Sara Geater, 27/01/11

Sara Geater was a co-production executive in the Drama Department at Channel 4, 1987-1996 and Head of Commercial Affairs, 1998-2007.

Interviewers: Justin Smith, Rachael Keene

JS: ...And we'll send you a transcript of what we say. So you'll have got a sense of what our project's about I hope, which essentially is looking at the very important change that Channel 4 made in terms of [the] intervention of television in the film industry in this country. Um and obviously you're very much a part of that story. Um so you know our real sense, we've spoken to David Rose and Karin Bamborough and so on and so forth, from an editorial perspective...

SG: Have you spoken to David Aukin?

JS: We're talking to David Aukin um in a couple of weeks time.

SG: Are you talking to Allon [Reich] as well?

JS: Haven't reached Allon. Useful?

SG: Oh you should, yeah yeah. 'Cos he's still working, he's working with Andrew MacDonald you know did *Trainspotting* and what have you. You should talk to him. Fantastic, I've got a phone number you can have.

JS: Oh that would be very nice, thank you. So where did your story with Channel 4 begin [SG: Oh God, can't remember now, where did it begin?]...and what was your background?

SG: Uh God...accounting, drama production. I sort of did production really. Um so I'd worked as...I'd got work from LWT as it was...for years, I was a cost accountant there. Did all their big shows, things like the *Royal Variety Show*, did some drama. I did a big drama with um which Anthony Hopkins was in actually, and various others. I did everything, did their current affairs like *Weekend World*, lots of stuff there. Managed all their costing department at one point.

JS: So it was budget management and finance which was your key role?

SG: Yeah. And production....I used to sort the productions out and things like that. And then um I went from, where did I go from there. From LWT I went and produced...I went from LWT to the indie sector and did work for a company called...'cos...that Channel 4 had just set up, so there were a couple of production companies set up, which was called Broadside. With a woman called Dee Dee Glass, and I was an associate producer then on...which...I was line producer on a film called oh God, what was it called...my mind's gone blank. I'll come back to you on that. I produced that for Channel 4 and then did various films for Channel 4 and then they offered me a job. Then they...they used to ask me to troubleshoot them on a couple of shows. So I did that for Peter Brook's *Mahabharata*... [JS: Oh yeah...interesting] So that was 9 hours...and so I went to Paris to work with him. 'Cos they wanted to make that into TV so with the production team there I was representing Channel 4. And then they asked me if I'd go and run the Drama

Production so I did....Oh and I did loads of freelance shows as a line producer, I did *Mr Pye*, which was 4 hours of drama [indecipherable]...I did loads of drama freelance and then went to work for Channel 4, and headed up all the production and finance side of Film on Four, drama series, all of that. All the drama output from Channel 4, all the short films...

JS: So not just the feature length Films on Four but all the drama series...Alan Fountain's stuff?

SG: I did all the drama series, all the short films...No I didn't do Alan Fountain's stuff but I did...I advised on some of it. All Peter Ansorge's drama series' and all the short films, and all the feature films. So everything, really. 'Cos David Rose was head of all the drama output then, 'cos Peter used to work for him.

JS: So I mean my rather um cheeky question that I began with was a sense of you know in all honesty David did say we were so lucky because we had all these scripts piling up and if it wasn't for people like Sara it would have been absolute chaos. However...

SG: We did all those...so we did *Brookside*.

JS: Yeah, of course. So what was it like working for Channel 4 in those early days?

SG: Brilliant....Just the philosophy...Jeremy Isaacs' philosophy and then Michael Grade's philosophy was very much...you know we used to go in every year and bid for our budgets so David and I and Peter and I would sit down and decide what we thought we'd like to make, and so we'd go in and say we'd like to make 8 films at, I don't know something like £750,000 a film or something. And so or 8 million, we want a budget of £8 million plus development money and what have you, so go and argue for a budget of 8 million quid for 7 or 8 films or something. And um they would say fine. There was no micro-management; now there's all this bloody micro-management there you know, and then we'd meet the producers. And we'd help...we'd commission...you know David, incredibly well known, as was Peter, and they'd get sent fantastic scripts and what have you. We'd go through the whole scripts and go through the budgets. And basically it felt like a more collaborative process than it is now. And if people wanted help, or we felt needed help, we'd shore up production. We'd say get so and so to work with you. Or we'd go down...I spent a lot of time out on productions, which was great.

