Claire Monk: What was your response to Forster’s novel Maurice, and to Maurice as a character, when you first read it?

James Wilby: I had a very, very immediate love of the book. Forster is an amazing writer – an astonishing writer – and even the simple prose in Maurice is absolutely beautiful to read. Forster writes very much from the character’s viewpoint, so you’re right inside Maurice’s head – and that, for an actor, is doing half the work. For me, it’s a simple love story, in a way, with the obvious exception that Maurice is gay. It’s really odd anyway why one falls in love with one person rather than another, and when you do, it’s a kind of mad thing. And that is what happens to Maurice. The first time round he’s betrayed – and then you find your real love. So I found that side of it clear as daylight. He grows, throughout the film or the book, and slowly begins to understand himself.

CM: When James Ivory cast you as Maurice, he called it ‘the biggest role we’ve ever given a young actor’. You’d trained at RADA [the UK’s Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts] and been acting in theatre for four years – but Maurice was your first leading film role. You succeeded brilliantly: at the 1987 Venice Film Festival, you and Hugh Grant shared the Best Actor award for your performances. Yet you almost didn’t get to play Maurice at all. What did the film mean for your career at the time? And how did you approach preparing to play Maurice under challenging circumstances?

JW: Well, absolutely huge. I was a jobbing actor – just started, really. It was an extraordinary sequence of events that ended up with me playing Maurice. The first, obviously, was that Julian Sands walked out of the role. I think he had some kind of crisis: he left his wife, and his agent, and the country. I was working in the theatre [in Summer 1986, Chichester Festival Theatre, England, playing St John Rivers in Jane Eyre] when I got the recall to be interviewed again for the role – which, unknown to me, was because Sands had pulled out. By the time I met with James Ivory, I’d read the novel, and the script two or three times. I had a second recall – and then we pretty much went straight into filming. I finished in the theatre on the Saturday, we did a read-through in London on the Sunday – with some of the cast not even there – and started shooting on the Monday [6 October 1986]. I’m in almost every scene, so it was quite a haul from that point of view – but I just got on with it. And absolutely loved doing it.
CM: You already knew Hugh Grant (Clive Durham) slightly – and, as you recount in *The Story of Maurice* (2004) documentary, the two of you were able to work Maurice and Clive’s scenes ‘to death’ the night before the crucial recall audition – but not Rupert Graves (Alec Scudder). Maurice and Alec were then thrown together into some of their most important and intimate scenes very early in the shoot. At every stage, their developing relationship seems rooted in a real trust between actors. How did you build that rapport?

JW: Hugh was part of a comedy revue troupe called the Jockeys of Norfolk with two very close friends of mine from RADA. Then we met properly working together on a film called *Privileged* [1982, directed by Michael Hoffman for the Oxford Film Foundation] and rekindled our friendship. For *Maurice*, Hugh was very keen that I got the part (laughs), probably because he felt he knew me slightly rather than playing Clive to a Maurice he’d never met before.

Rupert and I struck an immediate friendship. We had to shoot the end scene, in the boathouse when we kiss, on the fourth day – I remember that very vividly. And we went out for dinner the night before to ostensibly discuss it. We went for an Indian meal (laughs), and we talked about everything else under the sun except for that. On the way back to the hotel, we walked through the streets, and – Rupert says he said this, but I know I did – I said: ‘I just think we should go for it, it should be a proper kiss’, and he went: ‘Yeah, so do I’. And that’s all we said about the scene. And the next day, his tongue was halfway down my throat, and that was the end of that! There was one take where there’s a tiny bit of saliva that connects us for a couple of inches as we part – but then later, when I was in the dubbing studio, Jim [Ivory] had used a different take. And I said: ‘Why have you changed the take?’ – and he says (impersonates Ivory): ‘Well ... uhh, I'm just not sure about that saliva dribble...’ I said: ‘But that’s good! Because that means it was happening!’ And he went: ‘Uh-uhh’. Then later I noticed it was back in the film.

In a curious way, doing that scene very early on was a help. People always ask actors: it must be very difficult to film scenes out of sequence, but it’s not true – it’s actually easier. The fact that we’d done that – that we knew we could do that – helped all the other scenes that we were going to play earlier [in the story chronology] but much later in the schedule. The hardest scene with Rupert was not the kiss – it was actually the scene in the hotel bedroom. That was a tricky scene. I think it’s the fact that we were naked together in bed, and it’s emotionally a tougher scene. The closing scene between Maurice and Alec at the boathouse is resolved – they’re together – but the hotel scene is unresolved, and that’s always a much harder thing to act.

