

JANUARY 2004

# SCREENwriter's (MONTHLY)

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## The Art of Adaptation



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## Shawn Lawrence Otto HOUSE OF SAND AND FOG



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# Shawn Lawrence Otto



Jennifer Connelly in HOUSE OF SAND AND FOG

## HOUSE OF SAND AND FOG

### INTERVIEW BY CHRIS WEHNER

**S**hawn Lawrence Otto owned a painting company, a rather successful one with fifty employees, yet he still felt as if he hadn't really achieved anything. "House painting, the saying goes, is something you can 'fall back on,'" says the writer, "[something you] do after you've failed at everything else in life. It's where I started. But growing up, all my heroes were writers."

Otto sold the business after he decided that there was something more in

life than just earning a nice income and saving up for that big retirement. "I decided I was selling myself short and I needed to craft the best life I could. So I sold the business and stepped into the void."

His first screenplay, *Shining White*, set in Minnesota about a banker with a gambling addiction and the Native Americans who run the casino, won some awards, including a McKnight Foundation fellowship and another from Barry Morrow, the screenwriter of *Rain Man*. The script drew the attention of Vadim Perelman, a TV-commercial director who had optioned "House of Sand and Fog" a few weeks before the novel became a selection of Oprah Winfrey's book club. Perelman, an immigrant from the Ukraine, recognized Otto's talent and the two struck a cord together. Perelman and Otto share the screenwriting credit.

A writer is someone who has to write, not someone who "wants" to, or "wishes" they had the time to, they write. So after selling his business, that's what Otto did. He took a leap of faith, albeit with some financial security, but still, he did something others would not. And it's paid off. His first screenwriting credit is for *House of Sand and Fog*, which is in theaters and is already getting rave reviews from critics. Adapted from Andre Dubus III's novel of the same name, *House of Sand and Fog* is a timely story that cuts deep into the heart of some heavy social and political undertones currently flowing through America. This is the story of an Arabic colonel who uproots his family to America, experiences bigotry and distrust, and when he finds the perfect home to move his family into, everything falls apart.

**SM: They say trying to get a project developed in Hollywood is like watching paint dry. You have experience with both.**

SLO: I actually thought for a while about making Kathy a house painter because I've known a lot of women like her. I couldn't find work as a writer, and I was almost broke—I had \$500 to my name. I didn't know what to do, so I started a painting company. I'd paid my way through college painting. It really took off, and we ended up with 50 people, but in the back of my mind, I still thought about writing. I guess I believe you only live once. You're entrusted with this little bud of life, and it's up to you to push it and get it to grow, to craft a good life, not just chase the buck. Life's stakes are so much larger than that. I didn't want to get to the end and ask, "what if?" So I sold the company and stepped into the void. I had

and a big dream. He'd read *Shining White* and thought I might be right for the project. The protagonist there is a man who is in some ways not unlike Behrani. Immigration and the immigrant experience—the truth of that in Andre's book—was a common thing that attracted us both. Vadim is an immigrant, and I am the son of an immigrant and an American, and our family was host family for foreign students all my childhood, so I know this question from both sides. Vadim, like me, had no produced film credits but had been shooting commercials for years. We got to know each other a little bit, and both of us had kind of different childhoods and some personal experience with the struggles of immigrants that probably gave us each a well to draw on for these characters. He sent me the book and a copy of his reel. I saw from the reel that he was good, but Andre's book

duce. I had complete confidence in him as a director, and I knew that together we could nail this project.

**How has the development process been for you?**

Later when Vadim came to my house we talked through the issues with the novel and how I would approach them, especially the beginning, or way into the story, and the ending. The novel starts with Behrani on the road crew, but we bond with him because of his distinctive first person voice. We needed a way for the audience to make a similar bond, so I said, "I think we should start in Behrani's heart, their Caspian Sea cottage and the cutting of the trees. That's what he equates with the past that Nadi blames him for losing. That's always what he hopes to regain." Then we move to the wedding, then the road crew, and

Jonathan Ahdout, Ben Kingsley, Ron Eldard



**WARNING!  
SPOILERS**  
discussed during  
interview

Vadim Perelman, Roger Deakins, Jennifer Connelly



no idea whether or how things would work out. Luckily, writing caught me.

**How did you become involved with *House of Sand and Fog*?**

I had written a screenplay that had won a couple of competitions—first, the Minnesota-based Barry (*Rainman*) Morrow screenwriting fellowship and then the McKnight, and it started to get me some attention. It was optioned by an independent producer named Steven Pearl in Hollywood, and he has a brilliant mind for development, and we became and have remained friends. On the strength of that script (*Shining White*), I had gotten an agent and maybe 30-40 meetings around town and gotten to know a lot of really terrific people in the movie business.

