

## Screenwriters On Screenwriting.

The BAFTA and BFI Screenwriters' Lecture Series in association with The JJ Charitable Trust

Simon Beaufoy

17 September 2010 at BFI Southbank

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**Matthew Sweet (Host):** Hello, good evening. This event in this series of lectures is slightly different because it isn't a lecture. This, in effect, is a conversation or an interrogation possibly.

**Simon Beaufoy:** That's a slightly worrying start.

**MS:** What I think we're going to try and do is explore a bit about what makes you tick as a screenwriter. And who knows, we may be going to some dark and interesting places with this conversation.

We have clips that Simon's going to show us, and images of all sorts. If we can put the first image up on the screen, there it is [a picture of civil rights activist Rosa Parks on a Montgomery bus in 1956, the day Montgomery's public transportation system was legally integrated]. So Simon, what does this picture tell us about what you do when you sit down at your laptop and type scene one?

**SB:** Before I start, thank you very much all for coming. When I was told, 'You've got the Friday night slot,' I thought, 'No-one's going to turn up to that.' But then I remembered that most people coming are screenwriters, and realised that if there's one group of people guaranteed to be doing nothing on a Friday night, it's screenwriters. Anyway, thank you for coming; I am honoured.

I started my career as a documentary filmmaker and trained at Bournemouth Film School. I became one of the directors of a BBC series called *40 Minutes* when I left Bournemouth University. I struggled with the difficulty of trying to be true to one's subject and tell a good story.

There was an amazing series editor, a famous documentary maker called Paul Watson. I was fresh out of film school and watching the stuff I'd shot go through the Steenbeck. He'd say, 'Put that shot next to that shot and you've really got something,' and I'd say, 'But that was two different days, he didn't say those two things like that.' And he would look at me and go, 'Simon, do you want the truth or a good film?' And whenever I said I wanted both he would say, 'Sorry, you can't do that.'

I was very uncomfortable with that, and he's made some astonishingly good films, but I was always very uncomfortable – as a documentary

maker – with the claim that you are telling some sort of reality or truth.

Rosa Parks sat on a bus in Montgomery one day, in the Whites Only section and caused the biggest furore of the civil rights movement ever and huge political changes in the whole world. I knew this photograph well, and I always thought the guy behind her was one of the white people in the Whites Only section.

I later found out, and it really interested me, that he was a journalist. And there are more photographs of Rosa Parks in prison, being fingerprinted, and being arrested.

The more I discovered about this the more I realised that the whole thing was entirely set up as a piece of media manipulation and had – in a sense – been fictionalised to create a narrative, and that's why it was such a powerful story. It had been structured as a narrative so that it became this *cris de coeur* of the civil rights movement.

The more I thought about that, the more I realised that the power of most situations is in the structure and sense in which they're fictionalised. I moved away from documentary at that moment and into drama, where I felt much more comfortable.

**MS:** Are you then a documentarist who documents things that didn't happen?

**SB:** I always need authenticity in drama. For *Slumdog Millionaire* I went to the Juhu slum and wandered around, as this sweating white man getting lost in these tiny, narrow streets in Mumbai. And, being an alien from another planet, people would come up to you and say, 'Are you lost? What are you doing? Mr Bean, what are you doing?' For some reason I reminded them of Mr Bean which is not brilliant.

I'd say, 'Yeah, I'm completely lost,' and they would take me through all these narrow streets back towards safety, and on the way I'd talk to them. We'd sit down and have a cup of tea and everyone would gather round, and I'd ask them questions about their story. If I gave them a camera, which is something I asked quite a lot, what would they point it at? What would they film? Who would they film?

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They'd say gangsters, because there's big trouble with gangsters in the slums. I'd sit there and go, 'Fantastic'. And those people wrote all those stories for me. Of course they're structured and manipulated by me but the stories came from them. I had absolutely no right, as the white, fat, sweaty white guy parachuting into a world that I didn't know very much about to say, 'I want to make a story about you.'

I needed them to say, 'These are our stories, this is what's going on here.' That gave me a sort of validation to structure and tell their story; to tell the story from the inside.

**MS:** It's a pretty hard thing to do though, to judge authenticity when you're so far from home, so far from your own comfort zone.

**SB:** Yes, you have to make a call on that. As documentary maker you have to sniff out what you feel is real and what is fabricated. The more media savvy everyone gets the more complex that juggling act becomes.

**MS:** But you yourself have used stories that have their basis very firmly in real events, haven't you? Films like *Yasmin*, and your new one, *127 Hours*. What effect does that have on what happens when you sit down and write?

**SB:** You have a responsibility to the facts in a situation. *127 Hours* is the story of a man [Aron Ralston] who gets trapped in a canyon on his own, a boulder falls on his arm and traps it, and after five days he cuts it off with a multi tool, in a rather spectacular fashion.

And he [Ralston] is very much alive, very much involved in the film, and I had a responsibility to the facts of his story. I spent a long time talking to him about the difference between fact, fiction, truth, authenticity – all of these things are slightly different. There can be a truth that you can tease out of something, though the facts are different.

**MS:** What did he make of that argument? Did he buy it?

**SB:** It took a while for him to trust me to buy it, and quite rightly, it's his life, it's his story. It's the most extraordinary thing that will ever happen to him. He's very moved by the film, and he completely

understands it and the reason why there are some tough things said about him in the film.

**MS:** One of the things that people often say when they use real life events to make stories, is that they've deviated from the facts, but somehow remained true to the spirit or the soul of the source. I'm never quite sure what that means.

**SB:** Gosh, we've got very metaphysical quite quickly. We need a comedy clip. With adaptations, all I promise the author I'll do is remain true to the spirit of what they wrote. The first book adaptation that I did, I loved the book so much that I transposed the book, almost word for word into a screenplay. It was a disaster and never got made.

I realised that isn't the way to do it. Most of the authors I've adapted are very at home with the idea that everything will change as long as the soul of it doesn't. As long as the feel you get from that piece of work chimes with the original work.

