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Writer and Director Douglas McGrath: The Great Collaborator

Douglas McGrath may owe his career to some “weird, fluke circumstances,” but the writer behind 'Beautiful' and 'Becoming Mike Nichols' has managed to rack up a variety of credits with big-name talent

March 2, 2016, [Craig Barboza](#)
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Late last month Douglas McGrath called me from his office on 54th Street. He was getting close to finishing up a long week of press on *Becoming Mike Nichols*, his new HBO documentary that aired on February 22, and the veteran filmmaker had been so deep in Nichols mode for so long that he was starting to sound like, well, Mike Nichols. Witty, quotable things rolled easily off his tongue as he spoke in fully-formed paragraphs. He was smart, ebullient and self-deprecating. And his stories, sometimes involving VIPs, elicited peals of laughter. McGrath, of course, always had a gift for humor. Born in Texas, educated at Princeton, he first moved to New York City in 1980 and began his climb as an actor-writer-director with a job at *Saturday Night Live*.



Writer/director Doug McGrath
(Photo: Carlo Allegri/Getty Images)

He went on to share an Oscar nomination with Woody Allen for their scriptwork on *Bullets Over Broadway*, one of the best comedies of the 1990s. He also directed Gwyneth Paltrow in *Emma*. More recently, McGrath penned the book for the Broadway production of *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical*, and he is now working on a film version, which will be produced by Tom Hanks.

As impressive as all that is, McGrath will tell you it doesn't begin to compare to the artistic and box office success that Nichols enjoyed. Over the span of five decades, Nichols won every major award in theater, television, music and film. “He was a great artist,” said McGrath.

The idea for *Becoming Mike Nichols* sprang up a couple of years ago, when Nichols' old pal Jack O'Brien learned that Nichols, who had signed a contract with Alfred A. Knopf to write his autobiography, couldn't bring himself to do it for whatever reason. Thinking of all those great stories that would go unrecorded, O'Brien mentioned it to the writer Alex Witchel, who mentioned it to her husband Frank Rich, who then pitched it to HBO as a documentary, and suggested McGrath as the director. Extensive research went into the making of the 72-minute film, which features clips of Nichols' popular stage act with the comedian Elaine May and follows his early directorial efforts on

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Broadway and in Hollywood, including *The Graduate*, which won Nichols the directing Oscar. (A new Blu-ray version of *The Graduate* was just released by The Criterion Collection.)

“When they brought it to me, in my head, I always thought of it as a stand-in for Mike’s autobiography,” said McGrath of the film. He shot it over three days during the summer of 2014 at New York’s Golden Theater, on the same stage where Nichols and May performed in 1960. Nichols died four months later. “This turned out to be the last filmed record of Mike,” said McGrath.



Executive Producer Jack O'Brien, Director Douglas McGrath and Executive Producer Frank Rich attend the HBO screening of 'Becoming Mike Nichols' at HBO Theater on February 17, 2016 in New York City (Photo: Michael Loccisano/Getty Images)

This isn't your typical Hollywood documentary, with stars and collaborators paying tribute to a celebrated artist.

That was a conscious decision early on. What [this film] really is is an intimate conversation with Mike Nichols and his friend Jack O'Brien. It is Mike Nichols talking about Mike Nichols, and his work and how he became an artist and how he grew as an artist. But it's really about becoming. The key word in the title is *Becoming*.

Why was that important to you?

Well, when you have a career as long and as rich as Mike's was, if you do a documentary that covers all of it — in addition to having other people come into the documentary to talk about Mike — there's so little time to delve into anything before you hurl yourself forward to talk about something else. I thought it would be much more interesting, and Mike thought it would be much more interesting, if we focused on an area of his life and really explored it in depth. So as Mike describes the decisions he made and the challenges his productions faced, I show lengthy film clips to demonstrate whatever point he's talking about. For instance, when he talks about *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and how Richard Burton figured out how he wanted to cry in a particular scene, which was something that bedeviled Burton for a while [Mike takes no credit; he said Burton figured it out], we play the whole scene. I show Burton coming into the room and finding this garment that is conclusive to him that his wife's had an affair, and you see what takes him from there to tears. And because we don't have to rush through the clip, even if you've never seen *Virginia Woolf*, you can feel how powerful it is.

What kind of response are you getting?

