

# JAMES IVORY IN CONVERSATION

HOW MERCHANT IVORY MAKES ITS MOVIES



ROBERT EMMET LONG

FOREWORD BY JANET MASLIN

## SETTING THE SCENE

*Robert Emmet Long:* Merchant Ivory is known to be the independent film production team of the last few decades, achieving its success on its own, outside the Hollywood studio system—or maybe in defiance of it. But, in fact, what has your experience with Hollywood been like? What sort of dealings have you had with the studios?

*James Ivory:* There has been this idea—people have often spoken or written in this way—that Merchant Ivory shuns Hollywood or feels that it is too good for it. Something of that kind. But people would be surprised at the number of our films that had a big studio connection, and also when that connection first took place—at the very beginning of our career. Our first feature was *The Householder*, which we made in India and then sold to Columbia (now Sony). You might say that it had even been partially financed with Hollywood money. One of our Indian investors on that film was a theater owner in Bombay who made a fortune off *The Guns of Navarone*, a Columbia hit. He put some of that in *The Householder*, so we might claim in a way that Columbia Pictures itself invested in it.

*Long:* So Columbia was your first backer?

*Ivory:* Yes, but only in the sense that they bought the film, as I say, and gave us what's called a "minimum guarantee." The way Columbia paid us for *The Householder* (they bought the world rights) was with four hundred thousand of their blocked, or "frozen," rupees—earnings from their films in India that they could not, by law, repatriate. All the American studios had fortunes in rupees sitting in Indian banks. Right away Ismail saw the advantages for us in such a situation. The studios—MGM, Fox, Warner Brothers, and so on—were

free to spend that “frozen” money on productions in India. It was all quite regulated, you can be sure, and prying it loose was a bureaucratic nightmare; but all of our Indian features were shot, more or less, in this manner. Fox spent a million dollars on our third film, *The Guru*—the rupee equivalent, that is—which was a lot of money to us but nothing to them.

*Long:* What about films you have made in the West?

*Ivory:* When we began making films outside India, there was again some studio involvement. *Quartet* was made that way; Fox put money into it. *The Wild Party* was financed by the Hollywood-based American International Pictures, a sort of Miramax-like “little studio” setup, with a Harvey Weinstein-like boss named Samuel Arkoff, who, like Weinstein, loved dismembering his pictures.

*Long:* Later, with the great success of *A Room with a View*, the studios came knocking at your door.

*Ivory:* After *A Room with a View*, Hollywood welcomed us. They thought we had some secret; we could parlay three and a half million dollars into seventy million, and get terrific reviews and Academy Awards. There were several three-picture deals made with the studios then, which sounds exciting, but these usually fizzled out after the first picture (as in the case of TriStar and *Slaves of New York*). But there were films like *The Remains of the Day* and *Surviving Picasso*, which were studio films from the beginning, films that were made from properties they’d acquired. We were hired to make these for the studios.

*Long:* How much creative freedom did you have once you were in a contractual arrangement with the studios?

*Ivory:* Some studios were absolutely princely, like Disney. Others were the opposite, penny-pinching and suspicious. But not one—no, wait, there *was*, or *is* one—gave us any real trouble over so-called creative matters. I always have had the final cut. I won’t do a film if I don’t get that, and up to now—with the exception of *The Wild Party*—I’ve always been given it. No film but that one has ever been recut (at least in the United States; outside the United States you don’t know what’s going to happen to your movie).

*Long:* How do these studios treat you as independent filmmakers? And do you feel that you have anything in common with Hollywood?

*Ivory:* The studio people are genuinely respectful; if there was a disagreement over some point, it was usually expressed in a diffident tone, almost murmured, apologetic. Well, you have to take that seriously; it would be very bad manners to go stomping about saying, “I’m the director!” We’ve made many friends in Hollywood. I’d hate to think of what our careers would have been like without them. And then both Ismail and I cut our teeth on Hollywood movies; in our tastes we precede the great days of international filmmaking, the French New Wave and all the other national “waves,” except, I suppose, the Italian. Hollywood set the standard for us when we were most receptive and the studios most creative. Strange, when you think how unlike a big studio picture any Merchant Ivory film is!

*Long:* A number of independent filmmaking companies exist today. How is your company different from these others, the indies, as they are called?

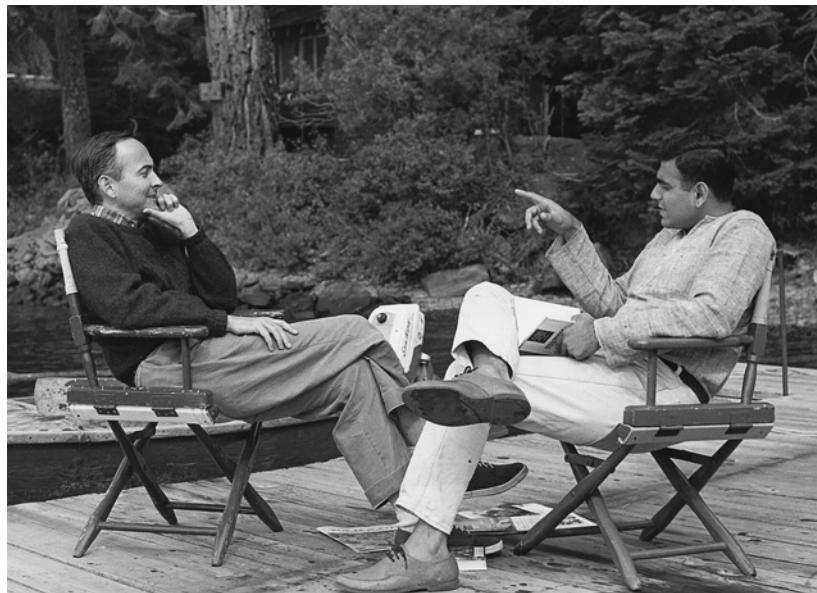
*Ivory:* Our company is different in that the three of us—Ismail, Ruth, and myself—are permanent. She writes, I direct, and Ismail produces what we write and direct. We’re all lucky in that way. Most producers who have a project they want to do have to search for a writer and then a director; or a director has to look for a writer and producer when he finds something he’s keen on doing. It’s worst of all for the writer in that respect. There’s a constant delay and changing of minds in most producing partnerships, but not in ours.

