

Stephen Woolley, 22/03/12

Stephen Woolley was a co-director and producer at Palace Pictures, 1982-1992.

Interviewers: Justin Smith, Laura Mayne.

JS: ...And you know our interest in your career as a major figure through that period, is the sense of, how, as an independent producer, your relationship with Channel 4 has evolved, and how significant you saw them as having been, and still being, from a producer's point of view. So that's the kind of background to...where we're coming from really, but we've got a number of obviously more specific questions. I think we'd like to start by asking you if you like, I know it's a story that's been told before, but in a sense how the whole uh Palace thing emerged from you know your running Scala, the cinema, and so on and so forth, so how did you get into first distributing, and then making movies?

SW: Yeah sure, did you get some tea or anything?

JS: It's on the way.

SW:Um yeah I think...how long is this going to take..?

JS: [Laughs] How long have you got?

SW: Well it's interesting because my career is inextricably involved with Channel 4. Channel 4 rather than Film4, um because of a very weird quirk, which was that I was running a cinema called The Scala in London, in a place called Tottenham Street. And we were primarily owned by Virgin, which was Richard Branston and Nik Powell, who were the 2 partners of Virgin Records, and they had been slightly hoodwinked into becoming investors about a year or two before I took over. And the cinema had been losing quite a lot of money, and I had to come up with this idea of a repertory cinema, where, I was quite young at the time, and I had a very good friend called Joe Boyd who was a record producer and Joe had said...and also was releasing a few films. Jimi Hendrix, the Janis Joplin movie, *The Harder They Come*...amongst them. And I had made a lot of money for Joe, because those films were particularly popular at the cinema I was running. And Joe had suggested, I had this fascination with American rep cinemas, and I wanted to make something at The Scala that was similar, because they were losing so much money, and I said 'Look, I can programme the kind of films that I do late night and matinees but give them whole days, and present 30 or 40 programmes a month, which was up to 80 movies a month. All nighters and all sorts of things. Because I had a very strong knowledge of cinema, Joe persuaded Richard and Nik that they may as well, it wouldn't cost a lot of money to revamp the bar and turn it into a different kind of environment. So they did and we were immediately successful. And after a few months of this, 4 or 5 months, The Scala became very hip and very trendy, and a really successful cinema,

300 seats in the middle of the West End. And Virgin began to turn the corner – their investment began to come back.

So one day Richard Attenborough wandered into the bar with a bunch of people, and NPC Car Parks, who actually owned the building, and had leased it out to this consortium that was mainly run by Nik Powell and Richard Branson. And I said 'Oh hello, nice to meet you, what are you doing here?' And they said 'We're looking at the building because we're thinking of buying it for Channel 4'. So my deal...with Richard and Nick was that I was on, they stupidly said 'Look, you can have 10% of the profits you make' because they didn't think any profits would ever be made, because they were like, how are we going to get rid of this turkey, this cinema. And I realized that Channel 4 were going to buy the whole building and turn it into Channel 4, and that would mean closing the cinema. So I said 'Could I please have my 10% from the sale?' because they were going to make 150 grand and of that [after] the losses of the cinema, they would make about 100 grand. So I said 'Give me 10 grand and I'll go to the King's Cross Cinema, quietly', because at that time The Scala was in Fitzrovia, where we're in now, just down the road. It had always been a place of public exhibition, first as a theatre and then as a cinema. I knew that they actually couldn't close the cinema. I said 'Look I'm not going to make a fuss about it, I won't tell anyone, I won't go public with it, but I said you know what, you're supposed to run this as a place, as a public venue'. And I also asked Jeremy Isaacs...if he would consider doing a Scala kind of spin-off for their first broadcast, which was called *The Worst of Hollywood*, which was all these bad movies that I used to show at The Scala, like *Plan 9 From Outer Space* and um *They Saved Hitler's Brain* and *Godzilla Versus the Swamp Monster* and *Glen or Glenda*, and we'll have 10 of them on TV and I'll get someone to introduce them at The New Scala in King's Cross, and Jeremy went with it.

So that was the first thing I ever produced, broadcast in the first few months of Channel 4. This was before Palace. It was something that I did, which I got, it was a TV thing with a commercials company, and I got a producer credit and a researcher credit, and I got a fee for using The Scala cinema as a venue, it was mad! Never since have I ever done a deal as good as that deal! And at the time I didn't realize I had such a good deal. But I think what it was, was that...Channel 4...Jeremy was very nervous about the fact that they had decided to buy Channel 4 right on the top of the most successful repertory cinema in London, didn't want to be seen to be doing that, so quite politically very careful about what, about how they played it. So they sort of said OK well they seem to be successful, let's do it. So we did that series *The Worst of Hollywood* – only broadcast once, got great ratings, especially, weirdly, in Newcastle and Glasgow. I don't know why...But it was 1982 so it was pre-late night pubs opening, pre- the clubs, it was 11 o'clock, 11.15 broadcast. So it was a real six-pack [thing]...it was a real come home from the pub, buy a 6-pack and watch these stupid movies...and they really did well but they were so embarrassed, because at that time Channel 4 was quite prim and proper, now they would love it.

Perfect Channel 4 now, but then it was quite embarrassing that they showed these terrible movies, and people were laughing at them.

Anyhow so I was really at that roots beginning of Channel 4, pitching to Jeremy Isaacs. On top of that, and getting this TV show going, and then having my cinema go from there to King's Cross where it ran, it existed for 10 years as The Scala and carried on, becoming and being a very hip place, never really making any money.

JS: Were Virgin and Nik still involved or had they bailed out?

SW: No, Virgin went – Nik came in and gave me a bank guarantee, and for that he had a very small percentage of The Scala, but I actually had the entire thing. From the money I took it just all went straight into The Scala. We managed to move it, all the seats, the projection equipment, everything, re-opened The Scala Cinema because it was no longer a cinema in King's Cross. It's a long story; it was a...they recently did something on The Scala. *Scala Forever*, and it's like what The Scala was, and the history of it, and everything else. So yeah The Scala started and that's when we started Palace at that point. And I was acquiring for Palace when I saw a film called *Angel* in Cannes. Not in the festival, [but] in the back streets. People have this idea that Cannes has loads and loads of films, all part of the festival, and there's about 10 different things go on in Cannes. And one of the things that happens in the back-streets of Cannes, off the Boulevard de Croisette [?], people are selling, that's where Tim Haslam sort of lurks, is they're selling movies all the time. Films that have been in festivals, films that will never play festivals, films that have been around for years, and brand-new films that nobody knows about. And all the early [work of] filmmakers, people like David Lynch, and the Coen brothers, and Pedro Almodovar; their early films would have been sold in the back streets of Cannes. They wouldn't have been in the festival; they would have been sold as low-budget Spanish trash, or American independent film. And I saw this film called *Angel*, Neil Jordan's first film which he made for telly, and I loved it. I flew to London the next day and met with John Boorman who was the executive producer of it. And I said 'Look, I really would like...I'm starting this company, I only have one film *Diva*, and a little horror film called *The Evil Dead* but if you could, I really want to show this [as] part of our company'. And he said, 'We can't because Channel 4 are going to broadcast it.' So I went back in to Channel 4, this time to another guy there - not Jeremy Isaacs, but the legal guys. I said look, I want to release it as a film, because I think if you put it on telly, it's more than that. And they said, 'Well there's the unions, we can't do that, and we've also got to fill our first schedule'. And I said, 'Well if you can delay it for 3 months, then I can show it as a film - get all the reviews, get the video out, and then you can still show it'. So we're back and forth, back and forth, and eventually they agreed. A guy called Larry Coyne was the guy who was the Sales person there, and it was him who had to deal with me. And I was literally knocking on the door every day. And they agreed. And of course *Angel* then became a movie because Neil Jordan got all the reviews, and instead of just being put out on television – which it was eventually – people thought [of] Neil Jordan as a filmmaker, not a TV filmmaker

