

## A PINEWOOD DIALOGUE WITH MIKE NICHOLS

Mike Nichols took Broadway by storm in the early 1960s with his comedy partner Elaine May. He began his directing career with the stage production of *Barefoot in the Park* and became a film director with *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, followed by his landmark film *The Graduate*. In this interview, just before he was honored with a gala Salute by the Museum of the Moving Image, Nichols talks about how the assured, controlled style of his early films evolved into a looser, more naturalistic approach, and about how, for him, directing actors is largely a matter of trust and letting go.

### **A Pinewood Dialogue moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (March 19, 1990):**

**SCHWARTZ:** And now please welcome Mike Nichols. (Applause)

**NICHOLS:** I'll tell you a very quick principle that I have come to believe is almost the most important principle of all of this: I worked with Dan Dailey long ago, directing him in a version of *The Odd Couple*, the play, and he told me that when he was at MGM, when he was a big musical star at MGM, they got lessons in everything. They had movement and they had voice and they had speech and they had telephone. (Laughter) And I said, "What did they teach you in telephone?" And he said, "In telephone you learned that if you were about to do a scene in which you get bad news, answer happy; and if you are going to do a scene in which you get good news, answer sad." And I think of that as the MGM telephone principle. (Laughter) It's amazing how often it comes up. It comes up in almost every scene—namely that you don't know what's going to happen until it happens. And the harder you are running in the opposite direction when it happens, the more expressive and interesting and colorful it is when it happens.

**SCHWARTZ:** The skill to find the core of a scene, to find exactly what it is that's structuring the whole scene—I'm sure your ability to do that grew out of your improvisational comedy work, your early work with the Compass Players and of course with Elaine May, where you had to field suggestions from the audience and instantly

come up with the scene. And you've often said that it wasn't just a question of acting funny or saying funny lines but to define the kind of emotional undercurrent of the scene. One thing you've been quoted as saying, is that Elaine always says, "When in doubt, seduce." That's always a good core for a scene. Or to have a fight. So I'd like to know what you got out of your early work as a performer, as a comic performer.

**NICHOLS:** Well, when you're improvising comedy in front of an audience, you learn very fast what you have to do to literally keep them in the room, and "When in doubt, seduce" is indeed a useful principle. But most scenes are seductions, or fights, or... there's another kind of scene, which sort of has its genesis in the Chekhov scene in *The Cherry Orchard* in which—his name may be Levpackin and it may not... [Trofimov]—is going to propose to Varia and everybody knows in the audience that he is going to propose, and he doesn't. She expects him to, and he doesn't. That was Chekhov's contribution to what a scene is—that's sort of the central modern scene that led to hundreds and hundreds of grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The scene in which you set up that something is going to happen, or it might happen, or that you hope that it will happen, and then it doesn't happen.

If we were improvising—if this were an entertainment—if you said "black" I would have to say "white," because that is the only way to get something going. And you learn that and various principles of that kind, and you learn to some extent to incorporate the audience in your head

so that when you are rehearsing a play or a picture you learn to trust yourself and say, "It's time to move on now, it's enough already," or, "I don't believe this, we have to do something here that I will believe."

And the most interesting thing that I learned about audiences when Elaine and I were performers—we played all kinds of places. We played what they called "sophisticated supper clubs," and we did TV shows where a lot of ladies lined up to see *some* TV show. They didn't care which one it was. (Laughter)

And what was interesting was the audiences were exactly the same. That the audience is the same. That altogether we know everything, and we see everything. We don't necessarily know what to call it, but when we are all together in the theater we know everything, and we can hear each other thinking.

When I... when Elaine and I used to perform, I felt that I could hear the audience thinking, because 800 or 900 or 1,000 people thinking is a very strong thing. When I have directed a play, and I come, sometime, during the run—through the back of the theater through the door—I instantly know how it is going. It doesn't have to do with laughter. You can hear it in the air. And I can give you an example. It is something that actually happens, it's not mystical. You have a new record. It's a great song that you want to play for your friend. And you put it on and you say, "Wait until you listen to this. Listen to this." And your friend is quietly listening, and you're not looking at your friend, but as you listen it's not as good as it was. (Laughter) And then you say to yourself, wait until we get to the good part. And then you get to the good part, and it's still not very much. You're hearing your friend thinking. And it's moving you that little bit.

Now, when you have 1,000 people or 100 people, this is very strong, and this is what is so exciting about teaching acting. Is that to hear that, to join that, is a very important part of the job. Jack Nicholson—part of his genius is that he is friends with everyone on the set. 120 people. All the way back to the woman by the trailer who takes care of the wardrobe. They are all his friends. And he takes time with all of them. He does numbers for

the lottery with the makeup women, and they put in their numbers together. And so that when it comes time for him to act, they love him, and they lift him in a way that couldn't possibly happen if he were cut off behind the camera. And that's part of what an actor needs to know.

And that's part of what I learned from people like Jack and Meryl [Streep]: that the concentration and the connection to other people, and this thing that we know more about than we've discussed—this thing of knowing what other people are thinking and bringing them with you somewhere, saying, "We're together now, we all know what we are thinking, we are all feeling something not so dissimilar. Come with me, I'm going to show you someplace that I'd like to take you." And that is sort of the best part of what we do, and it's the best part of the rehearsal process. And if you don't join each other in that way, when you're preparing or when you're shooting, then everything veers off in different directions, and people look at the play or the movie and they say, "Is there any place open where we can still eat?"

**SCHWARTZ:** In a way then, actually, the big film crew becomes a replacement for the audience, the way you're describing it. I was wondering what it was like when you directed your first film, *Virginia Woolf*. You had come from directing theater, and you once said in talking about your adaptation of *Virginia Woolf* that as a theatrical event the audience really became a character; that George and Martha in their battling back and forth were playing off the audience's reactions. The film version is a much more intimate experience—with quiet moments built in—and you didn't have the audience to work with in that way. So I'm wondering what it was like, getting into film directing. How that was different?

