

# The Wah-Wah Diaries

The Making of a Film

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Extract

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# DEVELOPMENT

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The Ivy, London. The producer Hilary Heath has invited me for lunch to discuss possible projects. Having assumed she is aware of the idea for a screenplay I have been blathering about writing for some years, I believe this to be the meeting at which I am required to deliver my 'pitch'. Not at all – Hilary thinks I might have a novel I am interested in adapting, or some such. Tall, beautiful, impulsive and unfazed, she accommodates my tangential idea and clucks welcome noises of enthusiasm when I suggest spooling forth the synopsis between mouthfuls of Caesar salad.

It goes something like this: 'Coming of age at the end of an age story set in Africa during the last gasp of Empire, circa 1969, about a man in his mid-forties, facing the premature end of his colonial career due to imminent Independence and, cuckolded by his wife, left to bring up their eleven-year-old son. Meanwhile the expat community stake their claim in the coming Independence celebrations by mounting an amateur production of *Camelot* to entertain the visiting British royal coming out to officiate at the handover. A comic drama. Purely autobiographical and as true as fiction.'

'Sounds wonderful – have you got a script?'

'Well, yes, but not quite. It's in a thousand pieces. Notes on napkins, on scraps of paper in drawers and plastic bags, old theatre programmes . . . But I do have a structure and a list of scenes.'

'How long will you need to write up a first draft?' Hilary has an uncompromisingly direct approach, accompanied by a sort of nervy, skittish quality that can sound either accusatory or blunt, or both.

I suppose I had been waiting for someone to demand a draft for

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years, but when finally asked the direct question, I'm not really prepared for it. Somehow I convinced myself it would never happen.

'Couple of months,' eases its way past my lips, which clearly know something the rest of me doesn't.

'How about aiming for just this side of Christmas, so I can read it on holiday in Barbados?'

'Sounds good to me,' I say, which should have *quavered* forth, but no, the words come out sounding quite assured and emphatic as I chew heartily, trying to hide the fact from all my panic stations that red alert might be a mere pudding away.

Before I know it, Hilary is my appointed producer and I leave lunch as her appointed writer-director.

I allowed myself a momentary auteur hop, skip and a scramble down the escalators into Leicester Square station and sat all the way home looking at my fellow travellers wondering whether they too were full of secret plans and subsidized lunch. 'But you haven't even written it up properly yet,' said my wife, only just managing to suppress a hearty snort.

'I know, but I'm going to.'

In my study I groaned and rummaged my way through every box, bag and briefcase to collect all the peripatetic pieces together. A vast pile emerged that looked ominously like a tax return in the middle of a nervous breakdown. Where to begin?

Having only made a list of scenes and written a brief outline, I began to wonder if I ought to phone Hilary, reimburse her for lunch and call it quits *now*. Rifling around, though, I realized that a huge amount of it was already written, albeit in short, unconnected scenes. I bunged on a CD of seventies music and set about numbering the chaotic postcards, notes and everything else.

The thought that 'someone really ought to write a book about this place' had refrained throughout my childhood. I remember a sense from everyone who lived through this last gasp of Empire that it was worthy of being recorded in some way. The cast list was composed of

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expats who had left England young, or scarpered out of India in 1947, dribbled down through colonial Africa, from Kenya, via Nyasaland, Northern Rhodesia, Bechuanaland and Basutoland, and finally fetched up in Swaziland, the last outpost of the Union Jack on the continent. There was a braying chorus of 'We're going home' on one hand, and 'England's gone to the dogs' on the other. Most faced the dilemma of either trying to hold on to a colonial standard of living and sense of self-importance that had a fast-approaching sell-by date, or sailing back to a life of anonymity in a semi in Datchet, or Norwich, or wherever.

The circumstances of my parents' pain-filled divorce were so riddled with rumour, recrimination and misunderstandings that, in writing about it, I hoped somehow to make sense of it all and expose the hypocrisy of the colonial hoi polloi sitting in judgement. Secrets are like poison and I wanted to burst the pustule. At the same time, I wanted to revisit and recreate the sheer malarkey and joy of being an adolescent amongst adults revving up for an amateur production of *Camelot*.

Hilary calls. 'Can you come in and pitch to the finance team at Blackjack Productions in Soho Square tomorrow?'

The next day I put on my confidence pants, go to Soho Square and hit the button for the seventh floor. In the boardroom I plonk down, riddled with doubt that my story's too fragile to hold their attention. I breathe deeply and smile as they enter.

No going back. The pitch is not a million miles away from the one I gave in Robert Altman's *The Player*.

When I hear the words 'an intimate epic' spurt from my maw, I realize just how beyond myself I have actually got. All the more so when I quote scenes and examples from the masterworks of Messrs Kubrick, Coppola and Altman along the way. Smokescreens and mirrors.

So far they are all giving me the hugest benefit of my doubts and continue nodding and smiling, even laughing at the *Camelot* shenanigans.

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'How soon can we see a draft?' And with a do-re-mi agents are negotiating a writing-directing fee. The 'pitch' is now a 'proposition'.

