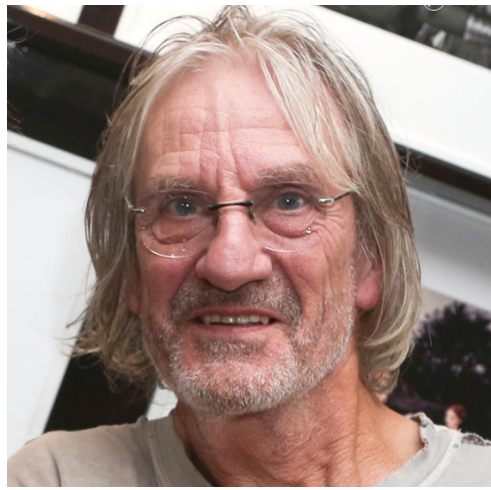


A Conversation with Andrew Birkin



LostReels met with screenwriter and director Andrew Birkin in August 2023 to discuss his work on *The Name of the Rose*. The following is a complete transcript of our discussion.

LR: Hello Andrew. Thanks so much for joining me and helping to present the film again to UK audiences. How did you first get involved with the film?

AB: I was in Hollywood doing something else and was staying in Malibu with some friends and my then-partner, and I just got a phone call saying would I meet Bernd Eichinger [the film's producer], who duly came over and told me a bit about *The Name of the Rose*. I didn't know it, I hadn't read it, but I was pretty interested in the idea of a monastery and this lost book of Aristotle, and the idea of laughter being a sin as a central theme. And we went from there. They'd already had two scripts done, one by Gérard Brach which was wonderful and very poetic but completely unfilmable – it would have gone on for four hours and cost mega-dollars – and then they had a second one done by a guy in America called Howard Franklin that I referred to as “Raiders of the Lost Monastery”, because that was at the other extreme, it was very much a Hollywood script and it lacked a lot of the nuances, the parts that actually interested me. Then I met with Jean-Jacques Annaud who came up to Wales where I was living and talked a lot about religion and Aristotle, I guess he was vetting me, then I got the thumbs up to go ahead and start writing it, which I did. I wrote a draft screenplay I thought was pretty good. It was probably a little too “Ingmar Bergman-ish” in the sense that it was a little closer to the Gérard Brach than the Franklin. But I did make it a central part of my take on it that the relationship between Baskerville and Adso, and I felt in very broad strokes that in the third act that he should have to choose between the books and the Boy, and that he would choose the Boy, grabbing a few books as an afterthought. Having been this man of letters, words and ideas, and being unemotional, I liked the idea that in the end his emotions would win out and that he'd sacrifice the books for the Boy. Eichinger didn't like this at all – it wasn't so much Jean-Jacques Annaud – he said, ‘but everyone will say he's gay’. I said good luck to them, there's nothing gay about it, it's to do with emotion and caring about somebody and loving somebody, but not

necessarily in a sexual way and I thought that's what the Church was all about – faith, hope, love and the greatest of these is love. The upshot of that was, I would go out to Germany and spend however long it would take to work with Jean-Jacques Annaud, but also with Eichinger very much in the foreground because it was his project.

LR: You worked on a new draft?