*Long:* What special problems do you have as an independent filmmaking company?

*Ivory:* The problem, of course, is in finding the money to make our films. And then, once they’re made, making sure the distributor brings them out in the right way.

*Long:* I saw you and Ismail one night on *60 Minutes*, and got the impression that the two of you often speak heatedly and may have many differences of opinion. How do you work together so well when you are both so independently minded? What happens when you have a disagreement and there is no one else to referee or arbitrate?

*Ivory:* I’ve always said that Merchant Ivory is a bit like the U.S. government; I’m the president, Ismail is the Congress, and Ruth is the Supreme Court. Though Ismail and I disagree sometimes, Ruth acts as a referee, or she and I



James Ivory (left) and Ismail Merchant at Lake of the Woods in southern Oregon, 1963. Merchant is reading *Vertical and Horizontal*, the novel by Lillian Ross about psychoanalysis that Merchant and Ivory hoped to film.

may gang up on him, or vice versa. The main thing is, no one ever truly interferes in the area of work of the other. At a certain point respect compels us to back off.

*Long:* What is there about Ismail that sets him apart from anyone else you know?

*Ivory:* He's never uninteresting, never dull. He's remained vital and youthful and enthusiastic about what he does and we do together and of course is prodigiously energetic. He has a lot of ideas—certainly far more than Ruth and I, who are pretty much going along in our grooves. Some of his ideas seem crazy when we first hear about them, but they tend to turn out successfully.

*Long:* Does Ismail still haunt auction houses? What sort of things does he bid on?

*Ivory:* Portable things, suiting his nomadic lifestyle: Kashmir shawls, rugs,

silver, now and then a miniature. He buys china sometimes. But not big heavy things on the whole. However, it can't be said that Ismail "haunts" auction houses. Because of all our moving around, it takes some arranging to actually bid.

*Long:* On a train bound for New York I fell into conversation with an Indian youth from Calcutta. We talked about India and eventually about Merchant Ivory, and it seemed as if one of the most important questions he could ask was about Ismail's cooking. Had I ever eaten one of Ismail's meals? How do you feel about Ismail's, in this case, almost overshadowing celebrity as a chef?

*Ivory:* Overshadowing what? His legendary prowess as a producer and filmmaker? I think he'd be very sorry to feel that his cooking has eclipsed his life's work in any way.

*Long:* When he began to direct films as well as produce them, did he call on you for advice and assistance?

*Ivory:* He never asked me directly to assist him in any way beyond reading his scripts. But of course I feel I would be letting him down, letting the company down, letting everybody down if I didn't speak up when I think he's about to make some mistake. During shooting I go for a while to wherever Ismail is making his film—Trinidad most recently, South India before that—and hang around in case I'm needed. Sometimes I am; once in a while I rewrite a scene or make up a new one entirely for him if I think it's useful. Once, in Bhopal, during *In Custody*, Ismail said one morning, "Oh, I'm tired today, you shoot it," and I was happy to let him lie down for a bit.

*Long:* As you know, Ismail has a sense of humor. One day at the Merchant Ivory office, I asked him if he felt overshadowed by you as a director, and he replied with some aplomb that he had given you a head start.

*Ivory:* I really think he's happiest of all directing; he loves the process and wades right into anything, as a director must. *But* he won't relinquish his producer's role, so instead of worrying about getting a tricky scene exactly right sometimes, he's berating the production manager over some air tickets. He's happy doing that too. That's actually a moment, if I see it happening, when I can be useful, and I yell at him and drag him away to his set.

*Long:* Rightly or wrongly, I have the feeling that you were influential on his New York/Paris-based film, *The Proprietor*, a very cosmopolitan picture (with Jeanne Moreau, no less). When I see a film directed by Ismail, however different it may be from one of yours, I have the feeling that it has come out of the same school of filmmaking as your own. Both your films and his have a rich look, shared production values, even the use of some of the same actors, and of course there is Dick Robbins's music.

*Ivory:* Well, it would be surprising if there weren't similarities of style, tone, look. We have used the same actors and cameramen and editor, and on *The Proprietor* even the same scriptwriter, George Trow. Sometimes the music Dick Robbins writes for Ismail's films makes me a bit jealous, I have to say. It's the content of our films, however, that's mainly different. Except for *The Proprietor*, which was about rich, worldly people in Paris and New York, Ismail's films are almost always about poor, struggling people, often living on the edge. This has been true since he directed his first film, *Mahatma and the Mad Boy*, which was about a beggar. His films might right a balance at Merchant Ivory and offset mine, which are almost all exclusively about well-off people from the upper middle class. When lazy critics try to lump Ismail's films with mine, as they sometimes do, calling them "genteel," their favorite pejorative word, I wonder whether they have ever seen them. Ismail has made films about mad people, prostitutes and pimps, drunken poets who fall down in their own vomit. Perhaps the high surface gloss of his films is what makes these careless reviewers think there's a real similarity.

*Long:* Now that Ismail is directing as well as producing, he is working at a prodigious rate. What is it that drives him?

*Ivory:* He does get run-down, it's true, and that's very worrying to us. But he has a rare ability to put all his worries aside, drop straight off to sleep, and above all enjoy himself outside the office. He is fueled by an extraordinary optimism and by a young Indian's desire to "make name and fame" that he has never lost, and about which we tease him.

*Long:* Ismail must have one of the biggest address books of anyone in New York. Is there anyone he doesn't know?

*Ivory:* Or remember? That's the point.

*Long:* Is there a colony of Indians who are prominent in the arts in New York that Ismail is in close touch with?

*Ivory:* Not really. There are a few people we see constantly. Madhur Jaffrey is one. We know Ved Mehta very well, and Ismail and I are both friendly with Zubin Mehta. When the dancer Indrani was alive we saw her, and now we see her children, who are also in the arts. Anita Desai, of course, but she's not a New Yorker.