JS: So you were kind of overseeing?

SG: Yeah yeah, the production side of it. So if there was a problem, I remember one night with Peter and we were watching the rushes...actually the other day we were talking about it...it was on something that Verity Lambert was producing. And we'd obviously got the wrong lead [actor], and so we were all talking together, Verity, Peter and I, and it was about 9 o'clock at night. They'd been shooting for a while and we'd said, look, this isn't gonna work. So I remember Peter and I went to see Liz Forgan and we said, look this is going to cost us half a million quid, but the lead's wrong, we need to recast. And she was brilliant, and she said OK, off you go. They were terrific. Nowadays it's not like that anymore. It was a much easier process, it was just...it was fun, it was really really a lot of work. But I think you know if you look at what was produced then, you know, it was fairly iconic stuff. Alan Bleasdale's

stuff, Paula Milne's stuff, and you know out of there...and all the new films, *Shallow Grave*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Trainspotting*, *Brassed Off*. I think I did 150 films there...

JS: And to what extent...I mean it sounds like your kind of role was very...there was a lot of fluidity and flexibility. Were you typically involved in the process of the film from the script stage?

SG: Oh yeah. Absolutely. 'Cos the scripts would come in...and then they'd have to send the budget in, and then they'd have to come in and go through the budget with me. Like with any budget, when you budget a film, it depends how you're going to shoot it that determines what the budget of the film's gonna be. 'Cos you can, you know, you could say here, when someone walks in the room, you can shoot that from a static camera, you can do a tracking shot, you can shoot it from above, you can get a helicopter in, there's all sorts...thousands of ways you can do things. And different people have very different styles of working, you know. And what they'd...you look at Ken Loach, and Ken Loach shoots sequentially, which is very unusual. To allow someone like that...and, but that's what Channel 4 and David did brilliantly, was that, they got the auteur films out, because there was an allowance that. There wasn't a kind of like you've got to shoot it like this, you've got to do it on one location. 'Cos that's not how he shot his films. You know, they were improvised...and Mike Leigh God blimey. And Simon Channing Williams, unfortunately he's dead now, but when he produced stuff he'd just have this whole process where Mike would spend a month and a half rehearsing. And you got a script at the end of it, and they'd start shooting it and you'd go 'It'll be allright...' and it was. Would that be...happen now? Very difficult, I don't know if it would. There aren't many of...Terence Davies' early films, *Distant Voices Still Lives*, they got funded. And there was more funding around then, the BFI had funds, there were various different things, there were tax breaks in the UK. I know there's tax breaks now but it felt like an environment when people were far more experimental than they are now.

JS: Yes...yeah. And did you see, typically see a film through to the end. Were you there for the whole process, in terms of its completion?

SG: Yeah, we had to make sure that, because we were divvying out the money, we had to be responsible for the whole process right through to the end. Including delivery - because it meant they wouldn't get paid at the end if they didn't deliver. And quite a few of them fell apart towards the end, and we had to go and sort them out and pick them up, finish them. [JS: Do you remember what those were?] No, not really, not offhand.

JS: How much were you involved in decision making about co-financing and those kind of deals. Because you know there was quite a lot of difference between...

SG: We used to put deals together...with the producers. So you'd get somebody like Sally Hibbin, who was brilliant, she'd work with Ken Loach then, and she got amazing...she's really good at putting deals together. But where there was a requirement...because we used to obviously um used to contractually, contract with whoever the third-party financer would be, so it would be a tripartite deal with the producer, Channel 4 and whoever the third-party was, which was quite a lot really. Just to make sure everybody knew what they were all getting.

JS: And did you have any involvement with decisions therefore about sales and you know territories, about what was going to be broadcast, what was going to be theatrical release, those kind of issues.

