



What Dreams May Come (1998)

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VINCENT WARD (DIRECTOR)

Q. Who are you and what do you do?

VINCENT I'm the director of the film, and my name is Vincent Ward.

Q. What is the story of "Dreams?," and how did you come to direct the film?

VINCENT 'What Dreams May Come' is the story of Chris Nielson, played by Robin Williams. It's a love story about a man who passes away and goes on a search to find his wife, a search which takes him all the way to hell and back. He's a family guy. And his wife is a painter, she's created this wonderful painting for him as a gift. And when he dies, he finds he's in her painting and he has to try and find a way to get to her. And that's the quest of the movie. He tries to commute with her and he goes on this truly extraordinary journey through paradise, down into hell.

The screenwriter approached me, approximately four years ago, with a number of his screenplays. We wanted to work together and we were trying to find something that we could work together on. I read about six of these screenplays and didn't immediately respond to anything. A month later, another of his screenplays came in, based on the novel by Richard Matheson, What Dreams May Come, and I loved it, it was very moving, I guess more than anything else, I was just deeply affected by this story. And I think that's what has attracted everybody to this film that wanted to be involved in it. But I couldn't see how to do it because seventy-five percent of the film, of the story, is set in either paradise or hell. The screenplay didn't have a way of addressing this. It didn't; have a way of conveying a very individual and special afterlife.

I studied as a painter, originally. I did six years at art school. So I finally realized I could draw on that background and create paradise using some of the traditions of how people are created in the past, but how people have never created it on film before. Likewise hell. Artists for the last two thousand years have been consumed with trying to find a way to envisage hell and envisage paradise. And it appeared to me that if you could find a way to draw on some of that tradition, and put it into a movie, into something from the 20th Century, you would have a solution. So, Chris' wife, Annie, in the book and the script worked in a catering firm, and I thought if you could make her instead a painter, you know, like a fine art painter and 19th century fine art restorer, then you could have something. When Chris dies he could come to paradise and believe that he is actually in her painting, a painting that she had done as a gift for him. So, when I came to the film that's what I brought with me. And my screenwriter was very open and, and we conveyed the whole of heaven, and hell as kind of a like a series of paintings. So, it's a very subjective vision of paradise and a very subjective vision of hell.

Q. What attracted you to this story?

VINCENT Well, as I said, I found it tremendously moving. And the fantasy in the story was also a huge draw. I grew up on an isolated farm in New Zealand a long way from everybody else. And with no kids my own age around. My brothers and sisters were carted off to boarding school. So I spent a lot of time having to entertain myself and dwelling in my imagination and trying to create and invent places. Ah, raging wild wars in the hills on my own, trying to be two armies at once, it's not an easy thing. So I kind of just enjoy creating those worlds. And you know, I think I got good at it because I spent my whole childhood doing it. Also, when I was very young, I was hit on the head and I was concussed a number of times. So the things that I liked doing—which were amateur wrestling, rugby and so on—I wasn't actually allowed to do anymore and I had to spend a lot of time doing something else on my own instead, instead of butting heads with other kids. I ended up painting a lot and that's probably what I am most is a frustrated painter who's a filmmaker by accident.

So when I give up filmmaking eventually, I'll go to some remote part of New Zealand with a bunch of canvasses and that's what I'll do.

Q. What were the artistic traditions you drew upon in creating the afterlife?

VINCENT We were influenced by many artists and many schools of painting, but in the end we had to create our own "art," because primarily we actually went out there and filmed things and then had to find a way to make them look like paintings.

While there were a lot of influences from the 19th century, Anne's painting was created by a New York artist called Steve Hannock. He's one of the few contemporary artists painting in an original 19th century style.

Q. Do you think today's concept of heaven is different than it has been in the past?

VINCENT In terms of the way people perceive it? I would say, definitely yes, I mean, we've had different artists trying to convey hell. Principally people like Francis Bacon give a kind of contemporary, psychological hell, rather than a hell of demons. Demons are all internalized rather than being, you know, devils and so on. So, I think that certainly our vision of hell is different in the 20th century than it was in times past. And I think that for most people— people who believe that there's another place that you go to after death— paradise is probably pretty much the same. I mean, you know, maybe it's more, a little more liberal than it's ever been because we don't have Queen Victoria sort of staring down our backs. I think that for most people it is a place of ranging mountains and lush growth and, animals that are wild, yet domesticated. People that can fly. A place of love, certainly conceptually that would be the main thing that I think people would expect to see. A place where you feel welcome. A place where you feel at home and a place that you could see and hang out with the friends that you'd like to be with. Hey, it could just be one long party.

