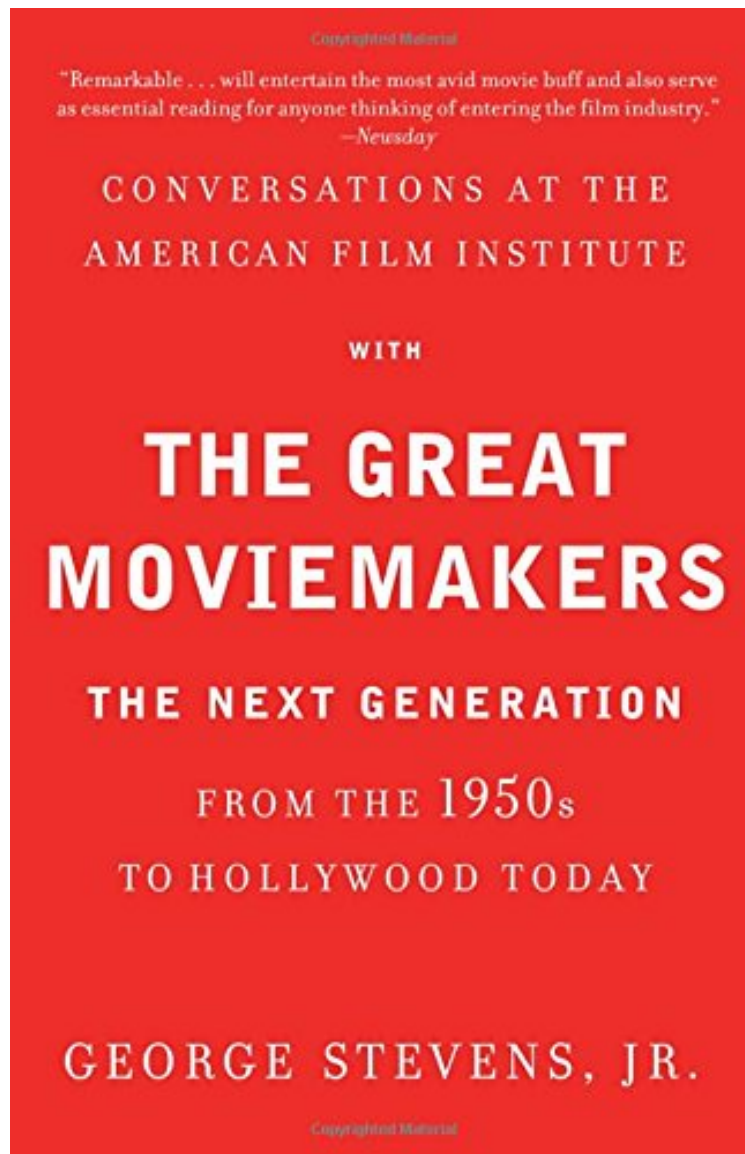


## Conversations at the American Film Institute with the Great Moviemakers: The Next Generation

*George Stevens Jr.*

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**George Stevens Jr. : Conversations at the American Film Institute with the Great Moviemakers: The Next Generation** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised  
Conversations at the American Film Institute with the Great Moviemakers: The Next Generation:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. It's not exactly all Next Gen (Gregory Peck and Sidney Poitier) but it's terrific look at the past 60 years of moviemakersBy Alan JayA fine companion to the first volume of The Great Moviemakers, but this time with conversations with film makers from the 1950s until the millennium. There is a terrific conversation with the late composer Leonard Rosenman (a friend of mine from my Hollywood days) who brought modern 12 tone composition to film scoring.1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. EXCELLENT READ FOR STORYTELLERSBy ASAs a storyteller myself, I enjoyed the perspective of directors, writers, editors, actors, and others who brought to life some great movies of our our time. The book is entertaining and enlightening.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. An inspiring and thrilling experience for an actress and boxerBy Vanda monacothere is knowledge and life in this book!I feel thrilled while reading it.

A rich companion volume to George Stevens, Jr.'s much admired book of American Film Institute seminars with the pioneering moviemakers of Hollywood's Golden Age, this time with a focus on filmmakers of the 1950s to present day. The Next Generation brings together conversations with moviemakers at work from the 1950s during the studios decline to today's Hollywood. Directors, producers, writers, actors, cinematographers, composers, film editors, and independent filmmakers appear within these pages, including Steven Spielberg, Nora Ephron, George Lucas, Sidney Poitier, Meryl Streep, David Lynch, Darren Aronofsky, and more. We see how the filmmakers of today and those of Hollywood's Golden Age face the same challenges of both art and craft to tell compelling stories on the screen. And we see the ways in which actors and directors work together, how each director has his or her own approach, and how they share techniques and theories.

