

BAFTA Screenwriters' Lecture Series: Dee Rees  
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**Jeremy Brock:** I'm Jeremy Brock and on behalf of BAFTA, the JJ Charitable Trust and Lucy Guard, welcome to the third in our quartet of lectures for this year. Tonight's speaker is one of America's foremost writer-directors, a visionary talent with a God-given gift for humanising complex narrative. Dee's credits as a screenwriter and director include *Pariah*, *Bessie* and her latest film, *Mudbound*. Anyone who's seen *Mudbound* will be left reeling by its brutal classicism, its unwavering veracity and its sheer humanity. Vision is a word overused, abstruse and often misused, but the vision in this film is extraordinary; the control of tone, content and theme speaks of a huge and fierce emotional intelligence at work. So it's with great pride that we welcome Dee to these lectures. We'll begin with a short clip of her work, Dee will then lecture, followed by a moderated Q&A with the preeminent producer of this series and BAFTA's programme manager, Mariayah Khaderbai. As always we'll then open it up to the floor. Thank you and I hope you enjoy what I know will be a wonderful evening. Thank you.

[Applause]

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

**Dee Rees:** Thank you guys. So first of all, thanks to the JJ Charitable Trust and thanks to BAFTA for having me and thanks to all of you guys for wanting to listen. I have to say, standing here in The British Museum, it feels like a huge, momentous occasion, so I tried to psyche myself out by pretending it wasn't a big deal on the way over. But standing in the midst of all these antiquities, you know, it didn't work.

So, I should let you know right away that I have more questions than I have answers, so rather than talking on a particular theme I thought I'd share with you some of the questions that I ask myself in writing and some of the ways in which I interrogate the material. Um, yeah.

So the first is, let me go to the first slide: Saying what they don't mean. And so basically people in real life rarely say exactly what's on their mind or exactly what they feel. And they do this for a number of reasons, right? So either they're protecting the self or they're protecting the other person. And so it's really weird in cinema when people give these full on, heartfelt, emotional monologues, you know, that are expositional and saying exactly what

they think, because that's not really how it goes in life. And so I had this great writing professor, his name was Mick Kassal, and so his idea was this thing called the 'triple bumper theory,' and this was the idea that whatever someone really feels, back off of it three times, and then you'll get to the thing that maybe should be on the page, right?

So for example, right, a love scene: You know, girl meets girl, right, so they're in love. So, you know, the thing that is meant is: 'I love you,' right? But you wouldn't say that, right, because there's a risk you might be rejected, so maybe you back it off once and it's, 'I love your sweater,' right?

[Laughter]

But even that feels too risky, so you could back it off again and say, 'Where did you buy that sweater?' you know? And then if you want you could back it off again and say, 'I heard there's a sale at Topshop on sweaters,' you know, so...

[Laughter]

And then as a director the subtext of that, 'I hear there's a sale at Topshop' is really, 'I love you,' you know?

[Laughter]

And that comes across in the scene; the audience is smart, the audience gets it. So as a writer, you know, you don't want to put it exactly on the page that way, so there's that buffer there.

So for you the writer, when you're writing dialogue, there are no consequences, right? And so there's a temptation for your characters to be this avatar, this kind of courageous defender that goes off and says the things that you want to say, but just, you know, keeping in mind that for the character there are consequences, there's very real consequences and they would protect themselves from that. And so, um, yeah. So rather than let characters be your champion, you have to understand the consequences they're in and kind of protect them with the dialogue. So with that, I'll let you play the first clip, and this is a scene from *Pariah* where Arthur, Alike's father, and Alike are kind of dancing around the truth, and then we'll talk about it a bit.

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[Clip plays]

Cool, so...

[Applause]

So that's like a three or four part scene, right? So the first part of the scene is kind of confrontation, you know? So we see these characters constantly kind of advancing and retreating from each other. So in the first part it's a confrontation; Alike is confronting her father who's obviously having an affair, but she can't quite prick him with it. He kind of bats her away and says, 'why are you questioning me?' So then the scene turns, and then it's Arthur's turn to advance: 'Oh you mom wants me to ask...' And so he tiptoes up to the line and he really wants to ask about her sexuality. And then he retreats, you know, and doesn't do it. And then in the end Alike goes back again and she advances to the line, and you know... And so going to the triple bumper theory, for example, in the beginning of the scene when he throws away the plate: Alike, I mean Alike's not that concerned about her mother's Tupperware, she's more concerned about the marriage. So when she's like, 'Dad you're throwing away the plate,' she's more like 'Dad you're throwing away us,' or 'Dad, you're throwing away the marriage,' or 'Dad you're throwing away the relationship,' you know, 'Don't you want the relationship?' And so that's an example of like an object kind of standing in for the real thing that the character wants to talk about.

And you know when we're talking about consequences earlier, so people say things or don't say things either because they want to avoid something or because they want something to happen. And so this scene is a stance of avoidance, right? And so when you're writing you're asking 'well what are your characters avoiding?' And so for the father, Arthur, he knows his daughter is gay, but he's avoiding kind of like the direct knowledge of that because to him that means things have to change. And so Arthur's main drive when I was directing is to maintain the status quo—so he wants to not know so things can stay the same. And with Alike, right? She doesn't want to know that her father is cheating although she knows he's cheating. Why? What are the consequences? Because the consequences of that knowledge means she has to hurt her mother, because if she knows then she has to

say something to her mother. And so she's like avoiding hurting her mother. And that's the kind of, that's part of the dance in that scene. And so, you know, in the end there's this kind of like consummation of this—they agree to keep each other's secrets, the sip of beer becomes this kind of like consummation of, 'We're both not going to say,' you know, this subversive thing that happens. And so all of that, as a director, you're working into the plot, and also in blocking. So when we go to the third part of the scene where the father tries to kind of confront once more, I had them facing away from each other because sometimes it's easier to say things if you're not looking at someone. So it's just like something to think about as you're writing and dealing with the truth and avoidance and all that good stuff.

