

**Eric Collins**

***Criticism – How to Take It, Dish It Out,  
 and Handle Both at the Same Time by Judging Oneself***

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ERIC COLLINS: A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away, I was writing a director's third feature film. We had landed a famous and reputable producer. (Yes, the two can sometimes go together; producers are not all vampire creatures, living off our creative juices.... See how good I am at constructive criticism!)

Anyhow, we had landed the development contract, thanks to a first draft, and we were going through our 'step deal,' involving two rewrites and an optional third. We knew that, after one incredibly upbeat beginning, our 'love story' with the producer was going downhill. The signs were very clear: after taking our project, the producer invited us to work over lunch at a swanky place off the Champs Élysées. The tab, the bill, for the three of us was probably not much less than what I would be getting for the first rewrite. Things were balmy. They even stocked the company's little fridge with a whole crate of Diet Coke for me, with little glass bottles of chocolate milk for the director. Nothing was too good for us!

The screenplay was highly original, really well-written. The only little thing they wanted, was for us to change the introduction. Not even the first act, just the set-up – the opening scenes. We did as requested. We sent in the draft, and then set out to enjoy another two-hour lunch with them, thinking we would get another 50-Euro hamburger with complimentary French fries....

Well, we did get the hamburger; but we had to go pick it up ourselves – at McDonald's. I am not joking. We actually went out with the producer to pick up a 'Golden Menu.' The producer at least let us choose what we wanted – and there were those little toy things for kids. It was a bit of an 'historic' place, anyhow, being the first McDonald's to open in France, in 1972....

So, we ended up doing the work session, with the producer using his McNotes and all. (*Audience laughter.*) No more special beverages in the company fridge for us. You see, we'd been down-graded a bit. They liked our new beginning even less than the first, so they came up with a very specific plan for our second rewrite: A well-mapped-out opening that would do the trick, in their eyes. They told us: "Don't touch the last hundred pages of the screenplay. It's still a highly original, very good quality work."

So, we worked pretty hard, filled in the dotted lines, as they wanted. We e-mailed it in, and waited, and waited, and waited. Every two weeks, the meeting would be rescheduled, so we thought we were out. But they kept on telling us that the producer needed at least two or three hours of work time with us. So, we thought: It doesn't take two or three hours to throw someone out, or cut them off. So, we guessed the project was still alive. Finally, the meeting day came and they told us, specifically, not to come for lunch but to come after. So, we realised we didn't even rate a fast-food tray anymore.

Then, when we sat down – this is true, now – the director asked if he could have something to drink. The producer told him, "There's a faucet in the toilet. Just wash one of the little glasses in the sink, if you want." (*Audience laughter.*) So, we thought, "That's not very good." Then, of course, immediately – or after about two minutes – he said, "Ok, it's finished. We finished the project and we're not going to work with you." The meeting was over.

He did say it pretty nicely. He explained that he was the one who had requested that exact beginning, but he just didn't like it. When we were really sure that it was over, the director asked the producer to give us his notes, at least, asking for the details of what the producer did not like – to help us with the rewrite before we shopped it somewhere else.

But the producer answered that he couldn't. He couldn't give us the notes.

"Why not?" the director asked.

"I can't," the producer returned. "Because... Well, I didn't read it."

There was a long, silent beat. Then, silly me: I asked the most stupid question, apparently – and I didn't realise this before it came out:

"Well, if you didn't read it, how can you know you don't like it?"

Now, the producer stared at me as if I was the ultimate moron – and, oh, what a stupid question. He said, "Well, I would have *read* it, if I'd liked it!" (*Audience laughter.*)

So, you see, criticism takes many forms. By the way – and this is true, also – the producer and I are friends on Facebook now. So, all is not lost. (*Audience laughter.*)

As most of you know, my name is Eric Collins, I am a screenwriter, working in France, and tonight I'm here to talk about criticism in the field of screenplays. I called this reading: *Critical Positions, or: Criticism – How to Take It, Dish It Out, and Handle Both at the Same Time by Judging Oneself!*

Not very original, but we have a three-act structure. I think we have about 90 minutes (just like your average film), including your questions and input. In general, my feeling is with a lecture is that, after about 20 minutes, it becomes hard to concentrate – probably even less, in this case, because I'm not a very good narrator, which is why I tend to write more than I speak. So I'm going to break it down into three parts of about 20 minutes each, and have questions come in between. That way, we can address each part, in turn, and you won't have to listen to me pontificate for a full hour.

Then, at the third break, I can ask for a drink, and we can see how SOURCES 2 rates me – see whether they send me to the toilet, where I can wash out a little glass.... (*Audience laughter.*)

### *Criticism*

Criticism is defined by *Webster's Dictionary* as: "The art of evaluating or analysing – usually unfavourably, as opposed to 'encouragement' – works of art of literature."

This is already pretty good, because they define the critic as an artist. Maybe you can just remain a critic and not go on writing. It's probably easier, and you still remain an artist....

But, the specific criticism of which I wish to speak tonight is: How to convey your analysis of a screenplay to its authors, in such a way as to help them perfect the story. So, it isn't criticism, after all, but encouragement – which, according to *Webster's*, is not an art form, but an *act*. The act of encouraging. So, let's get this 'act' together and try to pull it off – successfully encouraging writers through constructive criticism.

### *Critical Positions*

I call it 'critical positions,' because, for me, when a screenplay is being criticised, both parties are in a 'critical position': The authors are, because they will not profit from what is said if they don't remain open to it; and the person criticising – producer, development executive, script-doctor – is also in a critical position, because she will alienate the writers if she is too harsh, but not serve a better good if she's too soft.

However, I use the term 'positions,' here, not as the point of view that is adopted, but even as a physical posture that is taken. Then, I chose three bodily analogies to symbolise the three different types of criticism I'm addressing tonight. Again, these are: *How to Take It; How to Give It; and How to Handle Both at the Same Time by Judging Oneself.*

The last one, auto-criticism, I will illustrate with the Lotus Position, the "padmasana" posture, which is considered, generally, the best position for meditation and introspection. The second, which concerns how to encourage someone through your analysis of their work, rather than inflicting criticism upon them, I was going to depict through the sport of fencing, in which you constantly move in and out, and you barely touch your opponent with the tip of your sword, or the foil.

The first, which I'll get to right now, I will compare to *aikido*, the Japanese martial art that aims to redirect the force of the attack, rather than oppose it head-on. Thus, you defend yourself, but you also protect the attacker from injury. That's illustrating how to receive criticism, because you don't want to inflict severe bodily damage to the person criticising – especially if it's a producer. At least not before he signs the check...

### Criticism: How to Take It

So, the first one – *How to Take It* – is what made me choose this subject for tonight's session, because I think we all have 'war stories,' as writers, about the inane and off-the-wall remarks producers have given and told us about our work. We've probably all been subjected to what we consider ridiculous remarks. For example, you've handed in the work and they ask you, "Why don't you make one of your two main characters – Bob or John – a woman?" And your answer is, "because the entire film is about male homosexuality..."

