

Peter Ansorge, 7/06/11

Peter Ansorge was a commissioning editor (Fiction) and Head of Drama (Serials and Series) at Channel 4, 1982-1997.

Interviewers: Sally Shaw, Justin Smith, Laura Mayne & Ieuan Franklin [Rachael Keene also present].

SS: OK, hello, I was going to ask you about *Black Xmas* and *Empire Road* because that's my specific...research...so the first thing I'd like to ask you is how you met Michael Abbensets.

PA: Well uh I uh before I went to Pebble Mill as a script editor, I was an editor of a theatre magazine called *Plays and Players*, and we published a new play every month. And one of the plays that we had published just before I left was a play by Michael, called *Sweet Talk*, which was done at the Theatre Upstairs [at the Royal Court Theatre], with Stephen Frears directing. And after about a year at Pebble Mill I bumped into Michael on Oxford Street, we had a little chat and um I told him about what I was doing. And he said well can I send you an idea? I said yes, as long as it's contemporary and it's set outside London, because that's our brief. And he phoned me up I think probably the next day and said I want to write about a black family in Birmingham at Xmas. And that was the origins of the idea. I was a script editor then and I went to Tara Prem, who was a producer there [at Pebble Mill] on the Second City Firsts strand, of original new writing. And she had done a play called *A Touch of Eastern Promise* about the Asian community. She was half-Indian herself and therefore very sympathetic to the idea. We commissioned the script from Michael. I think he wrote it in about 3 weeks. We did a little work on the script but not much. And then we thought we'd offer it to Stephen Frears, who said he'd like to direct it and that's how it came about.

SS: I've actually watched the play (*Black Xmas*). And what's the first thing to say about it, is that it's stood the test of time. When you watch it, it doesn't seem dated. One of the things that struck me was this kind of longing for home and tension of 'where is home'. And one of the characters says you know 'Britain's my home now, I grin and bear it'. I wonder if you can remember any of the response to the play at all.

PA: Well in those days you obviously got viewing figures which were taken on board a little bit. But then you got letters. And letters were very important because you knew if you got any letters at all the following week – there had been a response. And I do remember with *Black Xmas* that we did get letters from the black community as it would be now known. Saying 'thank you very much'. We also got letters saying 'oh, you know, we're not as depressed as this'. Which you'll always get, from any audience, whatever you say about their profession or whatever. So we knew we had a reaction, which was quite important. Because actually to take the trouble of writing a letter...

SS: Absolutely, I mean you've got to be quite...it has to make quite an impression on you, doesn't it, to be that motivated to write?

PA: Yeah. We also knew that it had quite a warm reaction from within the BBC itself. Because it was BBC 2, and there hadn't been anything like it. Whenever the issue of black drama had been on the agenda, and they didn't do that many, it had always

been contentious. It had always been about race, it had always been about crime. And here was a black family sitting down to a Xmas meal. And the drama was entirely to do with the drama that happened within the family.

SS: And also what I noticed about it was that it seemed to be more of a middle class family, which was interesting.

PA: Yes. Michael and I had discussed that a little bit in Oxford Street [laughs]. That it should be something normal. Michael's a very acerbic writer. When he writes the Norman Beaton character, it's not sentimental. It's quite acute and painful at times. He does write with a comic gift. And those were the qualities we were looking for; we were looking to do something like that. But if I hadn't bumped into Michael it probably wouldn't have happened!

SS: So then obviously you went on, with Michael, to do *Empire Road*. That was '78, '79, a time of a lot of racial tension. I wonder if you found it difficult to pitch the idea of *Empire Road* to the BBC.

PA: Well absolutely not, funny enough. It proved no problem at all. David Rose, who was our Head of Department, every year he went to something called 'Offers'. To...to use that word now which we didn't use then, called 'pitch'. We pitched ideas from the Department, and I talked to Michael after *Black Xmas*. And he gave me a couple of ideas. One of them was - he wanted to do black families in a street in Handsworth, and he came up with *Empire Road*. And we stressed the fact that it was, I don't think we used the word 'positive' then, but it wasn't going to be about crime, it wasn't going to be about, you know, totally 'conflict', it was going to reflect the real lives of ordinary black families in that street. *Empire Road* had certain you know echoes in the soap opera kind of thing! And I must say that the Controller of BBC 2 at the time - I think I just wrote a paragraph - absolutely said yes, go ahead with it, commission a script and let's see. So contrary to what you might think, there was no internal opposition.

SS: That's really interesting...To speak to people like yourself, because you do have this impression that it might have been quite tricky...