SG: Well inevitably if you're doing a film you have to do it under the Cinema Agreement and you can't just broadcast it. We did that once on I think it might have been...if you do it on one agreement, I think we did it with *Riff Raff* actually, we made it as a TV movie and then decided to put it out as a theatric. I think that's the film. But if you do it under a cinematic agreement you can't then put it straight onto TV. So you can't do that. But we used to have weekly meetings, so we'd have you know David, myself, um the lawyers, distribution, we'd all sit in the same room. And go, and we'd talk about what we had in development, what was coming up, what needed financing, where it was going...You know, and we'd talk about the editorial [?] process, because you can't not. You're making a film, you've gotta know what you're doing, why you're doing it, where it's going to go. Where you're likely to get a release, who needs it and where, what the theatric window was, and when we were going to get it on television.

JS: Because of course Channel 4 was instrumental in breaking that kind of deadlock with the CEA over the theatrical distribution wasn't it. Didn't they have an agreement?

SG: Not really, because the thing was it was all about money. If you've got a film, if it's not a TV movie, and you're making a theatric film then. I mean *then*, obviously theatric windows have changed now because of platforms for distributing films and piracy. But then you would have a cinematic release for - depending on how successful you thought the film was going to be – 6, 12, 18 months or whatever and you'd go onto DVD, and effectively TV used to be at the far end of the scale. And what we used to do was spend as much time as we could trying to negotiate the television broadcast further up the chain. But inevitably TV's the last, the end of the chain because you make money out of getting people to watch it in the cinema, then you sell the DVD...or you do cinema, TV then DVD.

JS: So that was always the template was it? That...I mean that philosophy about sponsoring films for cinema release was very much there from day one...

SG: Yeah that's what Film4 was about, it wasn't about making television movies, it was about theatric release of the films.

JS: That's very interesting. I wonder to what extent working with the number of producers that you've worked with, the sense to which you saw those cinematic ambitions develop and whether you think that influenced the style of films aesthetically at all. You know, because we're moving from the territory...

SG: They were always destined to be cinematic films right from day one. [JS: Right. All of them...] They weren't TV movies they were cinematic films. That was the whole point because Film4, the basis was that the ratings would be higher if things had been out theatrically. And you could see that from the buying in of American movies. You buy in an American movie and people will tend to watch it if they know it. And it was the same with Film4; we were literally supporting the British filmmaking community. Um and that was the purpose of it. And they did it brilliantly. Virtually

everything they would try to get a theatric release. Some stuff was more difficult. But we got some good stuff out.

JS: And you sold those on pretty much on an open market basis, you know, you put on screenings for independent distributors and did those or were there more…

SG: Yeah that was Bill Stephens; you need to speak to Bill Stephens who headed up the distribution of Film4. Bill used to do all…used to release the films and sell them in the markets.

JS: Right and what, throughout the '80s?

SG: Yes all the time…he was there when David was there, there was Bill, Helen Playford-Daniel did all the distribution…Um…

JS: 'Cos they had arrangements with *Screen on the Green*, and um…Lumiere…

SG: Yeah [inaudible]…Do you want Bill's number?

JS: And did you say you've got a contact for Allon? That would be excellent….So you were never working exclusively on film, or is that something that…did you…the balance of what you were doing shifted more towards film during the '80s? You were still working on dramas as well? Typically how many projects did you have going at a time?

SG: We used to do 8 films a year and 4 or 5 dramas and 6 shorts…So it was always busy. Yeah it was fun actually.

JS: So this is the kind of naff question, but from that period when David Rose was there, what sticks in your mind as the film you enjoyed working on most, or that you were most proud of in a sense?

SG: I don't know…they were all so different…

JS: Is that part of the buzz of it?

SG: Yeah, and all the people were so different in the way they operated. You know, you'd do a Ken Loach film one day, you'd do Ken McMullen's films, he'd drive you around the twist, you'd do Terry Davies' stuff...you'd do…there were loads of people, that's the fascinating bit.

JS: You spoke about the vibrancy and the sense of freedom in the marketplace if you like, in that you were dealing with and attracting a lot of independent filmmakers, stimulating an independent sector that had been virtually non-existent before…

SG: They're responsible, David and Karin were fantastic.

JS: To what extent did that change during the '80s, where you've got companies like Working Title who grew and were clearly successful, and became more significant market players? How did that territory change?