So, when you're faced with a remark like that, we are often prone to curse or close down our own minds. It's hard, then, to take further input from the person criticising us. You go into the 'defensive

crouch,' and it's hard to receive much after that, making the whole exchange fruitless. I'm not implying that no producers or development people are good. But, in my experience, few producers really know how to read a screenplay. This is mainly because it is not their principal job. And, it may be that it is not because they don't know how to read it. They don't know how to express exactly what is wrong. They may have a feeling, but they don't know how to enunciate it in clear terms.

Let's look at that example: "Why don't you make one of your two main characters, Bob or John, a woman?" And your thinking is: "Because my entire film is about male homosexuality and these are two male characters." Maybe you're thinking this is ridiculous, but it may be something that the producer really feels – yet cannot clearly formulate. It could be something along the lines of: 'yes, this film is about male homosexuality, but it deals specifically about a man coming to terms with his amorous life. So, maybe it would be more powerful to show someone who is letting himself out of the closet, for the first time, and who is thus currently in a relationship with a woman, and then to show how he is going to feel guilty towards her, yet unable to stifle his feelings... rather than focus the film on the next step: How the man deals with his first gay relationship etc. Maybe the producer feels that that is the true subject matter of your screenplay, the moment of the revelation, and how it affects the man's life. But he can't formulate it, even in his own mind, and all he can come up with is this 'feeling': "Why don't you make one of your two main characters a woman?" which you might feel is a bit ridiculous and deter you from not going further into what he really had in mind, behind that statement.

My impression is that it's taken me a long time to learn to not just listen to what was said, but to try and understand where it might have come from, and what's behind it – and, in a way, to move from being somebody who is receiving (as I said, that wrestler who is ready to block things or receive things coming in and to move into that "aikidoka" position where you try to use the momentum of that person coming at you).

So, instead of taking something you feel is stupid at face value, try to put it aside for later, and then analyse it. See if you cannot find out where the idea came from, and even if you feel it's inaccurate at the moment, it might be an inaccurate expression of what is actually an accurate thought. Thus, you will profit from it.

Just like *aikido* aims at protecting the attacker from injury – as well as yourself – the fact that you do not "close down" – and show that to the producer and the development people – means that, if they don't feel shut-out, and they have the impression and see that you are taking what is being given, they'll probably also feel more at-ease, and move on to deeper and more interesting criticism, instead of ending the process that might turn confrontational.

Finally, *aikido* is often translated as meaning "the way of the harmonious spirit," and I feel also that the more you are in harmony with yourself, the more you'll benefit from any session of criticism.

What I mean is, if you are able to detach yourself from your work and not feel personally attacked when someone tells you your structure sucks, or something like that, then you will be able to see beyond the remarks, and try to get to the core of what the real problem is.

My advice on how to garner the best results from criticism is to do your best to not feel you are being judged as a person, nor even that it's your work, as a whole, that's being judged. But really what is being judged is this version, or this draft, of one of your screenplays. Nothing else. And the more you remain detached, the more you know that the criticism is being given to help make it better, and not to criticise or judge you.

So, that is learning how to take criticism.

If you feel your critic is not talking in specific terms, but is coming up with general feelings, try to keep an open mind, and analyse these later, to try and find the seed from which these ideas have come. That is learning to take the criticism in and use it.

To go back to *aikido* as a final parallel, I would say that – just as the "aikidoka" (the person using it) is supposed to lead the attacker's momentum, using even movements to pull it in and channel it – I think it's useful for us writers to do the same, and to lead the critics into telling us what they truly feel. It comes out in the kind of questions we can ask, regarding how they feel about it.

For example, do not ask: "Did you understand that Bob was sad in the beginning, because his dog died?" because you'll probably get a 'yes,' even if the person *didn't* understand. Instead, you might just ask, "What did you understand about the beginning?" Or, "Can you tell me what you felt about the beginning?" So that they vocalise it. Sometimes, if you ask the leading question, people will say, "Oh, yeah, I understood that," whereas, in the same situation, if you just ask a very open question, like, "Tell me

what you felt about the beginning....” people will come up with the exact opposite of what you had in mind, but would have said “no” if you had asked in a specific way. To me, that would be learning how to get criticism.

So, to sum up and answer that: “How to Take Criticism?” I would say that you should remain detached and open, in order to receive as much criticism as you can, and to ask specific questions to extract even more of the information you need. Then, later, look beyond what was said, and try to go to the root of it to make sure you are not missing anything. Then, if the guy really pissed you off, don’t spoil the relationship. Leave with a nice big smile. Later you can see if you want some revenge – like slashing his tires or something – but immediately afterward, do not spoil the relationship.

So I want to know if you have any questions or remarks on this first part? How do you deal with receiving criticism? Is it easy or not?

**AUDIENCE REMARK:** I think that sometimes, when you write, you have to make a lot of decisions. You need a certain truth to hold onto, that you have thought about. You have thought about certain things, and you make decisions, and you hold onto certain truths so you don’t have this big insecure thing, this axe or whatever. But I think, sometimes, we feel like the criticism endangers the truth that you hold onto. If you question them or address them, then you have to open it up ...and everything goes out of control, depending on what stage you are in with the script or the story.

**ERIC COLLINS:** For me, what you’re saying also reflects this same idea. At least for me, it took me a long time to learn how to listen to criticism. Of course, it all depends on the situation, and who is giving it; how useful they are to reading and analysing it. Often, you have somebody who will ask you to change something, and you know that, if you change that one thing, it’s going to ricochet through the entire screenplay, and just broaden out.

That’s also why I think it’s important to learn how to ask, “Why?” – to try to question people about why they want this or that change. Because, again, they could be bumping into certain ‘pillars’ that hold your whole screenplay together. Sometimes, I think, somebody asks to have that change – maybe they really want it – but maybe they actually want a different kind of change for a different reason.

That’s what I was talking about, the different levels: Trying to find out whether that person really wants that specific change. Or, is this just his way of illustrating something that he or she really feels, but can’t formulate exactly? It is true, that you often end up with people who will ask for a change or will criticise a certain thing without realising all the repercussions that it has.

Anybody else have any questions or remarks?

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** How do you separate them? In that case, the open tone, with the remarks that were quite stupid from that producer? But then, by being very sensitive and interpretive, you get toward the truth but how do you separate the really stupid remark from a stupid (or ill-considered) remark...

**ERIC COLLINS:** For me, it’s very situational. It depends on what the situation is. Does the producer want to work with you? Or is it someone you have sent it to, and you are trying to work with them? So, those situations are all different. But, in general, I think you have to try to see if the person really wants to work with you or is trying to work with you, because people make remarks, when they actually just don’t know how to say: “Well, listen, we’re not interested in this story, and we don’t want to do it.” They’ll just give some remarks that they think are reasons not to do the film.