PA: I think you have to understand that people who ran television, who run television, are not always the stereotype you think. And particularly at that time, there was a generation of television executives who were very ambitious for the form. Not just the form of drama but for what television could achieve. Um and although they were perhaps what you would call 'establishment', it didn't mean they lacked culture or understanding. And Brian Wenham, who was the Controller of BBC 2, who was the first executive at *that* level, because it went beyond David Rose, that I ever got to know. And it was one of the things that struck me was how well read he was. I mean he was a politician; he was plotting to become Director General. So a lot of his life was bound up with that. But he was an extremely cultured and clever man. And oddly enough he didn't have any problem with *Empire Road*.

SS: As I was saying at lunchtime, I met Horace Ové a year ago, and got to talk to him. He specifically said that he found you to be incredibly helpful, in terms of getting him involved with *Empire Road*. And you actually approached him, didn't you, to ask him to be involved. Can you tell me a little about what his kind of working practices were on *Empire Road*?

PA: Well yeah well Horace....Um I just thought, we had black actors, we had a black writer, was there a black director in the country. And really Horace was the only one. And I screened his film *Pressure*, which was what he was known for by everybody. And what struck me was actually what a good filmmaker he was. It wasn't actually to do with the fact that he was black. I mean one of the first shots in *Pressure* was of the mother cooking eggs and bacon. It's not talked about, although food is mentioned, but immediately there is an image there of England/Caribbean and that's really all expressed visually. And Horace was an incredibly ambitious filmmaker. And um really *Empire Road* was a fairly sparse schedule, in that it was mainly studio, and we had a few days on each episode outside with an OB camera. And at that time the lightweight OB camera [set-up] was regarded as a mini-studio, so it was 2 cameras, and you set them up, and the director was meant to do a camera plan. So it was close-up, medium shot, so you've got 5 minutes for 5 minutes. And Horace didn't want to do that. And I think that Horace was probably the first [television] director in the country to do it shot by shot like a film. And people were horrified, they said that he hadn't done his homework, it was unprofessional. But what he got from that was a filmic quality, and a sense of the streets of Handsworth, the people, which he was then able to cut together, although not on a Steinbeck [editing machine] but on one of these big video wheels [a Moviola?] where you were meant to have basically lined up a few shots which you could cut together. It took hours, and the editor would move it frame by frame. But when they saw the results, they got quite excited. And indeed later on, although it wasn't my production, when Pebble Mill came to do *Boys from the Blackstuff* with the digital [video] cameras, Philip Saville did exactly the same thing. They couldn't afford to do it all on film, so he did it shot by shot. And Horace was also um very observant about the environment around him. So if he saw something, if he saw some kids in the crowd doing something that was interesting, he would incorporate that into the filmmaking. Um uh so it had a sort of root in the place of Handsworth in Birmingham that perhaps some of the other directors didn't quite get.

SS: Perhaps also because of his whole documentary background, because he came up from that background. Certainly when I spoke to him he talked of that whole observational thing, taking notice of everything that happens around you.

PA: That's right. I think he brought all that to it. It was very exciting if occasionally nerve-wracking!

SS: Also when I talked to Horace Ové, he talked about working with Norman Beaton. Certainly for me he was a very important actor for the period that I'm looking at. He must have been incredibly hard-working because he seems to appear in virtually everything I'm looking at in the 1970s. I just wondered if you had any recollections of working with him.

PA: Oh indeed. Norman is very interesting. There had been other actors from the Caribbean, like Earl Cameron, who had been given work here, had been given rather dignified work. Norman was really the first black actor from this country, particularly from the Caribbean, who was able to persuade the audience he was a great actor. We always said he had a kind of Walter Matthau comedic sense. He would throwaway a line, but it would be very clear. His sense of timing was as good as any actor I've ever worked with. Uh so around Norman you got professionalism um which was at the time I think was unique to him. Therefore in that sense he was a pioneer.

We're no longer short of black actors. When we did *Empire Road* we wondered if we could cast it. We had Norman, we had a couple of others, but really there wasn't a wide group of actors to draw on. Indeed we had to cast people literally off the street occasionally! Because it was new. I do remember in pre-production, I still don't quite understand why, but a drama producer in London phoned me up, who I knew slightly, and for some reason had read about the fact we were doing this, and he said 'you must be mad'. And I said 'what do you mean?' And he said 'well there aren't any black actors in this country, and those that there are won't turn up for rehearsal on time'. [SS: Seriously?] Yeah. And Norman, who was a bit of a character, even when he'd been out all night would turn up immaculately on time, word perfect. So he was...he was a kind of leader of that company of actors. And actually he did *Empire Road* for the BBC, he did *The Fosters* for ITV, which got huge audiences, and he then went on to do *Desmonds* for Channel 4.

SS: 'Cos he was working on, I realise from my research, he was working on several projects simultaneously. He must have been incredibly busy during the '70s.

