David Hare

"I only went into the theater because it was impossible to go into the cinema. Cinema in the 1960s, particularly in Europe, was the most exciting art form, but British cinema was going through one of its many collapses. And so I started a traveling theater company, and I was the director of it. One day, somebody failed to deliver a play—it was a Wednesday, and we had nothing to rehearse for the following Monday—so I sat down and wrote a one-act play, *How Brophy Made Good*, which we then started rehearsing. But I didn't think of myself as a writer. For many years, I just thought of myself as a director who wrote.

That first play wasn't very good—I was 22, it was terrible. But then the most famous producer on the West End—Michael Codron, who had produced Joe Orton and Peter Nichols and Harold Pinter—commissioned me to write a full-length play. I stumbled into an ability I didn't know I had. It was just chance. When I talk to the young I say, "Things are always worth trying." I don't think there's anything more exciting in life than discovering a gift you didn't know you had. And it might have gone undiscovered. It might be for tending a garden beautifully. Or it might be for making a nice pair of curtains. But you don't know until you've tried, and it's always worth trying.

Even though my first play was no good, when I handed it to the actors they looked at the dialogue, and I knew they were thinking, "Oh, this is fine, I can say this." I'd been a literary manager, so I'd read a lot of plays. It's like a chef in a restaurant—when the plate is put before you, you know whether it's edible or not. And it was exactly the same thing when I wrote a page of dialogue—it looked like a page of dialogue. That's harder than it seems. And actors immediately went, "Oh great, if I say this, I can

DAMAGE

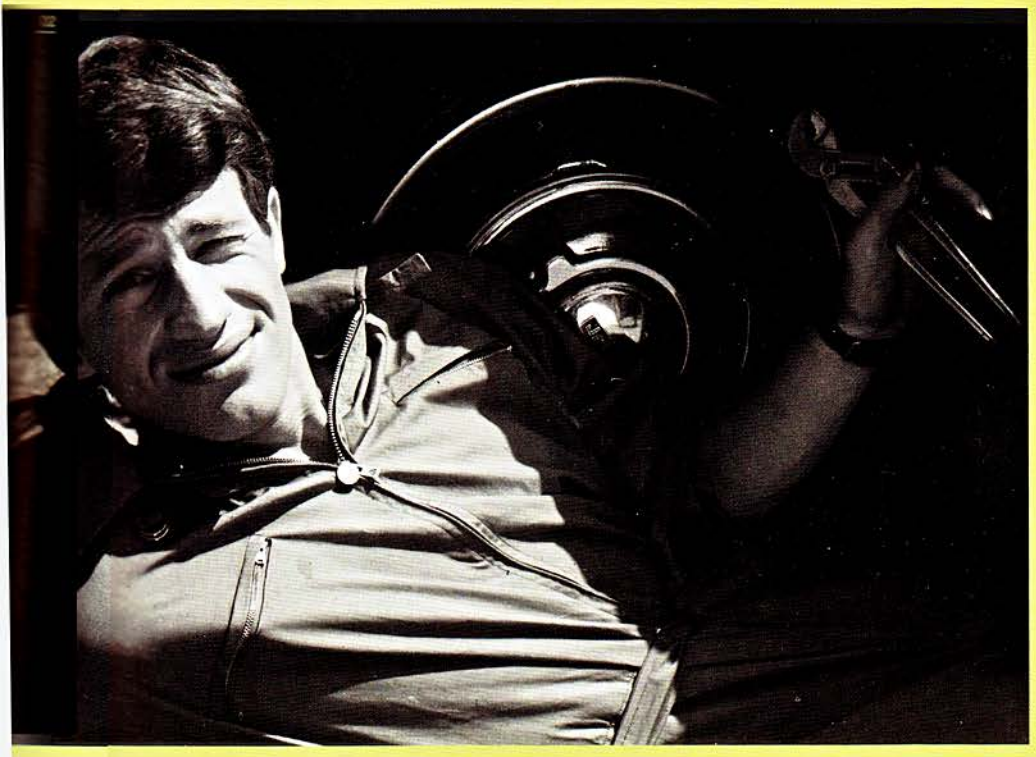
(01) Although Hare rightly considers **Damage** a complete success, he notes that it wasn't a commercial hit—and it wasn't a particularly delightful production. "It was a famously unhappy shoot," recalls Hare with a laugh. "Juliette Binoche and Jeremy Irons did not exactly see eye-to-eye. I think that part of that was because they were being confronted with a script which just presented them with a *fait accompli*: 'You two fall passionately and madly in love, and one of you walks away and the other is destroyed. And yet for both of you, it's just a fact.'" But despite the actors' struggles to find motivations for their characters' ambiguous actions, Hare believes that their mysterious attraction was entirely the point. "**Damage** is about the arbitrariness of passion," he says. "We all know periods in our lives in which we would have killed—simply thrown people off bridges—in order to be with the object of our love. And when this magnetic pull happens, which makes your whole life seem completely meaningless apart from the passion that is consuming you, it's very hard to say what it is in the other person that is making this feeling happen. It just happens for no apparent reason."

