

Jeremy Isaacs, 9/11/10

Sir Jeremy Isaacs was Chief Executive at Channel 4, 1981-1987

Interviewer: Justin Smith

JS: Aside from your established track record in television, you'd done a stint as Head of the BFI Production Board in the late 1970s. Was film always a personal passion? What were your reasons for making it a part of your declared manifesto for the new fourth channel?

Jl: Well, there was an argument going on in British society for many years – 15 years, at least, before Channel 4 came into being – there were a variety of arguments. There were arguments about freedom of expression, there were arguments about cultural content. And in those days there was something called 'film culture'. It was much debated, and I, who had been a programme maker in commercial television, received my first dose of film culture in a 100% proof glass when I was Chairman of the BFI Production Board. Because, boy, did those guys know their 'isms'! When we were voting on what were going to spend the tiny amount of money that we had to spend, and people going in and out of the room – I had no idea what was happening, I was so naive – but they were going off to the loo or somewhere in order to plot: "I'll vote for you if you vote for me and we'll both vote against X." And one man came back into the room and he looked accusingly across the table at a friend and said: "*You* are an opportunist! - And when I use that term I do so in its strictly Leninist sense"!

A mentor of mine was Denis Forman, who had been the Director of the BFI. And he went into television, and television began by saying – anyway it did in Granada when I went there – everything has got to be live, and then everything can be on video provided you never retake anything. Sydney Bernstein, who'd been Hitchcock's producer, was determined at all costs not to involve his company in the costs that were adherent in making feature films with vast amounts of money being spent on stock, which he begrudged because of endless takes. But one of the things that emerged in the course of this argument was the perennial question of Why is the British film industry not as locally, inherently, and nationally strong as film in France, or film in Germany or Italy? And the point was made that in all those 3 countries, I think particularly in France or Germany, broadcasters invested in feature films. And British television didn't. They used film to make documentaries, or even some drama. But they didn't invest in feature films intended for the cinema. So it was something that we weren't doing, and they were doing. And so that was the thing that was on the agenda.

I was invited to apply for the job of being the Chief Executive of Channel 4, in a situation in which the Chief Executive was going to be in control of programmes, not answerable to a Managing Director who had editorial charge, I had editorial charge. I put in my job application knowing that the advertisement, if I got the job, would have control. I listed the things that I would make my priority. One of them was to make feature length films. Another point which led to that was that Channel 4 was not to make its own

programmes, and did not have bricks and mortar, studios it had to justify and keep busy. So we could get on into film if we wanted to. The fact that I made this pitch in my job application, it was well received by the rather mixed-bag of bright people who were on the board. But one of them was Dickie Attenborough. And Dickie was hugely sympathetic to the idea of making feature-length films. And so then I got the job and then it was time to get started.

JS: As well as Film on Four, your innovative programming brought the British public a wealth of new work in the fields of animation, avant-garde film, great seasons of film classics and magazine programmes. How important was that eclectic and imaginative film programming to your notion of how film is publicly understood?

Jl: Well, the first thing that I was able to do, enlisting the help of a marvellous man called Derek Hill, was buy feature films. And we bought 1500 feature films within the 1<sup>st</sup> year that I was in the job. Another thing that I think determined these decisions was the wish to be of help to people in film and broadcasting. To give people a leg up, and I thought that we could and should, for comparatively moderate expenditure, give the animation industry in Britain an opportunity. And I had an image in my mind, which came from other things, of the sort of films I wanted to see on Channel 4. I wanted to see British independent film – I still think that Bill Douglas' trilogy is perhaps the greatest British film. And I'd also been very impressed by the BBC's success with something like *The Magic Roundabout*. And I bought from France a series called 'The Zadox' or 'ZX' or something - I've forgotten the name - so that we could have the same thing for 5 minutes a night, 5 nights a week. I was trying to underpin the one-offs of the channel and that sort of thing. We had animation, we had British independent films, we had the best of foreign feature films. I had met Alan [Fountain] at the BFI Production Board, and I hugely respected him. And I was delighted when he applied for a job as a Commissioning Editor. And I'm glad to say that we got really interesting things from them, which certainly we would never have had from anyone who had been brought up as a programme maker from within the hierarchical controls and strictures of either an ITV company or a BBC company. They were an attempt to be genuinely different, which enabled me to say we are giving voice to people who have never had a voice in British media.

JS: In terms of commissioning you worked out a rough slate to begin with of about 25 films per year at about £300,000 per picture, but in practice many good films stretched those notional budgets and as a consequence you made fewer, but better films.

