

## A PINEWOOD DIALOGUE WITH HALLE BERRY

In the powerful drama *Things We Lost in the Fire*, Halle Berry gives a raw performance as the mother of two young children who is forced to cope with the sudden death of her husband. Berry, who won an Academy Award for *Monster's Ball*, has had an adventurous and successful career, moving between commercial blockbusters and ambitious smaller films. In this discussion, following a preview screening of *Things We Lost in the Fire*, Berry talks about her career and her acting process, particularly the intimate style that Danish director Susanne Bier created for the film.

### **A Pinewood Dialogue following a screening of *Things We Lost in the Fire*, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (October 9, 2007):**

DAVID SCHWARTZ: Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the Academy Award winning actress, Halle Berry. (Applause)

SCHWARTZ: Hi, good to see you again; congratulations!

HALLE BERRY: Hello, everybody! (Schwartz laughs)

SCHWARTZ: Well, thank you so much for being here. I think you know you have long-time fans in New York because you started your film career with *Jungle Fever* (1991)—right here!

BERRY: Yes, I did. (Applause) I love New York.

SCHWARTZ: We have—Warrington Hudlin is in the audience; he produced *Boomerang* (1992).

BERRY: Oh, really? Oh, where is he? No, he's not here. Is he really here?

SCHWARTZ: He's somewhere out here; he really is here. I wouldn't lie about that. (Laughs)

BERRY: Hi, Warrington! (Laughs) Yay! Thank you!

SCHWARTZ: He likes the movie. And I think everybody here, both the museum audience and the Guild member audience, appreciates and could never forget the night that you won the Academy Award. What that meant for film history, so...

BERRY: Thank you very much. Me either. (Laughs)

SCHWARTZ: So now, having said that as a background, I heard that you actually had to fight to get this role, which I was surprised to read because it doesn't seem like that far-fetched a role. It's not like you're being asked to play Eleanor Roosevelt or somebody... (Laughs)

BERRY: I would fight for that, too, though—just so you know! (Laughs) But really what I mean by that is it wasn't one of those roles where I had to go beg and kick and scream and, you know, prove anything. It's just that there are so few good roles written for women every year, and there are many actresses who covet those roles. And so I had to just throw my hat in the ring, because it wasn't written for a woman of color. And often times when the description doesn't say, "A black woman," I'm often not thought of. So I sometimes have to just make sure that my hat is in the ring and that the people really know that I'm interested and that I think I can do this as well. And I really just had to do that more than I usually do on this movie.

SCHWARTZ: So what was it that attracted you to the role? Were you aware of Susanne Bier's films at all, and is there anything in particular about this script that really made you want to do it?

BERRY: Yes, I was aware of Susanne Bier and her films. I especially loved her films *Brothers* (2004) and *Open Hearts* (2002). I had seen those films right before I met with her. And what I really loved is that she's got this unique ability to make you feel like you're a fly on the wall; that you're really just

watching life happen. And it's the way she uses her camera. It's because of the Dogme movement and Danish filmmaking; she brought all of that to this piece. And I hoped that she would.

And when I read the script—sometimes you just read something and you just intuitively connect to the characters, to the story, and—I did that. I somehow knew there was something in this woman that I related to, that I thought I could breathe life into.

And I thought it was a message, a story that—right now in the world, with all that's going on—I think it's nice to be a part of a movie that reminds us that no matter how bad life gets, no matter what hand fate deals us, there's always hope at the end of the tunnel, you know? There's always the light.

**SCHWARTZ:** Now in terms of realism, maybe you should admit now that these are your real children, because they sure look like them! (Laughs)

**BERRY:** (Laughs) I wish they were my real children, that's for sure! I know; they were great kids. And they were real kids, they weren't "movie" kids. They didn't have movie parents that were there, you know, pushing them. Allan Loeb, the writer, wrote them as kids. You know how sometimes you see, in movies, kids who speak like they're thirty years old? And you go, "Hmm..." Well, these kids got to act and behave and do everything that children really do, and I really appreciated that in the screenplay.

**SCHWARTZ:** Also, I mentioned this idea of realism, but you really feel as though your character is married to David Duchovny. You feel that this is a couple that's in love, but you sense the problems and tensions. Could you talk about the chemistry in the film, and how that got created?

**BERRY:** Well, sometimes you meet people and you just genuinely like each other. I think that happened with everybody on this movie. I was a big fan of Benicio [del Toro]'s and David's as well, so we just had a natural camaraderie, really. We all were working on this movie—not for lots of money—we all just did it because we loved the project, and we loved Susanne Bier and her work. So that right there was a basis for us to all connect: the work.

