

## A PINEWOOD DIALOGUE WITH JAMES TOBACK

Ever since his directorial debut *Fingers*, a film that, like its concert-pianist/hit-man hero, is torn between high culture and low life, James Toback has divided audiences. His champions admire his unique mixture of pulp and art, while some, like an audience member heard in this discussion, are appalled by his approach to violence and sexuality. Toback lives up to his reputation for storytelling and entertaining indiscretion as he talks about his career and about the mixed critical response to *Fingers*, which was remade in 2005 by French director Jacques Audiard as *The Beat That My Heart Skipped*.

### **A Pinewood Dialogue following a screening of *Fingers*, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (January 23, 1996):**

SCHWARTZ: Please welcome James Toback.  
(Applause)

So we're going to see *Fingers* first and then have the session afterwards. We're very grateful for James Toback being with us this afternoon, so please welcome James Toback.

TOBACK: Thank you very much, David. The only thing I'll say before—I say a little before because actually *Fingers* is a rather numbing film. (Laughter) Usually, I think, with these set-ups it's better to do the talking afterward, but I find that ... well, when *Fingers* first came out, there were a lot of people who wanted to castrate me when the movie was over. In fact, there was a screening for Arthur Knight's class at USC Film School before the movie opened, and this sort of angelic-looking girl walked towards me after it was over, as I was sitting there with Arthur Knight, and I thought to myself, "What a sweet, lovely face this girl has. I wonder what odd compliment she's going to give me." And she stood there trembling and I thought, "How touching, look how nervous she is before saying what she has to say." And then she said, "I just want to say one thing and then I'm going to leave. I am not a violent person, but I would like to take a kitchen knife and stick it in your face." (Laughter) And Arthur Knight, who was this kind of austere elderly gentleman who actually made me squeamish about swearing when I was around him, looked as if he were going to fall off his chair and

die. And he turned beet red and sort of fumbled an apology. I said, "Really, no need to apologize: obviously the movie didn't agree with her."

But the overall effect usually is actually to make people—whether they respond the way she did or more generously—is to not want to talk or feel somewhat wordless. So anyway, I'll just say a couple of general things now, and then whoever does want to ask questions afterward—obviously, I'd be happy to answer them. But I never directed a movie before I directed *Fingers*. I'd written one, *The Gambler*, with Jimmy Caan and Lauren Hutton, which Karel Reisz directed. And I was around that film all the time but I'd never studied film at all, I'd never studied directing. I really knew nothing about how to make a movie. And I said to Karel Reisz, "Do you mind, since you're going to use me" which he did for both rewriting and general advice to a world he didn't know well. "Without my getting any extra money for it, do you mind if I use this occasion to educate myself?" And he said, "No, feel free." I said, "Well, I'm going to just casually, I mean, will you tell everybody that he or she is supposed to answer whatever questions I have?" He sort of looked—"Well, we are making a movie, it might impinge on certain people's functions to say, 'you always have to snap to attention if Jim has a question about how to do something,'" he said, "but within reason." And I did actually use it for that purpose.

And then what happened was, I wrote the script for *Fingers*, and it read unlike *Vicky* and unlike *Bugsy* and unlike most of my other scripts—*The Pick-Up Artist*—like a completely inaccessible obscene

semi-pornographic movie, to the point where everybody who read it first said, "Well, this is a kind of hardcore 'X,' right?" And I never thought of it that way and I knew that it wasn't really, but it read that way. There's quite a bit of dialogue which you see on the page. And I was getting absolutely nowhere in getting it financed. Very few people want to take a shot at a first-time director anyway, but with a script like that and with a cast which was totally uninteresting to anybody—Harvey Keitel at the time was not in demand at all as a leading man; Jim Brown had done some action films but this movie, forget it. He survived by driving a cab and working as a bartender. So it was not a cast that was going to draw anyone—and Danny Aiello no one had heard of at the time, so that wasn't going to help. And on the other hand it was sort of, "Well, this is what I want to do and to hang with it."

Then one day I saw George Barrie who ran Fabergé with [Frances] Davis, Miles Davis' ex-wife, thought that he looked like a rather unconventional perfume guy, and, to make a long story short, got him to finance the movie nobody else would have. And everybody at Fabergé tried to keep him from doing it. You'll see when you see the movie: it's not a movie that looks to be the film financed by a perfume company. And then when it was done, it met with tremendous adversity. There were a few people who really hooked into it and sort of were crusaders for it, and then once it got to Europe, Truffaut and Fassbinder, in particular, and Daniel Schmidt and some other directors really got behind it and did a great deal for it.