Jl: The first decision which signalled an intention was to call it not Drama but Fiction – and then David Rose had an opportunity to do feature lengths films which were one-offs, which were an attempt again to give talent its chance, people who believed they could make a film had the chance to do so. David Puttnam used to say the important thing is to get film running through the camera. And that's what we tried to do for those people. And David Rose

made 20 feature length films a year for the first 3 or so years, at a budget which started off at £300,000 each. And I think it was a great success.

But the crucial thing about this was that making feature length films was one thing, but getting them into the cinema was quite another thing, and I famously received a delegation from David Hare, Richard Eyre, Stephen Frears, Simon Relph and Ann Scott. And they came to see me in my office in the IBA at Brompton Road, and they wanted films that would go into the cinema *first*. Now that was a quite different step, and a hugely difficult one to take. And, because we didn't have all that much money, to invest a chunk of that money in films that you might not see for 3 years would have been too much for us. We couldn't have done that. So we had to get our colleague Justin Dukes, who heroically negotiated to get the exhibitors off their idiotic stance that nothing could be shown in the cinema until 3 years after it had been released as a feature film. And so we got that changed. And I'm afraid that the thing that made it easiest to change was that they didn't do well at the box-office. In that sense the exhibitors and distributors were right: their stuff was big, broad, popular stuff; our stuff wasn't in their league. And it wasn't *trying* to be in that league. All the same it was a great joy if a film in which we had a modest investment like *Room with a View* had a big box-office success, though we only got a tiny bit of it. But the one that came nearest to crashing this barrier, whilst retaining all the characteristics of the ideal Channel 4 film was *My Beautiful Laundrette*. But that's what we were trying to do there, and after a time it was possible to say to the exhibitors, "You people are not living in the real world. You've got a rule which is designed to keep big feature films which come into this country on a market off television until 3 years after they're released because you don't want television to run away with your box-office takings for such and such a film. Here we have something totally different – we have a film which we have funded ourselves. If we hadn't funded it, it wouldn't even exist. It isn't going to do particularly well at the box-office and so you absolutely have to put it onto the screen as soon as it's sensible to put it on the screen".

But I mean the point is that the people who were interested in the films that we made, or might be interested in showing the films that we made were not ABC or whoever. They were Romaine Hart at *Screen on the Hill* and so on and Andi Engel at *The Lumiere*. That's where *My Beautiful Laundrette* was shown.

JS: And where I first saw Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice* which you also sponsored.

Jl: Ah beautiful! That was another great part of my life - dealing with Tarkovsky. He paid me the courtesy of coming to see us when he wanted some money. And so then he rang up - he was well into production - and begged for another half a million or so. But Angelopoulos came to see me and so on.

JS: But some people raised the question: How does this help British film?

Jl: A very good question. Well actually it was helping British film because if you invested in really good films by really good filmmakers, Britain was seen

to have a stake in them - like Wim Wenders' *Paris, Texas*, for example, a major film. Of course, we had Greenaway as well. But the fact is, it was better than saying we don't have films by Greeks and Russians on our screen. And Tarkovsky was a very special case because he was a kind of refugee pulling all sorts of British public opinion strands you know.

All this comes back to this thing about film culture in which one could identify 10 different points of intervention. One of them was the deliberate intention to help not so much distributors but British exhibitors who were, in effect, their own distributor, because when Romaine took something for *Screen on the Hill*, she was really bidding against Andi Engel, and not against anybody else! So we were trying to help them, and we famously admitted, in fact I'm not sure Derek Hill didn't get his knuckles rapped very severely for bidding over the odds by Herzog and so on at Cannes in order to be sure of being able to bring them to Britain for exhibition in cinemas. And I suppose we thought that by encouraging good work from these various origins we were lifting people's horizons and standards in expecting them to demand variety and class in the way that this nexus of sources made possible.

JS: You were Chief Executive, you were Controller of Programmes as well, and you were in charge of a brand new channel. It sounds like you also read a few film scripts. I know that was David's (Rose) and Karin's (Bamborough) and Walter's (Donohue) province. Did you look at any scripts?

Jl: No. I looked at a dozen at the most, half a dozen more likely.

JS: Were they the ones when David would say, "I think we should fund this entirely, 100%"?

Jl: There were two great examples of this. One was *My Beautiful Laundrette*, where David came to me and said, 'I want you to read this Jeremy, but I need you to read it by tomorrow because Stephen Frears wants to direct it, and he's available for 6 weeks, 2 months away, and if we don't say yes immediately it won't happen'. And I read it overnight and said to David yes, we should do it. It cost £650,000. An even more extraordinary thing was *Comrades*, which cost £2 million. I felt we had to make it. I so believed in Bill Douglas' talent.

