

Screenwriters on Screenwriting

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

Paul Laverty

29 September 2011 at BFI Southbank

Paul Laverty: First of all, thanks very much for turning up. As Jeremy [Brock, curator of the Screenwriter Lecture series] said, it's such a beautiful evening. I couldn't give a lecture to save myself, so my friend Jamie Michie – a wonderful actor I had the great privilege to meet on *Route Irish* – is going to help us out. This is a little piece. It'll take about ten minutes so there's not even enough time to fall asleep. It was written in a blur, very quickly, and I felt some compulsion to get it out on 11 September 2011.

I'm always fascinated by what public memory is, and what anniversaries are, and who's remembered and who's not. So Jamie – he got this at really short notice – I'm so grateful that he's decided to help us out. So you've got to imagine this is not 29 September 2011 but 29 September 2030, and Jamie is not a handsome young man as he is, but a grizzled old ex-soldier. And so, here we are, I hope, 19 years into the future.

Jamie Michie reads an extract of Paul Laverty's work, after a musical piece *The Green Hills of Tyrol*.

"F**kin' break your heart that, eh? Nothing like a wee song and a wee dram to get youse going, huh? I was that soldier. And I've seen the f**kin' glory alright. But first thing's first, I blame the parents. I mean f**k's sake, they were well worn spelt out so even a f**kin' Arab could catch on. I remember it like it was yesterday. Nae shagging, I mean, it's not that f**kin' hard to understand is it. If ya didn't want wee uns keep your tadger to yourself. Nae wee uns, nae problem. I rest my f**kin' case.

"[Laughs] Kitchen equipment, I mean it's f**kin' hilarious man. It all started with the delivery of kitchen equipment. Fallujah, Iraq, 2004. Remember the American contractors who got lost in Fallujah? Down the wrong street, round the wrong corner, mobbed by the Iraqis, pulled from their motors: stripped, torn, lynched and hung. From a bridge. As they delivered a set of f**kin' cupboards.

"And that's heroic, huh? I still had life in me then, Fallujah, Iraq, 25 years ago. And as I saw those bodies sway I knew it wouldnae be long. I

mean, it's the only word you can smell and by Christ did it stink. Vengeance. It's a word you can feel too, it's a sort of nasty rumbling in your gut. I'm not a wordy prick, but the chaplain, he gave me a wee quote that stuck in my head. I didnae understand it then. 'Before you start your journey of revenge dig two graves – Confucius.'

"Well I'll let youse into a wee secret, armies never use a smelly word, like 'aftershave'. Words give away your position. So they baptised it Operation Phantom Fury, and that's not a joke by the way. It's what they called it. It's so long ago my f**kin' memory's going, you see, I breathed in some of that sh*t too and I get mixed up. It affects your brain, the dust does.

"But I still blame the f**kin' parents, did I tell youse that? I mean, if they'd just listened to their ain f**kin' doctors, they were well told man. Nae shagging. Anyway, see me and my fellow squaddies, we had a grand view of Operation Phantom Fury. We were sent north to back up the gringos, cut off the rat runs of the ragheads, Dogwood Camp no far from Fallujah.

"And what a show the Yanks put on, man. They really know how to put on a show. Bombed the f**kin' place to smithereens. Now this is where I need to get a wee bit technical. See life is in the detail, as the Devil well knows. It's about penetration, and the army are really big on penetration. A wee question for youse, what flies faster than Superman but is 1.7 times denser than lead? What burns at 10,000 degrees centigrade on impact? What slices through armoured metal and fries the bastards inside? What penetrates a bunker where the forces of evil wank in the dark? Anyone? Depleted uranium munitions, DU ordinance.

"I'm no as thick as I look, eh? Well we dropped thousands of tonnes of this sh*t. Do you remember that small fry, slimy wee c*nt Geoff Hoon, Ministry of Defence? Astonishingly effective he said. Oh yeah. Astonishingly so. But just one teeny, weeny, wee key fact they kept under their caps. It's f**kin' radioactive. So on impact 70% vaporises, it turns into dust including uranium oxide, which has a half-life of

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4.5 billion years. That's a f**kin' long time, even for a mountain. You know?

"So every round, tens of thousands of the bastards over the years, from tanks to cannons, vaporising, spreading the sh*te on every puffy wind and turning the cradle of civilisation into one big dirty bomb site festering with cancer. And that's what did it for me; breathing in all the Superman dust, in fabulous multi-coloured Fallujah. But there's nae proof by the way, there's nae proof at all. Just like there was nae proof of Agent Orange, nae proof of Gulf War Syndrome. It's all idle speculation.

"So when all the dust had settled, so to speak, and I went home, I began to feel like sh*te. Me and thousands of others. Now my memory is all f**ked, and that's the best part of me. I'd be a liar if I said I didnae feel sorry for myself, but you know what – and I learnt this in the army – misery is f**kin' relative. See you lose a leg and you feel sh*te. You meet your buddy who lost his bollocks, well you feel like hopping up and down on your stump with delight, you know?

"So I felt like a f**king Olympic champion, fit for a marathon when I saw what happened next. And that's when it started, man, that's when it started. The phantoms, the Phantom Furies for real. I mean, they picked a right good name. Real genuine flesh and blood f**kin' phantoms carried for nine months by the women of Fallujah. Real labour, real legs spread apart, real childbirth, and then the screams. No of the mothers, or the bairns, but of the midwives because of what they had to cradle in their arms. Wee f**kin' Phantom Furies for real.

"Imagine putting that to your breast, man. That would test a mother's love, eh? Now I'm no exactly Mother Teresa by the way, but I did feel sorry for the poor wee sods. I mean, they weren't even born when we turned it to dust in 2004, and maybe that's what got me. I mean, they weren't even born. It's our wee gift to the future. And then more of the Phantoms, they kept popping out like the Army of the Damned. Some even had two heads, bumpy heads, half a head, a few cyclopes too with just one eye, intestines outside instead of inside. Half a brain where it shouldnae be. A few crackers there, eh?

"Six fingers here, six fingers there, it's all very well if you want to play the flute but no if you want to terrorise the neighbours, you know? But nae proof mind, did I say? Have you noticed that? When squaddies or ragheads or grunts or slanty-eyed Vietnamese get f**ked there isn't any proof. Ever. It's just idle speculation.

