Winners Conference: Original Screenplay

American Hustle

Q. Now, David, we stood on this very stage 12 months ago as you won the BAFTA for Best Adapted Screenplay for Silver Linings Playbook. We have to keep meeting like this.

DAVID O. RUSSELL: It is just a fantastic honour, I have to say, to be in company in every one of the films here. It just makes you want to keep on making good films. These awards are enormously important to inspiring me, and when we were putting together American Hustle last year it helped keep us in the financing when we were still writing the screenplay. It is very encouraging to make cinema that takes chances.

Q. Absolutely. And Eric, as David said, this tale started with you, this script started with you. Where exactly did it start for you?

ERIC WARREN SINGER: It started for me on a plane ride 17 years ago from New York City to Los Angeles. It was late night, I was sitting next to a gentleman who used to be a US attorney and we started talking and he told me about Abscam, and that is where the seed was planted. So, you know, I don't know.

Then 11 years later I wrote the script and it struggled for a little bit, and when David came on, it was lightning in a bottle. Everything came together.

Q. In what way?

ERIC WARREN SINGER: The director that was on the movie previously to this, to David, dropped out, and when that happens a movie sort of can either die or can come alive when someone else embraces it. And David did in the best possible way. And, you know, the other part of it is that he is one of my favourite film makers. I don't know, it is weird saying that.

DAVID O. RUSSELL: Oh, it is okay. Keep saying it. I am happy to hear that from anybody. I am never too old or working too much to hear that ...

ERIC WARREN SINGER: It makes it -- it was really exciting to work with someone, to watch someone like David work and to be part of it.

NEW SPEAKER: Congratulations to you both. You know, you have worked with these actors before. You have kind of united the cast of your last two films, and I do understand that you kind of wrote with them in mind. So I wonder how important was it that you knew that these guys were going to be in the film and what do they kind of bring to your process?

DAVID O. RUSSELL: I feel that they're my partners, so I feel that it is very exciting because it makes it concrete. I write for them, you know. I take what Eric did and then I started to do what I do, and that is to craft it for each one of those actors, and to say: would you take this risk with me? And it is very exciting and daring for them to play roles they have never played anything remotely like before. So it inspires me to write scenes for the
broad range of each one of these.

I want to make sure I see all of them in these new roles. So you create scene after scene that shows that. You know, and -- well, keeping the movie propulsive. It is a great challenge to do that for five major roles. It is like creating an elaborate tapestry that takes a lot of care, and it is because I personally feel responsible to each actor that I feel -- that we can do the hard work to make that tapestry. Because otherwise, it might be easier to do it for three people or two people. This was the biggest picture I ever worked on.

NEW SPEAKER: And a few words about Jennifer who obviously picked up the Best Supporting Actress BAFTA today. You must be pleased for her.

DAVID O. RUSSELL: I am very, very proud of Jennifer and I am proud to call her my collaborator and my friend, and I am very proud that she dove into this and she is fearless. And I think -- you know, it is a partnership that I cherish and hope to carry into the future. And she is very daring and inspiring. She is special. So I appreciate that BAFTA recognised her.

It is a big deal to us and, you know, I sat with her last year and she didn't win, and there was famously a screen grab of me going like this when she lost (indicates) that people put all over the internet. I was just being loyal to my girl. Sticking up for her -- it was an embarrassing screen grab.

NEW SPEAKER: It looks like Jennifer could go on to win the Oscar now if we are looking at the other awards that she has won. Do you think she will do that, and what is it that makes her so special at just 23? To win, if she does it, two Oscars in two years is pretty impressive.

DAVID O. RUSSELL: You know, what I love most about Jennifer is her humility and her regularness. You hit her from one angle she looks like a regular girl from Kentucky, and you hit her from another angle she looks like the most magical beautiful creature ever seen. She is just a girl that shows up and does the work and is never afraid of trying anything. And she has, as our editor said on Silver Linings Playbook, he said: I think this one was kissed by the angels. She has to respect that, you understand? That kind of thing could be stepped on.

So it is a very special thing that she has to respect and I have to respect. I do respect it. I respect it and treat it very carefully, because it is the kind of thing in Hollywood, you can -- you know what I am saying? You kind of know what I am saying? You know. Look, I know, James Dean was an extraordinary -- I was kind of motivated by the fact that James Dean played 25 and 50 in Giant, and I thought he was an extraordinary creature. I knew Jennifer -- Jennifer seems ageless. I knew she could play Christian Bale's wife and what age was she? So that is exciting, you know?

ERIC WARREN SINGER: She is a breakthrough plate glass window, she is. She is just ... she is nitro charged. She is amazing.

DAVID O. RUSSELL: Let's get some water for that lady. This poor lady is gagging on the question she asked me. There it is. Chopper it in.

Q. Do you ever stop directing?
DAVID O. RUSSELL: At my age it kind of becomes a habit, you know?

NEW SPEAKER: I have heard that you signed up Jennifer for your next film. Is it because you guys seem to be an award winning film, literally?

DAVID O. RUSSELL: I just think you can't really pay attention to the awards. The awards are a great honour that inspire you, but you should never let your head go up your arse, you know. You should never think you know anything or have anything. It's the only way to keep doing the humble work, you know? You have got to just remember you can fail at any moment.

So only something that excites us organically would we possibly even have said: gee, let's do this. And the story of that woman, Joy, who invented a mop is a true story. It is kind of an amazing story, and I look forward to writing that for Jennifer.

NEW SPEAKER: You have talked previously about the last three films you have done, David, being a trilogy of sorts; you know, with similar characters. Will this be a new film, this film you are talking about, one where you concentrate more on just one lead and not have the ensemble together, or is that in the back of your head as you are writing?

A. I always have them in the back of my head to write for. I always feel personally connected to them. I think it will begin a new chapter of stories. But this was a trajectory that took off with The Fighter, you know? When I got my reinvention and I could look in the eyes of those real people in Lowell, Massachusetts and they knew that I knew heartbreak and I knew struggle and I had stumbled for about eight years at that point and had to get my bipolar son into the -- get him on his feet, you know? I could not get that movie made, Silver Linings Playbook. So I ended up getting to make The Fighter first after Sydney Pollack hired me to write Silver Linings. After The Fighter I was able to get it made.

Anyway, I don't know how that answers your question. I just tried.

NEW SPEAKER: Eric, I wanted to ask about your process. I am right beside you. I have always been here.

DAVID O. RUSSELL: Whenever you need me ...

Q. I am always behind me. It is kind of creepy. But David writes obviously with this incredible ensemble of actors in your mind. Do you write with anyone in mind?

ERIC WARREN SINGER: I don't. I try not to. I try to let the characters speak to me and how it comes out, it comes out.

DAVID O. RUSSELL: We share a love for locality, local people. That is what we share. We both had a great love for that, and he tells me the microwave detail which is a true detail that he wrote about. I go: that really happened. And it gives him a gift. That is what really happened: they gave him a gift of friendship. I say what a beautiful moment. Those guys really did love each other and even the FBI loved that guy, the mayor. The mayor was actually a good guy.
The first thing I watched on YouTube was a video that his grandson had made about him, and I said: what a sweet man. You could tell he was not just a straight-up criminal in any way. And then it leads to larger metaphors in the hands -- and when you are writing for Jennifer Lawrence it becomes a metaphor that takes the nutrition out of food, it is a metaphor for empty deals, it is a metaphor for a volatile wife who defies you. And it becomes a wonderful cinematic thing. That is a blessing.