Tessa Ross, 01/08/13

Tessa Ross was appointed Head of Drama at Channel 4 in 2000 and was Controller of Film and Drama, 2002-2014.

Interviewers: Justin Smith and Laura Mayne

JS: I understand when you joined Channel 4 from the BBC that you didn't come straight to film.

TR: No, I came in as Head of Drama.

JS: And FilmFour had been through this period of quasi-independence under Paul Webster. When you went for the Film4 job, was that a sense of this has come off the rails slightly, we need to get back to basics a bit, was that part of the kind of job description?

TR: No, it wasn't really like that. The first thing was that the pressure on FilmFour Ltd was so huge because it was all about delivering cash, and secondly it was impossible for them to do that in such a short space of time. If you asked, 'were there some good films at that time?', you'd say, 'Yes'. They made *Sexy Beast* (2000), *The Warrior* (2001), *The Motorcycle Diaries* (2004) to name a few – all great films. But their starting point was, 'We're going to have some hits'. And that was bloody difficult.

JS: In the short term.

TR: In the short term. And look, if they'd had enough money to pay for it for ten years it may well all have become brilliant. Why would it not be? But it was about the structure and the expectations placed on that organization, and the fact that it wasn't

just investing in production, it was also then doubling that money by spending it on distribution. Traditional British high-end films would not have been where Paul Webster's head was at that time because they would not have been hits – they would have been critical successes, but not hits.

JS: So what was your idea?

TR: The idea was to focus on the films. There was £10 million on the table. Everybody was gone. It was absolutely devastating – everybody wrote about FilmFour then that it was dead, it was defunct: 'the now-dead FilmFour' was what, if you Googled FilmFour, you got everywhere. And Channel 4 was eking out as slowly as possible the stock of films that it didn't want to play. So there were a number of issues. One was, Channel 4 needed to want the films that were made by FilmFour. It needed to want to play them, and it needed to feel its relationship with those films, rather than feel it was separate. In a way *Ali G Indahouse* (2002) had been the biggest example of that problem. That *Ali G* had gone to Working Title, having been developed as a character by Channel 4, seemed terrible. So the question was, how do you prevent those things happening? Of course you can't stop all of them happening, but you can be built in such a way that you encourage that synergy, rather than lose it. So it was about having Channel 4 want the films, and having the talent that comes into Channel 4 believing that film is a possibility for them as part of their livelihood, and as part of their ambition. And having Film4 addressing its relationship to the industry. So we needed to look inside: 'How do we make you want from us?' And we needed to look outside: 'How do we make you want to be working with us?' So the fixing was sort of being an answer to these problems. What did the Channel need? They needed good stuff that gets their name out in the world, and makes them look like they mean who they are. And what do the talent want? They

need a collaborative, supportive, public service, British home that understands its own audience and its role amongst whatever other public money is out there. I mean that sounds very thought-through, and I probably didn't articulate it at all well at the beginning. But I basically said to Mark [Thompson], 'You have to write-off £10 million, and I'll get you some good stuff on telly. Write it off, and I'll make sure that whatever we deliver, at the very worst will look like Channel 4's heart on telly. It may not be a hit in the cinema; it may not win you a prize. The worst version of it will be that when it comes back to telly; it will look like Channel 4. And I will be talking to talent that you want in the building, that is already in the building, and we'll be discovering new talent as well.'

LM: This is how long is a piece of string question, but how long would you say you spend at script development level at Film4?

TR: Within the team a huge amount of time, a huge amount of resource. In our Development Team we've got three editors and a Head of Development, and an assistant who logs and coordinates everything. We've got some external readers, and an intern who occasionally works with us, so it is a big resource to us. Because we understand that we're not cash rich, but what we can do is develop good material with producers, with or without directors, and build up enough of the kinds of material that Channel 4 needs to have, that Film4 needs to have, and also have ownership of that material. That's the only way that we could develop a project. We wouldn't start off thinking, 'Well we could make a $15 million movie'. Instead, we develop material with the producers and the talent, and then later down the line somebody else who believes in that material comes in and writes a cheque for it. It means that our small investment is delivering us huge value at the other end. If we didn't own the project

up front we wouldn't get it, so what we've tried to do is spend time and money on development.

LM: What proportion of your overall budget would you say you invested in development?

TR:I would say it's just under 20%.

LM: And is there a typical budget in your slate across films that are in development and films that are in production and being released, how do you balance that?