"Experts told us it could have been caused by the water, by inadequate nutrition or by stress. Well, stress it seems is greatly underestimated. Why didn't these f**king stupid mothers-to-be just take up yoga or take up Pilates classes when they found out they were pregnant? I mean it's not exactly as if there's a shortage of mats in the Middle East for f**k's sake. Soon the question wasnae, 'Is it a boy? Is it a girl?', it was, 'Is it normal? What shape is the head? How many eyes? How many fingers? Are it's insides inside?' You know?

"I couldnae get these f**kin' wee uns out my head man so thank Christ at long last somebody had the common sense, and that's when their ain doctors told them, 'Stop havin' wee uns, stop shagging,' but did they listen? No, did they f**k. Now do you get me? I blame the parents. And there's one that keeps at me. The commander, I call him. He looks like he's been boiled in fat, with wee fat blobs for feet.

"Close up I see him, he's always the first one to crawl onto his flying carpet as night-time falls, and then I pan round and I see his buddies, the Phantom Furies, thousands of the wee bastards, they mount their magic carpets too: the humpty back, the one eye, the mangled, the twisted. And then the f**kin' buzzing in my head man, it nearly kills me as they take off, and they come for me like we came for them.

"Intestines trailing as they speed through the night, six fingers on each hand, grappling their flying carpets. The buzzing, always at night, dive bombing me as I try to brush my teeth. The wee f**kers, they get inside my pyjamas, under my covers, up my nose, up my hole, inside my brain and then into my f**kin' soul. And that's not a nice place. I can feel them drilling inside me now. Jesus Christ, nae f**kin' piece ever, once you meet the future. We f**ked their wee

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uns man, that's the truth, you know? No just then, but into the future too. I did this.

"But who sent me? Who paid for it? I was an altar boy before I learnt to kill, and whoever would harm one of these little ones? It would be better for him if he had a heavy weight fastened about his neck and he was thrown into the sea. Sometimes I wish with all my heart that that was true. [Laughs] Am I mistaken, or is there a little bit of negativity in the air? Nothing like a wee song or a wee dram to cheer us up though, you know?"

"I'd like to ask youse one and all to unburden yourselves and just forget that we financed all this. And join me in a wee song.

Reprise of *The Green Hills of Tyrol*

APPLAUSE

Dave Calhoun: Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to reintroduce Paul Laverty.

First I think we should dive in and talk about *Operation Phantom Fury*. You wrote this piece to commemorate the 10th anniversary of 9/11 but without an obvious platform for it. Was it just a case of something you felt you had to get off your chest, that you had to write?

Paul Laverty: Yeah, I suppose so. There was a theatre company a while back that said, 'Have you got any ideas at the back of your head for a short piece?' When I was doing the research for *Route Irish* I came across these horrific – I mean the photographs are just unbelievable, these are the more palatable ones I thought. I had a good chat with my friend Ann [Cattrall] at the office this morning, there's other ones that are just so horrific that it almost feels like a freak show.

And there were stories of kids with two heads and three heads, and that image wouldn't leave me really, so I just wrote a piece and never really heard back from them again. Then when it came to 11 September I just felt the need to send it out to a few folks. And then I talked to the people at BAFTA and they thought it was a good idea to try to do it. And Ann in the [Sixteen Films] office told me just to

do it as well, because I was doubting whether we should do it or not, but she's from Yorkshire and I always do what she tells me.

DC: Obviously with this piece you wanted to remember, from the point of view of the future, these children who have been affected in Fallujah. How did you arrive at the image of this aging soldier in a bar, in that year, looking back? Because that provides a very particular viewpoint on the case. It adds quite a contradictory, complicated voice into the mix.

PL: I'd love if I could have had genuine voices for the three personalities, or that one person with three heads in Iraq. But it's very hard, you just don't understand the culture or the language. That was the image and I really wanted to give them a voice, but because of my limitations I suppose, or lack of imagination, or access to that culture, I couldn't do it. The other way to do it is to turn around with something more familiar. I was really keen to project it into the future, very, very keen about that because I think even now they're actually determined to wipe this war from existence.

We heard so many stories when we did *Route Irish* about Iraq fatigue. But it was interesting, there was a reference just recently before the Labour Party conference, Douglas Alexander said Iraq had cast a long shadow over the party. But it was almost like they were the victim of that and they'd forgotten about it. There's one way to get out of a shadow and that's to shine light on it. And one way of doing that is to make those responsible for that war in which a million people have been killed. That's an estimate by the Lancet that nobody ever repeats. I've never heard that on the BBC for example, quoting the Lancet, 'over a million people.'

Secondly and even more importantly, those children are alive today. They're struggling like mad. If you look at the information, the articles, the parents can barely cope. They've got no support whatsoever. So at the very least there's an obligation to pay compensation to these innocents for what we've done with them.

And the people who are often forgotten as well are the soldiers who do our dirty work. So

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that's why I was keen to project it into the future, because this will go on for generations, but they'd like to forget about it.

DC: This idea of you focusing on the forgotten and the unexamined is something that will come out through the various clips we're going to talk about. It's very much a theme of your work.

PL: Our work. This one I didn't do with Ken, but I always talk about 'we' because it's always such a collaboration with Ken and Rebecca and my colleagues at Sixteen Films.

DC: I'd like to go back a little and give a quick biography of Paul which I think will help give us some background to what we're going to talk about and also to highlight that theme as well, of why you're looking to examine the forgotten and the unexamined. You're from Scotland and, as this piece may hint in some way, you've travelled widely to live and work in Europe and in the Americas and you now live in Spain.

You studied as a lawyer and in the 1980s you were working for a human rights organisation in Nicaragua and I know that in Nicaragua and other countries in Central America you experienced war at first hand. And it was after those experiences you began to feel that maybe you had stories to tell. Would you say that wanting to make sense of those experiences you had at that time inspired you to become a screenwriter?

PL: Yeah, it was an accident really. I mean, I'm glad you asked that question in a way because writing that piece... What was amazing was, when I was in Nicaragua in the '80s, many of the same people who were responsible for *this* war were actually in Nicaragua. I came across them for the first time. Guys like John Negroponte, Richard Perle, all those neocons who coalesced around Reagan and George Bush Senior. Many of them were the ones who were around George Bush Junior at the time of this war.

