

Nora Ephron: *I Remember Nothing and Other Reflections*

I have had a lot of flops.

I have had movies that were total flops.

When I say total flops, I mean they got bad reviews and they didn't make money.

I have also had partial flops: they got good reviews and they didn't make money.

I have also had hits.

It's lovely to have a hit. There's nothing like a hit.

But it's horrible to have a flop. It's painful and mortifying. It's lonely and sad.

A couple of my flops eventually became cult hits, which is your last and final hope for a flop, but most of my flops remained flops.

Flops stay with you in a way that hits never do. They torture you. You toss and turn. You replay. You recast. You recut. You rewrite. You restage. You run through the what-ifs and the if-lys. You cast about for blame.

One of the best things about directing movies, as opposed to merely writing them, is that there's no confusion about who's to blame: you are. But before I became a director, when I was just the screenwriter, I could cast blame everywhere. There's a movie I wrote years ago that didn't work. In my opinion. You may have seen this movie. You may even have loved it. But it was a flop when it opened; it got exactly one good review in all of America, and then it sank like a stone.

For years I tried to figure out where I'd gone wrong and what I should have done. What should I have said to the director? What should I have done in order to fight for the original draft of the script, the best draft, the one with the voiceover?

What could I have done to prevent the director from inserting the fun-house sequence, or from cutting the flashbacks, which were really funny?

Or were they?

I spent years wondering about all this. Then, one day, I had lunch with the movie's editor. I was about to direct my first movie, and I was looking for advice. At a certain point, we got around to the flop. He must have brought it up; I never would have. That's another thing about flops: you never talk about them afterward, they're too painful. But he assured me that nothing could have been done; the problem, he said, was the casting. This calmed me down temporarily. This was at least a solution to the riddle of why the movie hadn't worked – it was miscast. Of course. So it wasn't my fault. What a relief.

For quite a long time I comforted myself with that theory. Then, recently, I saw the movie again and I realised why the movie hadn't worked.

There was nothing wrong with the cast; the problem was the script. The script wasn't good enough, it wasn't funny enough, it wasn't sharp enough. So it was my fault after all.

By the way, one of the things you hope for when your movie hasn't gotten good reviews is that some important critic will eventually embrace it and attack all the critics who didn't like when it opened.

I mention this for two reasons: first, so that you'll understand how truly - pathetic you become after a flop; and second, because, astonishingly, this - actually happened with a movie I wrote called Heartburn. Heartburn flopped when it opened. A year later, Vincent Canby, the eminent movie critic for the New York Times, saw the movie for the first time and wrote an article calling it a small masterpiece.

Those were not his exact words, but close.

And he claimed to be mystified that other critics hadn't seen how good it was. But this was cold comfort, because I couldn't help wondering if things might have been different had Canby reviewed the movie in the first place. I'm not suggesting that the movie would have sold more tickets, but a good review in the Times cushions the blow.

One of the saddest things about a flop is that even if it turns out to have a healthy afterlife, even if it's partly redeemed, you remain bruised and hurt by the original experience. Worst of all, you eventually come to agree with the audience, the one that didn't much like it to begin with. You agree with them, even if it means you've abandoned your child.

People who aren't in the business always wonder if you knew it was going to be a flop. They say things like, "Didn't they know?" "How could they not have known?" My experience is that you don't know. You don't know because you're invested in the script. You love the cast. You adore the crew.

Two or three hundred people have followed you into the wilderness; they've committed six months or a year of their lives to an endeavour you've made them believe in. It's your party, you're the host.

You've fought hard to improve the on-set catering. You've flown in frozen custard from Wisconsin. And everyone is having the most wonderful time.

I now know that when you shoot a movie where the crew is absolutely hysterical with laughter and you are repeatedly told by the sound guy that you are making the funniest movie in history, you may be in trouble.

The first time this happened, I had no idea. The crew loved it. They were on the floor. The camera operator and focus puller were stuffing Kleenexes into their mouths to keep from laughing. And then we cut the movie and it tested poorly. Let me be more explicit: it tested in the way many comedies do, which is that the audience laughed at the jokes and nonetheless didn't like the movie. This is the moment when you ought to know you are approaching flop, but you don't; you think you can fix it. After all, they laughed. That must mean something. And there are so many stories about movies that were fixed after they tested badly.

There is anecdotal evidence. They fixed *Fatal Attraction*. Not that your movie is remotely like *Fatal Attraction*. Still, it gives you hope.

So you recut. And you reshoot.

And it still tests poorly.

At this point, you surely know you've got a flop. You'd have to be a fool not to know.

But you don't. Because you hope. You hope against hope. You hope the critics will like it.

Perhaps that will help. You hope the studio will cut a trailer for the movie that will explain the movie to the audience. You spend hours on the phone with the marketing people. You worry over the tracking figures. You pretend to yourself that test screenings don't matter – although they do, they absolutely do, especially when you make a commercial movie.

And then the movie opens and that's that. You get bad reviews and no one goes to see it. You may never work again. No one calls. No one mentions it.

But time passes. Life goes on. You're lucky enough to make another movie.