TR Well it balances itself, because I'm not in charge of when things are released. But if I said to you I've got 100 projects in development, we've probably got sixteen projects in various stages of production at any one time. And we've usually got eight or nine films just released or about to be released. It's a constant challenge really, and of the projects we're invested in at least 70% are projects we've developed. At least - if not more. Which means if we didn't build them a lot of the films wouldn't get made. If we just sat around and said, 'We'll take one of those', we wouldn't get what we wanted or we wouldn't get the films. So in a way we're definitely feeding a certain sort of flavour into the industry, there's no question. And that may be a good or bad thing, because who knows whether or not someone else would do it differently, or the flavour would be different. But given that our taste is to be adventurous and drive new talent, and be curious and at least edgier in some way, do things that other people wouldn't, there is a flavour that we are injecting into the industry which definitely has a different energy.

JS: And to serve a public remit which has some of that at least enshrined in its core values, and has done from the start. Now you don't wait for scripts to come through the letterbox.

TR: Yes, and we're extremely proactive. David Rose was the most wonderful Head of Film Four and is an example of how goodness and humanity can make talent grow. I mean it doesn't get better than that really, and he's such an exceptional human being. But at the time no-one else was doing it in that way. Now we're competing as well as building, so we've got to do a bit of what David was doing – as well as we can, because none of us can be David – but equally we've got to grow, and we've got to deal with America a hell of a lot more, we've got to deal with other money a hell of a lot more; we've got massive commercial pressures on us. It requires a little bit of a different process.

JS: And there's an independent film sector, which you're at the centre of, which there wasn't [then].

TR: Exactly. And I think never rest on your laurels and think you're doing it the right way. There's isn't a meeting where we sit down and go, 'Aren't we clever, gosh that was easy'. We always sit down and go 'Gosh, what aren't we doing? And how do we make it alright? That sounds good and that sounds good, and we're not doing it, and why aren't we doing it, and how can we change that?' That doesn't mean to say we're always going to get it right, but that constant churn and expectation of change is really important.

JS: And important to the vitality of a creative atmosphere. So how do you manage the workload across that team, in the sense, the Development Heads, do they have their own people?

TR: Rose Garnett the Head of Development is new; she's completely brilliant. She seems to have an appetite for work like nobody I've ever seen - apart from Katherine Butler, who was until recently Deputy Head of Film, who also has the most amazing appetite for work. And you're surrounded by these people who have a massive passion, there's no jobsworth about it. And how does it work? Well, everybody feeds in ideas and we have a very rigorous development meeting, where everyone discusses who they're meeting, and what they've read, and who they've seen…

JS: On a weekly basis or a monthly basis?

R: On a weekly basis. So Development is really in control of the development slate and we all throw into it. Their job is also to find those ideas and churn them – and we all feed in. If you imagine it's a lovely big basket where the Execs – Sam Lavender and Anna Higgs – and I, we all throw in ideas. And we follow that up with a development meeting where we talk about what we might want to green-light, whether it's worth green-lighting and how we might move it forward. We all get involved and talk about what we're doing. Then at the production stage I will make decisions along with my Exec team, but actually the development team will get involved here too.

JS: So how soon would Sue Bruce-Smith get involved?

TR: She's not really involved in early development – but she comes to editorial meetings, she reads scripts early on, we talk about ideas, we often talk about directors and producers, and matching people up. She's very involved the minute we decide to move things into production – in conversations about scale and value, and how things should be built, she's unbelievably involved.

JS: I was going to ask you something about distribution actually, because this is something that interests me. You said it ages and ages and ages ago: that the problem is not getting British films made, it's getting British films seen. I know that during your tenure you've been involved in some quite imaginative ways of setting up some distribution arrangements and partnerships, as indeed have some of your predecessors with greater or lesser success. I mean how much power and influence have you got to move things on the distribution front, to influence the distribution sector, the distribution problem there seems to be in this country?

TR: It's not easy, there's no silver bullet. The question you're asking is the right question – how do we make sure people want to see the films we make. We might be making the right films, but they're not the right films if nobody sees them. And as I said earlier the one good thing we've got is that we have the Film4 channel and we have Channel 4, and we can make sure that in some way those films are seen. But given that some of the films are small and new and without stars, how do we create the appetite? Which is why Film4.0 was built.

[1] To ask ourselves, what can we do, what can we build around the films? I mean, of course it was about finding talent as well and making things differently, but part of it, the third leg of that set up was, how can we make sure that we build around the films because distributors often aren't on board until very late? But the materials might be lost by then, the ideas might be lost by then, we might have to tell stories about some of our characters online and in order to create an appetite for the films, so that audiences do want to see them. So, it's so the right question. And I suppose the only thing I can say is that we're asking it all the time and trying to find different ways of answering it. Trying to address the windowing issue is a big part of what we're doing. We're working, I think, in really innovative ways with *Stone Roses: Made of Stone* (2013) or with…

JS: *A Field in England* (2013)?