Another example of this will be from my film *Bessie*, and so this example—same kind of thing: Instead of saying what they don't mean, in this clip people are, like, avoiding saying the thing. So in this scene my conception is Viola is saying 'You owe me,' and Bessie is saying 'You don't owe me.' And we play out that dialogue, we play out that kind of unspoken dialogue, through their action. So we'll see the second clip.

[Clip plays]

So we can stop that one there, yeah. Cool.

[Laughter]

It's a trap. That's what's in the package. So here's an example, in context of the rest of the movie—we rarely see Bessie hesitant or afraid, right? So, you know, she's the baby sister but she's still... When she comes into contact with Viola, Viola's on her turf, Viola's taking up her territory, she's trying on her make-up, using her things. There's a hostility in that; 'these are my things'. And this is the first time we see Bessie kind of like on her heels. And so, you know, we're saying so much in this; there's a guilt in that. Bessie feels guilty about what she has, she's afraid of Viola. She maybe some part of her believes she does owe Viola because Viola hasn't had the life that she's had and she took care of her as a child. And so all that's playing out in the blocking and the body language and then Bessie coming to take back her territory, you know, the subtle threat with the scissors—or maybe not so subtle. But, you know, there's this kind of idea where Bessie's going to, like, reclaim her space, she's going to like

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reclaim her area, but even when she does reclaim her territory, Viola, even though she's diminutive, still has this hold over her. And so that's another example of people not saying what they mean. That 'I'm proud of you,' obviously that's like the opposite of what she means. And so, yeah, that.

Alright, so the next thing: narrative lyricism. And so this is about, you know, separating your voice as a writer from a voice as a character. I think first time filmmakers, even second-time filmmakers as a tendency to make your character an artist or a writer—I did it. I know, I did. And you know, why do people do that? They do that because then the character's an even better vessel for your like, you know, writer-ly, poetic kind of things that you want to say.

But it goes back to the first point about not making the character an avatar for your voice, but if your character does have an artistic voice, if there is a lyricism to their language, how do you separate it out? How do you make sure that this poem is coming from them, or this thought is coming from them and not just coming from you? Like how do you translate it into the characters kind of terms? And um, I would say that in blending your voice with the character's voice, be mindful: What is your character's scope of experiences? Like if you're a forty year-old screenwriter who's travelled the world and you're writing a seventeen year-old woman who's never left Brooklyn, you know, then automatically you have to be careful of your references, even in lyrics. You can't reference things they wouldn't have seen, and even in terms of like, fears—the thing that you fear, like aging or loneliness or death, may not be the thing that your character fears. So when you're crafting poetry for them or crafting things for them, what is it they're afraid of? What is it that they desire? And trying not to transpose your own desires onto your characters.

I would also say, like, figuring out your characters' reference points of the world. You know, people's worlds tend to be routine and small, in a way. And so how they compose metaphors about their life is based on things they've seen or experienced. Um, so, the next clip is from *Pariah*, it's the end poem. And actually, I didn't even want to write this poem when we were in the production of it because I felt like, 'oh, it'll be corny, it'll be yet another film where the protagonist is an artist and

delivers a poem in the end and I don't want to do it.' And my editor Mako Kamitsuna was like, 'Oh just write something, like, just write it, record it and if you hate it we won't use it.' And so for *Pariah* we had like one day of pick-ups, we had to shoot the rooftop scene between Alike and her father because it was snowing the first time we tried to shoot it, so we had to come back and get it when it wasn't snowing. It was the same physical location as where we shot the classroom location. So I wrote this poem on a napkin at a Starbucks and then we, you know, popped down and shot it, and I'm glad we did. But this is—the thing I was struggling with and afraid of was what was my voice and what was Alike's voice? And so yeah, we'll see that.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

So that always chokes me up, so it's probably a little more my voice than Alike's voice.

[Laughter]

But that's an example. And I would say, you know, also between characters, each character has their own separate vocabulary: Even people who live in the same household, even people who are best friends, even people of the same, you know, nationality. People have their own kind of favourite words and things they reuse and so even when characters are in a similar milieu or similar circumstances, it's important to kind of separate their voice from each other. So as an example of that, we'll play—let's skip to clip three from *Mudbound*, Hap's monologue, and then we'll go back and hear Ronsel and Florence to hear how even within a family the voices can be different.

[Clip plays]

Cool. Yeah so, this is like, so Hap is a sharecropper, right? So he's going to have a limited amount of education and this is the time where, like, illiteracy was the law. I'll say it again: Illiteracy was the law. It was against the law for black people to be literate, but within that he can have a kind of grace, he can have a kind of thinking about the land and he can have a meditation. But, you know, I'm writing for him, so I'm interested in like, the way he forms sentences differently—you know, 'father and mother,' instead of 'mother and father'.

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So just like, ways you can break the conventional when you're writing for another character and like ways that they would speak that you may not speak, and even, like, you know subject-verb agreement and tenses—it's about how it feels, how that character would express themselves, but even express themselves in a limited way or within kind of like a narrow context can be graceful and can be elegant. And so now we'll play the second clip where we hear a little bit of Ronsel and then it hands off to Florence's voiceover.