People who love the book are not at home with that and are quite often extremely cross. But that's the only way to do it I think, it's an entirely different medium. You've only got 90 minutes or two hours, you have to be very bold and rather brutal in adapting things.

**MS:** So how does the fact that you were a documentary maker change what you do when you sit down and write a script?

**SB:** I suppose I don't sit down and write a script, is the answer. I go out and find out what on Earth is going on. The Channel 4 film that we made, from the documentary department, called *Yasmin* was a very strange and interesting process. It was just after September 11 and there was a whole 'Let's go and find suicide bombers in areas of Yorkshire and see what makes these people tick' [approach].

It was such an insulting question, to even approach these people, up in these mill towns in Yorkshire who knew much less about September 11 than I did and had no concept of why I would be asking them about what makes a suicide bomber tick. They didn't know, they were just living their lives in Yorkshire.

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I went back to the documentary department and said it was absolutely impossible to tell this story. And, being a documentary department – brilliantly – rather than a drama department, the man there, Peter Dale, asked, 'What is the story? What's going on there? If that's not the story,' he said, 'tell the story that is going on.' Which is the documentary maker's instinct.

The story was that we'd found this extraordinary woman who dressed in a salwar kameez, was married to a Pakistani man who could speak no English at home. She got in the car to go to work, and in the middle of the moors stopped the car, changed into a crop top and jeans, and went to work where she had a white boyfriend.

**MS:** This is the opening sequence of the film.

**SB:** Yeah, she had this extraordinary double life, and I thought 'Why do you need to make anything up?' It encapsulated all the complexities of trying to belong in this country when you are from a different religion and a different culture. It was the most extraordinary story, and we nearly got her to play the lead part, so close was the material to her life.

**MS:** So is the documentarist in you present in the part of the process that happens before you sit down and write, or is he legible somewhere in the script that's actually produced?

**SB:** It's always the starting point. I can't sit down and write something unless I've been there because I need to soak up the landscape. I need to hear from the people. I don't feel justified in writing a story [otherwise]. For some reason or other I need its roots on the ground. I need it to grow from the ground up, I suppose.

**MS:** When people talk about fiction films that are in the documentary style they're normally talking about things that come from the director, aren't they? Or the cinematographer? They're not necessarily talking about the way the dialogue is.

**SB:** Well it doesn't have to be shot in a documentary style to have the authenticity of a documentary. *Slumdog* is the least documentary like in its *mise-en-scene* that you'll ever find. It's totally operatic and melodramatic, but all those stories came from the people there – I didn't

make them up. So in that sense it feels like the real place.

**MS:** This seems like a good moment to go to the next photograph. What are we looking at here?

**SB:** This is the Salgado picture of Churchgate Station in Mumbai. It was a real inspiration for *Slumdog Millionaire*, because I thought we had to have a scene in a train station. And being India you can actually close the biggest station in the world down, provided you're nice to the right people in the right way. It's like shutting down Victoria Station or something like that.

Salgado has been a great inspiration to a number of my films because of his use of landscape and the people within the landscapes. But this is, I guess, an example of the way that if you write the fiction in the right way with the authentic facts, they will come full circle and you'll be back at a fact again.

It was only after I'd made the film that the man who prints and sells Salgado's work, pointed out that there are only two still people. Everyone's moving in this frame except this man here, who appears to be staring at a woman sitting on a bench.

They're the only two figures in it, and it sort of encapsulated the whole film and I didn't even know that until after the fact. I thought, 'Fantastic, I can now tell everyone that the entire film was inspired by this painting.' But actually I had no idea. There was a weird synchronicity happening, and it sounds a bit hippy-ish [but] films have a tendency, when everything is working right, to synchronise in a really extraordinary way and that was an odd example for me.

**MS:** You don't have to be a hippy to believe in the idea that the unconscious can exert a powerful influence upon your work. Are you very instinctive? Are you often surprised by what you've done when you get to the end of this work?

**SB:** Yes, mostly. And I've realised that you can't really make anything up anyway. I wrote and co-directed a film called *The Darkest Light* about a 12-year-old child in Yorkshire who sees a vision on

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a moor, and her son is very ill with leukaemia; so a very specific series of events.

At one of the screenings a Yorkshire woman came up to me and said, 'That's my life. I saw that, that exactly happened and my brother was ill. And I was 12.' You can't actually make anything up. And if you do it right it will become true...

**MS:** How do you mean?

**SB:** Ah, I've said something that I now can't follow up. Next clip.

**MS:** Let's go to it, shall we?

[Clip from *Yellow* (1998)]

**MS:** So that was *Yellow*, an early-ish short of yours.

**SB:** That was the first brush with Ray Winstone, who said, 'Yeah, I'll do this.' He's a very powerful presence. We had just left film school and he said all he needed was a mobile phone, a deckchair and sandwiches. And that's what we had, and he was absolutely fantastic.

**MS:** There are two key Beaufoy things here, the landscape and pylons.

**SB:** I'd forgotten about the pylons, yes. I had a slight obsession with electricity pylons. *Among Giants*, which I made after *The Full Monty*, was all about pylon painters, and sure enough they're cropping up here in a slightly odd way. It must be 15, 16 years since we made that.

**MS:** So is the landscape one of the things you go to as a starting point?

**SB:** Yes, that's part of why I have to go to a place before I can write about it really. I grew up in an extraordinary bit of West Yorkshire, when all the mills had been closed down. It was a weird, post-industrial landscape that was like the Valley of the Kings of the industrial revolution, just empty mills everywhere.

Large bits of heavy industry just rusting away there. I think landscape has a huge effect on people and their personality, and so has always been hugely important. *Slumdog Millionaire* is as

much a film about Mumbai as it is about the people in it, really.

And [recording cuts out momentarily] was an extraordinary time for Sheffield, when I was living there. They shut all the rolling mills down in the valley and were just about to build the Meadowhall shopping centre.

There were a lot of men wandering around with nothing to do, so [I was] watching generations of livelihood be replaced by car parks and shopping. So that landscape is really important to the film.