but a filmmaker. And through the process of doing all that, which was a difficult process, because we had to get Jeremy around, we had to get Larry Coyne around, I brought Neil to London, and out of that was born *Company of Wolves* because he stayed with me in my apartment in Islington, and we talked about well you know during this process, well what do you want to do next? Through the weird thing with John Boorman - 'cos they had sort of told John Boorman 'No - this has got to be on TV, don't even talk about this being in cinemas 'cos we're not going to do it'. John said to me 'You should produce...' and I said 'What do you mean?' And he said 'Well you seem to know so much about cinema, and about the business of cinema, that you should be a film producer'. And I sort of went 'Oh that's very odd' [?], but simultaneously with all this I went to Tokyo to see uh *Merry Christmas Mr Lawrence*, which was a film produced by Jeremy Thomas. And in that week in Tokyo no-one else from the UK had bothered to go, nobody knew who Oshima was, who was the director, it was David Bowie, it was Ryuichi Sakamoto, and I thought well this sounds really interesting, why wouldn't you fly to Tokyo to see the first ever screening? And all the distributors in Britain were invited, and the only person who bothered was me. And I was 21 or 22, I looked all of 16, and so I turn up at Tokyo Airport, and they're all like, all the Japanese people are like, 'who's he?' And through that week, Jeremy said - because I'd bought the film in Tokyo for the biggest amount of money we'd ever paid. By now I'd started my company Palace - with Nik Powell - we spent 4 times as much on that film than any other one. I saw it twice in Tokyo, and it freaked me out spending all that money. But it did make a lot of money....but through that process Jeremy said to me, you should be a producer. So I had this idea of Jeremy Thomas and John Boorman had both said this to me, so whilst Neil was with me, knocking on Channel 4's door and eventually agreeing to us releasing the film, and subsequently the video, we came up with the idea of *Company of Wolves*. So this is where the story becomes rather strange because, as you can tell by now, I had become inextricably involved with Channel 4, and both Channel 4 as a broadcaster, Channel 4 as an existing entity, as a building, and Film4 as it was going to become, having released one of their first ever movies, which was *Angel*. Um so when we made *Company of Wolves* I encouraged Neil and Angela Carter with Film4 to write the script, and at that time, I was releasing *The Evil Dead* which was a Sam Raimi horror film. I'd also read a very good script for a movie called *Nightmare on Elm Street* which was about dreams and fantasy, which I had acquired for my distribution company Palace, because Palace was a distribution company. And I loved that script, and I said to Neil when he gave me *Company of Wolves*, I said look, the only way we can do this is to really make it quite of its, *of now*, and have people's heads being chopped off, and people turning into wolves, and we've got things like *American Werewolf in London* to worry about, we've got big special effects [to worry about], so we need to be very smart. And the other thing I said was, we need to do something that makes it cinematic, so we went back to the Michael Powell films, and thought about how you can make something work in a studio in the way that Powell and Pressburger made *Black Narcissus* work. So we based the kind of design of it on something cinematic rather than grungy and location or special effects or CGI and

all of those things (it wasn't CGI in those days). We wanted it to be in camera. So we got Chris Tucker, who worked on *The Elephant Man*, and we tried to work all the effects so that you saw everything on camera, like you're watching an old 1930s movie but keeping it in a cinematic way. But make sure that everything's quite in your face, so that it was quite scary. So we didn't want Little Red Riding Hood to feel like you were watching a kid's version, with silly effects, you wanted everything to be 'boom' in your face, and using Angela Carter's incredible imagery that she created, to do something that was within that context, rather than just say OK well it's all going to be for the particular Angela Carter audience, I was always saying well let's get the Cinefantastique audience as well, let's get people who like Cocteau, let's get the Michael Powell audience, let's get all of the cineastes, plus the fantasy/science fiction/horror fans, plus the Angela Carter fans, they'll come anyway. So we kind of went for this kind of idea in the script, and I really loved what Angela and Neil were doing. And then getting [it] into Film4, and they hated it, hated it.

JS: Who were you dealing with? David Rose, Karin?

SW: David Rose. Before Karin Bamborough. It was David Rose and [JS: Walter Donohue]. Walter. I saw their script. When they had a meeting they were apoplectic about the script, they had red marks through it, because it was so vulgar, it was so kind of. I don't know if you've seen the film. [JS & LM: Oh yeah] Well you know now it feels quite tame really, it feels like Harry Potter or something, it doesn't feel like a big thing, but at the time it did seem you know...wolf bursting out of a man's skin, wolf girls coming out of wells, boys in the forest turning into werewolves. All the stuff that goes on in it, on the page it seemed trashy, they didn't really like it, they saw me as a bad influence on Neil and Angela because they knew I was the one who pushing the envelope, I was the one going 'no no no let's chop his head off, when he comes in, chop the head off, it goes into a bucket and it turns into a wolf's head'. And I thought that was beautiful. And they were going, why all this blood? It all seemed to them to be too bloody and gory.

JS: Was that because it was too fantasy, too genre...for them?

SW: I think what I was doing was bringing in genre elements which didn't sit with the way that they saw it. So they basically said we're not putting money into this, they didn't put money into it, and we were going to put it together with some money out of the what's now obviously become the BFI, but the UK Film Council before that was called the NFFC. And they were going to put some money in but they were very nervous that I was a first-time producer and that Neil had only done one other film and not a special effects film.

JS: Yes, that was Mamoun Hassan at that stage?

SW: Mamoun Hassan. And Mamoun asked us to do some special effects tests, which we did, um with a special effects guy who'd worked a lot with Derek Jarman, and they were still a bit like, well we're not sure some of those growing mushrooms –

we had mushrooms that were grown in the forest. Stuff that you would have had to watch the film quietly to notice what was going on. There was a lot of stuff we were doing, weird stuff. We wanted the trees to look like [?] All of the stuff we were doing was a bit odd, but perfectly suited for the material. And they weren't that [sure], they were a bit 'ooh'. And I had a company called um, which later became Sony Picture Classics, and at that time was UA, United Artists Classics. They bought *Diva* the same time that I bought *Diva*, which was a big success around the world, and all the people that bought *Diva* were very proud of themselves, and a bit cocky, there was this sort of little *Diva* club of like the people that recognized that that film was commercial, when everybody else had turned it down. So they were in the *Diva* club, and they loved the idea of *Company of Wolves*, and they were prepared to put quite a lot of money up, about £700,000, which was a huge amount [of money], looking back on it. And then weirdly out of the blue came um, uh ITC, for no reason whatsoever, had never done anything [in film] before *Company of Wolves*, never did anything after *Company of Wolves*. This guy called Bernie Kingham who was an accountant there – Lew Grade had long gone, Mr Bond was in Australia and I don't think he had a clue what Bernie was doing – Bernie just gave us all the money. He just signed a cheque, how much, we said '2 million', and he said fine and wrote a cheque. We then had no control over the film other than the UK theatrical [and] video release, but we didn't really have any control over the world, which was the slight disappointment of the film. But they stayed well away – creatively, they didn't come...as long as we stayed on budget and on time, they were fine. And I don't think they had a clue what we were doing, they came to visit the studio a couple of times, Bernie and his wife, they were very very very nice people. And he just came down, looked at what we were doing, loved it all, told a few anecdotes, wandered off, he was a sweetheart. The film financiers [?] weren't too pleased when we went over-budget a bit so they came down and rapped our knuckles. But again it was, the hardest thing for Neil and I was creating all these effects, and creating what I wanted, which was this Michael Powell feeling of the forest. We wanted to use glass shots [?] and Anton Furst, the designer, who of course went on to do *Full Metal Jacket* and *Batman*, and won the Oscar for *Batman*. And this was his first big feature film, so Anton, I drove Anton nuts with trying to create something that was...this forest that we could work around all the four seasons, so we could close the doors and do all old-fashioned studio stuff, I ended up doing the second-unit [direction] myself...through this whole process we made the movie, and then Channel 4 bought it. This was the irony...then, after we made it, Channel 4 went 'Oh it's great, we'll buy that'. And they put it, they always put it in their Channel 4 as a Film4 movie.

LM: Yeah they do, it's often thought of as being a Channel 4 film, but it's not actually...

SW: Well ironically, my partner Nik Powell, who was my financial partner at that time, who again was incredible in terms of backing me, as he had been with The Scala. So he'd done the same thing with production as he had done with distribution. So he

said what shall we buy, you go and buy it, you'll have no interference from me at all. And because I had been lucky, I'd lucked out with *The Evil Dead*, which was a hugely successful film, and *Diva*, and *Merry Christmas*, he, when I did *Company of Wolves* he just did the same thing and said you do whatever you want to do. And then he noticed after the film was hugely successful at the UK...it broke the box-office record at the Odeon Leicester Square [over/until?] *Gandhi*, and was very successful theatrically for a film like that. And then when we did, we did so well with it, we noticed that Film4 bought it for 3 transmissions...but then after that we sold it to the BBC, so the next transmission was on the BBC, which Film4 were really pissed off about. Because they hadn't...it wasn't their film, they thought it was their film. They had actually...bought it for a sizeable sum, but there was no risk at all. So we started off really with Film4 in a strange, on the back foot. We weren't...you would have thought, given that history, of where we were with *Angel*, where we were with the building, where we were with Jeremy Isaacs, that Film4 would have backed our movies. And of course we acquired and released quite a lot of Film4 films; I mean things like *Bloody Kids*, which was a very small film, the Stephen Frears movie.

JS: So it worked the other way around, because they needed theatrical outlets for films that they were going to give release to...

