

A PINEWOOD DIALOGUE WITH BENNETT MILLER

Capote is an astonishing fiction-film debut for Bennett Miller, who spoke at Moving Image the day the film was chosen as Best Picture by the National Society of Film Critics. Miller discusses his collaboration with his longtime friends Dan Futterman (who wrote the screenplay) and Philip Seymour Hoffman (who won an Oscar for his moving portrayal of Truman Capote). He also talks about his fascination with the inevitability of Capote's decline following the success of *In Cold Blood*. As one listens to Miller, it becomes clear that the film reflects his personality—quiet, wry, precise, and deeply observant.

A Pinewood Dialogue following a screening of *Capote*, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (January 7, 2006):

SCHWARTZ: Please welcome Bennett Miller.
(Applause) Could you tell us a bit about how you got from doing *The Cruise* to [*Capote*]?

MILLER: *The Cruise* was a documentary, which I guess was done about seven years ago now. Seven years ago. After that, I was looking for a long time for the right thing to do. And I began directing television commercials, which allowed me to wait, because I didn't have to do anything for money. Maybe three or four years went by doing that, before a childhood friend of mine, named Dan Futterman, who I'd known since I was twelve, sent me his script for this movie. And we said, "Okay, let's give it a go."

SCHWARTZ: And had he done a lot of other scripts before?

MILLER: This was Danny's first screenplay; and this is my first narrative feature; and this is Phil[ip Seymour] Hoffman's first foray into producing.

SCHWARTZ: Now, you had both known—is it true that you'd both known Philip for a while?

MILLER: Yeah, Danny and I knew each other since we were twelve, and Danny and I knew Phil since we were sixteen.

SCHWARTZ: From what? In what context?

MILLER: We did a theater program after our junior year in high school. Phil lived in upstate New York; Danny and I grew up in Westchester. And it was the New York State Summer School of the Arts that was held in Saratoga. It was an acting program.

SCHWARTZ: Now, I noticed the film—there's a credit for United Artists. Were they the first company to back this film?

MILLER: Well, United Artists made this film. It took us about a year. Phil and I flew around trying to raise the money for it. And eventually, the folks at United Artists, who originally said "No," said "Yes." What had happened is that Sony Corporation purchased United Artists. And I think the guys at United Artists said, "What do we have to lose?" Phil and I had come in there with a lot of passion, and they all knew that they were not going to have their jobs in about six to eight months. It was sort of like a 'Hail Mary' pass. (Laughter) We'll just—if it turns out okay, they were geniuses; if not, they're gone.

SCHWARTZ: This was Bingham Ray running UA?

MILLER: Bingham was already gone. It was Danny Rosette who I am eternally grateful for saying "Yes," after everybody said "No."

SCHWARTZ: Tell us a bit about your approach to this material. What's fascinating about what you're working with is that you've got the real life murder; you have the movie *In Cold Blood*, the book *In Cold Blood*, and the biography, Gerald Clarke's biography of Truman Capote. So there are a lot of

different layers going on. I'm wondering how you sorted through all that.

MILLER: There's—it's a lot. But for me, the reasons for doing this film were simple. I read the script and I kind of sat with it for a little bit, and there was a feeling that it created. There was, for me, a reason for doing it and the reason for doing it was specific. It's not a traditional biopic, and it does not burden itself with the responsibility of covering all the bases of a person's life. For me, the great resources that were available for us—*In Cold Blood*, Truman's story, Gerald Clarke's incredible biography that I would recommend to everybody—were really just a resource to serve a smaller purpose. It's a very classical tragedy. It's a classical tragedy, and it so happens to be based in reality.

SCHWARTZ: The tragedy being that it's inevitable. And what's interesting about this story, of course, is that it's both about Truman Capote's rise to fame, but built into that is his destruction.

MILLER: That's right. It's inevitable. It's somebody whose downfall is the consequence of his own character. So he had everything and really “answered prayers;” he got everything he wanted. And yet, in so doing, sowed the seeds to his own demise.

SCHWARTZ: But the fact that you are not doing the standard biopic, in a way, puts more of a burden on you, because the film is really about the nuances of what's happening to him. For the film to work, you have to understand very finite, very small things.

MILLER: There are two things going on here. One is there's the story and the plot of a person going about doing what he needs to do to write his masterpiece. But what's happening beneath the surface is a very private tragedy. And what's really going on, right from the very beginning [is that] the event is sort of a calling to Truman. And nobody knows what's going on with him; it's never made explicit. So you have a very public person with an explicit action and plot, a public person with that charisma, and the sort of very private and more disturbing reality that's happening beneath.

SCHWARTZ: But this all has to be suggested. So there's a love that he feels for—that grows, towards Perry, it's under the surface.

MILLER: Right, right. He does not share with anybody what is really going on; it's a totally private, internal experience.

SCHWARTZ: Could you talk a bit about then working with Philip Seymour Hoffman? It's such an uncanny performance that it's breathtaking, in a way, to see it.