**MS:** And *Yellow* was a film you directed?

**SB:** Co-directed.

**MS:** Co-directed, as well as wrote. How does the fact that you were in these two jobs, affect the way that you write a picture?

**SB:** I also co-directed *The Darkest Light*, and realised after that that it was a really bad idea for me to direct anything ever again. I think it's a different part of the brain from writing.

Directors are endlessly assaulted by crew going, 'Do you want the hair up, or down? Red lipstick or purple lipstick? Camera there? Lights there? What do you think?' And the directors are going: 'Purple, hair up, camera there.' That's what they do all day.

The writer in me goes, 'Hmm, red or purple?' I tell them I'll think about it and the crew go, 'No, we need to know now.' It's just a different part of the brain.

On Radio 4 the other day they called it cognitive polyphasia, and I thought that was brilliant. They've justified my level of confusion with a medical condition. That was great, I can be cured. The writer needs to look at both sides of an issue, more than both sides, look at every side of an issue and then make a decision.

Directors, even if they're wrong, have to have the confidence and boldness to go, 'This, red, purple, hair down,' whatever it is, [and be] highly decisive in the moment. I'd just be going, 'So many interesting questions...' I was a competent

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director, and having met a visionary director, there's no point in being a competent director, for me.

Also I hated it and wasn't very good at it. Editors are the writer's best friend, always. They would rescue me to turn things into a watchable film. When you see real directors at work... I realised that I should stick with the day job, really.

**MS:** But what did it mean to you to relinquish the power that a director, or even a co-director has?

**SB:** It's maybe bred in the bone. My father was an extremely good assistant headmaster for much of his life. Maybe as a family we're much more comfortable one step away from the power. I'm not very comfortable with being the powerful person. I'm very comfortable assisting the powerful person. But it's not my place.

I'm also, increasingly, very happy to hand the work on to people who can make it more. It's an extraordinary privilege to hand over a script and help it grow to a greater place.

**MS:** So you don't feel frustrated by the essential powerlessness of the writer, in comparison to the director?

**SB:** No, as a writer-director I felt much less of a sense of power because in my head it was brilliant when I wrote it. My God, that scene, whoa! Because you direct all the time as a writer you're sitting there back and forth with the characters in your head. It's looking good. And then you get there and it's raining, and the gaffers are going, 'I'm not going up there to put a light up mate.'

So you have to do it indoors instead of outdoors, and it's suddenly lost its landscape. It's an endless sense of compromise from what you had in your head, which of course was perfect because it was in your head. I felt a sense of disempowerment, being a director. I just felt I was never doing the script justice.

**MS:** *The Darkest Light* is a film that wasn't very widely distributed.

**SB:** That's a really polite way of putting it.

**MS:** I watched it the other day, and was in tears by the end of it. It's a really powerful film.

**SB:** It is a powerful film, yeah.

**MS:** Why was it so miserable, making it?

**SB:** It was immensely frustrating; we had children, we had animals, a lot of them dead and on fire. It was set in a foot and mouth outbreak, with a child dying of leukaemia. So there was an awful lot of death, and it rained the entire time in Yorkshire.

When we were doing the auditions for one of the children, we were going around the schools in Barnsley, and you tell the plot to the kids and say, 'It's this story about this person and this happens,' and one guy put his hand up at the back and said, 'There's a lot of sad stuff in this film, isn't there?' I wish I'd listened to that, he was so right. There was a grim overload; it was the feelbad movie of the decade.

It's not a *bad* film but I suppose I was very dogged and rather stubborn at the time and thought, 'I will get my vision out there and I don't care whether people like it or not.' I don't feel that any more. But there are all sorts of good things about the film, but it's a hard one to get audiences to on a Friday night, when they could be having a laugh or a big glass of Sauvignon Blanc. It's hard to get them to watch cows burning and 12-year-olds dying.

**MS:** Shall we look at somebody else's vision?

**SB:** Yeah, let's.

**MS:** Tell us what we need to know about this next clip.

**SB:** The couple of clips coming up are examples of what screenwriters are always aiming for, and sometimes when you consciously aim for it you fail to hit it. But it's that – rather grand word – epiphany in the film when tone, subject, character, music, everything comes together in one scene; usually, oddly, without dialogue in.

It's usually the moment that everyone takes away from the film and remembers, because it's the moment of synchronicity I suppose. The first clip is, for me, the most breathtaking shot and another

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thing that made me think I have to be a filmmaker. It's Marcello Mastroianni [in *Stanno Tutti Benne (Everybody's Fine)* (1990)] coming from Sicily to the mainland to visit his daughters, all of whom have fobbed him off with various excuses because they really can't be bothered to see Dad.

And it's a film about him remembering all his children and there's this beautiful... I just think it's a piece of film artistry. You'll all sit there going 'Huh? Doesn't look that good to me' – but it was a very inspiring moment for me and I always try and aim for that in a film. I don't always hit but I always aim for it.

[Clip from *Stanno Tutti Benne* (1990) in which Tosca runs up the steps to meet her father]

**SB:** That always makes me cry. It's all done in camera, no special effects, and it just encapsulates that film entirely, of a man trying to reconnect with his daughters, some of whom want to know him.

**MS:** Is it possible to write an epiphany, like this? Who wrote that film, do you know?

**SB:** [Giuseppe] Tornatore wrote it. If you try too hard to write something, if you concentrate too much on it, you're going to fail. In *The Full Monty* we wrote what became a scene that everyone remembers and takes away from the film, and says, 'Oh, I love that bit, where they do this.'

I wrote it and crossed it out, wrote it and crossed it out. We tried not to film it. In the edit everyone stood around and went, 'I don't know, it's too much, it's a slight change in tone.' But it became the scene that everyone remembers, and goes to show that filmmakers really don't know anything. Audiences will decide what an epiphany is or not. But it is the moment where everything in the film comes together, the various texts and subtexts of unemployment and dancing of this group of people coming together, with a great piece of music.

**MS:** We should put it on straight away, every single person in the audience knows exactly what they're going to see now, I think.