*Long:* Because you and Ismail have been such close partners for such a record number of years, do you ever feel as if you were half of a person?

*Ivory:* Not at all. I feel sometimes that we are the *same* person.

*Long:* Simon Callow told a reporter that Ismail was so many different people that he couldn't imagine what he would be like when he was alone. How many different people does he contain?

*Ivory:* He may seem very complicated to people who know nothing of India and the Indian character. To those who do, Ismail's behavior is more understandable, easier to place. As I stayed on in India year after year, Ismail himself came into sharper focus for me. And now, when we're mostly in Europe and America, and seldom in India together, he sometimes appears in even sharper focus—as in relief, against backgrounds that play up the difference between him and the “natives,” you might say: Americans, Englishmen, Frenchmen, Italians . . .

*Long:* People tend to think of the two of you as being total opposites: he's flamboyant, and you're discreet. But I wonder if there isn't some kind of symbiosis here, the notion of two opposites who are often together and share qualities. Do you have any of Ismail's qualities?

*Ivory:* Well, his optimism perhaps, but untinged by his fatalism, which is perhaps a Muslim or even a general Indian quality. I think I share in his energy; I may possess my own or be energized by his. At any rate I watch people half my age drop with exhaustion (particularly during shooting), and I'm always the last person in the house to go to bed.

*Long:* In his recent book, *My Passage from India*, Ismail describes himself as a film director in the following way: “I cut scenes if I felt they weren't working, or suddenly adapted scenes to take advantage of an unusual location, a

striking face, a new idea. Although I have been observing Jim at work for thirty years and have learned a lot from him, I have my own way of working that is different from his. Instead of being thrown by the unexpected elements that can occur during the filming, I actively welcome them. I like the sense of spontaneity and surprise." Would you care to comment on the differences between Ismail and yourself as film directors?

*Ivory:* Well, Ismail certainly has far less patience than I have on the set; as in everything in life, he hates delays. I saw him once, an expression of exasperation on his face, during the filming of *In Custody*, as he listened to a long-winded scene being read aloud by the Urdu co-scriptwriter. Ismail took the pages away from him, went inside where he couldn't be seen, crumpled them up, and rewrote the scene himself on the spot with Shashi Kapoor. On the other hand, I don't think I'm that much "thrown" by the unexpected during my own shooting. But I might want a little more time to decide how best to deal with it—which might also mean how best to exploit it for the good of the film.

*Long:* I wasn't aware that Ismail spoke Urdu.

*Ivory:* He would have to be fluent in Urdu in order to make a film like *In Custody*, which is all about an Urdu poet. Ismail's Urdu, in which he delights, is very fluent; he speaks it beautifully, in a slightly old-fashioned way. It's always full of jokes and puns that make people laugh.

*Long:* I tend to think of Satyajit Ray as a figure you met and admired tremendously at the beginning of your career rather than someone with whom you have had an ongoing relationship; but Ismail speaks of Ray's seeing *A Room with a View* and of their meeting at Ray's hotel suite at that time. How close were you and Ismail with Ray during those intervening years between *The Householder* and *A Room with a View*?

*Ivory:* We were always close, corresponding during those years when I didn't go very often to India, and almost always managing to meet him when we did. Sometimes we saw Ray in the West, in Paris—Ismail writes about that in his book on France—or in New York. Here's a funny story: Satyajit came to New York for some reason—this must have been before his heart attack—and was staying at one of the hotels on Central Park South. I went up to his room to see him, and while I was there a delivery man arrived bearing a luxu-



Satyajit Ray with James Ivory in Calcutta during the music recording session of *Shakespeare Wallah* (1965).

rious chocolate cake. It had been sent by Richard Avedon. Ray explained that Avedon wanted him to pose, but Ray said, "I'm not going to be photographed by Richard Avedon. He makes you look like a corpse, or in the last stages of senility." He was referring to the series of portraits Avedon made of famous directors, which certainly did make them look as if they had one foot in the grave, especially the one of Jean Renoir, a hero of his. Then he offered me some of the cake, which he proceeded to slice, and we ate it. It was excellent.

Another time when Ray was in New York he stayed with us. In those days it was virtually impossible for Indians to get any foreign exchange in order to travel abroad, not even the greatest artist in the land. Anyway, while he was with us, we gave a little party for him. He wanted to meet Pauline Kael, who loved his movies and wrote wonderfully about them. But when she came they ended up having an argument over the Russian director Eisenstein, another

of Satyajit's heroes. Kael said Eisenstein was an overrated director and really lousy. Ray couldn't believe his ears. Being very, very polite, he changed the subject, but she wouldn't let it drop. When she was safely out of the door, he exploded: "She's crazy! She's out of her mind!"

*Long:* In addition to being Ismail's collaborator, you are often Ruth Jhabvala's screenwriting collaborator. Do you and she have the same tastes, the same methods of working?

*Ivory:* When we collaborate on a screenplay these days, we follow a certain pattern that seems to work for us both. It goes like this: I write the first draft; she takes that and rewrites it and gives it back to me. I then modify my original ideas, reject some of hers, and finally we sit down together and go through it line by line. Of course we do argue sometimes. Then I give in, or she does, or we compromise. Our biases are different, certainly, but I think in most things our tastes are pretty similar. We differ on the subject of humor. Sometimes I like things she thinks are too broad, even stupid. For instance, the famous "birds and bees" sequences in *The Remains of the Day* . . .

*Long:* I loved that business . . .

*Ivory:* Or the episode in *A Soldier's Daughter* when the Marcella character throws sand in the eyes of the teacher tormenting her young son. Ruth wanted to cut that. I refused. Ruth most likely didn't feel so strongly about these two sequences. If it had been a case of "over my dead body," I suppose I would have felt duty-bound to cut them. There have been such cases, scenes in which from her point of view everything has gone wrong: bad acting, bad writing, bad directing—just plain bad. Scenes, maybe, where I'd liked the photography or some extraneous element. At such times she can be very withering. Like a Supreme Court justice's acid dissent.