**NICHOLS:** Well, it took me a long, long time to understand movies. It's funny—Orson Welles said that you can learn in one afternoon how to use the technical tools of moviemaking. Which is true, it's not hard. But movies are very different from plays. It took me, I would say, until *Carnal Knowledge* to understand what I thought I needed to understand about movies. And then it took me until *Silkwood*, which by the way included a seven-year period when I didn't make movies, which I also—something that I believe in now very

strongly is downtime; is time where you don't do anything. Not even think, particularly. I don't think very much. When I'm alone I'm sort of like a dog. (Laughter) I wait for somebody to come along, but I don't think by myself. I don't figure things out, and I've come to see that that's a kind of useful way to be.

**SCHWARTZ:** You worked in TV before *Silkwood*.

**NICHOLS:** In TV? No. I think that's different too. I didn't really work in TV—producing is not working. It's different. But I think that what you learn about movies—what did you ask me?

**SCHWARTZ:** About when you start directing and the audience is no longer a kind of character in the way that it is in a play.

**NICHOLS:** Yeah. Well, that was very specific in *Virginia Woolf* because [it's] a comedy, or a comedic play that is a battle, is a battle for the audience. If I make a joke about you, and you laugh, then I'm ahead, and then if you make a joke about me, then you've caught up. And that battle for the audience was the central, the crucial element of the play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Of course, it doesn't happen in the movie, which is why the movie is far more "inner," as you say, and in a weird way more romantic than the play. Perhaps not as exciting in that sort of boxing-match way, but maybe more about their love, which is actually what animates both play and film. But in that case the crew is not the audience.

The crew is never right about how it is going. It's a very interesting thing about a movie. Nobody is right about how it is going. There is no right. It goes the way it wants to go. All the director can do is sort of—it's like a snowball, you sort of throw things under it as it is rolling. (Laughter)

What happens is that if you are doing it right, I think, you are not trying to control it nearly as much as I used to, for instance, in the days of *Virginia Woolf* and *The Graduate*. I wasn't very nice during them, and I was trying to control every aspect of them, and I think thereby missing what really is most wonderful about both making and seeing movies: which is that if it is alive—there's a certain point when you're making a movie, if it is alive, when it jumps in your hand, and you think,

"Oh, look at that! It's alive, and it wants to go somewhere, too." And if you have extraordinary people (like Meryl), you then follow it where it takes you, and that's the great—that's why it really is, in my view, the best thing you can do. It's more fun than anything because it's leading you on a journey. You prepare like crazy; you prepare and you prepare and you prepare and then you prepare, and then you show up and you're still sort of mindless and you wait to see where it will take you.

And things like *Virginia Woolf* are not like that, and yet when you put it all together—I don't know, this is not true of anything else that we do—you put it all together, and you run it all in a row, it's something different from what you put in, it becomes something else. And that's I think one of the reasons that we're so glued to movies, why they're so... This amazing thing that you have upstairs [in the Museum] where there's like one- and two-second shots of hundreds, thousands of movies. And we know every one of them—as you see it, it's all in there registered—and that I think has to do with this strange quality of a movie. It's not only a story, it's instantly—two years later, three years later, four years later—It's about its time. It's about something that isn't here anymore that we can learn from or be taken back to. It becomes a metaphor all on its own, which isn't true of anything else that people make. And the great ones that survive, the ones that we're always in some ways always thinking about and in some ways always quoting to each other, they have become almost completely metaphor because they were so strong and true to begin with, and they're now so far removed from where we are that we're looking at what can't... We're not in touch enough with most of the things we read to apprehend them as pure metaphor.

**SCHWARTZ:** There is a quality really to I think all of your films, and I think it's true more in your films than with other directors' [work], that they do have almost a time-capsule quality, that they really capture the mood of the times. It's certainly true of *The Graduate*. I think it will be true of *Working Girl* if people want to know what the 1980s were all about—I think it'll have that kind of quality. And *Carnal Knowledge* really captures the mood of that time more than you could, I think, in a documentary. And I don't really have a question

about that, but I just wonder what you feel about that.

**NICHOLS:** Well, I think it's a quality of *movies*, and I think it's a quality, most of all, of comedies of manners. If you think of the great masters of comedies of manners, like Preston Sturges—it's always so embroidered with details of how people lived. It's always so specific. And at the same time, it's this bizarre "you can't take it with you" family. It's people like you've never seen. They're all crazy. They're crazy in the way that a friend's family is crazy. When you go home with a friend, especially to some other place, to some other part of the world—and if it's an animated family—then they seem to you crazy in a wonderful way.

And that's what people like Sturges can do. It's both individual and specific about how things—I always think when I'm working that if you—it's very, very important to do something the way you remember it. If I get exactly the green cup, that kind of—you know, it's translucent, it's a mug, and it has a handle. And if you hold it up to the light you can see through it a little bit. We all know those cups, and that's the kind of cup that was in that kitchen with that linoleum when this happened to me. That if I get it right, you'll recognize it. And the odd thing is, that that's what happens, that that's true. You have to get it right, and then everybody says, "Oh, yes." And it's weird, but it's true. And when things represent their time, I think that's the reason—is that the filmmakers got it right for them.

**SCHWARTZ:** I'd like to hear a little bit about how you work with your production designer. I mean, you've generally worked with Richard Sylbert on most of your films. You've also worked with Tony Walton and Patrizia von Brandenstein. And also your cinematographers. You've worked with just a roster of the greatest cinematographers—Nestor Almendros, Giuseppe Rotunno—so I'd just like to know a little bit about your relationship with those people.