"If my life in the cinema has been about anything, it's been about introducing subject matter that is not normally seen in mainstream films."

do that," and it fired up their imagination. Of course, I didn't know anything about writing plays, but it's like an artist being able to do hands and feet—you've got to be able to do those or you can't draw.

I wrote and directed feature films in the 1980s, and each one was worse than the last. Like a lot of directors, my life as a director was U-shaped. It's a familiar pattern: Your first film is very good, and then your second film is really bad, and then you bump along the bottom for a while. Some people never go back up the other side of the U. I've only climbed up the far side recently by making **Page Eight**. But after my films in the 1980s, I realized that I was facing a choice. I could either bump along and become a film director and commit my life to that, or I could be a playwright. There was no time to be both. And I was being asked to write a trilogy of plays for the National Theater, so I really threw my lot in with the British theater and gave it all my energy. But then my life was changed by Louis Malle, who asked me to do **Damage**, which I really, really didn't want to do. I said, "You know, I'm finished with the cinema, I'm just getting worse at it." And Louis said, "Well, you won't have to make this one—I'll make it. All you have to do is write it." I said no. Later, I was on a holiday, lying on a beach in the south of France. The phone rang and it was Louis. He said, "I'm coming down to join you." I said no, but he came down and said, "I know you're not going to write it, but, on the other hand, why don't we just imagine you were going to write it? Let's talk about how you would write it."

He had this incredible method which taught me everything about writing movies. Louis would start every day at 8:30 with a cup of coffee, and I would have a croissant. And he would say, "Tell me the story of the film." And I would say, "Well, →



The French New Wave

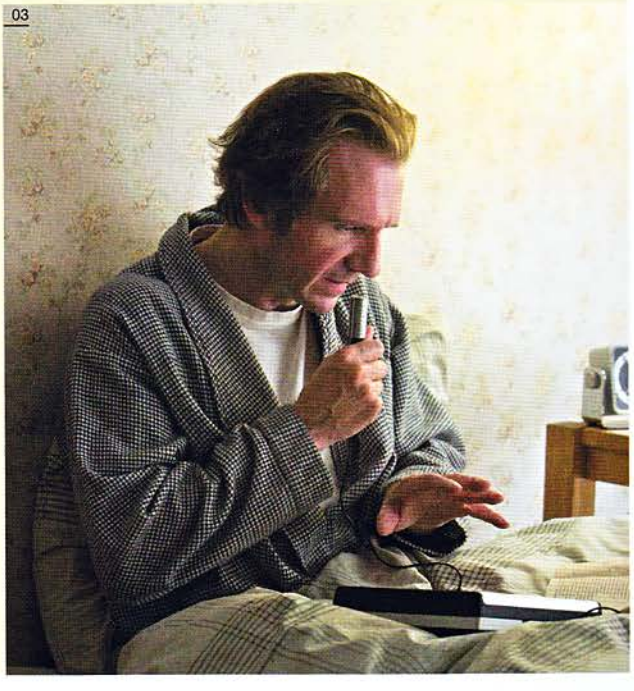
(02) When Hare and director Louis Malle were developing the story for **Damage** and exploring its flawed, human characters, they drew inspiration from French New Wave classics like **Breathless** (1960). "The *Nouvelle Vague* is very much about human behavior," says Hare. "The reason that everybody woke up to French cinema at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s is that suddenly people were behaving like human beings. They were not behaving as if they were puppets to the storyline. In a classic Hollywood film, people move along the tracks that are determined by the narrative, and they fulfill the story and that's their job. But French cinema wants people to be people, and they want them to be contradictory and ambiguous—sometimes likable, sometimes unlikable, sometimes warm and sometimes cold, presenting one facet of themselves to one character and another facet of themselves to someone else. Just like you and me—not like people who are controlled by an author. The whole effect of the *Nouvelle Vague* is to make it seem that Jean-Paul Belmondo **(02)** or Jean Seberg are thinking up their own lines. They aren't, of course. But it looks as if they are."