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

And so the last line is 'God will forgive me,' but just even between like Florence and Hap, there's like a difference in how they use language. Like hers is a little more old-y, almost like from the Bible, it's biblical the way she speaks, a little crisper. So, you know, imagine that Florence comes from a different mother and father than Hap comes from, so idioms, sayings, things they believe will be different even though they're now joined in the same household.

So the stupid metaphor I wrote for this was nobody—even though it may be the same cuisine, nobody cooks their pot of beans the same way. You know, so it's kind of like Florence, the way Florence cooks it is different from the way Hap cooks it, even though it's the same recipe. So, there's that... Yeah, yeah.

And also voiceover I think can reveal a character's inner life. That's when it's like most interesting, and, you know when it's not about what's literally happening on the screen, when it's more philosophical. When it's more about how they feel, the thing that they won't say to someone else. And the inner monologue, yeah, it's like the thing they would never say to others. So for this film, for *Mudbound*, we actually cut a lot of things that we recorded because it was too just kind of expositional on what was happening, and so yeah. I made that point to say that in Hap's monologue there's a bitterness—not a bitterness, but there's a fatigue, there's like a cynicism, there's like a kind of doubt about this endeavour that he would never express to his wife, to his sons. In front of them he's relentless, he's optimistic, 'we're gonna make it, we're gonna make it'. But in his mind he can be, 'what good is a deed?' So it's just a character revelatory thing

where he's keeping up this front for his family but inside he feels like he's rolling a rock uphill.

So then we'll go to the last group, which is: Look at me. So this is about spectacle and so, you know, Aristotle lists spectacle as the least important of the six elements of drama, and I think that spectacle sometimes is misused in terms of like, standing in for a lack of feeling or standing in for a lack of character development, but I think all the best things start with spectacle. Like *Romeo and Juliet* starts with a murder, actually, so I like spectacle and I think when used smartly you can actually use it to reveal character, right? And spectacle then becomes useful for introductions and for turning points, so when we're first meeting a character, or when the character is becoming something else or changing into something new, so it's a way to kind of combine this extraordinary kind of sight and sound with a turning point inside someone's life. So then spectacle becomes meaningful and we get external visualisations of this person's kind of mind change, or we get external visualisation of someone's personality. So to that point, actually, yeah, we'll play the opening sequence of *Pariah*. Clip two.

[Clip plays]

Cool. Yeah, yeah, so Alike... So the opening music you hear in watching this film is *My Neck, My Back, My Pussy and My Crack*, so that's like audio, that's auditorily shocking, it's spectacle in a way. It's like, 'oh my God, what are we in for?' But it's not just shock for shock value's sake; it's introducing Alike as someone who's not comfortable in this hyper-sexualised environment. You know, she's a chameleon and a loner, so by the end of the scene she obviously wants to be in this place because we've watched her get here, but then she's kind of both attracted and repulsed by, you know, the sexuality on display. So in the opening scene, without her saying more than a sentence, we get that she's a chameleon, she's a loner, she's someone who's sexual but not yet comfortable in her sexuality. And so then the next thing, the last thing I'll play for you, is use of spectacle as a turning point. So this will be the *Bessie* clip, so...

[Clip plays]

[Applause]

So this is a turning point for Bessie. This is the point where she's gone from singer to folk hero. So just before this moment she's run off the Ku Klux Klan with an axe. And so, you know, for her this is an unintentional transition; she's not trying to be their hero but this is a moment she's anointed a hero and where her music becomes freeing, her music becomes a sermon, her music—you know not only she's preaching to women about liberating their sexuality, but she's also, you know, showing activism, like autonomy. The show did not get shut down; they didn't burn the tent, this kind of courage in the face of fear. And so this is a good use of spectacle, you know, yay a fun dance number and there's music and singing, but the bigger thing that's happening is that Bessie's elevated from singer to hero. So, that's all I have guys. Thanks for listening.

[Applause]

**Mariayah Khaderbai:** Thank you. I'm going to start off with a few questions, but I want to open up to the audience. Thank you so much. I wanted to talk about catharsis, in a way, in terms of it's something that runs through all three of your features, through the characters. All of them—with *Pariah* it's a girl navigating her way through her creative talents, her sexuality; with *Bessie* through her own demons to fame; and in *Mudbound* you see it through everyone's narratives. In terms of being a writer and the idea of catharsis, how much—do you give more of yourself than you get back from it?

**DR:** Yeah. I would say—I think I probably get more catharsis out of it than the character. Is that the question? For the characters or for myself?

**MK:** I mean both ways, but yeah, for yourself.

**DR:** Definitely. I think the first thing I told you, like don't make the characters your champion, like OK I kind of do that anyway but I try to do it in a way that's realistic and in a way when Alike stands up to her father, you know, and when she tells her mother, you know, 'I love you'... You know, like that was a reflection of a lot of what I was going through at that moment and it was the things, the conversations I'd had with people or the conversations I wanted to say, and Alike said things for me that I didn't, so I feel like in that way, through the characters' catharsis the audience should have an emotional feeling so it's not just me the creator

but the audience—hopefully there's a catharsis for the audience or the audience feels or cries or laughs; that's kind of like the ultimate goal. So, yeah...

**MK:** And in terms of in the films the subject matters—you don't go in big and wide, it's not trying to tackle a huge experience. And through trying to tackle something collective you go very personal, you manage to tackle race and gender and sexuality. Are you very conscious you want to write stories about human relationships and those narratives and they way people communicate with each other, rather than making it issue-based?