David and I spent lots of time talking. When you have to play a married couple that has been married for ten years, you have to have a certain rhythm and easiness about you. And we talked about—we made up this whole back history for ourselves, which was a lot of fun for a couple of days. And we wrote it all down and we decided what we had been through as a couple, and how many fights we had, and how many times he cheated.... No, I'm just kidding! (Laughs) You know, we had fun with it, and I think that helped us have a connection.

**SCHWARTZ:** And what was the shooting style? Susanne Bier is known for this very intimate style, for very extreme close-ups, and a very spontaneous-feeling camera style. So what's that like on the set?

**BERRY:** Yeah, it was interesting because on this movie, our DP, Tom Stern, had to light the set three-hundred-and-sixty-degrees, which—I'd never worked on a movie where we had that happen. So that meant that at any moment, anybody could move wherever they wanted to move. There were no marks that we had to hit. We didn't have to look a certain way because the light source was coming from one direction or another. So we were pretty free to be natural.

But the other unique part was when the film—when the set is completely lit, that means the camera can be on anybody. So when I was told, "Okay, this is going to be a close up on Benicio." Halfway through, the camera would just go *whoosh* and then it would be on me. (Laughs) So it was really hard to—not that as an actor you ever sleep through a scene—but you had to always be on, one hundred percent of the time, because you didn't know when you were really going to be on, and you wanted to be—you needed to be—really prepared.

**SCHWARTZ:** Now talk about your preparation as an actress for this role. It's a very realistic role, but you're dealing with the subject of grief; the steps that you go through. What kind of work did you do in terms of thinking about that? I think it's known that you prepare a lot for your roles.

**BERRY:** Well, I read a book. I started off reading a book by Joan Didion, called *The Year of Magical*

*Thinking*, which helped me tremendously. Because I've never lost anybody near and dear to me in my life. (I mean, only animals. Pets, you know, household pets.) So I really had no genuine basis to start from, only my imagination of what that would be like. So her book helped a lot.

I then talked to people. I realized that even though I had never lost someone, I knew many people who had. And I had supported them through the losses, but I never approached questioning them in a clinical manner. So I went back and I called all these people and I said, "Hey, tell me what it was really like. What were you going through?" And then I talked to a couple psychologists who really explained to me the stages of grief. There are very real stages of grief: there's the denial; there's the anger; there's the misplaced anger; there's the resentment; then finally there's the sadness; and then, eventually, acceptance, and you have a cathartic experience. I really didn't know all of that like I had to figure out for Audrey.

**SCHWARTZ:** Could you talk about the relationship between Audrey and Jerry? Again, there's a kind of chemistry between them; it seems like it might become sexual chemistry, but it's something else. And of course, it's a great performance by Benicio as well. So what was it like, playing that kind of relationship?

**BERRY:** I think we did have—I think Susanne was telling somebody in an interview yesterday that she cast us both because she thought we had real sexual chemistry (Laughs) you know, sort of this...

**SCHWARTZ:** Spark?

**BERRY:** ...Sexual thing happening. (Laughs) But what it was, I think, was just a healthy respect for each other. I had always wanted to work with him and I was so excited to have this opportunity. And it was really important for our characters, because essentially, that's sort of what drew them together, in one sense. In the other sense, they both wanted to touch this man, who they both loved so much. They fundamentally knew that the other person was the only real way to do that at this point.

It got a little hairy in the movie. The scene where we almost kissed wasn't really—was never written. We were doing the work one day and Susanne said, "I

think you should try to kiss her right now." And of course we both went, (Gasps) "That would be terrible. We can't do that!"

And she said, "No, I want you to just come and start the scene with the intention of feeling sexual tension towards each other, and let's just see where it goes." And it wasn't blocked out, it wasn't talked about. We just said, "Okay." You know, "Stay in your character, with that intention, and just see what happens." And that's sort of what happened. We realized that somehow we had to deal with that sexual tension that was happening on film, and not just leave it to our imagination. That it was a good thing.

**SCHWARTZ:** So you needed that scene.

**BERRY:** I think we did. And I think we needed to stop it and not go there, because then Benicio has a line in the movie when Harper says, "Why don't you just marry my mom?"—he says, "Because that would mean that your father never existed." So I think that's why it could never really happen. But it was, I thought, good that they were *human* and they explored how they were getting a little bit confused by this connection.

