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DISPATCH

"We can love one another in other ways": Collaborating with James Baldwin on a Screenplay of *Giovanni's Room*

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Abstract

The author discusses his personal relationship with James Baldwin, recounting their collaboration on a film script for an adaptation of *Giovanni's Room*.

Keywords: *Giovanni's Room*, Michael Raeburn, James Baldwin, film, Paris, Marlon Brando, Robert de Niro, Saint-Paul de Vence, Steve McQueen

It was a bright summer's afternoon in the south of France on 2 August 1977. In the garden of his house below the ramparts of the village of Saint-Paul de Vence, James Baldwin was celebrating his 53rd birthday. He made a brief speech thanking his friends for coming. Then, much to my surprise, he announced that he and I had embarked on "an adventure" to write a screenplay of *Giovanni's Room* (1956). He raised his glass to me; most of the guests raised theirs to us in hesitant celebration.

The idea had occurred a few weeks before. It came from Jimmy; I cannot call him James, as to me, and to all his friends, he was Jimmy. His offer to collaborate on the adaptation had come out of the blue. Only a set of mutually shared circumstances going back to our first meeting can explain his proposal which was presented to me in these words: "We can also love one another in other ways: we'll write the script of 'Giovanni's Room' together."

To most outsiders we were the most improbable match: a young, novice filmmaker from colonial Africa, and a world-famous African-American writer from Harlem. Part of this article explains how the author came to think that such an artistic process could be beneficial for both of us.

In 1974 the novel *If Beale Street Could Talk* was launched in London by the publishers Michael Joseph. I arrived at the event late, invited by a journalist prominent in the women's movement. The author was already introducing his book.

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Figure 1 Launch of Michael Raeburn, *Black Fire!*, with an introduction by James Baldwin, The Africa Centre, London, January 1978. From left, Julian Friedmann (publisher), James Baldwin, Michael Raeburn. All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder.

I don't remember what he said because I was fixated by him. Being from Africa, for me his head and face were like a Benin mask come alive. I was spellbound by such African beauty—the high forehead, the bulging eyes common to depictions of trance states—and by the energy of his delivery, too, which was more passionate than what is considered acceptable in northern cultures, yet maintained, in its seamless flow, an icy coherence.

Drinks flowed after the formal reception. The author was enjoying fine whiskeys on the rocks. So was I. Guests filtered away, leaving a small group in which Baldwin was arguing with a Northern Irish Catholic whom he identified as belonging to a "repressed minority." But when he went on to compare the situation of Catholics in Northern Ireland to that of the blacks in America, the other man indignantly rejected the comparison. The author's reaction to this whiff of racism can only be described as hopping mad: his eyes grew so large I thought they would pop out and floor his opponent. I found myself vigorously defending Baldwin. He clutched my arm like a fellow comrade. Already it was apparent that despite the gulf between our backgrounds we shared a similar political spirit.

The next day Jimmy invited me to lunch at The Savoy where he was staying. We began by talking politics. Luckily I was familiar with his work. He was interested to hear about my commitment to the liberation war in Africa against the British, and about my first film, *Rhodesia Countdown* (1969), that occasioned my enforced

exile by the white minority regime, an exile that endured until the country became Zimbabwe in 1980 after the first democratic elections. The struggle against racial repression in Africa and in America was to become a recurring subject for us. When it arose during the script collaboration, Jimmy confirmed that the class issue between Guillaume and Giovanni was a concealed metaphor for racial prejudice; as Giovanni explains, "When something has happened to humiliate him and make him see, even for a moment, how disgusting he is, and how alone, then he remembers that he is a member of one of the best and oldest families in France."[1]

Our conversation at The Savoy veered off into literature. Being the unusual offspring of an Italian-Jewish-Arabic mother, born in Egypt, I spoke several languages and had studied French literature at university. When I mentioned that I found *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) to be "Proustian" with an African-American pulpit fluency and soaring choral rhythms, he laughed with his famous child-like spontaneity.

It was politics and literature that first drew us together. From an early age Jimmy had read widely to survive his stepfather's cruelty and to escape the "ghetto mentality" of Harlem. I was surprised to find that he lacked friends with whom he could talk about his writing as an artist, instead of as a spokesman for civil rights. Art in its purity was his aspiration; his political destiny may have assisted his success as a writer, but it cramped his choice of content—that is how he saw it. His attempt to find a more congenial context in which to write and think was one of the reasons for his coming to France in 1948. *Giovanni's Room*, his first book not explicitly dealing with issues of racism, was a product of this decision.