SG: We didn't really. You look at it now and it's a bloody nightmare trying to get a film off the ground in the UK. Don't think it's ever really changed that much. Working Title did a brilliant deal with Universal, which was terrific, and I think any of those

companies that did well was good for the rest of the industry, because it sort of starts to put you on the map. Because the difficult thing in the UK was that, and I think it's true now, is that there's money out there for sort of smaller first-time filmmakers but when you try and grow up your business it's much more difficult. And the brain drain in terms of film goes straight over to the States. They'll invest, they'll take the risk and invest…and they'll buy it…

JS: But you're suggesting there that not much has changed. I mean is your sense that for an independent filmmaker it's just as easy to get a first-time film made as it was then?

SG: It's just as difficult. It's never been easy to get a film made, I think it was quite tough, and it still is.

JS: That's interesting. There's an impression, perhaps a wrong one, that that particular heady climate of the 1980s when 4 was a new player on the scene that there was more advantage and more stimulus to the independent sector, and that things have become more entrenched, and people are less willing to take risks, do you think that's true.

SG: Absolutely. Without a doubt…we're more risk-averse now than we were then.

JS: But then maybe that's a cultural thing, maybe that's to do with people's sense of what will be successful, the tried and tested formula.

SG: Everyone is just too prescriptive.

JS: Who, producers?

SG: No financers they're too prescriptive… in terms of…I just think we need to be a bit more…taking more risks. People want to know 'Is it going to be a hit at the box-office?'

JS: What kind of film is this, that I would know about, that's been out in the last 2 years, is it one of those sort of films?

SG: Yeah.

JS: Yeah, we recognize that don't we? So while you were working at 4, you produced your own feature.

SG: Not while I was working for them, I did it separately.

JS: In '87?

SG: It was partly funded by Alan [?] – *Business as Usual* was part-financed by Channel 4 and Cannon Films; I was working for Cannon Films then…

JS: So you left Channel 4.

SG: No it was before I went to Channel 4…

JS: Ah. OK. When was it produced, much earlier? When did you join? Sorry I thought you…

SG: I can't remember when I joined Channel 4…

RK: So you had you been involved kind of on a freelance basis with Channel 4…

SG: Yeah. They funded it, I didn't work for them. Channel 4 don't make any of their own programmes…or films. It was all through the companies.

JS: So that was made in '85 or '86?

SG: Yeah. So by '87 I think I'd just joined Channel 4.

JS: And what was it like putting that film together?

SG: A nightmare….no actually it wasn't a nightmare putting the film together. Because Cannon paid…made a decision, and unusually within 48 hours, of wanting to fund it. It was really fast. So that bit [was good] but the actual production process was the kiss of death. But I probably shouldn't say anything about that… [JS: Oh right, she wrote the script as well…]

JS: That didn't put you off? You did *The Dawning* as well.

SG: I can't remember when I joined Channel 4 but *The Dawning* was before that I think. *The Dawning* I did with Sarah Lawson, through her independent production company. I was a co-producer on it. Yeah we did that with Anthony Hopkins and…that was good.

JS: So you got those features behind you and then you were working for 4, and then David [Rose] departed, and David Aukin arrived. Um what sense…in what sense did things change?

SG: Well just in the sense that David was a different person to David Rose. You know, slightly different taste. Um but he still had, his main sensibility was working with good writers, and giving people a chance and stuff like that. And he was great actually, really good. And then he brought Allon in as well. Um was Allon there when David Rose was there? [JS: I don't think…] No I think David Aukin brought Allon in. No no no he was brilliant. Because we would decamp together at the end [indecipherable]…So no that was good, we had a good time together, good stuff, you know *Trainspotting* and all that *Four Weddings*. They had quite remarkable success at that time. Although we did turn down, whatsit… [JS: We ought to know this…the famous one…] Someone on our financing was the co-producer on that… [JS: *The Full Monty*] So we developed that and turned down the co-production. The famous one that got away.

JS: So, well I mean…again, it might be a slightly odd question but my sort of sense of how things altered for you, if at all, when it came to the sense of well now we're going to leave and set this up. You're doing the same thing… [SG: Set what up?] Set up HAL, you know.

SG: Oh yeah, that was with Colin Levanthal and David, who were bought at Channel 4 – were going to leave, and then they asked me to go with them and Allon, so we decamped at the same time.