Remarkable . . . will entertain the most avid movie buff and also serve as essential reading for anyone thinking of entering the film industry. Newsday Magnificent. . . . A collection that is compendious, illuminating, and utterly indispensable. Directors Guild of America Quarterly An entertaining in-depth look into the art, economics, and politics of filmmaking for those of us for whom film still has the impact of being struck by lightning. . . . Essential reading. . . . A sine qua non of film books, one that belongs on the shelf of every film student or serious fan. New York Journal of Books Cuts across the spectrum of genres and artistic attitudes. . . . A rare treat [and] an eclectic one. . . . A treasure-trove to flip through and savor. Los Angeles Times Fascinating and valuable. To a film junkie, it doesn't get much better than this. Portland Book Remarkable . . . simply indispensable for anyone who has even the remotest interest in film. . . . An incomparably rich collection [of] candid, knowledgeable, and thoughtful conversations. Choice Magazine Wide-ranging and informative. . . . Sure to be a stimulating, valuable, and much-used reference source for film addicts. Library Journal Illuminating . . . informative and nostalgic . . . a montage of delights for all who like sitting in the dark, popcorn in one hand, a lover in the other, transfixed. Cleveland Plain Dealer Truly indispensable to anyone who cares about the art of film. Buffalo News A feast for film junkies . . . a textbook made of cotton candy, an intellectual treat. The Big Story (Associated Press) Brings together, for the first time, thirty seminars with directors, producers, writers, actors, cinematographers, composers, and film editors . . . all of them talking honestly, seriously, openly. Turner Classic Movies About the Author George Stevens, Jr., is a writer, director, producer, and founder of the American Film Institute. He is the author of the acclaimed play *Thurgood*, which ran on Broadway and was filmed for HBO. In 2013 he received an Honorary Academy Award from the Motion Picture Academy. He has received fifteen Emmys, two Peabody Awards, the Humanitas Prize, and eight Writers Guild Awards for his productions, including the annual Kennedy Center Honors, *Separate but Equal*, *The Murder of Mary Phagan*, and *We Are One: The Obama Inaugural Celebration at the Lincoln Memorial*. His production *The Thin Red Line* was nominated for seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture. In 2009 President Obama named him co-chairman of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities. Stevens started out working with his father, George Stevens, on *Shane*, *Giant*, and *The Diary of Anne Frank* and in 1962 was named head of the United States Information Agency's motion picture division by Edward R. Murrow. He lives in Washington, D.C. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Excerpted from the hardcover edition. My films are scripted. I use improvisation as a tool during the rehearsal period before we shoot, but basically, once we start shooting it's a very set thing. Improvisation is misunderstood. We don't just turn people loose. Robert Altman (Born in Kansas City, Missouri, 1925-Died 2006) Robert Altman became one of the most accomplished filmmakers of his generation, but his pathway to making features was a long and winding one. After flying fifty bombing missions as a B-24 co-pilot in the Army Air Corps, he returned to his native Kansas City, where his father was a prosperous insurance man and amateur gambler. He spent the next decade shooting documentaries for a local industrial company before heading for Hollywood in 1955, where he made *The Delinquents* in 1957. He spent another decade directing television shows, including *Maverick*, *Peter Gunn*, *Route 66*, *Bonanza* and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, before making *Countdown* in 1968, a low-budget story of the first flight to the moon starring James Caan and Robert Duvall. Once Altman started making features, the skills he acquired on television sound stages enabled him to become one of Hollywood's most prolific directors, displaying the widest range of subject matter and style. *That Cold Day in the Park* with Sandy Dennis in 1969 wasn't well received, and his career had stalled when he was offered *M\*A\*S\*H*, a script that had been passed over by many leading directors. Altman, at age forty-five, placed his

