

# James Ivory: an interview with the Oscar-nominated director from Oregon



James Ivory, left, with screenwriter Ruth Prawer Jhabvala and producer Ismail Merchant at an awards ceremony in 2002. (*The Associated Press*)

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James Ivory walked into the lobby of The Nines looking as crisp as an October afternoon, ready to talk about his career as a movie director. He thought for a second about the changes that have come over Portland since his last visit and laughed. "Portland is too hip for us poor New Yorkers," Ivory said. "It's hard to imagine."

Ivory was in town for **Mid Century Oregon Genius**, a program that honored him and another University of Oregon graduate, James Blue. Ivory introduced two of his movies at the Hollywood Theatre, "Maurice" (1987) and "Autobiography of a Princess" (1975). They are two of the almost 40 movies he made with his partner, Ismail Merchant, a creative team that often included screenwriter Ruth Prawer Jhabvala.

Ivory, who grew up in Klamath Falls, has been nominated for three Oscars as best director ("A Room with a View," "Howards End" and "The Remains of the Day"). He is 86 and is as classy and intelligent as the movies he makes.

### **Why did you pick "Maurice" to screen at the Hollywood Theatre?**

I wanted to see it again. It's true (laughs). When I go to these various things people want me to show other movies, and usually it's "A Room with a View." How many times can I see "Room with a View"? (laughs) I would prefer to see ... it's very hard anymore to see my films on a big screen. You just can't see them anymore. So I try to pick something that I'd like to see. People better get ready for "Slaves of New York," which was universally hated. But I'm dying to see it.

### **Do you get asked to do festivals and celebrations a lot? Do you like it?**

I do. I do. I get invited to all sorts of things. Earlier in the year I was invited to Copenhagen to show "The City of Your Final Destination," which went over very well. I had never been to Copenhagen and I was in London.

### **Do you feel like you're getting your due as an Oregon filmmaker?**

Oh, more than (laughs).

### **How do you think being from Oregon influenced your career?**

That would be hard to pin down. I don't know how to answer that. I've never really thought about it. It gave me a belated sense of the beauties of nature, that's one thing. But that didn't come along until I was probably in my mid-20s. Maybe there's something in the Oregon character that pushed me into the kind of life that I took up.

My partners in all this were from very, very different places. The writer, Ruth Jhabvala, lived in India but was German. My partner Ismail Merchant was from Bombay but was educated in England and he had a different view on the world. Probably they had to

contend with some sort of Oregonian-ness in me that they didn't understand and didn't know where it was coming from (laughs).

**Were you ever tempted to make a movie in Oregon?**

Yeah, I was. I wanted to make a movie once at Lake of the Woods, where my parents had a cabin, which I now have. We actually planned, we wrote a whole screenplay about a kind of Indian spiritual group that was at Lake of the Woods. We weren't calling it that but it was Lake of the Woods. We wrote a whole screenplay about it but we couldn't get funding for it.

**When you say Indians do you mean Native Americans?**

No, Indians from India. The name of it was "How I Became a Holy Mother."

**Is it true that you and your two partners had to agree before you moved forward on a project?**

Well, pretty much, yeah. It wasn't exactly like that because Ruth didn't write every one of our screenplays. Sometimes we'd collaborate with somebody else so she didn't have that kind of influence on a film she didn't write. I could not go forward without my partner, although I did once, and that was at the end, after he died, with "The City of Your Final Destination." So yeah, we pretty much had to all agree.

**Did you all have similar tastes?**

Yeah, I think it turned out to be that way. I think we all had similar tastes in that we all wanted to make movies about real people in real situations with real emotions that are living in modern times or other times. I think we all agreed that that's what we wanted to bring out in our stories.

**Did it get easier to get financing after you became more successful?**

Well, it's funny. It went up and down and up and down. It really did. I would say after "A Room with a View" it was relatively easy to get financing for a time because we were working with the studios. I would say from "A Room with a View" down to about ... well, right up to end, actually. There were some films that were harder to get financing for in the latter part of our career. "The White Countess" was not a film that was easy to get financed.

**Did you get involved in that, or was it mostly Merchant?**

I didn't get involved, no. I was never allowed to be involved in it.