Stylistic dialogue

(04–05) "Dialogue's a form of stylization," says David Hare. "The question is, is the audience going to accept that stylization? In **Sweet Smell of Success** (1957) **(04)**, the dialogue is as mannered as Jacobean or Elizabethan tragedy. Clifford Odets"—who co-wrote the screenplay with Ernest Lehman—"consciously modeled it on Jacobean plays. In real life who ever said 'Match me, Sidney'—I mean, who ever talked like that? But it works perfectly." Hare also pointed to the dialogue in **The Godfather (05)**. "If you actually analyze the lines in **The Godfather**," he says, "the level of literacy is way beyond anything you'll hear from a mafia hood. But you accept it. And why? Because it has a great stylistic consistency. Just as a painting doesn't look like a photograph, verisimilitude is not always the point in dialogue."

05

03



"... I'm all for good entertainment—I wish there were some in the mainstream cinema. But so much of the stuff that's presented to us I don't find very entertaining. Do I want my films to have some content? Yes, I would prefer that."

there's this conservative politician . . ." And within about two sentences he'd say, "What sort of person is he? Why is he doing that?" He'd just ask questions. And so maybe by lunchtime we had got through about six scenes, and it would be really solid. Then the next day, he'd get up and say, "Tell me the story of the film." And I'd try and pick up where I left off the day before, and he'd say, "No, no, you've got to go back to the beginning." And this went on for about 10 days. By the end of that process, I could tell the story of **Damage** in about 20 minutes. He said, "Well, you've done the hard work now—you've written the film. Just go and hang some dialogue on it." It was an incredible way to write. And writing the dialogue only took me a few weeks, because the story was already completely laid out. It was the most severe way that I've ever worked on structure, but it was also the best way ever of writing a film. It does drive you absolutely mad—you just think, "Oh, I'm going insane." But that's when I began to realize why my own films were so bad: I'd never subjected them to this narrative test and created such a taut string on which you could just hang the pearls.

If my life in the cinema has been about anything, it's been about introducing subject matter that is not normally seen in mainstream films. During **The Hours**, director Stephen Daldry and I did our very best not to use the word "lesbianism" or "suicide," but ultimately, that's what that film is about. And if you start thinking about movies about lesbianism or suicide that have played in multiplexes, there are actually very few. I've written plays about aid to the Third World, the Chinese Revolution, the privatization of the railways, the diplomatic process leading up to the Iraq War. These are not regular mainstream subjects, but what I want to do is get this kind of subject matter into the mainstream. That's the first thing that draws me to a movie.

People who disdain my movies tend to complain about them having "messages," and implicitly say how much they prefer what they call "pure" entertainment. Well, I'm all for good entertainment—I wish there were some in the →

THE READER

(01–03) Because **The Reader** won Kate Winslet a Best Actress Oscar, it might be easy to presume that she's the film's protagonist. But Hare knew that Michael Berg (played by David Kross as a youth and Ralph Fiennes as an adult) was the story's central character. "After the film was made and it became apparent that Kate Winslet had given this completely wonderful performance and was going to draw all the praise," Hare recalls, "Ralph would say to me, 'You and I know this is a film about Michael, don't we?' Hanna is a brilliant part and it's a showy part, and Kate played it better than anyone in the world could play it, but actually, it's not the heart of the film. The heart of the film is Michael's story. But because it's a reactive story and an essentially passive story, he's not an active hero. Everyone is drawn, of course, to the more showy side, which is the story of her—and properly so. But Ralph and I know how that film works."