SW: And there weren't that many distributors. We took big risks on Peter Greenaway, on Ken Loach. If you look at what Palace were doing – Mike Leigh. We were seen, and we were their natural ally. Because our philosophy...or *my* philosophy was the same as the Scala cinema, which was that you need to have umbrella films – *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *When Harry Met Sally*...that create the opportunity to go and take risks. So you can have a Mike Leigh film or a Ken Loach film, as long as you've got a *When Harry Met Sally*, which is kind of a safer bet, you can have the riskier film. Because sometimes those riskier films, like *The Snowman*, which was a Channel 4 film. I bought *The Snowman* at Vidcom. I think Vidcom, it was way before uh it was in Cannes just before Cannes Film Festival, [or] just after my first Cannes Film Festival, which was '82. Um and we bought it I think for 5,000 quid, and it became the most successful VHS we ever released. 'Cos it, the first year it did 5, the next year it did 15. It didn't matter how many times it was shown on TV. It was the first...that and the other film we had which was *The Making of Michael Jackson's Thriller*, which was Vestron [?]. That was basically interviews with John Landow, interviews with Michael Jackson, interviews with the dancer, the choreographer, interviews with Baker the special effects guy, padded out with a few film clips, and then just Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. It was only 25 minutes, [you'd] never seen anything sell like it in your life. 'Cos it was just the right time, right place, everyone wanted to own [it]. 'Cos it was a stoner movie, you could put it on at midnight, you could watch it 50 times. Like 'Oh let's put *The Making of Thriller* on, who's rolling the joint?' That's what it was like, it was a stoner movie. It was brilliant, and we had no idea. We kicked ourselves 'cos we only made a quid a tape from that,

because we did it as a sell-through film for Veston. That and *The Snowman*, was the beginning of what's now known as sell-through. Which was, people didn't realize, we didn't realize, 'cos that's why we paid so little for *The Snowman*, we thought let's milk it before it shows on telly. We didn't realize it'll show on telly, and then the next year you can sell more.

JS: Yeah, that's an ad for your video, it works back...

SW: Yeah, we knew that cinema, see our theory was that cinema was the ad for video, and that the two markets would...would always work together. Which is you see it in cinema, you tell your mates, they'll go and get the video, they'll love the video, they'll tell their mates, and they go and see it in the cinema. That those two would always be integral, which the industry didn't get at all. They said that wasn't going to happen. [Phone rings...]

[File 2]

JS: Great, I wanted to, Laura wants to ask you more about the Channel 4 relationship, but something just struck me in what you were, where you were talking about *Company of Wolves*, so OK on a personal note you've come from being a distributor turned producer, and all of a sudden you were [on the] 2nd unit on a film, you'd never made a film before right?

SW: No, no, I hadn't no...

JS: So hang on, how did you?

SW: I hadn't produced a film, let alone...what was happening was um *Company of Wolves* Neil didn't have an assistant, I didn't have an assistant for the film but we were...The philosophy behind Palace was that I had spent, in my years of programming *The Scala* and *Screen on the Green*, we were dealing with a very moribund type of film industry. There was no enthusiasm for film, zero zero zero, and you're talking way before Danny Boyle made *Trainspotting*, way before the Harry Potter movies, before the big revival that Channel 4, Film4 kicked off in the '80s. The '70s was like wasteland. The biggest box office star in the '70s was Mary Millington. 2 years running! You know what I mean, in the crappiest soft-core movies you're ever likely to see in your life. I defy anyone to watch more than 5 minutes of one of those movies without wanting to kill themselves. They are so bad; they are so bad they're almost good. So you think about how bad the film business was, and everybody, all the people in the companies like Rank, for instance, who owned all the Odeon cinemas were all guys who'd come out of the army in the late '40s, and J. Arthur Rank deliberately gave jobs to people who were ex-servicemen. And they thought that way about the way that they ran cinemas, they way they ran stuff. They didn't like *The Red Shoes*, you know J. Arthur Rank didn't like anything different or unusual, and he was, that philosophy was embedded in the company. So when I was running The Scala cinema, and trying to book, I don't know some old movie that

no-one cared about, I mean they really couldn't care less about their heritage, they couldn't care less about contemporary cinema. So when I started The Scala I said to Nik, look I don't want anyone who's designed posters before, we want completely new poster people. I don't want anyone who's done a trailer, I will cut the trailers. I don't want anyone who's anything to do with the film business, forget those bastards 'cos they really will kill us, 'cos their lack of enthusiasm...so when we bought *Diva* we were told off by everyone you've paid too much money, you've bought a French subtitled film, what are you doing? ...When we bought *Evil Dead* we were told horror films don't work, you'll never get it past the censor. When we made *Company of Wolves* Puttnam called me up and said 'Oh why are you playing that in the Odeon Leicester Square, that's far too big a cinema, you're crazy, that's suicide!' You know everything we did the industry weighed against us. So I thought when we were making *Company of Wolves* I thought I'm not going to listen to anybody. I know what I'm doing, I'm producing this film. So I would say to Neil, look, you go over there. Peter McDonald, who was our 2nd unit DP, who was also a brilliant guy who later on directed films, I'll go off with Peter and we'll shoot. What'll we shoot...wolf jumping over there, you go off to do that, come and have a look at this, can you light that? So we were doing that sort of leapfrogging during the whole movie. All I was doing was under the wire, I didn't want to put my head up and say this is how we're doing, 'cos everybody would tell us were doing it wrong. Because what they would do is stop us doing it. So I didn't want to look at the guidebooks. So far in my brief, tiny career, the guidebook just told me lies...Everything we did we broke the rules...But I wouldn't know any other way of doing it. So that kind of philosophy, which was always inspired by the punk thing of '76, and I was very lucky as a teenager to be part of that movement. Embrace change, try and make the best of what you have, and always think differently, and think outside the box, there is a way of doing things. That is why people would say to me, John Boorman and Jeremy Thomas said, you should be a producer. Because they were having the same problem of Film4 saying you can't do this, or people, other UK distributors saying why are we releasing a Japanese movie? Oshima, who the fuck is that? I would be saying Oshima, wow, the guy who was making...working with David Bowie, this is incredible! So I was saying, we can do these things, we can make this work. So the passionate enthusiasm and the common sense worked better than experience or knowledge, in an industry that was so eating itself up it couldn't do anything. They were so frightened of risk and change and difference. So when we made *Company of Wolves* and *Absolute Beginners* and *Mona Lisa*, working with ITC, who were strange and great for us, but had already sort of, the Lew Grade days were over, and it was mainly a TV concern. And then one of the last films with Goldcrest, as a powerhouse, and then working with Handmade, in that short, if you think about it, that would have been '82 through to '86, we...kind of worked with all the major players from the British film industry, from that time. So we had kind of gone through a huge baptism, and we got through it by being bold and being different and taking risks. *Absolute Beginners* was obviously a whole different kettle of fish, and where everything which could have gone wrong on *Company of Wolves*, which was, real wolves, 14 year old girl, big

studio, special effects, somehow we blurred just the line of it, it worked out. And *Absolute Beginners* was on the other side of the line, everything that could have worked *just* missed. And that went from the very very very beginning of actually doing it, the very beginning of casting the girl, but that doesn't involve Film4 so you know what I mean...

LM: Well you were just talking about *Mona Lisa* briefly. I mean uh *The Company of Wolves* wasn't the only film that Channel 4 missed out on investing in and got involved later. They did that with *Mona Lisa* as well, didn't they? Why didn't they like uh that script?

SW: *Mona Lisa* was...yeah that was really, really weird. It was David Rose again...

LM: It seems more like something that he would have [gone for]...

SW: I think it was me actually. I don't think they liked, I don't think David Rose liked me very much. I think he respected what we were doing, but I think we crash-landed into the middle of the film industry with Palace and I...retrospectively when I say all those things I sound like I'm old-fashioned, with change, punk, difference. Now everybody goes '*of course*'. But what you could look at through one aspect as being refreshing and challenging and different and new, you could also say arrogant upstarts, what do they know? Know it all, show offs. That's kind of from one side of the industry we were being perceived, especially from the older generation...David Rose came obviously from television, from *Z Cars* and those brilliant things...Pebble Mill, and was extremely well-respected and loved television doyen, came into film and quite rightly did the right thing, which was, he looked at film in the way that Tessa Ross has I think. Looked at film as an auteur driven [JS: Medium], it's about the director. Television's about the writer. The writer and producer are strong in television. Film, one always says OK, it's the director. So the producer's role in...while it's quite strong in television, traditionally in film, and at that time, was being perceived as being um less of a...I had the same problem with with Goldcrest, I had the same problem with Handmade, which was that with I, with *Mona Lisa* had kind of come up with a concept, which was a newspaper story that somebody gave me, a TV show I saw about Paul Raymond, and working at The Scala cinema, and seeing all these prostitutes at 3 in the morning, because we did these all-nighters at King's Cross there, it was like fucking hell, what world do they live in, this twilight world of 3 in the morning, 50 girls on the street, cars backed up. Who are all these people, who are the men in the cars, and who were the girls in the street? I couldn't get my head round it. And it lasted for 3 years and then they got rid of it. It was in York Way, behind the back, near the gasworks at King's Cross Station. Because we used to close up the box-office about 3 in the morning and I used to wander around King's Cross meeting all the real characters, and we had a place called Play it Again Sam, a pinball machine place opposite The Scala, which was constantly being observed by the police from our roof, and stuff like that. 3 in the morning was like [being] a taxi-driver in London. Everywhere else was asleep, The Scala was awake,