*Long:* In working with Ruth, have your ideas for a film ever diverged so much that you have just reached an impasse?

*Ivory:* Yes. We started out together in the mideighties on an original screenplay of *Three Continents*, which then, after we disagreed on it, Ruth turned into a novel, having got interested in the theme and characters. I wanted the first two sections of the story to be seen through the eyes of the homosexual brother, Michael, and the last section only to be seen through the eyes of his sister, Har-



Ruth Jhabvala in Central Park in 1966, during her first visit to New York.

riet. Ruth didn't go for that idea, and as I felt Harriet was too passive a figure to sustain interest as the main protagonist throughout the whole story, I dropped out. I think that's the only time this has ever happened. Perhaps I could have pushed it more, have convinced Ruth, but I was already at work on the two Forster films back-to-back, *A Room with a View* and *Maurice*, which kept me busy for more than three years.

*Long:* Ruth has a formidable reputation as a novelist and short-story writer. Does she prize her screenplays as highly as her other work, or do they take second place to her fiction?

*Ivory:* Second place, definitely. Fiction writing is her first love, and doing films with us is more for the fun of it than anything else. If she doesn't think some project will be fun for her, she ducks it.

*Long:* What is it chiefly that Ruth brings to your films?

*Ivory:* A secure, a profound, grasp of character and story. As an original fiction writer she is well placed to do that. That is how she is so different from, and better than, so many professional screenwriters who lack these gifts.

*Long:* Has there been a particular collaboration with her that has given you the most pleasure and satisfaction?

*Ivory:* I think I most enjoyed our early films, the ones set in India. We worked very closely on all those, from *Shakespeare Wallah* up through *Heat and Dust*, which, in small ways, came out of an earlier collaboration, *Autobiography of a Princess*. When it came to doing the big novels—*The Bostonians*, *Howards End*, *The Golden Bowl*—Ruth worked far more on her own, struggled on her own. How to compress all that mass of writing was a task far beyond me. The same was true of the Bridge novels, which were far closer to me than Ruth in terms of subject matter and were about people, times, places that I had firsthand knowledge of, but which she lacked. Still, she had to struggle on her own with those books, too.

*Long:* Not everyone realizes, I think, that you write as well as direct. This isn't true of most directors, is it?

*Ivory:* It has been said, and I think it's mostly true, that directors are better off when their writers are not themselves. Yet in some cases a director can spin out his own story, too—as, for example, Woody Allen can—and then he is truly blessed. If I'm an effective scriptwriter, it's mostly because I have Ruth at my side.

*Long:* The other member of your inner circle of collaborators is the composer Richard Robbins. How did he come to join you?

*Ivory:* Dick was on the faculty of the Mannes School of Music in Manhattan, where Ruth's youngest daughter, Firoza, was his piano student. He became a friend and then gradually offered advice on things musical in our films. This was in the midseventies, and we had no longtime composer then as we had an ongoing cameraman, say, like Walter Lassally or like Subrata Mitra in India. Then, in 1978, during *The Europeans*, Dick provided his first score. It was mostly source music, such as early piano works and hymns, but there were some original compositions as well. He's been with us ever since, with the exception of *The Five Forty-eight*.

*Long:* Has your working method changed much over the years? Robbins has

done sixteen scores for you, as well as scores for other Merchant Ivory films not directed by you, such as Ismail's films, and for the films of directors completely apart from Merchant Ivory, such as Nicole Garcia's *Place Vendôme*.

*Ivory:* And in all of them he's shown the most refined craftsmanship—I should say, instead, musicianship—and an originality of approach that makes him different from anyone else that I know of these days. It's now hard for me to imagine a film of mine without his music.

*Long:* I know that Ismail is musical, but about yourself I am not quite so clear. Judging by some of your references, I gather that you had some sort of training or at least some sort of background in classical music. Is this so?

*Ivory:* No. Not really. I was never musical in the sense that I could play—or even want to play—any instrument. I began to listen to 78 records of classical music about the time I was a senior in high school, and my tastes were very primitive. When the first long-playing records appeared around 1950, I'd somehow trained my ear (I don't know how) and become an addict of Bach and Handel, buying every cantata that came out by the former and every oratorio or opera by the latter.

*Long:* Ismail recalls that when he first met you, you had an extensive record collection, among which was “the music of Nazakat and Salamat Ali Khan, two brilliant Pakistani vocal musicians. . . . Jim enjoyed Indian classical music as much as I did.” How did you develop your interest in Indian music?

*Ivory:* My feeling for Indian music came out of working on *The Sword and the Flute* and from seeing Ray's films, especially *The Music Room*, in which the singer Begum Akhtar is featured. Indian vocal music slowly comes to be enjoyed in time; it's rather difficult for the Western ear to adjust to. It grows on you, however, until it surpasses all other enjoyment of Indian music. I remember Hyman Bloom, the artist, telling me that in time this would happen to me. I think it's a bit like the appreciation of opera in the West. Slowly you come to feel that the human voice is the most expressive, the most beautiful, of all instruments.

*Long:* Go back, if you will, to the way you work with Robbins.

*Ivory:* You know, I'm not a musician myself. I can't read a score and could never be the judge of performances on the whole. However, I've always liked all sorts of music and even fancy myself something of a connoisseur when it

comes to certain kinds of period music, such as baroque, and some vocal music—not to mention Indian music. But it's an amateur's ear we're talking about. Dick knows that I'm not absolutely hopeless in matters of craft when we go to work. He accepts that.

*Long:* [Laughs] I imagine there are worse.

*Ivory:* Exactly. We usually plan the source music before we begin shooting if we can—the music that is actually being performed on screen by somebody, for instance, Lucy Honeychurch's Beethoven or Olivia Rivers's Schubert. Such instrumental music has to be very carefully prepared in advance, and the actresses—or actors—have to slave at it in order to seem to play convincingly. Dick is then their music master, all but knocking their knuckles, I imagine, and going like a metronome. Or sometimes it's a performance piece, like the little opera in *Jane Austen in Manhattan*, for which he composed the music entirely, arias and all, in an early classical style. Then the actors, who may not be singers, have to be taught to sing, or seem to sing, stylishly. So that's one side of it, but by no means the biggest job Dick has to do.

