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Gurinder Chadha *Purab aur Pachhim* and *It's a Wonderful Life*

Gurinder Chadha was the first director who couldn't just pick—in fact, refused to pick—the single film that changed her life. “I don't think that I can split them up. It's like children, isn't it?” she says. “I'd be splitting up the family because they both represent different sides of me, you see.”

Gurinder Chadha, selected filmography:

Bhaji on the Beach (1993)
What's Cooking? (2000)
Bend It Like Beckham (2002)
Bride & Prejudice (2004)
Angus, Thongs and Perfect Snogging (2008)
It's a Wonderful Afterlife (2010)

***Purab aur Pachhim* (a.k.a. *Purab aur Paschim*)**

1970

Directed by Manoj Kumar

Starring Ashok Kumar, Saira Banu, Manoj Kumar, Nirupa Roy, and more

It's a Wonderful Life

1946

Directed by Frank Capra

Starring James Stewart, Donna Reed, Lionel Barrymore, Thomas Mitchell, Henry Travers, and more

How would you describe *Purab aur Pachhim* to someone who has never seen it?

CHADHA: No one would have heard of it, but it's a fantastic Bollywood film and it means “East or West.” I often put that in my top ten movies. It was made in 1970 by a man called Manoj Kumar, and it's one of the most wonderful Bollywood movies ever.

It's about an Indian who comes to England to study. When he gets to England, he's staying with an old friend of his dad's; they were both freedom fighters against the British. He's got a son and a daughter who have completely turned Westerners—they have very bad Western ways. Subtlety is not a big thing in this movie [*laughs*], like most Bollywood. The girl walks around with a glass of whiskey in one hand and cigarette in the other. And the guy is into flower power; he's got long hair and sort of hippie clothes. So, it's sort of on that level.

It's a magical mystery tour of the East and West from a very kitsch, '70s, resolutely patriotic Indian filmmaker. It's a complete joyride in terms of music, entertainment, cinema, and cultural politics.

But it was the first film, the first sort of Manoj Kumar film that I saw. And it's actually much cleverer than it sounds. Yes, on the face of it, it's very brash and very silly. There are sequences on the River Thames when they're all doing the Twist, and it's cheesy and over the top. But underneath it, there's a wonderful kind of yearning quality about what is culture and the perils of living in the West and the dangers of what could happen.

Do you remember when you first saw it, who you were with?

CHADHA: Yeah, I was a child, a small child, and I saw it in an Indian cinema in London. It would have been with my family. I was always watching Bollywood films, but this was the first one that showed England where we lived, as opposed to a set in India, so that's what made it striking.

Do you remember how your family talked about it when they saw it?

CHADHA: I think everyone in England was very entertained by it because it was so far from the truth. It was such an exaggerated version of our lives in England. As a young girl with two long plaits, with a mother who refused to let us cut our hair or anything, this girl was supposed to be like us, with long

blond hair and cigarettes and miniskirts. We were like, “God, that would be great! But we’re not allowed to be like that.” I think it was the incongruity of what he perceived people like us growing up in Britain to be like, and what we were actually like. That incongruity—that was bizarre.

Was there a scene or sequence that you remember loving particularly?

CHADHA: As far as the characterization of the young woman: what she wore. And, actually, in my first film, *Bhaji on the Beach*, I referenced this film. In *Bhaji on the Beach* there’s a character called Asha who had a video store. She kept going off into these fantasies and imagining what was going on around her, but she would experience those fantasies through Bollywood movies.

I would take elements of the story and make use of a Bollywood vignette. And one of them referenced *Purab aur Pachhim*. It’s when she realizes that one of the young girls is pregnant and she’s got a black boyfriend, and she’s like, “Oh my God, this is what England is doing to our kids.”

In my film, she walks into a temple in a miniskirt and a long blond wig, with a glass of whiskey in one hand and cigarette in the other. That was a complete reference to the film.

Did you ever work with or run into anybody associated with the film?

CHADHA: Well, as it happens, I was in India just recently for the release of *Bend It Like Beckham*, and I was on a TV program. They were asking me about films I had loved growing up, and I talked about this film.

Afterwards, I got a call saying the director, Mr. Manoj Kumar, wants to talk to you. The director of the film tracked me down and basically he was so thrilled that I talked about him in my interview, about influencing me, that he invited me over for dinner, for tea. And so I went over and saw him. He’s an old man now, but it was a complete thrill for me. He’s also the star of the film, so he’s a very dashing man. And here he was this old man, in bed with dyed hair. He was great, completely focused and to the point, and still wanted to make very patriotic films. He was operating at a time when India was desperately trying to find an identity for itself after so many years under British rule and, prior to that, Muslim rule under the mogul.

So he used to make films that were all about rekindling and promoting a sense of Indianness, of Indian pride. And he loved the fact that he thought

I was doing something similar, albeit in a British context, that I had been touched by him. It was a very moving few hours I had spent with him.

What was the film’s reception like in Britain?

CHADHA: Well, it was a huge hit in the Indian community. It’s a gem, but, of course, someone who knows nothing about Indian film wouldn’t know about it. That’s why it’s important for people like me to talk about it, because otherwise people would think the Indian cinema starts and stops with Satyajit Ray.

I was always taken to very populist films by my parents. And so, for me, it’s about promoting this sort of work that no one knows about, but definitely was an influence on me, as was Ken Loach and all his early films of the ’60s.

The actual film that I saw on a screen when I was young, and I thought, “Wow, I want to make movies like this!” was *My Beautiful Laundrette* by Stephen Frears, because that was a portrayal of my community in Britain in a very exciting way that I’ve never seen before. It tackled homosexuality and right-wing Indians, and it was just something different. Really political for that time—I just thought it was the most exciting movie on the screen, in terms of race.

