



THE MAKING OF THE DEPARTED

by Kate McCallum



stellar cast of talent, and a brilliant scribe who can spin gold from hay? *The Departed* is more than a “remake”—it’s the synergistic expression of some of the top names in Hollywood and it’s classic dramatic entertainment.

The Departed is an American film “adaptation” of the popular and stylish 2002 Hong Kong crime thriller *Wu jian dao*, otherwise know as *Infernal Affairs*. The original screenplay was written by Felix Chong and Siu Fai Mak. The film sold exceptionally well in Hong Kong and was considered a box-office miracle. Due to its commercial and critical success, *Infernal Affairs* was followed by the prequel *Infernal*

What happens when you have the kernel of a “great idea” born from a highly successful foreign film, a star’s production company, a genius veteran director, one of the most mythic actors alive, a

Affairs II and the sequel *Infernal Affairs III*. Both were released in 2003. That same year Brad Pitt’s Plan B Entertainment acquired the rights for a Hollywood remake. The film was written by screenwriter William Monahan.

An acclaimed writer before he turned to film, Monahan has powerfully ascended the ranks of Hollywood screenwriters. In just a few years writing screenplays professionally, he has already worked with some of the biggest names in the business.

After attending the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Monahan worked as a journalist, essayist and critic in New York City. He was also an editor at *Spy* magazine. In 1997, Monahan won a Pushcart Prize for short fiction and published his first novel, the acclaimed *Light House: A Trifle*. Warner Bros. Pictures optioned *Light House* before its publication. Monahan adapted his own book and developed the project at the studio for director Gore Verbinski.

In 2001, Monahan, having turned seriously to film, sold his script *Tripoli*—about William Eaton’s epic march on Tripoli during the Barbary Wars—to 20th Century Fox.

LEFT: Crime boss Frank Costello (**Jack Nicholson**) and his protégé Colin Sullivan (**Matt Damon**) star in *The Departed*, adapted by William Monahan from *Infernal Affairs* by Felix Chong and Siu Fai Mak. The dark thriller is directed by Martin Scorsese. LEFT INSET: Screenwriter **William Monahan**. BELOW: Double agent Billy Costigan (**Leonardo DiCaprio**) struggles with his own ambitions as Costello looks on. PHOTOS: Andrew Cooper. © 2006 Warner Bros. Pictures.



Ridley Scott signed on to direct the film with Russell Crowe attached to star, and then commissioned Monahan to write an original epic set in the Middle Ages. That project became *Kingdom of Heaven*, starring Orlando Bloom which 20th Century Fox released in 2005. On May 23, 2006, it was released as written in a director's cut DVD to critical acclaim.

Monahan has worked with most of the major film studios on various projects. His upcoming projects include *The Venetian*, a historical epic based on the travels of Marco Polo, to star Matt Damon. Monahan is also at work on *Penetration*, an adaptation of David Ignatius' novel which Scott will direct.

The Departed, directed by Martin

Scorsese, was released by Warner Bros. Pictures on October 6, 2006. Leonardo DiCaprio, Matt Damon, Jack Nicholson, Mark Wahlberg, Alec Baldwin, Martin Sheen and Ray Winstone lead a top-flight cast of actors in this tough gangland drama that takes place in Monahan's native Boston.

Set in South Boston, where the state police force is waging war on organized crime, young undercover cop Billy Costigan (DiCaprio) is assigned to infiltrate the mob syndicate run by gangland chief Frank Costello (Nicholson). While Billy is quickly gaining Costello's confidence, Colin Sullivan (Damon), a hardened young criminal who has infiltrated the police department as an informer for the

syndicate, is rising to a position of power in the Special Investigation Unit. Each man becomes deeply consumed by his double life, gathering information about the plans and counter-plans of the operations he has penetrated. But when it becomes clear to both the gangsters and the police that there's a mole in their midst, Billy and Colin are suddenly in danger of being caught and exposed to the enemy—and each must race to uncover the identity of the other man in time to save himself.

scr(i)pt: *How did you find yourself tackling this assignment, and can you share with me whose "great idea" it was?*

WILLIAM MONAHAN: I think the best idea, after the concept of the Chinese film itself, was letting me do an adaptation from the literary material rather than a remake of the film. Brad Pitt, as a producer, okayed that. It is an adaptation rather than a remake. A good film like *The Departed* depends often on a lot of people having great ideas simultaneously—to put all the pieces together—and this is really one of the cases where everybody deserves credit, where the Hollywood system, the star system, and even the packaging system worked. Martin Scorsese and I share representation. He got first crack at the script and loved it, and Leonardo said, "Let's do it," and we were off. I think I finished my draft in September of 2005, and it was a greenlit project by the time I was in Spain on *Kingdom of Heaven*, if not before then. Any way you look at it, it came together in an amazingly short period of time, and that only happens when everybody's at top function—whether they're talent or executives or agents.