**SCHWARTZ:** Now was this the first film that you did with a woman director? And what was that like?

**BERRY:** Actually, this was my third time working with a woman director. Amy Holden Jones [*The Rich Man's Wife* (1996)] and Martha Coolidge [*Introducing Dorothy Dandridge* (1999)]. Good filmmaking isn't gender specific. A talented director is a talented director, no matter what your gender.

But as a woman, it did make a difference to me, because women have a shorthand. Women can speak sometimes in ways that men and women cannot. We understand intuitively sometimes what each other are thinking or feeling. And especially in this case, playing a woman who had lost her husband; I think Susanne and I had never had this loss, but we imagined it the same way. So we had a lot of unspoken conversations throughout making the movie, and I had never had that experience before.

**SCHWARTZ:** And how would you, in general, compare this experience to other films? You've

done so many differently-scaled films. Of course, *Monster's Ball* (2001) was an independent film, but you've done huge movies. Is it freeing in a way, to work on this scale and to work on this sort of intimate level?

**BERRY:** It is, and I really like it. And that's why I've tried to have a career that was balanced. You know, do one for the studio and one for myself. One to make money and one for the art. This is how we make a living, so I've learned to not make excuses for trying to make a living in life. (Laughs) But I do like when we get to go do something that's not about money, it's really just about the art of it and the freedom to really explore new territory and not worry about if you're being politically correct. You don't have the studio—because they haven't put a hundred-million dollars into it, they're not there breathing down your necks all day. They sort of leave you alone and let you make this little quirky movie, and you really feel like you're in a creative, organic environment. Which is, I think, what most actors really wanted to be actors for. That's what they really signed up for, and that's what they really love about the craft of it.

**SCHWARTZ:** Something that I've read occasionally in interviews with directors who've worked with you—I think even with Spike Lee, with the first film—they were afraid maybe you were too glamorous, too pretty to have that role. I wonder what's it been like dealing with that?

**BERRY:** I deal with it. Early in my career, I didn't want to (Laughs) deal with it at all, so I tried to do, like *Jungle Fever* and *Losing Isaiah* (1995). And I really wanted to force people to not look at the physical and sort of shed that image of myself. And then somewhere along the way, I sort of started to get comfortable with myself. And I thought, "Well, you know, I can play all kinds of roles. And sometimes I can use that part of myself, and other times I can get rid of it, and make it less important. But to deny either side of that wouldn't be doing myself and my true ability justice; to not use all of what I am." So now I've become okay with going in and out, and trying to do character work like this movie, but still do, you know, *X-Men* (2000) and those kinds of movies that allow me to use other parts of myself, too.

**SCHWARTZ:** And this is a major studio film. It's a DreamWorks release. It's this big studio, it's not independent. Was it difficult for this film, in terms of the financing and getting this film out there?

**BERRY:** No, because they really treated it like it was a little, tiny film. I mean it was fifteen- or something-million dollars. But they didn't treat it like that. It felt very much like it was a little, tiny movie. And they approached it like that from the beginning and all the way through. And I think they still think it's like a little, tiny movie. (Laughs)

**SCHWARTZ:** Okay; I want to open it up and give the audience a chance to ask questions and I'll try to repeat so people can hear.

**SCHWARTZ:** (Repeats audience question) She loved some of your previous work, including *Dorothy Dandridge*. Could you talk about some of your upcoming projects?

**BERRY:** Oh, thank you for all that. Thank you very much. I do plan on doing some more producing. There's a few things that I have that I'm producing for myself. One of them is a project called *Tulia*, about a story in Tulia, Texas.

There's another one that I'm producing that I'm not going to be a part of. It's for Alicia Keys, called *A Composition in Black and White*, about Philippa Schuyler, an inter-racial child pianist prodigy in the 1940s. You know? You read it? It's a great book. Isn't it a great book? And a really good story, too. It's a story that should be told.

There's a project I have called *Nappily Ever After*, that I'm producing (Laughter) for the women in the room! It's all about our hair and how our hair defines us... So there are some things out there that I'm working on.

**SCHWARTZ:** (Repeats audience question) In *Monster's Ball*, your character loses a husband. So was there any thought of that film, in terms of this one?