Where I grew up, we had three cinemas that showed Indian films. But then down the road, there was an English cinema where I saw *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Sound of Music*, all those kind of movies. And on television every Saturday and Sunday afternoon, I used to love watching all the old British films by Ken Loach and people like that, where you’d get working-class girls getting pregnant and going for abortions, and all these kinds of really gritty social-realist movies. And, of course, the old evening comedies. I loved the old Alastair Sim, Margaret Rutherford comedies, so I had a very mixed diet of films when I was growing up.

Does your perception of that film change with subsequent viewings?

CHADHA: It gets better and better. Because as a filmmaker, I came to appreciate a bit more of how clever he was in terms of his message. If you look at it, it could be a very propagandist sort of message. It could have been very two-dimensional; he could have shown the West is bad and the East is good, but he did a very good job of making it human, making the characters human, making it work in a very human way.

My films are from a much more celebratory view to show that the nightmare Manoj Kumar saw was going to happen—actually didn't happen. It's like the opposite, you know. It's a film that has really informed me, and it's an absolute gem. If I had the power, I would take it and release it myself.

Why do you think it's stuck with you for so long?

CHADHA: It hasn't informed everything I've done. If anything, I would say *It's a Wonderful Life* is more like that. I think of it as something I watched at that time that had an impact because it was portraying people like me on the screen.

That's a good segue into *It's a Wonderful Life*. Why did you choose this film?

CHADHA: *It's a Wonderful Life* is one of the best films ever made. I can sit and watch it over and over. The other one is *Tootsie*. There's something about *It's a Wonderful Life*. It doesn't matter what generation, who you are, when it was made, what country you're from, whichever culture—it's so, so wonderful.

Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* is the film I come back to time and time again, which I think informs me and my work, if I could ever achieve an iota of what this film is really about.

Some context here for the three people on earth who haven't seen the film: James Stewart plays a man who wishes he was never born, then is taken around by an angel to see how the world would be without him.

CHADHA: It's about the human spirit and about what being alive means, what life is about. It's corny, but it's a masterpiece of cinema. It's a masterpiece of feel-good cinema. It's more than that. Ultimately, I think cinema is about exploring the human spirit. Capra just somehow manages to capture the essence of human life without making it schmaltzy. Try, if you can. You can watch that film, and you know what is going on. But I defy anyone who is able to watch that film, and the end when the table is cleared, and everyone is coming in with the money—I just cannot believe there isn't anyone with wet eyes at that point, or a big lump in their throat. I've seen it millions of times, and I'm just in floods of tears at that point.

This was Stewart's first film after World War II. A lot of critics and scholars have said that you can see him tortured by that experience, that he was a different actor after the war. Do you think any of that translated to the film?

CHADHA: Absolutely. I feel it. If you've been to war, you've seen people killing each other. War is about death and destruction. That's why it's even more of a remarkable movie, because it's about the human spirit and the willingness to survive. I think that it's actually what makes his performance so wonderful. Even in his face, that moment when all the money is being put on the table, holding that look of incredulousness without at any point it going schmaltzy. That's an incredible piece of acting. It's just really, really genuine.

The reason it's so powerful is: it makes you think. I lost my father a few years ago, and it had a profound effect on me. *Bend It Like Beckham* is dedicated to my dad. For me, it's a film about life and death. For me, it brings up grief and that whole side about losing someone. But it's also about an affirmation about what their life was about, and the pleasure that they gave in their life. For me, it's a great film when you're happy, when you're sad, when you're grieving. You can watch it any time, and it puts your feet back on the ground and reaffirms what it means to be human.

You mentioned that it doesn't matter which culture you're from to appreciate the film. Why do you think it reaches across cultures so well?

CHADHA: It's such a universal story, like the ordinary man against the corporation. It's about the human spirit versus dehumanizing forces.

What other scenes stick with you?

CHADHA: The whole thing about losing his hearing in one ear; I just think that's just so beautiful. That little bit of vulnerability, that constant reminder of his goodness to his brother. I think it was Jimmy Stewart's performance. I thought he was wonderful. I think that moment where he's trying not to fall in love with his wife, and he just says, "No, no, I don't want to do this, I've got so many things to do," and then he just succumbs. There are loads of moments in that film.

I think that one at the end, when everyone is coming with the money—there's twenty-five thousand dollars and he only needed eight thousand.

Even now, as I'm talking about it, I'm welling up. It's such a beautifully told story about a man making choices.

But the film flopped badly when it came out. No one went to see it. It only became a classic later on TV. Why do you think that is?

CHADHA: Well, I think it was after the war, and I think people were quite cynical. Many people had lost loved ones, and the world was being mapped out, and no one knew quite what was going on. There was a lot of insecurity and suspicion and the Cold War. People were all, "It's a cruel world."

I think we have better communication now. I was thinking the last time I was watching it, this film, if it had come out a few years later, it would have been totally massacred during the McCarthyism period. So it was a tough time when it came out, but I'm just truly grateful that I got to see it as an Indian girl in England, and it touched me.

Actually, here's a little story: When I was sitting with Manoj Kumar in his flat in Bombay, we were talking about how much I loved his film. He said that he was at a film festival in Delhi, and he ended up spending the night with Frank Capra, who loved *Purab aur Pachim*. Frank Capra actually spent all night talking about it. He actually wrote to Kumar telling him what a wonderful night he had, watching his film and talking to him.

And you talk about this film informing your work the most. Can you give me examples of how this film has impacted your work?