*Long:* That would be the actual composition of background music, I imagine. How do the two of you approach that?

*Ivory:* When the film is more or less edited—when we've cut it down to a manageable length—he and I sit together for several sessions and work out where we think the music ought to be. I have sort of a rough idea already; he often has a more exact one by then. Sometimes—rarely—our ideas don't coincide on placement. There are times when I think a bit of music is needed to smooth over rough edges in the editing that we can never really fix for some reason. Sometimes I feel, then, that we have the opportunity to make a virtue out of necessity. I explain these concerns; he listens, makes notes; I go away while he works out some themes that he already has in mind on the piano or the Kurzweil electronic keyboard. When I come back, he plays these against the film, which we watch on a video monitor. Naturally, this being Merchant Ivory, he's always being rushed; the tempo of finishing the film and preparing for the mix has now become for him what the shooting earlier on was for me. Everything has to be got ready: music composed—maybe twenty-five cues or more, some several minutes long—and then orchestrated, musicians and conductor and

recording studio engaged. I don't know how he does it, but he always has. Strangely, though living so close to New York, we almost never record there.

*Long:* Why not?

*Ivory:* Oh, he doesn't much like the system there, dominated as it is by the musicians' union, and appallingly expensive. He prefers to go abroad, usually to London. Well, so many of our films have been made in England, have been British productions, that would be a natural after all. But we've recorded in Salt Lake City—very good musicians—and for a while in Dublin, where none of the musicians (also very good) appeared to be over twenty-five. [*Long laughs*] We just pick up and move. Naturally, Ismail and I want to be present at the recording. That's always a pleasure, a sort of culmination of it all, the whole film; and then we may have to confer, put our heads together when some cue needs adjustment. And Ismail wants to be sure that all those expensive violinists are playing loudly enough and that he's getting his money's worth! In that respect I'm like Ismail. I want Dick to give me music that will ravish everybody—as Satyajit Ray's music did. I want it, in combination with certain images, or sequences of images, to be literally ravishing—at least for people in a receptive mood seeing the film. I want them to clutch at their hearts if possible.

*Long:* When an actor or an actress comes to read for a part, what sort of things do you look for in reaching your casting decision?

*Ivory:* Whether in appearance and personality they have some kind of individual distinction. I don't want actors who aren't very much themselves. I take the talent for granted in most cases. They wouldn't be there meeting me if they were untalented, unless I was doing someone a favor. Of course they must seem right for the role. Sometimes it's an instantaneous decision, as, for instance, with Hugh Grant in *Maurice* and with Daniel Day-Lewis as Cecil Vyse in *A Room with a View*. Incidentally, I saw both actors for the latter role; Hugh said I didn't even glance at him; he was in and out of our office in seconds.

*Long:* How elaborately do you rehearse your actors before shooting a film?

*Ivory:* We are almost never able to rehearse before shooting except, of course, on the set the day we shoot. We're lucky if we can do a prior read-through. That's because in a film the entire cast is almost never assembled at the same time. *Mr. and Mrs. Bridge* was the exception.

*Long:* Do you allow them to improvise or to contribute ideas that may not be in line with your own conceptions?

*Ivory:* It's not possible to improvise dialogue when you're adapting authors like Henry James or E. M. Forster. But improvising action is a very different thing. I always welcome my actors' improvisations if they're consistent with the scene. If I am doing a contemporary film, then I hope they'll improvise dialogue, too. However, I obviously don't want improvised ideas that are inconsistent with my own ideas about the part, the scene, the story. If an actor insisted on something and it didn't do any general harm, I might, to be diplomatic, agree to shoot it. But then, if it was as bad as I feared, I'd just throw it away in the editing room. Usually actors are so unsure of themselves they are timid about suggesting radical changes.

*Long:* I've watched you directing actors on a set and was struck by your calmness, by the way you keep things on an even keel. You can seem quite detached. Have you ever lost your temper and stormed off a set?

*Ivory:* Once, but I went right back on again. I did it for effect many years ago but then thought, "Why am I doing this? I need to be on the set to have my way, not off it." This was during *The Wild Party*.

*Long:* When Shirley MacLaine and Jack Lemmon were preparing to make *Irma La Douce*, they are supposed to have gone to the Paris brothels to do their research. Have your actors, or have you yourself, done background research of no matter what impolite kind in preparing a film?

*Ivory:* A lot of research is, by nature, impolite. I know that actors do "research," but frankly I'm not very interested in how they do it. Ismail and I once went with William Shawn and Lillian Ross to "do research" in a jazz club in Greenwich Village for *Vertical and Horizontal*, which we hoped to but didn't make. Sitting there between them, I felt humiliated that they thought I needed to be "educated" in that way.

*Long:* Why should that have made you feel humiliated?

*Ivory:* I think it was mostly because a young woman who was about my age—Ismail and I were in our thirties—had been hired to guide our party from club to club. This seemed strange then, and now, because Shawn was apparently a habitué of that kind of Village musical scene. He himself was said to have been a gifted jazz pianist, and to have played the piano in Paris jazz haunts in the

1920s to earn a living for a while. Anyway, we were led by this girl—I think she was given ten dollars at the end—so we could experience the special ambience, observe the customers, hear the music. I don't know if you've read Ross's *Vertical and Horizontal*, but one of the characters in it was a young jazz musician who starts going to the psychoanalyst, Dr. Blauberman, and this causes him to give up his playing . . . But you were asking about actors doing research, not directors. We're digressing . . .

*Long:* Generally speaking, do your actors come to the set well prepared, having thought out their characterizations in detail, or do you have to give them quite a bit of help?

*Ivory:* Actors are generally very well prepared, are far more in touch with their parts than I can ever be. Especially English actors, who are fanatical about preparation. Americans are a bit more apt to wing it (and sometimes don't know their lines, *the unforgivable sin of acting*). Sometimes I have to do a lot of work with actors, helping them to shape the part, say their lines well. This is most often the case with very young actors or, sadly, very old ones.

