

THE HEROICS OF EVERYDAY LIVES

DIRECTOR STEPHEN DALDRY ON THE HOURS

I read David Hare's screenplay for THE HOURS before I had read Michael Cunningham's novel. My first response was that this was a fantastically well achieved screenplay, which moved seamlessly through time and three different women's lives. The same was true for the novel, which I read next. Both were rich and multi-faceted – about life and death, mothers and sons, art and madness, memories and regrets. Ultimately, I saw the story as being about the cost of different choices a person makes – the cost of being a caregiver trying to give a dying person dignity; of being a mother who has no choice but to change her life; of being an artist risking insanity for the sake of creation – and how the consequences of those choices can be very high.

I was particularly drawn to the script because it was a wonderful opportunity to explore a single day in the lives of three women. For me, the idea was that the voyages these women take moment by moment are courageous. Often, I think, the heroics in women's lives are silenced and take place behind the scenes and are overshadowed by the public heroics of men. But the struggles of these women are equally monumental and profound.



From the outset, Michael Cunningham told us that we should feel free to do whatever we felt was appropriate with the book, which was very liberating. Towards the end of filming, Scott Rudin, David Hare and myself all re-read the book to make sure that we hadn't missed anything and based on that last reading we made some final re-writes. The book always informed the production. However, the movie was never locked into a strict adaptation, which created a perfect relationship. An important aspect of the filming process was to be true to the spirit of Virginia Woolf, which is everywhere in the book and screenplay. Certainly if you've never encountered Virginia Woolf or the novel "Mrs. Dalloway", it makes no difference to the enjoyment of the film. But those who have read "Mrs. Dalloway" know what a treasure trove it is, and I hope they will find as much joy in the exploration as we did. Although there isn't a lot of natural physical similarity between Nicole Kidman and Virginia Woolf, they have a similar animal magnetism - a danger and alertness. Because Nicole couldn't look exactly like Virginia Woolf, we tried instead to create the essence of what that extraordinary face was like.



Since I come from a theatre background, rehearsal allows me a chance to work out the internal dynamics, the emotion of a scene, and from that I can work out where the camera should or shouldn't be. One of the great joys of rehearsing and knowing the screenplay for THE HOURS so well before we shot it was knowing the cutting pattern from story to story. Rhythmically, what you see on the screen is pretty much what we rehearsed, which is unusual. In a sense, for THE HOURS, we were rehearsing three films at once, as we never rehearsed Meryl Streep, Nicole Kidman or Julianne Moore at the same time. There was also great joy in having David at the rehearsals, ready to re-write from the input of the actors, and directly to their strengths and weaknesses.

Ultimately, THE HOURS was a deeply collaborative process between all the participants. The level of collective creativity was quite remarkable – it was a true team effort. Most importantly, we were lucky to have a group of actors who had worked extensively in the theatre and were used to this way of working. They were able to participate in the rehearsal process in a way that David Hare and I found incredibly useful.

During production, one of the most difficult sequences to shoot was the drowning of Virginia Woolf. Nicole Kidman was aware that we would have to put her in a real river with a fast current, and she was going to have to get under water and stay under water. It was a seriously dangerous situation. But as far as Nicole was concerned, there was never any question that anybody else would do it. That sequence took several days to film, including the part where Virginia's body has to be dragged along by the current on the bed of the river. When you see those shots in the film, it is Nicole Kidman. She wouldn't have it any other way.

One thing we knew we always wanted on THE HOURS was to have not only a coherence and unity in the overall look and design of the film, but at the same time to have a different and distinctive look from story to story. There is a visual opposition at work between the lives of the three women – and a lot of that is done with simple elements such as colour. We used a different palette for Meryl, Julianne and Nicole but simultaneously, the colours in each of their stories refer back to one another, providing little echoes from scene to scene. We did similar things with camera movements and film processing techniques – giving each woman and era a unique look yet one that is always tied to the next story and the next moment in time.

In the end, I think the film calls for a very complex emotional reaction, and a different reaction to each story. One thing that really interested me is the exploration of the mother-son relationship, which is very complex, and comes to the fore in the story of Laura Brown. In this case, you have a child who is literally deserted by his mother – "abandoned" is the word that the mother herself uses. And our individual response to that sort of act comes from a political, moral and emotional place, especially because in our society mothers who leave their children are judged severely. I think the response of each audience member to Laura's story will be different depending on their own personal experience or personal knowledge of that sort of situation. But no matter where you are starting from, I think everyone can relate in some way to the mother-son relationship and will feel how potent it is and will be engaged by it.



Another interesting role many people will be able to relate to is that of Clarissa Vaughan as the woman who looks after others in the hopes that creating happiness for someone else will in turn create more meaning in her own life. There are millions and millions of "carers" in this world who go unsung and unexplored for the most part. I think many people will have a strong reaction to Clarissa and the consequences of her choices.

And then of course there is Virginia Woolf, who is willing to literally risk her own sanity, risk descending into madness, as an essential element in the creative process – another choice that is open to debate and different responses. In this sense, the film really is an exploration of women in the 20th century and the difficult, sometimes heartbreaking, choices that they have had to make. For Laura, Clarissa and Virginia Woolf, the choices are literally a matter between death and celebrating life.

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QUESTIONS RELATING TO STEPHEN DALDRY'S ARTICLE

1. What themes does Daldry see running through the story?
2. How does Daldry describe each character?
3. What does Daldry tell us about the filmmaking process?
4. What does Daldry tell us about the creation of the three story lines?
5. How important is it that the film viewer has read "Mrs. Dalloway"?
6. Daldry ends by saying that the story is "a matter between death and celebrating life". From your viewing of the film how true would you say this was? Explain your answer and give details from the film to back up your argument.