But when it first opened here, Vincent Canby and Janet Maslin, as an [entity], really tried to kill the movie. I mean, it was a kind of conscious effort to see that the movie closed and vanished. And then there were quite a few people that sort of took their cue from them. So it had a very, very rough beginning, and it sort of has taken about ten or fifteen years for it to get out there around the world and it's now doing that. But anyway, it's still going to be a sort of rugged movie to talk about after. This is all I'll say for now. Those of you who wish to remain and not try to get me with a kitchen knife I'll talk with. (Applause) (Screening begins)

**SCHWARTZ:** (Screening ends) This film was very controversial, as we talked about, at the time that it came out. It's both in terms of the violence and

sexual transgressiveness—it's provocative, but there were certainly more violent films out around that time. So was it some of the sexually transgressive scenes that caused the most controversy?

**TOBACK:** I think that it was a combination of things. One: by any conventional way of looking at it, [it has] no redeeming social value. It wasn't that it presented what it presented in any context of conventional hopefulness or decency...I mean *Taxi Driver*, for instance, was a kind of morality tale and had a very happy ending which was tacked on after originally having been written in a very cold and dark way. This didn't, and also I think a number of people—there were a couple of what I called "walk-out" scenes, exit scenes. One of them is the scene with Jim Brown—at the moment that he bangs the two girls' heads together a lot of people...Richard Jordan, who is now dead, a very good actor, and his then wife or girlfriend Blair Brown, also a good actress, were sitting next to each other. They both later became friends of mine. I didn't know it at the time, but they were sitting at Cinema 2, and when that happened, Richard Jordan howled with laughter—he found it funny, which not many people did; there were others occasionally. Blair Brown punched him and said, "If you find that funny, I don't want to be with you," and walked out of the theater, and then told him she thought the whole movie was disgusting because of that. Anyway, I saw her at an airport not long after that. I had met Jordan by then and he told me the story, and I went up to her and I said, "I just want to introduce myself to you because you're one of my biggest admirers." And she said, "Who are you?" I said, "Jim Tobeck." Well, she blushed...anyway, we became friends. But my point is that that scene a lot of people took to be an expression, in some way, my way of looking at the world, or that there was sense of approval. And that had to with...there was an awareness, at the time it was written, that I had lived with Jim Brown for two years and was very friendly with him. And he had been arrested for doing that six times—for that very thing. In fact, that's what gave me the idea to do it.

Because it kind of haunted me and I think that, you know, John Simon went on television and said that I was encouraging people to do this by approving it...and often people confuse the—it's this idea that if something's on screen, you are advocating it.

And the whole idea of presenting a character you can root for, or sympathize with, at least—but even now that phrase is everywhere in moviemaking: who are we supposed to root for, who are we supposed to identify with? So I think for a lot of those reasons this movie—and also it's perceptual when something comes out; a movie of this kind needs big support from a lot of places to have a shot, and this movie got very little support and a huge amount of rage.

I mean, about six or seven years ago somebody sent me all the stuff that'd been written about *Fingers*. He's a *Fingers* fanatic from the Philippines. And he had sent me a letter saying that he knew the movie by heart and also just wanted to introduce himself, and that he'd saved everything that had been written about it. I didn't have anything that had been written about it, so I wrote him back and I said, "If you want to Xerox everything you have of this, I'd like to see it. I'm curious because I remember it being quite vicious, but I'd like to get it." He sent me this huge dossier from around the world—I mean, the Australian reviews and the Dutch reviews translated—it was everything. And I looked at some of the stuff in New York and it was mind-boggling, and it pretty much killed it. You can't open a movie in Cinema 2 and have *The New York Times* write three long articles about what a violent, despicable movie this is and how you should die before you see it, and then *New York* magazine and just about everybody in the sort of New York—in that the very people that you needed, and *The Village Voice*, the very people that I was interested to see because they said here this, you know, like, "James Toback brings this cult classic to the thing."

The *Voice* fucking tried to run it off the planet. By the way, Vincent Canby—I got to just tell you one funny thing about it, is Vincent Canby really was just—it was like 30 paragraphs of venom on this movie that opened at 1 theater, 200-seat theater. And three years later, I came out with a movie called *Love and Money*, and his whole review was bemoaning that I'd lost the intensity I had in *Fingers* (Laughter) in *Love and Money*.