*Long:* How conscious of the camera should an actor be, very conscious or hardly conscious at all?

*Ivory:* The more conscious they are, ideally, the better. Nothing is worse than to have to argue with an actor over the camera. Often they don't have a clue about what the camera sees but are fussing a lot, out of fear or vanity. The best thing is when an actor knows what the camera can do and exploits that to his or her (and the part's) benefit.

*Long:* What is it that makes a great, a magical, screen performance?

*Ivory:* I know it when I see it happening long before the film is finished. I watched Maggie Smith and Daniel Day-Lewis during *A Room with a View* and was certain they were doing something very fine. And during *Howards End* I had the same feeling about Emma Thompson. I think I even said to myself: "She will be nominated for an Academy Award."

*Long:* What sort of dealings have you had with agents?

*Ivory:* For a director, they're mostly of two kinds: those with one's own agent and those with the agents of the actors you'd like to hire—or not hire, that's a more delicate situation.

*Long:* Who are you represented by yourself?

*Ivory:* I've been very lucky to have been represented for many years by Creative Artists. My agent there is Rand Holston. He also represents Ruth and Ismail. Sometimes it's necessary for him to handle Ruth's affairs with us. He's absolutely unflappable and is possessed of such common sense he makes me look like a hysteric, which I'm not. I also have an English agent in London, Anthony Jones, at A. D. Peters. He, too, is unflappable; we've known him since he was a very young man and just starting out.

*Long:* What about other agents before you found Creative Artists?

*Ivory:* We didn't really have good representation until the days of *The Bostonians*. Christopher Reeve, knowing this, brokered our arrangements with Michael Ovitz at Creative Artists to get us in to that agency, which also represented him. Our later success with the Hollywood studios is certainly due in good measure to Rand. He opened doors after *A Room with a View* and guided us through some tricky negotiations with virtually every Hollywood studio in the last fifteen years.

*Long:* Do you deal with actors' agents, or is it Ismail who does that?

*Ivory:* I leave all that to Ismail. I wouldn't dream of getting involved; I'd say all the wrong things. Also, it's considered to be a form of lèse-majesté, I've noticed, for a director to speak personally with agents representing actors he might want to hire, except in very unusual circumstances. Anyway, as I said, for sure I'd get us in hot water. I'm sort of a pushover. But now and then I do come to know an agent fairly well, and then I'll call him up like any friend and perhaps ask his advice about something.

*Long:* Who makes the career decisions, an actor or his agent?

*Ivory:* Agents are powerless when faced with the determination of their talent. All they can do is damage control when their client decides to do a low-budget movie like one of ours, for little money. Similarly, they can rarely talk a client into doing a role that the client thinks is wrong. Sometimes the client is bent on making a bad choice, and there is nothing the agent can do about that either.

*Long:* Can agents be frustrating to deal with?

*Ivory:* Certainly. They can build a protective wall around the client you'd like to woo, send scripts to, telephone. When that happens, you have to find a way to reach your actor, and Ismail is incredibly resourceful in finding these ways.

This of course irritates the agent no end. But what else can Ismail do in that situation? The agents take their own time to deliver a script to somebody you're considering. They may even forget and leave it in a taxicab, as happened with the agent for Imogene Coca, whom we wanted to cast in *Roseland*. . . . But I have to admit that they are also loyal to old clients who get few parts or make little money for the agency by way of commissions. That's touching, in a hard-boiled place like New York or London.

*Long:* What do you like most about directing films?

*Ivory:* The life of the shoot—the eight, ten, twelve weeks it takes to actually shoot what is, after all, just raw material to be shaped and reshaped over and over in the editing room. But the intensity of that life is when a director really lives.

*Long:* What is the hardest part of directing films?

*Ivory:* Not losing hope as the film goes through the hands of one financier after another until the deal is made. The rest is easy. Except at the very end, when you project the film for the financier and don't know what his reaction will be. There's not a great deal he can do if he doesn't like it, but you want him to, most desperately.

*Long:* When you have completed a film, do you continue to live with it for a long time, still thinking of ways it could have been improved?

*Ivory:* Once a film is finished, there is no further tinkering with it; it's not a painting or a play or a piece of music. The expense in changing the tiniest thing is huge. So I don't think or worry about it at that time. Of course you do go on living with it, from festival to festival, from premiere to premiere, and then its release in DVD and so forth. And, yes, at a later time, I do think of the ways I might have done something differently, better.

*Long:* Have you changed your mind later about a film you have made, deciding that it was really better than you thought, or perhaps not good enough?

*Ivory:* Yes. Lately I've felt that *Surviving Picasso* could have been better, on the one hand, and that *The Bostonians* was better than I had remembered, on the other.

*Long:* How reliable a gauge of the reception of a film are your advance screenings for invited audiences?

*Ivory:* Not reliable, if you're being honest about it. One's friends rarely tell you what they really think. Years later a close friend will surprise you by saying, "Oh, I just *hated* that scene. Why did you leave it in?"

*Long:* You've been to innumerable film festivals. What has that experience been like? And what are your feelings particularly about the Cannes film festival?

*Ivory:* It's another aspect of the business, you might say. For me, it's never been that easy to get tickets to the films, then get dressed up, then get oneself to the Festival theater to see the films. After working all day with the press on one's own film, you mostly just want to take it easy, to escape. At Cannes we always have our own rented villa, and I hide out there as much as possible. I even dread Ismail's big parties. On such nights, if I could, I would be the first to go to bed.

*Long:* How do you feel about critics?

*Ivory:* I feel that the critics are always sitting in the front row of my audience, as it were—are definitely part of that audience. If you're lucky, they go out afterward and tell everybody how much they liked your film. They need to do that from time to time for a director of films or theater to have a productive, ongoing career. But beyond this sporadic praise, you're in danger if you take what they write too seriously. A critic who has written about you in ecstatic terms may in the next breath destroy some other director's film that you feel is little short of sublime. Or he may pronounce sublime, putting it next to one's own film on his shelf of favorites, a film you know is nothing but rubbish. What can you do when this happens, other than stick to your own opinion?