TR: *A Field in England* is a brilliant experiment, and doing it with a director who is such an adventurer, who is up for it, whose producers are up for it, who wants to understand how people consume his work because he's interested in audience; but he's also interested in film. Is it worth waiting for two years for a film that's been in cinemas? – no, it's not. The crass answer is always make films people want to see. But that isn't enough – because we haven't got the marketing budgets. So we've got to find ways of television driving VOD maybe – not always waiting for VOD and then television being at the end. It's just playing with that whole structure, and getting partners who are prepared to play with you. Because they're going to get it wrong as well as get it right. But I don't have an answer, I wish I had an answer!

JS: No no, in a sense you've provided lots of answers in the variety of different things you're doing. Clearly there isn't one thing – there is also the role of festivals, for example.

TR: It's so interesting to me that the big films – the films that have success – have success almost all the time on the back of a successful US release, which means that a UK film-going audience are influenced more than anything by American success, which is depressing. And how can we change that? Well, we understand British television – maybe there is something we should be doing differently that we're not yet doing. But we do need to keep asking that question.

JS: Yeah, very much so. It's like we can only really believe something when it's sold back to us by the Americans.

LM: How important are European festivals like Cannes, how does reception and awards influence distribution here?

TR: A lot of the films that go to those festivals have already got distribution. Obviously a lot of those films go there to sell. There are films we've made that have huge need of that launch, partly because they're sold to distributors at those launch festivals, partly because winning prizes allows people to feel confident about picking up or spending money on those films. So there is nothing that isn't useful for a small independent or medium-sized independent film.

LM: I suppose it depends on the market doesn't it?

TR: And you just have to place it right and not kill your film before it's had a life. Because you can put your film in the wrong festival or in the wrong launch position,

and it's gone before it's even existed. You know, that can happen too. So you do need people who think very carefully about the options.

JS: This is a question that I've asked…well almost everyone we've spoken to…about this notion of what a typical Film4 is, and how, and particularly perhaps these days, how the Film4 brand is differentiated from BBC Films? They're no longer picking up Film4 rejects; they're the first port of call for some people.

TR: What would you say about that?

JS: I'm asking the questions!

TR: No, but I'm really interested.

JS: OK. I would say the word you used earlier, which was 'edgy', I think by and large they appeal to a slightly younger demographic than, say, BBC Films does. And I think often they're from the wrong side of the tracks or they fit with the multicultural - as it used to be called - diversity agenda in some ways. And I still think there's a remarkable continuity, it seems to me, across Film4's work, of, I don't want to say ticking those boxes because that sounds very functional, but of that kind of spirit. And attracting filmmaking talent of an age and a stage in its career when it wants to be edgy, it wants to find its voice.

TR: I think that's true for a lot of our output. I would say that the liberating thing about Film4 is that it is about filmmaking – it really is about filmmaking. Everything we make must sit on the Channel – and it will sit on the Channel if it's made with purpose as a film because that's what the Channel believes in. And that means that Mike Leigh, who's still making films for us, is making films for us.

JS: And he comes back to you.

TR: I honestly believe that if there is a clear purpose and authorship, a sense of a need for resonance in the work that's being done, then it works for Film4. I would also say if you think you're a great filmmaker and you've got something to say that no one else can say, then you should probably be working at Film4. We should be doing stuff that no one else can do, so there's a kind of comfort when people want to go to their truest place, to believe they're going somewhere that will defend the best essence of their work. That doesn't mean to say that the BBC doesn't make great work – it does. But it's very driven by the story and by its accessibility to the audience on television.

JS: It's a kind of literary sensibility to filmmaking; I don't mean in a literary adaptation sense, but I think there's a kind of, there's literary qualities, character-driven narratives.

TR: I mean I would ask you which of the films that the BBC made, that really you think should be or are Film4s? I can tell you what they are.

JS: *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011).

TR: Yeah. People congratulated me on that film all the time. *Fish Tank* (2009) too.

JS: *Fish Tank*, yeah. And *Morvern Callar* (2001).

TR: And why? Because they are about filmmaking. They're filmmaker-driven films. And I find that really interesting. Brilliant that they were made, and I sort of think we probably would have made them, or should have made them, or could have made them. But it is quite clear that some films are right for the BBC and I've called up Christine [Langan][2] and said I think you should make this film. It's not because it's bad, it's not because I wouldn't love to go and see it.

JS: And of course, they've got the great example of selling the BBC, the ability of films to sell the BBC brand in the States, which is fantastic and I mean which is one of the other benefits.