**SCHWARTZ:** In your script for *Vicky*, which was I guess written before this, you have Vicky saying—and this is set in the nineteenth century—"You're

really nothing until you've been attacked by *The New York Times*."

**TOBACK:** Right, yeah.

**SCHWARTZ:** Were you surprised at the *Times*'s reaction?

**TOBACK:** I wasn't, because they had done the same thing to me about *The Gambler* with Jimmy Caan and Lauren Hutton. What happened was, Penelope Gilliatt, who was living with Vincent Canby and was a screenwriter herself and a film critic for *The New Yorker* and a kind of very sort of sad, pathetic drunk, (Laughter) had one night slobbered all over herself at Elaine's at a table in a really embarrassing way, and she was constantly sort of interrupting. And I was trying to talk to a friend of mine...

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** But are you going to have any questions from the audience?!

**TOBACK:** I hope so, yes.

**ANOTHER AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Shut up!

[Heated discussion ensues in audience]

**SCHWARTZ:** Please... there will be time... please. We always have questions from the audience and we've only had two questions so far.

[Audience member continues shouting]

**ANOTHER AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Shut up!

**SCHWARTZ:** Please, you'll have your time.

**TOBACK:** This is like my original screening of *Fingers*. (Laughter and applause) So what happened was, I heard from that that Canby had it in for me. And I told Karel that because I was unpleasant with Penelope that night, and Karel Reisz said, "Don't worry about it; she's a friend of mine from England and she's very kind to all my movies, and I after all directed this movie, so I'm sure she'll be very kind." He not only eviscerated the movie, he went after me... So there are these vendettas that go on. They're very petty and they're very intense and they can be very long-term, they can be very destructive.

And particularly if you're making movies, people always say, "Oh, it doesn't matter, movies succeed. Reviews don't matter." They don't matter too much if the movie is *Eraser*, a movie that everybody sort of knows in advance is going to be bad because the word is out, but it doesn't matter. If you're going to spend thirty million dollars, it's going to get out. But if you take a small movie and you get nasty angry reviews, forget it. Canby killed one of Antonioni's last films. It was supposed to open and Dan Talbot [founder of *New Yorker Films*] cancelled the whole opening—it never opened in New York because it was an early response and just said, "I can't show it if I don't have a good review from *The New York Times*. I'm not going to book it."

**SCHWARTZ:** This was independently produced. What was the distribution of *Fingers* like? How many screens was it on?

**TOBACK:** That was another problem. It was distributed by Brut, which was a perfume company, and they had never distributed anything before. And they had to deal with Fox, which had just run out, and so George Barrie said, "I know how to distribute. I'll distribute the movie." So it opened in, I think, 200 theaters, and it played for about 2 or 3 weeks in most of them.

In fact, Roger Ebert, who did love the movie and was very good about it from the beginning, told me that in Chicago it was the second film on a double-bill with a movie called *Drum* with Ken Norton. The thing with *Drum*—it was, "*Mandingo* lit the fuse. *Drum* is the explosion." And on the marquee it said, "Ken Norton is *Drum*. Jim Brown is *Fingers*." So that's how it opened in Chicago.

**SCHWARTZ:** Harvey Keitel. Can you talk about getting him to do the role and how he felt about seeing the script—his reaction to the script?

**TOBACK:** That was sort of a funny thing. I had been very friendly with Bob De Niro, who had wanted to play *The Gambler*, and then Karel Reisz decided to use Jimmy Caan instead, which turned out okay. But I had been upset and Bob was very upset, and I think sort of held it against me because I went to him first about doing *Fingers*, and he kind of delayed and delayed and delayed and delayed. He and Harvey were best friends, and I had never met

Harvey but I liked him a lot in *Mean Streets*, and I finally said to Bob, "This is, this is silly. If you don't want to jump in, I really actually want to go to Harvey, because I think he'd be very good, too." He said, "Well, give me another week," and I said okay, and then in another week he said, "Just give me another week." And I said, "No. I'm going to go to Harvey."