We had a premiere the other night and my pal, and Mike's friend, Nathan Lane was there and Nathan said what I'd always hoped people would feel, which is that even though the documentary stops after *The Graduate*, you understand the man. You understand the whole thing. Because you don't need 20 examples to tell you how great Mike is. If you have a few and look at them in depth, you get the full picture. The beauty of the movie, I think, is that it allows people — the audience — to really understand what Mike's thinking was on these extraordinary projects that he did.

You really do. It was fascinating to hear Nichols talk about what he had learned about directing for the stage and screen throughout his career. At one point, he says, "There are only three kinds of scenes: negotiation, seduction and fighting," and sometimes you can be working on a scene for weeks before you realize what it is.

I know. I forget which scene he used as his example but he said as he's watching it, all a sudden he thinks, "This isn't a fight; it's a seduction!" [laughs] And, you know, once you realize that everything



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A poster for the New York Philharmonic's 175th Anniversary 2016/17 Season concert titled 'All-Mozart'. The poster features a portrait of a young woman with long dark hair. Text on the poster includes 'NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC', '175th ANNIVERSARY 2016/17 SEASON', 'Dec 1-3', 'All-Mozart', and a quote from The New York Times: "Pure and moving ...". A red button at the bottom right says 'FOR TICKETS ►'.

has to alter to suit that.

Nichols also believed in being spontaneous. He allowed things that were happening on the set, specifically things that could be useful to the story, to feed into the production.

Yes, I've thought a lot about what Mike has said because he's very interesting. My favorite director is Alfred Hitchcock. I mean, as a pure visual storyteller, I think he has no equal. And yet Hitchcock's approach to filmmaking was to plan every single thing; nothing, *nothing* was left to chance. You can read all the literature about Hitchcock, and there's never a story about, "Oh the funniest thing happened that day and that's why that's in the movie." [laughs] That doesn't exist in Hitchcock's canon and you can't fault him. That's the way it worked for him and he turned out a handful of masterpieces! Mike is the other way. I'm not trying to suggest he didn't plan and wasn't careful. That's all there. But Mike left himself open to the moment, if you know what I mean. And by leaving yourself open, you discover things all the time. Maybe the actor finds something that day that you didn't plan six months ago when you were sitting at your desk, working things out. Human beings, when they relate to each other in a place, they find things. They bring their own intelligence and emotion to what's around and in front of them. Sometimes it's the mood of the person you're working with; sometimes it's your surroundings. But I think that's why so much of Mike's work feels fresh. He stayed alert to what was in front of him.

It must have been Nichols's training in improvisational comedy. What about your past, when did you first know that you wanted to make movies?

I always thought I was going to be an actor because when you're a kid and you're watching a movie that's all you see. You think, God, that looks fun. But in college I started writing plays and through a series of weird, fluke circumstances, after graduating I got a job as a writer at *Saturday Night Live* in what is safely regarded as the low point of the show's history. Nevertheless, since it was my first job, I thought: I'm a writer. Then I directed a short film at *SNL*, which I really liked doing. It was called *Lori Has a Story*. It was with Catherine O'Hara, Laurie Metcalf and myself. That was my first experience on a movie set. Later, I wrote an adaptation of [Garson Kanin's 1946 Broadway farce] *Born Yesterday*. It was a hilarious and, ultimately, a terrible experience.



Actor and friend Nathan Lane and McGrath attend the HBO screening of 'Becoming Mike Nichols' at HBO Theater on February 17, 2016 in New York City (Photo: Michael Loccisano/Getty Images)

Why?

At a certain point other writers were brought on. So some of my material was in and a lot of it wasn't — and even the material of mine that was in didn't seem directed properly. I remember thinking, well, if I don't want to spend the rest of my life doing this, meaning watching someone else muck up what I did, there's only one way around that. I have to become a director.

What advice do you wish you had gotten when you were starting out?

I guess I would try to encourage the younger me to not be so worried. A lot of the writer's life is just being alone at the desk and you learn something new every time. So much of that is what *not* to do! But it's always about going forward because rejection is very discouraging and you get a lot of rejection, or I did, in the early years and you have to think: What can I learn from it? [Also, don't get stuck on one thing.] I remember Nora Ephron said I hate when my friends say I just can't get my script made. She'd say, "Then write another script!" I like that.