01

mainstream cinema. But so much of the stuff that's presented to us, I don't find very entertaining. Do I want my films to have some content? Yes, I would prefer that. But this idea that my films have "messages"? To me, it's just a nonsensical line of argument. You know, who are these tender flowers, these sort of overprotected people, who just feel that they're going to wither if anybody brings content to them? I'm bewildered by this line of argument. So many great American films are full of content. But now there's this extraordinary delicacy that everybody has developed lately, as if they're not hardy enough to be able to withstand a plot with something urgent to say.

After Nicole Kidman won an Oscar for **The Hours** and Kate Winslet won an Oscar for **The Reader**, I got a lot of telephone calls from actresses saying, "Oh, I understand you're the man who writes films that win actresses Oscars." And I had to explain to them, "You know, Nicole Kidman won the Oscar for **The Hours**." If she hadn't played it, the actress playing it would not have won. Same with Kate Winslet. It's not the

Invisible exposition

(01) "What you're trying to do as a screenwriter," Hare says, "is bring out the best in everybody else. You're meant to be providing an opportunity for the director and an opportunity for the actors to do the thing they can do." To illustrate his point, he cites **Moneyball** (2011), which was written by Steven Zaillian and Aaron Sorkin from a story by Stan Chervin. "They created this fantastic structure that was so secure and so in place that it allowed Brad Pitt to be Brad Pitt," Hare says. "Brad Pitt could be that relaxed and that charming and that mellow because he's sitting there thinking, 'This script is holding me up. I'm just in such safe hands here that I can be this incredibly relaxed figure at the center of the film.' And it's no coincidence that it's one of Brad Pitt's greatest performances—he's incredible in it. He's not having to work, he's not having to sweat—the effort is not showing. He's not appearing to have to characterize, but actually he's characterizing brilliantly. You can't see him do anything because it's all being done for him. And then he comes along and does the extra thing he can do. The actor isn't thinking, 'Oh, I've got this bloody long speech where I'm going to have to sweat like a pig to do the exposition.' The actor doesn't have to do the exposition because the screenwriters have hidden the exposition away, which, if you look at the book [written by Michael Lewis], my God, they've hidden it away so beautifully. It's almost Zen-like when Zaillian and Sorkin are on form like that. You don't see them, and yet they're doing everything. I so admire that."


01

"The whole notion that an actor saying the first thing that comes into his or her head somehow delivers authenticity is a complete misunderstanding of what art is."

part, it's the actor. The idea that I write these parts that are a free pass to winning an Oscar is nonsense. I just happen to have worked with two very great actresses.

I don't have any insights into how to write Oscar-winning roles—I only know how to write good parts, but that's completely different. That's something I developed. My first play I had in the West End was called *Knuckle*, and there was a part of a barman in it. The barman had to say, "Do you want a drink?"—that sort of thing. The actor was sitting around in the dressing room all evening just to say that. And I thought, "I'm never going to do that again—I'm never going to get people along for something that isn't worth playing." And so now, I look at every character and think of it from the actor's way around: "Is this worth it? Is there going to be something in this to play?" I mean, everybody in **Page Eight** remarked to me how incredible that cast was. They all came because the parts were worth playing. And that's because I thought about the structure of their parts—even if they only last three scenes. Gary Oldman did a film of mine, and he said, "I did it for this one line that I just knew I wanted to say." And so what you're trying to do is give actors something that they go, "Oh yeah, I'd really want to do this—this gives me something extra."

Lately I've seen some absolutely appalling films where actors have obviously been allowed to improvise their own dialogue. You know, when Mike Leigh improvises, it takes him three months. When John Cassavetes improvised, it took him six months. And yet, now I regularly go to the cinema and see films where the actors have plainly improvised on the spot. You can feel the whole film sag when it happens. Last month I saw the dramatic climax of a film where the actor's line in response to the film's principal revelation was, "Wow, hey, that's a real slap in the face." Now, no writer has written that line—you can tell the actor has improvised it. And this foolish director imagines the line is more authentic for the fact that it's the first line an actor can think of on the day. You can only say in response, "Get a professional," because a writer will spend a week working on what that line should be. And they will know as much about writing as the actor knows about acting. The whole notion that an actor saying the first thing that comes into his or her head somehow delivers authenticity is a complete misunderstanding of what art is.