stamp on the story of an army field hospital during the Korean War, creating a box-office hit and capturing the Palme d'Or at Cannes, five Oscar nominations, and Best Picture of the Year recognition from the National Society of Film Critics. Altman liked to have several stories moving at the same time. He favored overlapping dialogue and he was more interested in characters than plot. "I look at film as closer to painting or a piece of music," he once explained. "It's an impression of character and total atmosphere-an attempt to enlist an audience emotionally, not intellectually." He followed M\*A\*S\*H with hits and misses like Brewster McCloud, McCabe Mrs. Miller, Images, The Long Goodbye, Thieves Like Us, California Split and then, in 1975, one of his career triumphs, Nashville. Set during the last five days of a fictional presidential primary, Nashville interwove the stories of twenty-four characters in the music business and showed off many of Altman's favorite performers, including Elliott Gould, Lily Tomlin, Julie Christie, Shelley Duvall and Keith Carradine. Roger Ebert wrote that after seeing the film, "I felt more alive, I felt I understood more about people, I felt somehow wiser." Between 1976 and 1990, Altman made fourteen pictures including Buffalo Bill and the Indians, 3 Women, Popeye, Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean, and Vincent and Theo. His career received a shot in the arm with The Player, the sardonic look at Hollywood based on Michael Tolkin's novel, a film that earned him his third Oscar nomination for Best Director and the award for Best Director at Cannes. It was followed by Short Cuts, for which he took Raymond Carver's writings as a point of departure and earned a fourth Oscar nomination. Then came seven films in six years, including Prt--Porter, The Gingerbread Man and Dr. T and the Women, none of which matched his most admired work. Throughout his career Altman jostled with studios and sometimes with collaborators. He angered screenwriters when he said: "Many writers have hard feelings about what I do to their scripts, but my idea is, it's not their script. Their script is my tool to work with-I don't owe them an apology." Altman had to fight to get his films financed, often pressing his vision in ways that put his career at risk. He was known for his irascibility and hard drinking and found it difficult to convey his concepts to studio heads. "When I explain what I want to do," he told the Washington Post, "they can't see it, because I'm trying to deliver something they haven't seen before." In 2001, Altman made Gosford Park, an elaborate, multilayered murder mystery filmed in an elegant English manor house with an ensemble cast of England's finest actors. It was the third-best box-office outing of his career and earned seven Oscar nominations, including Best Director and Best Picture. He received the Golden Globe for directing Gosford Park. Hollywood honored the iconoclastic director with an honorary Oscar in 2006. In accepting it on national television he revealed for the first time that he had received a heart transplant ten years earlier. Altman came to AFI and spoke with the fellows following a screening of Gosford Park. Robert Altman December 18, 2001\* I saw in the Gosford Park production notes that you passed out etiquette books to the upstairs people. We had three technical advisors. We had a butler, a housemaid and a cook who were all in their mid-to-late eighties and who, during the period of our film, which is set in the early thirties, had all worked in service. The maid, a woman named Violet, had worked at Chequers, which is the prime minister's residence, and also for Bernard Shaw. They were there to assist the actors. I'm a foreigner making a film about English manners, which is a little presumptuous and arrogant of me, so I wanted to be sure that we got it right. And the actors all wanted to get it right. We found out in doing this that most of these films you see from England about this sort of thing aren't right at all. In the first half of the twentieth century you had these estates with maybe forty servants for a family of six. You had these two totally separate societies going on. That's really the reason we made the film. What we found is that most of these people worked in an average of two households their entire life, and none of these houses were run in the same way. There were certain protocols that were similar, but when somebody would say, "Oh no, they never served this with so-and-so," it became clear that in another house they did things completely differently. Except for cigars and brandy after dinner? That's always the same. And get the women out of the room. I wonder if there is any particular reason why you're drawn to stories with large ensemble casts. It's a caprice of mine. I can give you a lot of quick answers. I made a film called Secret Honor which had one character, Richard Nixon. I've made films with only a few characters. 3 Women comes to mind. But generally I like to see a lot of stuff going on. A glib answer I have, which is true, is that if a scene doesn't work I can always cut away and go to something else. I'm finding that large casts seem to hurt a film commercially. These are not date films. It's not Julia Roberts and Richard Gere and a few people, which is what I think most people want in a film. Did you find it different working with British actors as opposed to working with an American ensemble? Yes. I never saw an agent. Nobody ever came and argued about how big somebody's trailer was. They all got paid the same. They all had a great time doing it. It was the best experience of my life. An actor like Alan Bates, who worked ten weeks on the film, was there an average of four and a half days a week for the first six weeks. He was standing way in the background in every shot. I don't think he had a scene. It was the same with Derek Jacobi, who played a really small part. He was there for all that time. That kind of thing couldn't happen in America. Was it more fun working "upstairs" or "downstairs"? I enjoyed both equally. They divided themselves into two groups and kept themselves kind of automatically separated. It was a lot of fun. Could you describe the process you use with actors as you work on their performances? Well, I don't have much to do with the actor's performance. When I cast a film, most of my creative work is done. I have to be there to turn the switch on and give them encouragement as a father figure, but they do all the work. If an actor comes to me and asks, "What exactly should I do when I come in that door?" I'll say, "Have you thought about wearing cowboy boots instead of those slippers?" I'll say