I have a friend who is a producer, for example, who used to run international co-productions for the French/International channel, TF1. He used to work a lot with an American co-producer. He said this woman was really horrible for him to work with, because she would challenge everything he said. But he was too polite to say, “Listen, we don’t want to do this.” Instead, he was saying, “Yeah, well, we don’t want to do a love story.” So, her reaction was, “That’s ok! We can make it a thriller, then!” (*Audience laughter.*)

“Yeah, but it’s a period piece....”

“That’s ok! We’ll give it a contemporary setting...”

In the end, he said, “Listen, we just don’t want to do it.”

“Oh., ok. Thank you.”

But, again, I think this is just something you have to feel – whether you’re with somebody who isn’t

very interested, or who's not very smart, or whatever. Or, if you feel that person wants to have a relationship and work with you, but maybe, he's bothered by the screenplay and says, "I don't think it's funny" and, maybe, for this reason and that reason...

Just to try to push, to see what it is.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** Can you tell us about your anecdote at the beginning? What was the reason why he had this (change).

**ERIC COLLINS:** I can only surmise.... It took us a long time to figure out. Honestly, I've had weird things happen but, honestly, that was the strangest. It's a true story. That's exactly what he said, "I'd have read it if I had liked it..."

I think what happened really didn't have anything to do with us. He had set up some company with a very famous young director, who has done really big films. They had made this production company together, based on the director's name. They thought that, with this name, they could bring the projects out and they'd get money from the TV channels, etc. Then, we found out after the meeting that this wasn't working – that people were challenging what they brought out. So, we were lucky that they had even read it. They weren't really interested at all. They abandoned the projects that they had (planned) and, in the end, they'd only made one film – and that was pretty small – than producing the director's films in the company. So that's what we think happened...

Because, they did go on to find a different producer, and he told us, "If people call me up, I'll tell them how much I like it" – which we learned that he was doing.... So that's what we think happened. They just realised that they had problems with the slated productions. We were the third, and they weren't able to get money for the first two, so they just abandoned everything.

So, wrapping up this first part, about how take criticism, for which I, at least, do not have many pragmatic tips, since it remains more of a frame of mind. I do wish to add one thing: I think it is important, if you can, to know who is criticising you. The more you know a person's references, likes, dislikes, the more you can judge the scope of what he or she tells you.

For example, let's say you have a producer who loves character-driven stories – and that's why they've taken yours. That's her thing. She just can't get enough of them... But she tells you she feels your characters are not well fleshed-out. Well, that probably means there is a lot more work to do on them than she's stating. If she liked it a lot, she would probably be a lot more forgiving for that.

On the other hand, if you have a development exec who loves plot-heavy stories, and tells you your plot is "good," maybe it's not that good because, again, if that's something he really likes, maybe "good" for him is "not that good" for someone else, and you should look into it.

Finally, whom to take criticism from? I do think that if you are not in a professional relationship with an author and potential director, or a screenwriter and producer – I think it is best to avoid seeking too much criticism. My feeling is that you lose a lot more than you gain if you hand your work out to friends and relatives and people who are not really involved in it, because you'll often get a lot of contradictory remarks. And I suspect you normally get more of people's feelings or sensations: "I really like this." Or, "I think it's a good idea..." You know? Or, "I don't like this character very much; he's too mean...." without getting specific things that help you. Specific criticism really helps us. Very pragmatic information on the storytelling points.

That's what I wanted to get into in the second part: *How To Give Criticism*.

#### Criticism: How to Dish It Out

I do not know if giving criticism is, as the *Webster's* says, a form of art. I do think there are specific tools that we can explore, as we give criticism. If you remember my sports-world parallels, I talked about fencing as relating to the act of giving criticism.

Why fencing? Because, in fencing, you wield a light weapon that is only used on a specific, valid target area – restricted to the torso – and points are scored only with the very tip of the sword.

Also, during the fight, you advance and retreat non-stop, and you have to deal with your opponent feinting, disengaging, parrying and even counter-attacking. All of this, for me, is pretty similar to giving criticism, because often, you have a lot of emotions involved, and people can become confrontational, or try to counter-attack by asking what you did, and 'Who are you to judge me?' Or they can fall back and

change the subject – start talking about films you both saw – and bring the subject off-track.

To try and avoid this, in general, I try to keep criticism a ‘light weapon,’ and only use it on the restricted target area, which is, for me, the current draft of the specific project at hand, or maybe even a certain part of it. Remember, in criticism – as with the foil – your points are only made with the very tip: You only need to *point* things out, not to run the author through with your sabre, not skewer him!

To get a bit more specific, the first thing is the greeting. As in fencing, when the participants salute each other, at the beginning of the encounter, for me it is important to do the same when you start criticising.

You set the field, set the scope of what is being critiqued. One thing, for me, is to make sure your credentials – and who you are – are quite clear.

For example: Are you talking as a producer who wants to produce a project? Or are you talking as a person who is helping someone out, so the person has a better sense of where he or she is going – and leave hopes that are not too high, or too low...? Maybe also to explain what you may be lacking, or what you like more – again, the idea is having the author you’re working with know what your reference points are.

For example, for myself, I believe I am more of a narrative screenwriter. Often, I will explain that in the beginning, if I am working with somebody, because my basic reference remains – although it might seem quite unoriginal – Aristotle’s *Poetics*: I really like a film with a beginning and an end, and to follow the middle that leads from the one to the other. Thus, for me, if I don’t see a setup, or ‘stakes,’ or something specific that’s happening, I am not going to be that interested in the characters or specific scenes. I just want to make that clear, so that the person knows – when I’m criticising – what my points of reference are, so they can evaluate it according to that. This might help them to know, for example, that my input on dealing with a specific character might not be that good unless major problems with the basic plot aren’t addressed, because that’s where I’m going to focus. That’s how I work.

One thing I was thinking of: We have all these cop shows we watch, and you have all these interrogation techniques. A (real) police interrogator always tries to open with a question that the person opposite him will answer with a ‘Yes,’ because, on some subconscious level, if the person being questioned begins with a ‘yes,’ he will be more forthcoming than if he starts by saying ‘No.’

Along the same lines, I feel that it is crucial to start with a positive remark on the work – and, also on that note, I think it is important that your first remark be a truthful one. Even if you really think the work is quite bad, and you believe there is a lot of progress that needs to be made, I would advise that you find at least one thing – maybe a detail, something – that you can say you liked in it, without lying. Again, this is not just to be polite, or hypocritical. It is just to set the tone that you are not there to judge, but to help bring progress and positive things to the work. For me, if you start upbeat – with a positive and not with a negative remark – it does lift the process.

Open the work in a positive way, because you have a positive goal. At the end of the work, it is not important that the author knows that you like his work or that you like his jokes, or whatever, but that you are there to give him some insight, tools and ideas to see the weak points and, especially, to make them better.