**NICHOLS:** Well, it's the same. You're really asking and partially answering the same questions that you do with the writers and the actors that I was talking about. 'What happens?' and 'To whom does it happen?' But also you—there are secrets—and you find physical secrets around

which to organize the look. I mean, in *The Graduate* it's no longer a secret because we went so far. You know, that we were concerned with glass, water, plastics, all the barriers between people—invisible in some cases. That we conceived Mrs. Robinson as the beast in the jungle, and she is indeed always in her jungle backyard. At one time I was almost going to send an ape through... (Laughter) Then they talked me out of it. And all her clothes are animals, they're leopards, and zebras, and tigers. I don't even know if it was a good idea, but it gave us something to do. (Laughter) We organized the whole thing around these certain secrets that we had, and it does indeed give you something to do, and it hooks everything on, in the story.

There's a great—not a great story—a story that meant something to me, about [Elia] Kazan saying to Jo Mielziner for a play called *Flight into Egypt*. Mielziner said, "What do you want?" And he said, "I want a cul-de-sac with a long escape." And that's a good way to approach a set. That was the event that was being expressed in that play. They were caught, and there was the hope of escape, which you were looking at all the time. And that's the job of the designer and the director together, to express the play or the picture in those ways that heaven forbid anybody should tear apart as you're looking. It would be a disaster if you went to see *Flight into Egypt* and said, "Aha, look, dear, it's a cul-de-sac with a long escape." But we assume that these things work on us by other means. And a great production of anything, whatever medium it's in, physically expresses the event all the time.

There's a good example, which is when you're on a plane and the movie is on and like most of us you don't put the earphones on, you can tell how good the movie is just from looking. Because if it's just as in a soap opera as on television, if it's people standing in the middle of the room talking to each other, it's not a good movie. But if it begins to pull you in by what it expresses physically, by where they are going and how the light is and what the size of the people is in relation to each other, and where everybody is, then it's a movie. Then it's expressing physically what's happening. And the designer—and God knows, the cameraman—are your allies in that part of the journey.

The great cameramen have a strange non-verbal comprehension. I remember Rotunno when we came to do *Carnal Knowledge*. We went to Vancouver (for reasons that aren't worth going into) and Rotunno didn't speak English very well. And we all had dinner in some big Chinese restaurant before we started shooting, and Jack [Nicholson] was doing his Jack thing, and Artie Garfunkel was sitting with the light behind him and his golden halo.... (Laughter) And then everybody went on and Rotunno and I were having a drink, and he said—I want to do his accent—he said, "It's interesting, you know." He said, "Jack has the face of a saint, and Artie is—am I wrong?—a little malicious." And he didn't even know what they were saying during this long dinner, but he absolutely understood the people at that moment in their lives when they were already beginning to be the characters.

And I trusted him so much—he understood so completely the things that we talked about in the rehearsal period and the pre-production, that he would come and say—no one has ever done this before—he would come and say, "Mike, you know, I would like to make this scene red." "Okay fine, that's fine." He made one red, he made another yellow. And he knew so many of the secrets. [Robert] Surtees of *The Graduate* was the same. They are artists who know things by intuition that you don't have to talk about to them.

**SCHWARTZ:** You seem to create an atmosphere where all the craftsmen can—the designer, the editor, the cameraman—can all chip in and the lines get kind of blurred. I was surprised to read—there's a moment in *The Graduate* when Benjamin sees Mrs. Robinson naked for the first time when she walks in and there are flashes from his point of view of what he sees—that suggestion didn't come from the editor or the cameraman but from Richard Sylbert. You described that that was his idea.

**NICHOLS:** I didn't even remember that. I would have said it was the editor. But I do know that Elaine and I used to have a rule: Right is right. And that is certainly my rule in a play or picture. Wherever the idea comes from, you know the right one when you hear it, and that's the one you do. I don't care whose it is. It seems to me spiritually and otherwise that a very important

aspect of that rule is not to keep track. If you keep track, you're not doing it right.

I didn't get along with Haskell Wexler on *Virginia Woolf*. And he did an interview afterward in which he said he had brought so much, he felt, to the film and the idea of the taillight flashing, which people for some reason felt was so moving and evocative—that that had been his idea. And I thought, "What a strange thing to do." Even if it had been, it didn't seem to me the way you play to say, "This was my idea, and that was his idea." In fact, that particular one had been my idea because you have to build the whole thing. Taillights won't flash unless the engine is running, and you can't run an engine in a movie because it wrecks the sound. So you have to anticipate those things. Nobody has that idea in the moment. But it's the keeping track that I find slightly nasty.

And the idea is that everybody throws in whatever happens, and the director's job is to say, "Thanks, that's all great, this is the way we will go because this is what happens next." And that's our real master. We are obligated to tell what happens, and then have what happens after that, and then what happens. And whatever ideas will help you in telling that story, those are the right ones.

**SCHWARTZ:** The type of director you are describing sounds more like a theater director than a film director. We often have the picture of a film director as a visionary who has to express what is inside him, his personal vision on screen. And what you are talking about is a director who will be more observational, kind of watch things happen.

**NICHOLS:** Well, that's the fault of the French, I think, that we think that. (Laughter) Movies are their scripts. Who are we kidding? You read the screenplay of the movie, and that's pretty much what you see when it is finished. Some scenes have been cut out, some few things have been altered by the way it's photographed. Some things—small things usually—have been improvised. But a movie is its screenplay.

"The mystique of the director" is French silliness, I think. Certainly there are directors... See, it's very

confusing. I always think of it like Larry Adler and the harmonica. There are [Ingmar] Bergman and [Frederico] Fellini and maybe one or two others—[Akira] Kurosawa. When Larry Adler plays Bach on the harmonica it's great, but it's still a harmonica. (Laughter) And the rest of us are playing the harmonica. And all the sorts of mystical art stuff that is encouraged by *Cineaste* and those magazines, it just seems to me silliness. Talking about "The frozen image"—I once read an article on a fellow who says, "It's important to take advantage of the screen's primary characteristic: its flatness." (Laughter) Give me a break!