[Clip from *The Full Monty* (1997) in which the characters start dancing to Hot Stuff whilst in the job centre queue]

**SB:** A bit much to call it an epiphany in *The Full Monty*, but you know what I mean.

**MS:** But this is a good example of a scene that has, in a way, escaped what's on the page. The tone of this is very, very different from the script that you started with, isn't it?

**SB:** Yes, *The Full Monty* was an example, and a really telling example for me very early in my career that a film will tell you what it wants to be whether you like it or not. I was setting out to write a political film with some jokes in. We were all trying to do that, Uberto [Pasolini] the producer and Peter [Cattaneo] the director; that was our intention.

During the editing process it became a comedy with some politics. It jumped genres which was a really extraordinary thing for me, watching that happen.

So rather than cut it as a film where you stay back in that slightly naturalistic way and watch the scene develop, and if there's a joke happening over this side and you catch it great but if you don't it doesn't matter because there'll be another one along shortly – we cut in on the joke, we cut to a close up and then left a little gap for laughter.

And then in the next scene, which was pretty downbeat, we put some jaunty music under it to keep things rolling along. And suddenly it became a comedy, an out-and-out comedy, and none of us were really happy with that in this very British, grumpy way. We were all going, 'It's not as good as it was,' because we wanted the film that nobody wanted to see that was all very serious and political, and the film just said, 'That's not me, that doesn't work that way. What you've got is this, this is what works.'

And this has happened on every film that I've worked on. You have to let the film tell you what it's going to be. You can fight it all the way, which we've been doing on *127 Hours* recently, at the end we've been fighting, going, 'You have to have this at the end.' And it never works.

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**MS:** Is this a good example of how a film is the work of many hands, the writer, the director, everybody who works on it, so it does take on a life of its own that cannot really be controlled by any one person?

**SB:** I sort of see it as a very tall building. The writer does the foundations and the brickwork, and then you've got people doing the windows and other people doing the furniture and the nice bits inside. But this is a very tall building that is moving in the wind the whole time, and you have to move. The building has to be allowed to move, otherwise it will fall down.

If you try and make this very static thing and go, 'No, I'm changing this scene, it has to be like this,' or, 'It can only be this actor who plays this role,' or, 'These scenes are the ones that have to be at the end of the film,' which is what we've just been saying with *127 Hours*, it's not going to work.

You have to allow the whole thing to move, and if you have the right people around you, and this sense of synchronicity then everything moves together and your building's fine. In fact more than fine, in fact it's a very strange thing because no matter what you do and how clever you are, the end product will be very different from what you started out with here.

**MS:** I think if we go to our next clip we might be able to explain a little of how *The Full Monty* left you feeling, or what sort of position it put you in.

**SB:** I can explain everything.

**MS:** He'll explain afterwards.

[Advert for an electronics brand in which Beaufoy stars as a fast-living Hollywood writer, working on his laptop by a pool]

**SB:** I can't think why I didn't go to the gym before that happened. It's a terrible thing, it really is. I thought it was also a really good example of how writers are held. It's a fabulous backhanded compliment; 'Who's he?' You can even see those models, sitting around the pool.

And they all were genuinely going, 'Who the fuck is that?' because they would be hired for the day

expecting the movie star to come in and sure enough 'Mr Tubby' comes along. Anyway, it was done for a purpose, I can justify everything. Cognitive polyphasia.

We needed some money to make a very strange film – I needed some money, what's wrong with that? – we were trying to make a film called *This Is Not A Love Song* on a very, very low budget. A number of us had got together and got very bored with the very slow pace and process of filmmaking.

Digital cameras had just come along, which meant you could do things very fast with a very small crew. The UK Film Council, bless them, were up for this challenge, but they legally couldn't fund 100% of a film, they had a certain amount they could [provide] and we had to find the rest of the money ourselves. So I got my Speedos out, and did that advert. And very unwisely I put it all into the film, and never saw a penny of it again.

**MS:** Why did you want to make a small film, after making a film like *The Full Monty*. You could have made a very, very, very big film – as that advert [for Syntegra] indicates.

**SB:** Well sort of. Syntegra also went bust not long afterwards.

**MS:** The advert had nothing to do with it, did it?

**SB:** Probably. A very good friend of mine said that I have an unerring instinct for self sabotage. And it was that sense of running away from the things I didn't quite trust or know, which was the big Hollywood scene that was calling quite loudly after *The Full Monty*. But it was a world that I didn't know, and they're not my kind of films.

**MS:** But was it because you yourself were unsure why *The Full Monty* had been the success it had been, that you hadn't kind of mastered the art that you had been celebrating?

**SB:** Yes, it was the second screenplay I'd ever written, and the first film. And I knew my craft skills weren't that brilliant. I'd been helped a lot by everyone else making that film. So I was slightly scared by that world. But also I wasn't that interested in the big budget movies.

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I was really interested in making films in a different way, and seeing if there was an entirely new way to make and distribute films. So all the way along in the process of *This Is Not A Love Song* we did it in a very deliberately different way.

I went to The Film Council with a two page outline of what it might be. Based on that they gave us the money to cast it and then with the two actors – it was a very, very small amount of money so we had enough money for two actors effectively – I workshopped it and wrote it with the actors. And it was shot in 12 days.

This is going back some time. These days that's not unusual micro budget filmmaking, but at the time people weren't doing that at all. And then we had a simultaneous webcast, the first of its kind apparently, at the same time as it was distributed in not very many cinemas.

And at each stage of the process we were trying to break the rather leaden way the film industry works, where contracts go to and fro, and things take forever to agree. We said, 'Right, we're going to write it in this amount of days, and you have to greenlight it over the weekend, and we've got to go the next weekend.'

That's impossible; it takes a week just for lawyers to say, 'No, my client wants egg sandwiches not ham sandwiches.' We said, 'What if everyone sits in a room together and we agree on everything?' They said, 'Well that never happens, that's the whole point of having agents and managers, we all disagree.'