As I’ve said, it is really important that you *not* lie – that you find an example of something that you really like. Also, to give the author the scope of how far you are going to go in the criticism. Are you going to demolish it? Or are you only reviewing certain points? Or the whole structure? For example, after the opening remark, I try to state what the depth of my criticism is going to be. I may even warn the person that he may never want to speak to me again, because I’m going to be pretty harsh. It is important that the person you are working with doesn’t think that this is going to be a very light session and then, suddenly, you surprise him with harsh remarks. I don’t think a person benefits from that.

Actually, it is the opposite. It is good if the person knows, from the beginning, how far you are going to go – how hard, or tough, you are going to be. How much you like it, or how much you think there are weaknesses. From there, the person knows where you are going, and not get tossed from one bad surprise to the next.

All this, for me, is the preliminaries – saluting and the moving in. In general, of course, I am talking about worst-case scenarios, in which you think there is a lot of work to be done. Or you might think the person is very emotionally involved in the screenplay. Because, of course, if you find the screenplay very good, and you feel it only needs tweaking, then it is a lot easier.

Anyhow, that is my ‘Act I,’ as far as screenplay criticism. My opening scene. My premise.

Be sure it is clear in what capacity you are working and to:  
 show what you feel are the strong and weak points, in the criticism;  
 clearly set your goals for the session;  
 pen in a favourable way; and  
 say where you are headed: how 'badly' you are going to criticise the work... (Again, I would advise painting this a little bit darker so that it will seem a little bit more uplifting as you move on. From there, you move into the actual criticism itself.)

I imagine we all know the basic points that you can address:

Looking into the quality of the dialogue;  
 The depth and believability of the characters;  
 The description of the scenes;  
 The overall structure; and  
 the fundamental idea of the film.

I will not get into those points right now. Rather, I will concentrate on general methods of how to employ the various tools that can be used to go through all these specific points.... The main goal I have is simply to reiterate the points that I find helpful to remind myself of – and I hope that you will find this beneficial too.

So, I have a short 'catalogue' – a general frame of mind – to use these various tools on the various points which, of course, depend on each situation. Sometimes you'll work only on the dialog. Sometimes you'll be stuck on the structure, because you can't go any further.... Again, it is important to be very specific and to give examples, because the clearer your examples – the more specific they are – then, the more clearly your ideas will get through, and the more it will help. For example, you can't just say, "Well, I don't think the dialog is good. Can't you just rewrite it?" I don't think that's going to help someone at all. It's an extreme example, but sometimes you get that. I don't know your experiences, but I've had people say, "Oh, we like it. But, can't you just make it funnier?" And the person doesn't explain what, exactly, he thinks is funny or not.

You really have to analyse your own thoughts. For example, if you're talking about dialog, to really try to define the manner in which you find the dialog lacking, and then point to several instances – just point to some examples – to really illustrate that. It is also important to try to go to the source of why you think the dialog doesn't work, not only to give a specific piece of dialog, but to try to explain why the dialog doesn't illustrate the character as a character is defined. Or that a character will speak in different manners in different scenes that don't work together, leading to incredibility about the character. From there, you can move on to try to give some help – to give ways for the person to make it better.

In general, it is always better if the person you are working with finds his own ideas for changes that you've pointed out. I often try to give the silliest examples I can, just to illustrate what I mean. Give examples that can't be used, because your goal is not to influence the work, but to point out places where something might be lacking or something doesn't work. The idea is for them to go and think of something to be used there. Making things lighter also sends the message that you clearly trust the writer to do the job – and it also boosts his morale a bit, making the task more uplifting. So, remember that your examples are not to be used as solutions but only to illustrate and explain what you mean.

Another thing is to try to follow how people react to your criticism – and to the process of change – as you're working together. You might consider certain questions, to make sure you're getting across: Are they shutting down? Or are they still getting what you're saying, still open?

You have to work at maintaining that open relationship, and to adapt to make sure that you are still helping – that you're not in a situation where progress is being lost, for some reason.

All of this is hard to address here, since it all depends on the circumstances. It depends on what your position is, on the person you are working with, etc. Is this person a friend? Is it a producer, in development? It also depends on the stage the story is in, and what you think of it. How do you adapt to a situation where you feel that the communication has broken down, or you're not getting through? There are some little tricks you can use to get around that. One I was thinking of was to go 'one-on-one.' Let's say you are two people, on the production side, working with one writer. If you feel like a person isn't listening, or closing down – perhaps even feeling a bit of aggression – you can try to work with just one of the people criticising.

This also works if you are a development executive and you are working with two people who are co-writing. I've seen situations in which you have the feeling that they are not taking in what you are

saying, just because there are two people there. I don't know if one of them was embarrassed or didn't want to admit to something (because the other person was there) or if they were just feeding off one another. But, it worked a lot better for me to just take one person aside, work some with him; then, later on, to work with the other.

Another way I have is to 'go around the back.' In other words, if talking about specific points in the screenplay does not work, you can 'pull back' and talk generally about screenwriting techniques, as a means of bringing a person's attention to his screenplay and the specific problem you're addressing. Sometimes, you have the feeling that they do not understand, or don't want to understand, or it was a little bit too overwhelming. If you talk about general things that relate to the problem – like a certain type of writing, or scenes of a film, or something else you like – without getting lost. This is another means of getting someone to open up.

My feeling is that, if something doesn't work while you are talking, write it down and give notes. You can do this beforehand, so that people can have time to read and digest it a bit before you meet. I have this anecdote, which is also just a little bit delirious:

I co-wrote a couple films with a very famous French director. We'd work in his office, where he had every trophy you can imagine: two Oscars, a whole bunch of Cesars.... Something like eighty trophies, in all. (He probably has at least one of every national award – one from every country.) But this man had hired me, asking me to come and co-write with him.

At the very start, I was just jotting down the film's basic ideas. Unfortunately, anytime I would say anything, the director would frown, get a little upset and say, "No. No...."

I really saw that I was losing him. He just couldn't listen to anything from me. It was really quite strange. He never accepted one, single idea at all. Just "No, no," without even discussing it. After a while – it took me a while – but I soon realised the man was 100 percent insecure. He would say something and, if I didn't think it was a great idea for the film – or if I tried to add something to it – his reaction was just as if I'd told him all his films were useless, his wife was ugly and his kids were morons. (*Audience laughter.*) He would just close down. So, that was not the best situation for brainstorming.

The process of the work was that we would meet in the morning, and we would brainstorm which, in the end, was just me writing down everything that he said. Then, I was supposed to type it up in the afternoon, and he would read it the next day. On the third day, we would meet and work on what I had written. So, what I did was this: When I wrote, I started throwing in all the ideas I wanted to include – but I couldn't tell him, because he wouldn't listen to anything. I would just change what I thought should be changed from what he had said. I would take out things I didn't like – not too much, but I would just take them out.