Published in 1956, the novel was to some extent a present from him to the people of France who had openly welcomed him as a great writer . . . not as a black one, nor a gay one, nor a political one. The accuracy and eloquence of his descriptions of France and the French in *Giovanni's Room* must have been behind the committee's decision to award him the Légion d'Honneur in 1986. Jimmy was truly honored to receive it. I was among the group of his friends who celebrated the occasion at La Coupole restaurant in Paris.

With *Giovanni's Room* being set in France, but written in English, the French characters speak English with a Gallic intonation and phrasing, while David speaks American English with smatterings of French, and Giovanni speaks good English and French, throwing in bits of Italian. The result being that the reader gets a real sense of being in France. For Jimmy it was essential to carry this over into the film and never to get bamboozled by commercial pressure to have American English throughout. This technique is so well achieved in the novel that we transposed certain passages into the script pretty well verbatim, like the exchange in Guillaume's bar between an outrageous "*folle*" and David: "Oh my poor friend, so young, so strong, so handsome—will you not buy me a drink?" To which David vehemently responds, "Va te faire foutre!"[2] Here, David's French is understandable as a brutal dismissal, and the tone of the Frenchman speaking English would be sustained in the film not just by his accent, but by the stiff turn of phrase: ". . . will you not buy me a drink?"

Our chance meeting in London had sparked an immediate friendship. But another and more spectacular incident was to raise it to another level that would

lead us to the adaption of his singular novel. I did not see Jimmy for over a year, during which I was in Tanzania making a drama-documentary called *Beyond the Plains Where Man Was Born* (1976). The edit of the film brought me to Paris in the summer of 1976. I was strolling on the left bank enjoying the sun on the Rue St. André des Arts. The road is full of nondescript restaurants, all of them, at the time, unfamiliar to me. But as I passed an unprepossessing one, I found myself wanting to go inside and find out what kind of people frequented the area. I entered through a red, thick-curtained corridor into the dining room . . . and there was Jimmy staring straight at me, despite being seated with a couple of friends. There is no "normal" way of explaining this—how does a mother know her child is in danger on the other side of the globe? We were both flabbergasted.

From then on, until the last year of his life in 1987, I always knew when he had arrived back from America to his house in Saint-Paul de Vence: "Hi Baby," he'd say, upon answering the phone, "I just walked in!" And I'd say, "I know." Or when he traveled, unbeknown to me, to the States, I'd phone his mother or his sister's residence in New York, and it would be the same thing.

The time had come to face my sexuality. As a student I had participated in the 1968 Paris uprising when everyone was throwing everything into question: political systems, class issues, social behavior, moral values, sexual and psychological identity . . . everything! And now I was in love with, and loved by, a gay man to whom I felt connected in a way I had never known and would never know again. I was ready to turn myself inside out in the search for my sexual nature beyond any psychological, cultural, social, or political blocks that might have been implanted in my subconscious.

Jimmy was very patient with my bewilderment and hesitancy. "But I like women," I'd say. "So do I," he'd respond. He could see right through me. He knew me better than I knew myself. During a dinner at the Colombe d'Or restaurant in Saint-Paul de Vence, he told an agent, for whom he had no respect, that a book I was writing on imperialism in Africa was not for him, although he had not, as yet, read a word of it! Called *Black Fire* (1978), it was published simultaneously in the U.K. and the U.S.A., with an introduction by Jimmy.

It was part of his nature to want to help those he was close to, as he would his ex-lovers, and his family, always, especially his mother and his brother, David. I felt nurtured by him, and safe, because I knew he would never force me to be somebody I wasn't . . . although neither of us, as yet, were sure who that was.

I became a challenge for him. He was charmed by my mentioning how much I admired a boyfriend he had for a while who was by nature bisexual, adding that bisexuality must be a state of higher consciousness that ought to be aspired to. Encouraged, he looked for arguments and ways to help me sort myself out. And so it came to be that while I was struggling to cope with my sexual turmoil, he made his extraordinary offer as a potentially helpful exercise: "We can also love one another in other ways: we'll write the script of 'Giovanni's Room' together."