**BERRY:** Only in the sense that it was another dramatic role in a smaller-feeling dramatic movie. But the characters, to me, were almost night and day. Although I was a mother, I was a very dysfunctional mother in *Monster's Ball*. In this

movie, she was a very good mother, a loving mother. She sort of had her life all together. And even though she lost—Leticia Musgrove lost her husband in *Monster's Ball*—I mean, he was in prison and their relationship was very broken. And they didn't quite have the connection that she had with her husband. And she knew he was going to die; understood why he was going to die. And in this movie, Audrey loses her husband suddenly, just [as he was] going to get ice cream. So I thought the circumstances were way different, and what one feels emotionally and what you go through. So I really didn't find a connection between the two.

**SCHWARTZ:** (Repeats audience question) Do you like to work in a more collaborative way, or stick closely to the script? So I guess was there freedom, for example, in this film?

**BERRY:** I usually like the script. Because the script, you know, was written by somebody who took many hours to write and whose talent allowed them to write it. And there's usually, you know, a pace that I think is important to keep with the written word. But what I do like to do, which Susanne allowed us to do a lot in this movie, is to keep the intention of every scene exactly as the writer planned it, and then play within the scene. So that we don't go too far off with improvisation until you start changing the context of the movie and you start changing the direction that the characters are going in. And that kind of improv I really, really like. But when it's out of control, I've seen that be a disaster.

**SCHWARTZ:** What is it like, in terms of sort of creating the mood? One thing that I love about this movie is it really feels like we're sort of observing private moments, observing life as it's lived. When you start shooting on a given day, how do you create that?

**BERRY:** Well, in this film, we had an hour-and-a-half of rehearsal every morning. Susanne and everybody got their coffee and their yogurt or whatever, and we would sit around and we would read through the day's work. Everybody would talk about what they had been thinking about the night before, and what they wanted to change, or what ideas they had. She would let us play those out and see if it worked. And if it worked, then we got to

shoot that. If it didn't work, then we would just leave it there. But that's how we warmed up every day, to sort of get back into these people and understand where we are at this moment in time that we're about to shoot.

**SCHWARTZ:** And do you look at dailies at all during the process?

**BERRY:** (Whispers) No! (Laughs) I wouldn't come back the next day; I'd quit!

**SCHWARTZ:** Okay. (Repeats audience question) You must see a lot of scripts. So what do you look for? What are the sort of qualities you look for in a script?

**BERRY:** Usually, it's something that emotionally moves me the first time I read it. If I start reading a script and maybe thirty pages into it I'm emotionally just gripped by it—somehow I feel it in my gut. If it evokes emotion in me—whether it's anger or sadness, happiness—if it evokes any of those emotions to a great, great level, then I know that this is something I just have to do. And many times I read scripts, I don't have that reaction, but I read it and I say, "Oh, that's a good movie. It's time to do a movie like that. It would be good to be part of something like that; I think I'll do that." But not every time do you get that gut-wrenching feeling that you've got to bring life to this, or that somehow it seems extra important. And I kind of know what those things are and what those things aren't.

**SCHWARTZ:** (Repeats audience question) When you started your career, which—and your first film is 1991—did you sort of plot it out? (Laughs) Did you include winning an Oscar in your long-range plan? So tell her how to—I guess you want to know how to do that, maybe?

**BERRY:** I had no plan; none. I just wanted to work as an actor. And I really didn't think I would make a living doing it. I thought it would be like my side gig. I'd have a real job, and I would do this on the side. It was only after *Boomerang*, and movies that I seemed to sort of flourish in, that I realized, "Oh, maybe this could be what I could do for a living." And once that thought set in, then I thought, "Oh, maybe I can, you know, get better at this. Oh, maybe, you know..." And so the thoughts just occurred as I went along.

As I started working, I then devised some sort of plan of knowing that I had to do commercial movies to stay relevant within my industry, but then I also had to do the movies for—the smaller movies—for the art of it. You know, to also stay relevant in another way within my industry. So that was my—that *is* still—my only plan, to try to swing between both of those mediums.

And other than that, I don't have anything else planned out. I just want to keep working, having the chance to take risks and try new things. Sometimes they work, sometimes they don't work... (Laughs) But that's the joy of it—to keep trying.

**SCHWARTZ:** What did specifically change after the experience with *Monster's Ball*, in terms of what was being offered to you and the choices you could make?

