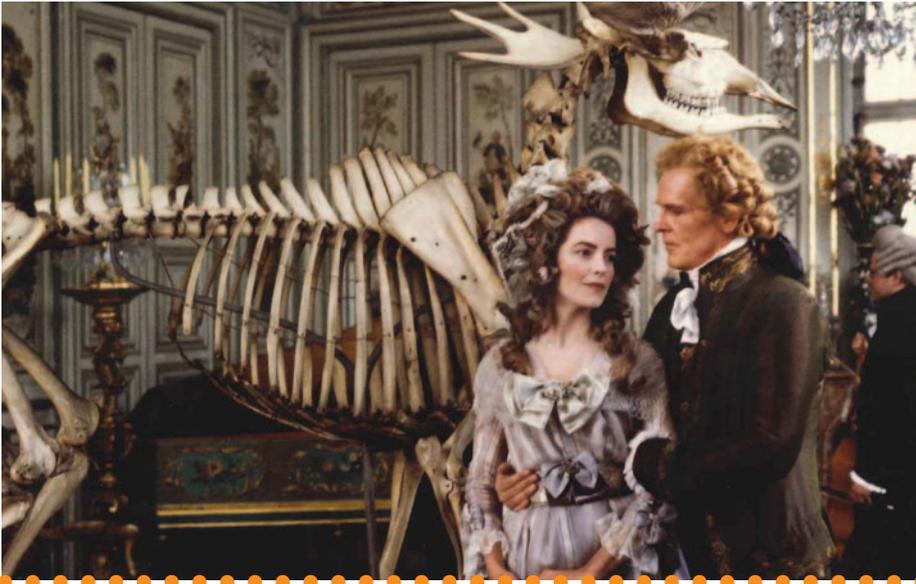


# James Ivory in France

James Ivory is seated next to the large desk of the late Ismail Merchant in their Manhattan office overlooking 57th Street and the Hearst building. On the wall hangs a large poster of Merchant's book *Paris: Filming and Feasting in France*. It is a reminder of the seven films Merchant-Ivory Productions made in France, a source of inspiration for over 50 years.



Greta Scacchi and Nick Nolte in *Jefferson in Paris* © Seth Rubin

When did you go to Paris for the first time?

**Ji:** It was in 1950, and I was 22. I had taken the boat train from Victoria Station in London, and then we went to Cherbourg, then on the train again. We arrived at Gare du Nord. There were very tall, late 19th-century apartment buildings which I remember to this day, lining the track, which say to every traveler: Here is Paris!

You were following some college classmates traveling to France?

**Ji:** I did not want to be left behind. But I went really to study French. I had a serious plan which was to go and enroll at the IDHEC [French school of cinema]. And in order to do that, you had to speak French fluently, obviously. But we spent more time in the swimming pool than at the school, which was at Tours, where the best French was supposed to be spoken.

Although you had traveled to France numerous times after that summer, you waited until 1980 to direct your first French movie?

**Ji:** *Quartet* came about just by my accidentally picking up a book by Jean Rhys that Ruth

Jhabvala was reading. I had always been interested in Paris in the 1920's, and I liked the story very much. Not only was it my first French film, but it was also my first feature in which I thought there was a true overall harmony and an artistic balance within the film itself of the acting, writing, photography, décor, and music.

And it brought you an award?

**Ji:** It was Isabelle Adjani's first English role, and she received for this film –and the movie *Possession*– the Best Actress Award at the Cannes Film Festival the following year.

You also knew then the French producer Humbert Balsan.

**Ji:** Humbert Balsan was a junior producer who had worked with Jean-Pierre Mahot on films based on operas. I think *Quartet* was his first proper feature. From then on Humbert was involved with us on every single film we did in France; less so on *Le Divorce* in which he plays a lawyer. But still, during *Le Divorce*, he made arrangements for us that we could never have made on our own.

Ten years after *Quartet*, you returned to France with Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward for *Mr. and Mrs. Bridge*, and you had the privilege to film at Le Louvre.

**Ji:** Godard had already filmed a famous scene there in *Breathless*. But then the museum said no to all film directors after that until we came along 30 years later, and they changed their minds, luckily.

Then you filmed at Versailles for *Jefferson in Paris*, a project you started working on in the mid 1980's and which you shot in 1994. Why did it take so long?

**Jl:** Because it was a costume film set in 18th century France, it did not interest financiers very much (and films about American presidents never made any money we were told). When *Howards End* came out, it was such a big success that Jeffrey Katzbenberg from Disney, one day out of the blue, called up and said, "Guys, I was so impressed; I just saw the most wonderful movie... Is there anything you would like to make and you don't have the money for?" And we were given carte blanche.

The story with Sally Hemings became the focus of a lot of criticism.

**Jl:** Sally Hemings was Jefferson's slave and, incidentally, his sister-in-law. People said that in order to make money and add spice, we had distorted the historical story by concentrating on Jefferson's long unproved relationship with his slave woman.