Q. What does heaven look like to you?

VINCENT Well, again, I think the first thing you have to say about this vision of paradise is that it's a subjective vision. I mean, one of the great ideas behind this film is that rather than there being an objective paradise and that everybody's paradise is the same, in this film you create your own paradise and it's whatever you want it to be. In this case, Chris Nielson bases his paradise on a gift from his wife which is a large painting of places where they've been. In terms of the kind of influences of paintings and the colors that we were going for, I tried to achieve a slightly 19th century style of painting, given that, his wife, Annie, is also a 19th century restorer of 19th century paintings. And I tried to combine that with a sense of light and color that's very much like the stained glass windows, kind of crystalline colors. Emeralds and violets and blood reds. Very deep colors, very rich dark browns and blacks in the shadows.

One of the artists that I really liked for helping create the look of this film was a German artist called Casper David Fredrick, a German romantic painter. The German romantics were fascinating because they believed that nature was more powerful than man. So, you create a sense of paradise that's not a tame place, it's a place of roaring winds and twisted trees and steep mountains and mist. Incredibly beautiful, but at the same time, to some degree quite alone. In our film, Chris Nelson goes to paradise. But paradise for him is a kind of hell because he's there without his wife. And it's a place of aloneness and that one painter seemed to convey that more in his work than anybody else.

One of the fascinating things about the late 19th century is that it was kind of really the last time that people really believed in a fairly consistent vision of paradise. So if you dig into those 19th century artists-- like John Dore, John Martin, Casper David Fredrick—there is a mystical sense in the paintings that you don't find very much in 20th century art. Because they believed that there was something else. Many 20th century people kind of believe, kind of don't believe, sort of vacillate backwards and forwards, and probably have very little idea of what it would look like. They still have a kind of relic from a residual memory from the 19th Century.

Q. What kind of research did you do to prepare for this film?

VINCENT We did two complete rewrites of the screenplay, revisiting every part of what the afterlife would look like. Then I brought on a production designer, Eugenio Zannetti, and a costume designer. And we start doing drawings and we brought in a team of artists. I brought an English artist over from Australia, I brought a Russian artist over from Russia. I hired visual researchers, who did three months of visual research. Going into UCLA and coming out, because fortunately they were honor students, with bags, with a hundred books in them. And each of the pages that were relevant would be marked with post-it's, and then we'd do mass photocopies we thought might help create a sense of the world for people. Then we did an intensive pre-visualization period with these artists. Using all these stills, many of them I have here around me. Storyboard artists, visual effects artists, painters, illustrators. That went on for like, two and a half months. Until, every part of the film had at least key illustrations. And then, we started making the sets about three months after that.

Q. What were your primary goals in the production design?

VINCENT I suppose the major challenge for the production design is to create a unity, to create one single vision. Not three people's visions, just one. It's a unity based on colors, on psychology. For example, my production designer and I went looking for Annie's house. And we looked for you know, two or three days, and he'd say well, do you think it should be a Queen Anne style house, do you think it should be that? And in the end he was getting completely fed up with me because I couldn't find the house. Finally I realized it wasn't the house I was looking for, primarily, I was looking for a line of Jacaranda trees, because of the color, the kind of blue—a kind of redy, purple, blue that creates a sense of nostalgia. And I always imagined Chris, the last time he saw his children, standing there, with the van going away, under these trees and the whole street covered in the leaves, in these blue Jacaranda leaves. And, every time he would think of his children, from then on, through the rest of the movie, somewhere in that shot would be a color that was Jacaranda purple. The tree primarily grows in Australia, and there are virtually none in San Francisco. So we would have to dress whole streets by putting artificial, hand made flowers attached to knitting over the top of these enormous, I don't know, forty, fifty foot trees. Kind of a massive art department job. This film definitely has the largest fake flower collection in the history of filmmaking!