*Long:* Have you ever been attacked savagely? . . . Well, I suppose you were for *Slaves of New York* . . .

*Ivory:* That's not the only time. What about *Jefferson in Paris* and *Surviving Picasso*? When critics heap scorn on something you've just made and love dearly, you have to be thick-skinned, as Oscar Wilde appeared to be on one occasion when he declared, apropos of a play of his that didn't work, "My play was a success; it was the audience that was a failure." So you must tell yourself: "My film is a success; it is the critics who are a failure."

*Long:* But there are critics and critics . . .

*Ivory:* Unfortunately, many of today's critics do not seem to be writing for the moviegoing public. The most important audience for these reviewers is made up of other reviewers. Film criticism itself seems to have become one more form of show business, almost stand-up comedy. In the newspapers and on television these days, the reviewers are the performers that count, the *real* stars.

*Long:* Merchant Ivory seems to have been stuck with its own distinctive set of adjectives that critics apply exclusively when putting down your films.

*Ivory:* It's hard to imagine that those reviewers use such words in their actual speech: "decorous," "languorous," "stately"—as in a "stately pace." "Pallid" is another word they like a lot. And "wan." Perhaps they picked these obsolete words up from anthologies of Pauline Kael reviews. But she had an old-fashioned education; she knew what she was doing.

*Long:* What can you tell me about the famous remark the director Alan Parker made about your films, referring to them as belonging to the "Laura Ashley school of filmmaking"?

*Ivory:* Actually, he had drawn a cartoon about us for the English film magazine *Screen International*, which flourishes in a big way at film festivals like Cannes. The cartoon showed two middle-aged people putting their coats on at the end of one of our films. On the screen behind them it says, "A Merchant Ivory Production." One says to the other, "I don't like those Laura Ashley kinds of films." It made me laugh, and I tried to buy the original drawing, but somebody else got there first. The press picked it up, and it's hounded us down through the years. His joke will be remembered long after Parker's own films are forgotten, I think.

*Long:* Both you and Ismail are remarkably prolific. As soon as you complete a film, you begin the next one. Is this an ideal way for you to work, or is it dictated by the need to keep your film production company moving along?

*Ivory:* Well, of course one wants to go on as long as one can, as long as one has the energy. And, naturally, for our company to survive, we have to produce new films. My hope is that we will be able to do that with younger directors working through us on their own projects.

*Long:* When you and Ismail were making your early films, you were always in transit and were never in one place for long. Today, after a long and suc-

cessful career, you have comfortable homes and New York apartments, but you still travel almost constantly. If I see you in New York, you may be leaving for your home upstate in Claverack, and a day or two after that you may be flying to Los Angeles. When summer arrives, you are sure to spend a few weeks in a cabin in the Oregon woods; and when you return to New York, you may soon be off to London or Paris or Venice or even Bombay. Don't you ever tire of traveling?

*Ivory:* Not really. Except for my weeks off in the Oregon cabin, my travels always have to do with my films—one about to start somewhere, one about to open somewhere else, one to be presented at a festival.

*Long:* By the way, I have sometimes wondered what you do when you go to that cabin in the Oregon woods. Do you swim or fish or commune with nature or . . . ?

*Ivory:* I've never fished in my life. I don't like to eat fish very much, and catching them has no interest whatsoever for me. I do swim, but my lake is cold. As for communing with nature, at my age one finds oneself simply sitting somewhere *in* nature, staring ahead either without a thought in one's head or else with thoughts far, far away from nature. No, at Lake of the Woods I see my old friends from high school and college, some of whom are extremely good company, or I import my company.

*Long:* Your home base has been New York City rather than Hollywood. What does Manhattan mean to you as distinct from what it means, say, to Woody Allen?

*Ivory:* I can't answer that; my Manhattan is not Woody Allen's. He's always lived in New York, whereas I came to it straight out of college on the West Coast. It was then the beckoning city of sophistication, and I was—and still perhaps am—as susceptible to its glamour as when I was twenty-four. Anyway, it's my home, for better or worse. I can't imagine living full-time somewhere else. I wish I'd made more films in New York, however.

*Long:* What about London? You're often in London and have a branch office there. What are some of the attractions of London for you?

*Ivory:* I like it well enough. I have many close English friends, and there is an interesting, very agreeable sort of social life, which is, in some ways, more interesting than that of New York. The English are always surprising me. And

then there is the city itself, a sort of treasure house, like Paris—maybe even more than Paris. Things to see and things to buy, if you're so inclined.

*Long:* You have apartments everywhere, it seems, and you also have permanent offices—one in New York with a fine view, another in Paris.

*Ivory:* The one in Paris is a fifth-floor walk-up—it kills you.

*Long:* Another in Bombay.

*Ivory:* I don't know how permanent any of them are. Ismail is always threatening to shut one or the other down—just as he threatens to sell the apartments. Today it's New York, the next day Paris. Never London, however.

*Long:* Why is that?

*Ivory:* Because nearly every film we make now is based in Europe or India, so it's the London office that mostly deals with financial matters, production matters. Say, the lab or music recording—big things like that.

*Long:* Ismail can't run all these offices himself. He must have some help.

*Ivory:* He gets it in England from Paul Bradley. Paul started working for us there when we didn't even have an office, when we were making *Heat and Dust* out of the basement of the publisher John Murray, who publishes all Ruth Jhabvala's novels. Paul must have been very young—twenty-two or twenty-three. He looked like an undergraduate, but he had then—and still has, though more so—an iron authority and an unflappable manner. He was like those young men in English war movies who always knew in an emergency the right, sensible thing to do and say. Ismail's rages don't faze him, or my "artistic beastliness" either. He just goes on, has thrown his lot in with us for better or worse. And he has a great sense of humor, which you really need when you work for Merchant Ivory. Behind every one of our big English movies you will find Paul Bradley, moving men and matériel around (and money), until victory is assured.

*Long:* And in New York? Who is in charge there when Ismail is away?