CHADHA: Well, *Bend It Like Beckham* has been sold to and seen in most countries around the world and appeals to people of all different ages and backgrounds and cultures. It's because it's a very human story about someone defying the odds and doing something they really want to do, but it's told in a very simple way in which you are hopefully emotionally involved with the characters. You understand the family's dilemma. You understand the parents, you understand the girl—you understand everyone's point of view. She's yearning, yearning to do something different. And I think both films have that sense of being universal, but I would never in a million years put myself on par with Capra's wonderful movie. I'm down below somewhere, trying to get up there.

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Richard Linklater *Raging Bull*

Linklater's career, spanning two decades, has alternated between art house fare (*Slacker*, *Waking Life*) and mainstream movies like *School of Rock* and his *Bad News Bears* remake.

It might be appropriate then, that the movie that changed his life straddles both worlds: Martin Scorsese and Robert De Niro's boxing masterpiece *Raging Bull*, often cited as the best film of the 1980s (even though it was released in 1980).

"At that point I was an unformed artist. At that moment, something was simmering in me, but *Raging Bull* brought it to a boil," says Linklater, paraphrasing Walt Whitman's praise of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Richard Linklater, selected filmography:

Slacker (1991)
Dazed and Confused (1993)
Before Sunrise (1995)
SubUrbia (1996)
The Newton Boys (1998)
Waking Life (2001)
Tape (2001)
School of Rock (2003)
Before Sunset (2004)
Bad News Bears (2005)
Fast Food Nation (2006)
A Scanner Darkly (2006)
Me and Orson Welles (2008)

Raging Bull

1980

Directed by Martin Scorsese

Starring Robert De Niro, Cathy Moriarty, and Joe Pesci

How would you describe *Raging Bull* to someone who has never seen it?

LINKLATER: On the surface, it looks like a sports biopic. When it came out, that's what I thought it was. You get into it, and you realize it's this deep psychological portrait of this troubled, not-so-happy guy and how boxing is really a metaphor for his life. On top of it all, it's this deadly accurate period piece.

Under what circumstances did you see it?

LINKLATER: I remember watching the movie, and I was not a big movie person at this time. I was a writer. But living in East Texas, I had seen just the popular movies. I was more interested in the theater. I was twenty. I was an athlete, a baseball player. More than anything at that time, I really related to Jake. I was an athlete at the time and I agreed with him, even though most people see it and go, "OK, he's crazy. He's overly paranoid and he's suspicious, and he's out of his mind."

I saw very clearly that his wife was cheating. I thought he was correct in a lot of his assumptions, which seems almost embarrassing to say now.

It's a wild guy's view of the world. He was inarticulate. It was all feelings. He was this unleashed id. I was an athlete. That's no small connection. I felt the absolute dedication and focus you have to have to the detriment of everything in your life: normal relations, women in your life. For anybody to be at that level, you have to have made incredible sacrifices.

What other effects did it have?

LINKLATER: This film pulled me in so dark and deep. It was the boldness of the movie. In the era of feel-good movies, touchy feely stuff was all over the place, and man, this movie was unafraid. It was so brave to depict such a flawed, unlikable, scary guy.

There's a moment in the film where he's had a big fight with his brother Joey (Joe Pesci). Joey's sitting at home watching Jake take a beating from

Sugar Ray Robinson on TV. There's an ad, I believe it's a Pabst Blue Ribbon ad, but it's a transparency on the screen, and the ad flips down, but you can see a hand. It looks like it's been x-rayed. It's the slightest detail, a little bitty subtle mistake that probably happened on live television in that era, the '50s, but I thought, "Oh my God!" It sent a shiver up my spine. At that point, I was so enthralled.

How did it change your life?

LINKLATER: It made me see movies as a potential outlet for what I was thinking about and hoping to express. At that point I was an unformed artist. At that moment, something was simmering in me, but *Raging Bull* brought it to a boil.

I was on a college campus at the time, and I started thinking, well, gosh, movies are an outlet. It got me looking at a book on the history of movies. Every week, an English teacher would, in this little East Texas college, show a movie, and anybody could show up to watch the movie on a little monitor and would sit and talk about it after. Sounds like no big deal, but I would go to these things and sit and hear people talking about movies, and it was like throwing raw meat to starving beasts. I totally shifted to movies over the next six months, and I started reading everything I could. I still couldn't see that many movies. A little more than a half-year later, I was living in Houston where they had colleges showing these movies, and then I was really addicted.

That was the only film I had ever seen by Scorsese. I saw his stuff out of order. *Martin Scorsese: The First Decade*, the Mary Pat Kelly book, I read that very intently, and it talked about how he worked with actors and helped with loose, structured improv. I hadn't looked at that book in years, and I said, "Shit, that must have really left an impression on me," 'cause that's how I approached working with actors.

Scorsese wanted to direct what he called a "kamikaze way" of making pictures, pouring everything in and then forgetting about it.

LINKLATER: I do understand that—make every film like it's your last. He was coming off of financial failure and also, unfortunately, a critical failure, although *New York, New York's* truly a great movie.

I've been in this position myself now, where you make a film you feel happy with and you realize no one's with you. Critics aren't with you, audiences aren't with you, the studio that made the film with you is not with you. I was in a similar position after *The Newton Boys*. You put everything you have into a movie. At that point you're tempted to make a commercial film, to get back into good graces, but it gave me this perverse desire to make a noncommercial film that you really don't give two shits what anybody thinks. That's really empowering yourself. You can come off a failure and not go back pandering, but actually go back further into your failure. I'm sure when they made *Raging Bull*, they had to have thought, "Oh, if this works it could be *Rocky*."

Scorsese thought this was going to be his failing, that he "would spend the next decade living in New York and Rome and making documentaries and films about saints."

