

The Irish Times, 1 Jun 2007

The truth is, you never really believe it's going to happen.

When I received a call in early 2005 from David Heyman's office – the producer behind the *Harry Potter* movies – to arrange a meeting about a potential adaptation of my fourth novel, *The Boy In The Striped Pyjamas*, I thought it would make a good story to tell my friends but never expected it would lead to anything substantive. However sitting in the Heyday offices a couple of weeks later, surrounded by Hogwarts memorabilia, I wondered whether there was just a chance that it might. The book wasn't scheduled for publication until January '06 but David had read a manuscript copy and was interested. Both he and co-producer Rosie Alison spoke passionately about the novel and their vision for how to bring it to the screen; the whole thing seemed like a great adventure and I went away feeling excited, flattered, and convinced that I'd never hear from them again.

A couple of months later, after a lot of emails and agent-led discussions, I sat down in Leeds with director Mark Herman, whose previous work included *Little Voice* and *Brassed Off*, and he talked to me about the characters, the risks involved in Holocaust literature and the manner in which he would like to adapt my prose into a screenplay. 'What about the ending?' I asked nervously. 'You wouldn't change that, would you?'

'Of course not,' he said, looking at me as if I was mad. 'There'd be no point making it with a different ending.'

Still, I didn't really believe it would ever happen.

And then I started to hear about other meetings that were taking place. David, Rosie and Mark were talking. Miramax was involved. And Disney, who had recently purchased Miramax, were interested. Budgets were discussed. Locations considered. Then my film agent called to say that he had a contract for me to sign and when would I next be in London.

'Tomorrow,' I said. It would be a good opportunity to catch up with some friends, after all. When I told them why I was over there, they were astonished and wondered why I wasn't behaving in a more excitable fashion.

'Well, lots of novels get optioned,' I told them with the world-weary air of one who had been there a thousand times before, which I hadn't. 'I wouldn't buy an outfit for the premiere yet.'

And then something strange started to happen. The emails became more frequent. Names of potential cast members were pondered over. The agreement was that Mark would write and direct the movie – I'd never written a screenplay and had already begun writing a new novel – and one morning

towards the end of '06, a draft of the screenplay appeared in my email inbox. I couldn't help but wonder... was this *really* going to happen after all?

I sat down to read the script with a mixture of excitement and apprehension. Of all my novels, *The Boy In The Striped Pyjamas* was by far the most successful. Its success had exceeded my wildest expectations, translated into 28 languages and with sales figures amounting to more than all my other books combined. But more than that, I felt a very deep connection to the characters in the story and had spent much of my time over the previous year discussing them in schools, at literary festivals, on radio and television around the world: Father, the monster at the centre of the novel, who believes in what he is doing but remains a loving and devoted family man; Mother, who is torn between duty and conscience; Grandmother, whose outspoken voice is her undoing; Gretel, the hopeless case; Shmuel, the nine year-old Jewish boy, condemned to a torturous existence on the wrong side of a fence.

And, of course, the other nine year-old boy in the story, whose inquisitive nature and love of exploration lead him on a journey where he becomes, by the end of the novel, its eponymous hero. Bruno, the boy in the striped pyjamas.

Here before me was 120 pages of script, retelling the story in dramatic form. Dialogue and stage actions. Points of view and production values. What if I hated it? What would I do then?

I didn't hate it. I'd seen a lot of bad film adaptations in my time but felt that if this was the direction Mark was going in, this wouldn't be one of them. It was as faithful an adaptation as I thought a script could be, while still recognising that a translation of sorts, from prose to images, was taking place. Some scenes from the novel had been cut, of course, and some added, but the additions felt faithful to the tone of the story and the characters were fully realised. I felt more than relief; I felt elated. And I started to think that it might happen after all.

Months later, several drafts of the script later, and we had a flickering green light. A recce took place in Budapest to scout for locations. To my delight, Vera Farmiga, who had recently appeared in Scorsese's *The Departed*, agreed to play the role of Mother; she was quickly followed by the brilliant English actor David Thewlis as Father, the commandant of the concentration camp. Rupert Friend became the Nazi true-believer, Lt Kotler; Sheila Hancock the outspoken Grandmother. After a careful search, three outstanding children were found for Gretel, Shmuel and Bruno. And finally the light stopped flickering and turned green.

A few weeks ago I found myself taking a short stroll from my hotel in Budapest on the second week of filming towards a square where tables and chairs were set out to represent a mid-century café. I was in conversation with my agent and the film's publicist when I turned a corner and stopped in my tracks. All around me the great buildings were festooned with long red flags, swastikas planted deep at their heart. Around me stood SS officers with guns; a few feet away were a couple of teenagers, members of the Hitler Youth. Men and women in period costume gathered too and, as I made my way over to greet Mark, I felt as if I had stepped back in time, although the reality of this being *my* novel hadn't yet hit me.