Over the years I have thought a lot about why he made this proposition to me in particular. He was such a confident and talented artist that he had rarely

collaborated with anyone before. He was certainly keen to have a film made of the novel; this would be a natural consequence for something that had been written to a great extent to ease the stress of his political activities. He mentioned that some time after the book came out he had written a rough draft of a script. Of course I wanted to read it, but he would not give it to me, saying it was better to start afresh. He was clearly not satisfied with it, but I never found out why.

The fact that I was very much *there* as his lover, and as a filmmaker, too, with a good knowledge of French culture, were surely more reasons for his making his offer. What must also have been significant, because he felt so isolated on an artistic level, was the pleasure he had got from our discussions on literature and on the literary aspects of his own work. Writing a script together promised to be a warm and fruitful extension of our budding relationship.

Giovanni's Room had often cropped up in our conversations. After we became lovers the basic subject of the novel led him to suppose that what I was experiencing with him could provide me with immediate access to David's character, while perhaps also giving me insights into my relationship with him. When he told me this, I was disconcerted. I had none of the character's sense of shame and despair about homosexuality that lay in him like "the sediment at the bottom of a stagnant pond," making him feel "as awful as a decomposing corpse."[3] I did share his confusion, but not his fear. David's terrors came from a homophobic background that was not dissimilar to mine. But like racism, homophobia was intolerable to me.

Of course, I could not refuse Jimmy's offer. I soon found myself in the invaluable but unorthodox situation where the writing of a script also became a therapeutic process, and one in which the psychotherapist was an active participant. Just as I had certain similarities to David, Jimmy was as passionate as Giovanni. Furthermore, Giovanni was bisexual—a constant feature of our relationship.

Fortunately, my feelings for him overcame my discomfiture. Hardly a day goes by when I do not think of him, and of how fortunate I was to have shared his remarkable spirit, and to have had the honor of collaborating with him.

Getting down to the script began early in 1977. The work was sporadic because we were both traveling a lot. It was after Jimmy's birthday party in August that the pace of writing picked up due to two remarkable strokes of fortune when two stars of the cinema came charging into the project like knights in shining armor!

In September we were driving from Saint-Paul de Vence to the 1977 American Film Festival in Deauville where Andy Warhol was presenting his film *Bad* (1977). Jimmy saw an opportunity to catch up with him. The author's fame had spread far and wide and brought many connections with it. On the way we called in to see Yves Montand and Simone Signoret, the darlings of the French public, for whom Jimmy had become their darling! I mention this simply to indicate the extent to which Jimmy was connected to France. It was of prime importance to him that the truth, in all its detail, that is contained in such intimacy should be transferred from *Giovanni's Room* into the film.

During the festival the first moment occurred in the main theater while waiting for a screening of *Star Wars* (1977) to begin. I was seated between Jimmy and an

unknown woman who, when she recognized the author, leaned across and introduced herself to him as a PR representative for Robert de Niro. It was unbelievable to hear her open the conversation with, "Have you ever considered making a movie of *Giovanni's Room*?" Jimmy replied, pointing at me, "We're writing it." She said that de Niro was interested in finding a role "outside of his comfort zone," and a gay character like Giovanni fitted the bill. After the festival she contacted Jimmy to confirm the actor's interest and that he looked forward to reading the script.

The second incident occurred in February 1978 and involved Marlon Brando. This was after *Missouri Breaks* (1976) and before *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Brando and Jimmy had met through civil rights activities and become friends. Holed up in a *hôtel particulier* (private hotel) on the Paris left bank, Brando was keen to get out and visit old haunts. A tough proposition, as Jimmy and I found out on arriving at the gates to the hotel where a band of paparazzi was waiting to pounce on the star. But Brando had hatched a plot for his escape. His frosted glass saloon drove off, followed excitedly by all the paparazzi. After which a humble taxi drew up. The three of us climbed in, Brando wearing a woolly hat pulled down over his brow, his enormous body made more so by a thick winter coat. Then we drove around the city, unnoticed, for at least an hour without getting out.

We had crossed the river into Les Halles when the actor brought up *Giovanni's Room* because much of the novel is located there. All of us lamented the disappearance of the old Halles, the buzzing halls of the central food market. At which point Jimmy came out with our adaptation project. The actor responded at once by saying he wanted to play the part of Guillaume, the unscrupulous owner of a bar in Les Halles. I couldn't believe my ears. No one would believe it: we had de Niro, and now we have Brando! A producer friend, Philippe Carcassonne, would stop me talking in a Paris café about this celebrity casting because he feared people would take me for a mythomaniac.

