



A NOVEL INTERPRETATION

Robin Swicord Takes on Jane Austen

BY **SUSAN MICHALS** PHOTOGRAPHY **PAUL SCHEFZ** HAIR/MAKEUP **STELLA**

For the writer, inspiration can come from anywhere—the waft of fresh honeysuckle; a fleeting, passing glance; the bittersweet taste of lemon. Jane Austen built an entire career illustrating the joys of such simplicities—compounded, of course, by romantic entanglements and sometimes embarrassing family members.

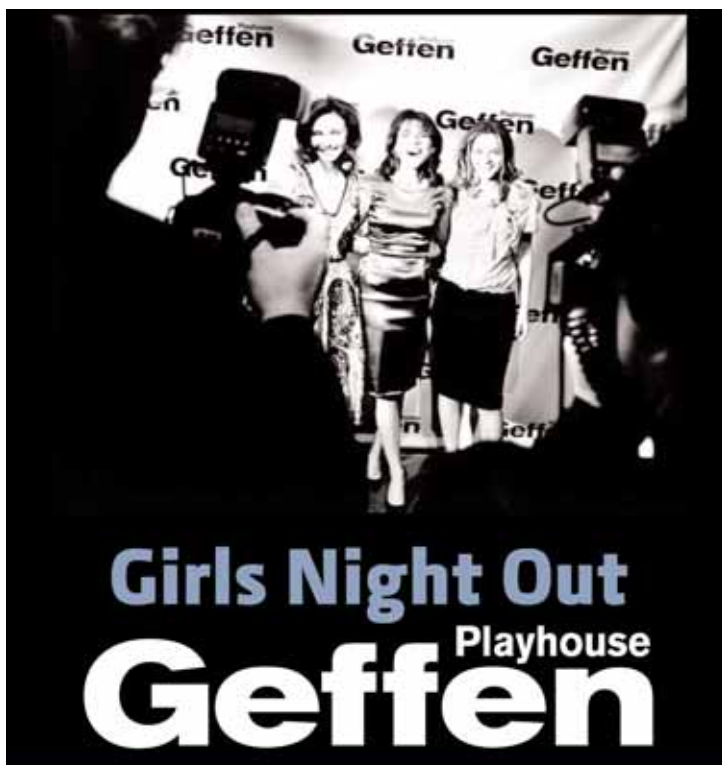
Much like Ms. Austen, Robin Swicord is also a purveyor of fine fictional concoctions. Looking round the cozy home she shares with husband (and fellow screenwriter) Nick Kazan, one can see examples of a most happy life—and a plethora of material. The walls, the tables—even the bookcases are graced with beautiful accoutrements from favorite excursions and beloved family. She pulls out a petite blue and gold Italian pottery set—what looks like on first glance a container for maybe oil and vinegar. “No no, it’s to serve Limoncello,” she tells this writer, another fan of all things Italian. Apparently, many years back, she and her family were traveling through Italy. Every night, the two parents—along with their young daughters—would partake in a “digestivo”—a drink comprised of lemon and hot water...or, so they thought. Soon thereafter, they found out the basis for this drink was Limoncello—a rather potent lemon liqueur. “It became a bit of a family joke,” laughs the screenwriter. “Some years later, Nick secretly bought this Limoncello set and gave it to me for my birthday—he knew it would always make me laugh.”

As a writer, Swicord has produced many a tale that has moved us to laugh and sometimes cry—she’s the woman behind the adaptations for many successful films, including *Little Women* and, most recently, *Memoirs of a Geisha*. Of course, there were a numerous scripts that never saw the light of day—but that hasn’t phased this writer one bit. “Most of my career has been spent pushing a big heavy rock up a hill, usually by myself; occasionally, others will join me,” laughs Swicord. “Mostly I just try to get impossible things made all the time, and it doesn’t happen very often.”

With that kind of creative gumption and determined ingenuity, she took on the best selling novel *The Jane Austen Book Club*, not only as writer—but director as well. *The Jane Austen Book Club* depicts the trials and tribulations of six characters, (including Maria Bello, Hugh Dancy, and Emily Blunt) brought together by their love of literature. As they work their way through six Austen novels, their lives begin to parallel the very books they are reading. Jocelyn (Maria Bello) is a commitment phobe, afraid to relinquish the control she finds so comforting. By sheer happenstance, she meets the gorgeous Grigg, (Hugh Dancy) and invites him to join her literary circle of Jane’s addiction with an ulterior motive—set him up with pal Sylvia, (Amy Brenneman) currently grieving the end of her 20-plus-year marriage to Jimmy Smits. Jocelyn personifies many an Austen character, particularly the matchmaking Emma. Yet as the film progresses, she evolves into that ultimate romantic heroine, the determined Elizabeth Bennett.