And I suppose it does drive you absolutely mad to see them do it again, cause so much misery and get away with it. Of course Blair helped a

lot. He greased the path for them and his own hand since. Those people have got away with it again. And that's what really, really would drive you mad. I think we've got great lessons to learn from the Argentineans, from their dirty war in the '80s. They never gave up despite all the determination to forget about that and the amnesties and the way that powerful and rich people hide. They kept at it. And just very recently they put some senior generals and an ex-president in prison, 30 years later. And I think we should do that with these people because [it's] the only way to stop them.

I think we've got an obligation. And it's not just me saying this off the top of my head. When you look at fantastic human rights reports by Human Rights Watch for example, the case they make against Bush and all of those people for introducing and making torture work again, they say there's a criminal case to be made at the very, very least. And I think we have to start pursuing them instead of celebrating them and turning them into peace envoys, and making them rich and giving them a voice. We should examine what they have done and make them responsible, otherwise they'll try and do it again.

APPLAUSE

DC: You poured much of those experiences you had in Nicaragua into your first script *Carla's Song* which was made by Ken Loach in the mid-90s. I'm curious to know why you decided to bring those experiences to cinema specifically. Your background was in law, working in human rights organisations, travelling a lot for that work. Why not journalism or books or plays or poetry, why did you go for cinema?

PL: I did do a lot of journalism when I was there. I was sick of doing human rights reports and I was sick of writing journalism, but I just thought by delving into fiction you can go into another level. There are just so many more levels to play with. And in my innocence I thought you'd be able to reach more people by cinema. And a book sounded far too difficult. I came back from Nicaragua, I was there for three years, and I had the great fortune... I just wrote to Ken. And he wrote back and said if I was passing by in London to pop round for a cup of

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tea. So I went to see him and he was remarkably curious.

He didn't give a toss about whether I'd written before or knew about this film industry – which I didn't – and he just said, 'Try and write a few scenes.' He said it was a real long shot, so the first half of *Carla's Song* popped out. But there was a long time between that and making it, because Ken was working with a wonderful writer, Jim Allen, and they were several projects in front so we didn't get around to doing it for about five years.

DC: Did you get in touch because you felt from knowing of him and seeing his films that you hoped you'd be kindred spirits in some way, that there was something you could share there?

PL: Yeah, I loved the films. I knew what he had said and I read and found out about it. So when I met him he was just remarkably curious and open.

DC: For the last 15 years, since *Carla's Song* was made, you've written 12 or 13 features I think, and ten of those are made by Ken Loach. *Carla's Song* was the first one, the second one was *My Name Is Joe* in 1998, which we're going to see the first clip from. I'm just going to give a general overview of the film, as anyone who's seen it will know *My Name Is Joe* stars Peter Mullan as a recovering alcoholic trying to hold his life together in Glasgow. He strikes up a relationship with a woman, a tentative relationship. He's also trying to hold on to a friendship as well through the film. I won't say any more but maybe you can say a little bit about the scene we're going to see.

PL: Well it's just the opening. I think openings are interesting. Have a wee quick look at the names on the blank screen as they come up and then we'll just watch it and talk.

(Clip from My Name Is Joe)

PL: Did you ever hear that story about... it's hearing the Glasgow accent again, I don't live there now and I miss it a great deal. But did you hear that story about Bono, when he went to a concert in Glasgow? I don't know if it was

covered down here or not, so he went along to a concert in Glasgow and everyone was cheering, and the usual. He walked up to the microphone, and he whispered into it, 'Just hush,' and he got total silence. And then he started clapping his hands, and he said 'every time I clap my hands a child in Africa dies.' And someone shouted out from the front, 'Stop doing it then, you evil bastard.' It jumped in my mind then as well.

I remember once as well Ken was up visiting me, we were doing some prep for a film, and were walking back home after having a bite to eat. It was closing time and all the bars were coming out. We just walked past this bar, and you know when a drunk focuses on something it's like a missile just connecting up. He just caught sight of Ken. He's a big fella as well, and he charged over to him, right up to his face, and he just goes, 'Are you Ken Loach?' you know, and there are quite a lot of Orangemen up there and Loyalists who are not best pleased with *Hidden Agenda* and *The Wind That Shakes The Barley*.

Ken backed off a wee bit and said, 'Aye, it's me,' and he goes, 'I f**king love you,' and he grabbed him and gave him this big, giant kiss, picked him up and gave him a bear hug and just went off. That was one of the reasons I wanted to start with that piece, because I miss Glasgow and daft things like that happen. And also for the names at the front. The only reason I'm talking to you here today is because of the wonderful people I work with. And a name wasn't added, it wasn't there; Roger Smith who's the script editor, who's played a very, very important part when me and Ken talk. They both saved my bacon on many occasions.

DC: So those two anecdotes you told there about Bono and someone coming up to Ken Loach on the street suggests that there's something there of the spirit of Glasgow that's incomparable, that keeps bringing you back there to write about it and want to set films there.

PL: Well I think it's a lively place. Other cities have it as well, I don't want to be all romantic about it. I think Liverpool's got it. Maybe port

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cities have got that type of energy, and slightly crazy things happen, you know?

DC: If we include *Carla's Song*, which was partly in Glasgow, obviously *this* film and *Sweet Sixteen*, *Ae Fond Kiss*, and you've also got in the edit at the moment *The Angels' Share* which is also set in Glasgow as well. In terms of writing these films would you say that, if you're writing for the character of Joe for example, the Glaswegian voice is the easiest one for you to tap into and run with when you're writing?

PL: Yeah, by a mile. I suppose I'm very lucky too. Ken's always really been supportive in helping with that. We've made films in Los Angeles and Nicaragua and other places, and I'm always just really respectful of the differences with people. Someone from Mexico City has got a different life view from a Campesino in Nicaragua, or someone who's grown up in Los Angeles. They're all very, very different, so you have to work much harder and listen. You can never capture it the same way. But with something from Glasgow, well it's your natural rhythm and it's much easier.

