

Making a Crisis into A Drama

In the autumn of 1979 I found myself standing in the middle of Victoria Station anxiously scanning the faces of the late morning commuters, looking for Lord Olivier who I was meeting off the Brighton train. Never having met him I was wondering what to call him, 'Larry' seemed too familiar and 'My Lord' seemed faintly ridiculous. Four days earlier producer Derek Granger had asked me, a 28 year old recent graduate from Coronation Street, to direct Granada Television's production of 'Brideshead Revisited'. Lunch with Olivier was my first test, and I had asked (foolishly it now seemed) to have this first meeting with him alone.

Shooting for a six-hour adaptation of Evelyn Waugh's novel started that summer under the direction of Michael Lindsay-Hogg. The first location was the island of Gozo, which was standing in for North Africa, the scenes of Sebastian's final days, and for South America, where Charles Ryder travels in search of inspiration. Shortly after the crew returned to England, a strike shut down ITV production and everyone was on the street except for a few panicky executives trying to keep a skeleton transmission going. I found myself standing on the picket line with Derek week after week and we talked about Brideshead and I remember saying that I would like to see some of it if he was ever screening any rushes.

The strike dragged on for three months, and the day it ended I received a phone call: "Derek says you want to see some of Brideshead, when are you free?" The call was from Vanessa Lees, Derek's secretary, and it was an odd request, I was a very junior director and had not really expected to be allowed to see anything and certainly not a personal viewing. I asked to speak to Derek but she said he was 'unavailable' so I decided to push my luck and asked if I could see them the next day, a Saturday and therefore requiring overtime for the projectionist. After a brief hesitation this was agreed - something was definitely wrong. I rang the casting department, the centre of all gossip and information "No one's supposed to know," I was immediately told by Doreen Jones, head of the department, "but Brideshead may not have a director".

The next day I sat alone in the Soho viewing theatre and watched some uncut takes and a few loosely assembled but disconnected scenes: Anthony Blanche's dinner at Thame, Cordelia's lunch at The Ritz, Charles Ryder's Art exhibition in London, a London Ball during the general strike, and Sebastian's final scenes in Morocco which was the only section that was complete. I was on my own and I had no idea what I was supposed to be doing but I knew what I thought. I tracked Derek down, he was in Manchester. "Well?", he asked. "I can't tell you what I think on the phone, I'll come up to Manchester", "No, no, that won't be necessary", he replied.

So it was all a false alarm, and indeed had probably never been an alarm at all. However I couldn't leave it like that and told Derek I was coming anyway. It was the first week of British Airways operating daily flights to Manchester, it seemed a ridiculous extravagance but it was my money so I bought myself a ticket. I arrived at around five

o'clock and found him in the gloomy lobby of the Midland hotel. He looked exhausted, which was unusual, although nearly sixty at the time, he had an energy of someone half that age. Three years earlier I had worked on two films with him as an assistant and knew the unique mix of meticulousness and enthusiasm with which he pursued his projects. We sat down in a corridor on the ground floor outside one of the restaurants with waiters and early diners criss-crossing around as we talked. "So, what did you think?", he asked again, "Well", I said, "this is going to take a while to explain".

It is hard to describe what it's like to watch someone else direct something you care about, it's like seeing them seduce someone you love, skillful or clumsy, the effect is equally difficult. My father had given me my first copy of *Brideshead* before I was in my teens and I had inevitably read it again when I was at Oxford and I felt of course that I knew it better than anyone. So we talked about the book, about the characters and about the problems that had arisen from the four month stoppage. Some time later (we were still in the corridor) the Production Manager Craig McNeil appeared clutching thick files and lists of dates and calendars. "How quickly do you think it could be restarted?" he asked, and they both looked at me. I had no idea, technically every cast member and location was no longer under contract, so I said: "Three weeks would be the minimum, but I don't know how one could guarantee it". Craig looked at Derek and said, "We were thinking of nine days, we think Granada might lose their nerve and cancel if we don't get going". As we parted that night, no actual mention had been made of what the crisis actually was, or why I was part of these conversations. I later understood that intensive last minute conversations were still going on between Michael Lindsay Hogg and Derek to try and solve a different scheduling crisis. Michael had agreed to direct another production starting in the autumn, he could not do both.

