, I got to see them - wherever I was and whenever they came through - at least once a year and sometimes more. That's too many times for me to comfortably count.

**So how did you get involved in the project?**

A combination of events happened and I finally met Chicago's main guy, Robert Lamm, and I got to know him a little bit - which is still one of the major thrills of my life. And then one day out of nowhere, he sends me this instant message saying "you're a writer, aren't you?" And I said that's true, I am, and he gave me the name of this producer in New York named Richard Akins, who was trying to put together a show based on their tunes.

The main bit of direction I got from Robert Lamm, who wrote most of the songs in the first place, was that the show had to have a real story and not just be a bunch of oldies hanging on a clothesline. What I said I was shooting for, was that I wanted to make it so that if you never heard their songs at all before you walked into the theatre, you would swear that the songs were composed for the show, and not the other way around – which was pretty much what Robert was saying, so everyone was on the same page from the start.

As soon as I started writing though, I discovered a pretty interesting thing that should have been obvious from the start, except it wasn't – and that is that almost all of these songs were written from the point of view of a guy, at one of those three stages of a relationship. He wants her, he blows it and she leaves, he wants her back. Yet you can't have a musical where a guy is singing to a girl for two hours. So then, after the customary period of outright panic, I found a way to open up a lot of the songs.

Then another problem was that with all these love songs, the thing was going to get so sugary that if I didn't do something about it, you were going to end up carrying people out of the theatre in diabetic shock. And the antidote for that, after the panic of course, was comedy. And that led to some of the most inventive stuff in the whole show, because I really had to twist some of the songs around and make fun out of them, but those are the pieces that are going to bring the biggest kicks. And that's what it's about, isn't it. The biggest kicks...