### *October to November 1999*

Bruce Robinson, who wrote and directed *Withnail and I*, advised me to start my screenplay with the tried and tested precept of thinking about what happened on the day it begins that had never happened before. My beginning is inadvertently witnessing my mother's adultery on the front seat of the car whilst I 'slept' in the back. The middle: my father's drunken attempt to blow my brains out one night when I emptied a case of his whisky. And an ending: my father's bizarre funeral when a young Swazi priest attempted to raise him from the dead. I decided on these three foundation posts, then set about filling in the gaps – which plunged me into examining my past and the people I knew with urgent ferocity. Firstly I made a long list of key events, characters, incidents and anecdotes to try and find a narrative thread to bind them all together.

One of my earliest images of growing up in sixties Swaziland was the contrast between the black Swazis, kitted out in traditional Mahiya national dress, which kept them cool and casual-looking, and the pasty Brits, who wore clothes that never seemed to suit the hot weather. Those that did brave the sun soon burnt to an angry red crisp like a bursting sausage. There was a brigade of horsy women with enormous arses, moustaches and jolly-hockey-sticks ideas about everything walloping about in all directions, whose skins had weathered like leather and whose breath and hands always smelled of horse saliva and dung. The men all seemed to be obsessed with their balls – big ones, small ones, red ones, white or black ones. Any and *every* sport featuring balls seemed to be an obsession. Given the

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heat, no television, nine-to-five working hours, cheap servants and lots of leisure time, it was entertainment.

If known familiarly, all adults had to be addressed with the prefix Uncle or Aunty, though they were not blood relations. Unless you were American. There were American kids who even called their parents by their Christian names, which was considered really outré. People generally scoffed and laughed at them behind their backs for being 'different', but the fact remained that they landed on the moon first. The largest American presence was the Peace Corps hippies – or Vietnam draft dodgers, depending on which side of the political fence you sat. They were the third 'tribe', sandal-wearing, bearded and bead-bedecked folk who bridged the visual gap between the milk-bottle Brits and coffee-brown Swazis.

My story always seems to start with a betrayal. The image of my mother in a paisley flared pantsuit swaying wantonly to 'Winchester Cathedral' with eyes clamped shut is something that I watched with the secret knowledge of having witnessed her carrying on with a man who wasn't my father in the front seat of his car, whilst I was supposedly asleep in the back.

Seeing what I should never have seen. Feeling guilt for being a witness. It is the precise moment when my childhood ended and my 'divided' view of the world began – at once both a participant in and observer of my own life. I am grateful in retrospect that it has proved to be such a creative, if sometimes painful, force ever since.

It was the moment I started keeping a secret diary. It was also the moment I gave up on God. Although I kept praying in the weeks that followed my mother's dawn departure that God might intervene on my behalf, when she clearly wasn't coming back I gave up on him. Seeing my father begging and weeping when I was ten years old, and not succeeding in bringing her back, was a big unspoken realization. When you see that the very man who is supposed to be strong and in control is not, and whom, as a child, you naturally invest with

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superhuman powers that it turns out he doesn't have, then your faith in the old order gets shot to pieces.

When he got paralytically drunk and fell asleep in his chair, I childishly accepted that although he was in agony, we'd be all right, just so long as nobody else ever found out! Watching *The Sound of Music*, which finally made it to Swaziland four years after it was made, I willed Julie Andrews to leap off the Alps and come and save us. The schism between the face shown and not shown, the nature of pretence and self-image, is what really interests me.

It takes me a couple of months to complete a first draft which clocks in at 140 pages – too long, according to the time-honoured screen ratio of one page to a minute of screen time. I edit it down to 115 pages and nervously post it off to Hilary in Barbados.

She is enthusiastic, has very few script suggestions and is gung-ho about setting up a casting director and getting it up and running immediately. Mary Selway, who cast me in my first film, agrees to do the casting and without so much as a do-re-mi, Hilary organizes a location recce trip to Swaziland, where we meet the King and are granted permission by him to film out there. Everything seems to be going smoothly and quickly, and various actors' names are bandied back and forth for the main roles. Hilary is convinced it will be a snap to get actors interested and attached. Her positive enthusings lull me into thinking that I won't have to do multiple rewrites of the script, as is customary, and that we can realistically aim to get it cast and therefore financed before the year is out. Securing 'names' for the lead roles in turn attracts finance. The chicken-and-egg syndrome – actors and agents want to know if the film is fully financed, and financiers want to know which famous actors are on board.

The first warning signal comes from Mary Selway, who opines that the script is not yet ready to be sent out to actors and that it would be improved by focusing more on the inner workings of the family in the story. Reality check.



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Mary reluctantly withdraws a week later due to the recurrence of her cancer. The casting director Celestia Fox generously agrees to take over, and she has valuable suggestions to cut down some of the peripheral Peace Corps characters and to focus on the father-son relationship. The story covers about four years, and she is very insistent that we try and cast a single actor to play the lead boy, rather than attempt to find an eleven-year-old and a fifteen-year-old who can morph into each other.