TR: Film4 is a great brand because it's a recognised film brand, and BBC Films is a still viewed essentially as a television brand. And I don't know enough about branding or about the BBC's rules about its own branding, but when you call something BBC Films you sound like you're talking about television. And when you say Film4 people know you're talking about film. And that's why we've had a hugely valuable boost, having a channel and having a brand, because Film4 channel can celebrate us, even if Channel 4 doesn't regularly put us in the same slot.

JS: It's very clever actually, because at one time you had a very close relationship with the Channel - a closer relationship than BBC Films has with television - and yet at the same time your brand identity is sufficiently robust that actually Film4 seems to be about making films.

TR: But I do think it's been hard won.

JS: It's evolved.

TR: I don't think it was like that. It's been hard won, and I've now got a Chief Exec[3] who gets it, and that's made a massive difference. You cannot deny - ever - that you need the people around you to want it too. And in truth this is the first time somebody's said to me, 'I get how valuable what's going on here is'. You know, that your £15 million's delivering £90-100 millions-worth of film. That the brand, when it's visible, is brilliant on big films. You know fighting for branding on our big films has been hugely important. Having this talent talking about us without them asking to, is

so wonderful. You know somebody getting up at a BAFTA ceremony and saying, 'I'd like to thank Film4', is worth a fortune. We don't do advertising of ourselves. It's wonderful. It's about people feeling that they have a shared ownership because it's not about us, it's about them.

JS: And a huge flagship for the Channel of course.

TR: Exactly. And he gets it, and is very supportive. So it can take one person to come in and change that, for the BBC to get it right.

LM: Nowadays the government requires public service broadcasters to support the film industry, a situation that would have been unthinkable in 1982, when Channel 4 started. What does television's commitment bring to the British film industry?

TR: I think it brings most of its films actually, doesn't it? It brings most of its public service support.

LM: And can you see a scope for the expansion of television's involvement in film in the future?

TR: Yes I can. There's always an argument for where more money can exist, and where more visibility for films can exist. And given that we're talking about windowing, and how many more films will have that theatrical life. How many more films might reach their audiences sooner or differently on VOD and television? Of course those things will change. But I can't predict much further than that!

JS: Yeah. But there's plenty of government support in the Policy Review that you yourself were involved with, wanting to get Sky on board and so on and so forth.

TR: Yes. I think it's absolutely right that if you're making your money out of content, you owe it to this industry to build this industry. Not just this industry but public service television, not just film but television as well. And actually the truth is that it does seem odd to me to be able to come in and squeeze value out of the market without constantly putting it back in. And I think it's brilliant and right that Channel 4 is committed by licence now to make films. But then Channel 4's public service remit is onerous and big, and of course it makes it its special self. But it also has a huge commitment to an awful lot of duty, as does the BBC. So of course what you want is a vibrant, different range of possibility, from public service to completely commercial. But you do want there to be a duty to the next generation of talent, to the content industry of this country.

JS: Absolutely. I think what's interesting, following on from that, is that over 30 years Channel 4 and latterly the BBC have forged a place, a sort of tier, a layer within the film culture that is unique. I mean it does exist elsewhere in Europe, but is unique as this kind of cultural subsidy, and I think that's hugely influential on the kinds of film that get made and the kind of film culture you have, and the kind of films that you've been talking about that wouldn't have existed otherwise, or would have perhaps existed differently otherwise.

TR: And if you think that the people who we're working with in America, given that we're speaking the same language, and therefore can come and squeeze value, make money out of what we're doing – the pressure on them is for every dollar, to deliver a bottom line. And that isn't the pressure on us. Of course that pressure grows and the market gets tougher in television, and commercial television particularly. But, in truth, if I made a tiny percentage back of what I invested but delivered great work, that would be OK, because that's my job. And that's the big

difference between the pressure on Paul Webster and the pressure on us. Because I said, ‘let me call it making great work rather than making money, and then we might get somewhere’. And that actually is a massive liberation, and of course that privilege does not exist anywhere else.

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[1] Film 4.0 was a low-budget digital film initiative established in 2011 under Commissioning Executive Anna Higgs. It pioneered the user-generated competition Scene Stealers, developed documentary projects with Carol Morley (*Dreams of a Life*, 2011) and Ken Loach (*The Spirit of ’45*, 2013), worked with Warp Films and Shynola on the Vimeo short *Dr. Easy* (2013), and produced Ben Wheatley’s *A Field in England* (2013). From 2014 its digital innovation activities are being incorporated into Film4.
[2] Christine Langan was appointed Executive Producer at BBC Films in 2006 and, since 2009, has been its Creative Director.
[3] David Abraham was appointed Chief Executive of Channel 4 in 2010.