PA: Well he was and he wasn't. These all happened separately. And I think because he was a pioneer Norman he always carried with him that sense of – will it ever happen again? You know, although Desmonds went on for quite a few series, he...never had quite that sense that he'd always be in work. He always carried with him that sense of being the immigrant and the pioneer and so forth.

SS: That's really interesting. If I can take you back a little bit, because you said about the casting for *Empire Road*...Did you go to any of the local theatre groups?

PA: Oh yes, the first director Alex Marshall, knew we had to do that. Certainly the two lads in it. Desmond was an actor, 'cos he'd done a little bit in *Gangsters*. But Royston was a school kid from the local school. Miss Mae, we couldn't find that West Indian mother, and eventually Alex was...the scriptwriter Harold Schumann directed him to a Manchester nightclub where Miss Mae was performing - singing - because she'd never actually acted. So in a way it was a mix.

SS: In a way I suppose that's why it had such an authentic feel.

PA: We wanted to go for authenticity. There was a tendency, which Norman rejected entirely, was for black actors to be quite theatrical, to be quite large...Norman understood screen acting, that you play down. That's what we wanted, to go for that. And Stephen Frears absolutely understood this, when he did *Black Xmas*, that's how he directed the actors.

SS: Yes the performances are incredibly nuanced. When you watch that for the first time, I watched it for the first time a couple of weeks ago, and it does completely stand the test of time because of the performances.

PA: And Joe Marcell plays Walter, the stutterer. He again had come from the theatre, and he was a very very good actor, putting the two together. Joe learned a lot from Norman. You could see Joe growing as an actor throughout the series. And of course he then went on to play the butler in the Will Smith comedy [*Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*] [laughs]. [SS: Did he? I didn't know that]. He had quite a good life, Joe! [Laughs]

SS: OK well just one more question because I don't want to monopolize too much...One of the things I've read from Norman Beaton's autobiography, is, he kind of writes rather bitterly about the demise of *Empire Road*, he says he doesn't really know why it was cancelled, the second series had better ratings and it was on at a better time. Can you shed any light on that...

PA: Yeah. I think one of the things you have to understand about both the work at Pebble Mill, and indeed the work I then did in the series form at Channel 4 was that we were not looking for dramas that necessarily went on again and again and again. I know that sounds a bit crazy today, when that's what virtually all broadcasters are looking for, a drama series that will run and run. Uh because what it meant, there's a certain budget, if we had decided to do a 3rd series of *Empire Road*, it would have meant that something new in the pipeline – in this case *The History Man* – couldn't have been made. So we did have that....that was an issue. Secondly, Michael Abbensetts had written all 15 episodes, and was quite tired! And really there wasn't anybody else. So unless the BBC had said he's an extra sum of money, go on doing this, which at that time would have been the 1970s, another recession, they weren't inclined to do. I understand how Norman felt. Perhaps we didn't sit around and talk about it seriously enough. Because I imagined that following from *Empire Road*, similar things would happen elsewhere, but they didn't and haven't outside of Channel 4.

SS: Thank you, that's really helpful.

JS: Well before we go on to Laura, to talk about Channel 4 and your later career, it might be useful to sketch in some of the context of the creative dynamics at Pebble Mill, and how that studio was set up as BBC Regional Drama, and the people who were involved in bringing new writers and new talent to the screen. Because I think that much of what was innovative that followed can be traced to that pool of talent that you brought together.

PA: Indeed. Well I think in 1970, um Huw Wheldon, who was the Managing Director of the BBC, and David Attenborough, who had just stopped being Controller of BBC 2, asked David Rose, who was a very experienced producer within the Drama Department, most notably known for *Z Cars* – the early *Z Cars* – to start a Drama Department at the new Pebble Mill building based in Birmingham. It would all be networked, it wasn't a local station, but the specific brief would be to find new writers. And indeed, that...David took that very seriously, and I think it started out with a season of basically studio-based half hour plays, called, which became known as Second City Firsts – first plays from the second city. And the brief was to be contemporary, and not to set anything in London. That was the only brief. And he brought in a script editor at the beginning, just one, Barry Hanson, who'd come from the Royal Court Theatre. And in fact everyone David brought in hadn't come through television. He was looking for a slightly broader experience, and often theatre-based. Theatre-based not in terms that he wanted to do theatre on television, but [in terms of] people [who] understood scripts. My background, I was working as the editor of a theatre magazine called *Plays and Players* where we published a new play every month, so I did know quite a lot of new writers. And Tara Prem, again, who I worked with after Barry left to work for Thames; she was half-Indian and had a different kind of perspective on what was happening in England, Birmingham, at the time. So

David surrounded himself, actually, with a bunch of people who didn't know anything about film and television [laughs].