MILLER: Actually, I did an interview with Phil yesterday, talking about his process, which I don't think he likes to talk about that much himself, and I still find it interesting, how he works. But we've known each other for a long time. He's a deep thinker. He really knows how to dig deeper and peel back the layers and going through the script together, really discussing what's going on; and like, this is what's on the surface, what's the next level, and what's the next level... He really works hard. I don't think anybody works harder to prepare the physical aspect of it, the voice and the physicality, but those are not the things that make him a great actor. It's not his intelligence, and it's not his preparation and his work. All of that stuff, I think, prepares him to a level, and he ingests that, and he's got that preparation. But when he is in the moment, and the truth of the moment presents itself, he really relinquishes everything, all ideas and preconceptions. For us, it was really a process of getting to the place where we felt comfortable enough that it could be discovered when the cameras were rolling. In rehearsals—preparation began about six months out for him; rehearsals began maybe two-and-a-half months out—and two weeks before, it was just full on, working it, working it. But we never rehearsed anything to the point where it actually happened. And the first time it was going to happen, the cameras would be rolling. We really left room for the kind of magic that happens.

SCHWARTZ: Could you talk specifically about the party scenes? I love those scenes, because they have such a great flavor to them. They capture him being boisterous [and] at the same time, you can also sense his loneliness.

MILLER: It's hard to contrive something like that, and we did not try to. We really left it to creating the atmosphere and the circumstances for it to happen, and he pretty much improvises every word in those scenes.

SCHWARTZ: What was it that you had in mind that sort of gave you the confidence or sense of what the whole film was going to be like? Were you thinking of other films, for example?

MILLER: Other films? I like quiet films, where things are going on in the ether, and films that somehow feel conscious. I didn't want to tell the story so much as I wanted to observe the story; and how it's observed; and being able to feel the kind of mind that is observing it. So, [Stanley] Kubrick, obviously, how every frame in his movies just...you can't understand. Like, how is it that you feel conscious, you know? Every frame feels conscious. One of the first movies that kind of got me thinking, maybe I should get into movies, I saw when I was fifteen years old, called *Walkabout*. You know, Nicolas Roeg, that kind of thing. Wim Wenders' early movies, like *Kings of the Road* and *Alice in the Cities*, just in the kind of voyeuristic nature. But the idea was to create something of profound austerity that would really sensitize you to what's happening on the subtlest level, and make a movie that just scrutinizes.

SCHWARTZ: Just to sort of jump back to—you were talking about how hard it was to get the film made. What was difficult about convincing, say, UA or other studios?

MILLER: Well, you walk into a room and you tell them "I want to make a film about a writer writing his book." Like box office gold. (Laughter) I think the appeal of the film is very difficult to communicate. I think Phil and I—and of course, Danny Futterman too, the screenwriter—we believed it. Kubrick says—somebody gave me that Kubrick book (*The Stanley Kubrick Archives*), the archives, you know? It comes with a CD, which I would recommend to anybody. In that CD, in an interview, he says—"If you're right about something, people tend to know it." And for a year, they didn't seem to agree with us. (Laughter) And maybe we were wrong, but...

SCHWARTZ: Now, Kubrick had to often wait many years after the film, before people came around. But you're seeing—the response has been pretty amazing to this film.

MILLER: Well, this is the digital era, so it's like everything's accelerated.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Okay, in terms of the production design, did you have access to the original crime scene photos? What did you use to get that period detail?

MILLER: Yeah, we had the crime scene photos, and we had a lot of stuff. The original—the Richard Brooks film [*In Cold Blood*] was shot in Holcomb and Garden City, and used the real locations, in the courtroom [and] that's the actual house, in the Brooks film. That was helpful. Only a few years after, like six or seven years after the murders, that thing was shot. Richard Avedon traveled to Kansas, as is portrayed in the film, at the invitation of Capote. And he photographed not just the killers there, but all around town; [he] went to the Dewey home, the cemetery; the courtroom. A few weeks before he passed away, he invited Phil over for dinner, and cooked him linguine with clams, and for three-and-a-half hours, shared everything he had. He gave us all those contact sheets, so we've got hundreds of photographs that we based it on.

There was a strong effort to be accurate, to be obedient to what was. But the goal never was to convince anybody of anything. It should be right. But, it's a period piece, and the pitfall of that kind of thing is: you give it too much importance, and it becomes some kind of a barrier between the story and what's really happening. It kind of separates you from it. So the movie doesn't hit you over the head with the period or strain itself to sell 1961 or anything like that. [I was] much more concerned just how it communicates tonally, the production design, than, "Is that what Perry Smith's journal actually looked like?"

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Did you consider anybody else other than Philip Seymour Hoffman?

MILLER: No, he was it. Danny Futterman told me, "If you want to do this movie, I would love you to do this movie." We talked about it for about two weeks before I agreed to do it. Then we talked about who Capote would be, and who would be Capote. Phil was the only name that we ever came up with. And had he said no, I probably would have...