Part of the reason Swicord signed on to *The Jane Austen Book Club*, was she realized this story was deeper than just a love of Austen and all things romantic—it was about community and camaraderie. Today’s lives aren’t that far off from the characters epitomized in Austen’s novels—barring the cell phones, emails, and the barrage of media geared to the ADD-riddled masses. We still have the same feelings, the same emotions, and the same difficulties as her characters almost two hundred years ago. Swicord’s *Book Club* characters find a certain kinship in their book club meetings, but in the end, they realize there’s much more to their gatherings than just literary discussion.

Over two steaming cups of Limoncello—in Italian teacups, of course—Robin Swicord talks with Venice about interpreting Jane, making a movie on a shoestring budget, and how she pushed that rock up that momentous hill, one more time.



Third

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Venice: Recently there was an article in *Time Magazine* entitled “Who Killed the Love Story?” discussing the death of the romantic comedy. It talks about the mad rush for that first weekend financial haul, and how romantic films have gone by the wayside in favor of films like *Superbad* and *Transformers*—films geared to the teen boy market. That being said, was it hard for you to get this romantic comedy made?

Robin Swicord: I think the (romantic) genre has definitely fallen slightly out of favor. I guess it didn't come up for me because this (situation) was very unusual—most of my career has been spent pushing a big heavy rock up a hill, usually by myself—occasionally, others will join me. (laughs) But mostly, I try to get impossible things produced—and it doesn't happen very much. I write a lot of movie scripts compared to the movies that actually get made. So this (*The Jane Austen Book Club*) was the opposite experience—John Calley (producer, *Remains of the Day*, *The Da Vinci Code*) had read my script *The Jane Prize*, and he knew I had done the Austen research. Amy Pascal recommended me to write the script and I had always wanted to work with him, because his reputation among filmmakers was just stellar—everybody in the world loves him and I knew that he had mentored Amy and had really helped her lay out her career path. In our initial studio meeting I said, ‘This is a very tiny movie you're talking about.’ I had seen *Italian for Beginners* which I really loved—and I brought a copy of it to the meeting. I said, ‘The movie you're talking about making isn't much bigger than this, and I don't know if Columbia is in that business.’

Your budget for the film was tiny by today's standards (six million dollars). That's an independent, Sundance film kind of budget.

That's exactly what it is. When Amy Pascal said, “I love this story and I love this book and we should be making this movie,” John and I went on the strength of that and went for it. When I turned in the script, Amy then said, “I think you're right—this is a little small for Columbia, but maybe you can find another home for it here at Sony.” The next day John Calley told me Sony Classics is going to finance and distribute. I could not have been more shocked. It was the fastest I've ever experienced from writing the script to someone making it. It's really reflected in the respect that everyone has for John Calley, and my belief that this film could be made for a reasonable price.

That kind of meager movie budget could set off a lot of bells and whistles—you have a well known, variegated cast, and you made it for a song.



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Sony Classics had already done well with *Friends with Money*, which was made for about the same amount. That was the number that had stuck in their heads. I called Julie Lynn (producer, *Wit, Ten Items or Less*) who has made a lot of movies for under three million dollars. She was a godsend—she brought in (line producer) Jonathan McCoy and he put together a budget. He said we had to make it in 30 days, and nobody got star salaries. Everyone was paid the same. But because it was not shot out of town, you could get actors to say yes because at the end of the day they could go home and sleep in their own beds. Once we had Maria Bello in place, we were able to attract the rest of the cast.

I particularly liked Kevin Zegers character—he's so beautiful.

He really is and he's a doll to work with. Everyone in this cast was incredible—Kathy Baker—such a pro, so much fun to work with, was sort of the glue of the group.

Once we had a wonderful cast, then I could get my perfect crew together and we ended up with an unusually high-powered group of people to surround a first-time director.

I've read just about all of Jane Austen's books, so I almost feel like that gave me an edge going into the movie when various Austen characters were mentioned in the movie. Was there any worry on your part about audience members who don't know Elizabeth Bennett from Emma?