AB: I worked with Jean-Jacques Annaud. Basically, what we did was take a few bits out of the Franklin script, a few bits out of the Brach script, write a few new bits but it was more or less the one I had written, except for the fact that Eichinger wanted to backpedal on any suggestion of homosexuality. I didn't agree with it, I thought it was going to lose its soul. The fact that the Boy in the book is described as looking like a Botticelli Angel, and I talked to Eco a few times and he thought that was very important too. Not *Death in Venice*, but you know he should obviously be attractive. And when they cast Christian Slater, that was Eichinger casting someone who did not look attractive particularly. It was this fear that he had. It was always a bit of a problem for him, I don't know why. We came up with a new draft and that's when this thing with the Olivetti [an early home computer system] happened. They'd rented for me a keyboard, that was a German keyboard, but it worked with the Olivetti system so all I had to bring to Germany were the disks. I'd spent three or four days with Jean-Jacques and with Eichinger dropping in now and again, polishing it up, doing tiny bits here, tiny bits there, trims here, trims there. I can't remember quite what the distraction was, I think it was Jean-Jacques asking if we could look at an earlier draft or something, and I said sure okay. Control-L for 'look-at' then execute. Suddenly the machine made this awful grinding noise and I thought 'fuck, what's happened?' and everyone went into a panic, and it took unfortunately too many minutes to realise we could just unplug it and hope for the best. We got onto Olivetti and they said, 'we don't know what you've done, but bring it over here and we'll see what we can do'. I got in the car and drove over and found the Olivetti place, and they asked me to run through what I'd done. I'd pressed control-L for 'look-at' then execute. They said, 'L? L? You have liquidated the disc! We have exterminated the disc!' What I hadn't realised was that on a German keyboard the letters meant something different in German to in English. I got back to the office and there was a plate of caviar, and a lobster, and a bottle of champagne, and a note from Bernd saying, 'work right through the night and see if you can put back as much as you can remember', so that's what I did. And in some ways maybe the script was better because when you think too hard about lines, they can become kind of creaky, whereas if you're just going with the flow and doing it as fast as you can, it gains a certain spontaneity that it might not otherwise have had.

LR: Is it that the script you shot?

AB: That was the script we shot because Jean-Jacques was very meticulous about storyboarding, and he basically storyboarded everything from the screenplay which was printed on A3 so that half of it was the screenplay and half of it was his drawings and storyboard and he stuck to that rigidly.

LR: How did you come to have an acting role in the film?

AB: We'd been in Rome, and they wouldn't let me into the restaurant because I wasn't wearing a tie or something, or looked shabby, the way I tend to. This prompted Jean-Jacques to say, would I play one of the characters? I said I really don't like acting. First of all I don't think I'm very good at it, but secondly, I find it so boring sitting around on a set waiting, waiting, waiting, waiting... because I'd done it a couple of times before, again to please people, not because I particularly wanted to do it. My mother was an actress [Judy Campbell], my sister was an actress [Jane Birkin], I'm surrounded by that profession, but it's not for me. I like being behind the camera, or behind the typewriter or whatever. But anyway, he said would I play this part, and I said, 'on one condition - that I don't have to have a tonsure' [a shaved scalp], and he said 'everybody has to have a tonsure, even Sean Connery's going to have a tonsure', and I said 'well that's my red line, I don't want a tonsure'. So the upshot was I wore a plastic one. I was the only monk that got away with a plastic tonsure.

LR: It's not uncommon to have the writer on set or at least be available, so I wondered if you were there for that purpose originally?

AB: No, nothing to do with that, I was already writing something else. I don't like hanging around somebody else's set when somebody else is directing. I mean if I'm directing that's entirely different but all you're doing really is sitting there thinking you'd have done it, not better necessarily, but differently, and so on balance I find it more of a painful experience than a pleasurable one. And the writer is sometimes called onto the set, which does happen from time to time, you get called in to do a quick rewrite or something on a scene, but on the whole, I steer well clear. I hand in the script, I'm there for the director if they want to talk about it. I seem to remember I recorded the entire movie so that he [Jean-Jacques] would know where the stresses came because Jean-Jacques could speak English but it wasn't fluent English, and in my experience one of the problems is that unless the script is full of underlines, which are too strong, or italics which are too strong, sometimes they don't get the inflections, so I recorded it for him. I think I suggested it and he said that would be great, and I recorded the whole movie for him playing all the parts. But again, that had nothing to do with why he asked me to do it, we were in Rome. We were visiting the set which was then under construction, and Sean Connery had a big birthday celebration there which was good fun. So having agreed to play a part I had to show up. It was shot in two parts. In the real monastery and on the set in Rome. For this first part we were in Eberbach monastery, and it was December and freezing cold. And if you've ever been in a monastery that's not heated in the freezing cold then you'll know why Sean Connery insisted on having a relay of hot water bottles to sit on!