*House of Sand and Fog* started with just Vadim, me, this fantastic book

really blew me away. I read it in a single day, writing frantic notes all along the way. My wife was in Chicago. By some freaky coincidence her sister, brother and mother all had different operations on the same day, and I was alone with my little son and this book. I went back to it after I put him to bed, and I finished at about 1:30 in the morning, exhausted but exhilarated, and I had about 20 pages of thoughts and ideas about the adaptation that I emailed to Vadim. He was impressed, and though he didn't have a lot of money to hire me, we agreed on a nominal fee, and I decided I would take a risk on him and myself. He flew out to Minnesota and stayed at my house for a few days. I pitched him the new beginning and ending, and we talked about character and passion and life and hardship. We traded life stories, and by the time he left, we'd agreed on where we thought the movie needed to go and that I'd write and co-pro-

we are with this man emotionally and understand his drive in a similar way to the bond in the novel. The ending was the same way. The novel ends rather nihilistically, and we wanted to respect the fundamental themes of the book but needed to infuse a tiny bit of hope in the end with Kathy learning something. So I suggested that she comes back and finds them dead and tears through the plastic bag, tries to resuscitate them. The intimacy of CPR, the grief—I needed her to feel that, to show that. The feeling that they are like her family—this is a wound to her. These people were the only ones, ironically, who really showed her love and compassion. And then the cut to the widow's walk and the officer asking her, "Ma'am, is this your house?" and her saying, "No, it's not my house," foreswearing it. Vadim loved these suggestions, and I went off and wrote. Once the script was ready, we immediately got Ben Kingsley attached



Ben Kingsley, Jonathan Ahdout, Shohreh Aghdashloo

and shortly after, Jennifer Connelly. It was truly a blessing since Sir Ben was the only one I had pictured for the part while writing, and Jennifer, hot off her Oscar nom (and later Oscar) for *A Beautiful Mind*—it was like a dream come true. With such a dream cast, the movie set up fairly quickly.

**Were you on set? I believe you were a co-Producer. How was that experience?**

My co-producing role was more in the development stage. My wife was running for state representative at the time, and I was her campaign manager, so I couldn't be on set. But by then the script and the movie were in very good hands. Vadim did a terrific job for a first timer, but I knew he would. He had a very nice commercial reel and our sensibilities for the story were similar. He was surrounded by great acting talent and by (Academy Award winner) Roger Deakins, who did a truly wonderful job as cinematographer, and he had fabulous production design by Maia Javan, whose father is an Iranian immigrant and who really captured the cultural atmosphere of the Behranis the way I saw it when I wrote the script. It's hard to shoot a bad movie under those circumstances, so I had every confidence. And as it turned out I was right.

**Director Vadim Perelman performed at least one revision. Why didn't you just do it? Were their creative differences?**

It was very important to Vadim to participate as a writer in the project, and as option holder on the novel, that was his prerogative.

**You read the book in one night, and you were excited**

**enough about it to write notes about it at that time. How quickly did the line of action present itself to you?**

The "character drives" were very clear in the novel, though slightly more clear for Behrani than Kathy. In his case all he wants emotionally was to recapture what had been lost—his pride and the stature of his family and the love and respect of his wife. Externally, he is running out of money and desperate to stave off ruin and send his son to college. The house presents his one chance to achieve both his emotional and external goals. For Kathy, all she wants emotionally is to find love without strings attached. All her life she's used and been used instead of loving and being loved. Even her mother is enmeshed with her. When she meets Lester and he appears to show her compassion, her heart seizes the chance that this could be the real thing. But she is so needy that she can't see he's just using her too. Externally she needs the house for stability, and he needs to get it for her to feel worthy inside. Ironically, it's the Behranis, her sworn enemies, who show her love and compassion. But by then things are beginning to cycle out of control, and she lacks the clarity from her fog to be able to see how to stop them, just as Behrani's gritty sandiness propels events from his side, now without either of them intending to hurt the other but locked in an impossible dilemma.

**Oftentimes characters have to be folded into one and timelines compacted. How much of this was required?**

Very little. The novel was a luminous piece to adapt. With well driven characters it laid out very nicely once those core drives were articulated and the beginning and ending were

focused. It was more a case of making the internal emotions external so they could be captured by the camera and shearing away story lines that were wonderful but less on the spine.