Brando spoke seriously about playing the part. He remembered the book well. He referred to a passage where David compares Guillaume to a monkey eating its own excrement: as David watches the Frenchman, "his utter grotesqueness made me uneasy; perhaps in the same way that the sight of monkeys eating their own excrement turns some people's stomachs."[4] Being the very particular actor that he was, as Brando continued to "camp up" the prospective role in the back of the taxi, I imagined him reveling in other aspects of Guillaume, as in David's comment about his lewdness in conversation with their friend Jacques: "revolting in that it not only failed of wit, it was so clearly an expression of contempt and self-contempt, it bubbled upward out of them like a fountain of black water."[5] Interpreting lewdness as "a fountain of black water": perfect fodder for Brando!

I scored a point by telling the actor how much I admired his performance in the Pontecorvo film *Queimada* (USA title: *Burn*, 1969), in which he played an English secret agent who gets involved in a slave revolt in the Caribbean for his own selfish reasons. The actor had created a brilliant composition of an affected, self-seeking English gentleman with a plummy, public school accent. So I said something to the effect, "Playing Guillaume will give you the chance to do for

the French what you did for the English in *Queimada* . . ." Brando appreciated this cross-reference.

The exchanges in the taxi were a moment of epiphany for me. I suddenly "saw" the film of Jimmy's book, Brando having provided me with the key to its style in his famously mannered performances. The title of a recent Doris Lessing novel, *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (1971), flashed across my mind as an adequate description of the film's central mood or tone. The title made them both smile.

Initially, Jimmy was wary of my approach. His taste in film leaned toward social and political realism. In the scripting process he tended to concentrate on the dialogue, letting it drive the characters and the story, and skimped on his genius for place descriptions. His memorable character traits were also missing. The novel's thematic core is the pain and suffering of lost souls: frustration, resentment, envy, self-deprecation, despair, claustrophobia, panic, hysteria, terror . . . and "the darkness and long moan of this long night."[6] Some of these needed highlighting to better illustrate the characters. The script risked veering toward a theater piece; since Jimmy was also a master playwright, such a step was an instinctive progression for him.

There was another crucial element that had to be brought to the table. What Brando had done by highlighting the dramatic force of "the bad guy" Guillaume was to remind me how, in the novel, the predicament of the protagonists is reflected in their environment—a *sine qua non* for a movie. This merging of character and place is achieved in the text through the first-person narrative of David, who epitomizes pain and suffering. The technique enables the author to give a bleak and often highly distorted picture of everyone and everything as seen by David, while adding perceptive and disturbing insights that the David character himself would be incapable of: as when the young man's explanation of the disgust and pity he feels for his friend, Jacques, includes a remarkable turn of phrase describing his eyes as those of "a dying man who looks everywhere for healing"—a tantalizing performance indication for an actor.[7] Subjective, too, is this view of Paris from a bus as David's affair with Giovanni progresses and anguish pursues the American, twisting his vision of reality: "Mist clung to the river, softening that army of trees, softening those stones, hiding the city's dreadful corkscrew alleys and dead-end streets, clinging like a curse to the men who slept between the bridges—one of whom flashed by beneath us, very black and lone, walking along the river."[8]

After the taxi episode in 1978, while searching to convey a signatory style for the film to the author, I qualified what I felt to be the overall atmosphere of his novel as "impressionistic." Baldwin was not against the qualification, but worried about it. Fortunately, his generosity of spirit allowed him to listen to the cocky young boy from the colonies telling him how his literary style might be translated into the language of cinema so as to fuse the characters and their milieu, while the narrative moves from the claustrophobia of Giovanni's room, to the bars and their fraught clientele, into the sad light that falls upon the streets, ending in the desolate house in Provence where David awaits the execution of Giovanni.