**You guys were independent filmmakers before it was cool.**

We sort of had to be (laughs). We were making movies in India in English for a western audience. Nobody had ever done that. They weren't all that successful commercially, although there was one big star of those movies and that was "Shakespeare Wallah," which kind of made our name. We had to be independent. There was nobody else who wanted to do what we wanted to do. And then we began to make films in the United States and those too were independent because nobody else was interested in doing what we were doing. We had to be independent. Even when we were working with the studios, it was independent. They liked what we wanted to do -- this is from "A Room with a View" on -- and as long as we didn't go wildly over budget or something like that they let us alone.

**Do you think it would have been easier to make "Maurice" prior to "A Room with a View," or to make it today?**

Today it would be easier than anything. It wasn't hard even when we made it. We made it right after "A Room with a View" and it seemed we could do no wrong after "A Room with a View." It was not a hard film to make or get financed. It didn't cost very much anyway.

**You worked all over the world, but you didn't spend lavishly or have big budgets.**

Sometimes we did. Sometimes we had to. Sometimes things of that sort can take up a big chunk of the budget. It was more apt to happen with the studio films. They knew it was going to happen and they were ready to spend a lot of money on expensive sets. It was part of the production values.

**Did you feel like you were making movies in a recognizable style? When people hear "Merchant Ivory" they have a particular image in their head.**

I think the Merchant Ivory brand really means literate dialogue. I think it starts with that. When people say something, you know it has some sort of ripples to it. But beyond that, when you think of all the different kind of movies we've made in all the different places and the different periods, what is a Merchant Ivory movie?

**"Heat and Dust" is a Merchant Ivory movie, and so is "Le Divorce."**

And they're very different.

**Do you think Merchant Ivory gets confused with Masterpiece Theater?**

It could be.

**Do you care?**

Yeah, I sort of care. Sometimes it makes me angry when I'd make something that really had some strength to it and somebody would say that. It made me angry because I knew they were not listening to what was said. They were too busy looking at the coaches and the wallpaper and the people in their fine clothes. They weren't paying attention.

**Do you think about your legacy?**

Yeah. Sure. Who doesn't? If you spend your whole life doing something you do think a bit about it. That's one of the reasons I go around and appear with films. I like my films to be shown. But in the long run I don't know what people will think. You can't know that now. That hasn't happened yet. I'm still around.

**Are you going to make another movie?**

I hope so. I have two other movies in the works. One is a Shakespeare film, "Richard II." The other is a film that will take place in Sicily. It's based on a novel called "Call Me By Your Name" by Andre Aciman.

**How's your health?**

It's good. I broke my leg three years ago, but I'm fine. I just spent some time in Venice and I thought this is not a good place for someone who's broken their leg to be getting in and out of boats (laughs).

**Are all of your films available on DVD?**

Everything is available except our third film, which is called "The Guru." Criterion was going to bring it out on DVD. They remastered all the films that we owned, but we didn't own that film. They wanted to add it to the collection but it didn't happen.

**Do you work with Criterion on those releases?**

Yeah, I do. A lot. They're fantastic, the best. I've seen the restorations of all sorts of films by all sorts of directors, going way back into the past, and they're very, very, very careful and scholarly about it.

**If you were looking at yourself as a director, how would you describe yourself?**

I don't know (laughs). I'll have to duck that question. I don't know. I think I'm someone who's always wanted to have my way in all kinds of matters. I think as a director you have to have your way. Otherwise you can't really proceed and come out with something

that's really personal and all your own. I think I've lived up to that really well, but only because I had Ismail Merchant as a partner. I would not have had such a run without him and Ruth.

**What did he give you that allowed you to do that?**

His enthusiasm and his sheer energy in joining with me to make films that we wanted to make together. Sometimes it was he who wanted to do a particular project. Sometimes it was me or Ruth, and we were all very solid. His strengths were loyalty and very, very good taste and love of what he was doing. That kept me going.

**Is it fair to say that he handled the business side while you made the movies?**

Yeah, yeah. I didn't get involved in the business side of things. I didn't have to go out and raise money, and I had no talent for that. I was never allowed to sit in on these business meetings because I might say the wrong thing and spoil everything that he'd set up (laughs).