JS: And you were very much a working team in terms of commissioning writers, following projects through, it was very hands on. Could you say anything about that?

PA: Yes, in fact, I do now remember, I arrived in 1975, the day after New Year, 'cos that's when my contract began. Everyone was on another week's leave, except for a man called Mike Leigh, who was running up for doing a Second City First, which became *The Permissive Society*, a half hour play in the studio. He'd done 2 films before but never worked in the studio. So we ended up for a whole week in Indian restaurants in the evening, and Mike told me his life history. Much as I love Michael, he does go on a bit [laughs]! But when he went on after *The Permissive Society* to do *Nuts in May*, which, as you know, he improvised and devised plays with no script. All of us, the 2 script editors, Pedr James, myself, Tara, David, we all went into the editing room to discuss a rough cut which I think was 3 ½ hours long. Then it became 3 hours [and so on]. And we all...I think that there was no acrimony at all. You did get a sense that here you were, and learnt a massive amount of film editing and film through that process. And you couldn't suggest anything to Mike that was stupid [laughs]. Because you'd get hauled over...you know? It was a team, but it was...looking back there was quite a high level of discussion going on, about the ambition for the film, and the achievement of the film, and what it became and...

JS: Right And that was a model that sort of transferred to Channel 4, I mean did David Rose pretty much take that forward um...into what became Film on Four?

PA: Yes, I think...I mean David was *always* a great champion of the films that we did. And the films in those days were 50 minute, or maybe 75 minute Plays for Today, and they were all made on 16mm. All of those you felt there was a care and attention devoted to. And when we did the David Hare film *Licking Hitler*, um which I was script editor, he produced, it went out with a credit 'A film by David Hare'. Which had never actually happened before at the BBC. Maybe at the most they'd have accepted 'Written and Directed by'. But they felt, the BBC in London, that this was terribly indulgent, that that tradition of filmmaking was not what public service broadcasting was about. And at the same time, they became aware that film was an investment that was quite expensive, compared to what they could do in the studio. And their view was that the future of television drama was in the studio, not with film. David was invited by Jeremy Isaacs to become the first Head of Fiction, as it was called, at Channel 4. They took the complete opposite view. They wanted to continue the great tradition of television film drama, but with the slightly broader brief, with the possibility of a theatrical release. But they did not make, Jeremy and David, a distinction between film and television drama, to the extent that what they *wanted* to do was grow and continue, and empower, that tradition of television drama on film.

JS: Very interesting. Laura, I know, has got some questions related to that.

LM: I know that there was no real policy of what constituted a Film on Four film, but um how far would you say that your selections in the early days were kind of influenced by the tradition of what you'd been working in at Pebble Mill, that kind of contemporary focus, that strong literary tradition...

PA: Well I think if you look at some of the early commissions...*Angel* by Neil Jordan. Neil was somebody we didn't actually make a film [of his] at the BBC, I can't remember the reasons but...Neil was one of the first people David went to. Uh not only did he write *Angel* but he directed it. And I think the Licking Hitler analogy came in there because um *Licking Hitler* David sent us, we always knew it was a great script, but he [Hare] wanted to direct it himself. And he'd never been behind a camera before. He'd directed in theatre. But somehow...we had an instinct that that would be the right thing to do. Although it could have ended up with a great script being destroyed but it didn't. In fact David Hare had a feeling for film, in a way that you'd get in Plays for Today like *Gangsters* or *A Day Out* or the Alan Bleasdale *Muscle Market*...that was something they wanted to continue to do. That was something they wanted to continued to do [at Channel 4], and of course David Hare was commissioned quite early on at Channel 4. At the same time, Jeremy Isaacs, who took a great deal of interest in Film on Four, had just come from being uh a Chairman of the BFI. And um was aware of uh another kind of tradition of filmmaking...the Peter Greenaways and the Chris Autys and those people. Although I know that at the BFI he often said 'why don't you just tell people ordinary stories that they can follow?' [laughs] So um 'why does everything have to be postmodern?' Nevertheless, Jeremy encouraged David to work with people like Peter Greenaway to bring in another kind of experience. And also he was...we all had been at Pebble Mill great fans of the New Wave – Truffaut and everything, Horace Ové, yes, he was a documentary maker but he'd also in his early life worked as an extra in Rome and had seen Visconti in – you know, that neo-realism tradition. Um it has to be said David Rose didn't really...that wasn't what he talked about, but Jeremy loved that. So Jeremy was very keen to link David with some of the European filmmakers like...And his first script editor Walter Donohue also. So there was a kind of broadening of the brief, it wasn't just plays set outside of London in the English Regions but nevertheless that was something that was brought right in at the heart of Film on Four, and I think helped to make it popular and a success with audiences.