Because of Brando's desire to play Guillaume, the bar owner, I began pleading my case by presenting passages set in the two Paris bars featured in the story. At Guillaume's the atmosphere is depicted as: "A noisy, crowded, ill-lit sort of tunnel."[9] The author focuses on the clientele who are the stars of this theatrical setting, with their "camp" mannerisms and their lewd conversations laced with vicious remarks. David, through his own turbulent emotions, is part of the ambience: "I stared at the amber cognac and at the wet rings on the metal. Deep below, trapped in the metal, the outline of my own face looked upward helplessly at me."[10]

As I have previously indicated, the sense of authenticity in the novel also depends on attention to the use of languages with regard to the French speaking English and the foreigners speaking French. Such authenticity extends to the descriptions of place, and to the accurate depictions of French character. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the second bar in Les Halles which is owned by Mme. Clothilde, and frequented after hours by David, Giovanni, Jacques, and Guillaume:

> Behind the counter sat one of those absolutely inimitable ladies, produced only in the city of Paris, but produced in great numbers, who would be as outrageous and unsettling in any other city as a mermaid on a mountain top. All over Paris they sit behind their counters like a mother bird in a nest and brood over the cash-register as though it were an egg. Nothing occurring under the circle of heaven where they sit escapes their eye.[11]

The high drama continues when Mme. Clothilde "turned with the air of an actress about to deliver the severely restrained last lines of an exhausting and mighty part. 'On t'offre, Pierre,' she said majestically. 'What will you have?'—holding slightly aloft meanwhile the bottle containing the most expensive cognac in the house."[12] For the script, I hoped we could come up with an adequate portrayal of Mme. Clothilde's captivating presence.

In the same bar, there is a shocking portrayal of a clientele of "*folles*": "screaming like parrots . . . they looked like a peacock garden and sounded like a barnyard. . ."[13] One of them is described as "a mummy or a zombie," in prose that rises to the surreal: "It walked on its toes, the flat hips moved with a dead, horrifying lasciviousness . . . it glittered in the dim light."[14] There could be no better metaphor for a man from hell, mannered to a feverish pitch as he flares up after a rebuttal from David: "The dark eyes narrowed in spite and fury and the scarlet mouth turned down like the mask of tragedy . . . he straightened up as though he were a princess and moved, flaming, away from the crowd."[15] How does one convey "flaming" in a script? Simply by using the author's phrase to lend power to the scene, since no scriptwriter could have invented it!

Of course the violence of the *folle* comes from David's gut reaction. Even so, the portrait is realistic since it illustrates how far the expression of gayness can go in defiance of homophobia. As a blend of the real and the unreal, of thematic purpose and its psychosocial manifestation, the "zombie" helped conclude our debate on a stylistic formula for the film. "But it's not a horror movie," Jimmy warned me. I promised him never to lose sympathy for his characters and to preserve their

complexity as he had written them. To further allay his concern about the "descent into hell" as a cinematic experience, I encouraged the inclusion of optimistic moments that occasionally cut through David's gloom: "Our oysters came and we began to eat. Giovanni sat in the sun, his black hair gathering to itself the yellow glow of the wine and the many dull colours of the oyster where the sun struck it"—a glimmer of hope that the young American might let love take him over.[16]

The search began to select episodes from the book for the script. Most of the scenes I have already referred to went into the first draft. The "marked style" opens the film, just as it does in the book with David's first lines:

> I stand at the window of this great house in the south of France as night falls, the night which is leading me to the most terrible morning of my life. I have a drink in my hand, there is a bottle at my elbow. I watch my reflection in the darkening gleam of the window pane.[17]

Giovanni's small and cluttered room intensifies the emotional thrust of the narrative: "The room had two windows, against which the courtyard malevolently pressed, encroaching day by day, as though it had confused itself with a jungle."[18] Intimate details of the room are highlighted in the scripting to expose the lodger as a deeply troubled soul; who but such a person would begin his life story by saying: "I left my village one wild, sweet day. I will never forget that day. It was the day of my death. . ."[19] The sad room is like a decorated theater set defining Giovanni, and it soon becomes a stage for the uncertain growth and swift demise of the couple's love, after "anguish and fear had become the surface on which we slipped and slid, losing balance, dignity, and pride."[20]

