



Reign Maker *Rush* screenwriter Peter Morgan's films ask if it's good to be king

AT THE END OF THE 19TH CENTURY WHEN UPPER-CRUST Europeans went bad, they'd renege on their responsibilities and go exploring. In the more circumscribed world of the 20th century, they'd race. Yachts. Horses. Cars.

Rush, written by Peter Morgan for Ron Howard, explores this male need for speed, focusing on the furious Formula 1 battles of the Seventies between English bad boy James Hunt and relentless Austrian driving machine Niki Lauda, wonderfully played by Chris Hemsworth and Daniel Brühl, respectively.

Ten years ago, Stephen Frears told Morgan he was about to hit his stride now that he was turning 40. Now 20-plus years into his career, having married the daughter of a prominent Czech politician and Austrian royal family member, raised a family in Vienna, turned 50 in April, and written some two-dozen titles split between film and television, Morgan can drive a story with authority.

Morgan's screenplays give context to politician and potentates in *The Queen* (06), most notably; *The Last King of Scotland* (06); *The Other Boleyn Girl* (08), less agreeably; and *Frost/Nixon* (08). On the softer side, his screenplays for *360* (11), *Hereafter* (10), and *The Very Thought of You* (98) might suggest that he's enamored of some New Age notions of love and death. And, finally, Morgan is drawn to masculinity's battle between art and artlessness, as in *The Damned United* (09) and now its companion piece, *Rush*, which premiered at the Toronto Film Festival. In Hunt and Lauda, Morgan may have found the purest expression

>> IN FOCUS: *Rush* opens September 27.

of the thing that grabs him most: the way men calibrate life differently and what it means to win.

In *Rush* you have characters that behave like the tortoise and the hare: slow methodical planning versus "Hey let's party." James Hunt is a child of stockbrokers, upper-middle-class. Niki Lauda was from an even more prosperous business family. Both were quite well off, and both were looking for meaning.

They were both individualists and resistant to authority. They were both hotheads. You need that sort of a character to be arrogant and foolhardy and willful enough to think you can defy these otherwise very intimidating odds. These guys are like gamblers. Gamblers can stand the logic of "The odds are against everyone but me." They had that sort of level of obstinacy and delusion.

Did you find yourself more sympathetic to Lauda?

The subject goes to the heart of my own schizophrenia. I married an Austrian, I was brought up German in England and consider myself English. My mother tongue is both English and German. Linguistically, the film really appealed to me. There is a James Hunt and a Niki Lauda in me. I got their voices very, very quickly. You could give me a subject and I could extemporize it in their different voices, speech rhythms, and perspectives. It's rare. You know you are onto something when you can do that.

***Rush* and *The Damned United* are set in the mid-Seventies. Why is that such a fertile period for you as a crucible for male characters?**

The *Frost/Nixon* events were taking place on either side of the Atlantic at the exact same time, as was *The Last King of Scotland* [in Uganda]. I can't quite understand why it is. Part of it is coincidence. I was approached by Ang Lee to write something set in the Seventies. Ang didn't know that my father died in 1972, which was like a bomb going off in my family. I'd had conversations with my father about Nixon, so doing *Frost/Nixon* was a way, not of reconnecting with him, but at least connecting with an era in which he was still alive. The same goes for Idi Amin and for Brian Clough—connecting back to a time where I knew my father was aware of these events, when I was a 10-year-old kid.

Your father was a German Jew who escaped Nazi Germany early, in 1933. You were born 30 years later. Did you ever feel anything other than British?

The community of friends that my father made when he came to London were other dispossessed fugitive Central European Jews. That was very much the culture that I grew up in. There weren't any English people, even though I was brought up in London. I was exposed to English people in school, but even they called me German.

Did your father lose family in the Holocaust?

Yes.

Do you think that shaped your life?

Many things shaped my life. My mother suffered equally great if not greater family trauma after the war. It is strange that my mother and



my father got married; they were from opposite sides of the camp. My mother was from a Polish part of Germany and escaped after the war when the Russians pushed across. She lost her father and siblings. Every side suffered significant trauma. The war left scars geographically, psychologically, emotionally. It left no one unscarred. In that sense, anybody that survived those years who wasn't able to heal those psychological and emotional wounds with the idea of a victory—all those Central European countries—were left ravaged and scarred no matter on which side of the fence [they were]. Even though it's wildly unfashionable to say so, the humanitarian crimes committed against the Germans by the Russians afterwards, the stories that no one tells, were genocidal in all but name. Anybody coming from that part of the world at that time in history was profoundly scarred.

Did my father and his friends who determined my cultural background talk about people that they had lost and the trauma of that loss? They didn't. They were energetic people, hungrily embracing a new identity being British. They were passionately proud to be British even though they had these thick accents. Very much like the whole generation of Central and Eastern European Jews that formed the backbone of the film industry and were proud and passionate Americans. You would hear my father saying [*in a heavy German accent*], "I am ebsolutely a proud Br-r-ritish pehrson." He would say, "Vat do you mean I haf oon eccent?" There was no sense of being a victim. There was no sense of defeat. They were reinventing themselves as Brits.

In the characters of Brian Clough and Don Revie in *The Damned United* you found the difference between a bully and an artist. Similarly in *Rush*, winning is important, but the question is how it's done. When you construct a story about how two completely different men come at the eternal challenge of winning, it says something about who they are as men and how men were changing in the Seventies.

We are talking about a group of men here post sexual revolution. Before Niki and James, pre-sexual-revolution men went bowling,

played cards, and got married to have sex. All that changed in the Sixties. The Seventies were defined by profound economic difficulty. Not just with my family but with the whole country and the battle between right and left: you were either a Labour or Conservative voter. Or a Socialist. The country was split right down the middle. That continued right up until Thatcher completed her revolution.

Britain was defined in a way that no one who grew up in the Eighties will ever understand. You were either one of them or one of us. That has completely disappeared from British political life. It is much more present in America. You are either a red or blue state. It's not that way with us anymore. It hasn't been for years, not since Margaret Thatcher.

You often put gear changes in the narrative, like resequencing events or flashbacks such as "Six years earlier." How does that help the storytelling?

This is such a difficult question. I map out the structure in an outline. And until I've got that, I don't know where I am going. I will play with the form of it. The form of *The Damned United* was very difficult. I structured *Rush* as a series of overtaking maneuvers. The screenplay was written as a race. The protagonists start off on equal terms, then James Hunt wins. Niki Lauda buys his way in. James hears about that and realizes that he has been overtaken. James then conspires to join Formula 1, and suddenly they are on equal terms. James beats Niki, but then James joins Ferrari. Niki meets a girl, but James has been there beforehand. It continues all the way through.

What do you want to accomplish with footage of the actual people, as used in the codas in both *The Damned United* and *Rush*?

To pay respect to the real men. It wasn't in the original script. It was something we added in the cutting room. If the audience can see how scrupulous we were in our casting and how skilled the actors were, it helps deepen their investment and trust in the filmmakers. And that, in the end, is what the battle is all about. Do you trust the people who have just given you this entertainment? □