

Burgess and Beethoven, Part II

By [Anthony Wilkinson](#)

My friend Lord Birkett's colourful memories of Anthony Burgess and the distant beginnings of our 'UNCLE LUDWIG' (Beethoven) film project has stirred colourful memories of my own.

The 'two Anthonys' - Burgess and Wilkinson - did indeed swap ideas and drafts. Following that memorable lunch Burgess asked me to send my own original draft screenplay (he had previously seen only a skeleton story-outline draft), was both flattered, yet concerned, when Burgess's next draft was far too close to my own, abandoning many of his more imaginative passages. In the end we finally produced a version that was a combination of the best of both.

With characteristic generosity, he also provided a hand-written title page, complete with musical quotation, together with a bold Anthony Burgess signature, but placed my own name in first position.

Lord Birkett, who by this time had to leave the project to take up the demanding position of arts supremo at the G.L.C. (Greater London Council), played diplomat once more in this stop - furnishing an introduction to his friend, Rod Steiger, perfect casting for the Beethoven role. In short order I found myself at Steiger's ocean-side residence in Malibu, where I met with him for several intense script sessions, which I recorded on a small Philip's dictating machine.

"Mr Anthony Burgess, Mr Anthony Wilkinson, I respect you both as artists...", the great actor began, and followed with a critical and detailed analysis of character motivations, dialogue and so forth. The sessions were as bizarre as they were illuminating. What I most remember now, many years later, were the large number of expletives - and how Steiger's eyes turned huge and black and evil as he acted out one of Beethoven's rages (leaving me wondering how as prospective director I would best survive such a tantrum should it turn personal on the set!) - and also the moment when Steiger announced that he would expect me to keep the cameras running at the end of a take, as it was his style to improvise, often something quite unexpected!

And, by golly, the unexpected then did happen! Discussing a scene in which Beethoven was to upturn a tureen of noodle soup over a hapless maid-servant, the actor suggested that by take three he might not follow the script as regards the soup, but might rise and hurl the table at the girl. Upon which, Steiger, in his own living room in Malibu, picked up his marble coffee table and hurled it across the room! I can still hear Lord Birkett laughing down the phone when I reported back to him: "That's Rod for you!"

With Steiger's participation, interest from Warner Bros. and Colombia Pictures followed - both waiting to see the final draft screenplay resulting from my sessions with the star. I returned hot foot from California with my collection of precious tapes.

A new secretary had recently joined my film company, and the first task I entrusted her with was to prepare a transcript of the Steiger tapes. This seemed very slow in coming. Several days later four thin sheets were put on my desk. The text was almost indecipherable. It began okay with "Mister Anthony Burgess, Mister Anthony Wilkinson. I respect you both as artists..." but soon any semblance of text was interrupted by sequences of dot-dot-dot, asterisks, and lines of dashes. Finally on page four, in capitals: I'M SORRY - I CAN'T TYPE ANY OF THOSE WORDS. She was a Born Again, and Steiger's language was more than she could cope with,

And then suddenly it was all too late. Production of a rival Beethoven film was announced, to be made by Andy Warhol's director, Paul Morrissey. That put paid to our project for the time being -- the fate that befalls many of us who dabble in the public domain,

But the story is by no means over, though the most distinguished of the Anthonys is sadly no longer with us. The surviving Anthony was in the process of moving back to London after eight years in Hollywood, when he heard the sad news of Anthony Burgess's death.

The rival Beethoven film had by now been confined to movie history and as a tribute to the memory of our friendship and collaboration. I determined to make another attempt to revive the fortunes of our 'Uncle Ludwig'. The story of Beethoven's relationship with his nephew is a savage, even distasteful, episode in the life of a composer whose music has brought such joy and inspiration to many people's lives. Re-reading our final draft I felt that the screenplay demanded further work to resolve certain dramatic issues, and to win greater audience sympathy for a flawed hero.

Before starting work I approached the agent of the star that I now felt most appropriate for the role of Beethoven, another Anthony, Sir Anthony Hopkins. The agent read the existing draft script, and impressed that it had Anthony Burgess's name attached to it, more than encouraged me to undertake the re-write for his client - saying that Colombia Pictures had agreed to back any Beethoven movie that Anthony Hopkins wanted to make.

I began work at once on what I thought would be a relatively simple and quick re-write. But change one scene in a screenplay, many changes seem to follow. Nine weeks later, and within ten pages of completion, I took a call from a First Assistant Director I knew, who had just returned from Prague, What had he been working on? "Immortal Beloved", he replied. "A film with Gary Oldman playing Beethoven". Once again the devil of the public domain had hurled a large spoke into the wheel of our fortune.

But 'Immortal Beloved' is now five years into movie history - and perhaps it is time to try again. Your *Newsletter* has fortuitously put me in touch with Lord Birkett once more. He is presently reading the final draft of the script. And who knows!

A musician, writer and director, Anthony Wilkinson has enjoyed an active career in many branches of the media: drama, documentaries, music and arts, commercials, television, radio and theatre. He has directed major productions for several international networks including the BBC, ITV and Channel Four in Britain; NBC, ABC and PBS in the United States; CBC in Canada; and TF1 in France.