**DR:** Yeah, I think I'm interested in like, people interrogating the self. People's kind of like either obliviousness to their selfhood or questioning of their selfhood. Characters who are lonely or feel lonely or are isolated or feel isolated, I think I'm drawn to that thematically. A journalist raised it to me—I hadn't... I guess it's all subconsciously happening, but a lot of my family relationships tend to be unsafe, you know? Or the friendships tend to be tense, you know? And so I think that probably comes across and those are the themes I'm kind of drawn to. So in *Pariah*, Laura's her best friend but Laura's tugging her to be something that she's not; so there's a tension and there's the other tension of Laura being in love with her. And then in *Bessie*, you know that scene, Bessie just wants her sister to be proud of her, to really be happy for her, but her sister just feels like she always needs something from her. When Bessie... When I was researching her biography I was most taken by the fact that when she went home is when she got stabbed, you know? If she'd just stayed on the road, she would have been fine. And then in *Mudbound*, you know, like Ronsel doesn't want to go back home and can never go back home in a way. From the father, like, 'I didn't know you smoked.' I'm always kind of drawn to that inability to go back home and when home is not safe or family relationships, I think that's the thing I'm always exploring, and each of those characters from like Alike to Bessie to Ronsel, and even the McAllans—all those characters they're kind of questioning themselves and how the world, how they're affecting the world around them or how they feel they're not able to affect the world around them.

**MK:** And then in that vein of maybe questioning yourself, if you go back to *Pariah*, it originally started as a thirty-minute short film.

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Did you write it originally as a short or did you write it as a feature?

**DR:** So *Pariah* I wrote as a feature. I wrote it as a 140-page feature—it was before I knew any better that feature scripts shouldn't be 140 pages. But um, it was that, and I had her going to college and like going to frat parties—it was awful. So it started as this bloated draft of a script and then I realised that to tell it well I could only tell that part of her experience, that kind of high school moment over the course of a couple of months, versus trying to span so much time with this character's awareness. Because I had her learning and unlearning and making mistakes over and over again, and while repetition I think happens in life—I think we make the mistakes over and over until we don't—you know, in cinema or in drama you have to kind of find—to illustrate that with a brevity of kind of like experiences or a brevity of moments.

So *Pariah* started as a feature and then I needed a thesis to graduate from NYU and I was obsessed with this, I couldn't think of anything else, so I shot the first act as a short film. And then the short—which, by the way, was against all the rules, they said: 'Don't make a half hour short film, it'll never get programmed because then that means you've got to be as good as three films to even get considered.' But I did anyway and the great thing is like they would always programme us last, so we would be either first or last in the programme because it was so long but the short then kind of made the way to raise funds for the feature film. So I'd written this feature script, bloated, workshoped it at the Sundance Labs, and then we shot the feature—used the short to finance the feature, it became our calling card.

**MK:** You know part of that short—did you include part of that short in the feature length?

**DR:** We reused the bus sequence because getting an MTA bus from New York City is like hell. So there was no way we were going to rent another bus. So we reused the bus scene, we reused some of the club scenes, so it was extremely low budget. We shot *Pariah* for like four hundred and something thousand dollars. And we never had all that money in the bank at the same time. And so we totally like reused some of the short that we could, but we had recast so for the father we went with Charles Parnell versus the short was Wendell Pierce,

and the mother... so we recast the parents completely but I wanted to keep the girls the same. So we used what we could but we mostly reshot it.

**MK:** And then there was obviously a lot of critical success for *Pariah*, it did well, and you managed to then move on to *Bessie*. So you've gone from a complete original screenplay to then autobiographical. Was *Bessie*'s story something you always had in mind, did you always wanted to tell *Bessie* Smith's story, or how did that come about?

**DR:** It wasn't. So *Pariah* is 2011 and *Bessie* is 2015. So in that four-year gap I was writing many things that didn't get produced. So when Focus acquired *Pariah* they'd given me a blind script deal to write a crime thriller. And so I'd wanted to do next this kind of crime thriller about this detective based in Memphis, and she was like a lesbian detective. And so, you know, Focus said 'OK, this script is too small for us, but if you can find the money we'll give it back to you.' So we then found these independent investors who said, 'make this if you cast in a way that makes sense for the foreign sales value equation.' And so, you know, of course none of the people I wanted to cast fit the foreign sales value equation, and then the two people who did fit the foreign sales value equation when I went out to said 'oh, I'm sorry, I don't want to be a lesbian.' So it was just interesting. So that was two years of a film not happening. So then that's 2011 to 2013.

And then, you know, I also had written a spec pilot for a, this spec pilot about Nashville, I wanted to tell a story about Nashville, my hometown. So I'm shopping this spec script around like, 'I want to tell this story about Nashville,' and everyone's like—my agent's like 'No one wants a story about Nashville,' and then ABC like six months later comes out, there's a fucking series called *Nashville*.

[Laughter]

So that's been a year of walking around with something that's not working. But in the course of that, this little spec script had gotten all around town, and everyone's saying 'It's great, it's great... We don't want to do it.' But HBO had it, because I'd pitched it to them twice, and so they had it and they said 'do want to you like... We have this script and we got it from another studio, it's called *Bessie*. Do you want to do a rewrite on it? Would you be

interested?' And I was like 'Bessie Smith—queer woman from Tennessee? Like hell yeah, I want to write this script'. And I wanted to rewrite it if I could make her queer, if I could talk about Ma Rainey, if I could talk about how the blues women sexually and economically empowered other women. And so that was again like my reason to come on, so I could inject my own kind of agenda into the material. So I rewrote the script and another director was originally attached but I rewrote it so specifically and so weirdly they were just like 'Do you... No one else can direct this, do you want to direct this?' So I was like 'Yeah,' so evil plan pays off.