**How many adaptations have you executed and what were the issues involved for you if this was your first serious attempt?**

I've done two now, but this was luckily my first. I say that because the characters were so well driven. The second one has a much more passive protagonist who is more of a passenger through the story, and

because of this it has been far more challenging. Emotional drives cause choices to act, and choices to act cause plot to happen, and plot drives story. So inserting a drive can be done, but it invariably must change the story. How do you change the story and keep what's precious about the novel? It's very tough. Those choices weren't there with *House of Sand and Fog*.

**Looking back over the process, did you have a structure worked out for how you were going to set up the story and then the formulation of the narrative?**

Yes, that is pretty essential in an adaptation because without a plan you can't remain true to the novel. The structure came out of the drives I described above between the two main protagonists. Lester is a spoiler who acts on Kathy's arc. But the core dilemma—and what was beautiful about the novel and drove the tension of the story—the thing that we absolutely could not lose was this sense of complete empathy for both sides. We don't know who we want to win this impossible dilemma, and we have no idea how it could ever be resolved. But because we come to care so much for both of them, we hope there may be a way. Keeping that tension from empathy was paramount.

**How did Andre Dubus feel about the beginning and ending changes?**

Andre is very happy with the film and the opening and ending.

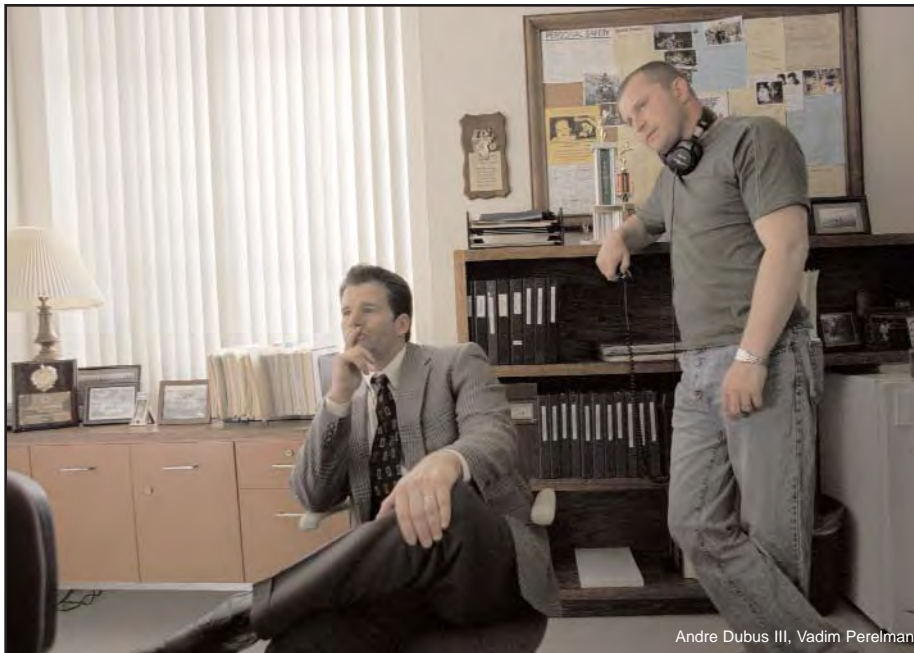
**Novels are notorious for narratives that live inside the characters mind, which makes them difficult to transfer to the screen. What issues did you have to deal with in this regard?**

That's both the challenge and the joy of adapting. Literary novels are about morality, emotion, politics and spirituality, so it goes without say-

ing that great novels are told from the inside out. But great movies are told from the outside in. The fun is to figure out ways to make the internal external so the camera can catch it and move the audience. Usually, this lies in selecting choices for the characters who are along the spine of their emotional drives. That way the actors can capture the emotion in actions. But it also lies in the structure (i.e. what is juxtaposed with what to convey what emotion). The camera is like the eye of God, and it puts the audience in the role of God, just looking with great compassion and empathy, but just looking without the characters aware they are being watched. The audience members share their lives and draw their own conclusions.

**What was it that originally hooked you as a reader when you read Andre Dubus III's novel?**

I loved the character of Behrani. He was not dissimilar to a character named Whitie, whom I'd written in one of my originals: harsh on the outside but with a big heart. I loved the empathy of the novel. Andre did a wonderful job empathizing with all the characters he created. And I loved the theme of how the pursuit of the American Dream carries with it the need to be tolerant.



Jennifer Connelly and Shohreh Aghdashloo in a © 2003 Dreamworks production.