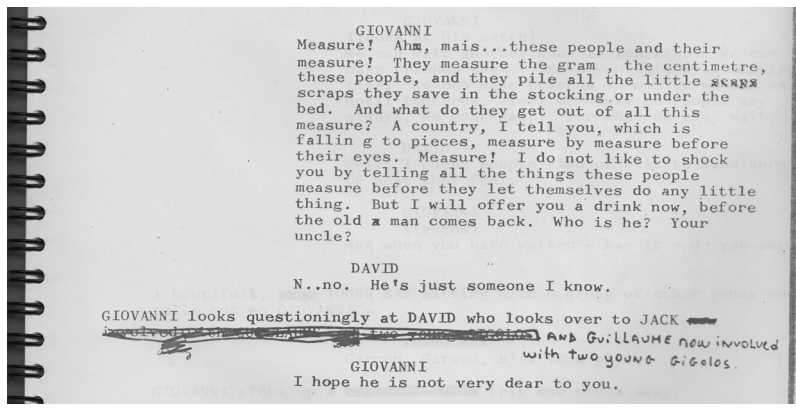
We were writing in haste, itching to get to the end so that we could have an overall picture of structure and content. Only then could we make decisions on how to approach a second draft. As a consequence, the first draft contains little of the descriptive, and so often cinematic, magic of the book; portrayals of places and characters are prosaic; but the dialogue works.

This being said, a script is not a work of art. It is more like an architectural plan, and must obey formal structures in which one page equals one minute of screen time—a severe limitation. It is hard to transfer the emotional power of a literary setting into scripted form. But it needs to be done as vividly as concision will allow. When a scene is full of action, it becomes easier: the end of the book almost reads like a script as David's imagination reaches fever pitch, bringing Giovanni's executioners from his prison cell on death row into the house in the south of France: "My executioners are here with me, walking up and down with me . . . They are everywhere I turn. Walls, windows, mirrors, water, the night outside—they are everywhere."[21]

During the writing, what became useful as a guide were references to other movies, especially those of Orson Welles. Jimmy admired Welles for the epic breadth of his vision and his use of language; they also shared a passion for Shakespeare. His early life in Harlem was not short of Shakespearean moments, and neither are

his novels. In *Giovanni's Room* the effects of David's guilt contain echoes of the bard's tragedies: "Giovanni will be rotting soon in unhallowed ground in Paris. Until I die there will be those moments, moments seeming to rise up out of the ground like Macbeth's witches, when his face will come before me, that face in all its changes. . ."[22] Moreover, the author's time in the pulpit under the stern influence of his preacher stepfather taught him all about the power of the well-spoken word. But when I said that the novel had Wellesian stature, Jimmy replied, "It's a small story." Again, I resorted to the "zombie" for help who, like the soothsayer in *Julius Caesar* with his "Beware the Ides of March," becomes a prophet of doom after David tells him to go to hell: "'Oh no,' he said, 'I go not to hell,' and he clutched his crucifix with one large hand, 'But you, my dear friend, I fear you will burn in a very hot fire.'"[23] I finished by saying something to Jimmy along these lines: "The novel may be 'a small story', but it has a mythological grandeur that comes from David and Giovanni's tragic and ill-fated destiny, their fall from grace." Jimmy connected with this.

For a while, on we went with the script. We'd discuss, I'd write, he'd read then write or sometimes scribble notes on the page, as demonstrated in the photographed examples from the script with handwritten annotations by the author (Figures 2 and 3). When we had written approximately the first quarter, we agreed that the dramatizations were sometimes overdone—certainly in the scenes of David's torment in the Provence house. This was my error, being the "novice filmmaker" that I was at the time, having been named as such by the producer of my first feature film, *The Grass Is Singing* (USA title: *Killing Heat*, 1981), that I was to adapt from Doris Lessing's novel and direct three years later. For me, to read the first draft today is embarrassing at times. But I am confident that we were on the right path.

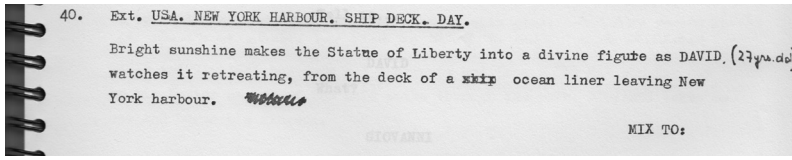

GIOVANNI
Measure! Ahm, mais...these people and their measure! They measure the gram , the centimetre, these people, and they pile all the little scraps they save in the stocking or under the bed. And what do they get out of all this measure? A country, I tell you, which is fallin g to pieces, measure by measure before their eyes. Measure! I do not like to shock you by telling all the things these people measure before they let themselves do any little thing. But I will offer you a drink now, before the old man comes back. Who is he? Your uncle?