**BERRY:** Well, things changed. You know, it's a moment that I will never repeat, ever. I don't care how many awards; if I'm ever lucky enough to win again—nothing will replace that magical moment of that night, for me. And things changed, that... My industry saw me differently. I think there's a different kind of respect that I think I garnered that night. I think directors saw me differently, and I think that has impacted my career. But what didn't happen was—the movie god didn't come and put all these great scripts on my front door, you know? (Laughs)

I realized very soon after that, maybe a month after that, Oh! My life was really going to be, as an actor, back as it always had. Yes, I was now a part of history and yes, more people around the world maybe knew my name. But as an actor, my struggle was going to be always as it had been. And it's a very competitive industry that I've chosen to be in. I was still going to have to fight hard and work hard and continue to study and grow and learn. All of that stayed exactly the same.

**SCHWARTZ:** On a broader perspective, since that night included Denzel Washington winning and Sidney Poitier getting his lifetime award... that's six or seven years ago, so how do you see things changing in general for African-American actors?

**BERRY:** Well, we've had Jamie Foxx, we've had Jennifer Hudson since then. I mean, it's changing. It is really, really changing. And I'm so proud to be

a part of that change and that evolution. I'm really happy to be still working, and hopefully, I'm going to benefit from this change and this evolution. And when we can make a movie like *Things We Lost in the Fire* and have an inter-racial family and have it not be mentioned *in any way* in the movie—that says to me, we're changing! (Applause) It is changing! It's reflecting a modern, twenty-first century family. I grew up that way—my mother was white, and I lived in that environment. It was normal to me, and so it's nice that it's becoming normal to other people as well. (Laughs)

**SCHWARTZ:** Right; because, of course, whenever Sidney Poitier played a role, his color was an issue.

**BERRY:** Always a reason. He had to be black, because that was part of the plot. This movie, to me, the wave of the future.

**SCHWARTZ:** Great. Okay, well, we have time for just a few more. (Repeats audience question) Okay, well, the first question is what you take away from a role after you play it? Is there anything you took away from playing Audrey? And then, if you want to say anything about being a mom-to-be?

**BERRY:** Yes—I always take away something, every time. And that's one of the big reasons, I realize, that I do what I do. Because every time I finish a movie, I realize I too have had some sort of cathartic experience. I realize that I choose movies that allow me to express whatever I most need to express in my personal life; I'm drawn to that material. In this case, I really wanted to be a mother. Every single thought on my mind was, "Motherhood, motherhood. How is this going to manifest in my life? It's got to happen. I can't miss it, I can't miss it." And this movie came along, and then sure enough, I was drawn to it. And I realized after making this movie, "I am meant to be a mother." I got to mother two beautiful, smart children for three months, and I realized I am really, really meant to be a mother. It's no mystery that as soon as that movie was over, it started to materialize in my life. It was sort of validation that I think I needed in some way. So that's just an example of this movie, but every movie, I walk away with something almost as profound as that, and deeply personal. Every time.

**SCHWARTZ:** (Repeats audience question) A question about your approach to your craft. Do you study a lot? Is it an instinctual thing? And then, can you leave the role when you are finished?

**BERRY:** I always study. I started studying and I will continue to study until I decide not to do this anymore. I think that's a big part of evolving as an actor, to always study. When I stop studying, that must mean I think I know it all and so I think I should quit. (Laughs)

I started studying at Second City in Chicago, that's where I first studied. And then I studied a little bit in New York City, sort of the school of Stella Adler and Strasberg. And then now, I study in Los Angeles with Ivana Chubbuck—all the time, and on everything I do. I don't always go to a formal class (because with my life now, I don't always have time to be in a class) but I always study, and I think that's really important. And every movie I work really hard on. I never show up and just think, "Oh, I'm a good actress now so I'm just going to wing it." I always break it down. I'm always scared to death. I always think, "This is the one they're going to realize I'm just a fraud, and so I better work my butt off, and I better give this one one-hundred-and-fifty

percent of what I have to give." (Laughter) What was the second part of that question?

**SCHWARTZ:** Well, just what you take, when you finish a role; does it stay with you?

**BERRY:** Oh, when I finish; does it stay with me? Sometimes it does. A movie like *X-Men*, not so much. (Laughter) I'm kind of glad to get that suit off and that wig off and just be done. But a movie like this, it would be really hard not to have it resonate and have me think. The same things, the same thoughts and emotions that I hope it evokes in the audience? It did the same for me. I still think about it, and it's been a year later. I still think about being a mother, and dealing with loss, and having the ability to have compassion for other people, as my character had to learn to have for Benicio Del Toro's character. So yes; the really special ones like this stick with me... probably a lifetime, in some way.

**SCHWARTZ:** Well, we know you're a great actress and wish you luck as a mother. Thank you for being here.

**BERRY:** Thank you everybody, thank you very much! Thank you. (Applause)

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