JS: When I spoke to David I asked him a very naive question, I said to him, "When you were reading scripts, because of the potential at least that this is a film that might be shown in cinemas as well as on television, were you looking for the kind of product that had a cinematic quality?" And he said, "Well I was just looking for good scripts, I've never read a script and thought well that's a damn good script but it's not very cinematic"! Were you, in retrospect, moving the feature film beyond that concept of the 90-minute television drama, out of the 4 walls domestic scenario, and into films shot on location and with international appeal?

Jl: I used to ask David and say, "How do you decide"? And the answer was completely revealing and non-revealing. He just said, "If there's something in it that appeals to me, and I'm looking for something that's edgy and different".

And that's all he ever said. And he then let the director of the film, who in some cases was also the author of the film, having written the script himself, get on with it so they brought to it what they could bring. There's one thing about David's choice of films and filmmakers, which perhaps marks him out as the Hollywood failure he would undoubtedly have been if he'd gone to Hollywood - and bigger men than him have come a cropper. David's use of filmmakers was unpretentious in a way: he was happy with quite modest results if it bore the fingerprint of somebody whose talent he wanted to develop. Some of them weren't massive great must-sees, they were just very interesting. *A Month in the Country*, for example - a superb film, but very understated and quiet. What we're up against, on the other side, is people who would never connect to a film unless it was big, strong, maybe violent, certainly sexy, you know 'box-office' written all over it. That was the antithesis of what we were trying to do. *We were interested in the still, small voice*.

The most difficult thing David had to do was persuade the board that we should spend whatever it was 3 or 4 hundred thousand pounds on a Mike Leigh film for which there would be no script. And of course it was absolutely the right thing to do. But Mike Leigh had made excellent films which probably had more script in them for the BBC - *Nuts in May* and various other things.

The biggest beneficiary must have been Peter Greenaway, because we funded 5 films by him one after the other and they were all quite expensive. And not to say we did it all, he got money from other places. But this is one of the best examples of the way that David and I worked. I knew of Terence Davies' films from the BFI, and I knew that Colin MacCabe thought that the trilogy that Terence did was marvellous - difficult but marvellous. Then he made *Distant Voices, Still Lives*. I think that he had made the first half of that. David took me to see it. It was much nearer a middle-of-the-road concept than his earlier, highly experimental work. But it was a great pleasure to stand in the room with David when he [Davies] needed money for the other half [of the film] and we said, "Yes, of course". So what was wonderful about all that was that it was just his judgement which I could then back up if necessary by my judgement, and by my underpinning the cost of it, which made it work. It happened like that [clicks fingers]. Put a proposal like that to the BBC, it would have taken them 18 months to reject it.

JS: Do you lament the fact that since your day, and in the face of changing commercial imperatives, new work commissioned by Film4 now takes longer to reach television screens and, when it does, isn't accorded the familiar position in the schedules it once had? Gone are the days of a season of new Films on Four.

Jl: Well I think that what happened after my time was that a lot of what we'd been trying to do in the film world generally was reined back or cut out. After a certain time the commitment to animation was much reduced. After a certain time Alan's stuff was just abandoned, in a way. But the very success of the best of the films that David made by his own lights and judgement prompted the question, "Why don't we do something that makes, you know, more money? Why don't we do something that's bigger?" And in that matter the couple of hundred thousand pounds if it was that - it may have only been one hundred thousand - that we had in *Room with a View* was one of the things.

Why don't we do more like that? I used to shudder when I wanted to keep us away from the television mini-series and from the standards. We bought some terrible rubbish... we bought some wonderful stuff...but some of it was dreadful, but those were deliberate hokum things of mine to go on in the afternoon. But the point is, when Barbara Taylor Bradford and *A Woman of Substance* got 7 million viewers I thought something's wrong here - that's a dangerous road, we should keep away from it. But other people took exactly the opposite view; I'm talking of my successors. I don't think I've got any doubt at all that it was the replacement of David - when he retired and in God's good time - by David Aukin, and David Aukin's very excellent professional and friendly relationship with Colin Levant, who was the sort of Head of Business and did the contracts, and both of them reporting to Michael Grade - at that point what Channel 4 was trying to do on film altered actually suddenly and dramatically, and there was less of what I've called 'the beginner's chance' and pretentious stuff. It was: "It's got to be big or why are we spending money?" And I think that was a big change of direction, and it would be almost impossible now in fact it would be - we'll I never believe anything's impossible - but it would require an earthquake to return to the previous state of affairs.

I'm hugely proud of the work that we did *but* I wonder if it did have any lasting impact at all. If you were to stop people in the street now and ask them what do you...look at the schedules...or look at...the kinds of films that are being made in Britain for cinema, and ask yourself - where in any of this is there any sign of seeds germinated by Channel 4 years ago? I don't think there is.