I returned, feeling rather dazed, to my flat in Didsbury which I shared with Alan Erasmus, co-founder of Factory records and I waited through Sunday, not daring to go out. At about eight o'clock that night the phone rang, Alan handed it to me, it was Derek. "Well, would you like to do it?". I was standing on the first floor at the bay window looking out over a hedge and the rain swept road beyond. I don't suppose the pause that followed was as long as it seemed at the time but what was whizzing around my head was one thought: "Can you make it your own". Derek waited. "Yes", I said. "Good", said Derek. "I think you better meet Olivier first, I've arranged lunch on Wednesday, and then there's Tony and Jeremy you'll have to talk to them and Diana of course, well you know her. We'll take the train down tomorrow".

Twenty four hours later I was standing on Victoria Station scanning the faces of the passengers from the Brighton train certain I had missed Olivier, then I saw him, wearing a fawn raincoat, frail but firm, walking towards me. On the way to the restaurant sitting in the back of a rather ridiculous Daimler Limousine, we discussed his recent work. He had just been through a period of playing 'movie foreigners' in films such as 'The Boys From Brazil', 'Marathon Man', and 'The Jazz Singer'. "Do you know?" he said starting to laugh, "What I regret most? The Betsy. I was playing this boring American businessman, and I had

the maid in a hotel bedroom. He was so 'dull' (he rolled the single syllable word round his mouth and raised his eyes) I could use none of my snakey movements! I don't suppose I'll do another sex scene, so that's how I'll be remembered, as a lousy fuck!". He roared with laughter, the ice was broken.

At lunch we talked about the first appearance of Lord Marchmain in the book, which he was reading for the first time. In fact he had only read "his bits", but he liked Waugh's introduction of the character which I also wanted to preserve: A solitary shoe, followed by a walking stick and a gloved hand emerging from the chauffeur driven car as the dying Lord Marchmain returns to Brideshead for the last time. The compact between actor and director is a unique one and it's language private, and specific to a each relationship. I did not discover everything at that lunch but I did learn what was to become a key to working with Olivier, his overriding concern with the audience becoming bored. His characteristic habit of stressing a seemingly unlikely word, and forcing you to re-evaluate the meaning of a familiar sentence, was connected to this. Later when we were shooting, I would sit in his hotel room in the evenings after dinner running lines with him, so that I could learn what he was thinking about a scene, and whenever I wanted to ease him in a different direction I would start: "Don't you think the audience might expect that? What if you tried this...."

The next day I met Michael Lindsay Hogg at Granada's Soho offices. As well as an distinguished drama director he is one of the legendary architects of the fusion between pop music and pictures, a literal parent of the music video. "It's so exciting" he said, "I remember my first Ready Steady Go... it's such a brilliant opportunity for you". His clearly genuine pleasure at my opportunity was both unexpected and comforting. We did not meet again until a party the night before the American Emmys three years later. The rest of that day was spent meeting the heads of the technical departments who were in a state of some confusion as it became clear that we were proposing to start shooting in a weeks time. These initial meeting were made much easier by the fact that almost everybody involved was on Granada's staff, Ray Goode the director of photography had shot my second Coronation Street and most of the rest of the crew I knew or had worked with in one way or another. There was one major freelance on the team, the costume designer, Jane Robinson, and Derek was clearly worried that this test might prove a more formidable one and spent some time preparing her and me for the meeting. She was of course brilliant and we immediately got on and, as with every other department we started making plans.

Some decisions were made for us, Olivier's availability was defined, he had three free weeks six days after our proposed start and the intention was to cover the events of the final episode, at least those specifically dealing with the illness of Lord Marchmain. I wanted to keep the first week as simple as possible and Derek suggested and I quickly agreed that we would start with Nanny. These were a handful of scenes, which all took place in the same small room, it would allow the art department time to start work on the rest of the house. I knew who I wanted to cast as 'Nanny', I had first worked with Mona Washbourne, over a decade earlier when as a schoolboy I acted in Lindsay Anderson's 'If...', and she played the school matron. She could convey perfectly the combination of eccentricity and innocence

that was needed and Doreen Jones, the casting director, who had first whispered the truth to me a few days earlier, made a phone call and she was hired. So the first days shooting was decided, it would be Nanny in her room, and days two and three would be the same although we would have to start the jigsaw dance which we were to perfect over the months that followed. These handful of scenes were spread over twenty years in the life of the characters, so that Jeremy Irons would start his day as a gauche eighteen year old and have to be transformed into an embittered middle aged army officer by the afternoon. Is it better to be embittered in the morning, and gauche in the afternoon or the other way round? This was an argument that was to become a permanent part of the development of my brain. For the record, the eyes look better and therefore younger in the afternoon, but the middle aged hair and moustache takes forever to remove and that loses a lot of time.