Eric Fellner at Working Title rejects the script in its present form, expressing doubt about the *Camelot* amateur-dramatic section of the story. An agent says that as all the characters are so thoroughly unpleasant, she is disinclined to send it to any of her clients for consideration.

Minnie Driver turns it down.

Brenda Blethyn and Anna Chancellor 'pass'.

Major wake-up call. I feel foolish for having willingly believed the script was ready to send out so soon. Portcullis down and drawbridge up. Rewrite. Rewrite. Rewrite.

Harry Hook, writer-director and a very good friend, helpfully puts me in touch with Philip Palmer, a script editor who kindly agrees to give me his professional opinion which I pay him for.

Philip's opening paragraph goes like this: 'This is a beautifully observed, delightfully written script. I love all the droll asides in the scene directions. Like all the mad incidents that are so unlikely – the African evangelical priest who jumps on Harry's coffin and tries to bring the corpse back to life – they must be true. The script succeeds totally in conjuring up the bizarre, claustrophobic, eccentric, hermetically sealed expat universe, and takes us on a tour of that world.'

So far so good, but the next four pages are a detailed breakdown of everything that is 'wrong' with it. Deep-breath time, and I sort out just how much I agree with him or not. Significantly, Philip reiterates notes I have had from elsewhere – that the film is 'first

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and foremost the story about a father and son relationship. This *is* the story. Excise material that does not in some way reflect on the underlying character story about a father and son.'

As I'm anxious to try and get it as right as possible in order not to blow my chances before I've even properly begun, I request that Hilary give me some time to act upon Philip's suggestions before sending the revised script out to anyone else.

### *October to December 2000*

Whilst shooting a children's film in Australia, I do yet another rewrite. During my time there, I pursue Toni Colette as a possibility for the key character of the American stepmother, Ruby. Toni *could* play it Australian rather than American, thus maintaining the character's essential 'outsider' status.

### *15 January 2001*

Hilary has worked with director Mike Newell, who generously agrees to read the script and give me two hours of notes. He focuses on the divide between what goes on behind the central family's closed doors and the strict social hierarchy of the colonial society. He manages to be ruthlessly incisive, encouraging, charming and friendly all at once, and I'm very grateful.

I reread William Golding's pithy experiences of being a screenwriter, in which he underlines that *everyone* has a different opinion and inevitably describes the kind of film *they* would like to see from your script. As helpful and hugely informing as the notes, feedback, advice and opinions are, you have to decide on your own which

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direction to go in. There's nothing so easy as advising what should be cut or included, and nothing so hard as implementing these apparently simple suggestions. The moment one scene is cut, it has a knock-on effect that impacts elsewhere.

The likelihood of it ever reaching a screen seems utterly remote at this moment. I call Bruce Robinson, who reassures me with, 'Welcome to rewrite hell.'

Rewrite. Groundhog day. Dog-day afternoons. Call it what you will, but as soon as you think you've got your dish ready to serve, it spaghettis all over the place and you have to clean up the mess. There's a Charlie Brown 'Arrgh' in a bubble over my head.

Rupert Everett, whom I know from Robert Altman's *Prêt-à-Porter*, is a lifelong friend of Celestia Fox and a client of Duncan Heath, Hilary's ex-husband who owns the ICM actors' agency in London. Both Celestia and Duncan are keen that Rupert play the lead role of my father, even though he has relatively recently 'come out' in *My Best Friend's Wedding*. Although I'm assured he will hugely help raise the finance, I'm not convinced he'd be right for the part, but send it off to him. He says he is 'interested, with reservations'. Ditto.

He also knows Toni Collette, whom I have now spent three months pursuing via her agent. The delay is due to her doing films back to back. I hope she reads it soon.

*2 February 2001*

A 'Dear Richard' email from Toni's agent:

I have spoken with Toni and unfortunately she feels *Wah-Wah* is not a project for her. Thank you for your patience and I apologise for any delay in response.

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I feel lumbar-punctured by this and am unable to rewrite all day. Celestia and I bandy actor names about, and as with Mary Selway, *everything* is very personal – who you rate or don't, who is a reputed nightmare to work with, who is likely even to consider a no-budget first-time-writer-director's project, shooting in a southern corner of Africa. I need to pull myself up by the proverbials and have courage.

Back to the old drawing board, and the schizoid nature of it whereby you invest thought and passion into why and how this or that actor is perfect for the part, and are then forced to forsake and forget them when they turn you down. Even though I know it is in the nature of this circus, it's a bollock-kicker the day you get the news. If rejection is part and parcel of *every* actor's life experience, it pales significantly compared to the turn-downs already encountered *trying* to get this film off the ground.

But then, nobody is exactly forcing me to pursue this dream.

*1 March 2001*

Blizzards, train crashes, foot-and-mouth disease, transport at a standstill and a general air of everything falling apart. The threatened American actors' strike in June means that no American actors could work until it's resolved, and as we are faintly hoping to shoot in August and September, the dry winter season, we'll have to pursue non-Americans.

Rachel Griffiths is our next choice, but she has recently had break-away success in *Six Feet Under*, so I know this is pipe-dreaming. We try anyway. Everything takes much longer than my genetic short-fuse attention span is used to.