And I think that movies really are made by a group of people, and yes, the director does lead the way. I won't go on about this, but even great icons like Orson Welles... We had a sketch artist on *Catch-22* who—his greatest pride was that he was the sketch artist on *Citizen Kane*. And Mr. Welles was coming, and Mr. Welles was coming, and he was so excited. And finally Mr. Welles came and he walked right by this guy. (Laughter) And I said, Orson, this is so-and-so. He was your sketch artist on *Citizen Kane*. And he said, "Oh, I would never use a sketch artist." And he kept walking. Well, I knew what he meant—but he *did* use a sketch artist. And there is no way one man can have done all the things that have to be done in the movie. It's enough. It's enough that you are the boss. You don't have to have done it all, or say that you've done it all. It's not... To totally disappear Herman Mankiewicz is not necessary. He wrote the goddamn thing!

**SCHWARTZ:** I just want to read this because this is a description that you once gave, which kind of—it's very modest, of course, but it demystifies the process, and it's very much what I think this museum is about. Somebody asked you what making a movie is all about, and you said, "You shoot a picture, and good guys carry gigantic lamps for fourteen hours at a time, actors stand in cold water for three months, and then you cut it. And guys are ruining their eyes looking at the tiny code numbers in the film, and then it goes to the lab and there's another month of saying, 'This is too green,' or 'This is too blue.' And then you dub and you say, 'Could you bring the door slam up a little bit, and could you bring down the footsteps?' And when you're finally through, it's shown in a

theater, and people see it, and they come out, and somebody says, 'Is there any place open still where we can eat?'" (Laughter)

Having read that, I did say it was modest before because there is definitely a contribution that you make, and I think with your films it comes out most in your work with actors. At the Waldorf tribute, every actor who got up was begging for work on your next film. To get specific about it, I was interested in talking about Jack Nicholson, because he was in three of your films and gave three very different performances: a very explosive performance in *Carnal Knowledge*, an incredibly funny performance in *The Fortune* as a kind of Laurel and Hardy-type character, and then a very, very natural performance in *Heartburn*, where he just seemed to be himself. I just wonder what it is like working with him, and how you craft these different performances.

**NICHOLS:** Jack is like no one. Jack is spiritually very advanced. (Laughter) I mean that seriously as well as funny. He is an enormously intelligent man. He may be as intelligent as anyone I know. And he had, as some of you may know, because he says this in interviews, he had two mothers. I don't know if you know this story. Jack was brought up by his mother and his sister in New Jersey. As I say, he has told this story publicly, and it's important. His mother died and then after a while his sister died. He told me this story once when I said, "God, you must have had a terrific mother." And he said, "Well, she was great, and she always said you could do whatever you want but just call and tell me you are okay," from the age he was twelve. So then after a while his grandmother had died—no, wait a minute. Have I got it right?

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Pretended to be his mother, and the girl he thought was his sister—

**NICHOLS:** Was his mother. That's it. After they both died he found out that his sister had been his mother, and his mother had been his grandmother. (Laughter) But he said it was okay because he loved them both, and they loved him. So he had two, and it was great for him. It made him enormously confident and happy—not always happy, but a guy living his life fully, experiencing his life. And a very, very loving

person. To know him is really to love him deeply. And he's your friend wherever you are.

On *Heartburn* I fired an actor, and I called Jack and I said, "Are you free? Do you want to be in a picture?" And he said, "If you need me, Mick, I'll be there tomorrow." And that, see—I guess I think that it's not an accident that Jack and Meryl are both the most intelligent people I know and the most charming. To meet them is to be in love because they are so in the moment, and they have such control of what they want to express, and they have such wonderful manners, and their attention to you is so complete. This is all part of being a great actor.

And it's interesting to see that the great actors in fact can do anything they want with you, and you can see it sometimes in children. There are children who can do anything they want. They can just walk right through a crowd and come up to you and say, "Hello," and you're theirs. They can take you where they want. And there are some people who don't lose that. And that, I think, is what makes a great actor. What makes a great movie actor—whatever people say about anybody is wrong after a week to ten days. (Laughter) Like saying the thing about me is the work with actor, or George Cukor, that he was a woman's director. It's always something that isn't right.

You work with actors—it's all right in a movie, but it's relatively beside the point. You can't direct actors very much in a movie. Because if you tell them what to do, they will be doing what you told them, and that's very uninteresting in a movie. What's interesting in a movie is something happening that nobody planned, that's happening for the first time like *this* is happening for the first time. And for an actor to cause that, you can't say, "Now, when you come in—" It's too late; it's over. You can't tell him how to say things and what to do. You have to do other things so that it will happen for the first time. And in the end, what's important in a movie is only one thing, and that is what shapes things are and people are. You are just looking at shapes.

The answer to your question, the answer that I'm laboring toward, is that it's the same instinct that leads you to certain actors as the one that leads

you to certain writers, designers, directors, or photographers. That the suggestion that anybody is—you ask any actor about any good movie director, "What did he tell you?" You know what they'll say, don't you? "Nothing." (Laughter) Because they have to have the impression that there are no requirements; that all they have to do is show up.

**SCHWARTZ:** Has your approach changed? Starting with *Silkwood* [and the films after that], the films since seem to be very different in tone from your earlier films. And there seems to be a more naturalistic style, even more easygoing style on your part, like less of a desire to control every moment of the film than to kind of let things happen.

**NICHOLS:** That's exactly what happened. What happened is that I lost the whole thing for a long time. I hated shooting movies so much because there was so much pressure in the sense that it was gone and you couldn't get it back after today's shooting; you could never get that minute back. And I liked the preparation of a movie, and I liked the postproduction, I liked cutting, but I hated shooting. So I stopped. And then it was Meryl who brought me back, really. And it was both herself and the experience of working with her, and—oddly enough—the theme of *Silkwood*. They were all about death and resurrection.