LINKLATER: All filmmakers of his generation and all generations since have this specter of Orson Welles taking over everybody. He's the true Christ. If you think of Welles and *Citizen Kane*, he sacrificed for everyone, but you could be sacrificed, too. Your genius could go thwarted.

Scorsese said that the film was ultimately about a guy attaining something and losing everything and then redeeming himself spiritually. There's this undercurrent of finding redemption through pain.

LINKLATER: I'm not Catholic, but I could see that. Some of this stuff is hard to watch, but that's a total Scorsese theme. I've heard Paul Schrader say Jake La Motta wasn't redeemed; he was the same lug he was at the end that he was at the beginning. That makes me laugh. That's fine, and they're both right.

Even though he's in a slightly better place, he's dressed a little better. He bottoms out at that one place before he goes to jail. He's still got a long way to go, probably, in his life. Who knows what his relation is going to be with his kids? I would think that would be a big thing, but you gotta hand it to the movie not cheesing it out.

You feel like some of these bridges may be burned permanently, but at least you see him reaching at least a little bit. I see the slightest flicker of self, some kind of self, some kind of redemption in his mind.

One of the things that Scorsese said about the film was that he wanted to "take all the unsynthetic things from myself and throw them up on the screen."

LINKLATER: What about the difficulties of having what he called a loathsome protagonist? I don't think we're challenged enough with loathsome or questionable lead characters. Let's face it, it's like this dark theme, but it's funny as shit. That's what I truly appreciate and what redeems it on the entertainment value. *Raging Bull*, just like all Scorsese movies, is actually, it's very entertaining. It's funny. It's got a lot of these not-so-great heroic characters, or they are heroic in their own way, in their own mind.

La Motta himself said he took punishment in the ring as a penance of sorts because he believed that he had killed a mugging victim. How do you explain La Motta's masochism in the film?

LINKLATER: I took it as a lot of false pride, that whole thing about not hitting the canvas to take an extreme beating. It was weird because I'm not like that. Most people aren't. Let's face it—we all do things not in our best interests now and then, but in sports and boxing in particular, you can get your ass kicked by not performing well and someone beating you. In boxing, to lose is to get beaten, to get bloody but not to fall down. The ultimate zero-sum sports game is to take this incredible beating.

There are a lot of people in pain. An athlete is someone who willingly accepted the trade-off, that to be good, to be at the level you can reach, you're going to have to push yourself to a place where your body is tested to the limit, where you might give out. A coach will scream at you, "No pain, no gain!" But it's true.

Why do you think we as a culture tend to romanticize the figure of the boxer, whether that's Rocky or in a song by Simon and Garfunkel?

LINKLATER: It's the modern gladiator sacrifice to all of us, someone who will go out there and suffer the blows, take the shots for all of us. Boxers get so many punches to the head. Everybody knows that that's unhealthy. They get their trade-off, their moment of glory. It's a weird pact they've made with the culture.

To see someone self-destruct, the moment where he's beating his belt to get some jewels out of it. It's the saddest self-loathing act you can imagine. It's unbelievable. It's stupid, and yet he can't help himself. It's painful to watch.

De Niro got an Oscar for his performance. He employed Jake La Motta as his personal trainer for the film, and he knocked out his teeth. De Niro famously gained sixty pounds for the role.

LINKLATER: He looked the part. Just in his looks, when he's in the nightclub performing, he's so sad. That's clearly one of the great performances, but it's such a great cast. Everybody—De Niro, obviously, but Joe Pesci is so perfect. Cathy Moriarty and Frank Vincent as Salvy, all those Mafiosi-type guys hanging around. They all seem so perfect.

It's hilarious, that milieu. Everything's so real you could feel it. I'd never been to New York, I didn't know any of that, but one of my boyhood friends' dad was this Italian guy from the Bronx, and he raved about the movie, saying, "Yep, that's exactly how it was."

Everything except the fight scene is pretty straight-up. Every angle, everything's beautifully, eloquently done. It's an ingeniously, perfectly edited movie, and not the fight sequences. I'm talking the rest of the movie, the way the first wife disappears. I thought it was bold that they didn't have to tell you everything; you could fill in some gaps. It pounds you. It didn't condescend at all to you on a narrative level. The first wife, she's gone; he's on to Vickie. You didn't have to see the scene that people would think was missing. We don't have to have that scene of her moving out. We know what happened; let's get on with the story.

The fighting stuff was so expressionistic. I remember Quentin Tarantino even said that. I asked him once. After *Pulp Fiction*, we were riding around and I said, "Did you ever want to show some of the fight when Bruce Willis kills that guy in the ring?" And he went, "How could you shoot a boxing scene after *Raging Bull*?" He's not even going to get in that ring. Why would you?

One of the things in this film that creates the tension is the traditional vow of celibacy before the fight.

LINKLATER: Jake got the best depiction of that mentality in athletes. It's the same as a crew cut and high-top black shoes for football players. Military, by definition, means no sex unless you're gay.

I remember this movie was on my offshore oil rig, and all these guys were sitting around and they hadn't seen it. He's got the girl in the room and then half the room empties. They'd been denied their sex scene.

How has your perception changed with subsequent viewings?

LINKLATER: I see Jake La Motta in different ways. I was, at the time, so identified with him. I remember I was more critical of Jake on subsequent viewings. Maybe it was getting older and finding my own equilibrium as an adult going through the world.

In your own work, are there any references or homages to it?

LINKLATER: A line here and there. I saw it nine years before I made *Slacker*. I started shooting in '89. This caught me at a real formative, early place. It got me thinking, but by the time I was making my own movies, I wasn't attempting to do that. The films you love the most, you're always a little sad to realize those aren't the kind of films you'll ever make. The die has been cast before you even know it, and you're making films. That's the sad thing about even starting to make films.