These initial decisions gave everyone something to start on, but Jane Robinson was pleading that we cast the part of Cara, Lord Marchmain's mistress, because she represented one of the big costuming challenges of the film and if she was to appear on screen in under two weeks there would be no time to have anything made. The news that we were telephoning France to try and track down Stephane Audrun, did not allay her fears but I seen her in Bunuel's: "The Discrete Charm of The Bourgeoisie" and, emboldened by the casting of Olivier, was determined to persuade her. Meanwhile I had the rest of the actors to meet, initially the three principals, Irons, Andrews, and Quick. The three month strike meant that their contracts were void and so in effect each needed to 'approve' the new plan and the choice of director. Diana was the only one I already knew, having almost overlapped at University. We talked on the phone and she was immediately supportive but Jeremy and Tony felt that my appointment was some Machiavellian plot by Granada to sink the production. They could think of no other reason why a director of my obvious inexperience had been chosen. Jeremy later explained that they had discussed tactics: 'we'll be very nice to him and if it doesn't work out - we'll get rid of him'.

I took Jeremy to Langan's Brasserie, I can't remember what I didn't eat, and I am not exactly sure what I said, but I started to talk about the book. My theme was memory, and that the essence of the book was exactly that, one man's memory not literally the truth but a single and very personal view. I talked about the relationship between life and art, Waugh's nervous disdain for his own profession, parodied by Charles Ryder's career as a painter of abandoned houses. I talked about university and Oxford and the exactness of Waugh's depiction often ridiculed for its romanticism (in fact one glorious term followed by two miserable years), and the operation of powerful families (I was thinking of my own - there are seven of us) and my catholic education - Ryder, like Waugh sought something from religion that only others seemed to possess. The only distraction was a reference to a possible meeting that Jeremy was due to have with the director Karel Reiz to discuss a film of John Fowles: "The French Lieutenant's Woman". It seemed unimportant and was only mildly referred to although when he agreed to his new contract he made it a condition that he be allowed to do the film in the event he was in fact cast.

I took Anthony Andrews to Wheeler's in Soho, although in the book I think Sebastian had dark hair (twinned with Julia), watching the rushes that weekend had convinced me that he had the essential and disarming "cool, creamy, English, charm". He was passionate about the character and like Jeremy had brought a copy of the book with him and we quickly got into the detail of the scenes that defined him. We discussed families and houses and one of the Sebastian's key speeches when on Charles's first visit to Brideshead he explains why he won't let him meet his family: "they're so madly charming. All my life they've been taking things away from me. If they once got hold of you with their charm, they'd make you their friend and not mine, and I won't let them". That evening I had dinner with Diana, the easiest of these meetings as I did not have to establish my credentials. She had only shot a couple of scenes so far, and reminded me how several weeks earlier I had sat in her dressing room while she was being made up, grumpily muttering: "I should be directing this, I know more about it than anybody else". Whether everyone left these meetings with their fears allayed I don't know - I doubt it - but I think it was clear that we had made a start, underpinned by the literal prop of our existence which had been present on the table between us at each meeting, the book.

I ought to remember exactly when I discovered the central fact of the production, unspoken at first, but always present: that there wasn't a script. It should perhaps have been clear at that first meeting with Craig and Derek in the corridor of the Midland Hotel when they were trying to create a schedule without scene numbers. Adaptations of period novels were not exactly new to television, shortly before Brideshead, Nancy Mitford's: *Love in A Cold Climate* had been televised in a six part adaptation and Brideshead was conceived in much the same format. John Mortimer, the eminent television writer and playwright had been commissioned to distill the novel into six hour long episodes, he told the story in the 'dramatic' present tense with a more 'logical' structure and minor characters stripped away or combined, exactly as he had been asked. I was not present at the moment when the novel began to fight back against the corset of its commission but it had begun before I arrived. Stripped to its essentials, what was essential had been lost so Mortimer's script had been abandoned and the process that was to define the final film of "going back to the book" had begun. Because this had developed during the early shooting, attention had been paid to the scenes that were immediate. When I arrived the 'script' for the filming that lay ahead consisted of a couple of milk crates containing a transcript of Waugh's dialogue. Olivier was fretting because he wanted to start learning his lines so Derek and I set off for Yorkshire together with associate producer Martin Thompson. The plan was that we would stay in a hotel near Castle Howard (so that I could have access to location) and we would start work on the script of what was to become Episode Eleven, the death of Lord Marchmain.