This worked. We would go through it, as if it was all material we'd discussed – as if I had typed just what we had talked about. There was only one thing that he asked for me to put back in, among the few things of his that I had taken out. In general, he cut things of his own out, and he cut things of mine.

I thought it was a totally neurotic way of working. We both knew what was going on, but never spoke about it. It was like some freak duo. He was a freak because he was so insecure – although so successful. He couldn't take any criticism. Even co-writing was criticism for him. I guess I was freakish, on the other hand, because I came up with the idea. I thought I could try it, and it worked. Although, my entire writer's fee went into psychoanalytic sessions to help me work through that one! (*Audience laughter.*)

That would be my Third Act of *How To Get Criticism Across*: Do whatever works, as long as you manage to get your points across to the person, on how to make the screenplay better. If you do that – however you do it – then you have won.

When in doubt, always go back to the 'basics': What do you feel needs work in this story, and how can you make your thoughts on that clear to the author? Remember, your goal is not just to criticise him – not to say whether the film is good or bad – but to make the screenplay or the story better.

That's the end of my second part, so do you have any questions on this? Any remarks on how you give criticism or have problems taking it....?

Actually, I'll tell you how I figured out how that director worked: We were in a car together, driving along – this was in the States, and I was driving. I don't know what it was, but he suddenly saw something in the street.

"Oh, Eric, look there, look there! That was something in my film!"

"I didn't see," I said. "What was it?"

"That scene," he said. "That exact scene was in my film!"



“Which film?” I asked, and he told me which one.

Well, he’d made the film in 1963, and I hadn’t even been born then. I mean, I’m old, but not that old...yet. (*Audience laughter.*)

“Oh, I didn’t see it,” I said.

He looked at me.

“You didn’t see it?”

Really, he looked like this very sad little child because *one* person hadn’t seen one of his films. (*Audience laughter.*) He just sat there, looking as if his whole world had crashed down upon him. That’s when I realised, ‘Ok, this guy is really insecure....’

I thought I’d just throw that in there.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Was it only insecurity? Was it vanity perhaps?

ERIC COLLINS: Well, he appears to be very, very vain.... But what I felt there was not vanity, because he didn’t look at me as if he disrespected me. It seemed that he had really failed in his ‘mission in life’ because one person hadn’t seen one of his films.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Perhaps vanity regarding the co-working, co-writing...?

ERIC COLLINS: Honestly, I don’t think so. Because, when I would do the writing, he would cross out as many of his own ideas as mine....

AUDIENCE QUESTION: I once worked with someone like this, and it still could take years to understand it, but vanity is, of course, a form of insecurity....

ERIC COLLINS: Yeah.

AUDIENCE REMARK: ...and anything could be taken (by him) as a statement of criticism. It could be very, very hard...

ERIC COLLINS: Yes, I guess vanity is about the same. If you’re very insecure, you try to project vanity.

AUDIENCE REMARK: It made my life easier to tell myself, “This is vanity.” (*Laughter.*)

ERIC COLLINS: Yeah. Did you work in the same way, just writing the things and giving it to him?

AUDIENCE QUESTION: It was very, very similar. Whatever I said was brushed off....

ERIC COLLINS: Yeah. The same thing. Maybe it’s a good thing to know that it didn’t just happen once. It might happen a lot.... Any other questions, remarks?

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Have you ever started working with someone and it was impossible to continue? Where you couldn’t get the psychology right?

ERIC COLLINS: Yeah. Sometimes, I think, you could know from the beginning, because you might be working with a director as a writer. In France, you are often teamed-up like that. After a while, you realise that the director didn’t want to do that, but the producer forced him. It’s a bit of a different problem, because it’s situational. But I’ve had that problem, yeah.

I feel that the main thing, in that case, is when people say they’re open – and, again, this is often the case with a director, or director co-writer – they come and they say they really want to work with you. Then you realise that whatever you say (gets criticised).... It’s not because of their vanity, I think. In those cases, it’s more likely that they have a very set idea. I don’t know why they even find (a writer) to work with, because everything you say, they answer with, “Oh, yeah, but that’s not what I want to do. I want to do this....” But it does happen a lot.

So, to finish off with that second part, I wish to point out that, even though the writer might not see

you as such, your goal is to be his ally. Your task is to say things that are possibly hard for the other person to hear, but are probably necessary – things that the author might even know already but, coming from you, it will help him out.

For example, take the case I was talking about before, including taking notes for the person who couldn't hear criticism, and all: Since we both knew what was going on, my impression was that he knew those things needed to be done, and that's how I was helping him, since it did come out all right, in the end. But, somehow, he could not hear my comments when I spoke, so I imagine he would never hear them on his own....

Speaking of the problems of listening to criticism, when is it good to bring someone else in? I wanted to get into the last part, which is judging yourself – being your own critic. For me, this is perhaps the hardest thing to express, probably because it's so esoteric.

So, we've talked about how to receive criticism from others, and we just discussed analysing someone's work. So my question here is what do you do when you are both 'the victim' and the 'hangman' when you are both criticising and receiving criticism at the same time. What is your position?

#### How to Dish it Out and Take It at the Same Time

A word I often think about, concerning this, is *heauton timorumenos*. It's an ancient Greek phrase – and a play by Menander, a Greek dramatist from the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. The phrase means: 'He who chastises himself' and it's one of his most famous plays. (This is a bit off-subject, but Menander was crucial in bringing about "New Comedy" nearly 2,500 years ago which, by the way, is a genre that still influences today's situation comedies and romantic comedies....)

To me, this unpronounceable word means that it's important, when you reflect, to chastise yourself, to learn how to not be too kind with yourself, and to do a bit of 'violence' when you are working on yourself, and not to be too happy or too vain in looking at your own work. To 'chastise' actually means a verbal rebuke, or punishment – but one that is done to effectively improve someone. I feel you must never be afraid to be too harsh. If you want to have the bigger-quality leap in your own work, you should be able to reflect on it and take down what you've already done, look into it, and do the contrary of 'auto-congratulation' – to be that *heauton timorumenos*, the person who can chastise himself and push himself further.

In the beginning, I talked about auto-criticism, and the lotus position, the "padmasana" posture. I am not interested in the contemplative or meditative aspect of it. Rather, in the *Bodhisitva*, the posture is described with the legs being folded and rather grounded on the soil, the body erect, with the head on the top being the 'line that goes up to heaven.' So there's this duality of being very rooted and, in this case, what I describe as being very pragmatic working on specific things, and still having your idea of what you want to aim for, what your goals are. When you work on introspection, it's like a journey into oneself – into our own work – to see how you can chastise your work and improve it in a pragmatic way, while still keeping your basic idea, your basic goals. It was that idea that I thought was interesting in that image of the lotus position, the presence of both heaven and earth.

For me, if you auto-criticise – if you really work to improve your own work, by yourself – you have to walk a thin line – a balancing act – between your imagination, your creativity and your goals, your knowledge and craft as a screenwriter, and the pragmatic aspects of what might sell or how to 'seduce' a producer or how to find money, and to always balance these aspects.