And we said, 'But what if we say yes to everything, and money's not an issue, we're all going to work for nothing, so that is off the table.' So they got round one evening and did all the contracts over some glasses of wine one evening. They all really loved the process. The whole thing was made and shot in a matter of weeks – which has its good and its bad side.

**MS:** How did speed effect what you did when you sat down and wrote that script? It seems that over the history of this medium the process of writing a film has been getting slower and slower and slower. In the old days somebody might say, 'We need to do this in a week, we need to shoot this for a pound a foot in seven days.' That sort of

thing doesn't happen any more and films are these vast coalitions of people.

**SB:** It's the sense that one can make a perfect script, which is a foolish idea really. They lose a tremendous amount of individuality and identity, and frankly energy and momentum. Film, by its very nature, is going through the camera at 24 frames a second, it's moving forward the whole time. Film and forward motion, kinetic energy, belong together I think.

So if you have a really stodgy development process you can almost feel – I'm going hippy again here – but you can almost feel that in the film. You can certainly feel the hands of multiple writers in screenplays when they get to the screen. So what we got from *This Is Not A Love Song*, it's not perfect in many ways because of the speed we were going, but it has a kind of undeniable energy to it.

**MS:** It's a very, very vital film. I remember being at the press screening of it and feeling very excited by it because it was like a cross between an art house film and an exploitation film from the 70s, the sort that hasn't been seen for some time.

**SB:** It also came out of a documentary I was trying to make about the Glencoe Mountain Rescue Team. They were very media unaware, they told me all sorts of extraordinary tales that they should never have told someone with a camera, and eventually they realised what they'd done and someone sent a note to the BBC saying, 'If you come up here again we will put an ice axe in the back of your neck,' which was the end of that documentary. But all that I learnt ended up in *This Is Not A Love Song*.

**MS:** I think we should see some of it then, in that case.

[Clip from *This Is Not A Love Song*]

**MS:** So if *The Full Monty* had left you in this slightly strange position of having crafted this global, worldwide hit without quite knowing how you'd done it – or at least it having come from something that was very different on the page to how it was on the screen – what was it that you learned in these years of making fast, low budget films?

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**SB:** Well, I suppose that I'm more at home with that than the big budget films. It was like being back at film school making it, everyone had two jobs on the set. I was the writer and the caterer, which was the only other thing I could do. So I was literally catering for 50 extras on one day, and serving them their beef stew while they were all going, 'I don't know what this film's about, it's a load of rubbish.' I was there with my caterer's hat on going, 'Potatoes?'

I suppose I got into filmmaking to make the films that I thought were really important to me in one way or another. It was never about the money or the fame or anything. Those two things bizarrely, came along by accident. But it's really important to always go back to the reasons you make films in the first place.

I'm writing a film for BBC Four at the moment, because it's really important to write about what you love, and to make films for the sake of making films, not for all the other reasons. They can very easily get in the way.

**MS:** That's about motivation, but what did it teach you actually about the craft of screenwriting itself that you didn't know when you were doing *The Full Monty*?

**SB:** It taught me a lot about the importance of structure, and getting everything absolutely right. Particularly in terms of your actors. What I did with them, and it was the first time I'd done it, and I've done it a lot subsequently, workshop things with them.

Again, it's about an authenticity. Actors are brilliant at digging very deep into themselves and finding character points that are very difficult for me to come up with, sitting on my own. They're incredibly useful, fertile tools to use. And they love talking about themselves, obviously, being actors. So they provide an immense amount of material. On many scripts I've written subsequently I've used actors.

**MS:** And how did making these films in Britain, in this way, lead you on the road to making *Slumdog Millionaire*, obviously a film set in a totally different environment, in a place that was utterly unfamiliar to you at first.

**SB:** There's no nice hierarchy where you can move up from office boy to CEO of a company, it's very random. I'd love to say it was a lot of wise decisions made over the course of time that led to *Slumdog Millionaire*, but it's always been slightly random. It's always been going with something that fascinates me.

It really doesn't matter; you can make it for a tiny amount of money like *This Is Not A Love Song*, or a substantial amount like *127 Hours* or *Slumdog Millionaire*. It's really been about the film, and that's been the guiding principle.

It's not been a very wise route, the career choices are not 'clever career choices', because I have ducked around between a DreamWorks animation and a BBC Four film about one person swimming across various bits of Britain, on his own. Those career choices are rather odd, but if you cannot engage very passionately with the material I find it very hard. I find it very hard for it to be a job, I suppose.

**MS:** So the film's the thing then, and yet again we seem to be talking about films as though they were creatures unto themselves.

**SB:** I do maintain that they always become another beast, no matter who's in charge, what's written or who's acting in it. They'll even jump genres, they'll cross over to places you don't understand and they sort of do it on their own.

Once you'd got everybody going in the same direction there's a twist in the tail of that film that will flick that way or that way. A little film like *Slumdog Millionaire*, that Warner Bros. looked at and went, 'Whoa, we're not distributing that, it's got subtitles, nobody famous, all sorts of weird kids running around doing strange things in toilets. That's not for us.'

They were going to dump that film. And somehow, something happens, that was out of all of our control. Fox Searchlight picked it up and made millions and millions of people go and see it.

**MS:** Okay, well let's see a bit from this funny little film, then after the thunderous applause dies down it's your turn to ask the questions.

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(Clip from *Slumdog Millionaire*)

**MS:** Okay, we've got some roving mikes, so if you want to ask Simon a question stick your hand in the air and I shall do my best...

**SB:** Before you do I should say that that is an example of a cinematic epiphany, which I'd love to have written, but didn't. That's also an example of a film telling you what to do with itself, without anyone else's help. It was Danny who decided to run the film backwards at that moment, because we'd all made a film about memory.

We hadn't quite realised that at the time, but in the cutting room it was very clear that this entire film was about memory, and the kiss – and running the film backwards – is him trying to erase time and the past, and the bad things. I think this is a beautiful piece of pure filmmaking, which I sadly had very little to do with.