I'll never forget, the day I actually sat down to start *My Name Is Joe*. I remember the blank sheet and the absolute exhilaration because I thought this man was going to bring us to troublesome places. What I loved about the character Joe, in my head before I started, was one of the steps – one of the 12 steps, I think it's the fourth one – he's got to make a fearless moral inventory of himself. And there's great juice with that.

So you don't know exactly where it might go, but you just feel it's going to take you on a journey and I love that kind of sense of excitement, of not exactly knowing where you're going to go.

DC: You said you wanted to say something about openings as well, and [we just watched] the opening of *My Name Is Joe*. It's the only opening we're going to see throughout the clips this evening. What did you feel you were able to say about the character of Joe in that opening scene at the AA meeting? Even as we just hear his voice, as the credits were going.

PL: It's a pity you missed little bits there in all that. You just feel there's a ticking bomb right from the very beginning, isn't there? 'My name is Joe, and I'm an alcoholic,' and you just go, 'Well, what's going to happen to him?' You know he's had a chaotic past, you know he's probably had blackouts and missed five or six, ten, 15, 20 years of his life. So now that he's sober, those things have got to come to the surface.

There are a lot of things implied. So you just feel there's a bomb ticking. You also feel like there's a man who's trying; you're on his side. That's not a bad option sometimes. I think it's good to have other characters where there've been other films where it's a free world, where the character is equal parts repellent and positive. But in this particular story I think you're rooting for him but you're suspecting trouble and if you have that tension at the beginning I think it can be very, very helpful.

DC: Where did that character come from? I think later on we're going to talk quite a bit about how, in your research process you're a writer who very much likes to get out into the world, meet people, hear voices, pick up dialogue. Obviously if you're working on a historical film, throw yourself into the research of that. With *Joe*, was it the character around which you built the film or was there something else there you were exploring which brought you to Joe?

PL: I can never really remember now. Sometimes a character just pops into your head. I do listen and talk to an awful lot of people. I think listening, for a writer, is greatly underestimated. It's underestimated for a human being. People are happy to talk about their lives. What you're doing with a screenplay is that you're trying to understand the world from someone else's point of view. You only see the world from *your* point of view, so to try and understand it just by listening to people just gives you great information and new ideas.

I don't think you can copy a screenplay from the street. You can't do that. But it really gives you a lot more information, a lot more ideas, if you're talking to a kid, or someone from a different culture, a different language, a

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29 September 2011 at BFI Southbank

different sex or who is much older or younger; someone from a different country who has just seen the world a different way. And when you listen and talk to them it's sometimes absolutely remarkable. So I like to do all that. But when it comes to the character, I've never copied a character that I've met; not consciously. I think you rob and steal and take little bits here and there but I just felt when I confronted Joe, I felt I knew him, you know?

DC: But to those encounters, you have people give you confidence to imagine, to make things up, to go into the world of fiction. So even though you're not copying a conversation with someone you've met or the life of someone you've met, did the fact that you have that stored there give you confidence to go forward do you think?

PL: Yes, and we're going to show another little clip later on, it's a Mexican actress who plays a cleaner but it's really her back story. And the only reason I could have done that really is because I went to Tijuana and Juarez and I saw the places where these people worked. And it isn't a different language, a different sex, a different culture, but by the very fact that you've seen these places and talked to people from different circumstances, when I came to write this piece I just had much more confidence you know?

DC: The film that Paul's talking about is *Bread and Roses*, that's going to be our next clip. Just a quick summary of *Bread and Roses* for anyone who hasn't seen the film that came out in 2000. Paul and Ken Loach and your other collaborators went to California to shoot this film. It was the story of two sisters, Maya and Rosa, both of them Mexican immigrants to Los Angeles. One of them who's been there longer and is established, the older sister is more established there with a family. And the younger sister is very new to the city. We see her arriving at the beginning, and maybe you'd like to say a little more about the scene which is quite late into the film.

PL: You remember it much better than me. This is Maya, the younger sister, who's just found out that her elder sister has betrayed them. This is going to have devastating consequences for

her friends and fellow workers. This is the confrontation.

I saw Pilar [Padilla, who plays Maya] two days ago – and she's just dynamite – and Elpidia [Carillo, who plays Rosa], I really love seeing this scene because they're such cracking actors.

DC: Pilar is the actress playing Maya the younger sister, who comes in to confront her sister in her living room.

(Clip from *Bread and Roses*)

APPLAUSE

PL: It was amazing Dave, going to Tijuana and Juarez and all these places along the border where they have all these maquila factories. What was remarkable about them, when you actually go to the factories, is that they're state-of-the-art. I went to see one at Ford and they were making beautiful brakes and machines and all that. Then I met some of the grass roots organisers. I went to see where they lived. And the wooden pallets that brought in all this fancy machinery, that's what they lived in. And they were working so many hours their children were just left to wander. It's an experiment of absolute, totally unrelated brutal capitalism. They just work and then they're dumped, there's no infrastructure, there's absolutely nothing, so there's no surprise in a way that one aberration breeds another in Juarez. I don't know how many thousands of women, literally, are murdered each year along the Juarez border.

They're actually working so hard, doing double shifts, that at the weekends they go absolutely crazy. They go drinking. And often, because they don't have enough money, they drift into prostitution. So after seeing all that, talking to these people, seeing their faces and seeing where they went, you have the confidence perhaps to try and write that and give them a voice. And I love how Ken dealt with this scene, because it's all coming from the older sister, so he didn't give Maya a script at all. All that she knew was that she'd [been] betrayed and her first line was, 'Why did you do it?' So that was her hearing it for the first time.

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DC: I think when you *know* that it makes sense because you look at the reaction in her face, and I'm not sure you could see a more genuine reaction on an actor's face than the reaction you see on hers when she bursts into tears as she hears what her older sister is saying to her.

I think it gets to something which I know is very important to you, in that any prejudices that we've built up about the older sister Rosa, in that scene begin to fall away. You take us into a new grey area there. Is it important to you that your characters are constantly contradicting themselves and surprising us as an audience, but surprising you as a writer as well as you take them through a story?