I was asked during previews of the musical of *The Lion King* to rewrite it. They said to me, "The dialogue is very bad, and you're very good at dialogue, right?" And I said, "Nobody is listening to the dialogue in this thing. That's not what it's about." I saw the musical, and it was dazzling, but the dialogue is not important—it's only there to express what's going on. If a lion cub wants to go back to its dad, then "I must return to my father" is a perfectly reasonable line. I can't come up with a better line than that. I can't make something happen between those lines that's not happening anyway. The audience will be perfectly satisfied with that line. It may not be the greatest line ever written, but it's doing the job you want it to do. Good dialogue is not something that you slap arbitrarily on top of a narrative: Good dialogue is the expression of good ideas and complex feelings. It grows out of ideas, it isn't decoration you add at the last minute.

I'm very pleased with **Page Eight**, but my only regret is that it's genre. I've been trying to avoid genre all my life. I think it's the death of cinema. Nearly all the interesting work these days is from people defying genre. I've tried hard to avoid genre because the audience know the game so well. They know more about Joseph Campbell's writings than the screenwriters do—they've read all that stuff about character arcs and journeys and all that mythic nonsense. They know the hero's setting out to find the holy fucking ring or grail or goat's foot or whatever it is. They can see the strategies coming a mile off—they know that in reel 10 the hero will face an insuperable problem, and they know that in reel 11 he will overcome it. Why write it?

My heart is broken about my version of *The* →

THE HOURS

(01–03) Because of the complexity of author Michael Cunningham's multiple story arcs in *The Hours*, the book was considered difficult to adapt. But Hare wasn't concerned. "It kept alarming me how many people said, 'How on earth are you going to do that impossible book?' And I kept going, 'I don't know what's impossible about it—it looks very easy to me.' I was freaked—I felt, 'Oh, I'm missing the point of this somehow because everyone keeps saying how hard it is.' Whereas it seems to me juggling those three stories, wow, that is so filmic." But that didn't mean the adaptation was easy. "One of the problems we had was that we knew that the end was much stronger than the middle," says Hare. "We were always going, 'Well, we know the first 40 minutes are going to be very intriguing, because no one's seen a film like this before. And we know we're heading into a fantastic climax, which is so satisfying.' But that middle 40 minutes was absolute hell. Unless you got it right, the audience would be thinking, 'Oh, now we're going back to that story, and I don't like that story—I want to stay with that other story that's much more interesting.' How do we keep all three stories equally interesting? That was the real challenge." The toughest of the three storylines was Laura Brown's, which Hare calls "the deepest story" and was played by Julianne Moore **(01–03)**. "It's the ultimate taboo, isn't it? The mother who leaves her child—unforgivable, you can't do that. So, okay, we're going to make a film about a woman who leaves her child, and we're going to make you understand why she does it. Even if you're never going to sympathize with her, you're nevertheless going to go, 'That probably is the decision she had to make.' That's what we had to swing there."

01

02

03

Dramatizing Virginia Woolf

(04–06) Hare describes the process of dramatizing Virginia Woolf (who was played by Nicole Kidman) in **The Hours** as "nobody's favorite screenwriting task." As he explains, "You know that a thousand academics are going to descend on you, as well as a lot of people to whom her books mean so much. But the thing I was proudest of when the film came out was that her book, *Mrs. Dalloway*, went to number one in the *Los Angeles Times* fiction list. And, you know, okay, you expect Michael Cunningham's book of *The Hours* to go up the fiction list—that's not so rare. But can you believe that more people in Los Angeles bought a copy of a Virginia Woolf novel written in the 1920s that month than they did any other book? That is an incredible achievement. And when I heard snooty academics and biographers complain about the film, I felt 'You've never persuaded quite as many people to read her work as we have.' That was one of the great achievements of my life, actually."

Working with Meryl Streep

(07) Hare has worked with Meryl Streep in **The Hours** and on the 1985 film version of his play *Plenty*. "I will always go to Meryl's rehearsals," he says. "You're crazy not to. It's hell on your way of life if you schlep out to a studio at nine o'clock in the morning to see the rehearsal, but when you've got Meryl Streep, she's going to tell you so much about the scene by the way she does it. And because I know her a little I can say, 'You don't need that line—get rid of that.' And that to me is the real joy of filmmaking: to watch that first rehearsal and then change it all. When you see what the actor's bringing, then you go, 'Oh, look, you need something from that point of view—let me give you that.' Or, 'You don't need this anymore, and it would be more interesting if you did that.' Meryl will always give you so much that it's impossible not to be inspired by her."