### Q&A

**Q (from the floor):** I'm just curious, there must have been one or two scripts that didn't make it to the screen I assume during this time, or maybe has not yet made it to the screen. I wonder which of those is your favourite? And can you talk about it.

**SB:** I've been very lucky that most of the films I've written have ended up being filmed. The one that got away I feel was one called *Waterloo Sunset*, and that really won't ever be filmed because it was all about Eurostar at Waterloo Station, which it no longer is.

**MS:** A period drama, that's called, isn't it?

**SB:** I feel very fondly about that, it was one of those films that nearly got made a number of times and, somehow, they become slightly cursed, the ones that nearly get there and then the finance falls apart at the last minute or an actor wanders off to another film. Again, it's about momentum, filmmaking, and you lose that lose momentum and it becomes the film that was going to go last year but didn't.

In peoples' minds, again it's about confidence and momentum, it becomes a film that people

didn't quite have confidence in and it had lost its momentum and it's now in my drawer. That's what happens.

**Q (from the floor):** It was interesting how you were saying that when you make a film really well it comes full circle goes closer to the truth. But you were also saying that as a writer/director there's a different image of the film in your head from the film when it's shot. I was wondering which one you think is closer to that truth, maybe because of the compromises it's closer because it has more of a shade of reality.

**SB:** I'm going to plead cognitive polyphasia. That's a really interesting question, getting to the truth of something – it's such a complicated word, truth. All I know is you can sniff it when it's not there, you can tell a fake, I think, very easily in the cinema. I'm very, very conscious of that. All my antennae are out for a scene that is a fake.

The dole queue scene in *The Full Monty* was one of those scenes where I thought, 'I'm pushing this too hard, I'm trying to force and manipulate a reaction out of the audience.' It's not as naturalistic as the rest of the film, it sort of hovers above naturalism a bit further than everything else. And I'm manipulating the truth or the reality or the authenticity of this for other reasons than being true to the film.

As it turned out, everyone in the audience felt those characters had really earned that moment and our audiences told us that it was fine to have that moment. But I think one always has to be deeply careful and aware of the authenticity – and it's just my way of working – of what one is saying. And then somehow the truth will out.

Whatever kind of truth that is, even in a melodrama like *Slumdog* there is a certain sort of emotional truth to it that's very important. If you miss it, if you don't hit the target with it, it's very apparent. It's a nasty thing when you feel manipulated by a film, for pushing the big suite music to make you cry. I find all that really troublesome.

**Q (from the floor):** I'm a great admirer of your writing Simon, and the fact that your socks match the carpet which is a very nice touch.

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**SB:** I checked that they hadn't changed the colour of the carpet.

**Q (from the floor):** Very good research. You talked earlier about happily giving up control and being the second in command, and so on. But then when you were talking about the various films you've been involved with it sounds as though you've been involved in the editing process, and you've been on board the whole way through and that's obviously not always the writer's experience. Have you deliberately tried to keep involved? Have you been lucky in those choices? Have there been films that got out of your control at that point and you haven't been happy with the end result?

**SB:** I've been really, really lucky is the truth and worked with directors who actively want me in the cutting room, as a rule. I think that's the really important place for a writer to be, not on set. I try not to go on set at all really, because you're just the person who's in the way and everybody goes, 'Who's he? What's he doing here?'

You don't really have a role. If you've done your role properly, as a writer, you're just there watching. But in an edit room I think the film gets rebuilt, somehow, in an edit room. Except the script is not words, it's all shot footage. And then you start rebuilding the film again, and so a writer's a very useful person to have in the room again, at that stage.

I've been incredibly lucky to work with Danny Boyle, who wants the writer there the whole way. I was at the sound mix of *127 Hours* and *Slumdog*. It's unheard of for a writer to be asked to the sound mix. What does a writer know about sound mixing? Except that, if you get this group of people together at the start who all understand intimately the way this film should go, then they should be included in every decision down the way.

It's not that Danny did everything I said, but he's always listening to the comments and suggestions of the people who started down here because we're all headed in that direction. But I've been very, very lucky. I've never been shut out of a film like that. And thank you about the socks.

**Q (from the floor):** I've noticed this is the photograph you guys have used to promote this series and I just wondered, Simon, the big bottle of Grey Goose up on your shoulder there, does that help or hinder your writing?

**SB:** You know the advert I did? I'm also promoting Grey Goose vodka. That is Christian Colson's bottle of Grey Goose by the way, not mine.

**Q (from the floor):** I wasn't sure if there was a correlation with the glass. My real question is, aside from an adaptation, when you set out to write do you know where you're going? Do you know the end point or does come through the process of writing your characters through the story?

**SB:** It's a good question, I know certain places I'm heading for. Quite often not the end, actually. I sort of deliberately keep my eyes slightly averted from that because, again, I'm very suspicious of driving a film and its audience towards a great end. The end is incredibly important, obviously. I'd like it to come as naturally as possible out of all the other elements heading towards that end rather than go, 'What we need in this film is for these two guys to kiss.'

Again, it's that documentary suspicion of manipulation I suppose, that I've always got. It's not always very helpful, but it's just the way I work. So endings I quite often don't know about until the film says we're going to have the end at the train station.

**MS:** What about beginnings?

**SB:** Beginnings I'm always very good at on paper and they're always a mess in the film. Again it's because a film will go, 'Well you've written a beginning like this, but I've turned into this.' The beginning sets out the stall of your film, it says, 'This is who I am, here are our characters, this is where we're going on this journey.'

But if all that's slightly changed then the beginning becomes very troublesome. Each time I sit down to write a script I go, 'This time the beginning's going to work,' and it never does. The first two, maybe three scenes of *The Full Monty* that I wrote were cut out because they didn't

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work. So it starts in this rather uncomfortable wide shot where you can't see any of the characters, because we didn't have a beginning.

The same with *Slumdog*, we're cutting between violent torture and a game show – which looked great on the page – and all the audience was going, 'Whoa, you're sticking his head in a bucket trying to drown him and electrocute him and we're back to a game show!'