At the time, I remember mixed feelings. I remember telling people, some of my buddies, "Oh, you gotta go see this movie," and they're like, "Uh, yeah. Maybe." And even that girl I went with, we broke up shortly thereafter because she said it was boring. I was so mad. I'd had, like, this huge experience, and she walked out and goes, "Eh, it was kind of boring."

I was, like, "Who am I with? This is crazy!" That was the end of that. A guy wants his girlfriend to at least appreciate that part of him. It's every guy's fantasy to have a girl who, if she doesn't think that those films are great, at least can see why you like them, and tolerate it.

Jay Duplass

Raising Arizona

Jay Duplass, best known for his low-budget dramas on the Mumblecore circuit, got to *Raising Arizona* first. Among his age group—filmmakers in their early '30s—this Coen brothers classic was the most requested film to talk about in this book.

“I will be the first one to shamelessly admit that some of my peak emotional experiences in my lifetime have happened inside of movie theaters,” Duplass says. “This was one of the top ones.”

Jay Duplass, selected filmography:

Scrapple (2004)

The Puffy Chair (2005)

Baghead (2008)

Cyrus (2010; codirector, with Mark Duplass)

The Do-Deca-Pentathlon (2010)

Raising Arizona

1987

Directed by Joel Coen

Starring Nicolas Cage, Holly Hunter, Trey Wilson, John Goodman, William Forsythe, Sam McMurray, and Frances McDormand

How would you describe *Raising Arizona* to someone who has never seen it?

DUPLASS: Wow. *Raising Arizona* is . . . I've never even thought to describe this movie. It's like beyond a movie to me. A couple wants to have a baby and they can't for biological reasons, so they decide to kidnap one of, one of the quintuplets of a furniture store owner, Nathan Arizona. Then bad things happen. The most critical person in it is obviously Nicolas Cage. The best thing about Nicolas Cage in this movie is that I think he's about fifteen years old playing a thirty-three-year-old. I don't know how old he was, but—

He was twenty-two.

DUPLASS: He's twenty-two, and he's playing Holly Hunter's husband in the movie and you know, I don't even know the age difference. . . . I'm looking it up on IMDb right now. They're six years apart. She's twenty-eight. He's twenty-two. My brother, Mark, and I are obsessed with him in this movie in particular, but we like to refer to Nicolas Cage as the president of the Blown Testosterone Club.

What that means is there is a select group of males who blow out all of their testosterone in the first twenty years of their life. It's like they used it all up. So when he was twenty-two he seemed and looked like late thirties to us—the hairiest guy in the world. Then for some reason like five years later he was bald and chubby. He was just the image of virility, hopefulness, and male capability. That's just something that I enjoy thinking about. So he was fantastic in that. Holly Hunter is just absolutely adorable, and she is the cop he is just smitten with, and they get married and she can't have a baby.

Tell me about your first experience with the film.

DUPLASS: This is '87, I'm pretty sure. I would have been fourteen. We saw it on a family vacation in Hawaii.

We saw it in a tiny little movie theater on Maui. It was in a movie theater where we thought, this is the movie that will suck the least at this movie theater. We weren't too excited about anything going on over there.

It was one of those things, where all the movies before that were clear-cut; they were just movies. There was something intangible about it, and it didn't feel like other movies. It felt homemade. It felt—even though it's so

superbly executed—it felt handmade on some weird level and it felt like us on some strange level.

It was the highlight of the entire trip, and I will be the first one to shamelessly admit that some of my peak emotional experiences in my lifetime have happened inside of movie theaters. This was one of the top ones.

Why do you think it resonated?

DUPLASS: Something that you need to know about me and my brother Mark is that we grew up watching very serious relationship movies our whole lives. Like when everyone else was watching *Star Wars*, we were obsessed with *Ordinary People* at the ages of, like, seven and four. I don't know why, but Mark and I have always liked movies about relationships and how people are treating each other, and how they're negotiating. It's just the weirdest thing now that we think back to it. It's like we would rush back from grammar school and watch HBO in the early '80s. So when this movie came up, it was a relationship movie that was incredibly stylized and amazing, and just so, so funny. It was one of the first movies that externalized the internal struggle that people have when they're trying to make their relationship work, and they're trying to make their dreams come true, and all the little things that they're battling with. After that experience we started stepping up our home video production from like cutesy little things to trying to incorporate some plot.

Tell me about your favorite line.

DUPLASS: God, it's an evolution is what it is. Right now, what we're obsessed with more than anything. There's this one guy, the husband of Frances McDormand. He's Glen, the wife-swapping guy. There's a line in there when he's talking about looking to adopt a new baby because "Dot says these here are getting too big to cuddle."

And: "They said we had to wait five years for a healthy white baby. I said 'Healthy white baby, five years? OK, what else you got?' They said they got two Koreans and a Negro born with his heart on the outside. It's a crazy world." I don't know why, but the "two Koreans and a Negro born with his heart on the outside" is probably my favorite line from the movie and nobody else probably remembers it.

And what about it?

DUPLASS: There are just so many layers of comedy and insanity and commentary on the state of America and Americans' self-entitlement. The fact that the character thinks *Negro* was a better thing to say than *nigger*, and just how ignorant that character is. I don't know. It was a ballsy ball of humor and just craziness. It's terrifying at the same time. That guy is terrifying, and you don't want to believe that he exists, but you know that he's out there.

What's your favorite scene? What stuck out to you the most, or what's been the most instructive or terrifying?