And paradoxically this was in the Polo Lounge of the Beverly Hills Hotel—we had this conversation. That day, later, there was Harvey Keitel sitting with Jack Clayton, whom I knew through Karel Reisz—a British director. And I said to Jack afterward, "Can you introduce me to Harvey?" And he said, "Sure." And Harvey had gone out of the room and then came back, and I said to Harvey, "Listen, I was just going to try to find out where to reach you, because I want to offer you a part in this movie that I'm doing." And I said, "I'm up in Room 207. Why don't you come up there when you're done with talking to Jack?" So he did, and I said to him...we talked, we were sort of friendly for five or ten minutes, and then I said, "Listen, this is the movie of your life, and it's going to change your life, and I want you to commit right now to doing it." And he said, "Well, do you mind if I read the script first?" And I said, "Actually, I do. I think that part of the way that it should be done is that you should commit to doing it before you read the script just out of the awareness that we have some connection together." He said, "I think I'd really prefer to read the script first." (Laughter) So we argued about that for about ten minutes, and then he said, "Okay, why don't we say this: I'll commit to doing it, but I also want to read it, and I'll speak to you tomorrow after I read it." So I said, "Okay," and gave him the script. And then the next day we pretty much agreed to do it. It happened rather fast. What didn't happen fast was the financing, because I said there was no way of getting it, and early or easy.

The only odd way I could've gotten it—and I resisted the temptation—was: Ricky Nelson, who actually was a very bright and nice and crazy guy, of *Ozzie and Harriet* fame, or rock 'n'roll fame, came up to the room one day and said—his agent had given him a script, and he said, "I just want you to know, I am Jimmy Angelelli." So I said, "Really?" He said, "Yes." And I said, "Well, I always had a mad crush on you when I was a kid watching you on *Ozzie and Harriet*, and I like your singing, but I don't

think this is really for you. I want to use this guy Harvey Keitel.” He said, “Well, I can get this movie financed. So if you can’t get the money with Harvey Keitel, then get it with me.” And I actually, when things looked bleak, occasionally I would think about it, but then we finally got it.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I saw the film when it first opened in 1978 and I was really impressed by it. And one of the things that I really liked about it was that lust is in the air throughout the entire film. The scene with the man looking at him in the bar and the scene with the little girl looking at him near the pier—and I just really like that, and I would like you to talk a little bit more about that.

**TOBACK:** Well, that’s extremely...you’re right in my unconscious, and actually in earlier drafts of the script, because in the first several drafts of the script, really right up until the end—and Harvey objected to my taking it out—there was a very violent homosexual scene in the movie. Because the whole movie, it seems to me, is about a guy who has not figured out whether he is a dick or an asshole.

That is to say, he does not know which end is which. And his father is looming over him as this sort of colossal dick that he hasn’t been able to escape from, which is the irony of the father saying to him, “What are you trying to do, stick your prick up my ass?” when that’s what he’s been doing to his son his whole life. But what happened was that scene in the bar involved a lot of look exchanges and afterward Harvey’s character went up and was drawn in and went up to an apartment with three of the guys. And it became—I don’t want to say pleasantly sexual; I’d say agreeably sexual. And then all of a sudden Harvey flipped and became very violent. This was in an earlier draft, and the scene became very brutal. And it was Harvey’s favorite scene in the movie, and I can’t honestly remember why I felt it would derail the movie, but at the last minute I took it out. And Harvey really was angry; he felt it was a scene that was needed and up until a couple of years ago used to say to me, “We shoulda done that scene, we shoulda had that scene in.”

The other one that you talked about came out of nowhere. It wasn’t written in—that little girl was not written in, but I always felt the scene needed

something that it didn’t have. The night before we were going to shoot it, I was in a McDonald’s at eleven o’clock at night on Third Avenue in the eighties, and I see this beautiful little seven-year-old girl. And all of a sudden it hit me: “She ought to be in that scene tomorrow.” So I went up to her and I said, “May I speak to your mother, because I want to talk to you about being in a movie tomorrow that I’m shooting?” And she said, “Is Joe Namath in it?” And I said, “No, but Ed Marinaro’s in it,” who was playing for the Jets at the time. She said, “I don’t like Ed Marinaro as much as Joe Namath.” I said, “Well, I can’t help that,” but I said, “I would love to talk—where is your mother?” So she said, “I don’t know.” I said, “Well, whom are you with here?” She said, “I’m here alone.” And I said, “How old are you?” And she said, “Seven.” And I said, “Well,” I said, “Do you usually come to the McDonald’s at eleven o’clock at night?” She said, “Yeah.”

So we took a walk together and I told her about the movie. Eventually, we were going to go back to her apartment, which she has a key to, and her mother was going to be there eventually, she said. (Laughter) We ended up going into Central Park. It was in summer—no, it was in winter, actually, but we went into Central Park and there was a kind of intimate series of things going on in the bushes. And I sort of steered her away and she said, “Look at those people.” Anyway, we ended up going up to this apartment that she had in Sutton Place, and around four in the morning her mother staggered in. She had had a late date, and here she sees this strange man sitting with her seven-year-old daughter, and I said, “Listen, I know it’s odd for me to be here, but, you know what...” She said, “Really, you want to use her in the movie?” She said, “Is there a part for me, too?”