*Ivory:* That would be Richard Hawley, an altogether different type than Paul Bradley—someone with a different fighting style; someone, you could say, who is never thrown off-base by the guerrilla warfare of the entertainment business in New York and on the West Coast.

*Long:* You didn't mention the English theater. When I lived in London, I went to the theater all the time and saw everyone perform there, including Laurence

Olivier in repertory. One night he was the father in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, and the next he was Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. You must have had acquaintances in the London theater or have known some of the leading figures.

*Ivory:* I've met some, mostly socially, as friends of friends. But since you've just mentioned Olivier, here is a little story about him. In 1985, while we were shooting *A Room with a View*, Maggie Smith and her husband, Beverley Cross, asked me for the weekend at their house in Fittleworth, in West Sussex. On the Sunday, we went to lunch at the Oliviers, who lived nearby. He was sitting in his garden under a big tree. By then he was pretty old and frail. He'd suffered from cancer and had also recently banged his shin against a bed and developed a clot, so that he had to wear shorts and keep the leg propped up on a stool. Maggie introduced me and explained that she was shooting a film with me. He was extraordinarily courteous and welcoming; he kept getting up to show his guests to their chairs, though it was obviously a struggle, and he even offered to go and fetch our plates of lunch, though he could barely totter. I didn't exactly help matters; in my haste to refill my glass of champagne, I knocked against the stool on which he'd rested his throbbing leg, but being such a great actor and perfect host, he stifled his cries. He told me an extraordinary thing, confiding perhaps as one director to another (or as an elder to a younger)—though I don't know which films of mine he'd ever seen, beyond *Shakespeare Wallah*. He said that the accomplishments in life he felt the happiest about were the two films he'd directed, *Henry V* and *Hamlet*. Those made him prouder, more satisfied, than anything else he'd ever done. This coming from the man everyone calls the greatest English-speaking actor of the twentieth century!

*Long:* Do you know other directors or spend time with them socially?

*Ivory:* In the course of my rather long directing career I've met many other directors, but apart from Satyajit Ray I've never become close to any of them. I have felt warmly toward some, and if I could have spent more time with them, I feel that they might have become personal friends: Louis Malle, Krzysztof Zanussi, Peter Weir, Jacques Demy, Martin Scorsese. It might have been possible to have had interesting discussions about work, actors, and just life generally. At Venice, before the fall of the iron curtain countries, I came to know Zanussi slightly; but at the end of our lunch together—before the end, in fact—

some Polish strong-arm men came to the table and signaled that it was time to go. He had warned us this would happen when he sat down. He flew off to Warsaw under escort, and I never saw him again.

*Long:* What is it apt to be like when two film directors meet?

*Ivory:* The orbits of film directors swing together and intersect for a few moments at film festivals and other official functions, and then you're off again on what might be thought of as a lonely trajectory. I've noticed that these encounters can be a little edgy; one feels that defenses are up, well in place. Remarks are apt to be carefully formal, a bit distanced, guarded. There will be a mutual exchange about having admired the other's recent film, with suitable expressions of modesty and self-deprecation. This must be the only time that directors are so modest: when they are talking to each other. [*Long laughs*]

*Long:* Is there any comment made to you by another director that you have always remembered?

*Ivory:* I remember how a very senior director put a junior colleague, myself, at ease. I once met Jean Renoir, and after I gave him news and greetings from Indian friends, he touched my necktie, which had a stylized paisley pattern on it of mangoes, and said, more or less: "When you eat an Indian mango, you taste all the succulence of India—just as, when you bite into an apple from Normandy, you can taste in its crisp flesh all the rich flavors of France." He spoke in English and no doubt had said this other times in French, much more beautifully than I recall it today. But I was wowed by it.

*Long:* Speaking of Jean Renoir, it's been said that your ancestor is Renoir and the humanist filmmaking tradition that he stands at the head of. Do you yourself think this is so?

*Ivory:* Perhaps it's true; it would be nice to think there's a line from Renoir and Ray to me. That would be one line perhaps. I think a parallel cinema has recently developed in China, actually. Today's Chinese films remind me of the humanist cinema of the past in the West. I think it would be impossible to make similar films in America in any sort of consistent way today.

*Long:* Your reading would be interesting, probably revealing. Do you have time to read very much?

*Ivory:* Yes, even while shooting I manage to read. This is mainly for plea-

sure. I don't really read in the hope of finding some book to make into a movie, though that is the assumption of many people.

*Long:* A final question. You've made so many films that celebrate other countries, other cultures, other worlds. Do you have affirmative, even patriotic, sentiments regarding your own country?

*Ivory:* Never so much as when I'm looking down at it from an airplane. Then I think of it—I may have been drinking—but sometimes I think of it almost with a kind of rapture as *my* country. I don't mean I feel *I* own it, or want to own, or possess, it. But it's my country. My own. And this is never so strong as in the big expanses of the West. But once I'm over the Rocky Mountains going east, I seem to lose interest. It's strange, seeing that I've lived my entire productive life on the well-ordered East Coast in and around New York and have a beautiful house in the Hudson Valley, which I almost think of as the House of Life, like that of Mario Praz. Yet somehow I'm more emotionally connected to the uninhabited, wild, desolate western deserts than to the more regular and tamed eastern part of my country. (I think that's why I loved Afghanistan so much, both on the ground and from an Ariana Airlines plane; it must have reminded me of home.)

*Long:* I didn't know you had such strong feelings about desert places . . .

*Ivory:* I look down on the long, long scratches on the red earth of Arizona from a height of thirty-five thousand feet, and I wonder: Where do these dirt roads go? Who put them there? What purpose do they serve? I feel as someone might feel who is flying over Mars and looking down on the so-called canals: How do those scratches happen to be there? And then when I see towns, some of them huge, I also wonder: Who lives there in this wild, cut-off, seemingly cursed place, with playing fields and swimming pools? What do the people do? What jobs do they have? But I don't want to omit saying that to look straight down on Manhattan at the end of my trip, especially at night, is also to experience a kind of ecstasy.