What else have you learned from the people you've known and worked with?

The thing about Nora and Mike and Woody [Allen] and all those people who are at the sort of top of the firmament in the entertainment business, they're very practical, down-to-earth people.

I remember on *Bullets Over Broadway*, we had a scene with John Cusack and Dianne Wiest walking down the street and [producer] Bob Greenhut, who was breaking the script down, said, "If we have them walking down the street, that's like \$80,000 because we need period cars, we need to close this ..." There were a million expenses we didn't think about while writing the scene. And Woody, who had every power to insist the scene be shot on the street if it was crucial to the story, was immediately like, "Well, we'll move it." We moved it to the park and it's actually one of the most beautiful scenes in the movie because it was autumn in the park and John and Dianne are just sitting on a bench and it's *gorgeous*. There are no cars. You don't have to have so many extras. That move might have saved \$60,000. I was really impressed by that because this is a guy who could do anything and yet he was sensitive to the practicalities. I don't think you work for very long if you're not.

I love that scene. Was that in Central Park?

Yeah, it's up near the Conservancy Garden.

Speaking of Allen, I read that he was one of your idols growing up.

Yes.

How did you two meet?

We met through my wife, Jane. She had worked for Woody for many years and when she stopped they remained very close friends. So when she and I started dating, I became included in the dinners when they would get together.



Actor Toby Jones, actress Sandra Bullock and McGrath attend the 'Infamous' premiere after party at Brasserie 8 1/2 in New York City October 9, 2006 (Photo: Evan Agostini/Getty Images)

You had only one movie credit when you began working on a screenplay with Allen. He had 28. Were you at all nervous?

Yes! Yes! Yes! I mean, I had been nervous just being friends with Woody for a long time. Nothing in his manner was making me nervous. I just couldn't get over the fact that I was sitting at a dinner table with Woody Allen. Who, first of all, looks a lot like Woody Allen. He wears the same clothes he wears in his movies. You know, he seems like he's in costume. So for the first several times we would have dinner — I'm not kidding, I don't speak this way — but I would have out-of-body experiences. [laughs] I still remember they kind of came in my head with a little sound: Wooo-ip! Where all the sudden, it was like I was in a movie. I could see myself talking to Woody, as if I were at a perch on the ceiling looking down at the table. And, you know, it's not very good for conversation because you're sort of distracted.

So what was your reaction when Allen asked you to write something with him?

He never asked me directly. He asked Jane. One night she said, "Woody wants to know if you'd like to write a movie with him." And for 20 minutes all I said was, "Are you kidding? Don't kid about this." I'm a very optimistic and dream-minded person. But I wasn't thinking that that was going to happen. So I told her yes and she told Woody yes, because he's very indirect in that way. Then one day he asked me to come by his apartment. I assumed it was to talk about writing and when I walked in he said, [a dead-on impression of Allen] "OK, here's how I like to work." I thought, What? Oh my god. And he started talking. Immediately — Wooo-ip! — I went into my place on the ceiling [laughs] and

I'm kind of nodding and everything and then he said, [continuing in Woody's voice] "So, you wanna hear an idea?" And I went, Oh sure. And then Woo-oo-oo! Back up to the ceiling. I'm telling you, I didn't listen to one word out of his mouth. I couldn't concentrate. The whole parade of my life with Woody up till then went before me. I could remember lying in my bed back in Texas reading *Without Feathers*." I could remember where I'd seen certain movies [of his]. And then I noticed he had stopped talking. I said, Oh, Jesus. And I looked at him and he said [back to Woody's voice], "So, you know, what do you think?" And I thought, it's probably a bad idea to tell him I didn't listen to one single thing he said. So I said, "Well [long pause], maybe."

[laughs] Then what happened?

He had a look on his face. He got such an impressed look on his face, like [as if we're hearing Allen's interior monologue], "Jesus, he's got standards. He's not just snapping up any idea I throw out at him." Little did he dream I would have gladly snapped it up.

Did you meet regularly to discuss story and write scenes?