**Why can't a movie accomplish the same psychological goals that a novel can?**

Well, I hope we've come close here. But I think it's a matter of time and medium. A novel has much more time to tell its story, and the novelist can accomplish a lot through narration that doesn't work in a movie. A movie is not so much sharing in the minds of the characters, like novels do, as it is sharing in the space of the characters. It's telling a parallel story from the near outside, and that is not necessarily as intimate.

**This story seems timely when considering our current social and emotional state right now as a country. Were you conscious of that during the writing process?**

I was set to fly to L.A. and meet with Vadim on September 12th. By the time I finally got there a week later, Vadim and I talked about how 9/11 might affect the movie's reception. There was some initial concern but I felt—and I think we both agreed on this—that by the time we got it made the country would be past its initial outrage and shock, and start to remember that there are some precious things about America and American freedom that we can't afford to lose in our fear and outrage. And that's really what the political themes of the movie are about anyway. They are not radical; they are the time-honored themes of how freedom and the American Dream require tolerance of others' right to the same thing, even if those others may see the world a bit differently than you or I and how, as Americans, new or tenth generation, if we cherish our home, we must respect and hold empathy for each other. I think as a people we are searching for that core value once again, so people are especially receptive to the movie right now. It is a creature of its time.

**What's the theme of *House of Sand and Fog* to you? Are you conscious of them when you're writing?**

Yes, I think you have to be because the themes live in the emotion of the story. I've talked about one of the big ones—the link between freedom and tolerance. Others are empathy, bigotry and responsibility for one's choices.

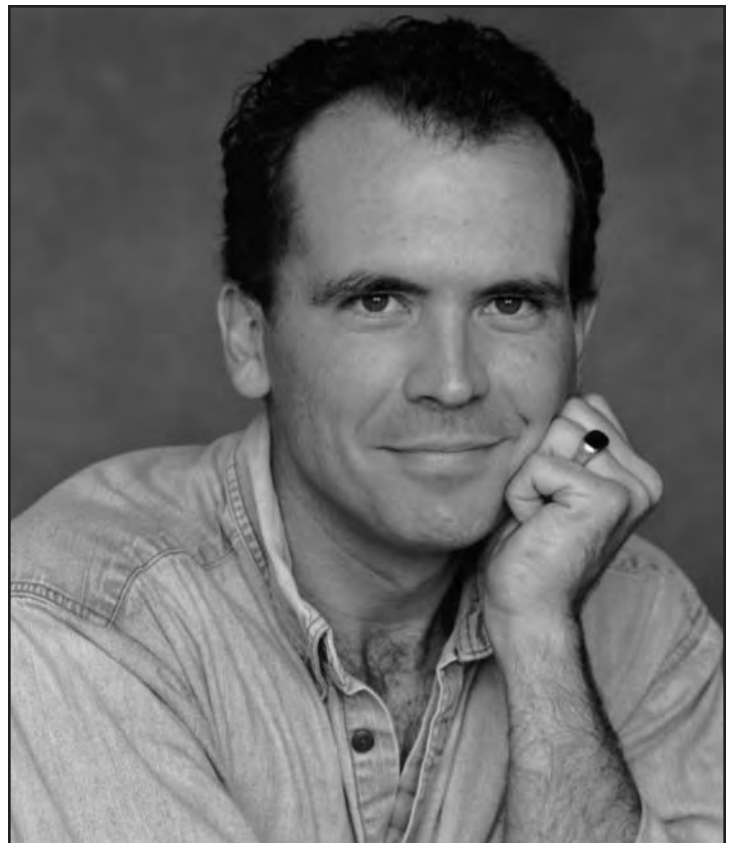
**Give me one event in the book that you wish could have been in the screenplay, but it simply did not fit or could not be put in.**

There really are none. If something is crucial there is always a way as long as you are adapting a novel in which the protagonist is well driven as was the case here. Then the events lay out along a relevant line, and there is always a way. We included what had to be there.

**What are you working on now?**

I just finished another adaptation and am starting a new project after the first of the year. -CW

Chris Wehner is a film critic for the Movie Review & Screenplay Database ([www.iscriptdb.com](http://www.iscriptdb.com)), editor-in-chief of *Screenwriter's Monthly*, author of *WHO WROTE THAT MOVIE? Screenwriting in Review: 2000-2002* (2003), and founder of [Screenwriters-Utopia.com](http://Screenwriters-Utopia.com).



Screenwriter Shawn Lawrence Otto



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