DAVID
N..no. He's just someone I know.

GIOVANNI looks questioningly at DAVID who looks over to JACK [redacted] AND GUILLAUME now involved with two young GIGOLOS.

GIOVANNI
I hope he is not very dear to you.

Figure 2 Example from the script of "Giovanni's Room," with handwritten annotations. All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder.


40. Ext. USA. NEW YORK HARBOUR. SHIP DECK. DAY.

Bright sunshine makes the Statue of Liberty into a divine figure as DAVID, (27 yrs. old) watches it retreating, from the deck of a ship ocean liner leaving New York harbour.

MIX TO:

Figure 3 Additional example from the script of "Giovanni's Room," with handwritten annotations. All rights reserved and permission to use the figure must be obtained from the copyright holder.

Maybe the tragedy of the story infected our script, because at the end of 1978 it was brought to an abrupt halt by Jimmy's agent in New York. He controlled all the author's work. We were both in the city at the time, as my book, *Black Fire*, was being published in America thanks to Toni Morrison who was still an editor at Random House—it was renamed *We Are Everywhere* (1978) to avoid confusion with LeRoy Jones's anthology, *Black Fire* (1968). However, I was not present at Jimmy's meeting with his agent. I had no official contract with Jimmy, nor with the agent. He wanted $100,000 for an option. Bernard Hassell, Jimmy's assistant and confidante, told me afterwards that Jimmy tended to spend more than he earned, his generosity letting money slip through his fingers. Needless to say, I did not have that sort of money, neither did Jimmy. It was a shock for us both. I had never asked for anything in writing from him, and he never thought to bring up the subject. Our collaboration was an act of love and trust.

For at least a year I did my best to find the money. A book has to be optioned to embark on a production. With the support of my British agent and publisher, Julian Friedmann, we presented the script as "A Film Development Proposal" from "Raeburn-Friedmann Associates Ltd, 4 Perrin's Lane, Hampstead, London NW3 1QY" —I still have a bound copy of the proposal with "to be continued!" written by me in ink on the last page we had reached in the script. But the producers we approached couldn't get their heads around a brazen homosexual love story. Even the idea of Brando and de Niro playing two of "these kinds of roles" was too much for them. The project struck them with terror. It seemed that the late 1970s was not the time for *Giovanni's Room*.

Jimmy passed away in 1987. I had not seen him for almost a year, as I was directing a movie set in South Africa (where I was banned), but shot in Nigeria and Zimbabwe. His devastating disappearance at the early age of 63 revived my desire to bring our screenplay back to life.

But there was to be a long wait before the clouds of homophobic prejudice began to lift in the world of film. The break came in 2003 with the television mini-series *Angels in America*, followed in 2005 with Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain*. Then in 2016 the clouds were well and truly dispersed by Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight*. Jimmy's work has been vigorously revived: in trains, planes, cafés—in Paris, London, Berlin, Southern Africa—I see people reading *Giovanni's Room*. Even in his lifetime Jimmy was not so universally read as he is today. The movie's moment had come.

Encouraged, I sought contact with the Baldwin Estate just before Barry Jenkins's next movie *If Beale Street Could Talk* was released. I scoured an old address book for phone numbers: I knew that Jimmy's assistant Bernard Hassell had died, as had his brother, David; I assumed his mother must have passed away too, and the numbers I had for his sister, Gloria, did not work. Only one number worked: for Eileen Ahearn who had become a friend in the 1980s when she was Toni Morrison's assistant, but who I had not seen since I was last in New York in 2003.

Luckily for me, Eileen has become one of the custodians of the Baldwin Estate. "The Estate is cautious about optioning the works," she told me. "Because we could sell everything Jimmy wrote tomorrow. *I'm Not Your Negro* and *If Beale Street Could Talk* are a start. After *Beale Street* comes out, we'll think of where to go next. I suggest you wait a while."

Meanwhile, I wonder if there is a special "caution" still being applied to this homosexual love story. Jimmy lived life to the full, drank and socialised, his energy and stamina were impressive, he delivered public speeches with fire. Naturally and openly gay, he never made a fuss about it, being neither adherent to, nor entertained by, affectations of homosexuality as a statement of defiance toward the heterosexual majority, even though he knew all too well where the suffering came from that created such behavior. His expressions, his gestures, his way of walking were unpremeditated and contained both masculine and feminine qualities; or, going back to my first vision of him as a Benin sculpture, he could have been the holistic embodiment of a great spirit that could be nothing other than itself.