And then when we thought of Annie, for example, I always thought of this Edward Munch painting. I can't remember the title, I think it's the three stages of life, perhaps. And it's a dance, or maybe it's called the dance of life. And you see her as a young woman dressed in white, standing watching. You see her as a middle-aged woman dressed in red, violently dancing. Then you see her as a widow dressed in black, watching from the other side of the painting. And her character you see in these three different stages in the film. And so whenever I would have something to do with her, I'd have these blood red sails. You try and find some psychological thread that drives the colors of the movie. Sometimes it would be a lack of color. Most of hell has very little color in it. Just maybe one single color that stands out.

The film is a little bit like a stained glass window to look at, I hope. You get a lot of turquoise and purples and blues. And blood reds and emeralds. And that's kind of the feel of the whole movie. The reason for this is that it also gives you a sense of, of something else. Of something on the perimeter of almost a....other worldly or, for want of a better word, 'spiritual' sense.

Q. What role do special effects play in "What Dreams May Come?"

VINCENT Probably the greatest challenge in filming this was that seventy-five percent of the film was in the afterlife. So you have a vast number of visual effects and you are constantly battling to keep the costs down so that you can realize what you see in your mind for your version of the afterlife. So you do endless drawings. And I have a whole range of artists working for me trying to envisage this afterlife. And you're constantly having to chop and rearrange it and rethink it and rearrange it. I am frankly quite amazed with what we've got and what we're still getting. In fact, a lot of the film was made in the post production, on a film like this, where the visual effects are created after you stop filming. We have like, two hundred and fifty or two hundred and sixty visual effects. Each shot of those I have to design in the

post production with the other artists I'm working with.

Q. Were there special challenges for the actors in working in this "afterlife" environment?

VINCENT Perhaps, but I tried to create an afterlife which was gritty, which was almost more real than our everyday lives. For example, in the film a bird craps on Chris as he's looking up and the "crap" is paint. And for most of the rest of the movie he's covered in paint, the same paint that landed on him from the bird. So it's very much a place of cause and effect, it's not a place where you just go through untouched. So for the actors, I think it had pretty much the same challenges you have on any film. We filmed in actual locations, or we filmed on sets. We filmed in Montana. I like to film in sometimes quite wild locations. We filmed for example, on the top of mountains, with very strong winds. I'm sure Robin probably told you the story of the Indian guy who talked about the gods that lift you off the top of the mountain and you find you're sort of sailing down three hundred feet and don't survive. He'd just been told it one day and I said, okay, I'll tie you to the tree, which fortunately was a two and half ton tree. It wasn't actually that dangerous. You could stand on the edge in front of him, but just as a kind of safety precaution, we did tie him to a tree. But generally, you know, I'm very careful about safety on movies so, it's kind of an extreme example.

Q. What are the differences for you between adapting a novel for the screen versus working with an original story?

VINCENT I would say that most novels don't really suit being films. And that if you don't completely rethink them and try and stick only to one thing, which is the spirit of the novel, then you'll never make it work. So you almost have to throw away everything and rebuild it. Most of will come back when you rebuild it. But a lot of it, will also have something that's particularly cinematic about it. And that's what I try and do. I try and reinvent it but keep to the very spirit of it.

Q. Tell about the casting of the film.

VINCENT The main reason I wanted Robin Williams was because I thought he's kind of an everyman, somebody that everybody can identify with. I needed somebody who was a dramatic actor, but who also has a sense of humor. This isn't a comedy, it's very much a love story and a drama. It's an intense drama. And it really needed that leavening of somebody who has a real sense of joy and humor in life to contrast with the intensity of some of the other parts of the film. And I felt that a movie like this needed someone who could live in the drama, and that you would want to take the journey with. That's Robin, of course, and I was so glad when he responded to the script.

Annabella Scioria, who plays Annie, Robin's wife in the movie, did without question, the most powerful audition of anyone I've ever seen. Truly extraordinary. But she wasn't a big star, and the studio originally wanted a big star to play that part. When we finally gave her the part, she said she always knew she made for this part and she always knew we'd give it to her. And I thought she deserved it. Her part is very psychologically driven. The journey she goes on is sometimes quite dark, and you have to

completely believe her. She kind of grounds the film, because she remains behind and she has to deal with her own demons.