So anyway, that’s how it happened, and then a year later I saw her on David Susskind. David Susskind is talking to the different kids about how they got their start, so he says to Tina, “And how did you get your start?” She said, “Well, I was sitting in McDonalds at eleven o’clock at night, and this director James Toback came up to me and said, ‘Come here, I want to talk to you.’” By the time she had finished this story and said, “I want to use you in a movie,” I sounded like somebody that you would want incarcerated before the show is over. And David Susskind pumped that up, he kept saying, “Now, say this again, he came up to you at

eleven o'clock at night and he walked you into Central Park?" (Laughter) Anyway, I don't know what's happened to her but she was very precocious.

**SCHWARZ:** (Repeats audience question) Who were the champions in the United States, the critics who supported the film when it came out?

**TOBACK:** Roger Ebert, Gene Siskel. Pauline Kael I wouldn't call a champion, but she sort of called attention to it. David Thomson, by far the most important and the best, who, by the way, if you don't know his work, is the best writer about film, I think, by far in the last thirty years in the world, and has a book out called *The Biographical Dictionary of Film*, which is the best one-volume book about movies, and a terrific book about Orson Welles that just came out called *Rosebud*. In any event, David Thomson wrote at the time for an alternative paper in Boston called *The Real Paper*, which is now defunct, but he wrote a lengthy and really brilliant essay on *Fingers*. And I would say that that's pretty much the nucleus of it. Charles Champlin in *The Los Angeles Times* actually wrote an extremely intelligent and passionate piece about it, but hedged and said a lot of people will find this movie outrageous and disgusting. But those were the nucleus.

And there were about fifty people who were just furious, and John Simon actually wrote and implied that I was fucking Pauline Kael—that's why she wrote what she did about the movie—and then said it at UCLA at a big gathering they had. And they asked me about it on a TV interview after that and I said, "I have fucked Pauline Kael the same number of times I've fucked John Simon." (Laughter)

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Secondly, can you just say anything about any influences on the film or on any of your other films?

**TOBACK:** You mean who influenced me?

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Yeah.

**TOBACK:** I am too megalomaniacal to admit to myself that I'm influenced by anybody. I'm sure I am, but I hate—a lot of people consciously borrow all the time. I would not ever do that. I can't imagine that Orson Welles's love for wide-angle lenses did

not influence me, because the first thing I ever noticed stylistically about movies was the wide-angle lenses in Orson Welles's movies, and I read André Bazin about that and I heard Welles talk about wide-angle lenses, and it struck me that there was a whole philosophical justification that one could make for using wide-angle lenses, and that it was in harmony with what I wanted to do cinematically, anyway. So I'm sure that that, and in particular *Touch of Evil*, definitely had an influence.

But most of my movies, and certainly *Fingers*, are coming very much from raw, personal experience. I studied the piano, I know the gambling world inside out, I lived with Jim Brown for two years in his house. And I usually develop some kind of personal rapport or connection with the actors that I'm dealing with, so that I'm not only having them play a role, I'm using things about them that I know in the movie that—as I said in case of Jim, it was rather egregious, because he had been arrested six times for exactly this one act, and I was a bit squeamish about suggesting that he do it in the movie, but he went with it, even though I think he knew it would certainly not help his career or image at all.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Doesn't this movie promote violence—that people see movies like this and pick it up and then follow the example, and crime goes up from movies like this? There's now an organization that's called Fairness and Accuracy in Media that's promoting a different outlook on television and the others...

**TOBACK:** Well, unfortunately, or fortunately, not enough people saw *Fingers* for it to influence anybody but... (Laughter)

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** It comes to filth, its lowest degree! I'm going! I can't stand you! Go to hell!

**TOBACK:** It's nice to see that the movie can still elicit some of what it did when it originally came out. Except that that used to be the majority response to the movie.

I was up in Harvard with the movie and got the best response I'd had. And the next night, I was in Dartmouth and David Thomson, in fact, who I'd just mentioned, was the head of the film department then, and he did put it on a bit thick. You could tell the audience didn't like it, since they hissed wildly

when the movie ended. Then he said that anyone who didn't understand that this was a great movie really didn't know anything about film, and that twenty years from now everybody there would realize this was a great movie, and here he is—James Toback. So if it wasn't bad enough—it's not only did you not like the movie, you're assholes for not liking the movie.