It is well-known that Baldwin's lifestyle was embarrassing for some: Martin Luther King and Malcolm X were concerned about being associated with him, and Eldridge Cleaver infamously called him a "faggot" in *Soul On Ice* (1968). Driven by his intelligence and creativity, Baldwin was able to transcend the short-sightedness of such prejudice, and continue to write dangerously about politics, love, and sex.

I am now waiting to renew my option request. It will be more like an appeal based on the spirit of our collaboration. Jimmy wanted our script to be made. Of course, as usual, further drafts will be needed. If I can write them, they will be done in the way Jimmy wanted: not as a compromised commercial picture, but as a more intimate "auteur" work preserving his privileged access to a particular time and place within a small, huddled milieu of damaged characters . . . True, in every way, to the novel.

The film must be deeply moving and sad: tragic in a doomed, Shakespearean sense. Jimmy never played it safe. He memorably told me: "Know what you can do, then don't do it!" Risk was at the heart of his nature. He never paused for breath. I learned how to be an artist by watching him live and create. His life was a hurricane, his mind was its center transferring turmoil into lucid and beautiful prose.

A would-be producer—and perhaps the Estate as well—would need to face the terror at the heart of the novel. The screenplay should be brought to life by a director like Steve McQueen, for whom terror holds no sway. Such a movie would convey Jimmy's final message, as Jacques put it to David regarding the young man's moral confusion over Giovanni: "But you can make your time together anything but dirty, you can give each other something which will make you both

better—forever—if you will *not* be ashamed, if you will *not* play it safe."[24] We all know what that "something" is.

Giovanni's Room could never be a "feelgood" movie; it can only be a profound tragedy. We shall always weep for King Lear's doomed destiny, and we shall always weep for Giovanni as David breaks his heart. At the end of the movie there will be no "happy ending"—the audience will grieve for Giovanni's terrible death, and weep once more.

Notes

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1 James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* (1956) (New York, Vintage, 2013), p. 106.
2 *Ibid*., p. 40.
3 *Ibid*., pp. 22, 16.
4 *Ibid*., p. 27.
5 *Ibid*., p. 45.
6 *Ibid*., p. 104.
7 *Ibid*., p. 24.
8 *Ibid*., p. 45.
9 *Ibid*., p. 26.
10 *Ibid*., p. 56.
11 *Ibid*. p. 50.
12 *Ibid*., pp. 57–8.
13 *Ibid*., pp. 26–7.
14 *Ibid*., pp. 38–9.
15 *Ibid*., p. 40.
16 *Ibid*., p. 61.
17 *Ibid*., p. 3.
18 *Ibid*., p. 85.
19 *Ibid*., p. 139.
20 *Ibid*., p. 75.
21 *Ibid*., p. 111.
22 *Ibid*., p. 42.
23 *Ibid*., p. 40.
24 *Ibid*., p. 57.

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Contributor's Biography

Michael Raeburn was born in Egypt and grew up in Zimbabwe. He has an Honours Degree in French from the University of London. His first feature film *The*

Grass Is Singing (1981) was adapted from the Doris Lessing novel, and released in America as *Killing Heat* (1984). His other films include *Triomf* (2008), adapted from the eponymous novel by Marlene van Niekerk, *Home Sweet Home* (2001), *Winds of Rage* (1998; French title *Vent de Colère*), and *Jit* (1991). He has made over forty documentaries. He is also the author of the novel of his film *Jit* (Anvil Press, 1991/Kaleidoscope, 1994) and of a collection of narratives about the liberation war in southern Africa, with an introduction by James Baldwin—*Black Fire* (Julian Friedmann, 1978; also published as *We Are Everywhere*, Random House, 1978, and Mambo Press, 1981); his most recent publication was the novel *Night of the Fireflies* (David Philip, 2006). He has had retrospectives of his films at the Museé Dapper, Paris (2010), the Festival of Douarnenez (2011), the Munich Museum of Cinema (2012) and the Museé du Jeu de Paume, Paris (2014); more on his writing and films can be found at these sites: www.michaelraeburn.com and https://vimeo.com/channels/michaelraeburnfilms.