Max Von Sydow is an actor I've always loved. I wanted someone who had a sense of real knowledge. A sense of wisdom, a sense of somebody that you completely believed, without question, I mean, he's played God before. I think he was in the Ten Commandments. Someone with a natural authority that you wouldn't question. He plays a kind of tracker in the film— a mentor and advisor for Chris on his journey to hell.

And Cuba Gooding Jr., who plays probably the most challenging character in the movie, Albert, is a kind of jester in the afterlife, a guide, and a man of many illusions. Ultimately, you learn all sorts of surprising things about him. When I first started auditioning for that role, I couldn't find anyone who could pull it off the page. There were like maybe two actors, and even of those two actors, they didn't have quite the right quality of the character. It had been written as a Caucasian, middle class guy in his early twenties. So I started wondering of somebody from a different culture or different sort of minority could bring something special to that part and I started casting around with African Americans and people from a Latin background. Cuba expressed an interest in the movie. I interviewed him and decided he'd be fantastic for the part of Albert and he absolutely was. He dances with this part.

Q. What was the chemistry like between Robin and Annabella?

VINCENT Well the key thing about casting Annabella with Robin was to find two people that would have some chemistry and that you would believe had lived a large part of their life together. And who had this special quality of soul mates. You know, Robin is not the traditional romantic lead per say. But his qualities are disarming; he is loyal beyond belief. And the one thing that I felt that these two had, that Robin had in relation to Annabella, was that he would protect her as a person, as an actor. If she had the slightest problem, he would be the first person to stand up for her. He would go through hell for her. And it's the same, quality that Chris has for Annie.

Q. What's it like to work with Robin Williams?

VINCENT Robin brings a humanity to everything he does. He is incredibly open for a director. We did three weeks of improvisation and, rehearsals before start of background and improvisation and improvisational theatre. And he would try out anything. And I could talk him through a take and he would do it. I could suggest what he might be thinking and he would always give it a try. And he might try something also completely different, he'd say, no, no, this one's for me, this one's for me, just let me try this, just let me try this, one more take, and I'd go, okay, good. But anything you'd ask, he'd try. He's very much there for his other actors. I don't know all that many stars, but my my impression is that many of them are not as supportive of their other actors as say, many theater actors are. And the crews love him. I mean, he'll stand up, there will be a group of extras who are bored sitting around for three days, listening to eulogies, and he'll get out between takes and start doing a stand up routine you know, in front of three hundred people, just to keep them interested. They'll be some cold, very thin extras in a

swimming pool, and they'll be working there for two days with very few clothes on, and he'll kind of buoy them up. He always remains friendly to everybody. And here's another thing which is kind of interesting, he loves staying on the set and he's kind of invisible, you have to watch what the hell you say. Because, you don't see him, he's kind of like the invisible man. Even though he's such a big persona, when he appears he just sort of quietly does and you look around, and you go, oh wonderful Robin's going to come out of his trailer, and of course he's there, and he's been there the whole time. He's always there and he's always ready.

Q. And Cuba Gooding, Jr.?

VINCENT The thing I observed working with Cuba was first of all that he's a very physical actor. He loves to dance, he loves to physicalize things. He has one of the best entrances in the film. You see him up here walking on water. Then he dances on water as he's talking. He's very spontaneous. Some actors, their best work is take 6 and they do lousy work on take 1. And other actors, you always film, making sure you have a very high standards technically with their first two takes, because it's always going to be their best. Normally that would be true of Cuba and it's the same with Annabella. Cuba loves finding a freshness, the spontaneous moment. And, what was great was that Cuba and Robin just fire each other, they love working with it, with each other. You know, if Robin was maybe tired or whatever, as soon as he'd see he's just light up. They were always cooking.

Q. Do you believe there is love in the afterlife?

VINCENT You know, I do. I believe in soul mates, yeah, I guess I do. They say a cynic is failed romantic. I guess that's me. But at some level I, I believe it very much. I can never quite make it work in my own life but, that's probably why I like to make movies about it. The wonderful thing about film is that you can try to fix through your story telling things that you would hope you can achieve in your own life.