And then I came out and I actually thought I was in physical danger, because the questions were uniformly starting with phrases like, "Where do you come off with, and who do you...?" It was a really—and I was supposed to stay overnight in this little motel in Dartmouth that had no security, and I said forget it. And I rented a car and drove around all night just to get out of Hanover.

There are obviously cases where people see things on the screen and then they decide to do them, and to do them in exactly the way they were done on screen. I don't think that in the long run you can make a case, one can make a case, for the censorship that that would entail. Because it finally comes down to censorship, because unless you make things illegal, they're going to happen cinematically. And I think that's just part of all free speech in the same way that when one talks publicly and says certain things, it's incendiary.

I mean, for instance, I happen to know Louis Farrakhan very well. I knew him when he was around Jim Brown's house; he was one of Jim's best friends. But suppose Farrakhan says something about Jews, and then the next day some guy who believes in him and follows him sees some Jew on television and doesn't like them, and goes to the studio and stabs him on the street afterward. Now are you going to say that Farrakhan is not allowed to say even things that might be interpreted as totally bigoted on television? Once you let the gates open, I think it's all over. You have lost all free speech, and if movies affect people and they cause them to fuck a dog, then they cause them to fuck a dog. If they cause them to kill, they cause them to kill. I don't believe that's usually true, but I don't take the position that that's never true. Oliver Stone always says, "Violence existed long before movies did." That's true, but that's also evasive of the issue. There are cases where people see a movie and decide that they're going to do what is done on

the screen, whether it's of a violent or sexual nature—and it probably is more often violent or sexual than it is anything else, as those are the things that have the greatest impact. But I think it's...ultimately, you can make no case in any kind of freedom-of-speech-oriented society for saying, you can't use that, you have a responsibility not to put that kind of stuff in movies. And I think Dole and Clinton together are pandering, repressive, censor-loving—and [Senator] Paul Simon, too. I think the whole political establishment in this regard is cowardly and intellectually unserious in the way they deal with the issue. (Scattered applause)

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** What do you think has happened to the climate? One of the things that David Thomson said while praising the movie *Fingers* was that it was going to be hard for you to continue to make movies like this. And just your experience—certainly you had a very acclaimed movie with *Bugsy*, but that's a different kind of movie. What has been your experience dealing with this sort of material since the 1970s in Hollywood? And how has Hollywood changed?

**TOBACK:** Well, even George Barrie wouldn't finance this movie today. This movie could get financed nowhere by anybody now. If Scorsese took this script with De Niro, he could not get it financed. There is no way anyone could get this movie financed with any cast. They would just say, reading this script, "Forget it, make anything else you want but don't make this." So I think that I was lucky that I came along at a time when there was at least some openness to this. I think that it's gotten worse and worse and worse, and it's going to continue to get worse and worse and worse, for doing any movie like it. The only answer to that is to do movies very, very inexpensively and very small, and that's why I did *The Big Bang* the way I did, not because I could have done that expensively—it was designed to be done small—but I was so tired of trying to do movies I wanted to do and finding no way of doing them. I'm almost in that situation again now. I've been spending months and months trying to get *Harvard Man* set up. I haven't been able to yet, officially. There is another movie that I've written in the last three weeks called *Two Girls and a Guy*, which I can shoot for ten days for under a million dollars, which I will do if I have to do, because I'm getting so frustrated and impatient. But that's really the answer, I think, to do it so that it

isn't an economic burden. Although even at a low budget, people don't want to finance movies that are strange, because they still say, "Well, we have to distribute it," and to distribute a movie now and you make any real money, the cost is big.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** First of all, I thought the movie seemed relatively tame compared to what I've seen on screen. But you mentioned the scene that had been taken out. Had that been shot already?

**TOBACK:** No. Just—I took it out of the script. By the way, tame in terms of graphic violence and sex, absolutely. It's not tame emotionally and that's what bothered people, I think. Because if you portray violence or sex in a way that is not real at all, which is what is usually the case—I mean in these sort of big movies you see people beheaded, you see veins pulsating. But you do not hear somebody talking about the texture of somebody's pussy, and you hear a use of a word, but the psychology of that stuff...or a father is saying to his son, "What are you trying to do, stick your prick up my ass?" When things approach emotional seriousness, they are far less digestible to people financing movies when there's some distance from them.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** The question I had is, how many scenes had you shot or trimmed in order to get...?