scr(i)pt: *The original film was a big hit in the international market. Is that why they chose it? And have you watched it a lot?*

WM: The original was chosen because it has a great central concept. I don't usually like high-concept ideas but this one was irresistible. Yes, *Infernal Affairs* was a huge hit in Hong Kong. It was very stylish, evidently,

and 90 minutes long. I not only didn't watch *Infernal Affairs* a lot, I shut off the film about 15 minutes into it and worked from a translation of the script. That's no disrespect to the Chinese filmmakers, but what I do has to be my own—and Marty's the same way, obviously. I don't think he's seen *Infernal Affairs* yet. I did a very personal literary adaptation. The project came to me when I had been thinking a lot about the past, about where I came from, about the people I had lost. Somehow in my own life, I made the right decisions out of a lot of confusing possibilities. The characters in *The Departed* are almost universally people who make the wrong decisions and pay for it with their lives, or they pay for it in grief.

scr(i)pt: *Did you work closely with Scorsese?*

WM: Yes, very much so. I was on the West Side, and he was on the East Side. We met a lot and we faxed a lot, usually really late at night. Pages went back and forth all the time. It was a fascinating job—more like writing in live theatre than anything else I've experienced. We had boilerplate material—say, eight tenths of the film in the theaters—which we were never going to change, like the bar scene where Jack meets Leonardo. Outside of that material, we really got creative. I learned a hell of a lot. Marty's always digging, always questioning. If you end up where you started, that's good, too, as long as you've subjected what you're doing to analysis and weighed other possibilities. In making a film, you'd learn a lot from someone who wasn't Martin Scorsese or Ridley Scott. When they *are* those guys, what you learn simply evaporates the known ways to quantify the acquisition of knowledge. Marty is encyclopedic on film. He's seen everything and knows everything. He's a great man—very knowledgeable, a brilliant artist and very funny.

scr(i)pt: *What a great opportunity and what an incredible cast. Did you work with the actors?*

WM: Yes, with Matt and Leonardo intensively, which was fantastic. Apart from the rehearsal meetings that Marty has, I worked alone a good deal with Vera Farmiga, who is a brilliant actress. She and I worked for days in a trailer outside the soundstage in Brooklyn, well into shooting. Actors show up on a Scorsese set expecting to improvise, but, in fact, everything outside of the realm of interpretation is meticulously scripted or

in some other way gone over and approved. Marty gets in close with the actors and really wants to see what they've got. He has a close, brilliant relationship with Leonardo that was interesting to observe and be part of. It was interesting for me because I'd never had a chance to work in tight with actors, in many cases I worked just hours or moments before the cameras rolled. Leonardo and I are trying to find other things to do together.

scr(i)pt: *Did you go on location? If so, any stories from production relevant to you as the writer? It must have been quite a thrill to shoot on your home turf.*

WM: At the time we were shooting, my home turf was New York City. I was living on West 82nd Street. Being in Boston was more a vacation than a homecoming. I was on the set almost every day of the shoot. One funny problem for me personally was that my only previous experience was in British film. On a British film, the writer is number two to the director—with no question, ever. An American film set is different, perhaps because very few American films have a sole credit writer on them. There are very often three or four people you know about and two uncredited rewrite men. The concept of authorship is utterly diffused. A lot of people on U.S. film sets have never seen a sole-credit screenwriter in the flesh, much less every day, and they don't know what to do with one. I guess I also had a bad contract or something, because on *The Departed* Graham King was watching satellite cable in a mahogany land yacht while I was dying around the corner in a two-banger trailer. Usually, as I said, there is more than one screenwriter on an American commercial film, and perhaps that's why the concept and importance of screenwriting isn't really grasped.

scr(i)pt: *How do you feel the remake compared to the original?*

WM: We didn't do a remake. You buy remake rights, but unless you're Gus Van Sant doing *Psycho* shot by shot, you're going to get an adaptation. In my case, I took up the Chinese concept, and if there was a bit that worked, I nicked it. But I was firing on all cylinders as an individual artist. There's an extraordinary difference between remake and adaptation. *Romeo & Juliet* is not a "remake" of the same story in Bandello. Everything that Shakespeare did in drama, except *The Tempest*, was

an adaptation. By today's criteria, *Hamlet* would be called a "remake" and, of course, it's nothing of the sort. I'm not comparing myself to Shakespeare in terms of scale, obviously, just in terms of the literary process and divergence from the original. I've still never seen *Infernal Affairs*. I know that our picture is much longer, has completely new characters, necessarily, and has nothing to do with Buddhism. But "continuous suffering" is, of course, something an Irish Catholic understands. And probably seeks. The Chinese script was a very Chinese story about a loyalty culture in which people just want to be cops, which is just unthinkable in Boston.