One of the things I think is that our process is death and resurrection in movies and plays, in that everything dies as you're doing it. Every rehearsal. You come into something and say, "This is hopeless. This is no good. I can't do this. You're no good, either. It's not going to work. This won't work." And then you come up with the idea that saves that day. That's what rehearsing is. That never gets any better. You never get so good that that doesn't happen. And if you are that good that it doesn't happen, you're no good anymore. So that kind of resurrection, with which you're dealing every day, was what *Silkwood* was about, and what happened to me, working with Meryl. I was resurrected.

And where I had previously driven myself crazy about figuring out how to shoot a scene, I now just shown up and shot it. I didn't think about it. And I discovered that all the things I like—having

people in the right relationship and moving the camera and coming around, another way to see things, like the way Indians look at things after they've passed them, to see them from the back, and to see things from their point of view—all of these things happen in a movie by themselves if you trust them in a certain way, and if you have learned. And Kurt Russell said while we were shooting *Silkwood*, "Are you always this light on your feet?" And I said, "No, now I am." Because I experienced it, too, but it took a long time. And the shots are better, by the way. The movies are technically much better than they were when I was beating the hell out of it.

**SCHWARTZ:** So you are more satisfied with your recent films than for that reason?

**NICHOLS:** "Satisfied" is not a word I would use. (Laughter) But I like their ease and lightness, yes. I like the way they happen.

**SCHWARTZ:** Just before we open this up to the audience, I have one more question because you talked about getting a feeling about a film by being in the room, and I just [was] wondering what it was like watching these clips before. Seeing *The Graduate* again, what that felt like, and then seeing this work in progress.

**NICHOLS:** Well, that's not—that's an artifact. That's part of... part of something we all did together. And so it's not quite like watching—a clip is not watching the movie, and this... we are not like a movie audience. It's different. But it's really saying, "Remember what that was like. Oh, that was not so bad, look at that that was the 60s." But it's fun. It's most fun when you've forgotten it completely. When I have, like seeing the stuff with Elaine, I don't remember anything about that. I don't remember doing it! (Laughter) I just sort of see my son up there. And that's fun.

**SCHWARTZ:** And seeing your new film? Seeing *Postcards [from the Edge]*?

**NICHOLS:** Well, seeing it in this way has no meaning, of course, because you are not seeing it in context. But seeing it at a preview, which I just did recently, is the most interesting thing there is because it's where you learn what it is and what you have to do next.

**SCHWARTZ:** Okay. I'd like to bring up the house lights now and we'll take your questions.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I'd like to know, with *The Graduate*, how did you come about using Simon and Garfunkel's music to blend with the action of the film?

**NICHOLS:** I believe in the found object. Especially in movies. I rented a house in California when I was shooting it, and my brother, who is a doctor, sent me the Simon and Garfunkel album, and I used to brush my teeth and do my exercises and stuff with Simon and Garfunkel on every morning. And we were shooting, and about three or four weeks into shooting I was brushing my teeth and so forth, and I said, "Oh, that's the score of the movie." (Laughter)

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Several of your earlier films were wide-screen or Panavision productions. I've noticed that in more recent films you decided to shoot your films flat instead. Is this basically a compromise to the problems of home video?

**NICHOLS:** No, although I am very happy to see everything I shot instead of half of what I shot, a random half. I think for me, it's part of this change in me, that I was very conscious of composition, and the golden third and all that stuff. And for that, the Panavision aspect ratio is a very interesting one, because it never says, "Just this face. Don't worry about the rest of it, just look at this face." And of course that's what [the] 1.85:1 [aspect ratio] does. I like 1.85:1 because it seems to me that the ideal movie has no visible technique at all. It's all gone. There are no shots, no cuts, and no montage. You're just watching life. As in Jean Renoir. As in, now, in Louis Malle. I think that's the highest form of movie. Louis Malle and Jean Renoir—you have no idea what they did. They didn't do anything as far as you can see. There is no shot where you say, "Wow, look at that." And you're not aware of the cuts. You're not aware of any technique at all. The idea of technique surely is, for the events and feeling and the story, to burn it away. So there is no technique, and for that I think 1.85:1 makes everything far less self-conscious and composed. That's why I like it. It's more half-assed! (Laughter)

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I have a question about one

of your films, *The Day of the Dolphin*. What did you think of the film, and how was it to work with George C. Scott?

**NICHOLS:** Well, what I thought of the film when? Then or now?

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Both.

**NICHOLS:** Well, at the time I thought, "This will be perfectly suitable to get me out of my obligation to Joseph E. Levine!" (Laughter) And I haven't seen it since. But some time after I made it I thought, "I know why I picked it." You know, Roman Polanski was going to make it, and then his great tragedy happened. And it was just sitting there, and I thought, "What the hell, I've got to get out of this obligation to Levine. I'll do this."

Roman sent me on the first day—you know, *Day of the Dolphin* was about dolphins learning to speak—and he sent me a jar of gefilte fish with a card that said "If only he could speak!" (Laughter) And what may be mildly interesting is that I thought about it since—I don't mind that I made *The Day of the Dolphin*. It was the dream of a new friend that made me make *The Day of the Dolphin*. I think that's a very interesting dream, that in the ocean there should be another friend for us. And the dream of a new friend is what has led to all these rather more successful movies, like *Star Wars*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *E.T.*

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I just want to tell you one thing. I taught in a rough school, ghetto kids, and we went to see that movie at the Ziegfeld. Kids who never knew anything about the environment or animals. I was teaching a course on the environment, and they loved that movie. And they got something out of it.

**NICHOLS:** That's great! I think it was an honorable impulse. (Laughter)

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** What are your thoughts about—you were hoping to finally get rid of the Hollywood code through *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* in 1966? What are your thoughts about finally getting rid of the Hollywood code?