CM: One distinctive feature of the hotel scene is the camera distance. I wondered how far that was a choice – or more a practical necessity when filming in such a small room. There are reports of Ivory having to direct wedged into a doorway, certainly in some of the Cambridge college rooms.
JW: Well, in those days there were no monitors – so if you wanted to watch what was happening, everyone – everybody – was behind the camera. It was rather lovely for the actor, because you had all this energy coming at you. Underneath the camera, or behind it somewhere, there would be Jim sitting on a little stool, the continuity girl on another stool, and [cinematographer] Pierre Lhomme trying to watch his lighting – Pierre didn't camera-operate, he lit. So there'd be a lot of people about. It was quite (laughs) – some of those rooms were tiny. And, if you're filming reverses, you've got an actor standing there too who you're supposed to pick out from this huddle of people. But I'm making it sound harder than it is – because they're such professionals, camera crews. I have such admiration for them. After the first day, it's as though they're invisible.

CM: As a viewer, it's startling to think of that number of crew squeezed into the room during such an intimate scene.

JW: And the hotel bed collapsed just before we started shooting. Pierre said, 'Ah, what a man!' and we all laughed. It completely defused the tension in the room. Because you're talking about a focus-puller, a clapper-loader, a camera operator, a director, a lighting man, all staring while you're doing ... and it was the first time I'd done anything naked on film.

CM: The precision of Pierre Lhomme's cinematography for Maurice is astonishing, and has absolutely stood the test of time.

JW: A wonderful man, wonderful cameraman, absolutely brilliant. While obviously the day scenes are bright, the interiors were very, very darkly filmed, but absolutely brilliantly lit. Many scenes were lit using natural candles, or with low bulbs, or little standard lamps. I remember many times sitting there waiting to shoot, and Pierre would come up with a little can of something and spray a tiny spot on the bulb, which was obviously giving off too bright a light at that precise point. The detail of the lighting was extraordinary. Some scenes took hours to film – I think all films do if they're using very low light, because you're lighting pools, not the whole set. I just remember it.

CM: More broadly, what was the atmosphere like on set? Some of Maurice's pre-release press coverage (originating from the set publicist Mira Stout) made it sound very entertaining. Reportedly, you had 'manic energy, playing the piano in a romantic way between takes', while Rupert Graves 'prowl[ed] the set' ‘playing air-guitar on a cricket bat’ – but I've no idea how accurate these stories were!

JW: That's all a bit exaggerated. Ivory always runs a very open set, and likes laughter, but in the main it was hard work going on. I smoked a lot, I remember that. Merchant Ivory never had trailers, so when I was off set I would hang out in wardrobe, or make-up, or whatever location we were filming in. And at one place there was a piano – I love playing the piano and I didn't have one, so whenever I saw a piano I used to play it. Rupert is a naturally funny man to be around – and Hugh's got this phenomenal wit – so you can't not laugh when you're around those two.
Laughter’s such a useful thing for actors because it relaxes your face. I didn’t know that then – I know it now. Michael Gambon taught me that working on [Robert Altman’s] Gosford Park. It’s really helpful to laugh – specifically, before very tense scenes. I’d be much looser now if I was filming some of the stuff I did when I was younger. I took it all a bit too seriously, to be honest (laughs).

CM: It’s on record that Maurice proved harder to make than Ivory had anticipated. It became his longest-ever shoot: 54 days in October to December 1986, including long days, inevitable night shoots, some weekends, some rescheduling – then some final scenes completed in May 1987 with a different crew. What are your own memories of this? Do you recall the shoot as especially demanding?

JW: I got onto a treadmill, and when we finished I got off it and went: ‘Whoa!’ I was absolutely exhausted at the end. The hours were very long. I think we did a 10-week shoot – I’ve never done more than seven on any other film – and then we had a pick-up of about 10 days a few months later. That threw me, because there’s something fantastic about finishing a film. It’s like finishing the marathon – you’ve done it, and you can have a nice long bath and go and get drunk, or whatever. Instead, there was this hiatus where I had to carry the character around with me, then remember back to what we’d done almost six months earlier. That was tough.