DUPLASS: My favorite scene is the eleven-minute montage that starts the movie. I've never experienced anything like that before or after, and it works so well, and it's so amazing. That being said, as opposed to being instructive, it has been completely destructive to our careers. Because of this movie, we spent—and I am not joking—thirteen, maybe fifteen years trying to be the Coen brothers.

We made our first successful film in 2002. We went to film school and, granted, a lot of those years were spent being a spastic teenager, some of them were spent being professional editors so that we could support ourselves within the industry. We, along with every other film student in the early '90s, wanted to be the Coen brothers. It took us fifteen years to figure out that you can't beat the Coen brothers at being the Coen brothers. They are so damn good at what they do. Honestly, for us, it took a really, really long time to figure that out. It's funny because what we do is so different from the Coen brothers. They're so specific, and I think their movies probably exist almost to a T in storyboards. And we don't know what the hell's going to happen when we get on set.

Is it as simple as imitation was the sincerest form of flattery? Or was it frustration for you?

DUPLASS: What made it click was a total accident. We kept making movies, and they weren't that good. They just weren't catching on, and we were completely depressed, and Mark basically was like, "OK, fuck this, we're making a movie." We were sitting in our south Austin apartment with seven items in it. One of those items happened to be our parents' home video

camera, similar to what we used to use when we were kids. I'm like, well, we can't make a movie. We don't have any film; we don't have a crew. This is before making movies digitally was possible, or this was right at the cusp of it, in retrospect.

Mark was like, "Just come up with something, and we'll just do it." What we came up with was something that had happened to me the week before. I had tried to perfect the personal greeting on my answering machine, and it took me an hour, and I was so worked up I basically had a mini nervous breakdown trying to do this fucking thing. Because I was trying to get it right, and I couldn't get it right, and it was this horrid experience. Then we started laughing about it when we talked about the idea, and so we shot it—Mark did it. We spent three dollars on a tape at the corner store at the 7-Eleven and that movie got into Sundance. That three dollars and that one take of fifteen minutes did more for our careers than fifteen years of trying to be the Coen brothers. It was a total accident, and it was only by virtue of us being stupid enough to keep doing it when everything in the universe was telling us not to.

This was not a universally loved film when it came out. Janet Maslin called it "first-rate apprentice work." Vincent Canby called it "full of technical expertise, but has no life of its own." But Joel Siegel was in its corner. He called it "one of the most inventive original comedies in years." Why do you think opinions were so split?

DUPLASS: Like I had originally said, the movie feels completely different from all of the movies that came before. There's something about the way they put the images together that feels different, and anything that's different is going to be met with an antagonistic viewpoint. I don't know why it's polarizing, and you're right, when people think of the Coen brothers' catalogue it's not like that's even in the top five. I know that the people who love it are obsessed. It's one of those movies that elicits really, really strong opinions—probably not as much as *Barton Fink*. Certain people think I'm crazy when I tell them that's my favorite movie.

What images float to the surface when you think about it?

DUPLASS: The Woody Woodpecker tattoo and him realizing that the evil

man is himself. The guy on a motorcycle with a baby on the front handlebars, picking off rabbits and lizards from miles away with his shotgun. I don't know, it had such a strong sense of place in Arizona. There was just a dreaminess to it. It just appealed to this deep part of my subconscious that had never really been accessed before by a piece of art. That's why I feel like a bumbling idiot, because I think that that's what the movie has done to me. It's working on me at such deep subconscious levels. The way it went in there was by making me laugh, by making me laugh as a dorky fourteen-year-old boy, and still now. It makes me laugh so much it just opens me up and gets within me.

How has it changed in your viewing experience from the first to the most recent time?

DUPLASS: I do know this—Mark and I did go see this movie together in Austin. The Austin Film Society had a 35mm print. We went to go see it, and we were scared because we didn't want it to not hold up. That's a big thing that we talk about, "Is this going to hold up? Do we have unrealistic expectations?" But we went, and we both walked out of the movie theater crying; we couldn't even talk to each other. It was just like, "I'll just talk to you next week because I can't even deal with it right now." In terms of how the experience affects me? The wild part to me is when I first saw the movie, all these guys looked like old, old men. When I watch it now the characters are younger than me, and it blows my mind. I don't know what that does to me, but it certainly feeds the frenzy that I've always had. I've always felt like I should be doing more, I should be accomplishing more. To think that these people could pull this off. I know the Coens were pretty young when they got it done.

Cage had tried to kick-start his career for years, and this is really kind of the second film that had done it. He was in *Rumble Fish* and *The Cotton Club*, which were both flops, and then he hit with *Peggy Sue Got Married*. This film made him a star, and he admitted that he based the character and the hairdo on Woody Woodpecker.

DUPLASS: Jesus, that's awesome.

And *Moonstruck* is the same year.

DUPLASS: Yeah. Where, I believe, he plays a forty-year-old or something? How old was Cher then and how old was he then? I mean, it's mind-blowing to me, and when I saw it I thought, man, she looks really young for him. I think he blew his testosterone out on that film; it was in between *Raising Arizona* and *Moonstruck*.

This film was the start of ongoing criticism about the Coen brothers in that none of the characters are ever smarter than the brothers themselves—that the brothers are oftentimes condescending to them. The other criticism is that a lot of their characters are cartoonish, and it's hard to care about a cartoon.

DUPLASS: Yeah, I feel love for all those characters, and I can only assume they felt love for all their characters in that movie, as ignorant as they all may be. I would agree with the statement that none of these characters are as smart as the Coen brothers. It's strange that you say that because that is something that Mark and I do hold ourselves to, is that we want our characters to be as smart as we are. The way that we feel is that we are smart enough to be aware of our problems, but that doesn't make them go away, and that doesn't make us suffer from them any less. In terms of the Coens and their characters being cartoons, I don't know. I am incredibly sensitive to overstylized stuff. It's very strange—I just feel that pure love for those characters. They're just distilling their own idiocy for us to share. That's just me projecting, because I don't know what their internal process is like.