Actually, a long time ago, I actually stole a term for myself. It had been coined by the Spanish Catalan surrealist, Salvador Dali: 'Paranoia-Criticism.' He said it was one of his surrealist philosophies. I'll just give a quick run-down of what that means, because I think how it works brings interesting aspects into screenwriting.

Dali developed this in 1928. For him it was as a 'delirious state of interpretation,' applied to art and reality. Its aim is to go beyond the impoverishment of our usual perceptions, and thereby achieve a distilled grasp of reality.

The basic example of the 'Paranoiac-Critical' method is illustrated with these classic double-images, in which your eye can exchange the foreground and the background. If you see the white as being in the foreground, you see the candlestick up front. But if you move the black to the foreground, and do the opposite, you see two faces. It's a pretty well-known optical illusion, but that's the type of thing that Dali was working on. In the initial exercise, you move foreground and background back and forth, and you see two different images. For him, from a Paranoiac-Critical standpoint, the next step is be to condition the

mind to hold both aspects of the image in conscious perception at the same time. At this point, the meaning of each interpretation, at each different level, begins to feed off one another and feed into the other. The meaning attached to the candlestick is affected by the fact that it's a border between two faces, which are looking at it, and the two faces are affected by the fact that there's a candlestick separating them.

Now, I've just briefly explained this theory, because I feel do feel that this illustrates a staple of good films, in which you have subtext and symbolism, images, and events feeding off one another. This is something to look for when you are criticising – looking at another writer's screenplay or your own – to see if the dialog doesn't only reflect thoughts but reflects other things, to bring in what symbolism you can. The way I used Paranoiac-Criticism is that criticism is what we have talked about: How we analyse and evaluate work – in this case, your own work. So criticism would be, for me, that pragmatic side of the 'thin line' I was talking about. The 'Earth side,' to be grounded, and that's the knowledge you have of how to write, how to analyse work, how to make it better. In that case, you really have to be your harshest critic. In a way, you have to be so hard and push yourself, even to the verge of thinking you cannot go on, because it looks so bad and you have to make it so much better.

You can imagine pushing yourself to the limit: Complete self-doubt, where you think maybe you are not even good as a screenwriter. This is very situational for me – more in the beginning, when I'm working on something – to try and deconstruct it and see how far I can go toward making it better, which is where the Paranoiac aspect steps in. I think it's pretty healthy to be a little bit paranoid. As my father used to say, "I might be paranoid, but I'm still alive!" (*Audience laughter.*)

A quick explanation of 'paranoia,' often said to be having delusions of persecution. Actually, the more clinical understanding is just to have delusions. So, you can also be diagnosed as 'paranoid' if your delusions just refer to yourself, like if you believe you are a CIA agent, a famous member of royalty, or a good screenwriter.

For me, to walk that thin line, to cope with rejection, but also the hardship of analysing and criticising my own work, and to get up, time after time, I think you must have a healthy dose of paranoia – and a firm belief that, whatever anyone might say or whatever you might think, that you are on the right track, and you really have to keep on going. So that is what I adopted as my own 'mantra' of Paranoiac-Criticism: On the one hand, to be able to criticise myself in a detached and deep fashion; but, on the other hand, to just know that, however flawed the work may be – or however flawed you think it is – just to know, somehow, that I have it in me to make it better. It's a bit like those two black faces staring at one another. You can make the image something else, just by going down that line.

As I said, this last part is a little more esoteric and, perhaps, not as clear. But, for me, it is an important thing in criticism: Whatever you are faced with – or whatever you face yourself – never lose the fact that you have a certain drive, and you are going to be able to go out and do what needs to be done to make it better, and get across the ideas you hold inside.

So, for me, my introspection and the self-analysis of my writing will only be as good as the degree to which I'm not afraid to criticise it, to break everything down, and to know that I can even start over (with that little paranoid trait) and go on. To quote Barack Obama: "Yes I can." Even though we have technique and an ability to analyse and criticise and look at things, it does boil down to retaining that initial spark, that drive or that *je ne sais quoi* or that 'Something' that makes you want to write and get your idea out – and the certainty that you *are* going to get it out – no matter what happens and whatever opposes you.

So, I don't believe you can get the job done if you do not have the ability to coldly examine your writing, and not be afraid to take it apart. Nor, if you lack that warmth, that fire, to keep on going, even after that.

So, to wrap this up, let me go back to that producer I mentioned in the beginning, which, to this date, remains the strangest meeting I've ever experienced, with his: "I would have read it... if I had liked it." It made me think that, to get others to read what we have written, we must really *like* our own work. (Maybe if we had liked it more, he would have read it? I don't know....). We must be proud of it – but not give it out, if you don't really think it's ready, which I do think is an important thing, especially in terms of production constraints, because you often only get one 'shot.' You really have to think it is 'the best' before you give it out. Because, to get others to like what we have written, we have to have read it over and over and perfected it, to be really sure....

So, do you have any questions on this last part?

AUDIENCE QUESTION: I find that, if I read something I've written, the more often I read it, the more I like it, and I think this is very bad. Do you feel the same way? It becomes better. (*Laughs.*)... You read the previous day's work and you think, "Hm, it's not that bad," when you had been thinking before that it was really very bad....

ERIC COLLINS: Yes, for me, that's work. Criticising. My own personal method would be to really like it when it's finished, it's really good. Then, a couple of days later, it's the opposite. It gets worse and worse.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Yes. Yes.

ERIC COLLINS: But that's just in an emotional response. When you start really working on it, it's a bit different. The gut feeling, the emotion, is "Oh, yeah, it's really good." Then, I get panicky. "This is really bad." You know? ...Do most of you find it easy to analyse your own work?

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Obviously, it is much easier to analyse another's work.

ERIC COLLINS: Right.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: How can you know if you are a good self-critic? If you are doing good? I don't know. It seems impossible to know, when I read my script.... I am not usually on one project. I am doing a project, and then I have another one. Then, when I go back to the first, I refresh my mind, so I can criticise it. But I don't know whether I'm good. What's good is that your talk can be heard from the writer's point of view, but also from the script editor's point of view. I might say, from the script editor's point of view, all you have said is true. From the writer's point of view, it can be true, but I can't check....

ERIC COLLINS: Well, to be a bit more philosophical, and very personal, this has been a question for me since I've been a young teenager. At what point are you crazy, and at what moment do you have drive and courage? I remember clearly, when I was ten or twelve in France, we learned about Bernard Palissy (ca. 1510-1589), a guy who's only known in France, because the French think he invented ceramics – or reinvented ceramics after the Chinese did it, a few thousand years ago. But the thing is, he brought ceramics to France, with big manufacturing, and such. He's a big French hero, with the statues and all.