scr(i)pt: *Thank you for clearing that up. It's an important differentiation for writers to be aware of. I am a huge fan of historical epics and think the work you did on *Kingdom of Heaven* was outstanding. How do you go about preparing to write a period story, and what advice might you give writers who tackle this genre?*

WM: Thanks. If I didn't love historical so much, I'd never do it again because historical is a minefield for the writer. Historical films come out and immediately get attacked by cranks and buffs and hobbyists and political people and, worst of all, professors who see a big film as their one lifetime shot at getting press outside their own professional journals. It's sad but true. A big historical film really is a temporary meal ticket for giant flocks of vultures. I looked at the press literally raping *Kingdom of Heaven*, and I thought, well, Monahan, you can answer this guy who thinks that medieval people were never anti-clerical, or that Gerard de Ridefort was a nice guy. You can be fighting the Hydra for the rest of your life, or you can get on with the next thing. So I didn't do any press and moved on to *The Departed*. I read something Churchill wrote in 1897 in India. Roughly, his point was that it's better to be making the news than reading it. Fair enough. But if you're going to make the news, the flip side is that you have to learn not to worry about what's in it. It's a hard thing for a person who is sensitive about his honor to learn. *Kingdom of Heaven* in its full version is a masterpiece; it's a written picture; it's a defiant picture. It's almost impossible that we got it through the studio system, and though it suffered from interference, it's the best anyone has done in that class of film since *Lawrence of Arabia*. And as the dust settles,

that's beginning to be acknowledged. Had that film been released without the hour cut out of it, it would have won at least a dozen Oscars®. It's a bitter thing. But it's another thing you don't worry about. You move on. Each film feels like a career in itself, and you're ready for the next thing.

scr(i)pt: *Can you talk about what you are currently working on? What's next?*

WM: I'm working with Ridley Scott on an espionage picture called *Penetration* which should be his next film after he finishes *American Gangster* (written by Steven Zaillian). After that there will be another Ridley Scott picture, set in England, which I hope to write in London this winter.

scr(i)pt: *Any thoughts on the future of film and media?*

WM: I'm a bit depressed by the drop in cachet and even majesty film has suffered since video players came along. I would have loved as a kid to see *Blow-Up* whenever I liked, but, in retrospect, a film had something special when you had to circle the listing in the Sunday newspaper and you'd wait all week. When I was 18, I sat through

Ridley's *The Duellists* through its entire run at the Exeter Street Theatre in Boston. The same thing with Peter Weir's *The Last Wave*, because if I was going to see these pictures and appreciate them, it was going to have to be during their runs. You'd go to revival houses, and it was tremendously exciting and a genuinely important experience. A film was an event when I was a kid. Film is no longer an event to younger people. There's no awe left, just familiarity, and in many cases, over-familiarity.

I'm a little worried about digital theft. At this point, I'm earning money for my kids. After having worked as hard as I have, it's a ridiculous thing to live in an era where the number one enemy of art is potentially the fan. If you download, it's the artist that gets hurt. Corporations can always move on and sell soap flakes or time-shares. I can only get paid for films when the company can collect on their copyrights.

There are periods in the past when technology has come along quickly, and you always have to know the "bail" point with old technology—when it's time for you to evolve personally. I'm exclusively a dramatist now because novels are a relatively dead

technology. If I'd come along 20, 30 years ago, I might have been writing serious novels as well, but right now, it's just not worth it. The novel's essentially gone as a serious business, and you have to move on. An agent in New York asked me recently "What can I do to make you return to the novel?" I said, "Give me a lot of money to do exactly what I like without having to talk to anybody about what I'm going to do." He said "I can't do that." I said, "That's what I'm doing in film. Have a nice day." (i)

KATE McCALLUM is an independent producer/writer/consultant based in Los Angeles and has worked as a development executive with Western Sandblast at Paramount TV, as well as, most recently, a stint in both the production of *Law & Order*, then development with writer/showrunner Michael Chernuchin at NBC Universal Television. She specializes in transmedia property development and consultation and has several media projects in development under her company Bridge Arts Media (Bridgeartsmedia.com). Additionally, she co-founded c3, The Center for Conscious Creativity, whose mission is to explore the power of art and media's effect on society and culture (Consciouscreativity.org).

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