SCHWARTZ: Okay, well. (Repeats audience question) Two different questions. One about the cinematography; but then, do you have anything in

mind for Philip Seymour Hoffman, so he doesn't get anchored, [or typecast]?

MILLER: Right. I was very privileged to work with another good friend of mine, Adam Kimmel, who is a great DP, who was somebody who I worked with doing commercials, as was the production designer and the costume designer. It's basically my commercial crew. The production designer, by the way, this was his first feature as a production designer. And as far as Phil goes, and what he might do in the future: he'll do whatever I tell him to do. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) What did you do as a director, in order to get that quietness—not just in acting, but in all the other elements of filmmaking?

MILLER: I think the key to making a movie that finds power in silence, and quiet moments, and simplicity, and a prose kind of approach, too—[is that] the a visual language is simple. The key to finding the power there is not approaching it from the outside in, like "I want it to be like Kubrick." But it's more, "What are you really going after in the moment?" I think the screenplay gave that opportunity. These scenes are just so rich with complexity that really the goal was—the invention born of necessity was—to direct and sensitize and magnify your attention to what was happening. Somebody said to me recently, "Why did you choose such a sedate style?" I don't think it's sedate at all. I think when a movie cuts—has a cut—every second-and-a-half or two seconds, that to me is sedating. I get numb. I'm not paying attention. To me, the movie needed it [the quiet tone]. There's so much happening beneath the surface. Very naturally, when you're figuring out, "How do you take this thing and really give emphasis to it?" my natural style and preferences are to get quiet and put the microscope lens up there.

SCHWARTZ: (Laughs) Are you working on anything new now, or you just...?

MILLER: I'm done, this is it. (Laughter) I'm done.

SCHWARTZ: So that was your retrospective, right there.

MILLER: Yeah. (Laughter) No, I've begun working on developing something that's going to take some time. And I'm reading, I'm looking for stuff. So if anybody's got a great idea... (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) ...What was your initial interest [in making a film about Bobby Fischer]?

MILLER: I wanted to make a documentary portrait of Bobby Fischer. Who, again, was a character—like Truman, and like Speed Levitch from *The Cruise*—whose life, I think, represents more than just himself. He was fourteen years old when he became the United States Chess Champion and he did so at a time when chess was more than a game. It was the metaphor for the Cold War, and he became an important personality. And then... A kind of pressure in a culture that would breed his genius into something so malignant as a cold warrior, as a child. By sixteen, he was living alone. Eventually, the Russians stopped running and had to sit down and face him in Reykjavik and he crushed Boris Spassky like a school boy. They draped the American flag around him, and there was a celebration, and he was the most famous person in the world, for a few minutes.

What happens when you cultivate your brain like that? What happens to a person like that? He just seemed to be this remnant of that horrible militant mentality. The Secretary of State is calling him up and... you're important. And the truth is what became of that is about the ugliest thing you could possibly imagine, with his insanely rabid anti-Semitism and his...anyway, it's—this went on too long. But it was the story of a Mozart-level genius not being governed by any kind of wisdom, but governed by the kind of things that govern this country.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Did your experience making a documentary help you have a sense of objectivity?

MILLER: Yeah, but I think that's my nature, too. And maybe that's why I'm attracted to documentary, and that's why I'm attracted to the kind of movies that do the same thing. But people are complex and the moment you label them or you make it so simple, this or that, I think it reduces it to something that negates the relevant truth of things.

SCHWARTZ: And Capote obviously helped establish that idea, the idea of a nonfiction novel was new, now it's old.

MILLER: Yeah, exactly. Capote looked at these guys in a very unconventional way, a very nonconformist way. These guys killed a family, but he did not look at them with the conventional attitude of hatred or fear—but fascination and curiosity, and a real interest in human nature.

SCHWARTZ: Okay. (Laughter) So this'll be our last question.

MILLER: ...The power of storytelling and its ability to... Well, I mean, two things. One is what that's about, what those scenes are about is just the ability to witness, in all of its forms, Capote's ability to seduce. He was a seducer. And he could seduce anybody from a sixteen-year-old girl in Kansas; to like Alvin Dewey, who's the lead KBI investigator; to these guys; to the literati of the late

fifties, early sixties, when the movie's set. What I would say about storytelling, seducing, I would say it's as much who he was, as whatever the hell it was that he was saying. My attitude about the film is that as much of a story as it is, it's also really just a portrait. When I was answering the question on how you go about organizing all that information, for me—you begin subtracting when you realize what you're after and for me—it was really a portrait. The purpose of the portrait is to somehow communicate the condition of a person's mind, and the consequences of that. In these storytelling moments, you see at once the charm and magnetism of a person with charisma—and then the film shows you the disturbing reality that's behind that charisma.

SCHWARTZ: Well, if this *is* your last film, you're going out in style, and if not, we'll have you back for more.

MILLER: Thank you so much. (Applause)

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