that area was awake, it was mad. Um and exciting, so all those things combined to put...so I presented it to Neil and I said what do you think of this? And my Dad had been to prison in the 50s and grown up with the kind of flash, the kind of Kray Brothers, Richardson thing, in the late 50s early 60s where crime was thought of (and the *Italian Job*) as being flashy and glamorous...and hang out with the stars, and be a criminal, you know, it was a job option. Because the police were also criminals it was, join the police or be a criminal, there was no difference. So the 60s was a time of...that kind of...and I wanted to make *Mona Lisa* to say actually that it wasn't [like that], it was not flashy, not great, and you end up where [the] Bob Hoskins character ends up, that's the likelihood of where you're going to be, he's a desperate angry person who's had everything stolen from him. And the Michael Caine character, who was really representing the Thatcherite villain was the guy who makes all the money out of visible [invisible?] things. Like Paul Raymond, nothing to do with me, he was the one who owned all those awful peepshows, that was what the programme [film] was about....Anyway I was kind of socially inspired to make *Mona Lisa* by from a lot of things happening in my life, and then I gave it to Neil, and of course Neil is a genius writer, began writing this thing which was very different to what I had ever, would ever have imagined, but, and was brilliant. But then he stopped – he couldn't finish it. And I was making *Absolute Beginners* at the time, which got into terrible – long story – terrible trouble, real problems with [indecipherable] company who tried to fire the director every day, tried to make me the director...I said no, it's Julian's project blah blah blah. I still tried to keep the *Mona Lisa* project going. And Neil got [to the point where he] said I don't get this [anymore], so I got David Leland on board, who'd written and directed *Wish You Were Here*, a film that I'd released. So I said to David, could you do something? And kind of gave him everything, and of course David did something totally different, and made it into a far more hardcore revenge cop movie, with the Bob Hoskins character quite tough – where it was supposed to be Sean Connery at the time. He was originally going to be cast. And then Neil read it and was horrified, and he said it can't work like this, this is how it works. And David was brilliant, because it made Neil...and David quite rightly deserves that credit as co-writer although...it's Neil. So Neil kind of took all those ideas that were floating around, and all the stuff that I was feeding him, and wrote that script. And as I say it was going to be Sean Connery. I had the most amazing meeting with Sean Connery; it was in a lift at Orion Pictures, who'd bought *Absolute Pictures*. Mike Medavoy had made, was one of the people who had helped make *Excalibur*, so I was, got into the lift with Mike, we'd written this script, we'd just got it and Sean Connery came into the lift. It was one of those moments...on the 27th floor in Century City, Sean Connery walks in the lift, Mike and I had been having a meeting. Mike is an old, old guy who goes way way back, he was at an agent at William Morris in the 60s, he knows everybody. So Mike turns to Sean and they start chatting...and he says 'Have you met? This is Stephen', and I thought OK we've got 27 floors. I said 'Oh you know Neil Jordan, he worked on *Excalibur* with John Boorman...' because Sean Connery had done *Zardoz* with John. And he said oh yeah John was doing that. And I said we've got this script called

Mona Lisa, I think you'd love it...And literally the floors were ticking off. And as we got to the ground floor, he said oh, send it over to me, I'd love to read it. So we thought we had Sean. Anyway we lost Sean somewhere in the wash, on a golf course somewhere in Spain. We didn't have mobile phones in those days. I literally pissed off CAA at that meeting, because you don't approach stars in that way, no experience, I'd done the wrong thing. They were never going to let me have Sean Connery, even though Sean wanted to do it. And I would be resorting to ringing him at the golf course. He's on the 17th hole. OK I'll hang on. No he'll be about 20 minutes. It doesn't matter, I'll hang on. And Sean would come on the phone and he would be really effusive...but no, he was never going to do it. But somehow, gave the script to Channel 4, thinking they were going to love it. But no, they didn't like it. I think at the time, Palace's image, or my relationship with Neil, or something. I think we were seen to be too blasé and too brash and too...And they would see the lines [?] like you know prostitution, drugs, and car chase and think oh this is going to be tawdry, or not good for our image. So I don't know, I felt personally quite wounded by it, because you know we proved to you with *Company of Wolves*, we'd done that and...

LM: You said earlier that Palace should have been Channel 4's natural allies, in terms of their remit, which was essentially to, uh you know, provide a base for new talent, to encourage innovation, to encourage distinctive, things that were different, that was kind of Film on Four's remit as well. You'd think the 2 companies were very well suited to work together.

SW: Well we were more than well suited to working together, and I'll give you a great example of that, which was *Letter to Brezhnev*.

LM: Yes, well um, I meant to ask you about that!

SW: Walter Donohue had left at this point, and Walter was pretty...when I first met Angela Carter, and I remember going to a party with Neil, it was like, well not a party but one of those drink things. Literary. Literary means, equals free wine....Neil's book, his short stories won the Guardian prize, he was thought to be a literary figure as much as a cinematic one. So with Neil Jordan and Angela Carter, two literary...Angela was a heavyweight, Neil was a middleweight. So you'd got to those parties with people like Salman Rushdie, who was then just a writer like them. Poliakoff, David Hare...fairly heavyweight literary people. And...sorry what was the point, I've forgotten what...So *Letter to Brezhnev*...Oh sorry I'll come back to that story. *Letter to Brezhnev* was a film that we saw in a very very early stage, and it was in bits. And they needed to shoot another week, but we knew there was more than a week to shoot. So I took it to Film4 and said, they need...this amount of money for the film. But what we'll do, is go to the record company, and get a record deal for them with London Records, and we will do this, we'll give them guaranteed distribution, you put up the money. So Karin Bamborough, I watched it with her, watched about 70 minutes. And she agreed and that became...that was one of the

best partnerships we had, because they basically funded it and we stood up and said we'll distribute it. And we got Bronski Beat, and we got all the people, we got all those guys at that time, who were kind of hip and around and would fit perfectly with an urban comedy. We did a great trailer for them, and finished the movie off for them. It was very successful...and we did a great job releasing it. I did the trailer for that, I remember doing the trailer. Again, trying to be different and trying to think outside the box. We did a trailer which was a black screen and it had um the title *Chariots of Fire* and then it was *A Passage to India* and...probably *Room with a View* or something. And it said something like 3 great movies, and now another great British film. And it went – bang - straight into Bronski Beat. And you couldn't think of anything less like those 3 films. And people loved it; it always got a good laugh. It was like; I see 'a different kind of movie'. And with all the humour, and the brilliant Margi Clarke...and Frank Clarke's wit, and it was a big hit. And that was our...working with Film4 was really good on that. So we were, as a distributor, Palace were massively well-loved by Film4, as we were always on the same ground. As a producer we never made the cut, and I'm not quite sure [but I think] it wasn't until...David Aukin came...

LM: Yeah, 'cos you did also submit um the script for *Scandal* to Film4 and it met the same reception didn't it.

SW: Yeah...they...no but that was *really* weird 'cos *Scandal* was another story again, of television. Which was, when we made uh, when *Scandal* was introduced to me it was when I was at the King's Cross cinema, and I'd just made that transition, it was Joe Boyd again, the record producer, who had been instrumental in persuading Richard and Nik to back me...to run the repertory cinema. And he had come to me one day and said...a real story, which was that he was working on a Toots and the Maytals album for, for Chris Blackwell and it got quite late into the night, and Chris had this guy who was his kind of, Chris' friend, who was his joint roller basically, and would actually sit around rolling joints. But it was Lucky Gordon, who was one of the characters, there were 2 West Indians involved in the *Scandal* affair, Lucky Gordon and Johnny Edgecombe. And Lucky Gordon...um, Joe said 'Oh you live in West London I'll give you a lift home'. So he gave him a lift, and Johnny said do you want to come in for a cup of tea, and he went into his kitchen, and his entire kitchen was all the Christine Keeler thing, literally wall-papered, all the newspapers wall-papered around his kitchen. And he said 'My God', and he said 'Yeah, that was the story...' And Joe said 'What story?' So Lucky that night told him the entire story of Christine Keeler, Mandy Rice-Davies, the Profumo affair. Which Joe knew nothing about it 'cos he was [in] America [at the time]. And he came to me and [I] said, look I've got my friend Michael Thomas, we'd like to do this, but as a TV show. So we can, Mick and I decided to commission him [it] as a four and a half hour TV show, and then it went, BBC commissioned a bible and then they commissioned the first hour and a half, then they just dropped it like a brick. We said 'We thought you liked it' 'No no we can't do it we've been told, Profumo is still alive, we can't do it'. So we spent 4 or 5