[Laughter]

So then that's how in 2015 I came to direct *Bessie*. And then so, I forgot the question, but...

[Laughter]

**MK:** It was there somewhere.

**DR:** But that's how that came to be, yeah.

**MK:** And then when you're writing, obviously from 2009 to 2015 you've been writing multiple things. I just want to get down to the nitty gritty of kind of you at home writing. Are you focusing on something different every single day? Are you like 'Actually, I'm going to go to that TV show today, I'm going to go to that film today.' Do you focus on all or is it project by project and is there a research method to it? How does your mind work when it comes to the actual sitting at the desk?

**DR:** it's kind of project-by-project. So for the spec TV pilot I was writing, I was writing that while we were in the edit of *Pariah*. You know, like I was like this is burning, simmering, I've got to get this out. So I wrote that pilot in like two weeks, so I was writing that while we were cutting. And then for *Bessie* it was a lot of research and it was daunting because this is someone's life and it's actual facts, so facts are harder to work with because you have to like, you know, be accurate. So I researched much more, of course, for that, than I would. And for *Bessie*, there's not a lot of visual record other than promotional photos, and there's one video clip of her. So I was really trying to get a sense of her as a character, and so and I ended up finding my way in to her through her music, because I figured the best way to know an artist is to listen closely to their art. So I was

listening very closely to her work and I'd wanted to not just play the hits, not just *Pig Foot and a Bottle of Beer*, but I wanted the songs that weren't hits, the songs that got deeply into her psyche—so, like for example we open the film with *Young Women's Blues*—so it's like a declaration of self, you know, 'I'm not going to back down, I'm beautiful, I'm strong,' even though the character may not quite believe that. So I wanted to open the film with that song because it's this kind of statement of like the desired self; it's not the real self. And even to *Preaching the Blues*, I chose that song because again it's about this—she's talking about sexuality in this feminist way before there was really a name for that, so you know, I found my way into Bessie's character through her music: So OK, she's about women, she's about... she's depressed. There's other songs like *Spider Man Blues* that I didn't put in there, but I wanted to choose—my way into her character was researching her lyrics and really trying to see what she's really saying, again understanding that what she would perform would be very different than the recorded lyrics that we have. And when she would—the things she recorded for record companies would be taken down or coded a bit, right? She was more radical in her tent shows than she was in her recordings, because in her recordings she couldn't call white people out directly, but she could talk around it. And so that was my process for that. And also there's this Broadway album, *One Mo' Time* by this guy Vernel Bagneris who did, uh, he's a well-known choreographer and composer, so he'd done this Broadway recording. And I remember as a kid my grandmother would play it for me and we'd listen to it and I'd put socks on my hands like gloves and we'd dance around the living room to these kind of Broadway covers of old vaudeville songs and Bessie songs. And so that was my way in. I drank gin for a time to try to like... because that was her drink and so I thought 'Maybe if I...?'. Whiskey's my drink but she drinks gin. I said 'maybe I'll switch to gin and see if that puts me in a different mood or a headspace.'

Yeah, and then for *Mudbound* it was more like interrogating my own personal history and I thought of things I didn't ask my grandfathers—one went to Korea, one went to World War Two. And so it was kind of trying to get into my grandmother's psyche and her journals and her memories, and injecting that into the script—shamelessly injecting that experience into this, and that being the thing I really

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wanted to talk about, you know, and kind of superimposing that on this material.

**MK:** So as we've got up to *Mudbound*, I just wanted to skip slightly back to the notion of female sexuality that you mentioned with *Bessie* and it runs through everything—it runs through *Pariah*, it runs through *Mudbound* and obviously, as you mention in *Bessie*. It's not an overarching theme but it's something that's present, and people are so scared, weirdly in cinema, to see female sexuality and see desire, but it's something that we all have and every human being experiences. Are you conscious that you've put that in or have you written it in just because it's a human experience?

**DR:** No I'm conscious, I'm aware of that. So one of the things from the book – in the original script there wasn't the moment of Henry rejecting Laura sexually, but I wanted that because she has this line, basically, 'It wasn't that great, but it's a thing we had. It made me feel like a wife'. I like that because that's like a feminist thing to say—to say that 'I, who am supposed to be grateful for this last-minute marriage, am not satisfied by this marriage, and the sex isn't good'. So, you know, saying that aloud was a radical thing and so I wanted that on camera, where Henry bats her away and she's like, 'it's not that good anyway'.

[Laughter]

So, yeah.

**MK:** I have a lot of questions about *Mudbound* but I'm conscious that these guys have them, as well. So if you do, please put your hand up and we'll get a microphone to you. Cool.

**DR:** Well, Happy Thanksgiving, guys. Bye.

[Laughter]

**Q:** Am I supposed to ask a question about *Mudbound*? There's a lot of different shifts in archetypes during the like—in terms of the characters. How much room did you allow for actors to find something that wasn't in script? And in your writing process how did you manage to manoeuvre all those arcs without them going over each other, if that makes sense?

**DR:** Yeah, so, *Mudbound*, they're pretty much on-book. They're pretty much on script for most of this, you know? It's more performance, the

challenge is throwing it away, it's like how do you not hear the script? And so there's moments, for example, where I'll like, sometimes like shout things out or add little motions—so for example, like when Jamie and Ronsel are in the truck and he's telling the story about pissing in his helmet, I'm in the back of the truck and shout out the line 'I thought I was hit,' and so he says 'I thought I was hit,' you know—so to activate that whole thing and make it funnier. So I'm open to adds on set but *Mudbound* they're basically on-book and it's in the delivery that kind of breaks it up and makes it not so read-y.