anything except answer their question directly, because the minute I've narrowed the 360-degree possibility down, they're not creating things themselves, and I'm doing the work. I want to see them do the work. All I'm trying to do is make it easy on the actor, because once you start to shoot, the actor is the artist. I don't say, "Here's the way I want it done," because I want to see something I've never seen before. How can I say what that is? I've got to let them know that if they stretch and they do something that's bad, I'm not even going to show it in dailies. The actors in Gosford Park all took care of themselves. As a director, I have to give them confidence and see that they have a certain amount of protection so they can be creative. The actors know that even though they don't get paid well, they trust that I'll let them do the creative work. I let them do what they became actors for in the first place: to create. And I not only let them do it, I insist that they do it. That's what I do in setting the thing up, and they do the rest. Actors tend to police themselves. The more of them there are, the easier it is to manage. If there are six actors, one of them isn't going to come in and misbehave, because the other five are going to beat him up. I work hard to try and create a family atmosphere. The first thing I do is get a place to see the dailies. I encourage everyone to watch them. You find that the actors start rooting for each other when they find out they're not in competition. Did you have any rehearsal time on Gosford Park? I never had a full quorum together, but I would meet with the actors and offer all this research and the technical advisors we had available, and encourage them to do as much work as they wanted to. Where did the idea for the film come from? Bob Balaban has been a friend of mine for many years. He's sort of a Renaissance man. He's an actor, a director, a producer. He does everything, and he and I were talking one day. He said, "I wish we could do something together. Could my company develop something for you?" And I said, "Well, I've never done a whodunit." I'm not very original. I mean, I'll take a genre that's comfortable and then go in and just kind of tilt it a little bit. Bob said, "What do you mean?" I said, "You know, the big house and all the people coming to shoot pheasants, and there's a murder and the like." We started describing the film as *Ten Little Indians* meets *Rules of the Game*, and then got Julian Fellowes to write a script. The next thing I know we're shooting it. I'm curious about the process in the larger scenes when there's so much action in both the foreground and the background. Are you using two cameras? I used two cameras almost all the time except when the room was so small we couldn't get two cameras in. I arbitrarily had them moving, with no particular purpose. That wasn't new. I lifted it from myself, from *The Long Goodbye* where the camera was always moving without purpose. I did it in *Gosford Park* because these wonderful English period films like *Brideshead Revisited* or the Merchant-Ivory films are so formal and their speech is all so precise. I thought, "You know, I don't really believe that's the way people really behaved." I just wanted to make it sloppy. I didn't want to have nice formal two-shots and singles and that sort of thing, so we just kept the camera moving. The standard thing with a film like this is a guy sitting watching television who gets up to go open a beer, and then comes back and he says, "Did she kill him yet?" He knows he'll be shown the important stuff in close-up three times. But I wanted to put the audience on notice, right off the bat, that they have to pay attention or they're going to miss something. Some of the punch-lines are done on the backs of people when they're leaving the room, like Maggie Smith when she says, "I haven't got a snobbish bone in my body." The more people I had in the scene, the easier it was for me to orchestrate, because all those actors could take care of themselves. We'd say, "Everybody just get in the room and go where you think you would be," and they'd just start moving. The more of that kind of thing I had to do, the more of it was done for me by the actors and the easier it was. We have created this film in a way that if you like it, you really have to go back and see it again and you'll see a different film. Once you know all of the mandatory things about who did it or who didn't do it, it becomes not so much a whodunit as a why-didn't-they-do-it-earlier. Or who-cares-who-did-it. I just really wanted the audience to have to turn their necks and work rather than serving it all up for you. Is the overlapping dialogue also something you leave to the actors? If you've got fourteen people at a dinner table, it seems to me it's pretty unlikely that only two of them are going to be talking. Can you talk a little bit about the casting process? For a film like this I had to have half the actors be people you recognize so you could tell them apart. If I had the finest talent in the world and you had never seen any of these people before, twenty minutes into the film you'd say, "I can't stay with this. Who's who?" Even now it's hard to keep the upstairs people really separate and know exactly what their relationships are. But it's not really that important. Hopefully you'll say, "Ah, there is a story going on between these people," and you kind of figure it out, much like if you go to a party. You spend four hours at a party with twenty people, sixteen of whom you've just met for the first time. Then you go home and say, "What did he really do?" "Which one?" "The tall guy smoking a cigar . . ." I know that's not the way to make a hit picture, but I say this truthfully: I'm not interested in making a hit picture. I'm interested in making the picture I made, and I hope people respond to it. I think I'd be late for work if I started doing one of these things that was all laid out for you.