PL: I'm glad you asked that question, it's really, really important to all of us at Sixteen Films. But just before that, because she didn't get the script, we imagined that she would react in a different way. We actually thought because of the terrible damage she'd done to the rest that she wouldn't be able to bear her sister. But when you hear that it's very hard not to react to it and to warm to her. So Ken left that space to Maya to react how she might do.

I remember when we finished it we just looked at each other and laughed, because it was different from what the script was and just much more convincing and truthful, so we skipped the next scene and that's the way it was. But going back to your question, I'm really glad you asked that because it's at the heart, I think, of what we're trying to achieve. We are often accused of being propagandistic. We don't see the world in simple terms at all.

I love that phrase from Oscar Wilde: the truth is rarely pure and never simple. It's mixed up. The strongest character in that film, which it is about and was based on the real story of these women, the Justice for Janitors campaign, organising a trade union and having some success because they're very marginalised. But right at the heart of it, she doesn't apologise for it, but she's militantly anti-trade union. And because of her life and circumstances, she just does not believe in the possibility of solidarity and support because she's been so hurt.

And that's the beauty about drama, you can dive into that, and so catching those contradictions in the characters are the things that we're always looking for and by far the most important. The more complicated things are, the more interesting they are, because that's the way life is. It's not simple. We tried to do the same thing in *It's A Free World*, where the main character, again you understand why she is so cruel, why she is so vindictive. That's much more interesting than when things are left dangling because there are no simple answers.

DC: Would you say that what you're trying to do in both those cases, with *It's A Free World* and sticking with that character of Rosa, even if we don't agree with her stance and the film doesn't agree with her anti-union stance, would it be your hope that we'd hear her experience, hear what she says, understand her but then not accuse her and not blame her for having those feelings, but go away and think about the wider reasons why she feels like that, what in her background has led her to that opinion? And the same with the character in *It's A Free World*?

PL: That woman's like that because in her teenage and early womanhood she lived in Tijuana and Juarez. Not everyone did that, but many are driven to it. That's what, I suppose, we've always been very interested in, in our films; how the rest of the world impinges on your life. And it does. Where you live, your class, your education, who your parents are; it's complicated and difficult and different for every single person. But what's obviously clear are the circumstances in which you live, the world of your story, it impinges upon us. All you have to be is surrounded by beautiful architecture and you feel different. You know?

And if you're in a different circumstance, what does that do to you? Or look at Joe. Joe only works because of his limited choices. Or young Liam in *Sweet Sixteen*, so it's a key question for us when we're planning a story; where are they? And we have to be consistent and realistic to the circumstances which impinge on those characters' lives. And hopefully if you do that well for that particular individual it has a

Screenwriters on Screenwriting

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

Paul Laverty

29 September 2011 at BFI Southbank

ripple effect and you try to understand how they came to be that person.

DC: You say you feel you and your collaborators are often accused of being propagandists. Do you think that's an inevitable reaction to putting your head above the parapet, trying to tell stories that other people don't tell, and telling them in an angry, confrontational way?

PL: It's a great privilege to get your film up on screen and for you to come along. When you do that, you should be ready for the debates. And we welcome that and love it. It's probably why we do it.

DC: The next film clip is *Even The Rain*, shot by a Spanish director Iciar Bollain who's also Paul's wife as well. Paul wrote the script, it was shot in Bolivia as well as being set in Bolivia, in 2009 I believe, around the same time as you were making *Route Irish*.

It's good to know that it began life as a historical drama about the coming of Columbus to the New World – but as Paul wrote the script and thought about how to tell the story, it became the story of filmmakers telling the story of Columbus coming to the New World, in the year 2000 in Bolivia.

The filmmakers choose Bolivia because it's cheap to shoot in, which taps into another element of the film, which is about the ethics of filmmaking as well. The other key point is that at the point in which these filmmakers are trying to make this film about Columbus, the water wars kick off in 2000 in Bolivia. There was an uprising against the privatisation of the water supply in Bolivian cities.

The clip we're going to see is later on in the film, and it's the director of this film trying to persuade extras, or the actors in the film, to walk into the water and simulate the drowning of babies.

PL: Yeah, there's an obsessed director who wants to try and make a film about what happened 500 years ago. I wrote the whole script originally as a historical piece, but there were a lot of problems with it. I should have

had Ken and Roger help me out on this one, then it might not have taken ten years. But what happened was, I think when you're trying to make a film of 500 years ago, there are so many obstacles to overcome, of credibility. The devil's in the detail as Jamie said.

The Taino population has been wiped out. The language doesn't exist anymore, even Spanish has changed. And there can be something very worthy and sanctimonious about films... it's just false. So we just thought if we could do it through a 20th century consciousness, that would perhaps help us and give us other angles and other moments, and the audiences give you some more things.

This film is dedicated to the memory of a wonderful friend Howard Zinn, who helped me with the historical research, who died two months before the film was finished. If you ever feel like a fantastic read, he wrote 'A People's History of the United States,' an absolutely brilliant book. He was a wonderful, wonderful man so when I see this piece it always reminds me of him. Gael García Bernal plays the obsessive director, and this is what happens.

(Clip from Even The Rain)

APPLAUSE

PL: I should have said just before, Dave, that they are being pursued by dogs. Howard Zinn had actually asked me if I would be interested in writing a script inspired by the first chapter of his book, which is the arrival of Columbus; what was set in motion, the first voice of conscience of these two radical priests [Fray] Bartolomé de las Casas and Padre Antonio Montesino and it's the 500th anniversary of one of his famous speeches. Many people say this was the founding father of international law.

DC: What we don't see in that film is the reconstruction of these women drowning their babies to avoid them being eaten by dogs, but what we do see is the fear even on the actors' faces even at the idea that anyone would do that. Did you feel that in the end, forcing the audience to imagine that and to see these women imagining themselves doing that was

Screenwriters on Screenwriting

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

Paul Laverty

29 September 2011 at BFI Southbank

actually more powerful than showing the actual act itself?

PL: Very much so, because we could have done it for real if we wanted. It's interesting comparing that piece with the first piece that Jamie read, because there's different ways to do things really. This one I was much more interested in trying to get the audience to imagine it really. The horror's in your eyes because these indigenous women from Bolivia just hearing the idea, they can't do it with their children. They can't actually stand it.