In the script, mysterious as it is to say this now, it was actually quite funny. It was supposed to be a funny opening. When you film it and see it on a screen, with this poor man dangling there, it's very far from funny. So there were an awful lot of problems trying to sort the beginning out.

**Q (from the floor):** I was just wondering, going back to your roots as a documentary maker, you said you like to immerse yourself into the landscape of a place such as Mumbai with *Slumdog*. Have you ever found that, once you overlay the story with themes of romance or love, that some of the harsh realities you found while immersing yourself into your research and spending time in such a place, are lost in the overall film. Are maybe forgotten as the story takes over and some of the things you've learnt in the place fall to the wayside.

**SB:** Yeah, that's interesting. I think narrative is a really seductive thing, storytelling is very seductive and it will take over. It always does, and it has to, that's the point. So yes is the simple answer. Things get lost and you try and imbue every scene with the landscape so it's there as a backdrop and a subtext.

The way Mumbai changed over the years, from its colonial past to this kind of rabid, 21st century beast of a city, we didn't want to labour it but it had to be there all the time. But story will always come first; it will always push its way to the front, as it should. That's the job of the storyteller.

**Q (from the floor):** I've always noticed that there are some hidden messages in your films. Like in *Slumdog* you show the harsh realities of the slums. I just wondered, do you do these messages intentionally or do they sometimes come by accident?

**SB:** That's such a good question, such a writer's question. I never set out to do that, they just creep in there. Someone said you make the same film over and over again, or create the same piece of art over and over again, which I don't think is quite true. But you write who you are, I think.

I think it's very hard to escape writing who you are, for better or for worse. A very wise person said to me, 'You always write about hope and love in every film.' I was talking to some writers who'd watched a lot of my films all in a row, poor them, and they said, 'It's all about transformation.'

No it's not, I did a film called *Miss Pettigrew Lives For A Day* which is nothing like *The Full Monty*. And they said, 'You see? Love and transformation.' I sort of stepped back and went, 'Oh yeah.' And that works for *This Is Not A Love Song*, despite the fact it's extremely violent and troubled, it's about love and hope and transformation.

And I never set out to do that, it's just there. As a writer you're a product of who you are, and it just bleeds into the material. Whether I head towards material that suits that or whether I subconsciously push it into the material I don't know. But yeah, that's a really perceptive thing to say.

**MS:** So these things are hidden from you as well, but what happens when you have those experiences and people do give you those readings of films that you then agree with and they can tell you that this is your theme? What happens to your writing after that?

**SB:** It's brilliant, it makes me look like I've done it all deliberately, which is fabulous.

**MS:** What happens in the next script, when in effect your master scene has been revealed to you and is no longer stuck away in your unconscious?

**SB:** I quite often head towards material that will have no hope, love or transformation in it; it's the self sabotage thing. It's very dangerous to know precisely what you're doing. If you get the formula right...again it's the sense of being suspicious of a formula, of the manipulation of a medium.

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So I try and avoid it, but it creeps back in every time. Even if, as I did for *The Full Monty*, I ran a million miles from that, to try and do something like *This Is Not A Love Song*. The same themes are cropping up of male identity, of different sorts of love between men; of hope and love. They just pop up again and you go, 'But that's totally different.' And then some film student will go, 'No, it's the same.'

**Q (from the floor):** Simon, there was an article in Sight & Sound slagging off British films, one of the arguments they used is that British screenplays make it to the screen in about four drafts – this is the argument they gave – so therefore you don't get a polished product. What do you think about that, and how many drafts did it take for *Slumdog* to get to the screen?

**SB:** Not many drafts of *Slumdog*, four probably. The magic disaster number. Obviously there's tinkering in between all the time, but probably three major shovelling around of things. It's very difficult to make sweeping judgements and say that no British films are developed enough, because one could easily point the finger at America and say that their films are way too developed.

They're over-developed to the point of a total loss of individuality, and a blandness that makes them unwatchably dull. It's just about extremes. I don't think one can say that British films are underdeveloped. That's actually never been my experience, that they go to the screen too quickly. It's always an effort to get a film to the screen.

One can say a lot about British films, but I don't think the fact that they're under-developed is one of the criticisms that's particularly valid, I don't think.

**Q (from the floor):** Obviously one of the important things of displaying a character would be the way they talk, and you were saying earlier about talking to the people in the slums, but when you were writing it did you have to spend a lot of time thinking about the language that they used? I come from the south of England, I had an idyllic background and upbringing, and if I try to write anyone edgy it feels like I'm lying because I don't know how to say what the person wants to say in

the same words because the words that I would use aren't necessarily what they would say. So do you find that you spend a lot of time with the people that you're trying to write, or does it just come naturally?

**SB:** No, you have to hang out with the people, I think. Then it's brilliant, because they will come up with the most wonderful ways of phrasing things. The wonderful registers of language. I loved being in Mumbai, because they flip between English and Hindi in this wonderful way, and all sorts of rather archaic British expressions that have sort of died away here will pop up in the midst of sentences there.

And it felt very fresh and vibrant, you'd have these odd syllogisms and bits of Britain mixed in with bits of India, and these fabulous words would pop up. I loved all that and wanted to include it. Same with *The Full Monty*, just that very dry, northern humour which I was born and brought up with. I just love that. It's so important to get that right, the only way to do it is to go and listen, listen to people talk.

**MS:** There's some pretty edgy places in south-east England, I think.

**Q (from the floor):** I know this is a lecture about the art and craft of screenwriting but I'm quite a vacuous person, and I'd like to know what it's like to win an Oscar.

**SB:** It's a very odd thing. Particularly in America where it's really important, and a very significant event. In Britain people go, 'Oh, you won an Oscar, that was great, anyway, what are we doing tonight?' It's a very extraordinary thing because it's one of the most iconic single images there is.

To wake up with one on the mantelpiece, or propping open the door or wherever it might be, is odd. One has to try and not be affected by that.