LM: That's excellent. Um just to kind of follow on from that. David Aukin has talked of Film on Four as being a relatively autonomous strand within Channel 4. How far did you kind of perceive that to be the case in the earlier days of the Channel?

PA: In the earlier days it wasn't. I mean one of the big...one of the bold decisions Jeremy Isaacs made was to say that my entire drama budget was going to go into Film on Four to do single films. Just at the time when the rest of television was actually cutting back on the single film for being too expensive, indulgent. They wanted to concentrate on series and serials. It was terribly bold. And I know at the time, because I was still at the BBC, the BBC thought that this was a terrible mistake on the part of Channel 4. So this was a very bold decision. The only exception to that was Brookside, the soap opera. But they didn't really invest very much in original television series at the beginning...and therefore it was very important in the early days of Channel 4 that there was a season of Channel 4 films, drama, right there on Channel 4 to be schedule. 10, 15 run of, great run, of drama. Some of them were co-financed, it worked out quite economically. But they were there for the television audience. Now that became less true particularly with the second David, David Aukin, by which time the films had had more success in the cinema, there were holdbacks, it was slightly more complicated. So David wasn't that interested in how films perform for television, or even having a season together. So there ended up

being no Film on Four season at all. Now you can argue about which was the most successful view.

LM: Yeah. Well... [laughs] Um...sticking with that kind of early Film on 4, um how do you, the input of Jeremy Isaacs - how closely, I mean obviously he had a lot invested in Film on 4, he developed the strand. How closely was he involved?

PA: When I say that he was involved he was, but what he didn't do was interfere. He did read the scripts. But he never ever and I know this because when I did Series and Serials he also...even if he thought probably I don't really like this script, he would never suggest that it shouldn't be made. David entirely made the decisions. Jeremy would advise. He was a filmmaker himself, so he knew about film and loved film, so he was a passionate kind of father figure I suppose on it. But would not...this is what you have to understand about the executives - I mentioned Brian Wenham earlier – they were passionately involved and committed but they did respect the individual producer's or Head of Department's freedom.

LM: OK that's very interesting. Just carrying on that idea of autonomy and creative control. Obviously Channel 4 was unique in that it was the first publisher-broadcaster commissioning films to [from] independent companies. But how far would you say that yourself and David Rose would have been involved in monitoring the actual productions themselves – viewing the rushes and offering creative input?

PA: Technically the commissioning editor [shouldn't]....[the way] Jeremy envisioned it wasn't the producer or executive producer and they commissioned and just let the producers produce. However I did not find the way David worked at Film on 4 any different to the way in which he worked at Pebble Mill. He gave the producers freedom, autonomy, but he was always there with what he thought about scripts, in the cutting room he was exactly the same. When I first...you know...went to Channel 4 - because I wasn't there from the beginning - and went to the cutting rooms and screenings with him, he was exactly the same. The only difference being he was talking to Wim Wenders or Tarkovsky, in exactly the same way he had talked to Mike Newell or whoever, Mike Leigh in the cutting rooms at Pebble Mill. He didn't change because he respected people's autonomy, and if he really wanted to do something he let them do it. That was the model I followed when I went on to do the series' at Channel 4 as well. I think when you're a Commissioning Editor you have to do these things, but not in the way of intruding on the individual producer's independence.

LM: I...understand you were very closely involved in *My Beautiful Laundrette* and films...

PA: When I joined I was a Script Associate and that was basically working on Film on Four with David Rose. Walter Donohue had left by then and...Karin Bamborough....and certainly, although, it was Karin who knew Hanif, but we all worked on *Laundrette*. Which was a script that evolved over a period of time. What is so interesting about *Laundrette* it was at that time when - which is a discussion that has never stopped, about whether it's a television film or a feature film – and at that time they said well we're going to make some films now on 16mm basically for television, and others, the ones we think are going to go really well in the cinema on 35mm. And the first candidate for the television, 16mm, was *My Beautiful Laundrette* because although everybody thought that it was a great script, and Stephen Frears, said this is just like *Play for Today*, we'll do it like that. Nobody in their wildest

dreams thought it would make any money at the box office. Of course it was shown at the Edinburgh Film Festival, and all the critics raved about it. That was the first Film 4 film that really made a lot of difference. It went round the world, made a lot of money, and that changed the climate. All the great 35mm films that had been thought of as box-office died a terrible death! Some of them were interesting films...And that's a true story. The other time it happened was with *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, which was the other David [Aukin]. David asked me to see the final cut, which was screened. Obviously it was a nice comedy, Hugh Grant was brilliant, every single person in that room, including the Working Title producers, Mike Newell the director, everybody, David Aukin, said 'This will do great business in television, hopeless for the cinema' [laughs]. Shows how much we know! And it's true. Those were the 2 films, both [LM: yes, those can be seen as landmarks in the 2 decades]...were judged as goodish television movies by the producers and makers [laughs].