years going to every TV station – Channel 4, of course – no, can't do it. We went to Lynda La Plante and Verity Lambert, who were at Euston. We can't do it. We went to Granada, we can't do it. We went to Central, we can't do it. And they all loved the treatment, loved the bible, loved the 1st hour and a half. It was always the same pattern. Huge enthusiasm, and then wait a month or so and then a very firm 'No'. Like 'No, fuck off'. And we went oh God what's going on here. And then finally we went back to Channel 4, there was a new guy there, and we said 'look, do it as a TV series'. And they said 'Don't you understand, there was a memo that was sent around a few years ago saying no-one must do anything about Jack Profumo [JS: An embargo...], it's not on...from the highest point you can get, we've been told you can't do it'. So the conspiracy... [JS: State censorship] It was, it was state censorship. So we said OK fuck that, we'll do it as a film, we'll just go outside the box, make it as a 2-hour movie. But Michael Thomas said you couldn't, he was the writer and he was determined that you can only tell this story in 4 and a half hours. So what we did, I cut and pasted it together with Michael Caton-Jones, who was this young film school kid, who [we] took a long time to choose him [?]. He'd done one TV movie for the BBC, it wasn't a movie it was a TV...screen [Screen Two?]. ...like an hour thing...He'd done a very very good short film called *The Riveter*, which I liked a lot. So Michael and I just sat and when through everything he'd written, because by now Michael Thomas had written four and a half hours. At one point Maxwell was involved, with Berlusconi – they were going to do *Scandal* - and even they got scared...Maxwell and Berlusconi! So we managed to put together a script, by cutting and pasting, and we gave it to Michael Thomas, and then we turned round and said, now we'll give it to Film4, as a film. Previously it had always gone in as a TV show. And now it was a film, a film script. And they rejected it, yeah. Who was it then? It must have been David Rose....

LM: Yeah it was David Rose, wasn't it, that was '88, '89, wasn't it?

SW: Yeah, '88.

LM: It's funny you should say you had a better relationship with David Aukin, 'cos he was very much into kind of genre films, and he actually said – we interviewed him a few weeks ago - that *Dust Devil* um, he consciously he wanted to get involved with that, because he wanted to let people know that this was what he wanted to do, he was moving away from that whole social realist aesthetic, and you know, he wanted people to know he was up for doing anything really, very different things.

SW: David was...What was interesting about the relationship we had with David Rose and David Aukin...was that when we went to David Rose...his rejection was a silent rejection, we never really got to grips with him. It was no, we don't like it. It was very much like that's it, no discussion, we're not doing that. And they would have their reasons, but their reasons were very intangible...The difference, when David Rose left, and *Scandal* was massively successful and shows on Channel 4 all the time, they bought it, and again it was the perfect Channel 4 film, I can't think of

another film more suited to Channel 4 than *Scandal*. Um but what happened when David [Aukin] came in, was that he and I had a meeting. When it was announced he was in, because he used to be at the Hampstead Theatre, and knew Neil, and again, was exactly was one of those glitterati literature people who would hang out with Angela Carter and Salman Rushdie, and was part of the Hampstead set, which I wasn't really part of, but was very pleased to be in there. And I was just with Neil, I wasn't really part of that set, but he very much was, David, he was dyed-in-the-wool National Theatre, his partner was a director of plays at the National Theatre. He came with pure, you know [lineage]. And he said to me, we had this lunch in Goodge Street before he was installed, and I remember being very impressed with his theatricality. He had a cloak, I think, he came in...but if he didn't have a cloak, I imagine he had a cloak...he strode into the room, unlike me who generally shuffles into things. He strode in, he sat down and he said he wasn't going to make any adaptations. I thought wow, that's pretty brave. No adaptations. So immediately my brain goes, so you wouldn't have made *Psycho* that was adapted from a book, *Rebecca*, you wouldn't have made *Educating Rita*...*Gone With The Wind*. What do you make then? There's so much, I'm thinking of all the great movies that are adaptations. He said no plays, no books. I thought, that won't last long. Now you look at his legacy it was *Madness of King George*, *Trainspotting*, all adaptations [JS: Well, *Howard's End*]. *Howard's End*...The thing about David Aukin that I loved, and Jack Lechner, is that they were very engaged people. They didn't...David [Rose?] wasn't...being a big football fan as well, an Arsenal fan, I'm a big Spurs fan. There was always something to argue about with him. I'm not saying he was an argumentative person, but he would engage. So if he didn't like something, you could talk about why he didn't like it...And you can walk out and say what's the point, or you can say you know what I think he's probably right about that, you know, if you think about what he's saying there, 'cos that's quite a good point, that doesn't work, go back in. So you always thought with David you could engage in a proper hands-on discussion. Now the other thing that happened at that time which greatly affected Film4 during this period, of *Scandal* as well, was that Simon Relph was running British Screen. And British Screen had upped their ante, they had a bit more money, and British Screen was being more active, and Simon who had become a very good friend of mine from very early days, I wanted Simon to...because I worked with...Because in those days because I had this huge company so I worked with all the line producers, who were people that I bloodied [?] as producers because I thought that, look, you're going to work really hard for me, I'll give you a shared credit. I did that with Chris Brown on *The Company of Wolves*, I did it with uh Patrick Cassavetti on *Mona Lisa*...uh and I wanted to Simon to [work on?] *Mona Lisa*. I said I think it's gonna, we're going to put it together, can you come on board as producer, 'cos I've got to work on *Absolute Beginners* to deal with. Um I can't do both...but I can do half of both, I can work with Neil, I can work on the script, I can do all those things. I can't be there every day on set. Could you do it? And he said 'no I can't, but I could do it with Patrick', so I kind of got to know Simon a bit as this kind of stalwart of the British film industry. And I released a film that he produced called *Wetherby*,

the David Hare film which was a Film4 movie, again one of the many Film4 movies we released. So when Simon took over at British Screen he was, he was one of the few people brave enough to back *Scandal*. Where Film4 wouldn't back *Scandal* Simon would. Simon also backed *Hardware*, a very good film, which was much more successful than *Dust Devil*. So Simon immediately put his cards on the table – I'm brave enough to back *Scandal* and I also feel that you know the genre doesn't hurt us at all. If it's going to be a good movie of any genre we want to be in there to support British cinema. So he backed those films and I think that was...incredibly courageous, and it kind of...our relationship with *him* helped hugely with our relationship with Film4, because we would bring in a bit of money from them as well. And I think that combination of David Aukin at Film4 and Simon Relph at British Screen was a great combination, and they I think complemented each other massively. So David Aukin of course was there for...at Film4 for, *The Crying Game*, which was the big...that was the big huge debate that we had, which went on for months and months. Well documented. That was really um absolutely to his credit that *The Crying Game* exists today, because he was talked around and I hate to say this, and it sounds like you're talking about someone who was weak, or you know the Head of the Studio would not like to be thought of as someone who was talked around. But it was to his eternal credit...I mean my credit was my persistence, and as you said that's well documented, but what's perhaps less [well] documented is that his...the credit he must take for saying, in the end, OK. OK I can see that you have got something here and I'll reluctantly back it, very reluctantly back it. But he did that. And I think that was the thing that we didn't have with David Rose. David Rose didn't reluctantly back *Company of the Wolves* and he didn't reluctantly back *Mona Lisa*, he *belatedly* backed them. Difference. Big difference, when you're at the sharp end of a movie as a film producer, and you need that money. You need the guarantee of that money – because you sit there in meetings with loads of lawyers, and they don't want to hear about what you *think* you're going to get for the film. They don't want to hear 'When we make the film we'll get this from television'; they want to know what's happening now, what's tangible now. And I think David Aukin became a major player in the European film scene because I think he was, he recognized the needs and desires of film producers to put together their movies in the cut and thrust of the actual real world – the coldness and the toughness of the real world. David Rose, who I think backed a succession of fantastic filmmakers, from Peter Greenaway to Stephen Frears to Neil Jordan, with *Angel*, was acting like a patron of the arts. Someone who would be giving money to, to...here you are, Peter Greenaway, here's your 100 grand, or 200 grand, or your 400 grand, and who's your producer? [JS: A benefactor]. Yeah. Oh some distasteful person who's out there trying to get money from other distasteful people. You know, that's how it was. Whereas I think David Aukin recognized that the distasteful world out there is the same world. We live in that world. There's not much we can do about it. And if you want to see good movies being made, if you want to see *Trainspotting* being made and properly released in America, if you want to see *Four Weddings* being made and properly released in America, you're going to have to embrace some of

