

SEATTLEWEEKLY

Going to the well

Bringing a literary classic to the screen.

By Amy Halloran

October 7, 1998

Stephen Schiff didn't always want to write screenplays.

"To the contrary," he told me over the phone from his home in New York. "It seems like I was the only one in New York who wasn't writing a screenplay or didn't want to write a screenplay. I didn't see it as writing. I was wedded to prose."

Schiff's name might sound familiar from his journalism on NPR's *Fresh Air*, in *Vanity Fair*, and in *The New Yorker*, where he still is on staff. *Lolita* is his first effort for the screen, but not his last. Lili Zanuck first asked him to try his hand at screenwriting *Lolita* in 1990, and then he tried again in 1994, after James Dearden's, Harold Pinter's, and David Mamet's attempts were deemed insufficient.

"It's interesting the degree to which journalism prepared me for being a screenwriter. When you're doing a literary profile you're bound to create for the reader a sense of narrative where there is no narrative. You have this person before you, but people are not characters. Even writing a nonfiction portrait of someone, you are engaged in the act of character-making. These things suddenly came into play in screenwriting."

Schiff sculpted the screenplay for this latest *Lolita* using Vladimir Nabokov's novel, director Adrian Lyne's guidelines, and the scripts written by Pinter, Dearden, and Mamet as references. Schiff and Lyne don't consider Stanley Kubrick's 1962 film a version of *Lolita* at all. In this original, Peter Sellers improvised his character, Clare Quilty, the man who steals Lolita from Humbert.

"It was a film that might be called *Quilty*, but really not an adaptation of the novel, so it seemed we might be going to the well the first time," Schiff said.

Nabokov scripted Kubrick's *Lolita*, but his screenplay was barely used. The screenplay was first published in 1974, and re-released by Vintage last year in anticipation of the new movie. Nabokov's screenplay is beautiful and baroque, a fabulous read. Schiff didn't use Nabokov's screenplay while he was writing his own. In fact, he didn't read it until the project was finished and so many journalists asked him about it that he felt obliged. "It does the novel wrong," he said. "The novel is a very alive literary event. The characters are alive, and his screenplay is not. It also of course would have resulted quite literally in a seven-hour movie."

Schiff hadn't seen Kubrick's *Lolita* for more than a decade when he began his own writing, so he didn't have to erase James Mason's Humbert and Shelley Winters' Charlotte before he began imagining his own. Still, I suggested to him, it must have been hard to work under the mantle cast by *Lolita*, as book, movie, and icon. After all, "nymphet" wasn't in the lexicon until 1955, when the book was first published. "Perhaps I should have been more daunted than I was," Schiff admitted. "I just didn't approach it from the position of fear because I've been a writer a long time."

There *were* problems that loomed large to Schiff in his screenwriting. "*Lolita* herself is glimpsed only very dimly in the novel, so I really had to make up *Lolita*," Schiff continued, "because one can pretty quickly

surmise that whoever she may be she's probably not this kind of demonic creature that [Humbert's] obsession is conjuring up."

To create *Lolita*, Schiff relied on his own childhood. On family vacations he saw the neoned Americana Nabokov experienced on car tours with his wife, Vera, at the wheel. Schiff selected details like Magic Fingers, jawbreakers, Wonder Bread, and Oreo cookies to define *Lolita*. Unfortunately, Nabisco and Wonder Bread wouldn't allow their names to be used in the movie, so scenes of *Lolita* eating wholesome treats ended up on the cutting-room floor—alongside scenes that risked violating the 1996 Child Pornography Act.

"I really wanted to approximate this effect that is true of the novel, and I think in many ways true of the greatest works of literature and indeed of the other arts, which is to have the viewer, as Nabokov has the reader, put himself or herself inside the mind of someone whose deeds they despise, so that you expand to fill a consciousness that you yourself would not ordinarily possess, while at the same time not losing your own moral compass. To me that's one of the most valuable things that art or literature can do."

These are ambitious and admirable goals, but ones that weren't, to my mind, met in the final product of Lyne's film. Without Humbert's mania steadied as a looking glass on the events described, our sympathies tend toward *Lolita*, who becomes the obvious victim. We lose our chance to put ourselves inside the mind of someone whose deeds we despise.

Dimitri Nabokov, Nabokov's only child and the careful executor of his father's literary estate, has declared Lyne and Schiff's *Lolita* the best film made of his father's work. "And it's the only film made from his father's work that his father would have loved," said Schiff.

But is that possible to know? As Nabokov himself wrote in his 1973 introduction to his screenplay, "When adapting *Lolita* to the speaking screen, [Kubrick] saw my novel in one way, I saw it in another—that's all, nor can one deny that infinite fidelity may be an author's ideal but a producer's ruin."

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