And for example, so another example is like Ronsel in the general store with the stare down with Pappy. You know, I was tempted to throw away those last lines where he says 'I was over there fighting and you're home safe and sound,' because I felt like there's no way that he can say that to Pappy full in his face because we'd just roll the credits right now, that'd be it. You know, but um, so, I was tempted to throw it away and the actors fought for it, and Jonathan Banks said, 'No, no. I want him to say it,' and Jason was like, 'No, no, I want to say it'. So I changed the blocking like 'OK if you say that, you say it as you're walking away, and you have to say it under your breath. Because if you can give him that speech full to his face then that means there's no problem here or you're going to be dead'. So I changed the blocking then to make the words work. And there's tonnes of voiceover that we recorded that we ended up throwing away, and then some voiceover I wrote during post because the things we threw away felt like it was expositional, saying what we're already seeing and it wasn't as philosophical. And things we added were things that were, you know, not necessarily things that we had planned for in production but in the edit where I felt there were gaps, and like, we weren't able to hand off things thematically where I wrote new monologues so that it became more thematic and not just chronological. So does that answer your question?

**Q:** Yeah.

**DR:** OK, cool. Or sometimes even actually I would start out, so for example, actually with the scene where Jamie and Pappy and Henry are drinking liquor, it's like his first night back—sometimes I'll give actors other dialogue or let them improv off-book to get into it. So I think I told Jamie, 'tell a dirty joke'; 'and that's the last

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thing she said', ' that's the end of a dirty joke, and then they get into like, the book, get on-script. Anything that kind of eases them—sometimes you need an entry ramp into the material, and I'll let actors have that kind of entry ramp of improv-ing but then we'll get into the words, and yeah...

**MK:** How did you create that intimacy between them? Because you can tell, it goes back to your first slide of subtext—there's so much that's not said between them, but it's because it's a level of comfort between the actors. How did you work with them to create that level of intimacy, so when we get to points like this, they can riff off each other in that sense, visually?

**DR:** Yeah. I would say, so my process with actors is not to rehearse the lines, it's just to pair them off in twos or threes and just kind of talk about the core of that relationship, the feeling. So for *Mudbound* I had Jonathan Banks, Garrett Hedlund and Jason Clarke just in my office in just a father-son kind of mosh pit. So you know, for me the core of that whole triangle was about admiration and respect. So this is a son, these are sons, who want the respect and love of their father; this is a father who just wants the respect and love of his sons—he doesn't wake up every morning and say 'I'm going to be a villain today,' he wakes up and says, 'I want to be proud of my sons and by picking at them I'm going to make them right,' you know? And so I had them just try to say—and that was what was already in the script. Already in the script there was going to be this antagonism, so in the workshop I wanted to do the opposite: I wanted to find the love and I wanted to find the warmth. Say one thing good about your sons, say one thing good about your father—so then underneath that there's a little blush. There's a little, you know, there's got to be a little warm blood, you can't just be playing the straight thing. And luckily also Garrett Hedlund and Jason Clarke, they actually elected instead of flying straight to set they elected to like road trip down together so they could build that brotherly rapport. So they flew into Memphis, I think, and then drove down to New Orleans. So they got matching back tattoos, probably...

[Laughter]

But they were able to ease into it and build this kind of rapport and this ease and just look at

each other and smell each other and be seen, you know? So, yeah.

**MK:** There's a microphone...

**Q:** My question's on *Mudbound*, as well. I saw it during the London Film Festival. I thought it was easily the best film there, I'm sure it's going to be nominated for some Oscars. But also why I found it interesting is there's four stories going on at the same time and they're all gradually interlinking throughout as the film went on and on, which I found quite interesting.

**DR:** Well I have to say, so the interlinking stories, that's the conceit of the book. So the book is structured where each character has a chapter, each character speaks. The book, that's how it's set up, where each one hands off to the other. So that was one of the tractions of the material, and in the edit you know was something we had to work hard to maintain or to make make sense, you know. And so how we edited the film is very different than how it was written and very different than how we shot it. But the multiple points of view, I can't take credit for, that was Hillary's idea. And it's not like a new idea—you know Isabel Wilkerson does in *The Warmth of Other Suns*, in non-fiction. And yeah, so it's not a new conceit but it's always hard because the risk is, in letting everyone speak, you know, you hear no one. So, was that a question or a comment?

**Q:** Yeah, so I didn't know that. I thought actually the script was written that way. I haven't read the book at all.

**DR:** Yeah.

**Q:** So I thought that's a very clever scripting there, integrating everything as the film goes on and on.

**DR:** I wish I could take credit for it, but no. That was Hillary's construct.

**MK:** Was it bias, in a way, that you changed, though?

**DR:** Yeah, I would say the first draft of the script was more weighted towards the McAllan family and, you know, in the original script the point of their connection was the little girl could sing; Lilly May, who wants to be a stenographer and Laura plays the piano, so they have this sweet piano singing session. For me, I just wanted to make each of the characters

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connected beyond something that was circumstantial. So rather than...

**MK:** Power hours

**DR:** Yeah, and rather than I've got this piano and this little girl can sing, I want it to be about, you know, these husbands connected by disinheritance—you know, Hap literally has blood, bones, ancestors in the ground but he can't take title to it, and Henry feels disinherited because Pappy's soul mate was meant to be his; and the two wives, they're connected by, not just by motherhood, by economic disempowerment—they both have husbands that tell them what to do and what not to do with their money and both wives are disobedient—they do what they want to do anyway.