those distasteful people. They are part of the business. And as one of those distasteful people myself...having come from the world of distribution. But also having been one of the few distasteful people around that actually did know David Hare and Salman Rushdie and Angela Carter and all of these so-called less distasteful people, I took offence to that treatment. You know, to me, making a film is not...it's definitely an auteurist thing. I would never, ever, in a million years, put down anything that Stephen Frears or Neil Jordan or David Hare would bring to a film project, or any project. You know they are immensely talented people. And the reason that I make films with those people is because they are immensely talented, and because I want to work with people who do things that I would never dream of doing. But by the same token, there are things that I can bring, and there are things that a DP can bring, and an editor can bring, and a financier can bring, and a distributor can bring, to the...game. You know whether it's Tim Haslam being able to get a German pre-sale, or whether it's your editor coming up with a genius idea of putting the middle at the back and the back at the middle. That's not necessarily the auteur, that's not necessarily what the writer or director are thinking. Everyone comes in, it's a big, big, big you know.... [JS: It's a collaborative process...] meeting of the minds. That's what films are. And I do think that we were suffering a little bit from some of the aspects, of the bad aspects, of the literally [?] being ignored by those original wave of Film4. And again, coming back to that, I don't think that Film4 recognized as quickly as I did, and certain other people of my generation, how important they were. I don't think they realized that they were really really important and they were giving a new lease of life, a new way of creating British cinema. In the way that if you look back at IFA and Germany or if you look back at J. Arthur Rank, or if you look back at some of the significant players in the history of 20th Century cinema, they weren't aware, when Sam Goldwyn was...or Sam Goldfish as he was known, was setting up his studios and thinking I can make a lot of money out of this cinema contraption thing. That's all he was thinking, probably. He had no idea that he was going to give birth to magnificent fantastic D. W. Griffith and all those amazing films. And similarly at the beginning of Film4 they thought we're just going to make a few television movies...we're not going to show them in the cinemas we're going to sell them abroad. Oh, well people want to see them in cinemas here, why don't we put *The Ploughman's Lunch* out, see what happens? It was all like, let's test the water. And it was all really about that sort of...

JS: And they had some barriers to break down as well, like the CEA for example, having to get around the 3-year rule, which was a really important breakthrough.

SW: A really important breakthrough...that whole thing from the Unions that you can't do that. I was lucky enough to come in at a time when that was breaking down...and that notion of there being cinema that wasn't Hollywood studio cinema, that there could be indigenous British cinema that would need a bit more help in terms of what actors paid or what technicians could get paid, and the hours you could shoot. And certainly TV hold-back, residuals, the things that everyone was fighting for; they

realised that they were all really fighting over nothing. That everything had gone, nobody had anything to fight over any more because no-one was making films. So if you're, if all you're making is *The Stud* and *The Bitch* and that's it, and occasionally a *Chariots of Fire* and *Room with a View*, then where is the rest of cinema? That was always my...I had a ferocious time with Julien Temple on *Absolute Beginners* because Julien, like me, is quite outspoken and iconic. And Julien tends to put his foot in his mouth. I had no problem with Merchant Ivory or David Puttnam. Absolutely no problem. I, whether I liked their films, whether I liked *The Europeans* or whether I liked *Chariots of Fire*, is neither here nor there. The reality is that they existed, they were employing people, and their mere existence was something you had to applaud. There's no accounting for [?] taste in cinema. In a way I would support Mary Millington films, because they kept cinemas open. If they're taking money in the cinema, anything that's taking money and keeping the doors open, I can't be that against it. So it's not the content that they were trying to produce, the so-called, the only people making films in Britain, which was the old guard - it was the fact that no other films existed. It wasn't that they existed - that's fine. In a world where you have *Mona Lisa* or *Trainspotting* or *Letter to Brezhnev* and you have Merchant Ivory and you have Puttnam, then it's a great world. If you only have Merchant Ivory and Puttnam then that's not a good world. And that was just complementing what they were doing, not taking it away from them. I think they felt was that there was a little pot of money. My theory was that you could expand the pot. Their theory was you're gonna to take the pot. And that was why there was the aggression of...new...because post-Ridley Scott, post-Alan Parker, post-Puttnam - the new lot, which I suppose you could now [include] ...Stephen Frears to a degree, certainly um *Trainspotting*, Danny Boyle, certainly that generation that were coming in, were, you know the older generation were seeing them as a threat. But they should never have seen them as a threat. And my philosophy as a distributor who was distributing Mike Leigh films and Ken Loach films and *Nightmare on Elm Street* saw that expansion as a great thing. And that's why when I joined BAFTA and I split the awards from television and film, because it was always...the problem with BAFTA was that they saw television as supporting the British...BAFTA, they couldn't see that British cinema was getting bigger and bigger and that the BAFTA awards on their own, would work, without television. The idea was that if you took television away the BAFTA film awards would wither, and that nobody would want to see it, it would never be televised, it would be reduced to nothing. Um and as the analogy is the same with Film4 is that everybody saw Film4 not as complementary but as a threat, so let's get their money, and let's make our films with their money, let's not expand. And I think with BAFTA, you know, it flourished on its own, and the TV awards flourished on their own. It was hilarious when you used to sit there for 4 hours, and John Travolta would be in the room, and they would be going 'And the best children's programme is...' and there'd be 5 clips...'and the best factual programme....and the best soap is...' And John Travolta would be looking around...is this the same awards event? Didn't they just have 4 children's awards there? It was 4 and a half hours. The problem with the film industry was that no one had, and you

can see historically why, um and you can also see why historically people like British Screen and Film4 were so significant, no one had any pride in what they were doing. No one had any respect for British cinema over and above filmmakers who'd gone to Hollywood and made it big. So as far as British cinema was concerned, it was Alfred Hitchcock and David Lean, who were old, and there was Ridley Scott, God love him, you'd got Hugh Hudson, Alan Parker...where were they? They were in LA of course. The deal is, you do a hit movie, you got to LA. That was it, Franc Roddam, you would go, that was the thing. So the idea that you would have a Danny Boyle, you would have a Stephen Frears, you would have indigenous filmmakers who were making films here, who would occasionally go and make some American films...but not necessarily having to make the £200 or £400 million movie, or in those days the £20 million, the £40 million movie. That wasn't the path. The path, the goal was to get to LA. So the industry was geared towards that. And the big mistake Goldcrest made was trying to embrace that. And the big mistake Handmade made was in trying to embrace that. It was, instead of saying, we've got Terry Gilliam, we've got the Pythons, we've got all these, we've got *The Long Good Friday*, we've got our success, let's look at how we keep repeating our success. [Instead] they wanted to get Sean Penn and Madonna, and make *Shanghai Surprise*, and lose all of their money. Because they thought that's what the next stage is. And Film4, when they started to go and do LA American movie. It's the, it's the, apple that we all [want to] bite. And exactly what happened with Film4, if you look at your huge chart, the spectrum of the history of Film4, was that they went Hollywood. In a way that they felt, building it up, taking advantage of their, of what David Aukin had, probably, and I want to big up David [Rose] because I think the patron style of David Rose is what *really* set them up. His grouping of that talent, pulling that talent in, with things like *Walter*, Stephen Frears' thing, and, you know, some of the lesser known - not just *Draughtsman's Contract*, not just *Ploughman's Lunch* - but some of the other ones that were more slight and more subtle but had great talent involved. That set up a notion of creativity and encouraging genius....

JS: It was an infrastructure as well, that wasn't there before. You know, in effect it was a mini-studio system, with follow-through from commissioning, conception, through to sales.

SW: Exactly - as long as you were shooting on a level, a budget level of a certain number then you could see the whole experience through. Um and that success of Polygram, the initial success of Polygram, was absolutely the lift-off. Polygram wouldn't have existed without Channel 4, without Film4. Polygram's existence was based upon the fact that British cinema could be sold [abroad]. As you say, things like *Draughtsman's Contract* were being sold abroad, there *was* proof that there was an audience for Ken Loach movies in France, there was proof that you could be successful in Germany with *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. OK that was later with Polygram. But you can be successful with these British films. That somehow the likes of Mike Leigh could get an Oscar nomination. Things were heating up. And