Well, eventually I calmed down. I'd like to say, to be clear, that my anxiety was only because of *who* he was, not *how* he was. Woody was generous in the collaboration. He never lorded over me his artistic and intellectual superiority. We worked at his apartment every day. He had a very unusual style, which must have come out of his extraordinary creative fertility. I'd come over and we would pick an idea and discuss it. We never wrote anything down. We discussed out loud what that movie could be, scene by scene. You'd have to say, "OK, in the opening scene this guy is a jewel thief and he goes to Tiffany's and" blah blah blah. "Then in scene two, he runs out and as he's just escaping ..." You'd say the dialogue, you know, suggest lines they could say. You talk through what the scene could be to make sure there really was a scene there. He was very rigorous. If we were repeating ourselves, he would say, "Now we're padding it out. It's not good." Sometimes we would have the whole movie, then think, "Yeah, all right. I see that movie. I see what that is." But we were never in love with it enough to want to do it.

How did you come up with the idea for *Bullets*?

Woody had the central idea of the gangster who was good at playwriting. But we couldn't figure out what to do after that. We had the scenes at the beginning with David needing to get the money for the play and all that stuff, but once Cheech is good at fixing the problems with David's play, we didn't know what to do. Woody was like [his voice again], "Yeah ... then what?" Whenever we got stuck for a while, we would sort of put the idea aside and move on to another one. There was always something else. But I have to tell you it was an absolutely irreplaceable education for me.



McGrath directs Toni Collette in 'Emma' (Photo: Alamy)

Your next film, *Emma*, was a comedy of 19th-century manners with Gwyneth Paltrow. Some critics marveled at the ease with which you moved from Broadway's heyday to Jane Austen. Was that a story you wanted to adapt for a while?

Yes, I read that book in the 80s and thought, Why hasn't this been adapted? It just seems so perfect for a movie. So as we were finishing our work on *Bullets* and Woody was getting ready to shoot, I thought, you know, I'm going to have a brief window here where I might be able to get something made that would be a little harder to get done if I hadn't just done a movie with Woody. Then *Bullets*, which was made independently, sold to Miramax so I knew Harvey [Weinstein, the producer and Miramax co-founder] from that experience and so we brought Miramax the *Emma* script.

What was it like directing your first film?

The whole experience of *Emma* was terrific. It was a happy crew and a wonderful cast. I was very anxious to do well. I was eager but also anxious. One of the most important things I learned on that film, and it was a great relief, is that you don't have to know everything as the director. I remember the day the D.P. said to me, "What kind of light are you thinking about for this scene? What time of day do you think it is?" And I said, "I always kind of figured this was late afternoon." And he said, "Ah, very good. Late afternoon light." And so he trots off. This is like 6:45 in the morning and I thought, you know, if it were up to me the only way to get late afternoon light would be to shoot in the late afternoon. The key to being a director is you have to know what you want! If you can't communicate it's a problem. But if you can communicate what you want and you get the right people, everybody's there to help you.

Has working on documentaries, such as *His Way* and *Becoming Mike Nichols*, benefited from your work in narrative films, and vice versa?

I think it really helped me because in narrative films the question every day is: What is the story? What's the scene about? And sometimes I find in documentaries people don't ask that question enough. As an audience member I'm impatient. I'm always very, "Why are we here?" I want to know, what am I waiting for? But in a documentary you also have to think, "What is this story about?" because someone's always telling you a story. So I'm listening to think how do we shape that and what else might we need either to get us from this story to the next, or what do we need to make this story complete. In *His Way* [McGrath's 2011 documentary on Hollywood mogul Jerry Weintraub], I had 60 hours and I thought if I don't take control of this, meaning as a storyteller, kind of early, I could be working on this for three years. So I planned every question. I asked all the questions in *His Way*, off camera. I could to a degree control what we were discussing.



McGrath (L) with original Broadway cast stars of 'Beautiful', Jake Epstein and Jessie Mueller during the Actor's Equity Opening Night Gypsy Robe Ceremony on January 12, 2014 in New York City (Photo: Walter McBride/WireImage)

Tell us about the Broadway show [Beautiful: The Carole King Musical](#). How did you go about writing your first musical?

Funnily enough, I treated it like a documentary. I interviewed the four songwriters, Carole King, Gerry Goffin, Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil, and that was similar to *His Way* because I had hours and hours of conversations that were transcribed into hundreds of pages. And it's that thing where you just sit with the stories for a long time and think, "What is the unifying link in all these stories? What is the thing in this life that is the most interesting?" Life is made up of so many little things, but in the end it's always a couple of big things that tell the story.

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