JS: As a team. I mean, obviously the attraction of backing Miramax must have been a big draw, but what was the sense for you creatively or professionally, that you were to leave the umbrella of television behind?

SG: I had been working for 17 years at Channel 4, so it was about time I did something else, to be honest. And it was a really good opportunity for me.

JS: More freedom to choose the projects you were interested in?

SG: I mean yeah the choosing was primarily done by Colin, uh David and Trea [Hoving] [JS: At HAL or…] Yeah, at HAL I was Head of Production so…you know I did all kinds of budgets and made sure they got made properly and delivered. Within budget and everything else. So they primarily chose them. I mean the subscription service at Film4 isn't the same as Film4 the production side.

JS: Yes I realize that…that was merely a sense in which Film on Four changed um uh during the, you know, mid to late '90s, you know as an entity.

SG: I think what happened though, was that it attracted more co-production finance. So when it first started it was financing a lot of films and as time went on, as the reputation of Film4 grew then obviously people like Harvey Weinstein and what have you wanted to co-produce with them. So we were co-producing with all kinds of companies, which was really good.

JS: And also its market reach increased as well.

SG: Absolutely. We did lots of films – lots of films with Miramax, we worked with loads of companies actually, and it worked really well.

JS: As…somebody who's worked in television and on television drama…is there any sense that you feel that television has lost something through the fact that new films you know are not appearing as consistently and as identifiably packaged as they used to be, with 'Film on Four'.

SG: I think from a creative and aesthetic point-of-view then yes, that's always going to be the case. Because there's filmmakers out there who'd don't get to have much of a voice. And the reason that they don't get made is that for the amount of money that they cost to make, you're better off doing TV drama.

JS: But then a lot of filmmakers might say that you know, for the, you know, paradox that they all want their films to be shown theatrically but for some filmmakers at least the chance to get a bigger audience on television, which is what Film on Four at its height, as a TV strand…

SG: But they all had a theatrical release first… [JS: Sure but more people would see them on TV maybe…] I know, but economically, which is what drives the value, economically why spend £1.5 million getting 90 minutes of film when you can spend less than that on TV getting TV drama. And also you have to wait such a long time for it to come onto television. It doesn't make any economic sense for TV to do it, which is why on the whole they don't do it. You know so you've got no guarantee of return. With television you're making it for a TV audience, and you're doing it for a reason which is to drive, for your commercial channels, to drive ad revenue, you know, whereas to make a film for theatric release, the chances of getting your money

back are remote. So from an economic point of view it's just not worth it. That's why there's so few films about – they just don't get the money back. If you want to look at one of the better models of how to, if you look at Vertigo, which Allon, Nick and that lot [set up], their model is quite good. But they do a lot of stuff which goes straight to DVD. And they've made it work. And there are a couple of film businesses around that have done that. But to try and make money in this country just from TV [or] just from theatrics is really difficult. Because we don't have any big stars either, you know we haven't got anyone driving that business.

JS: Do you think that in that sense the multi-channel, multi-platform environment has created those kind of nice, that niche potential, for some production companies [SG: for what?] straight to DVD, for example.

SG: No, the multi-channel won't make any different to that - straight-to-DVD is a completely different market.

JS: But my sense is that you know if there are multiple different markets for feature film, you know, DVD…specialized channels…

SG: Yeah but you're not going to get the value out of the DVD market alone, that's always been the case. Which is that you know when you were working out the funding of the film, and how you would like to go into profit you have to take every element of it, so what you're going to get from the box-office, what returns you're going to get from DVD, what returns you're going to get from from you know TV licensing, how much money can I get…and you would have to put all of that money into the budget for making it. So you've virtually sold…virtually everything just to make it, so where's your profit coming from. Whereas the model for TV is 1) you make it for a lot less money, you know TV productions, you make it for, we've just done one for £750,000 per hour – you're going to get the majority of that from the broadcaster. (2) And that's just for…in the UK we've got good terms…for TV production, that's 2 transmissions on television and then you keep all the rights, so then you can sell it all round the world, so you go into profit much faster. I mean having said that you've got to keep the costs of production down. But the potential for making money out of television drama is much better than film.