Polygram could see that they didn't have to just make. Although Polygram their deals would be not just with Working Title but with American producers whose backgrounds were commercials and promos but they were able to take advantage of the beginnings of that thriving activity in the UK. And that was born in 1982 by Film4. That was really what happened, was, by chance or by planning they kicked off what had become a dead film industry. I think that I suppose coming back to the Aukin situation, Aukin inherited a great mantle. If I put my slightly personal umbrage aside about what I perceived to be the limitations of their attitude towards the cut and thrust of making and distributing films, the nasty side of it, and I look at what they created, it was extraordinary. And what Aukin took over was extraordinary, but he didn't waste it. You know he did, he was able to make things like *The Madness of King George*, and make movies, and back films that were intrinsically very very British and had strong, you know, cultural connections, and at the same time were exportable. And I think that was why I loved...the success that *Crying Game* um, was that we had such a strong relationship with Miramax from the beginning of *Scandal*, and then we'd seen Harvey pull every trick under the sun. In terms of how he would try to remake a film in order to position it within his perception of the market. The, you know we all have to deal with what I used to be, which was an ex-distributor. And ex-distributors, like commissioning editors um like people that we all have to deal with in the business, you know, the guys who, in the end are the people who are going to make the decision. The public aren't going to make the decision about whether you get the money for your film. They have nothing to do with it. They make the decision with their feet, about whether they're going to see the film. But by then it's too late, you've spent the money. So people like Harvey, by the time he gets to the stage he got to when we were making *The Crying Game*, he had made so many mistakes. They make the mistakes all the time, and when I look at the successes, their luck, when I look at the flops, 'cause Harvey did this...we can turn the picture around. You look at the successes, God, Harvey's a genius. And you look at the flops...Oh my God, those filmmakers were terrible, weren't they? What were they thinking of by making those films. So by the time we got to *The Crying Game*, I'd gone through so much of a lottery um with success and failure, with the films that we'd made, that it seemed to me, you'd just as well...don't listen to anyone. And we made *The Crying Game*, everyone seemed to love it, so if you're gonna release it you can't change the title. It was called *Soldier's Wife* – we changed it to *The Crying Game*. [You can't] change the title, you can't dub it, you can't edit it. You can do nothing. That was the deal with Harvey, you cannot touch this film. Because when you try to do that in the past, it doesn't seem to have worked – it's like, the film probably wouldn't have worked in the first place. He spent all this time doing stuff to it, and it, in the end it was the same movie. It just sounded different. He just adjusted it. And we said, think about how much colloquial language there is in that film, how much, just beyond American's heads. How many Irish accents, how many Cockney accents there are. You know, when she shouts down to him 'Fuck off back to Essex!' – who in America is gonna get that? That was before Essex was Essex in 1992, before the word 'chav' hadn't even been invented! It was an Essex that no one knew

about. So there was so much in the fabric of that film that was just impenetrable for an American audience, so how did it take all that money? [JS: Ditto with *Trainspotting* of course]. Exactly. You cannot iron the stuff out of those movies. So all those, all that stuff of oh you've got to cut this, you've got to do that, you've got to change that. With something like the release of *The Crying Game*, the film will always rise above it. But what was fantastic with the *The Crying Game*, and the success of that, and of course the success of *Trainspotting*, and also, to a degree, the success of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, is that, if you look at the big hits in America up until that point that came out of the UK, they were all period. It was all about the past, it was all about leaning back...And often they would be critical of the past, they're not all Laura Ashley. *The Room with a View*, the *Passage to India*, and the *Chariots of Fire*, in the end, or even the *Gandhis*, they become about the empire, and the power of what we once had, and wasn't it amazing when we could go off on these little trips to Italy, and wasn't it amazing when men were men, and they ran these races and they wouldn't run on a Sunday. And all this tradition – it's like the English, British tradition. [JS: Armchair cinema...] Yeah it was as you say what we did so well on telly with um, what was it. They tried to release, re-do didn't they, *The Far Pavilions*, it was Charles Dance, which was great as I say it was fantastic, but if you have nothing else...So the great thing about *The Crying Game* and the great thing about *Four Weddings* or *Trainspotting*, it was contemporary, it was contemporary issues that affected British and European sensibilities. The great thing about *Women on the Edge of a Nervous Breakdown* was that it was so fucking Spanish. You couldn't make that anywhere else! It was like none of those people exist other than in Pedro Almodovar's mad world of Spain. The great thing about *Diva* was that it was so French; it was like smoking Gitanes for an hour and a half. It was mad. And that's really what British cinema suddenly became, was that the...the environment of now, the environment of tubes and buses, and the environment of what we live in now, became suddenly what Americans could not only understand, but enjoy. As much as they would enjoy Buckingham Palace, and a visit with the Queen, and *The King's Speech*. The success of *The King's Speech* is as much looking back to something that Americans love, and we love...What questions haven't I touched on?

LM: Actually I think you've touched on quite a lot, that's fantastic. One thing I was going to ask is that, just kind of after Palace really, you started up a production company called Scala with Nik Powell didn't you, and you did do a few films with David Aukin in the 90s, like *The Neon Bible*, and I think Film4 funded *Backbeat* as well.

SW: Well my partner Elizabeth and I have been running No. 9 for maybe 7 or 8 years now, maybe more than that. Because you know, Liz worked on *The Crying Game* with me, and we've been working on and off on films from those, the last Palace films, and through some of the Scala films, and *The Neon Bible* was Scala. And then we decided. I think what happened after, on a personal level for me after...after

Palace expired. [What happened to] Palace was a tragic because...um...incident...happening...event, you know, the origins of Palace were that Nik Powell, because of the success of the Scala cinema, asked me to start a little video label. As he said, show some of the movies [?] you showed at Scala. So I spent a year on my one in 1981 buying the Werner Herzog collection, the John Waters films, uh *Eraserhead*, the stuff I showed at Scala for nothing. Nobody knew what video was, so I spent a year going to Berlin, going to America, just buying these films, as was my brief. Then we came to release them, and put them out on video. And we put out a video label, and it was all run from the Scala cinema, and there was a lot of resistance to subtitled films, so we did things like bought the dubbed version of *Alphaville*, and we put the dubbed version and the subtitled version on the same tape so you could watch either, you know. But then it was black and white, so it didn't kind of work...So we were trying to think of all sorts of ways to kind of make these films work, and then I realised you had to have a theatrical label, and that worked with the release of *Diva*, and the release of *Evil Dead*. And although I had told Nik we weren't going to release films theatrically, after a year of looking at the video world, I thought no actually you have to release these things theatrically to advertise them so people will get them on [video]. The big example of that was the Peter Greenaway film *The Cook, His Wife*...which we released in the UK - beautiful poster, perfect Peter Greenaway, and we stuck the naked Helen Mirren on the cover of the video. Which um we managed to sell 10,000 copies before she noticed. [JS & LM laugh] And then we had to drop it. That was how it worked, which was that we recognized the video market was different from the theatrical market, but the theatrical market could gear you [up] with the reviews and everything else to get the video out there. But then you had to realise the video market was slightly different. Um so anyway through all that process of success with Palace, Nik had started off, when he split with Richard, a video editing company, a satellite dish company, a software company, a record distribution company in Holland – 10 businesses. Nothing to do with me at all. I knew nothing about satellite dishes then and I know nothing about them now...And this was a, I didn't perceive this as being a problem, 'cos we were doing so well. 'Cos our distribution arm was doing brilliantly, and our production arm was doing brilliantly, and we were making loads and loads of money, but when I started *Company of Wolves*, Nik Powell said to me, I want to make you half the company. And given that as I was just in my mid-20s I thought, wow this is amazing, I'm half of all these business that I knew nothing about. But that's because he didn't want to lose me. I had said I want my own producer's contract, and he said it should just be with Palace. I said how does that work? And he said if you are Palace then that works. I said OK fine 'cos I was very flattered. Then when we finally had a couple of flops, *The Big Man* was a flop and *The Miracle* – Neil Jordan film - was a flop, we went through a lean year. But instead of having the backlog of all the great years to back us – all the years of *When Harry Met Sally*, and *The Snowman*, and Michael Jackson [*Thriller*]. All that money had been sucked into the all the other projects...the software companies that lost £2 million, and the record distribution company in Holland. So we had nothing, so it was kind of a tragedy. But like a

phoenix, I, personally, did *Interview with a Vampire*, because Neil and I were in LA, doing all our stuff for *Crying Game*, and David Geffen asked Neil to direct *Interview* because Neil had written the script, and Neil was doing a project with me, so Geffen asked me to produce it. So then I [had] my first ever proper fee on a film, for Warner Bros, and made a proper studio film, which was a great experience, and a great time for all of us. But I didn't want to dump Nik so I kept...we started Scala but I knew that I would probably go, as I did, on this studio journey, making 3 films with Warner Bros. And I would keep doing stuff with Scala, like *Backbeat*, which was the most significant film I think we did in those early years. And a film that I developed with John with uh Ian Softly [?] for years before Palace um but I never really did Scala I never really – I was always wandering around. Except for *Neon Bible* which was again a project, I think the films we took from Palace I still kept fairly much close to. Which was *Neon Bible*, *Backbeat*, *Jonathan Wild*, which never got made, which is very sad to this day. I think there were about 5 projects, and I think most of them did get made. 1 or 2...*History is Made at Night*. And then Film 4 did, did Film4 do *Backbeat*, or did Polygram do *Backbeat*?

LM: Polygram did do *Backbeat* but I think Film4 put a little bit into it. Because they had it on their, they broadcast it on Film on Four, so they might have had television rights or something. Um but I don't think they had any equity in that. But they did *The Neon Bible* didn't they? *The Woodlanders* they had. [SW: No, we didn't do that.] Not *The Woodlanders*, *The Hollow Reed*.

SW: Well Liz produced those. And those were 2 that we did with David. And then there was, of course, *Little Voice*, was the big big hit, and that was with David I think, wasn't it? And *Fever Pitch*. We did *Fever Pitch* with David.

JS: That's a bit more recent isn't it?

LM: That was '96, wasn't it?