And you understand the frustration for the director, because he wants to get it for the film because he knows it's happened. So hopefully it brings you back to the women who actually did it, because they actually did do that, they drowned their children rather than be chased and torn apart by dogs, which in a way I find much more horrific than actually seeing it.

So sometimes there's a time and a place. This first piece [Jamie] read, I did have lots of doubts about it because it's almost brutal and right in your face. But sometimes, I think it's good to be very blunt. Or you choose to be and other times you can do something much more subliminally or implicitly.

DC: I should ask, we've just seen two clips here, both of them in Spanish, and you were saying at the beginning how the Glasgow idiom is the idiom that you're most comfortable with in your writing. Are you a comfortable writer in Spanish now, or is that a different process for you? Do you have to seek assistance, or do you seek other collaborators? I'm curious to know, both here writing for Spanish in modern Bolivia and in *Bread and Roses* writing the Spanish of Mexican immigrants to LA?

PL: I speak Spanish with a very Glaswegian accent that causes lots of confusion, thrown in with Nicaraguan words. People look at me as if I'm an alien when they hear me speaking Spanish, including my three boys who are constantly taking the piss. So, no I've had serious support and collaboration. And what I usually do to be honest, I wish I could say otherwise, it's a bit shameful given how long I've been in a Spanish speaking country, but I

write it in English. This [*Even The Rain*] with Iciar, she did a rough draft of the translation, then we went through it together in Spanish to try and chop and change things and capture what was stronger. Again, back to filmmaking, being a team, very much relying on other people.

DC: With *Even The Rain*, looking at the water wars and wanting to look back at the arrival of Columbus, one of the things that you're looking at is the very ethics of filmmaking here. How much did you feel, when you were writing the script, that you were tapping into your own internal debates about why you're a screenwriter, what road you should go down, what the ethics of what you're doing are, whether you've made errors?

PL: If the film works, and I'm not sure it does really, it should have lots of levels. Also, we're trying to put the audience on guard all the time. And so it is western filmmakers making a film about the indigenous population, which we were doing. Honestly I would have loved to have seen this film made in Quechua by Bolivians about their water workers. They're the ones that risked their lives and actually threw out this multinational who had privatised their water.

They'd taken on the army, the police, the IMF and the World Bank and to actually have won was a bloody miracle. I'd love to have seen them do it, but it was never, ever going to happen. We made this film by the absolute skin of our teeth, although I hope that we as the filmmakers didn't exploit the same way as Costa, the opportunist producer at the heart of this film. But I was very much aware that we were doing that, and again it shows you just how unequal film is and who has access to make films. Like I said, we got that film made by the skin of our teeth, and hopefully it might come here next year with a bit of luck.

DC: When you were first trying to write that film as a historical drama, did you feel that the more honest thing for you to do was to pull back and bring the filmmaking process into the actual story?

PL: It was a device really, because I'm not interested in films about making films. It was a

Screenwriters on Screenwriting

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

Paul Laverty

29 September 2011 at BFI Southbank

way for us to have lots of angles on what happened 500 years ago. Actors challenge other actors about what the role was, and it challenges the whole notion of objectivity in history I think because by the mere fact of selection, there is no objectivity. You make a choice about who your protagonists and characters are, so I think there's a great nonsense talked about objectivity and we tried to play with that too.

But there was one bit of material that kept me going when I thought we'd lost it, because I'd spent so much time doing the history, doing the historical piece, because I was never happy with it. But there was this first letter from Columbus back to the King and Queen of Spain. The first report back from the New World to the Old World, and he said, 'With just 50 men we could subjugate them and make them do what we want.'

This was after taking their food, and saying they were very gentle. Then he went on to say something that was really remarkable I think. He said, right at the very end of the letter 'Souls for Christ, and much profit.' I think it's fascinating how we always look for justification for making profit. We've changed in 500 years, but not that much. The psychology of that first letter was wonderful.

I think today it's 'modernisation and much profit'; it's 'privatisation and much profit,' but they always need that moral obligation in which to exploit people. And I think in a strange way, that metaphorical 50 men, that tiny elite... Look at the roots of this crisis with the financial sector in the United States, how they lobbied and put pressure to de-regulate so they could make a fortune.

I think that metaphorical people are still trying to subjugate us and make us do what they want. So it was interesting reading the history 500 years ago and all this going through your head when you see this whole thing happening just now, and with the water wars.

DC: There's one very strong image in this film which we haven't seen. But again there's another scene where there's a reconstruction during this historical film. The group of extras –

they're all indigenous Bolivians – dressed up as their counterparts from 500 years earlier, attack a modern police van which comes to arrest one of their colleagues, because he's been involved in the water wars uprising. It's a great image that says something about the continuity of oppression, from the characters whom you're trying to depict in the film, through to the characters who we see now, involved in the uprising.

It just made me wonder, in terms of thinking of you as a writer, that's one particularly striking image. How often do you find that you're writing to very powerful images that you think... in terms of whether you're writing to the words or whether you're writing towards images, how often do you find yourself dominated by images in your mind like that?

PL: I think you're writing the screenplay. I don't know if there are other writers here, I'm sure there are, I suppose you try to describe what you're seeing. And try to write down what you hear. I suppose you're trying to make it work in your head for the first time before it exists on a bit of paper.

So you're thinking of images all the time. And that one too, because what really struck me when I was doing the history was when I saw the news reports coming in and you saw the same indigenous community, with the same features that I imagined the Tainos to be – although they've all been wiped out. It's sticks and stones again, against a modern army. And then chasing them with dogs, like 500 years ago. But this time it wasn't about gold, it was their water they were losing. So you did feel that 500 years went very quickly.

DC: We're going to show our final clip, from *Looking For Eric* which was one of your most recent films. Maybe you could explain a bit about why you wanted to show *Looking For Eric*. I think you felt it would be good to end on a light note, but that brings me to something in which, even if they see *Looking For Eric* as more of a comedy in your work there is the fantasy element. Obviously it has Eric Cantona; would you say that comedy and humour is important to all your scripts? Even in your darker work

Screenwriters on Screenwriting

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

Paul Laverty

29 September 2011 at BFI Southbank

there's always moments of humour, there are always moments of comedy.