JS: Even with the mini-series and its sales potential…I mean the cost of [a] mini-series is…higher than single drama.

SG: Not necessarily it's not [JS: No?] …depends what it is. No if you…the mini-series is better – the more parts you've got the better. Trying to sell a one-off is virtually impossible…selling…even in drama, so the more, if you've got 6-part, 12…much better, you can sell it. So one-offs, which is the other problem with film, [are] virtually impossible to sell. So because it's not gonna…unless it's got a reason…or it's got big stars, it's not gonna pull people to watch it. And that's all they want, they just want to pull people in to get ad revenue. So, you know. Making films is like burning money. You might as well burn it in the street, to be honest, if you want to make money. Creatively, yes of course we should do it.

JS: Let's go back to the history a bit. Um after…what happened at HAL, and how did you end up then going to the BBC?

SG: What happened at HAL? I don't know, I was just offered another job. Um I didn't go straight from HAL to the BBC; I went to be Head of Film and Television at Avalon. So and at the time, I was Head of Production for HAL/Miramax and I wasn't sure how many films we were gonna make that following year. And so you know it was a different job, so to be head of the whole lot, film and television, was a better job. So I went to Avalon. [JS: That was fairly short-lived, wasn't it?] I was there for 18 months and then the BBC offered me…'Cos when I was at Channel 4 the first time round I did a law degree, and became a barrister, so got called to the bar at the same [time] the BBC offered me a job. I thought they'd phoned up and offered me Director of Rights and Business Affairs, and I thought it was going to be just Drama, but it was the whole of the BBC. So it was too good a job to turn down. So I was in charge of all the BBC's legal…content output in terms of finance and the legal side.

JS: You were there at that period when BBC Films as an entity was also becoming established, and that was something of a…there was some birth pangs in that particular trajectory I understand because of…well, partly because of the difficulties of the role that the BBC and it producing film for theatrical release, in terms of its public-service broadcaster remit. Um do you think I mean now BBC Films is seen to be very much [SG: crucial, yeah brilliant] a partner. Did you deal with that one, I know you're probably weren't involved with BBC Films in that regard.

SG: Well the legal team all reported in to me. So uh we just you know, it was something that was supported by the government – the BBC supporting theatric output was fine. And it did get onto television which meant you'd got new creative people onto TV, which was what the BBC should be doing. So it worked quite well.

JS: That's interesting, that paradox we were talking about earlier, with the comparative worthlessness of showing feature film for theatrical release on TV, you know, in a sense the BBC still has to do that.

SG: No I didn't say it's worthless showing films on TV, in fact it's the complete opposite, showing films on TV is a really good thing to do. What I'm saying is, making theatric films doesn't make any economic sense [JS: Value for money wise…] Yeah [JS: interesting…]

JS: So…again it might be a naïve question, but my interest, our interest in the way in which British film culture has changed with the impact that television broadcasters have had on the industry is this sense of the kind of flexibility that people such as yourself, with your experience of working in film and television, have brought to the market. And is there a sense in which that fluidity that Channel 4 stimulated, created, um do you think that's enabled the sort of survival of the British film industry to some extent over the last 30 years.

SG: Oh God yeah, I mean, money from the TV companies into film has been crucial for the survival of it. And arguably there's not enough going in, to be honest.

JS: And that's something that Chris Smith hinted at in his report. And do you think that's likely – Sky for example, they could easily follow that model. They've got their channel, they could create that.

SG: They could do. I don't know if they will.

JS: But also not just in terms of money – fine, that's the main driver - but I wonder about skills as well, that relationship between film and television, that is important in nurturing the kind of skills you need to do both, and to move between one industry to another. 'Cos I mean before Channel 4 it was never the twain shall meet, wasn't it? Heavily unionized...

SG: Yeah yeah it was heavily unionized, but um I don't think that's to do with Film4 though, that was to do with Thatcher and her attitudes towards unions wasn't it? But and also it's to do with the fact that people needed to cross the barrier because they needed to work. [JS: Which was kind of my point really…] But you often found that people who worked in theatricals also worked in the commercials business as well, and in TV. And to be honest they worked in television drama, commercials and film. Obviously film's got the most kudos, commercials are hated most. And then there's TV drama…people worked across all three. And it depends whether they got the work really.