**MK:** And the experience of war

**DR:** Exactly, the two sons are connected, Ronsel and Jamie, by PTSD, before there's a name for it. So I wanted to—I definitely weighted the film more fifty-fifty, so it's Jacksons and McAllans, we see each person is fighting on their own front and is not one kind of existing to serve the other.

**MK:** Microphone at the front.

**Q:** Um, Dee, first of all thank you for an absolutely wonderful, wonderful lecture. I wanted to just ask about structure of screenplays and how you deal with the cinematic element? There are some moments in *Mudbound* that are exquisitely detailed, like the brother—when his younger brother takes his fiancée for a dance, he simply readjusts a piece of cloth on.... her top... Do you write that, or is it an improvised moment? Because it's so exquisitely detailed and tells us so much about his vulnerability and his inability to, as you say at the beginning, to express that; it's the three degrees. How much of this cinematic element, the descriptive element, is in the script, and how much is development through the editing, etcetera?

**DR:** Thank you for noticing that!

[Laughter, applause]

You're the only person who's noticed the scarf.

**Q:** It's a wonderful moment.

**DR:** Yeah exactly, so that was a moment I found on set. So it was like she leaves and leaves her scarf and so, you know, it's like, that scarf is Laura, you're loving Laura, you're giving her this touch. And you know I just saw it on set and prompted the actor to do it. This care for this scarf is him caretaking for his wife and trying to not feel her absence, like exactly that, yeah. So I think definitely as a director you find those things on set and there's other things that are scripted. So for example in the first kind of talks with producers, in addition to scenes I wanted to write, I wrote imagery I wanted to write, like Laura chewing callouses off her hand, child eating dirt, kids playing soldier. So these are images that weren't necessarily in the script, but they're images that I wanted to shoot to be a part of the world and set a tone. Even like the dead things—the dead things, I don't know if it's in the script but I knew I wanted to bring forth Laura's voiceover of like, you know, basically about country violence and so we're shooting dead things to kind of activate that. But moments like that, that's exactly the thing—I can't love Laura, so I'm going to love the scarf that she had on and give a whole backstory, like he gave her that scarf for their anniversary, so he's securing himself, also, like, 'OK, not to worry, we're still here'. So yeah, exactly that. Thank you for noticing that, you're the first person that noticed that and got that. Thank you. I feel vindicated, thank you.

[Laughter, applause]

**MK:** In *Mudbound* and achieving the authenticity in those voiceovers, you had a special way of kind of recording those and working with the actors to achieve that so they kind of retained truth. How did you work with them for their voiceovers?

**DR:** So I wanted them—I had them record their voiceovers on set, which every sound technician will tell you not to do because they'll say it's dirty, you'll have unwanted room tone, blablabla. But I wanted to record the voiceovers on set because the actors are still in costume, they're still sweaty, they're still dirty, they still hurt. And they're still—they're fresh from the emotion that they just experienced. So I wanted to record their voiceovers in that state, versus letting them shower, go home and come back six months later do it in a sound booth where they're going to be distanced from the moment and trying to summon a feeling. You know, it would feel contrived. And

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I credit our sound recordist Pud Cusack, she got us this amazingly clear sound, where we used mostly what we shot on set, there are very few replacements. I think it's a service to the actors to get their best performance, and to me I'm failing them if I'm not putting them in a situation to give their best performance. And so taking the five minutes after a scene, or two minutes after a scene, to record something or even going to a rental car parked outside—is worth the five minutes of holding the work, or it's the three minutes to run to the car and do it, because it allows them to give their best, you know? So...

**Q:** Hi. Thank you for the lecture and your amazing work. I've got a question on genre, because it sounds like you've written across quite a few genres, from crime detective—you know, you've got historical epic dramas, and very family-based dramas. And you also did a Philip K. Dick piece for TV as well, so there's quite a range. Is there any particular genre that you find yourself most at home to or coming back to or any difficulties writing in a particular genre or style?

**DR:** No, I'm always—I'm always chasing story and characters. I'm actually drawn to sci-fi; again, I've been trying to do sci-fi for a while and so—a little backstory of how that came to be was I wrote an adaptation of a Philip K. Dick book *Martian Time-Slip*, so I was friendly with Isa Hackett, who was like, 'Yes, you can have this book and do an adaptation on spec,' so they wanted some rewrites, but at the same time *Bessie* came through so I had to leave that and go do *Bessie*. But we stayed friendly throughout the process and she said, 'Hey, we're doing this anthology, do you want to adapt an episode?' And I was like 'of course'. So for me, sci-fi is the thing I've always wanted to get to because I feel like you can actually say more and you can be more direct because people don't realise what they're looking at, quite. So you can actually be more on the nose and weird with sci-fi, and also, sci-fi, I think is more dense or intense, maybe, because it's world creation, coming up with the logic of a world or the logic of a language—the costumes, how people speak, the idioms. You know, you have to almost invent a whole new vocabulary, and you have to invent—it's like world creation, so it's what I'm really most excited by and want to get into, but for me, I'm chasing characters and ideas, no matter what genre they fall into. I'll probably never do a romance, that's the one genre I can't stand, but like, yeah. Other

than that, yeah... Watch me do a romance next year.

[Laughter]

**MK:** Is that the key, do you think, to have long—I can never say the word—longevity to writing? In terms of not being genre-specific and just writing stories about people you want to write them to and then place them in scenarios like a sci-fi situation—is that what you've always stood by in terms of picking what you want to work on?