**NICHOLS:** Did you all hear that? No? "What do I

think about having been part of getting rid of the Production Code, the censorship of stuff?" Oh, it's so complicated, because it's hard to realize how recent that was, and how the things that you couldn't say are amazing. You could barely say, "Damn." And how quickly it went when it went. I think that *Virginia Woolf*—that my being there was just sort of an accident, that it was the power of Jack Warner, and the Burtons, and the importance of the material, and things were really getting ready to turn. It was really about the Catholic Legion of Decency at the time. That was the thing you had to pass. You had to get a good rating from them, or you were really seriously hurt at the box office. They had a paper—what was it called?

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** The Tablet.

**NICHOLS:** Was that it? No, it was called something else.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** It was called The Advocate.

**NICHOLS:** Surely not! Isn't that something else? This was a thing that—it was some kind of organ where the Catholic diocese listed movies and what the index, the Catholic index—what you were allowed to see, and what you were not allowed to see. And for some reason, that lost its force just at that particular time. I guess you could liken it to television. What it really meant is that movies grew up as books had, again, a very, very short time before that. *The Lady Chatterley* case and *Ulysses* were what, ten years before that? It was all very recent. But books obviously had to happen first. And then movies grew up, and television probably won't. I don't want it to, either. I don't want the kids to come in while I'm asleep and turn on channel 23. I worry about that, too. So we'll let somebody else worry about television. But movies have to stay like this.

**SCHWARTZ:** Here, in the blue.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Do you cast all of your films? And what do you think of the Michael Ovitz packaging deals?

**NICHOLS:** Yes, to the first. I don't think there is a director who doesn't. It may be confusing when you see "Casting by..." [in the credits of a film].

Really what that means is that if you are looking for a type or really just an age range or race, a number of characteristics, the casting people line up—right now, I'm working on a picture with Harrison Ford, and there's a very important black character. There's a guy who—it's about a guy who's shot in the head and his physical therapy, and his physical therapist becomes his whole life, and saves him, and becomes his friend. And I know and have seen scores of black actors, but I haven't seen them all. And then I have a casting agent who goes all over the country and sees things that I don't—that I can't see. They're in Chicago, and they're in California. They line up a lot of people for you, but of course in the end you make the decision. What has changed about the way I've cast is that I used to just cast [people] who [m] I knew. And now I really want to see everybody before I cast.

As far as the Michael Ovitz thing is concerned, like all these things that are written about, it's very rare, you know. I write some jokes about the most powerful man in Hollywood at this dinner. I said, "They even write about the most powerful agent in Hollywood, and that always makes me think of a woman I knew who was voted the best-dressed woman in radio!" Agents simply are not powerful. Yes, they go on Christmas vacations with studio heads. But... yeah?

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** But have you ever wanted somebody and were not able to get them because you couldn't have them unless you have this person?

**NICHOLS:** Never. That's what I'm saying. Never. That can't happen.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** So you just say, "Forget it, I'll go to somebody else?"

**NICHOLS:** No, you can cast who you want. Nobody ever says—there is no real Ovitz that is as powerful as the imaginary Ovitz that is written about. There is no Ovitz of any kind, literal or figurative, who can say, "You can't have David unless you take Fred, Arthur, and Jenny." That doesn't happen. It is possible. What Ovitz does, and what my agent Sam Cohen does, and what some of the so-called "powerful" agents do (sometimes) is they call their own clients first. But

most of the time—I mean, I have many friends, writers—Edgar [E.L.] Doctorow is a Sam Cohen client; Tom Stoppard is now, through me, a Sam Cohen client. I get Tom Stoppard and Edgar Doctorow together, but I'm not working for Sam Cohen. I think Stoppard would be the best one to adapt Doctorow's book. Ninety-eight percent of the time it's real people thinking about the work. Like in the case of the thing I just mentioned.

The Ovitz thing you are thinking of because it's written about all the time, I think that happened once in that movie about fire lawyers, *Legal Eagles*. *Rain Man*. *Rain Man* was really simply something that Dustin Hoffman wanted to do for a long, long time. And Dustin is very smart, and he knew that it wouldn't hurt to have Tom Cruise. And he was friendly with Tom Cruise. And that was Dustin's accomplishment, getting the two of them interested together. The fact that after [Sydney] Pollack and a number of people turned it down, that it happened to go to an Ovitz director—it could've gone to an un-Ovitz director. It did go to some un-Ovitz directors who turned it down. So I think that thing is an illusion.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I was curious to know, when you decide to direct a movie and you read the script, how closely, once you start to shoot the picture, do you work with the writer and screenwriter?

**NICHOLS:** Oh, very closely for a very long time. It changes a lot. I sort of don't believe in directors taking screenwriting credit, but I, to varying extents, have always been part of writing the screenplay. And in the case of *Postcards*, I would say it was about—as I told you I don't like to assign percentages or say, "This was mine, and that was yours," but we did a lot of it together. And I always have the writer on the set, for several reasons. One is that things are always shifting and changing, and it's necessary to be able to say to the writer, "This doesn't work anymore because she's now doing so-and-so. Let's work on something where it stops here and you have a new line." You're doing that all the time that you're shooting.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** So you might shoot something with certain dialogue, and then change it right on the spot?

**NICHOLS:** Yes. I'll say, you might rehearse it and change it in rehearsal. If you want to change it yourself or the actor is improvising it, it's nice, it's polite to say to the writer, "Is that okay with you?" That's the most wonderful part of a movie. It's constantly changing, as you rehearse it, as you shoot it, as you cut it. And it's nice if the writer is there to make the adjustments just as the rest of you are.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Earlier this evening you said that it would be wrong—I'm paraphrasing you badly—but that it would be wrong to tell actors what to do. You do, quote, "Other things." Could you talk to us about those "other things"? (Laughter)

**NICHOLS:** Some of them! (Laughter) The whole job is really to help them experience the circumstances of what you are shooting as though it was really happening. Some people—Dustin for one—is a believer in really shocking and startling the actor—the other actor—as a gift, when he is off-camera, so that real things will happen. And people shoot off guns, and drop trap doors, and pinch people. And I tend to think that's slightly demeaning to the actor to assume that he doesn't know how to do that without our shocking him and startling him.