JS: And, what, your sense is that that relationship, that market, is now more fluid than it was before Channel 4?

SG: I have no idea, I don't make films any more…I can't comment, but I presume it's still the same. I know a couple of cameramen who work in film, and they also make commercials.

JS: Except for *Glorious 39*, are you going to have another venture of that sort?

SG: Never say never but I don't have any plans to make films at all. Having said that we finance a company called Albany, and they just did the *Holy Flying Circus* on Monty Python on BBC4, so we did that. But drama no definitely I'm going to make TV drama, I'm going to open up TV drama this year. But films are too much of a headache. Can't get the money. But never say never, might do.

JS: And there's a lot of good news stories about British film production at the moment, [SG: Yeah] despite your realpolitik about finance.

SG: Yeah you know there's a lot of people out there who've been doing it for a long time. Working Title – got the backing from Universal thank God – you know if you can get some other backing just the process of developing them to the point at which you can do it [coughs] and running on through, it's so difficult.

JS: Yeah. Do you think, I mean, you know what is often said is that it's the middle-budget mid-market that loses out. Um I mean uh how do you think about addressing that um?

SG: That's the Holy Grail isn't it – who knows? Dunno.

JS: Because as you rightly say, it's relatively easy to get a first film made.

SG: Because there's that direct relationship between making a cheap film and whether you can get your money back on it. The problem has always been about whether you can get a return. That middle-range is the kind of 5 [million] to whatever, I dunno, range it is now. It's difficult…the cinema-going public in the UK don't seem to be able to make much money back in terms of returns, which automatically puts

you in competition with the American movies [majors] who are spending more money…That's the problem. I don't know how you resolve it.

JS: And so the likes of Working Title – successful companies that are bankrolled by Hollywood – are going to be relatively risk-averse in terms of investment in what potentially could be that…I mean there are people making decisions who do that…

SG: No no you look at Working Title and they put money into *Senna*. Now who would have thought that a film about a racing driver would be successful? And it's great, it's a brilliant film. So Working Title take risks, do other types of films, and they're really good at it. And they deliver; they're really really good guys, the pair of them, and the whole team. It's just that, it's an economic argument; it's not an aesthetic argument. You know it's a kind of like, where is the money to do it, we can only sustain a certain number of productions at that level.

JS: And we've only got a film economy in this country that can sustain one Working Title, if we had 3 it might be different.

SG: Yeah, I mean, the money isn't here. It would be great if TV companies put more money into film…it would be great if Film4 put more money into film. But they, again, they're restricted. We've got a bad ad market in the UK, it did OK in a couple of bits last year, but the year before…We're in recession, you know, and it does come down to whether they can afford to do it. That's why tax breaks are so important. [JS: Yeah, sure…] Again, that's another argument, isn't it? It's quite difficult to give tax breaks when you're living in an economy where you've got huge amounts of poverty, people can't afford to keep themselves, the health service cracks, schools are rubbish… [JS: Yes, let's help the film industry, those poor filmmakers…] It's not a sustainable argument to the majority of the population.

JS: In view of which, the Film Policy Review is actually quite uh a positive…

SG: Absolutely it is, and it's a good outcome.

JS: What effect it will have, and what effect the transfer of the lottery apportioning to the BFI, we'll have to seek. What about Europe? And our, the relationship, perhaps the relationship you have had through Channel 4 and others with European co-finance. We've always had an ambivalent relationship with Europe in this country, haven't we?

SG: To be honest I think most of the time we've done co-pros with Europe because of their tax… incentives…you know Germany's always had great incentives and stuff like that. I think that's what's helped drive it. But you know, culturally, we don't speak the same language, it's quite tough you know. I mean, having said that, periodically, you get the odd break-out hit, which is great. And that's true for television as well as film, look at something like *The Killing*, which did incredibly well. Look at *Wallander*, there's the odd thing which comes out and breaks out which is brilliant. But as a general rule it's really difficult.

JS: And perhaps, looking back also, the kind of Europe's been important for the cultural status of…some of our important filmmakers, whose work hasn't crossed the Atlantic. Ken Loach uh…Peter Greenaway.