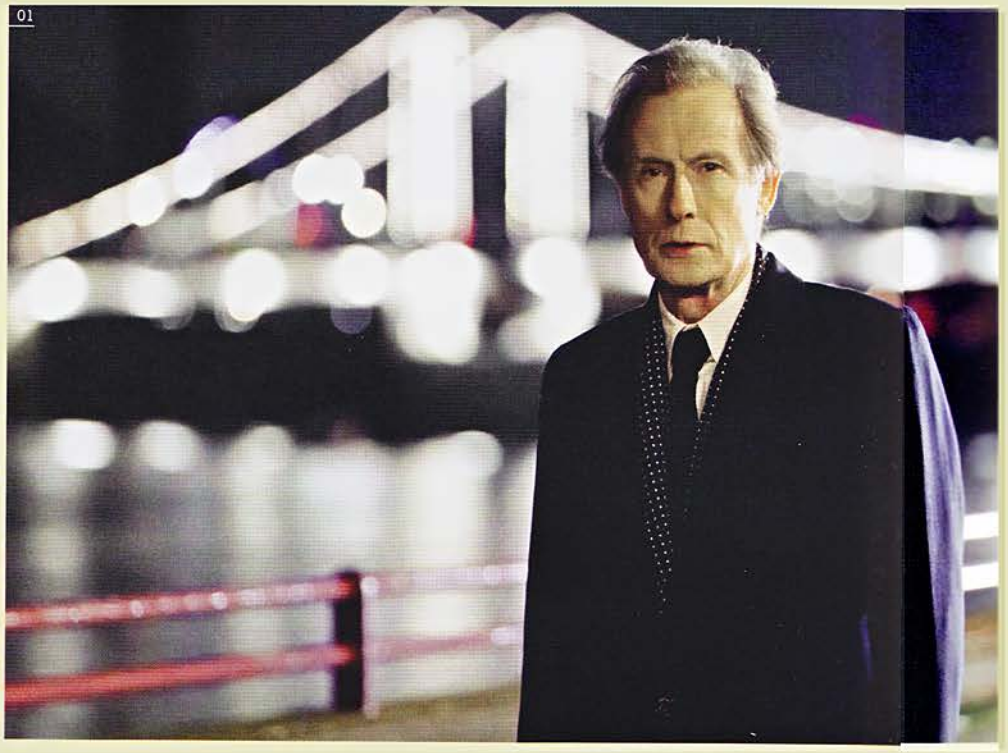
"Good dialogue is not something that you slap arbitrarily on top of a narrative: Good dialogue is the expression of good ideas and complex feelings. It grows out of ideas, it isn't decoration you add at the last minute."

Corrections not being made. I was on it for 23 drafts. I think the problem was that there was nothing for a director to do but shoot it. Jonathan Franzen has a huge personality—and I don't have a small personality—and by the time we had got what we wanted as a feature film, there wasn't anything for any director to do except turn up and shoot it. That's all they had to do. And now, of course, nobody will do that—that's out of fashion. They all want to say, "What is my unique creative input going to be into this?" To which the answer was, "I'm already taking up a lot of room, Jonathan Franzen is taking up the other side of the bed, and there isn't room for three people in this bed. Just shoot the fucker." Director Stephen Frears is famous for the fact that he regards the script as the thing that he's just there to deliver, but that is not how most Hollywood film directors talk today. And so ultimately I think that's why it wasn't made. A part of me died when I lost all that work.