But that flop sits there, in the history of your life, like a black hole with a wildly powerful magnetic field.

By the way, there are people who have positive things to say about flops. They write books about success through failure and the power of - failure. Failure, they say, is a growth experience; you learn from failure. I wish that were true. It seems to me the main thing you learn from a failure is that it's entirely possible you will have another failure.

My biggest flop was a play I wrote. It got what are known as mixed reviews – which is to say, it got some good reviews, but not in the New York Times. It pattered along for a couple of months, and then it died. It lost its entire investment. It was the best thing I ever wrote, so it was a particularly heartbreaking experience. If I think about it for more than a minute, I start to cry.

Some plays flop but go on to have a life in stock and amateur productions, but not this one. No one performs it anywhere, ever.

You'd think I would have given up hoping that anything good would ever happen to this play, but I haven't: I sometimes fantasise that when I'm dying, someone who's in a position to revive it will come to my bedside to say goodbye, and I will say: "Could I ask a favour?" He will say yes. What

else can he say? After all, I'm dying. And I will say: "Could you please do a revival of my play?"

How pathetic is that?

I just want to say: chicken soup

The other day I felt a cold coming on. So I decided to have chicken soup to ward off the cold. Nevertheless, I got the cold. This happens all the time: you think you're getting a cold; you have chicken soup; you get the cold anyway. So is it possible that chicken soup gives you a cold?

I just want to say: the egg-white omelette

There's a new book out about diet, and it apparently says what I've known all my life – protein is good for you, carbohydrates are bad, and fat is highly overrated as a dangerous substance.

Well, it's about time. As my mother used to say, you can never have too much butter.

For example, here's how we cook steak in our house: First you coat the steak in sea salt. Then you cook the steak in a very hot frying pan. When it's done, you throw a huge pat of butter on top of it.

That's it. And by the way, I'm not talking about sweet butter, I'm talking about salted butter.

Here's another thing it says in this book: dietary cholesterol has nothing whatsoever to do with your cholesterol count. This is another thing I've known all my life, which is why you will not find me lying on my deathbed regretting not having eaten enough chopped liver. Let me explain this: You can eat all sorts of things that are high in dietary cholesterol (like lobster and avocado and eggs) and they have NO EFFECT WHATSOEVER on your cholesterol count. NONE. WHATSOEVER. DID YOU HEAR ME? I'm sorry to have to resort to capital letters, but what is wrong with you people?

Which brings me to the point of this: the eggwhite omelette. I have friends who eat egg-white omelettes. Every time I'm forced to watch them eat egg-white omelettes, I feel bad for them. In the first place, egg-white omelettes

are tasteless. In the second place, the people who eat them think they are doing something virtuous when they are instead merely misinformed. Sometimes I try to explain that what they're doing makes no sense, but they pay no attention to me because they have all been told to avoid dietary cholesterol by their doctors. According to The New York Times, the doctors are not deliberately misinforming their patients; instead, they're the victims of something known as the informational cascade, which turns out to be something that's repeated so many times that it becomes true even though it isn't. (Why isn't it called the misinformational cascade, I wonder.)

In any case, the true victims of this misinformation are not the doctors but the people I know who've been brainwashed into thinking that egg-white omelettes are good for you.

So this is my moment to say what's been in my heart for years: it's time to put a halt to the eggwhite omelette. I don't want to confuse this with something actually important, like the war in Afghanistan, which it's also time to put a halt to, but I don't seem to be able to do anything about the war, whereas I have a shot at cutting down consumption of egg-white omelettes, especially with the wind of this new book in my sails.

You don't make an omelette by taking out the yolks. You make one by putting additional yolks in.

A really great omelette has two whole eggs and one extra yolk, and by the way, the same thing goes for scrambled eggs. As for egg salad, here's our recipe: boil eighteen eggs, peel them, and send six of the egg whites to friends in California who persist in thinking that egg whites matter in any way. Chop the remaining twelve eggs and six yolks coarsely with a knife, and add Hellmann's mayonnaise and salt and pepper to taste.

What I won't miss

Dry skin

Bad dinners like the one we went to last night

E-mail

Technology in general

My closet

Washing my hair

Bras
Funerals
Illness everywhere
Polls that show that 32 percent of the American people believe in creationism
Polls
Fox TV
The collapse of the dollar
Bar mitzvahs
Mammograms
Dead flowers
The sound of the vacuum cleaner
Bills
E-mail. I know I already said it, but I want to emphasize it.
Small print
Panels on Women in Film
Taking off makeup every night

What I will miss

My kids
Nick
Spring
Fall
Waffles
The concept of waffles
Bacon
A walk in the park
The idea of a walk in the park
The park
Shakespeare in the Park
The bed
Reading in bed
Fireworks
Laughs
The view out the window
Twinkle lights
Butter
Dinner at home just the two of us

Dinner with friends
Dinner with friends in cities where none of us lives
Paris
Next year in Istanbul
Pride and Prejudice
The Christmas tree
Thanksgiving dinner
One for the table
The dogwood
Taking a bath
Coming over the bridge to Manhattan
Pie