The thing is, he burned all his furniture (experimenting with his kiln). He ended up ripping off all the walls and the floorboards and everything. His wife and kids left him, and everyone thought he was crazy. They wanted to lock him up. Luckily for him, he was able to reach a high enough temperature by burning all his floorboards, in order to recreate ceramics. Therefore, it worked, and he became the king's protégé....

What would have happened, though, if he had been a couple of degrees too low? He never would have been remembered, and he would have been locked up somewhere. And how many other people didn't quite make it? (*Laughs.*) You always wonder, when you meet and work with people, and they always have an idea and you think, "This doesn't work," and "This film will never be made...." Often that's true – but, sometimes you wonder whether this person, maybe, has invented 'the new thing.'

The difficulty for me, though, is knowing, "Do I really like this, and do I think it's great?" When perhaps it isn't....

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Yeah, well, it's your story, so even if sometimes you don't like what you wrote, it's still you.... How much can I refuse to compromise or how much do I have to listen and to appear professional. You know it's very complicated, because the judging, when we're developing it, it's too early for judging. In the end, we have to judge the movie. So, it's not easy.

ERIC COLLINS: Yeah, but to get the movie made, you have to have a story and a story that works and can judge it there.

AUDIENCE REMARK: I think being detached is very important, because to just step aside and to see

criticism for what it is, and not as... I think it can easily happen that criticism is received as a personal criticism. I think dealing with criticism has a lot to do with self-confidence. You should fall in love with what you are doing and you shouldn't criticise it too much. I think ...the less self-confidence you have, the more self criticism can be self-destructive. So it's got two dimensions.

ERIC COLLINS: Right, because it is, in general, a business. It depends. I don't know about other languages but, in America, it's the 'film business.' In France, the words you employ are more artistic. But, in general, when you write, it does have to do with creation and your own ideas or thoughts or emotions, even, if you rationalise them and set them up with a specific work. And, therefore, it is a bit natural to feel attacked, if somebody criticises something that you really-really like and might even be a very personal idea, whereas often the people doing the criticism are not attacking you at all....

AUDIENCE REMARK: But there is a difference between giving an opinion and criticism.

ERIC COLLINS: Right. But sometimes criticism is taken as opinion, and you get hurt by it, or something.... For me, when I was saying, "Be careful about whom you ask for opinions?"

In general, it depends on what stage you are in your career. I remember, in the beginning, I wanted my dad to read it. (*Laughs.*) But in return, you may often get an opinion which actually won't help you very much – if, for example, you get your family to read it. We have people here who don't ask even their own family members to read it, right? (*Audience laughter.*)

AUDIENCE REMARK: Even (unintelligible). He gave scripts to friends and people to read . Mostly they said, "It's ok." Now, when we find mistakes, his (unintelligible) says, "It's ok." (*Laughter.*)

AUDIENCE REMARK:...because they weren't friends.

ERIC COLLINS: Yes, but it is pretty hard to read a screenplay. I mean, it takes time to learn how to read it and to see what you think works and what doesn't work. This is what I was talking about trying to understand what the people are saying. Is that really what they mean? Or do they mean something different? Because you can often end up with producers who don't know how to read very well. Again, I'm not criticising producers at all. It's not necessarily their job, Not all of them are into development.

AUDIENCE REMARK: You told us in the beginning to ask "Why?" Once, I was working with a very famous producer, who told me "This is wrong," and I asked him, "Why?" So, he says, "Because you don't have two (important) words in your dictionary. These two words are 'Thank you.' " He expected me to use these words in responding to everything that *he* had done well for the project. (*Laughter.*)

ERIC COLLINS: That's very specific. Very situational.

AUDIENCE REMARK: Yeah. But, sometimes, asking "Why?" hurts....

ERIC COLLINS: (*Laughter.*) Yeah. Or it doesn't work out.... Any other questions or remarks?

FIRST AUDIENCE QUESTION: What is the most you can expect from a producer?

AUDIENCE ANSWER: Money. (*Audience laughter.*)

FIRST AUDIENCE QUESTION: ...an impression? A question about the goal or the message? Or would you also like comments, besides? Because you're right, there's a difference....

AUDIENCE REMARK: The ideal producer should be one who can read your script and can go with you where the script needs to go, I mean...to finance it.

FIRST AUDIENCE REMARK: But maybe not, you know? Maybe there should be no question about finances. First of all...maybe, most importantly, you have a great story. And with a great story, sometimes

it's just not the right time to finance it, but it will be the right time two years later, by accident. So.... I'm not sure that the producer should be influencing the market because that comes after. When you have a great story, then you can influence the market. ...But my question was this: Maybe you should not expect too much from the producer because, again, it's not his expertise-

ERIC COLLINS: To try to detach myself a bit, I think what I would expect is for the producer to be clear and explain what he feels. If it's just a general feeling, and he doesn't want to – or can't – go further than that, at least that I am sure I understand what his general feeling is. Or, if we're talking about a rewrite, what changes he wants. But that could be a major rewrite, if you bring something in and the person "likes the feeling" but still wants a bit more of a different feeling, but then if the producer wants more specific changes. It all has to do with what the producer wants, as far as rewriting or changes. If it's very general, then the impression is going to be general. But the more he wants changes in details, I do think you do have to point out what they are.

I have lots of examples of miscommunication. I laughed my head off at one, it was so funny: About a week ago, a French director, Isabel Mergault, came out with her third film. She was on TV, on the news – the biggest French channel. She appeared there with the main actor in the film, and he starts by saying, "Well, this is a film about a guy who kills somebody by accident, but everybody thinks it's a murder, so he goes to jail. While he's in jail, his wife leaves him, and he has an aneurism. He recovers but, because of the aneurism, he loses his speech...."

This is the first day of the national promotion, and the director looks at the actor and, on a live broadcast, says, "No, no, that's not it!" (*Audience laughter.*)

"What do you mean, that's not it?"

"No, no, no, he would have had the aneurism anyway. His wife leaving him had nothing to do with it!" (*Audience laughter.*)

And he went, "Oh! Well....That's how I acted it!" (*Audience laughter.*)

And she's saying, "No, no, that's not it!"

And he started laughing and said, "Well we have to redo the film or something!"

It was pretty funny. I guess it doesn't change very much, but it was pretty interesting that the director and the main actor didn't have the same character in mind.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Who has the edge in changing things? You go to one producer who says, "This is not good," and you have another, and you can.... So, I think the author must, say, stop them.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Would you say, in an ideal situation, that the writer is the producer as well? Because, in America, that happens quite often, that they have two hats. And some of the most genius filmmakers, like Charlie Chaplin, they've been writer, producer, director, actor, all in one. They can switch from one hat to a new hat. They work from a different perspective, it's almost schizophrenic, in a way.

ERIC COLLINS: I don't know. That's true, although those examples are pretty.... To be your own producer.... I mean, you have this more in television, a lot. In America, at least, a lot of very famous screenwriters move into television to produce their own series. In France, screenwriters mainly become directors, because they have the impression that the work that's being written isn't being portrayed, and because the position of the screenwriter is kind of nonexistent and unrecognised. For me, I just like to write, but that's personal. I wouldn't want to produce because – while there is the development process of production – production is an entire job, as you all know.