SS: What do you think it was about *My Beautiful Laundrette* that made it so successful?

PA: Well, of course, *My Beautiful Laundrette* quite seriously, BBC Birmingham Pebble Mill was the first time that there had been anything like a body of work about multicultural Britain. And David took this...because David in a way had learnt this at Birmingham because of all that, he took that to Channel 4. And Hanif was absolutely part of that kind of writing...in this case about Pakistanis here. And it was a new way of looking at Britain, it was a new identity for the country, and films are about that, partly. You can't go on lying about that. I was reading a book of essays by Phillip French, and his definition of British identity is still to do with *The Lady Vanishes*. If you talk to him, he wouldn't, but that argument... Interestingly enough, with Film 4, there was *Laundrette*, there was *East is East*, look at *Slumdog Millionaire*, won an Oscar. That thread is directly from Pebble Mill to Film 4. It's not conscious but it's there, and it's a line.

JS: ...Because those continuities are difficult to attribute to any individual agency or any particular period perhaps, but I wonder, adopting that slightly broader perspective...It always seems to me that the creative producer is always in the middle, on the one hand dependent on the product that writers are bringing, and on the other hand responsible to the managers and the executives. And during your time at Channel 4, there were successive changes both at the top, but also there were developments in the suppliers, the providers, if you like, of independent British film. I remember David Rose saying to me that when he joined Channel 4 there wasn't an independent sector, 10 years later there certainly was. From those dual perspectives, how did that impact on your job? How did the material you were getting change over time, how did the ideological emphasis from above as it were alter what you were available to do? Can you say something about that?

PA: Absolutely. The first experience at Channel 4 for about 8 years was totally liberating, in the sense that the environment we had at Pebble Mill, with individual people being encouraged, seemed to be there without the BBC bureaucracies. There were small things like, you actually knew what a programme cost - which you never did at the BBC. You never really knew what it cost, because it was all internal costs. If you overrun in the studio, and you had to re-mount it everyone complained but it would be re-mounted by people who were on a full-time salary anyway, so the

only cost would be bringing the actors back, so it would not be colossal. At Channel 4 nothing would happen without the budget being absolutely there. So when the producers went into it they knew they were properly resourced. That's the first thing. They knew they were doing something different, working in a different way. I think they felt supported by the Drama Commissioners. So it was an absolute joy. And there were quite a few uh producers who had been in the BBC or wherever, who formed independent production companies and came with ideas they really wanted to do. You didn't say yes to all of them, you couldn't. One of the big things was you had to say no to a lot of people. But nevertheless it seemed to me to be entirely civilized. When you I used to go onto the sets there usually was incredibly good feeling, which you didn't always get at the BBC. Because although there were terrifically talented camera crews, they were bitter, they were always felt they were being you know taken for granted, they were asked to do too much. You didn't get that [at Channel 4]. For about 5 years it was absolutely wonderful. When I started to do the drama series, the same thing was true. Um and I always thought that this was going to be kind of the future, that [of] medium sized companies, that even small companies passionately doing the work they wanted to do. Because apart from getting paid, the companies got a production fee, which, of course, never happened at the BBC. Which was 5% or 8% of the budget, which was not an insignificant amount. So on top of working as producers, money went back into the companies and so forth. I have to say that about 10 years into Channel 4's history that did start to change. You know, inevitably drama is an expensive thing, it's a competitive thing, you can only do so many hours. The companies started to get bigger. They started to look at their, you know, their cash flow. One film a year wasn't enough, one series wasn't enough. And so the climate started to change. I'm not sure for the better.

JS: Of course after '91 they were able to sell their own advertising under Michael Grade. That seems a point at which their kind of emphasis changed to some extent.

PA: You have to understand that Channel 4 was a product of the Thatcher government [JS: Ironically enough...] [laughs]. Even though we were one of their biggest critics I suppose all round. The notion of independent production companies which didn't cost the government anything, 'cos it was entirely financed by advertising. Even though there were no shareholders. It wasn't a business. Mrs Thatcher wanted to turn it into a business, she wanted to privatise it. And because of Michael Grade amongst other, the ferocious political campaign, at the last minute she backed down. But the thing was that she didn't quite back down. She said that now Channel 4 - because we were financed before by ITV's advertising, we got a guaranteed chunk of it - but now you're going to sell your own advertising. Um initially it turned out to be a blessing not a curse, because we discovered that ITV constantly under-sold our programmes. Because Michael Grade...there was enough to finance what he wanted to do. The problem, as the companies get bigger, they look for more commercial gains. They're looking in the longer term. They're not looking just to make a movie next year. The Channel is looking at advertising, you know. Some programmes do well, others don't. It starts to have an effect, no question. It starts to become more commercial. Towards the end, I do remember that the first thing people would do – the Director of Programmes John Willis – would be to look at the overnights. The ratings. And I'm not saying they would then make a decision to stop an [un]popular programme, but obviously the mood was to go with what was popular. And I do think that then began to have an effect on the

programming and on the Channel, and on the whole climate of independent production.