PL: This is something that me and Ken feel very strongly about I suppose. Everywhere you go... When I went to Juarez, or Nicaragua during the war, or El Salvador in very miserable, dark times, you meet people with great spirit. They're not going around miserable the whole time. I think humour is a way of coping as well, but it's also very much part of us. Humour is one thing you can do that if you are powerless you can laugh and take the piss and undermine. Laughter I suppose, is wit and people use that to defend themselves as well. And it's part of us, a beautiful part of us, and we should try to capture it. So there's some scintillating dialogue here in two languages.

DC: Of course, more languages as well. If anyone hasn't seen *Looking For Eric* it's the story of a postman in modern Manchester called Eric Bishop and he's at a low point, would you say...?

PL: He's pretty low really. I was kind of fascinated by how families break up now, you're looking after other people's kids and other people are looking after your kids, and poor old Eric at this point in time is just falling through his own fingers. He feels he's got no identity, nobody listens to him. He just feels he's literally falling apart and has absolutely no control of his life, so he kind of needs a friend, I think.

DC: So into his life... well, we'll see who enters his life...

(Clip of Looking For Eric)

PL: I actually remember writing that scene and bursting out laughing really. It's a bit embarrassing to laugh at your own jokes but now that I've got three boys I really feel every kitchen should have a frying pan for saying no really. I think it would change the whole world if every kitchen had an old frying pan.

DC: We were talking earlier about writing to voices in your head, and you were able to write in the voice of Eric Cantona in yours.

Would you say that Eric Cantona was an unlikely but a welcome collaborator?

PL: He was great fun, and also very modest and smart. He'd seen a lot of Ken's films and really wanted to work with him. He came with a different idea, very different from this, about a Leeds supporter who had followed him. We were both fascinated, we both love football. And he was a gem, and we just thought it would take us to another way of telling a story.

Q (from the floor): I'd just like to say something about your research methods, because when I saw Guillermo Arriaga this week he was quite an intuitive sort of writer. He said no rules, no research, it's a combination of his imagination and his experience. Whereas you write about different sorts of things where you have to research. For example *Bread and Roses*; I work in a facilities environment, and when some of the Latin American cleaners went to see that they came to me afterwards and said 'We saw that film and cried.' But I'd like you to say something about how you researched *Looking For Eric*, the postman's world. Just give us an insight into your research methods, how you researched these things, because what you put on screen strikes a chord with so many people.

PL: Thanks for your question. I just ran out of experience so I just had to talk to people really. Like I said previously, what I love when I go see a film is to see the world from somebody else's point of view. That's essentially what storytelling is in a way. And so to do that, you run out of your own experience – I do, anyway – very, very quickly. So it's a great joy to delve into and try and figure out and almost discover new things. So with the women from, for example *Bread and Roses*, they were just marvellous people. And massively dramatic stories, many of them had risked their lives crossing the borders and the deserts.

They were very vulnerable, when they got to Los Angeles for example. They were illegal and so could be easily exploited because people would threaten them with deportation and everything like that. So when you spend time with them, you just see tremendous richness, and something you would never possibly

Screenwriters on Screenwriting

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

Paul Laverty

29 September 2011 at BFI Southbank

imagine. So if you can capture that, you're really capturing, capturing, capturing their lives. With *Looking For Eric* it was probably slightly different, there was a lot of...

I'm sorry, I wanted to say one other thing as well. When [producer] Rebecca O'Brien went to Cannes, she actually came with more money than she left with, because nobody really wanted to make that film [*Bread and Roses*] because it was about cleaners, it was subtitled, it was women who weren't recognised, so it was very, very hard to make that film. So you have to fight really, really hard and again it shows how important having a brilliant team is. With relation to *Looking For Eric* there was less research in a way, because you were relying a lot on your own imagination. But I did spend time with postmen, and I also spoke to a lot of people who were suffering from depression and panic attacks.

And I think what really struck me was I didn't realise just how many people had a difficult part of their lives. It happens to many of us, to a very significant percentage. And again I think it just makes us realise how vulnerable we are. Vulnerability in a character gives you great dramatic possibilities too because it makes you question who you are. It's very interesting too, for your story. What support do you have? With the character in *Looking For Eric* what was outside his front door impinged on his life in very, very important ways and so again that gives you great dramatic possibilities for story.

Q (from the floor): I've been reading a lot about Ken Loach and famously the actors in his films never get the whole script at once, it's divided into bits and they get the next day's or find out what's going to happen to them that day or even as they do the scene. It leads to incredibly powerful performances and scenes. I remember one from *The Wind That Shakes The Barley*, where Cillian Murphy's character joins the IRA and practically the first thing he has to do is execute two people and one of them is this lad he knows. Do you find that, as the writer, you've got to a stage now where you wouldn't ever want to give someone the whole script and you'd want to give it to them in sections? Which do you prefer?

PL: It's not really my choice, in the sense that I'm not directing it. I think Ken's just brilliant with actors because he confides in them, gives them confidence and also lets them breathe. He doesn't tie them down. In other words, again, it's like the great manager, he creates an environment where they can be free and express their talent. Looking at Jamie tonight, getting that at short notice. It's amazing what they can do with material. And Ken has always done that.

And Iciar, I have to say, who directed the other film. She used to be an actress and does the same. He just has great respect for the people he works with, and it's a brilliant way to work. I remember when Ken explained that we were going to do this in *Bread and Roses* and we met a guy and he said, 'Nah, nobody does that here.' He said, 'The last person to do that in this town was Cassavetes, and before that it was Charlie Chaplin.' So maybe it should catch on.

DC: Just to flip that question on its head, what role do you have, if any, during the shooting process? I know you had a tiny role in *Route Irish*, because you pop up in a cameo, and you did have a role in *Land & Freedom* which you didn't write.

PL: Making the tea and winding people up. There are lots of gaps in between takes. I really don't know if I do anything useful at all, to be honest.

DC: Your job is almost done.

PL: But it is great. In the recent ones I haven't because I've got three wee boys so I've been back home looking after them. I really miss it. I love the process, because you do shoot in order, and sometimes it's been handy in some films to chop and change things a little bit. But mostly it's just solidarity with your mates. We'd often talk about things at night-time for the next day; it's quite good just to go over it. I don't know if that's them just being charitable and putting up with me.