Meryl said this great thing to Cher when we were making what was Cher's first movie [*Silkwood*]. She said, "You should be working harder in my close-up than in your own." Which is exactly right. Stanislavsky said that if you feel very self-conscious, concentrate on the other actor. And an actor coming out of the scene or off-stage who says, "You were great tonight," was good, because he was thinking about the other actor, not himself. So I will do any one of a thousand things to interest the actor—in the other actor; in what's happening.

Meryl and I have a code, things that we can say to each other. Sometime I'll be sixty feet away at the monitor, and when I get thirty feet closer to her she'll say, "I know." And then I just go back. Or I'll say—on *Silkwood*, she reminded me once that I said she was supposed to be mad at the union head, and we did one take and I said, "More high school." And she said, "I know, okay." And she knew it meant just to be a little bit more like when

you were part of the student council, and you are puffing yourself up, and you are making a big fuss about being parliamentary. But all I had to say was, "More high school."

The main thing you do—the most important thing—maybe the only thing you do is you give them physical tasks. "Go here, pick this up, put that down, put this on, eat this, and go out that door." And if you've laid down the tracks correctly, then they will do those things and the scene must happen to them. That's what "blocking a play" is. A play is all about where everybody is on the stage. That's a director's job. If I have people in all the right places on the stage, the play will happen. And if I don't, it won't. And the whole other physical way—that's true in a movie. If they are doing the right things, then, One: the story will be told, Two: they will feel the right things, and Three: they will express the right things. My job is to choose the things that they will do.

One example is the scene you saw with Meryl and Shirley [MacLaine] on the stairs [in *Postcards from the Edge*.] That scene was written first...let me just think. It was written while Meryl was dressing upstairs. She'd come home from being out all night, took a shower, and was dressing. And then I said—way early in rehearsal—I said, "No, let's do something in the kitchen first. Let's have them meet in the kitchen. Maybe Shirley could be making some." Oh, it's a scene you didn't see. I forgot. She's making herself some sort of health drink. And she makes it and she makes it and she makes it, and she tells Meryl [that] her manager has run off with her money. And then I said, "Oh, I know what we can do. At the end when Meryl has walked out, why don't you put some vodka in the health drink." So she does that.

Then we had the rest of the scene upstairs while Meryl was dressing after her shower, and we rehearsed it, and we were ready to shoot. And I said, "I don't like this. It doesn't belong up here. Let's skip the dressing, which is boring, and let's have Meryl on the stairs. Let's have her going downstairs. And Shirley confronts her on the stairs. And let's play the scene in fact on the stairs." I got all excited thinking about it, and I said, "Yeah, good, we'll do that." And then when we were rehearsing it, I said, "Okay, this will work. But if we are going to do this, when Meryl says,

'You don't want me to be a singer, Mommy. You're the singer. You're the performer. I can't possibly compete with you. What if somebody would win?' Well, Shirley, why don't you go upstairs. Why don't we end it here? You're so pissed off that you're going to leave, and you go up the stairs and you turn and you say, 'You're jealous because I can drink' and so forth."

So that's how we then blocked it. So I have now put them on a track in which what in my view must happen, must happen. Now we shoot it, and Meryl starts to fall down the stairs. She just does. And being Meryl, she says, "Ssh!" and goes on. So now that's the beginning of the scene. So it's a combination of me getting lucky in what I think of at the last minute and God helping Meryl fall down the stairs (Laughter) and that the camera is rolling when it happens. And when it's all over I say, "By God, think of this: classic mother-daughter fights are always on the stairs." There's *The Little Foxes*, there's *Mildred Pierce*, and I thought, 'This is an honorable convention, and we didn't even know it!'" (Laughter) We were sucked into the mother-daughter staircase mainstream! (Laughter) And that's the job, really. Those are the "other things."

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** You are teaching a class now. Have you learned a lot from your students through that process of teaching?

**NICHOLS:** I've learned more than I've learned in all the years that I have been studying this thing. It's the most revivifying and enjoyable thing I've done for many years. I love it. And yes, I've learned more from that class, certainly more than they have! (Laughter) But also they've learned a lot. We're learning together in a fairly Socratic way. And it's amazing and exciting. It works. These ideas work, I think. Look at this. There are thirty people in the first year, and thirty more in the second year. Now the second year is the basic thirty, and there's another thirty watching. And twenty of the thirty are really first-rate actors in one year. And it's thrilling to me that these ideas, these practical ideas are practical, that there are certain things you can do. And it's how you learn is to do it—by teaching it.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** You've spoken a great deal about the movies, and I wonder if I can bring you

back to the theater for a moment. I think you answered me already. Are you happier in one or the other, which is a simple question, but more complexly, your approaches in the theater, are they similar or very different? When you are directing someone like Sigourney Weaver, in both theater and movies, is there a change in approach on your part? Could you bring us to theater a little bit?

**NICHOLS:** It is very different. It's very different in that, aside from the physical thing, like what I said about a play—that it is about where everybody is. A play, after all, you see everybody all the time. That's the best and the worst thing about it. It's why there can be no good Chekhov movie, really. Because you have to see all the characters all the time. That's what it's about. It's about everybody including the governess all the way upstage that nobody ever talks to. If you cut to Arkadina or whoever, the other one—cut to the main character—and you leave out the governess, then you're not telling Chekhov's story. And so forth and so on. So they are very, very different.