JS: Was that why you ultimately decided to move on?

PA: The reason I started to move on when Michael Jackson [came in] because Michael [Grade] left...I had enjoyed 10 wonderful years with Michael Grade, who was very supportive of drama series. And was a very different animal from Jeremy, but shared that same belief that you support the people you know...who, you back the people who are working for you until they mess up, and then they'll go. And that's fair enough, really. The first thing Michael Jackson said to me, 'It's nice to meet you Peter, you've done some very good programmes, but you've also done some that failed. Under me you'll find that no programme fails. I'm looking really forward particularly to commissioning the drama'. I kid you not [laughs].

JS: Which is a... [laughs]...no answer to that – cheerio.

PA: [Laughs]...He was a different animal, a newer generation. He believed that an executive should do the commissioning. Course you'd have a Head of Drama but he/she wouldn't make the real decisions. It had come from the BBC – the Birt era had started that really, the control system where...You see David Rose chose the drama, he had to go to the Controllers, and - particularly if you'd had a successful year – they'd be quite generous. And there'd be the occasional thing [of] I don't think you should do that. But they never actually read the scripts; they never actually said that didn't rate very well. Not at the BBC or even Channel 4. So the climate changed, and I don't think it was just at Channel 4! [laughs]

JS: The world changed, yes. Going back to the issue of commissioning scripts and reading scripts. I know that David Rose when I spoke to him has been very elusive about what makes a good script. And creative producers often find it difficult to talk about those decisions because so much of that is about instinct, and certainly about experience. But is there anything that you can point to in your own work. You talk about those things you have to say no to. Is it possible to actually say, this is what I...like.

PA: I think it probably is possible with the rider that this does have to do with some kind of intuition. And your intuition isn't always right, but when it is it's the best thing you can base a thing on. But I do think that to some extent, I don't know how to put this, when Hamlet says 'It's the purpose of [art] to hold a mirror up to nature. To show how, through the mirror, you reflect the life around you'. Which isn't documentary, you know? I always thought that the best work I ever did, with Alan Bleasdale, with *Traffic*, with Film on Fours, that's always been part of it. Although it hasn't been an obvious documentary conversion. It's gone through a writer's imagination. So with *GBH* you get Michael Murray, the Robert Lindsay character, who's *astonishing*, you can't [explain] [laughs] So when you get that, and a reflection of what's happening in the world. I guess that's what...if I really pushed against the wall that's how I always judge things. Of course, there are exceptions when that doesn't apply at all, and something works. You have to keep an open mind. I always said I didn't want to do love stories set in the Second World War. And then someone clever brought me *The Camomile Lawn* by Mary Wesley, which is not an obvious Channel 4 thing. Uh the BBC didn't do it because they thought it was old-fashioned, ITV it wasn't [right for them]. It was a rather splendid thing about women having a

good time – but in the right way – in the Second World War. And it got 7 million viewers every week [laughs]. And so you have to be flexible, you can't lock yourself into...

JS: Have there ever been...this is an even worse question, have there ever been any things you turned down and you wished you had gone with it.

PA: Now let me think, funny enough...there were not many with the series', or was I offered? No I can't actually, no I think. I can't remember. There was one but obviously my subconscious is suppressing it [laughs]! But to do that job you have to turn things down. And actually Michael Grade was very good about that. He used to say to commissioning editors, even if someone else picks it up and it's a masterpiece – I'm not going to sack you *the first time* [laughs]. If something is really good, on the whole, it gets done. If not by you then by somebody else. I don't know many...that notion of masterpieces that haven't been picked up. Certainly in terms of television I think.

JS: Shall we take a break at this point, folks?

[TRACK 03]

LM: Just to kind of talk a little more about Pebble Mill productions. Uh *Gangsters* - the Play for Today - obviously went on to become a successful series and, gradually as time went by, you could say it became much more innovative and avant-garde in its form. I was just wondering if productions like *Gangsters*, *Penda's Fen*, um you know, *Licking Hitler*, things like that, if you were ever aware of any critical or press backlash against that new, you know, innovative, type of programme?