SW: My assistant Amanda Posey was...I bought it as *Fever Pitch* as a book, and I read it, and I bought 10 copies for friends for Xmas presents – I'm a Spurs fan. And Amanda Posey said, God you love this book. I said it's great, one of the best books I've ever read about being a football fan – it's great, all the heartbreak, all the sorrow, all the joy. And um she read it, and said well, are you going to make it as a film? I said can't make it as a film, it's about Arsenal, that's against my nature! And she said well can I make it then? And I said yeah sure I'll exec-produce it and you produce it. That's what happened. And then of course I did have the awful day of watching rushes with David Aukin, who's an Arsenal fan of course, through and through.

LM: He had a cameo in that, as well.

SW: He did. But it was like oh watching rushes it was the 2nd goal that Michael Thomas scored against Liverpool. We had to watch the whole thing...with uh David Aukin and it was Allon Reich crowing every time the ball went in. It was uh yeah but

that was one of the last Film4 things we did at Scala. And then yes we did *Little Voice*, is that not on your list?

JS: Oh yes it is, '98.

SW: Yeah that was one of the very last films. Because Paul Webster was at Miramax then...and went onto Channel 4.

JS: And then David Aukin went on to form HAL with Colin Leventhal...a curious exchange...

SW: Which was the Miramax...We didn't do HAL, we didn't do anything with them...*Little Voice* was the last successful thing I did with them. 'Cos I did *B. Monkey* with Miramax, I don't think we did that with Film4. I'm pretty sure...But then we did one colossal disaster with the new Film4. Which was, in fact, famously the best deal I ever did on a film as a producer, it was a movie called *The Actors*, which was, I got all sorts of rights and box-office bonuses, and copyright, and everything on that film. And in the end the film just did not work. It's the weirdest film in the world. [JS: I haven't seen it...] Exactly. [SW: Have you seen it?] [LM: I haven't seen it...]There you go.

JS: Did Paul Webster fund that? It was before Tessa arrived?

SW: It was before Tessa and it was an idea that Neil Jordan had, and we had developed it, we had a deal with Dreamworks for 3 years. And we, it was commissioned and written for Dreamworks. And they...we were going to make it, oh God, it was going to be Edward Norton, either Edward Norton or Dustin Hoffman, one or the other was going to be in it. Either the older guy...that Michael Caine eventually played, was going to be Dustin Hoffman [originally], and then we were going to cast a British or Irish actor, or...we were going to cast a British or Irish actor...and then the young guy would be Edward Norton. Anyway, Dreamworks fucked around with Edward Norton for about a year. Finally it wasn't going to get made. And then I rang up and said can we just make it, give it back to us. And he very kindly did give it back to us; it was a really good script, written by Conor McPherson, from a Neil Jordan idea. And Conor ended up directing it. And everyone wanted to make it. Harvey said fine I'll give you this for America, everybody, the BBC wanted to make it, Film4, and finally I was negotiating with the BBC, it was proving difficult for different reasons. And Paul Webster said I'll do it. So at that point in the negotiation, I said we need this, this and this, and he said fine. And then we got Dylan Moran and Michael Caine and Miranda Richardson and Michael Gambon. It was a terrific cast, and a great script. And either Atlantic or Momentum released it – huge campaign, buses everything. And it was the weekend of Cannes. And I remember that Friday everyone was going on about, well we should do 1.1 at the weekend, but if we do 800 that'd be OK, but we'll do more than that. And I was thinking we'd do 1.2 or 1.3...I think we did 300. It was so below par, it was the most depressing weekend I've ever spent in Cannes. And it was just a fucking flop, and I

can't tell you why. And Harvey didn't release it in America. He said to me, he said, in his great crushing voice [?] ...cruel but kind, he said when they see those names in front of the film, they see Neil Jordan's names, Conor McPherson's name, and they see your name...he was flattering me...but then when they see Michael Caine they will expect something and when they don't get that they will kill you, critics will kill you, 'cos it's just not going to get up to their level. And he didn't even try to change that. He didn't even say we shoot...Lena Headey was the lead girl, she was brilliant. Just somehow, it just didn't work.

JS: What year was *Last Orders*?

SW: No, I didn't do *Last Orders*.

JS: I know you didn't. [SW: It was Nik...] No, but I'm thinking, I'm thinking, similar kind of subject treatment, you know, all-star British cast.

SW: Yeah, *Last Orders* was quite a good film. It didn't have very much to do with that.

JS: It was around that kind of time I've got a feeling...

SW: Yeah. Nik did *Last Orders*, and that was one of the last Scala things we did. And that was a good film, Fred Schepisi, and that was good. *Actors* was totally different, it was not a comedy. It was a stupid comedy. It wasn't comedy drama.

JS: It wasn't funny.

SW: I didn't say that. I would say it wasn't funny *enough*. [JS: I didn't see it.] Go and see it. Or don't actually, it's not funny enough!

JS: Well look I know time is at a premium, can I ask one last thing? I mean, you know, in a sense of the trajectory of the whole thing. You've subsequently made films, I mean you know *Dagenham* etc. etc. that have had Film4 involvement and you work with Tessa. How different is it now? I mean you've been, you've worked through this whole trajectory of Channel 4. How different is it now or how similar is it?

SW: We've got 3 or 4 films in development with Film4, it's totally different. I think, I think really the...it's kind of come full circle. I think one has to go, from Paul [Webster?] Film4 had gone to a place of taking its success to the casino and playing the bigger tables. [JS: As an independent...] Yeah it had gone from, with all the corporation of Channel 4 and all the advertising money, and everything that Channel 4 has. You know, what was a slight afterthought at the beginning of Jeremy Isaacs' thing, with David Rose as benevolent patron of some money for films, um which eschewed and pretended that the nasty world of film didn't encroach on them. It went on from that to sort of middle ground [with] David Aukin to another place, with Film4, with their own sales company, their own distribution company, with their own output deals, with some money from sellers [?] from Germany, as an output deal, the deal

with Warner Bros in America. It went to, from initially pretending that world didn't exist, to fully embracing that world. I think when Tessa came over, she went back to, well we know that world exists but you know, what we're going to do, is try to keep it at bay and go back to trying to get the young talent, and try to use some of the talent that we've got experience with. Finding Steve McQueen, working with uh Roger Michel, working with people we know we can, we've worked with in the past...Ken Loach, let's look at our roots and let's look at not trying to overreach ourselves. Um of course they've done *The Lovely Bones* and they've done a few, those kind of films, but they've kept their involvement to a fairly small minimum. So they haven't overextended themselves into power-mad. Not that anyone ever did that, by the way, but they haven't over-extended themselves to that level that Goldcrest or Handmade went to, where you're basically at the top, top table. Because you're not at the top table, you're at one of the top tables which gets you to the top table. And they've kept to the the small tables, and tried to keep it there...and um oh much more auteur-driven [?]. And it's complemented by the BBC. The BBC's rise in the last 10 years has also been a very good balance with Film4, in terms of the BBC, the BBC *are* more populist and more driven by conceptual thoughts about what the film could be, what is the audience for that. Film4 are more driven by the talent.

JS: And still more adventurous I think...

SW: They're more adventurous because they don't, they believe in branding and they don't believe in necessarily the business. So it's a different concept. So I think that's really the difference and I think it's um...we have films that fit in [the] Film4 area, which we have 4 films in development with them at the moment, and we have films that we fit with, in the BBC area. So we have *Great Expectations* in post-production with them. I would have thought that *Byzantium* would work with Film4, but it didn't, and we've financed it and we made it anyway. And it's the closest thing to *The Company of Wolves* that we've done, so that's really fun, Moira Buffini has written a great script, it's like *Interview with a Vampire*, it's like *Company of Wolves*, it's really great, which I think Film4 felt this isn't commercial because it's kind of conceptually different from what they've done, and it's possibly more mainstream. So you have...but there are other films that we're working on now in post [-production] but for the future, there's a lot of stuff we're working with them on. And we had a really good relationship with them on *How to Lose Friends [and Alienate People]*, a *really* good relationship with them on *When Did You Last See Your Father?* And we love working with them, I love Tessa, she's great. But it is more back to the David Rose philosophy and the way that, and the BBC in a sense is more slightly more into their mainstream, but having said that, you see if you were blindfold and you go *Bend it Like Beckham* this is...uh and you'll know that it's a Film4 series, but if you took for instance um *Inbetweeners*, that should be a BBC Film, but it's a Film4 film. It's weird, because it's exactly what you'd expect the BBC to do, because they did *Streetdance*. So *Streetdance* is more BBC, and *Shame* is more Film4. But then

Film4 did the *Inbetweeners*. So you kind of go that's weird, because it shouldn't go that way.

JS: But maybe that's a good thing.

SW: It's a great thing, and it gives us hope because you think they're not entirely like that. You know. What's going to be interesting over the next few years is what happens at the BFI, because Ben was Film4, because he was with Protagonist. The new appointment there, that will be interesting. The next chapter...

JS: Thank you so much. What we'll do is transcribe this and send you a copy...