As I began to meet members of the crew, I started to feel an enormous sense of pride at how pleased they each were to be part of this project. The director of photography, Benoît Delhomme (*Breaking And Entering*), had read the novel in French and asked to be part of the production; the production designer Martin Childs (*Shakespeare In Love*) told me how interesting it had been to design the bleak sets that the adaptation would require. I was thrilled when Peter Silbermann, the film's publicist, introduced me to 12 year-old Amber Beattie, who plays Gretel. Bubbly and enthusiastic, she's far from being the hopeless case that her alter-ego is, but she brings great charm and skill to the role.

The scene that was being filmed that morning was the opening scene of the movie, Bruno and his three best friends for life running through the Berlin streets, arms outstretched like Messerschmitt wings, causing chaos for all those around them. As the rehearsals began I saw four boys taking their positions and braced myself for my first view of Bruno but it turned out that they were the stand-ins; child labour laws are very strict on the amount of time that children can spend on set, how many hours they must spend with the on-set tutor and the breaks they must be given every hour so they are not brought before the cameras until it is absolutely necessary.

Eight year-old Asa Butterfield plays Bruno and we met shortly after he filmed this scene, a meeting which was captured by the *other* film crew on set, the one filming the making-of documentary for the DVD extras. (How far ahead they think!) Quiet and focussed, he seemed to be perfect casting for this crucial role, an old head on young shoulders. As we talked I was ambushed by Karl, Leon and Martin, Bruno's three best friends for life, who provided me with potential stories for a sequel centred around their characters. A revenger's tragedy, of sorts. 'After all,' they pointed out, 'we're still alive at the end of the novel.' Good point. But unlikely.

Spending time on the set of an adaptation of one's own work is both an exhilarating and surreal experience. My intention was to be a quiet observer rather than an interloper; in advance, I wondered whether it would make Mark Herman, the writer/director, slightly anxious – for if I started saying *Bruno wouldn't say that* or *Pavel wouldn't do this*, then I might make myself less welcome; in the end he couldn't have been more gracious but in truth he seemed so focussed on what he was doing that I'm sure he forgot I was there at all. I quickly discovered that the best place to stand is not beside the camera, watching the actors at work, but behind the monitors, where the shots are displayed as if already on screen, listening to the dialogue through headphones, and watching the director... well, *direct*.

Perhaps the most surreal moment came on the morning when we filmed a funeral scene in Budapest cemetery. For the first time I found myself in conversation with the entire family – Father, Mother, Gretel and Bruno – together, in costume. Vera and David were talking to me about the novel but I could barely take in their words; eventually I had to apologise and explain that this was a very strange moment for me, seeing my creations standing before me, the children bouncing from foot to foot in their tight funereal clothes, the parents keeping them close and controlled. 'How's the uniform?' I asked David Thewlis, tall and imposing in his Nazi officer suit. 'Makes me feel extra mean,' he told me.

One of the surprises to me was how much of film acting is concerned not with dialogue, but with expression and movement. A scene by the graveside, where an unwelcome wreath is placed atop a coffin, is filled with tension and suppressed rage, although few words are spoken. Another, set during a party before the family leave their comfortable Berlin home, is poignant for a small, devastated wave from Bruno's grandmother to her grandchildren standing on the balcony above.

I was delighted to discover that Herr Liszt, the children's tutor when they move to Out-With, is being played by Dubliner Jim Norton, familiar and memorable to so many as Bishop Brennan from *Father Ted*, one of my favourite TV shows, and who recently won an Olivier Award for his performance in Conor McPherson's *The Seafarer*. A cast and crew dinner one evening allowed me to quiz him on his memories of the show and he was funny and gracious as he recollected what were clearly very happy memories for him; personally I'm delighted to have an Irishman in the cast!

Unfortunately for me, my visit was forced to end as a book-tour of Australia and New Zealand beckoned until the middle of June; however, I look forward to returning at the end of the shoot at the start of July to watch the last week's filming. Of course no film is shot in the running order of the scenes, but Mark has wisely chosen to leave the dramatic ending of the film, Bruno and Shmuel's final moments together, until the closing day.

At the moment, the film is scheduled for a Christmas release, but this depends on editing, scoring etc. It was a wonderful experience visiting the set but I am already nervous, anxious and excited in anticipation of seeing the final film.

The truth is, you never really believe it's going to happen. But – sometimes – it does.