AUDIENCE REMARK: Emile (phonetic) is the best one. I mean Costa Ritsa (phonetic). He is writing, he is directing, he is producing. Now, he has a village and a cinema, so he does his own festival! (*Audience laughter.*) He has closed the circle. He knows his films will get into that festival.

ERIC COLLINS: Since you were talking about Charlie Chaplin, I'll move to my closing remark. I had a little thing here to remain very pragmatic, and to help you in your future criticism sessions. I'm handing out a rejection slip from the Essanay Film Manufacturing Company, which made a lot of Charlie Chaplin films between 1907 and 1925, including *The Tramp*. This is the rejection slip that was given out to screenwriters whose submissions were found wanting. Notice, you can just check off as many lines as you want and

send it back. That way, you can see that criticism can make you paranoid.

AUDIENCE REMARK: (*Reading*) “Illegible.”

ERIC COLLINS: “Illegible” is pretty good. You can imagine the writer with his quill pen.

AUDIENCE REMARK: It all seems to have an unpleasant nature....

ANOTHER AUDIENCE QUESTION: It's like a checklist, you know?

AUDIENCE QUESTION: And, at the end, (*Reading*) “Yours Very Truly....” (*Audience laughter.*)

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Was the company that did Charlie Chaplin....?

ERIC COLLINS: It was a big company. They started in Chicago, and then they moved out West. They are mainly famous for getting Charlie Chaplin over from (director-producer) Mack Sennett in 1915. I think they did *The Tramp* and other short stuff.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: (*Reading*) “Not enough action.” (*Audience laughter.*) They already knew....

ERIC COLLINS: Just to talk about something a bit different that I thought about today that might be interesting. We were just talking about 1907, and we were talking about endings – about liking open endings more than closed endings? This is something that I have to take time to find again, but in 1995, the French celebrated the centennial of filmmaking with Louis Lumière in 1895. They came out with lots of films, history films and all. I saw a really incredible film. It was a little excerpt from a film from 1905, I think. It was considered the oldest film that was fairly long: I think it was 40 or 45 minutes. It was a lot longer than any of the films that had been done before. What I found really incredible – and they showed this in the documentary – was that they made this 45-minute film and they shot three endings. They showed all three endings, and one was for the Russian market, one was for the European market, and the third was for the American market. This is 1905, and all that we are talking about today, really existed then.

At the end, you see these two ships. It's not really well-done – I mean, you are talking a kind of studio thing in 1905, with a painting in the back – but there are two ships in a storm, and there's this young naval officer, who is on a rope and is coming back to his ship with a beautiful blonde from the sinking ship. In the American version, of course, it is really hard, but he manages to climb up on the ship and the woman looks at him and she's, like, “Oh, Wow.” (*Audience laughter.*)

And, in the Russian version, they sink. (*Audience laughter.*) Instead of struggling up, and getting on the ship, they sink and disappear together. (*Audience laughter.*)

And, in the European version, you just don't know. (*Audience laughter.*) It ends with a shot of his fingers, like this, and then (blackout).

This is in 1905! I really have to find the piece. But, already, in 1905, this sense of what audiences want on three different continents! ...Three endings for the different markets, they just pop the endings on and send one to Russia, one to America and one to Europe. It was pretty funny.

Does anybody have any criticism or remarks? (*Audience laughter.*)

AUDIENCE QUESTION: What do you do if you really-really disagree with a producer?

ANOTHER AUDIENCE QUESTION: He'd cry? (*Audience laughter.*)

ERIC COLLINS: I'm a grown man. I cry.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: You'd think that they are wrong?

ERIC COLLINS: I think I'd just say so. Or, “I'll think about it.” It all depends on which situation it is, you know? As I wrote, “The only film I wrote that was made and more than a few million people going to see it, was a big-big change for me. I was very depressed afterward, because the film isn't that good, mainly

because it doesn't have a beginning. I was working with the director, who is dead now, but it was a really famous director and a big actor and I didn't fight for what I believed. If I had said what I really wanted to say – and if they had done it – maybe it wouldn't have changed very much, but I do remember that I believed there was no beginning. There was a situation and things happened and all, but it didn't start. There was no first turning point, and it really didn't start.

The director and the main actor were saying, "Yeah, it's OK because there's a lot of things happening and it picks up and it will work...."

This isn't exactly a response to what you're saying, but it's in the same field, but what I would have changed is this: I would have done what they wanted, because it was pure work for hire, but I would have stated that I disagreed, like, "I do believe that we must have a very specific beginning. I understand – and you may be right. I'll do what you want but...."

Whereas, instead, I kind of caved-in, thinking, "Oh, I guess they're right..." But then I saw the film, and I asked people and I read stuff about it and ... it just doesn't begin.... It was *Le Prince du Pacifique* (2000) by Alain Corneau.

So, in that case, if there is something you don't agree with, I believe it's important to think about it and to say it. But, again, the 'how' depends on the situation, and all.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Then, is it a problem, as a writer, if you agree on everything, almost?

ERIC COLLINS: Well, if you are really happy.... But, then, you have to come back the next day when you aren't stoned. (*Audience laughter.*)

Again, it depends on the situation. If everybody agrees and the film's going to be made, then that's OK. If everybody thinks it's great and you go out and it gets totally rejected, then it's not that good....

But I do believe, if you really don't agree, at least try to say why. Talking about working with difficult people. I was once (doing) the advisor thing, and there was a guy, a participant, who was making everybody crazy, so they asked me to talk to him. They did this because he wasn't on my slate of people to meet and he had met all the other advisors had seen him. He drove everybody crazy, and he drove me crazy too, in the end.

I immediately got into fighting with him, to try to have him open up and be able to listen to some criticism. In his screenplay, all the characters were very strange because they would act in one way here, and then act in a different way elsewhere, just because he wanted X to happen. The effect was that it made the character unbelievable. It didn't work, because in this scene, he wanted this and in that scene he wanted that.

"But why does he say this?" I asked.

"He says it because he says it."

His whole thing was, "Yes, but it's mysterious...."

"It's not mysterious," I said. "It just doesn't work." (*Audience laughter.*)

In the end, I said, "You have to know your characters. You. You're kind of like God for your characters." And he looked at me.

"Eric," he said. "Even God does not know everything that I think." (*Audience laughter.*)

OK. I give up. I'm not competing with God.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: What was the reason for him to participate, then?

ERIC COLLINS: I don't know. He didn't have a producer then. So it wasn't a producer who brought him in. But his film got made. I met the producers a few years later. He drove them crazy too. (*Audience laughter.*)

But I've never gotten into physical fights, so that's pretty good. (*Audience laughter.*)

Well, thank you very much. (*Audience applause.*)