SG: You know from a creative point of view, Europe and the support that has gone on has been really important actually.

JS: I've hogged all the questions as usual. I'm going to let you get a word in edgeways. Is there anything you'd like to ask Sara?

RK: I'm not sure if I've got anything to add.

SG: Yes, I've got to get out in a moment. Was that helpful? [JS: Very, thank you]. Good. It was a pleasure.

JS: It's very interesting for us actually because we don't know enough about those kind of day to day workings, if you like, of how projects were managed at 4, about the commercial, managerial structures, and about the influence that that's had. And that's very very important for our kind of argument about how significant television has been to the British film industry. [SG: Oh yes, crucial]. You know, it's easy to say 'ooh Channel 4 was the saviour of British film' you know, end of quote, but *how* exactly? So we're trying to dig down and recover the detail about that really from people.

SG: We helped, we helped people develop really. 'Cos of course one thing that you get when you work for a broadcaster, and you're there looking after all the production, you get to see how everyone does it. 'Cos when you're an isolated filmmaker, you just see how you do it. It's amazing because you can kind of make suggestions to other people about how things work and might be changed – so you pass that knowledge on. And you see why some people fail. You know, some filmmakers…you'd always be wary about writer-directors because they will not compromise on their own writing. To get them then to compromise when they're shooting something is virtually impossible. Also you're looking at the quality and the standard of the people who are making the stuff. You've got some people who've been attributed to making great films, [it] actually wasn't them at all, it was a combination of the DoP and the editor, and the director didn't have a clue; the film was made in post-production. And they might have got all kinds of awards for x,y and z and… [JS: It gives the lie to the old auteur argument…] Yeah. There were others who were a joy to work with. And you could see that in people's films, how good they are.

JS: Who was a joy to work with, come on, give us a final tribute…

SG: He was always a bit of a bugger, but I always liked working with Terence Davies but he's difficult. He's difficult… Ken Loach was good I think, he knew exactly what he was doing and why he was doing it. They're all good in different ways. I think the *Shallow Grave* guys, they were fab – Danny Boyle, really good. [JS: We want to get him to speak at our conference] He's fantastic…Who else, there's loads of them.

JS: I think there's an interesting point you made about Film4 and BBC Films being mini-studios [SG: Yeah, passing on knowledge…], which we haven't had in London since the '60s. That sense of a production house atmosphere…

SG: It was really good actually. I really like this job now, but that was probably one of my favourite jobs. I had such a fantastic time. You know, I went and travelled around the world, I met really interesting people, you know, saw fantastic places – because

when you're making a film somewhere you get access to things that you don't as a tourist. I've seen some amazing sights – I've been very very lucky.

JS: Were you involved in any of the big international productions like *Paris, Texas* or *The Sacrifice*.

SG: No, I was offered jobs actually on particular films but it was always like as an accountant. Early on in my career – you get to look after the location budget. I took a very, for my own career, I took a decision that I wanted to…better to make smaller films than be a bigger fish. Because you get to see more of the overall thing. And absolutely it was the right thing to do. I wouldn't be doing what I do now if I hadn't…you get to see the overall picture…the whole process, and you understand the whole process. 'Cos it's just…you've gotta know how stuff stitches together. And it took a lot of learning. I remember when I did what was it called…I did this one film – we did it up in a convent in Barnet. I was quite naïve then, and I remember a spark coming up to me and saying 'It's going to take a week and a half to clean up!' And like an idiot I paid him for a week and a half, of course it took him 2 days. Things like that, you just learn, about what…how the whole. So when someone comes and sits in front of you with a budget. You can go, actually you don't really need to do that; you can do it like this. Or when things go horribly wrong…you know I've fired people on film units doing the shooting, and had to replace them and things like that…I fired a director on one film 'cos he didn't know what he was doing…and so we fired him and got someone else in part-way through shooting. Fired producers 'cos they were hopeless, and all sorts of things! So it was interesting…got shot at in Mozambique… [JS: What was that on?] …that was on a small film…I can't remember…We fired the director. Can see his face but can't remember his name – hopeless. Got it on a list somewhere.

JS: …Thanks for your time, that's been hugely informative.

SG: It's a pleasure…