And for the actor they are very different, because it's a little bit like the difference between—I don't know what. (Laughter) Between improvising and being an opera singer. Because an opera singer is all conscious technique. And if it's a great opera singer, after the conscious technique—after the breath placement and the diaphragm pushing and the learning of the head tone and learning the score and so forth—if they are great, they can animate it and fill it up and again, burn off all the technique through their talent, inspiration, truthfulness. But it comes last.

Now the joke about acting on stage is that it's the same thing. It's as hard—nobody shows up for an opera and says, "Can I try? I have a feeling I can do *Casta Diva*. Let me try." (Laughter) And yet that's how people approach stage acting. It's completely impossible. Because it is exactly as technically complex as opera singing, and then you have to hide all the technique and burn it away. That's different from movie acting. Movie acting—yes, there's a lot of technique. You have to hit your marks, you can't look into the camera, you have to do things, as you know, exactly the same physically so the editor can match you from take to take and in the other person's shot and so

forth. It's also very technical. But it only has to happen once. So that, yes, Dustin can stamp on your foot out of frame and you go "Aah!" It happened once, it's real, you were acting, it's wonderful. You don't have to do it again.

In a play, everything is done over and over and over. So the approach is completely different. Physically, what the director does is completely different, and finally, the reason—there's two reasons I think that I love movies at the moment more than the theater. One is that the release from consecutive time is joyful to me. I find it very hard to see a play. Because you say, "Oh there's two more to come." And then finally you say, "That's the last actor. This is it. Nothing else can happen now. We're all here together till they're finished talking. (Laughter) I'm not going to be anywhere else, I'm not going to—that's all that's going to happen." And it has to be pretty good to get me over that depression about consecutive time. And it can be. I mean, Merchant of Venice made us very happy, and we argued for a long time with the kids. It's amazing that a play could still shock you after such a long time and be about things that are happening right now. That's rare.

I also have a problem with Broadway at the moment and just the nature of it. It seems to me a—what? A cynical transaction on everybody's part. And I would like to see it blown apart a little bit and to have some of the life that you can have, even in New York, in a small theater. There is something about the Broadway experience. I don't like to go be in that audience. I don't like putting on plays for that audience, and I am that audience also. And you get exactly the audience that you've earned. That's almost the worst thing about doing a play on Broadway is you think, "This is what I've earned?"

I go to the Brooklyn Academy of Music and say, "This is what I want, give me these heroes of the left in burlap ties! And the ladies with the hand-hammered silver jewelry and the suede dresses that only go to the Brooklyn Academy." I can't get her on Broadway because nobody trusts Broadway anymore. Rightly. Over and over, your friends lie to you. They say, "You'll like this, you really will." (Laughter) And 200 dollars later you're sitting there, saying, "Shirked again, dammit! How

could they do that to me? Why do I believe people?" Doesn't that happen to you on Broadway? So it's nice, the theater, because the worse it gets, the better it gets. Because the pendulum is just swinging the other way. At the moment I think movies are much closer to what we all feel like. It'll change again.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Do you think that your career in stand-up comedy could happen now? Because I think the entertainment world was a much different place than it is now. And it's not as encouraging. I don't know were you were encouraged.

**NICHOLS:** Yes, I was encouraged. Everybody was—it's a very interesting question that you ask. I guess I think yes, it could happen now. Well, I've give you an example. First of all, there's Steven Soderbergh. You see that movie [*sex, lies, and videotape*], and that's it. That's all. How can he possibly do this at 26? It's horrifying if you're a director because it shouldn't be possible. But it's this perfect and brilliant movie.

Or this movie that I'm making with Harrison Ford—the writer of the movie [J.J. Abrams] is 22. And I want to tell you, it's a brilliant screenplay. Harrison sent it to me. He said, "I think this is the most exciting thing I've read in five years." And me, too. This is a kid who worked for Steven Spielberg running tape cassettes for him starting at fourteen. And he wrote this quite remarkable script at 22. And I think it's all possible, wherever you come from. I think that—I have a kid that's an actress. Yes, she was exposed, obviously. Most kids don't have Milos Forman come to the house and say, "Would you like to be in a movie?" when they're three.

But nevertheless, I go to see her in the movies. She's in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. I never had anything to do with this. I never talked to anybody about it. Woody Allen, who knows her because her best friend is Mia Farrow's kid, Woody Allen wrote a part for her. And I said to her, "What did you think of it?" She said, "Well, I didn't like the first scene so much, but the rest of it I pretty much did what I wanted to do." And she went back to school and didn't think about it anymore. But I'm not saying that it's as easy as it is for a kid of mine, but I am saying the guy that wrote the

picture I'm going to do, or Steven Soderbergh—they were simply talented. And if you're talented, I think there's about a seventy-thirty chance that you will be okay.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** At what point in your relationship with Miss May did you decide to become a director? And how hard was it to get it into directing?

**NICHOLS:** Did you have a question? I never decided to do anything, is the main thing about all this strange lifetime. What happened with Elaine and me, she wanted to stop doing our act. It was very painful for her. It was not for me. I kept saying, "Why is it so painful? It's 2 hours out of 24. You go to the theater, you say the same things you say every night, you're home by 10:30." But

she somehow—I think she gave more and used more of herself than I did by far, and it was genuinely painful for her. So she said, "Let's not do this anymore," and I said, "Fine, that's all right. I wonder what I'll do!"

And a producer I knew suggested that I try directing a play, and I read it, and I said, "Uh, let's try it in summer stock." It was *Barefoot in the Park*. And in the first half hour of rehearsal I thought, "Oh, look at this. This is what I was meant to do. This is what I have been preparing for all this time, I just didn't know it." That's how I experienced all this stuff.

Shouldn't we stop? It's not 5:30 yet. We've got to get all the way back to Manhattan! (Applause)

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**TRANSCRIPT: A PINWOOD DIALOGUE WITH MIKE NICHOLS**

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