Now when you saw this, and again I know you were fourteen, but did this make you seek out other films like it?

DUPLASS: It was exactly that. I didn't even know what it meant to be a director. I was very immature. Also, I have just a very microscopic, microcosmic view of things. I witness this phenomenal piece of art, and I couldn't quite even get my brain around what it was. And my fixation on it was just singular. I was just obsessing about that movie, watching it repeatedly, forcing my parents to buy it on VHS, breaking it, and getting another one. It was a very singular, microscopic obsession with that single piece of art. Then eventually I did branch out because it did make me obsessed with films. Then I

started to learn what it meant to direct a movie, and then I dug back into *Blood Simple* and started following them to learn how to anticipate what it is they would do in the future.

And just ballpark here, how many times do you think you've seen it?

DUPLASS: I'm going to try to be really honest. I have a tendency towards hyperbole here. So I'm going to check myself. I probably have seen the film between thirty and forty times.

How do you think your life or your work might have been different if you hadn't seen the film?

DUPLASS: I probably wouldn't be making movies—seriously. It held over for so long. It really was the root of everything that Mark and I always hold ourselves to in making movies. That is to say that *Raising Arizona* is the most inspired movie that I have ever seen.

Inspiring or inspired?

DUPLASS: Inspired and inspiring, but mostly inspired. It's an inspired piece of art. I don't know how to quantify that or how to even talk about it, but I know that when they made this piece of art there was so much love, all pistons firing. Because they were creating things in ways that hadn't been done before, and they had to ignore the fears about why it may or may not hold up. Beyond that, the performances are inspired; it's hard to describe this electric thing that happens. I know it's probably cheesy for a lot of people to talk about or hear about, but—that really is the key element of that film. It's just an immensely inspired piece of art.

30

John Waters *The Wizard of Oz*

The Wizard of Oz keeps haunting John Waters.

It pops up in at least three of his films and accounts for the only time Waters found himself in drag (as a child, at a birthday party). At first when Waters told me he wanted to talk about *The Wizard of Oz*, I was skeptical—this was the filmmaker William Burroughs christened “the Prince of Puke” for extreme comedies such as *Pink Flamingos* and *Mondo Trasho*.

But as we talked, Waters’s affection for *The Wizard of Oz* seemed to fit right in with his misfit-with-a-camera image. He tells me about a favorite scene: “When they throw the water on the witch, she says, ‘Who would have thought a good little girl like you could destroy my beautiful wickedness.’ That line inspired my *life*. I sometimes say it to myself before I go to sleep, like a prayer.”

John Waters, selected filmography:

Mondo Trasho (1969)
Pink Flamingos (1972)
Female Trouble (1974)
Desperate Living (1977)
Polyester (1981)
Hairspray (1988)
Cry-Baby (1990)
Serial Mom (1994)
Pecker (1998)
Cecil B. DeMented (2000)
A Dirty Shame (2004)

The Wizard of Oz

1939

Directed by Victor Fleming

Starring Judy Garland, Margaret Hamilton, Frank Morgan, Ray Bolger, Bert Lahr, and Jack Haley

Although it’s unnecessary in American culture, how would you describe this film to someone who has never seen it?

WATERS: Girl leaves drab farm, becomes a fag hag, meets gay lions and men that don’t try to molest her, and meets a witch, kills her. And unfortunately—by a surreal act of shoe fetishism—clicks her shoes together and is back to where she belongs. It has an unhappy ending.

Do you remember how old you were and where you saw it?

WATERS: I probably saw it at the Senator Theater in Baltimore the first time, which I still have my movie premieres in. I probably saw it there and then on TV every year. But certainly I saw it at the movies as a kid.

I don’t remember how old I was, and it wasn’t the first movie I saw, but it was close to it. It was a complete, complete obsession from the very, very beginning. Now, today, you have video. We couldn’t do that, so you had to wait once a year to see it. That’s that sadness about the magic of movies: you can watch it over and over, and you can rewind it, see how everything is done. Still, is there a better tornado scene? To me, all these really expensive digital effects are very uninvolved. That tornado scene is as good as *Twister* to me, and I think it’s done with a nylon stocking.

It’s a great surrealist scene, too.

WATERS: And how radical—the black and white to color is almost like an LSD effect. It is a drug movie almost.

I know there are homages to *Wizard of Oz* in your films, specifically *Mondo Trasho*.

WATERS: In *Mondo Trasho*, she clicks her heels to go home.

And then, the seldom seen *Roman Candles*.

WATERS: Oh yeah, they are reading the book!

Are there any more overt ones?

WATERS: I'm trying to think. In *Desperate Living* there's a Wicked Queen. Well, every day of my life I wear striped socks a lot. Actually, *Commes des Garçons* this year had women's shoes that looked exactly like that. They were curled up, so if you wore them, they stuck up in the air. Remember how the witch's shoes shrink? That's one of my favorite shots, and the close-up of her hands with electricity.

Still, to this day, that's creepy.

WATERS: That's a great shot. And talk about an entrance, my God! "Who killed my sister!"

One of the things I'm always amazed at is the range of films that this has had an effect on. From David Lynch's *Wild at Heart* to—

WATERS: That's so great, and Tim Burton's films as well. Oddly enough, it's way more influential in America than in Europe. They know the film in Europe, but not like here.

What is it then, in America, that makes the movie stick as such a huge influence?