CM: Maurice’s daily call sheets (filed in Ivory’s archives at the University of Oregon) confirm this challenging schedule, and also the practical restrictions when filming in central London locations. It added to my admiration for what you and your co-stars achieve in some of the film’s most emotionally delicate scenes to realise that Maurice and Alec’s turning-point scene inside the British Museum was shot at 9am on a Sunday, while their morning after at the hotel – actually the Architectural Association in Bedford Square – was shot with the surrounding offices in use...

JW: Oh, this is filming – you do it at any time you're asked. I like a bit of pressure, I always have. So much time can be wasted on a film set – but if there’s pressure, everybody's on their mettle, because there isn't time to waste time. And it's much more linear for the actor. You’re not sitting around for hours: you’re on, and you know you’ve got to get it right and get on with it, and I quite enjoy all that. I’ve always enjoyed all that.

For the British Museum, I remember we had to go very, very early that day, and be out by some specific time. There was a furore because we weren’t quite finished, and there was Ismail [Merchant] running around trying to pay people: ‘Not done!’ (laughs). But mostly I just remember rain machines and things like that. I mean, they were a bit naughty – we were doing 12-hour days, and we’d often go on for 13, if not 14, hours. You could never do that now. Merchant and Ivory were guerrilla filmmakers, really, to start with. I don’t mean guerrilla – but they were used to shooting on very low budgets, with high-quality actors and a high-quality script.
CM: I think the people who call Ivory's films ‘elegant’ or ‘lavish’ don't always grasp that these were very low-budget films.

JW: Ismail never told anyone the real budget of Maurice. He made out it was probably five times more than it actually was.

CM: Ivory and his co-screenwriter Kit Hesketh Harvey, with some significant input from Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, initially experimented with shaping Maurice's script quite differently from the linearity of Forster's novel. Some of this non-linear approach remained in the shooting script – as can be seen in some of Maurice's alternative and deleted scenes, especially the reconstructed opening sequence – but the released film reverted (I think, entirely rightly) to a linear structure much closer to Forster’s. The scenes that were shot but not included are of huge interest to Maurice's audiences – but you may know better than I do whether there was ever any prospect of a different, longer edit of Maurice being released!

JW: Jim always hates cutting anything – Ismail used to have to beat him with a broom [metaphorically] to make him cut stuff. I shot every scene for itself – even if it’s a flashback, you're still shooting it as though it's not. Does that make sense? So I have no memory of the film being shot in flashback – but I'm glad it's not. For the actor, it doesn't make a lot of difference: it's up to the director how he structures his final edit.

CM: Do you remember shooting any scenes that were cut that you wish had remained in the film – or vice versa?

JW: There's one. There's a sequence in the book where Maurice looks at himself naked in the mirror – I suppose for some kind of imperfection – and realises that he's a handsome muscular chap. [In Forster's words: 'He saw a well-trained serviceable body and a face that contradicted it no longer.'] We tried to shoot this. And I said to Jim: 'This is incredibly undramatic, because all I can really do is look at myself naked in a mirror.' And I'm quite glad (laughs a lot) that it's not in the final version. Very glad. (Laughs)

CM: In the novel it's quite an important scene – but very difficult to make it denote what Forster intended purely by filming a naked actor.

JW: Exactly. Unless there's some kind of voiceover, which would not have been in keeping with the rest of the film.

CM: What were your reactions when you saw Maurice in its completed form for the first time? And can you talk about the responses the film received?

JW: The first time I saw it was at a screening in London. I was sitting behind Ismail, and at the end of the film I saw his shoulders shaking. And I thought: 'Why is Ismail laughing?’ Then he turned round, and he had tears – and I mean tears – rolling down his face, and he said: 'It was just so beautiful.'
The second time, I think, was at the Venice Film Festival [Maurice's public world premiere, 30 August 1987] in the main theatre [the Sala Grande]. I was next to Jim, and I whispered: ‘What do we do at the end?’ I meant what are we doing afterwards, are we going out for dinner? And Jim said (impersonates Ivory): ‘Well, if they like it, they’ll applaud, and we’ll stand and nod graciously.’ That’s all he said! (Laughs) So, at the end, this applause started. And – unlike theatre, where you come on for your curtain call and there’s a big hit of applause – this was quite gentle, then started to grow. And at a certain point it grew enough for us to stand up, and I remember thinking: ‘It’s time for me to nod graciously.’ So I started to nod graciously. And the applause went on and on. And you suddenly realised: ‘Oh my God – they like it.’ It was quite a shock, and a fantastic feeling. We were all in seventh heaven, thinking: ‘Wow, they liked it, they liked it!’