**If you own 27 movies, it must be like having 27 children.**

Kind of, yeah (laughs).

**Do you have a favorite out of your 27 children?**

Several. That's why I like seeing them again. I discover things about them that I'd forgotten about, and it's really a pleasure to watch them.

**When I write something, I might forget about it until I read it again, and then I remember everything about it. Is that the case with your movies?**

Absolutely. I remember them very, very well. I think I do. I'm sometimes contradicted by picky actors (laughs).

**You have a reputation for being an actor's director. Do you think that's true?**

I think what they mean by that is I leave them alone to do what they do best and I'm not constantly on their backs. I think that's what they mean. Also, I like my actors. It's very, very rare that I haven't gotten along with an actor, only one or two in my whole career.

**Did you do a lot of rehearsing?**

No. We couldn't afford to rehearse. When we made "The Remains of the Day" we didn't even have a read-through. Emma Thompson was making a film somewhere else and she could never come to a read-through. The only film that we had a lot of rehearsal for and preparation for was "Mr. and Mrs. Bridge" because everybody was in New York. The Newmans were there and all of the supporting roles, even the kids, so we were able to for once, and once only, have a long period of rehearsal. As far as I was concerned, in the long run it didn't mean all that much because we couldn't rehearse on the set. You have to rehearse on a set, and we were rehearsing in The Actor's Studio, and it's not really a set.

**You're not autobiographical director. You're not making movies about growing up in Klamath Falls.**

No.

**But out of all of your movies, is "Mr. and Mrs. Bridge" the most personal in some ways?**

That was probably the closest to that kind of American life. Even though it was set in Kansas City, the institutions that were shown were ones that existed in Klamath Falls and were familiar to me. The inhabitants, everything about it.

**Did you storyboard?**

I generally do not storyboard, but if you have a very complicated scene that goes on in different kinds of light or different kinds of weather you have to storyboard. Otherwise it's a terrible mess to shoot it. You have to have a very good plan. Like the tornado scene in "Mr. and Mrs. Bridge": you go from a bright sunny day and it gets darker and darker and then the storm hits and then the storm lifts. There had to be a storyboard for every shot. The same when we were doing "Le Divorce": that had to be exactly storyboarded because you could only shoot at the Eiffel Tower during certain hours. You were allowed to come in at 5:30 in the morning but you had to be out by 9 because the public came. We had this climatic scene that we had to storyboard very carefully. There's a bit of that in "The White Countess," when everybody's meeting at the boats at the end. But on the whole it sort of boring for me to imagine storyboarding a whole movie. It would take all the spontaneity out of it for me. I can't imagine doing something like that.

**Some directors do it.**

I know, and who am I to say they should not?

**Did you ask for a lot of takes?**

I don't generally ask for a lot of takes. Usually we got it by five or six. I had actors who thought their first or second take, often the first take, was the take, and who preferred not to do more, but sometimes you have to. Someone makes a mistake in their lines, or what have you.

**How involved were you in the editing?**

Very much so. I was always sitting there while the editor cut the movie. I'd come out from behind my newspaper from time to time and say "I don't like that" or "I do like that" (laughs).

**Do you still go to movies?**

Yeah, all the time.

**What was the last movie you saw?**

I'll tell you but you're not to ask me ask me what I thought -- "Gone Girl." I will tell you the last movie I really, really liked, and that was "Birdman." Really good movie. In every way, it's just superlative. Another movie I saw recently that I adored was "Boyhood." I thought it was a great American movie.

**What are your plans after you leave Portland?**

I'm going to see some friends in Eugene. I have quite close ties with the University of Oregon, the Knight Library, because our archives are there. Mine, Ismail's, and some of Ruth's.

**What's in there?**

Every kind of thing. In Ruth's case it's all the original drafts and finished drafts of all her screenplays, not only the produced screenplays but in some cases the films we didn't make for some reason or another, and the screenplays she wrote for other people.

**That's a gold mine of material.**

It is. They have all of our correspondence, and we wrote constantly. She would be in India and I would be in New York, and there would be a letter almost every day for a period of 15 years, and also Ismail writing and Ruth writing back. All of that is there. It's incredible, as a document of what we did and thought.

-- Jeff Baker