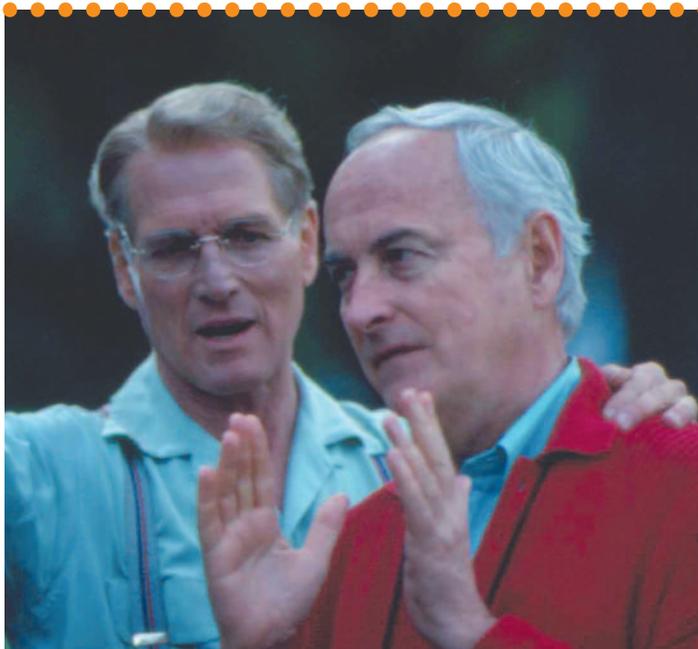
But DNA studies show the story was right?

**Jl:** We were right, and the time was soon to come when science would prove us right.

Even the French press was tough with you?

**Jl:** For different reasons... They did not care at all about Jefferson's love affairs, but none of our French films were that successful with the French critics and public. They loved the Indian and English films instead.

Jeanne Moreau at Maxim's in *The Proprietor*



Paul Newman and James Ivory on the shooting of *Mr. and Mrs. Bridge*

After Versailles, you filmed in some of the most beautiful neighborhoods in Paris, such as the Place Dauphine. Location is everything. *Surviving Picasso* is a good example.

**Jl:** We filmed in the courtyard of the house where Picasso painted *Guernica* on the rue des Grands Augustins. We also filmed in Matisse's apartment house in Nice and in the Place de la Concorde (scene during the Occupation).

Even on top of the Eiffel Tower in *Le Divorce!*

**Jl:** And we were doing a hostage versus terrorist scene! Originally that scene was set in the French Disneyland, and Disney said, "No way! We don't want a scene with a gunman." So we tried with the Eiffel Tower, and they said yes.

It is amazing how much Nick Nolte physically resembles Jefferson and Anthony Hopkins Picasso. Kris Kristofferson is incredible as James Jones in *A Soldier's Daughter Never Cries* but is it true that you originally wanted to cast Nolte in the role?

**Jl:** Nick Nolte could not make it for James Jones because he was filming *The Thin Red Line* (based on James Jones' novel!). Kris Kristofferson was interested in the part but for some reason I did not respond to that at first. Then we went to him, and he was a perfect James Jones.

## Abbreviated Filmography

- 1965 *Shakespeare Wallah* starring Felicity Kendal, Shashi Kapoor
- 1977 *Roseland* starring Christopher Walken, Geraldine Chaplin, Lilia Skala
- 1981 *Quartet* starring Isabelle Adjani, Alan Bates, Maggie Smith
- 1983 *Heat and Dust* starring Julie Christie, Greta Scacchi, Shashi Kapoor, Zakir Hussein



Isabelle Adjani and James Ivory, *Quartet*

Next to your period films, *A Soldier's Daughter Never Cries* is almost a contemporary story?

**Ji:** Well, anything that takes place in my own lifetime must be contemporary, no? I knew very well an American family living in Paris for years and years. I knew their lives, the schools the children went to. So I found Kaylie Jones' story very interesting. Then I liked the fact that it was in Paris in the late 1960's and early 1970's.

What is the common theme among all those French films?

**Ji:** They are all about foreigners in Paris, including *Surviving Picasso*.

Your next film, *The City of Your Final Destination*, features Charlotte Gainsbourg. How did you choose her?

**Ji:** I had met her a few times at Jane Birkin's house, but I had never seen her films. Then I was reintroduced to her by my assistant in Paris. She was exactly right for the character that Ruth had written in the script. She is absolutely marvelous - perfection- and such a natural actress. She decided her English was not good enough so she got an English teacher to teach her the kind of English that no one speaks in England anymore (except for Hugh Grant!). A perfect accent. She is sensationally good. The film will come out in the spring.

And you also have plans to film in France again; a film adapted from Shakespeare's *Richard II*. Doesn't the action take place in England and not in France?

**Ji:** We will have to go to France because the castles are so good there. Don't forget Richard II was a French king in a way as well as an English king; French was his first language.

- 1985 *A Room with a View* starring Helena Bonham Carter, Maggie Smith, Daniel Day Lewis, Judi Dench
- 1990 *Mr. and Mrs. Bridge* starring Paul Newman, Joanne Woodward, Robert Sean Leonard, Blythe Danner
- 1991 *Howards End* starring Emma Thompson, Helena Bonham Carter, Anthony Hopkins, Vanessa Redgrave
- 1993 *The Remains of the Day* starring Anthony Hopkins, Emma Thompson, Christopher Reeve, Hugh Grant



Virginie Ledoyen in *A Soldier's Daughter Never Cries*

Anthony Hopkins in *Surviving Picasso* © Seth Rubin



- 1995 *Jefferson in Paris* starring Nick Nolte, Greta Scacchi, Thandie Newton, Gwyneth Paltrow
- 1996 *Surviving Picasso* starring Anthony Hopkins, Natascha McElhone, Joan Plowright
- 1998 *A Soldier's Daughter Never Cries* starring Leelee Sobieski, Kris Kristofferson, Barbara Hershey, Jane Birkin
- 2001 *The Golden Bowl* starring Jeremy Northam, Uma Thurman, Kate Beckinsale, Nick Nolte, Angelica Huston
- 2003 *Le Divorce* starring Kate Hudson, Naomi Watts, Glenn Close, Leslie Caron, Thierry Lhermite, Stockard Channing
- 2008 *The City of Your Final Destination* starring Anthony Hopkins, Charlotte Gainsbourg, Laura Linney, Omar Metwally and Hiroyuki Sanada