In fact, the only country that didn’t really like Maurice was here in the UK. America loved it, it played for a year in Paris, it played in Italy for a long, long time – but British critics were mean about it. It’s the English, isn’t it? And the homophobia, probably. And one person of all people [a closeted prominent British film critic, now deceased] gave it a mean review, when of all the films in his entire life he must have been waiting for it was probably Maurice.

**CM:** The very odd reception of Maurice by many male critics in the UK has exercised me for a long time. I know that James Ivory holds strong views on this too. There is some evidence that Maurice was backstabbed in the UK by closeted gay male critics.

**JW:** Well, Clause 28 had just come out, and there was an odd feeling going on. I think it threw the gay community.

**CM:** The timing of Clause 28 [of the UK’s Local Government Act, which banned the use of public funds to ‘promote’ homosexuality, including in schools] is striking. It was debated in Parliament a month into Maurice’s UK release, then became law in May 1988 while Maurice was still in London cinemas. I think you and Rupert Graves got involved in at least one anti-Clause 28 gala/fundraiser at the time?

**JW:** Yes. I was picked up by gay groups and I was quite happy to talk. So I did.

**CM:** Something that strikes me in some of Ismail’s and Jim’s statements about Maurice – before, during and after its production – is a quiet sense that they were making a different kind of gay film. Ivory has said that Maurice was ‘the first unapologetic homosexual film’, and (for example) Ismail told American Vogue that it would be about ‘normal feelings as opposed to abnormal feelings’.

**JW:** I don’t know whether they were trying to make a different kind. I think they were trying to do what marks them out whenever they’ve filmed so-called classics, including Henry James. If you look at [Ivory’s] Howards End, or A Room With A View, or indeed The Remains of the Day, they’re all incredibly faithful to the original concept the author was trying to write about. I just think that Maurice was an intensely faithful adaptation of that book; and
that’s what we were all trying to do, it seemed to me – with no holds barred, because there are no holds barred in the book. We didn’t have any self-censorship – we did what Forster wrote.

CM: What are your impressions today of Maurice’s longer-term impact?

JW: I’m glad it’s still got some life and legs in it, because it’s a good film. The thing Maurice had that makes it stand out – which is effectively what Forster was writing about all the time – was its dissection of the dark and rather sordid underbelly of the British. Forster wrote about it in India, and he wrote about it in Italy, and he wrote about it at home. And if you look at Maurice, the hypocrisy of the British is absolutely there for all to see.

CM: In 2009, the gay website After Elton named Maurice as one of Five Gay Films That Deserved a Sequel More Than Rambo Did. They are far from alone in observing that Maurice and Alec’s happy ending is really only the beginning. Ivory wrote something uncannily similar in his production notes; Forster himself initially wrote an Epilogue to Maurice, then scrapped it. It seems almost no one can resist speculating, so, I have to ask: What do you think happens to Maurice and Alec in their future life after the novel ends or the credits roll?

JW: I remember having this same conversation with Jim. The first thought we all had was that the First World War breaks out less than a year after the story ends. Did Maurice and/or Alec go into the army? Did either of them – or Clive – get killed? Did they come through the war? Did their love survive the war? Whatever happened, that war would have had a huge impact on their future lives, while not forgetting that it also had a massive effect on British society. So ... I like to think they’re living quietly in some cottage somewhere, because what else can they do?

CM: Ivory’s thoughts (shared with Robert Emmet Long in the book James Ivory in Conversation, 2005) were that Clive enlists as an officer; Maurice, also from the officer class, first becomes a conscientious objector, but then joins Alec as an ordinary soldier fighting in the trenches. Clive is killed in France, but Maurice and Alec survive the war and return to England.

JW: Probably, yes. Exactly what happened! Ivory wanted to write a sequel to Maurice. He mentioned it a couple of times – he definitely had it in his head to do it.

CM: Would you appear in a sequel if you were invited to?

JW: An old bastard like me! Yeah, of course I would. Absolutely!

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