LR: I was watching the film again recently and you can see the breath of the actors.

AB: But when you cut to the exteriors in Rome you don't see the breath anymore. By then it was warm, and all the snow was artificial and had to be sprayed on.

LR: Do you have other particular memories of the shoot, or of Connery and the company?

AB: Well Sean I knew anyway from way back. I'd done some second unit on *Diamonds Are Forever*, and I'd been with him in Spain on a film called *Shalako* - or he was making *Shalako* we were making a Michael Caine movie next door - but we all used to get together in the evenings, so I knew him. And in fact, when I arrived at Eberbach at the hotel and Jean-Jacques wasn't there because they were shooting somewhere, and there was a note from Jean-Jacques saying 'Please do not speak to Sean until you have spoken to me, because he wants to put in ideas and it's too late to start putting in ideas.' And this was Jean-Jacques' point. I'm nothing like as inflexible myself when I'm directing, but then I've always directed stuff I wrote myself, so I don't mind a bit of ad-libbing or a bit of changing or whatever - I mean it's not Shakespeare - but he was scared that if I mess up with Sean that he would start breathing down my ear with these ideas. I didn't get a chance to reply and duly went down to the bar, and there was Sean sitting at the bar without Jean-Jacques. 'Andrew, Andrew, can I talk to you about a few ideas?' and I'm like 'Er, er...', but I wasn't really, I said 'Sure tell me, what ideas have you got?' I can't now remember what the ideas were particularly, but they all seemed fairly reasonable ideas, so when Jean-Jacques got back later on and I explained my dilemma that I'd run into him in the bar and he'd told me his ideas and I thought a couple of them were really good and he didn't want to hear what these ideas were. He said this has happened to me before, he said, I've been shooting a movie and somebody came up with an idea and it seemed like a good idea at the time and it was only later in the cutting rooms that I realised, 'Oh my God that line was in there for a very good reason because it pays off in Act III' or something to that effect, and so he was very inflexible on changing anything and that's why it's the script we wrote in Munich and that's the one that got shot.

LR: *Were you involved in post-production at all?*

AB: The shooting ended in terms of my part. I went back to England, went back to whatever the new project was that I was doing and didn't really hear from anybody until I got this urgent phone call - could I fly out to Munich because there were some problems? The basic problems were it was overlong so they needed to cut some chunks. I think I had originally said I thought that voiceover would probably be needed, but there are ways of using voiceover that doesn't have to sound like you're trying to plug holes in the Titanic. That was the problem, there was no voiceover, so I think in a day or a couple of days I scribbled out some things and I think that's what they used in the film.

LR: *Any final thoughts?*

AB: I still think that the casting [of Slater] was wrong, and it's a pity they didn't go for the more risky approach. The film is a bit too safe, and I know that would be countered by, 'oh but we got that girl, and they're actually having sex' doing that scene, but that's not what I mean by the dangerous edge of things. You know that Browning poem? 'Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things. The honest thief, the tender murderer, the superstitious atheist.' I love that. The dangerous edge of things, and not to be just black or white. But that's just me. That's just my opinion.

LR: *The film is what it is at this point I suppose.*

AB: Absolutely. It's certainly not a film I'm embarrassed by at all, except perhaps for my own acting performance. I don't think I ever ran into Jean-Jacques again. We parted on very good terms, but he's French, I'm English, we live in different countries, and circumstance has never brought us back together again. Eichinger I did go on working with, he financed a film I made called, *The Cement Garden* without even reading the script. That was great. But *The Name of the Rose* was basically a very pleasurable experience, even for all the sitting around.

Special thanks to Andrew Birkin for this interview.