PA: Yes, I mean...the original *Gangsters*, the film, was basically lambasted by the press. It was happening just as arrived at Pebble Mill. My first week, I think, it went out. I thought it was absolutely tremendous. It reflected a world that had never actually been reflected in British television drama. And it did it as a gangster move, which is now a cliché. But then in the hallowed Play for Today tradition, [it] shocked critics. Um and yeah, as *Gangsters* went on some critics got more and more infuriated and enraged. You have to balance that, sometimes to be fair critics give you a very rewarding response. Sometimes they don't. But to enrage them is not a bad thing. Sometimes.

IF: So, I just had a couple of questions just about the details of your work as a Script Associate for Channel 4. I was just thinking of the volume of scripts that you must have been receiving, certainly in the early days, it must have been quite substantial. How did you divide up the work with David Rose, Karin Bamborough and Walter Donohue, and did you have to make executive decisions?

PA: Yeah I think I'd learned quite a lot about that. We always said at Pebble Mill we would respond between 4 to 6 weeks to people. The only way you can do that is not pretend everybody is going to read anything. You have to find 1 or 2 reliable readers who you trust, who shouldn't be working in the organization –right? And then you will hand them 10 scripts, per week, and they will do a report. You have to trust their judgement, and occasionally look at it. I then organized, when I first came to Channel 4 - 'cos there was a bit of chaos around the scripts - a weekly meeting with David when I would tell them about the reader's report, what I thought, and then David

would dictate a letter - either yea or nay - and that actually became very efficient. So as long as you're prepared to make decisions, and trust a couple of people, you can make that quite efficient. If you just sit there and think 'oh my God, oh my God', the pile will just pile up.

IF: And just jumping on a bit, to, comparing really the era of Channel 4 under Jeremy Isaacs and under Michael Grade, and the management structures. Under Jeremy Isaacs, you get the impression that he was very accessible to everyone, that there was quite a big group of people who would all report to him essentially. But under Michael Grade it was divided into 2 groups, with Factual and Documentary under John Willis, and Arts and Drama... [PA: Controllers...] Controllers, exactly, a more business model...But I understand in Drama you were still reporting directly to Michael Grade. Was that due to the particular interest he took [in Drama]?

PA: Yeah. I think it is. But I mean Jeremy was a visionary, there's no question...Michael would not have taken that job on in the beginning. And he certainly would not have actually come through with the notion of Commissioning Editors giving money to independent producers, because, as he said 'we all thought they'd go off to the Bahamas' [laughs]! They didn't. Nevertheless, Jeremy admitted towards the end that it was impossible really for him to deal with all the Commissioning Editors. So he did try out one or two things, he made Senior Commissioning Editors, some of the Factual Editors reported to one and, you know. Then when Michael Grade came in he wanted to professionalize all that. He didn't want to bring a BBC structure, but he wanted some structure, so he created the Controller system. Except with Drama. He did...in a sense it was a happy time for me because I was [laughs] talking to Michael Grade whilst some of the others were not. It is a problem for Channel 4 really, because I believed it works best, or worked best, when you have a creative guy at the top who is relating to the Commissioning Editors. Not telling them what to do but just that there is, it seems to me...Structurally it's very difficult to get away with. What I gather from the time when Andy...what's his name, the last ten years, [IF: Andy Duncan] when there was a complete separation from the Chief Executive and the Director of Programmes, uh, and I guess the Chief Executive just regarded himself as somebody just to talk to important people and just...I think that's a shame, my best memories are [of when] the Chief Executive has real impact and dialogue with the team. Whether that will ever happen again I don't know – I doubt it!

IF:During the early 90s when you had the uh successes with *Traffic* and *GBH* and *Camomile Lawn* and so on...I think you had a 25% increase in your budget at a time when other departments didn't.

PA: How did you know that?

IF: That was in the press cuttings...

PA: Gosh...That was Michael. We had a Dennis Potter and Alan Bleasdale's *GBH* in the pipeline. He did love Drama. Again, like David Rose, you didn't have intellectual discussions with Michael. You could with Jeremy. Jeremy was, is an intellectual. Michael's showbiz. But underneath that show-business exterior is actually quite a bright mind, and an ambitious mind. So yeah we got on. But you're absolutely right. I remember Liz Forgan, who was then the Director of Programmes before John Willis, coming to me saying 'don't tell anybody Peter about this, 'cos everything else has

been cut...' So it's in the press cuttings! It doesn't matter now, but, it's funny you should bring that up - but it's true.

IF: And was BBC 2, in terms of content, was still the kind of main competitor?

PA: I did see BBC2 as the main competition, when I got the job as [Commissioning Editor of] Series and Serials. I never saw it that we should do long-running serials. And they didn't want me to do that, I suppose it was the BBC, I suppose, prestige work, that we should look at...

JS: [Ok shall I say] Peter Ansorge, thank you very much.

PA: It's a pleasure....Great...