**DR:** Yeah, so I think I've probably compromised a couple of times. When I first started out I was like 'I'm an auteur, I only want to do only my original stuff, no adaptations,' you know? And then of course I compromised. So I was like 'OK, well I will do adaptations, but only about stuff that I love,' and I thought that, you know, for me I've always wanted to work across features and TV so that wasn't a thing, but I think, you know, in chasing characters and stories I'm interested in that means I'll cross genres, and that means I'll cross—I want to get back to more original stuff, so after this I'm going to do a Joan Didion adaptation with Cassian, but after this I want to get back to solely original stuff and just like world creation. But yeah, I think I've had to be choosy. I never wanted to be a director for hire; I didn't want to be just like, you know, on loan to different studios directing someone else's idea. Like if I fail I want to fail on my own ideas, so I'd rather try to put forward the thing I want to do or put forward the idea I have and, you know, time is short: Each film eats like three years of your life, so I feel like the clock is ticking and so I just want to, from now on, if I'm going to go out, go out trying to do my own stuff.

[Applause]

**MK:** We've got time for two more questions.

**Q:** Hi, I'm Bemanzi. Good to see you again, Dee. We met at the after party for the premiere of *Mudbound*, which is a segue into my question actually, because everybody that I spoke to was like 'Dee is amazing to work with, she's absolutely brilliant,' and I wondered, as a director, if you had a particular process or you had rituals that you used to kind of build that trust and camaraderie?

**DR:** So um, I guess, yeah. I just like to keep it more conversational. And I guess in the same

way I work with actors in small pairings I work with the department heads in small pairings. I don't enjoy the big conference table meetings, which you have to do with the AD a couple of times, but I don't enjoy—I don't feel that the creative process is best served there. I feel like it's in one-on-ones, when I'm talking to the production designer—you know yeah, the cinematographer needs to know that, but later. I like to let the person, I like to complete the thought or complete the idea; we're going to go through three things that don't work before we get to the thing that does work, and that doesn't necessarily need to happen in front of the other department heads, because then it gets to a stage where people shut down or people are performing for each other, you know, so I think in that same way I like to work singly with people versus in a big group. So it's like collaboration one by one, in a weird way, or, you know, in groups that feel more intimate where things can bounce and grow without getting cut off without being figured out. And yeah, just very personal, like sharing stuff, like filtering stuff, like instead of dumping a big glut, like 'here's some songs that sound like the world,' and 'here's all my references,' like slowly, like 'here's some songs that sound like the world,' and 'here's some images that feel like the world,' or 'here's a passage from a poem,' or 'here's a thing,' so everyone feels like they're getting this personalised little love note from me and then they get inspired like, you know, text, email... Three o'clock in the morning, I saw this passage. You know I like to work in that way, so it's like a steady drip of inspiration versus like this formalised roundtable thing, knights of the roundtable thing. So yeah, so maybe that.

And then I was thinking back to the question of writing process: One of the things I do too in the writing of it... I feel like you vomit up everything on a bunch of index cards, not necessarily in order but not just scenes but ideas or sentences, you know, things you know you want in there but don't know where they go yet. And then when you start to kind of figure those sentences and imagery, arrange them in arcs by act. In writing it, I don't write it in sequence, I write the two scenes I'm most interested in that day, and for rewrites—so for this thing I started off the page; what are the things that are not there? What are the scenes that are not there? So that was an easy way to work back into how to incorporate it into the script. Because sometimes you start on the page, you feel locked in: 'Well this has to

happen because it connects to this and then that connects to that,' but if you start off the page then you're kind of freed of that and you're writing longhand and so you're not bound to the connections and you can figure out how to relink things, so, um, yeah.

**Q:** Thank you.

**MK:** I think Sean Baker may have touched on this in his lecture the other night, the idea of the rewrite and rewriting and his script, and perhaps it seems similar with you—that it's rewritten at least three times, it's rewritten when you put it together, it's rewritten when you direct it and it's rewritten

**DR:** In the edit.

**MK:** when you edit it. How—is that?

**MK:** Yeah that's an axiom, that's a common saying. Yeah, totally. And I agree with that, and you have to stay open to that. I think when you're in production you can't be married to the words if the actor wants to add something, if you need a kind of entry ramp or exit ramp you've got to allow for that because it'll give it a naturalism. And then in the edit room, you know, you've got to kill your darlings; you can't have a sentence just because it's literary or cool. Like, is it character revealing or is it moving the plot forward or is it setting a tone? And if not then you have to kind of kill it so then it's rewritten again. Even in terms of sequencing it's rewritten in terms of what best kind of gives the narrative propulsion. So totally, yeah.

**MK:** And if we can quickly touch on what, if you know, that you're doing next. The next project that you've got in the pipeline.

**DR:** Yeah, so the next is going to be about the failure to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment in the United States. I'm teaming up with Carey Mulligan again, it's called *An Uncivil War*, and so we're casting it now. And then I'm going to do *The Last Thing You Wanted* with Cassian, a Joan Didion adaptation, which is exciting, and so again, right, it's on the surface it's like the international spy thriller but underneath it's really about what happens when daughters trust their fathers blindly, you know—you die.

[Laughter]

And then the next thing I want to do, I really want to get away and do this original sci-fi

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thing that's been gestating about, you know, where environmental crisis meets, you know, the economic crisis.

**MK:** A lot going on. Well all the best with *Mudbound*—

**DR:** Oh, and Jason Blum! We're going to do a horror, how could I forget? Me and Sarah are going to write a horror story about what it means to be black lesbians living in an all-white town.

[Laughter]

**MK:** I want to see that.

**DR:** It's terrifying.

**MK:** Thank you very much, Dee Rees, thank you.

**DR:** Thank you so much. Thanks, thanks.