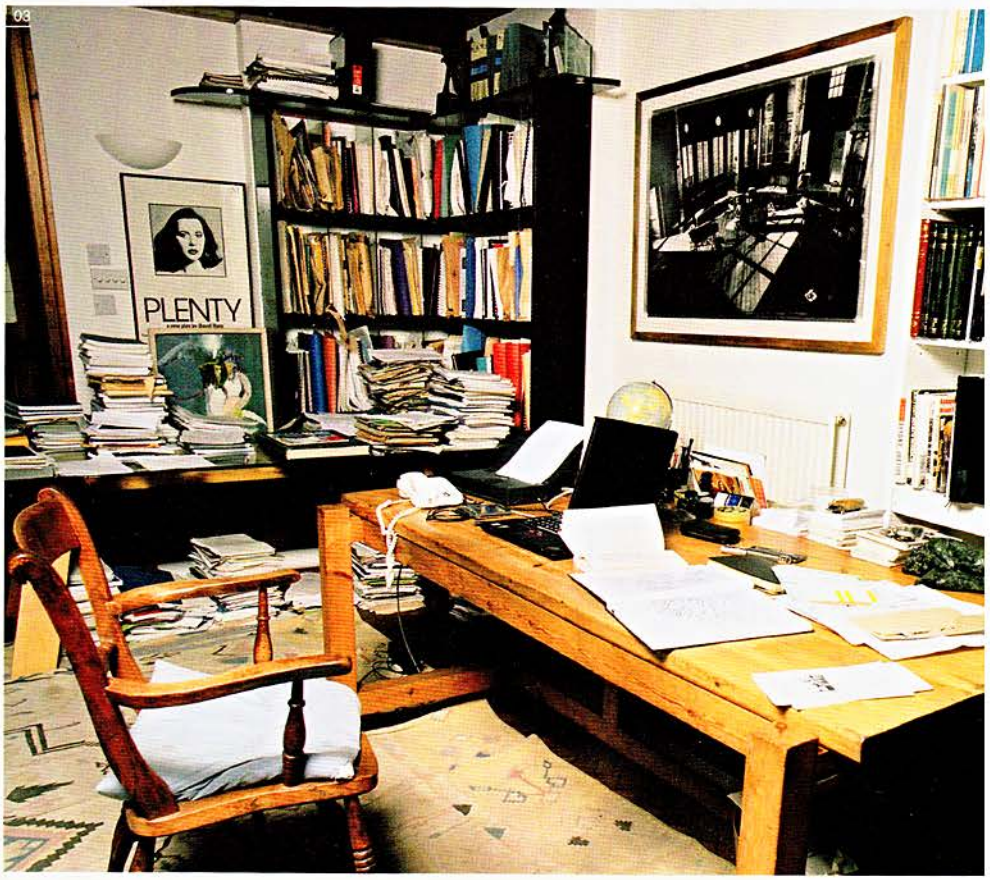
I think that my interest in writing came from—not a lonely childhood, but I suppose a solitary childhood. I was born 60 miles from London by the sea in a town, Bexhill, with the oldest average age in the country. It was just full of old-age pensioners, and it really was the most boring place on Earth. So I had the classic provincial childhood—exactly that kind of solitariness that fires the imagination. And it's left me for the rest of my life grateful that I'm not in Bexhill. Life has always seemed to me incredibly enjoyable and interesting because it's not Bexhill. But there's no doubt that I dreamed very powerfully from such a background. I mean, come on—suburban setting, semi-detached, it's a classic writer's background. The theater and the cinema were very, very glamorous to me.

PAGE EIGHT

(01–02) For **Page Eight**, a thriller about a veteran MI5 officer (played by Bill Nighy) investigating a political cover-up, writer-director David Hare didn't want to adhere to all the tenets of the spy genre. "There are no guns in my film," Hare says proudly, "because I firmly don't believe that MI5 kill people. And I certainly don't believe they kill their own. So what I wanted to make was what's called a suspense film, which is what Hitchcock made. You know, Hitchcock made suspense films that don't actually depend on people bursting into rooms with guns. I prefer **Vertigo** (1958) to **Psycho** (1960) and always will. And so I deliberately said, 'There will be no physical threat. No punches will be thrown. No bullets will fly.' That was my tiny little protest against genre. I would create the suspense through story, not violence. Even if Nighy's character loses, what's going to happen? He's going to go to prison. Well, those aren't the stakes for which thrillers usually play out. I wanted to make those kind of stakes very, very low, but for everybody nevertheless to be in a state of suspense, just as they are in Hitchcock."



And they still are. I still get an incredible kick out of walking past a cinema and seeing my name on there. That sense that I'm incredibly privileged and lucky to be doing what I'm doing has stayed with me. I'm 64 now, and I still get thrilled at the sight of a marquee because I can't believe it's happened to me.



03 The interior of Hare's office