**TOBACK:** Nothing. Every set-up is on the screen. We shot the movie in nineteen days, and every set-up is on the screen. I did a lot of tight editing at the last minute in order not to waste any time, and every set-up is on the screen, and the editing process was really one of just trimming and choosing takes.

**SCHWARTZ:** Was every scene shot as written? I mean, this is your first film as a director, and it feels to the viewer that it might have improvisation.

**TOBACK:** There's not a syllable that was not written. It's totally unimprovised. The only variety from take to take was in performance, but not in language. When you want to do a movie in nineteen days like this, you really have to get it down so tight, and it was very rigorously rehearsed with Mike Chapman as the cameraman, very carefully staged so we really knew exactly what we were going to do. Because it was winter, we had short days, and it was nineteen days and we were shooting all over

the city. So—and a lot of very raw stuff and a lot of actors who were not really professionals. Several people were doing this as their first movie. So really, we had to be very well prepared.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** What was your personal impetus to creating this film? The other half of that is what did you want people to experience, and why?

**TOBACK:** Well, I think it was...I start always with a character, a central character who interests me, and I'm saying what does he do? Okay, this guy is a frustrated concert pianist and he works for his father, who's a Shylock and bookmaker, and his two parents are coming from a different world. So that was a kind of premise. What does his life revolve around? It revolves around music and a desire to find out who he is sexually, and a provocation of death, a kind of interest in dangerous situations. So I start making certain—drawing certain inferences about a character as if he really exists without my having created him. And the more I ask questions about what he would like and what he would do and what he would be interested in, the film starts to take shape.

After the fact, I can say that all of my movies are dealing with characters who are sexually obsessed, romantically obsessed, have a nose for tension and danger and physical violence, and who are on some kind of quasi-suicidal course. But it isn't that I consciously—that I set out to do that. It's just, after making movie after movie that deals with that, I have to admit that that must be what I'm looking to convey.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Is the movie cathartic to do and see? It is negative in a moral sense, but personally is it cathartic?

**TOBACK:** Yeah, absolutely, and in fact I get very depressed by movies that have happy endings and that appear to be giving some kind of hopeful message, because, after all, it's very easy for the people on the screen to tell you that. They're usually doing much better than you are in life, and I get rather nauseous at these kind of jingoistic—and I don't just mean that nationalistically, I mean emotionally jingoistic movies that sort of say, everything's going to be okay, just hang in there, keep your dreams, keep plugging—and suck my

dick. (Laughter) I just get sick at movies like that, from the time I was a little kid.

And movies that sort of said that things are not all right, and they're not going to be all right, and life is unnerving and disquieting and ultimately tragic—then I felt I was being told the truth, because in fact the fundamental reality for all of us is we're either going to die suddenly and shockingly when we don't expect to, or we're going to die a rather painful and miserable and debilitating and humiliating death. One or the other. And so is everybody else that we care about, so what kind of cheery news is that? And it's not as if all movies are telling us that all the time. Most of the movies are lying to us and pretending that that isn't true. So I think in a way they cheat you and they make you feeble and less able to handle that stuff. And to me, a moral movie is the movie that gives you some kind of strength to deal with the adversity of life in a honest way, and not to feed you some kind of pabulum that you pay eight dollars to get, and they get enriched, and you go off and continue to suffer.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** *The Gambler* was a terrific film I really enjoyed very much. I was wondering why the studio never released the soundtrack. There's beautiful music in that movie.

**TOBACK:** I'll tell you why: for the same reason that they never promoted the movie properly. Frank Yablans—this is part of studio politics with a lot of movies that have come out—was the head of Paramount when the movie was given the go and when it was shot, and he was a hundred percent behind the movie and was making it the big movie for Paramount. He was fired the day before the movie opened and Barry Diller, who later became a friend of mine and I like very much, did what all studio heads do when they come in: they dump on the previous guy's pet projects. It's just—unless the movie's going to be such an obvious hit that it's suicidal not to and self-spiteful not to push it, always you see the rug pulled out from under it, and overnight they cancelled about twenty percent of the theaters, the marketing budget was cut in half, and all the things that ordinarily would've been done weren't done. The movie was just absolutely sabotaged. And the irony is, as I say, that I later became very friendly with Diller, and it wasn't that it was anything personal, it was just that that is what a

new guy coming in always does to the movies of his predecessor.

**SCHWARTZ:** I want to make that sure we talk about *Vicky* a little bit before we end. I just want to ask you... And this is the script that's published in the issue of *Scenario* and really an amazing script that I guess you started even before *Fingers* came out. Could you just explain briefly what that is and the story?