I didn't worry about that because of the nature of the script. Originally, I had been writing something called "The Jane Prize"—which was much more academic, talking about Jane Austen. (With that script) there was more of a worry that people wouldn't have a common understanding; some of the conversations were more intellectual than what you might find in say, a book club. But with *The Jane Austen Book Club*, everyone can relate. I can relate to Jocelyn (Maria Bello) because she's like me—she likes to set people up, and I like to set people up. There's nothing intellectual in that. That's the sort of common ground people who might discuss in the book club meeting. Having already written something more rarefied ("The Jane Prize") and grappled with this problem, I found ways to work the plotlines of the (various Austen) books into dialogue and have characters who were not academic kind of interpret for the people unfamiliar with the Austen mindset—like "What Austen was really trying to say was this..."

That was great because Hugh Dancy's character is not exactly an academic.

None of them were academics.

Yes, but the women in the film were more 'experts' on Austen—every one of them had read the Austen books at least once beforehand and he was the newbie.

Right, and I wasn't that worried. I thought there was a way at the writing level to clue people in. What was interesting for me was when people starting seeing the film. I ran a very open process—in prep, in shooting, in the edit room. I had many people come into the editing room in different stages because I really wanted to make a film that didn't leave anybody out. And if I heard it from two different people I paid attention to it. It was pointless for me to make a film that was about our everyday lives and make something that was too rarefied for people to relate to.

When we first played this before a paying audience in Boston—we did one test—it was a recruited audience—it was mixed racially, mixed in terms of ages, income, and educational background. And I was amazed when the numbers came back, at how many men liked the movie. People who did not come from an academic background, responded to the film. So I quit worrying; I felt we had made a film that almost anyone can understand, even people who've never heard of Jane Austen. We did know who we were making it for, but I think the things the film says about community and the need for refuge—how literature illuminates our lives...

There's also the fact that some of your characters are going through difficult issues, and the camaraderie and being able to really depend on each other in this situation is almost like therapy.

Almost. And the funny thing is, people who have been in book clubs a long time, say that it becomes like group therapy. And that becomes one of the reasons that they don't want to miss it is because they're letting the group down if they don't show up, ready to participate. And one of the things that happens in the shape of the story is that at the beginning people (the characters in the film) are sort of there for each other, but they don't necessarily feel a big responsibility. There's community, but they're not really that connected. And the process, is through reading these Austen books, they bond—they build a community that owes some responsibility to each other, and at the end it's elastic—that at the end, that these other partners of the women can enter the group and you get a sense that they've moved from sort of a semblance of community to something where they really know each other.

I know you've directed a short in the past, but what made you want to direct? Why this story?

Well, I've been trying to direct for a long time.

I know for a screenwriter, it must be good and bad on how your script makes it to the screen.

Sometimes the process can be great. Sometimes you can really come out with a great collaboration. That happened with Rob Marshall on *Memoirs of a Geisha*. I set out to write a film that he wanted to make; he had very clear ideas, and I was happy to be in service to his ideas. That was a fun, rewarding collaboration and I was proud of it.

Directing is an interpretive art. Someone has written something; there is a primacy of their ideas already that exists and it is your job to come to that, join it, and to make one vision that coheres. The problem is, that collaboration is not necessarily a given between directors and screenwriters. Very often writers are just disposed of, and directors are going to make it the way they want. Sometimes they are visionary people. But sometimes, they're just struggling. When people are good at interpretation and collaboration, it's a joy.

So how do you get the director to understand your work?

If they're willing to meet and collaborate and talk about it, you can join forces. But many times that's not the case, and a very different movie is made. And you're supposed to be grateful, and I am. It's a nice paycheck and you can sit there and complain as a working screenwriter that your work is getting made. That would be ungrateful. In terms of the creative satisfaction, for me, I knew it was only going to really happen when I got to direct as well.

It's such a crap shoot when you're a writer and you're not in control of all the other aspects of your script. People always ask why screenwriters want to direct—and people say self defense. But that isn't necessarily the case with me. I always wanted to direct and be a filmmaker from my early 20s, but I didn't know quite how to get there. I was coming of age in the late '70s, and there were not many female filmmakers, and women were thought of in a very different way, and there was still a lot of sexual harassment in Hollywood. When I would go around and try to make a film people would say, "You should be a script girl." But after I sold my first screenplay, I started saying right away that I wanted to direct. I see the film very clearly—I see the costumes, the people; I hear the music. It's so complete in my head. That's what I put into this movie, and that's what I hope will resonate. ▼

The Jane Austen Book Club opens September 21st.