**MS:** What's it like not to win one?

**SB:** That's less good, actually. You don't get into the parties, the car doesn't come to pick you up, and it's very apparent when you don't win one. You're very popular hours before the ceremony,

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and after...no-one's being horrible, but no-one quite knows how to talk to you, because it's a bit of a death in the family.

So you wander around apologising for not having won an Oscar, which is a weird thing to do. But I did, all night, after *The Full Monty* I was going, 'Sorry!'

**MS:** Someone took pity on you though, didn't they? On a plane?

**SB:** Oh yes, someone gave me a little plastic one. It's a bit like that advert; it's the backhanded compliment that I like.

**Q (from the floor):** You're obviously a successful screenwriter and a modest one so it might be quite difficult for you to answer this question...

**SB:** I'm brilliant.

**Q (from the floor):** I just wondered if you could step outside of yourself and look at your career and the way you work, and what's happened to you, and summarise the secret of your success. Just for the rest of us.

**SB:** It'll cost you a lot of money, that answer. It's a combination of craft skills learnt over about 16 years, a sort of dogged determination to get the things made, a lot of luck and being in the right place at the right time. Both the films that I'm known for were released at very specific times in the world, which helped the films tremendously.

*The Full Monty* came out just after Tony Blair had got in and the Conservative government had finally gone after however long it was, and there was a perception that one could actually laugh at unemployment, that it was going to be a thing of the past, and that it was okay now.

It was like a big relief, and there was this huge euphoria in the country at the time, so it was the perfect film to come out right then. The same with *Slumdog Millionaire*. Barack Obama had just been elected as President, and there was a sense that America was going to look at the wider world in a whole new light.

So this strange foreign film was embraced in a way that it might not have been at all under a

Bush Presidency, which was very inward looking. So there was a huge amount of luck involved. And craft skills. A tiny little bit of artistry somewhere, and a dysfunctional childhood was very useful as a writer.

I'm only half joking about that. The wonderful writer Frank Pierson, who's still writing aged 84 or 85, when asked by people as he always is, why he is such a great screenwriter and how do you become a great screenwriter, his answer to them is, 'Two divorces and a spell in prison.'

He's also only half joking. Writers are outsiders, by their very nature. If you're a happy person, a woman from the south east of England, don't become a writer. You had an idyllic childhood. It's tough to be a writer if you have an idyllic childhood.

If you're an outsider then you're always objectifying, as you asked me to do about this question, standing back and going, 'What makes that group of people work? How do I fit in to that group of people?' You become an observer, and it's only one more stage to become someone who writes the observations down. It's a combination of all those things really, mostly luck I would say.

**Q (from the floor):** I'm going to start off by apologising because I know absolutely nothing about cinema. I'd be interested in hearing how you arrived at the ending of *Slumdog Millionaire*, because in a way that railway scene seems to me as though it could almost be from another film.

**SB:** The ending being the dance sequence, or the kiss that you just saw?

**Q (from the floor):** Sorry, going into an empty railway station in a really busy city and the apparent Bollywood dancing.

**SB:** Very perceptive for someone who knows nothing about cinema. We had to go back and re-shoot that because the original screenplay and the original edits of the film, there was no kiss. They went into the empty train station, trains pull up, they have this rather melodramatic exchange together, everyone gets out of the trains and it moves seamlessly – that was the plan – into this dance sequence.

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But there was no kiss involved. We previewed it to a couple of audiences somewhere out in a Cineplex out on the M25 somewhere, quite frightening. The audiences really liked the film, and were up in arms about the ending. They were universally negative about it. And we were all very bolshie about it, the filmmakers, saying they just don't know their Bollywood cinema, it's borderline racism.

Then we questioned them a bit more closely and they were just incredibly bright about it. They said, 'We have invested a huge amount of emotion and energy in this story of these characters and then you just tell us it was all just a silly Bollywood movie. We feel betrayed by your ending.'

It was an incredibly cine-literate response. We went, 'Oh, so we'd better do something about this.' So we went back and re-shot the kiss and then put the dance as a kind of coda, with the credits as a sort of exhalation of fun after the end beat. And then tested it back at the scary place on the M25 and it was fine, they all loved it then.

But they needed to finish a real experience properly, not play a cinema trick. And then you can have the fun with the dancing, which everyone likes. In the credits is fine. Again it's about manipulation, and playing games with audience. They know, and they really told us that we'd pulled a fast one on them and it was not acceptable.

That's probably why you were instinctively picking up something odd about that scene, where there were a lot of people and then there were no people and then there a lot of people again, because it's a highly re-cut ending that we had to replace what we originally had. That was a really long answer, sorry.

**MS:** I think this is going to be the last question. No pressure.

**Q (from the floor):** First of all, yay for Bournemouth Film School. I just wanted to ask, a lot of people seem really ready to terrify writers into submission with regards to rogue production companies or difficult directors who are only out to make money and tear about your visionary dream which is perfect in every way. It's really difficult to take

things like that seriously when it's such a hubbub of confusion and activity and creativity. Have you had any experience with being messed around by companies or directors, or do you find it often much easier to make partnerships like that creatively?

**SB:** Film has got a very bad reputation for that, but the truth is – particularly now and particularly in Britain – it's such a difficult job to get a film made that if you're in it just to make money you're a real idiot. It's three years work to get a film off the ground, at least. My experience is that nearly everybody I come across has a passion to do what they're doing.

Especially in this country because it's not well funded, you don't get a pay cheque at the end of every week. I always work from the basis of trust first, and if you're disappointed well that's a shame. That approach works very well for me, I've had very few bad experiences. They've mostly been really good experiences.

If you're in the film industry in this country, it's there because you have to be, it's one of those rather addictive compulsions and everyone – including me – says all the time, 'I should do something proper, I should become a doctor, or a paramedic. Do something useful.'

But it's a sort of addictive thing, filmmaking, you're amongst a bunch of addicts hopefully trying to get your film made. My experiences have nearly always been positive, so I would beware the scare stories. Use your instincts about somebody, but on the whole people want the film made.

**MS:** We have run out of time I'm afraid, but Simon thank you so much for coming and sharing the secrets of your career so far. Take a bow.