**TOBACK:** Well, Victoria Woodhull, who is, I think, about as fascinating a woman has lived in America since its inception, was a spiritualist, feminist, free-lover, journalist, stockbroker, ran for president—a general wild woman who anticipated practically all notions of the women's movement in the nineteenth century, and lived a bizarre and colorful and exciting life that touched all these aspects of American life. And the self-same Brut Pictures, George Barrie of Fabergé, thought that this would make a very good movie and probably a perfume tie-in as well. (Laughter) So George had been a real...George had loved *The Gambler*, and he came to me and said, "Do you want to write this movie? You're not an obvious candidate for it, but I really liked your script for *The Gambler*, and if you could write me that kind of script that's as good for *Vicky*, we'll make the movie." So I said, "Sounded good," and I did. And I finished and he said, "Now who do you want to have direct it?" And I said, "I want to direct it." And that was out of the question. It was a very expensive movie, six million dollars, which in those days was about thirty now.

Anyway, "So, well, let's get an actress first." So I went to Faye Dunaway and Faye, whom I knew, and Faye loved it and was ready and eager, and then she and I decided jointly to go to George Cukor. And George was very much interested and intrigued, and everything was ready and we all got along well. We're going to go ahead and then what happened was, *The Blue Bird* opened. I don't know if any of you saw that, from Maurice Maeterlinck's play. And it was not only lambasted, it was cruelly and viciously slaughtered by the very people who had always supported George Cukor. In particular, Vincent Canby, the legendary Vincent Canby who had been a big, big fan of Cukor's, in effect said in his review, "This is a senile, helpless, pathetic has-been who can no longer make a movie." And George Barrie said to me and to Faye, "I'm sorry. I

am not going ahead and putting that kind of money into a movie directed by a senile guy who can't direct a movie anymore." The sad truth was that *The Blue Bird* was not a good movie, so it wasn't as if we could sit there and say, "What are you talking about? Just because some assholes don't like the movie doesn't mean it's not good." It looked like a movie that showed the director who had lost all of his capacities. The truth is, George then made several very good movies after that, and we knew, Faye and I, that he really was still at the top of his game, because he was still very sharp. He just happened to make a movie that didn't work. He was shooting in Russia; there were a lot of problems. He hated Cicely Tyson and Cicely Tyson hated him, and that made everything miserable. Ava Gardner was fucking the chauffeur. (Laughter) There was all this stuff that was going on, and he had these tales that were very funny tales. It's just that it didn't work. Anyway, that killed the movie and I had sort of hoped it would revive, and now maybe it will get revived, because the script has always been something that all of us have loved. George always wanted to do it. Faye to this day, always, she's unfortunately too old now, because there'll never be anyone who would've been as right for the part as she was.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** How much did *Fingers* cost to make?

**TOBACK:** Nine-hundred thousand of which a rather generous amount went to Harvey Keitel, Jim Brown, and me, given the budget. The three of us got a total of three-hundred thousand so the actual below-line cost was six-hundred thousand.

**SCHWARTZ:** Okay, right here.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I'm just curious about whether *Fingers* was like a singularly attacked film for these

moral reasons, like—I don't know anything about how *Taxi Driver* was received...

**TOBACK:** Much better. *Taxi Driver* got good reviews.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** And why is that, do you think?

**TOBACK:** *Taxi Driver* had a studio behind it, and was well-promoted and well-distributed and had a happy ending. If *Taxi Driver* had ended the way it was originally written, I think it would've been half as successful at best. It had a very, very cold, hard, dark ending originally, and instead they tacked on an ending which let people come out of the theater with something different.

**SCHWARTZ:** Okay, last question.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Did you make money on that movie?

**TOBACK:** Well, actually, I made, for those days, a fair amount of money. I never made any residuals from it, or profit participation. The movie actually has grossed worldwide now over six million dollars. So it's actually returned very well on its original investment, which few people know. And whenever they say movies that can't make money...but if you make them for nine-hundred thousand they almost can't lose money. And no money was spent distributing. The movie had an advertising budget of two-hundred and fifty thousand dollars total for the whole country. And I said to George, "How's anybody going to know it's there if you don't advertise?"—George Barrie—and he said, "They'll walk in front of the theater." So I said, "Is that the way you advertise Fabergé cosmetics—they go in the drugstore and they see it on the shelf?"

**SCHWARTZ:** So thanks a lot. (Applause)

**TOBACK:** Thanks.

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