We were met in by George Howard, the master in every sense of Castle Howard, governor of the BBC and the man whose patience and goodwill were to be put to the test over the coming months. A vast and vigorous man, he greeted us in an enormous flowing Caftan and led me round the house. It is a mark of Derek's extraordinary qualities as a producer that even at this stage he said of the house: 'Do you think it's all right? Should we

look at anywhere else?”. Castle Howard is not Madresfield (the Lygon family home and to some extent the real genesis of *Brideshead*) but it was clearly perfect for both book and film, with its mix of the theatrical baroque exterior and the more intimate relationships of the private rooms. Everywhere there were more decisions to make, choosing Nanny's sitting room (easy it was next to the nursery), deciding the basic geography of Marchmain's death (the Chinese drawing room), selecting the right approach to the house (I chose a side road that led to a field rather than the actual entrance). We then retired to the hotel where the ‘script crates’ had been placed in a converted chapel which acted as a conference/meeting room. There we remained amidst a sea of coffee cups and half eaten sandwiches for the next three days. The only occasional respite was to retreat into my Sony Walkman which had come on sale for the first time.

It is hard subsequently to credit what when on in those three days, we did not write fourteen hours of script, but we did map out the whole series almost exactly as we were to shoot it. Instead of the original six hours we decided that the series would become seven two hour ‘feature length’ episodes and this was how *Brideshead* was shot. Later ITV argued that two hours was not a commercial length and insisted on hour long episodes so we compromised and recut to make the first and last episodes long, with nine one hour episodes in between. The “Nanny Scenes” for the first week were quickly dispatched to the actors while we moved on to the construction of Lord Marchmain’s death which would be our first months filming. Corridors that I had only walked down once, a day or so before, became the location for specific scenes and the schedule began to take on an air of reality. However there was still the question of structure, the movement from A to D and back to B was achieved in the novel by the all pervading voice of the narrator, Charles Ryder. Mortimer had dispensed with this as a device in favor of reordering to create a ‘dramatic’ present tense but I knew this had to be Charles Ryder’s film, every image, every shot was his so his voice began to creep in, sparingly at first, but it grew and grew. The process of adaptation, as I have since learnt, is not a single decision but a continuous act of scrutiny that does not stop until the soundtrack is completed and the film finally finished. Nonetheless we lived with the decisions made in that converted chapel, and literally years later I would find myself in a room, or on a staircase wondering what I was doing, and remember I was there because of some speech made in those first crucial days.

With the episode complete we returned to London, amongst other things to meet the rest of the cast including the remarkable Nickolas Grace, who as Anthony Blanche had already shot most of his scenes and therefore had fewer worries about my arrival than most, and Phoebe Nicholls who was to play Cordelia from the age of fourteen to thirty six. Again I am not sure what I said to her (‘you went on and on about the book as though you imagined nobody else had read it’) but we have been together in one way or another ever since and have had three beautiful children together so I don't think it went too badly. Filming at Castle Howard started the following week and continued for a further forty one weeks in Yorkshire, Manchester, Venice and London. In those days we worked a five day week which meant that we could work on the script at weekends and by Christmas there was a full script. Jeremy disappeared in the middle of the following Spring to make ‘The

French Lieutenants Woman' as his contract had allowed which created another production hiatus but gave me a chance to start editing some of what I had shot and begin to understand what we were making. When Brideshead finally appeared two years later on ITV in the autumn of 1981 we were preceded in the press by a reputation for delay and excess but what came on to the screen was something very different.

The combination of seemingly catastrophic circumstances meant that the everyone else was continually preoccupied with whether we could keep going rather than with what we were actually doing and the result was one of the most liberating work experiences of our lives. Much of the credit for this is due to Derek whose encouragement and absolute commitment enabled the best in everyone and of course to Waugh himself. One might imagine that a dead author is easier to manage than a living one, however, there can be few whose presence was more absolute than Waugh's on the set of Brideshead. I don't think of the film as an 'adaptation', there wasn't time to twist it from one form into another, it is a 'realisation' of the novel and maybe this is what has contributed to its longevity and the fact that, unimpeded by executive committees, script editors, focus groups or test screenings we were able to concentrate solely on the work itself.

As we started that first October morning with a shot of the uniformed Ryder carrying a tea tray up to Nanny's room I was handed a telegram from Olivier. We had discussed at our first lunch how to address each other, I still couldn't manage 'Larry' with confidence and settled on 'Sir', used as a name rather than a title (Can you pass "Sir's" gloves etc), and when he asked what to call me I said that he could call me what he liked but it was usually 'Charles'. The telegram read: "Good luck Charley Boy. Look forward to joining you in my humble in fact almost undiscernable (sic) way. Love Larry". I felt lucky.

Charles Sturridge