WATERS: Because it was surreal and it was magical and it was trippy. We saw it when we were young, and it had good villains and one of the most famous songs in a movie ever. And great surrealism: "How about a little fire, Scarecrow?" When the winged monkeys fly, and rip out the straw! It's surrealistic.

My mother, to this day, is still scared of those monkeys.

WATERS: I think kids are the most scared when the trees grab back the apples. Kids *freak* when that happens; they cry.

Why do you think it's become associated with the gay community, as being a "gay classic"?

WATERS: See, to me, I don't think it's that much of a gay movie. Judy Garland is, but I don't think so much of that movie. Of course, this is her first one, but she wasn't tragic in that movie, except later they found out she was on diet pills when she was singing.

I think it's only a gay movie, if it is, only because of Judy Garland's later suffering in her life and melodrama. I love Judy Garland, but did she ever marry a straight man? I don't know. Did anyone in the family? It's a tradition. But basically, I don't think of it as a gay film. I know "Friends of Dorothy," but I think it's because of Judy Garland's later career.

Well, it might be a gay children's movie. I don't think it's a gay *adult's* movie. I know drag queens do the Wicked Witch, but I never saw one. It's not a drag role.

I read somewhere that you once, as a kid, dressed up like the Wicked Witch at a party.

WATERS: The only time I've ever been in drag in my entire life was once, at a children's birthday party. I was a witch. I'm sure a few eyebrows were raised, but not really. And once was enough. It ended my drag career. [*laughing*] I don't even think I thought of it as drag. It wasn't like being a woman in that outfit—it was being a villain. That's what I wanted. Of course, I also loved Captain Hook [Cyril Ritchard, in the 1955 NBC television production of *Peter Pan* with Mary Martin]—he was more a woman. Look at him. And Patty McCormack in *The Bad Seed*—that was the Holy Trinity of my youth, and they were all villains.

I was always lookin' for somethin' that other people didn't like, or people were frightened of, or didn't care for. I was always drawn to forbidden subject matter in the very, very beginning. *The Wizard of Oz* opened me up because it was one of the first movies I ever saw. It opened me up to villainy, to screenwriting, to costumes. And great dialogue. I think the witch has great, great dialogue.

It's always held up as one of the quintessential American films. Why?

WATERS: Because it takes place in LSD Land!

Maybe it's because—and what I do believe—in America, anything can happen. The great freedom of living in America, compared to many other

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Maybe it's because—and what I do believe—in America, anything can happen. The great freedom of living in America, compared to many other

countries—maybe this could happen; you could be home one day and be really just transported to another world, learn everything, and come back. To me, it is American because of the values with friends, and how people save each other and expose fraud—the person behind the curtain is really bullshit that has no power. All those are very American subject matter, but I don't know why they aren't European really, either.

To me, it's about one person, the whole movie: the Wicked Witch of the West. She inspired me. When I first saw the Wicked Witch of the West, I was completely obsessed by her. I didn't know why Dorothy wanted to go back to that smelly farm, with that badly dressed aunt and black and white, when she could live with gay lions, basically, and magic shoes.

Tell me about a favorite scene.

WATERS: When they throw the water on the witch, she says, "Who would have thought a good little girl like you could destroy my beautiful wickedness." That line inspired my *life*. I sometimes say it to myself before I go to sleep, like a prayer.

Her outfit, what a great outfit, it was a *Commes des Garçons* outfit years ahead of its time. Her makeup, the music around her—that one little shot where you see her in the tree before the Tin Man. It's my favorite little hint of her, because you're missing her.

I can still, with my nieces and nephews, just say, [*menacingly*] "Who killed my sister!" and they break into tears. They were young. It really scares most kids. If it scared me, I loved it. And it made me appreciate villains in films.

I never met her, Margaret Hamilton. But she did, before she died, send me an autographed picture. And my favorite thing that's made me obsessed to this day is she signed it, "Margaret Hamilton," but then "WWW" for Wicked Witch of the West. It was like her monogram. What a great, great thing to have all through your house. Those three letters were so amazing to me.

But she led to my whole belief, in all my movies that I made, that basically my heroes and heroines are sometimes the villains in other people's movies. Everything was backwards: The fat girl gets the guy [*Hairspray*]; the good killer is *Serial Mom*. It's always the reverse character in other people's movies that are heroes. I realized that I was never going to be like the other

kids, that I wasn't going to fit in, but it didn't bother me. It was a secret society to know that the villains were just much more fun.

But with Hamilton, the witch was a part she could never break away from.

WATERS: I never felt she minded. I felt that at the end of the day, she wouldn't sign a picture "WWW" in her old age if she was uptight about that.

I love that movie *The Making of the Wizard of Oz* by Aljean Harmetz, because there's a lot of great stuff about her in it. I think she even went to pose for Andy Warhol when he did the "Legends" thing. She embraced it, and she was really made a legend from that part. How many other villains are *that* famous from a movie, that can make a kid scream?

Although, and I said this line in a speech at the Independent Spirit Awards this year, but it's true: Last summer, I asked this kid I was talking to who was about seven, "Did you like *The Wizard of Oz*?" And he said, "Naw, basically that's just about *walking*." It was a great line!

I was stupefied: What do you mean about *walking*? It really shocked me. It was the only time a young person said something that was great, in a way, because they are just so into special effects. It was basically walking. But I asked him about the witch, because you've never seen a kid who has a neutral reaction. They all basically remember her.

And I have this great poster. I didn't have it as a kid, I bought it later, but it was this great marketing. It's this really scary picture of the witch for a kid's bedroom, and it says, "The Wicked Witch wants you to clean up your room—right now!"