Q. Who shot the film for you?

VINCENT Eduardo Serra was my choice of cinematographer. I've worked with him before in my previous film, 'Map Of The Human Heart'. He is very methodical and very particular about light. He can create these kind of exotic experiences. He uses a scale of kind of grays, so that he will light something, have a little bit of key light here, but then, he will measure each part of the frame. And even though it's sort of underexposed say, by two or three stops, it's all kind of part of the painting, so to speak. So he'll deliberately underexpose areas, but you'll still see something of the colors coming through.

Q. Are there any similarities between "Map of the Human Heart" and "What Dreams May Come"?

VINCENT Both 'What Dreams May Come' and 'Map of the Human Heart' are love stories. They're both quests. This one's more optimistic, but there are some similarities. This is a lot more accessible a

story, because it's not about an Eskimo. And in terms of what they explore, 'Map of the Human Heart' is a love story that explores people of different races trying to survive in a sort of white, western civilization in the 20th century. Whereas 'Dreams' is a love story that uses that genre to explore the nature of the afterlife.

I think the thing that drives both 'Dreams' and "Map" is that behind the love story—for me—is a personal search about what relationships can be and what consistency in a relationship can be. And the quest to see if it's possible to find someone that you can co-exist with and believe in and love for a very long period of time. And both those stories are about that issue, that search, that question. And they each explore it in different ways, and they each come up with different answers. One of the things that really appeals to me about this story, at the ideas level, is the belief that love can conquer death, that love can go beyond death. But even more than that, it's that the dead can grieve the living. That even once you pass away, you can miss those people that you lived with when you were alive and that you loved and that we who are left behind have people up there, or down there or wherever, who still care about us and that it's possible to be reunited with them. And I guess that's a very romantic belief, but it's something that I want to believe is true.

The other idea that's kind of amazing in 'Dreams' is that we create our own hells. That whatever we lived in life is to some degree our obsessions, that the things that we put in denial are those things that claim us back when, or if, we ever end up in that other place. And that's a very much kind of 20th century idea of hell. It's not the kind of moralistic, there were devils keeping us down, you have to watch out, kind of thing. It has moral value to it, but it's a much more subjective vision of hell.

Q. What is the theme of the movie?

VINCENT Love transcends death is the main theme of the movie. I think it's a very hopeful story, it's a love story. Ah, I think what it says is there's at least hope that there's some where to go after death, that it's not just the end, where you end up as a bag of bones with some worms. That we can be reunited with those we love. Have children, have parents, have lovers. And I think what's exciting about the vision of paradise in this movie is that paradise can be what you want it to be. You imagine a paradise where the Dali Lama and a Catholic Cardinal could have a debate, this is it. They could argue all the way up to some celestial city. In fact, we have someone like that in the movie. It could be a place where two lovers could embrace, flying, that could be some people's idea of paradise. It could be a child's vision of her enormous doll's house made real at gigantic scale. It could be a library where there are millions and millions of books and you could find each book instantly. Hey, that's my idea of heaven. You don't need to go to the librarian. It can be high mountain country where you can leap down into fields and fly through the fields. It can be a debate with any friend you've ever had or it can be a debate with some famous person from three thousand years ago. I think that's a pretty exciting thing to see, and that's what we tried to convey in the movie.

Q. What does Marie's dollhouse represent? How did you visualize it?

VINCENT Chris Nielson has a daughter, Marie, and she has a dolls house. When we come to her in the afterlife, she's older and this beautiful dolls house that her mother's made for her—kind of like a Victorian stage, with a stairway to heaven, bridge, and a bridge city, with flying figures and jesters and ballet dancers flying in the air, mermaids—is her paradise in the afterlife. I liked the idea that this world of hers in miniature could be made grand. In the afterlife she created this whole world with real figures rather than cardboard figures. With real mermaids, with real flying figures, with a stairway that's fifty miles high—it vanishes into white light—with gorgeous and distant cities on mountain tops. So it's a true vision of a child, a fantasy world brought to life.