Q (from the floor): Thank you for such an informative evening. When I was running the Cheltenham Screenwriters Festival, which tried

Screenwriters on Screenwriting

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

Paul Laverty

29 September 2011 at BFI Southbank

to give a voice for screenwriters that we felt was much needed, one of the regular themes that came up over many years was the one of improvisation. And Guillermo Arriaga, who was here in the same room earlier this week, was complaining about improvisation saying it was the devil's work pretty much. You've embraced it and I wonder if you could talk about what you do when the improvisation doesn't improve your script?

PL: [Laughs] I think there's a lot of misconceptions about this. This question keeps coming up again and again. As a writer you're in a massively privileged position, you really are. I mean, you're trying to invent the characters. I always find the most difficult things in a screenplay are finding characters with the contradictions that will make that journey interesting. You have to have a great premise, and to keep on story and keeping the narrative tight. These are massive challenges, by far the toughest ones, and I've learned a great deal from Roger and Ken about staying on story.

So in a strange way I think dialogue is the easiest. I don't mean to be disrespectful of the dialogue because it's what you hear, but there are actually many more architectural questions that are much more difficult. So Ken gives people the script, and talking to Ken and Jonathan Morris, when you go back to editing again, I probably get back to 90% of dialogue depending on the scene. But oftentimes talented actors will make it much, much better. And it's absolutely infuriating when the best laughs come from an improvised piece, which they often do. I passionately disagree [with the 'devil's work' line].

I remember when I was starting off, I heard this very, very well-known writer saying, 'Nobody changes even a comma in my scripts.' And I remember thinking maybe if they had, it wouldn't sound like it's been written. I think that's the beauty of the way... and the actors, they make it better. We're not in opposition, we're part of a team and our loyalty is to the film. You can have the best dialogue in the world but if you look into someone's eye and you don't believe it, the thing just falls apart. So I suppose I'll have to just take issue with

Guillermo, who I met the other day – and enjoyed his company a great deal.

Q (from the floor): I'm a new scriptwriter and I've got into writing a political screenplay as my first one. And I hate politics, which is probably not a good idea. I've been given advice not to hit the audience over the head with the social message – and whether you've got any advice on how you balance that through your scripts?

PL: Just very simply, I suppose – I'm not very good at giving advice. I think you have to follow your own voice. But good issues don't make for good scripts, you have to just find a great story and a great character. If you can capture the contradictions I think there's a better chance that it will touch people. There are many, many wonderful themes or issues to be dealt with, but I've got friends like that.

They can talk about the most interesting things in the world and they'll bore you stiff, and you've got another mate who will tell you about going to buy a cup of tea and a bun, and he'll have you pissing yourselves laughing. You just have to try and find a great story, but if you can do a great story and there's some meat to it, that's worth fighting for. That you feel like you'll really battle to get this one made, I think then there's a better chance that you might persuade other people to help you on that journey.

Q (from the floor): I really loved *The Wind That Shakes The Barley*, and I'm thinking Coleridge said, 'You diffuse, dissolve and dissipate in order to recreate.' I don't know what the history of that script was, but did you have a strong idea and then do all the research with the Irish Civil War, or did you let the research take over to decide the themes and individual story? I'm just wondering how you went about imagining that, where a lot of it was historical but it was presumably an imagined story as well?

PL: There was a tremendous amount of historical research; you just had to get your head around the grand narrative. The war of independence was very, very complex and important and so was the civil war. So there was a great deal to untangle there. And we

Screenwriters on Screenwriting

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

Paul Laverty

29 September 2011 at BFI Southbank

were very, very keen that we didn't get bogged down by the biographical detail, because people would be criticising [that] we didn't say this, we didn't say that. So what we did was really try to steep ourselves in the material, and then be true to the times and create fictional characters.

Ken got me off to a great start, because he gave me a book by Tom Barry about The Flying Columns. There was something very, very dramatic about all of that. So I went to Ireland and tried to find some people who might still have been alive. But I couldn't find anyone until the day the film opened. This old man from Kerry got on the bus at the age of 101 and came along to the opening.

He had no teeth, and his eyesight wasn't great, and he nearly swallowed one of these cocktail sticks with a sausage on it. It was fished out by his granddaughter. He loved the film, but I just thought it would have been terrible if the one person we found was [then] killed at the opening of *The Wind That Shakes The Barley*, having survived The Flying Columns, and [been] on the run in London in the '40s and '50s.

But I talked to a lot of the parents, you know, and what was really interesting as well is if you just do the research it does open up your eyes really, because you find the newspaper reports, the songs, the photographs. What was very interesting was tramping around the countryside, seeing where the ambushes took place. If you do that in February in Ireland you just get your bollocks frozen off, and it was really important because you realise, my god, being on the run like this, it was a young person's game. If you were 30 you were old, so many of them were teenagers.

There's another person there that mentioned being a doctor, and having to shoot a man in the head. I think that really came, in a strange sort of way, through my experience of living and working in Nicaragua where I saw war which bled into that script. And you realise just how vicious war is, that it becomes very, very dirty. I talked to a lot of the Contras, who were paid by the CIA to terrorise people, who had mutilated people, who had killed people and it was very interesting speaking to them later. You

realise they had been destroyed by what they had done. So in a strange way being a witness to a war in Nicaragua really helped me with this particular script. And we were looking for those contradictions all the time, and the research was obviously very important.

Q (from the floor): You mentioned earlier on that openings of films can be very interesting, and I don't know if I missed it but I wondered if you could maybe give us some ideas as to how openings can be interesting?

PL: Well it's easier to show something rather than to talk about it in general really, I suppose. There's all different choices and different ways; you can go in nice and slowly, nice and gently but I do think you have to have something that does capture the audience's attention, at least in traditional narrative storytelling. If they're doing something which is much more abstract, which I haven't done, maybe it's different. But I think you just have to feel that people are... work with their curiosity. If you can get to work with someone's curiosity it's a massively powerful ally. If you're working with children or anyone, you realise that curiosity can be your best ally.

DC: Paul, I know your tenth feature film collaboration with Ken Loach is now in the final stages of editing, called *The Angels' Share*. And as you mentioned earlier it's a film that has taken you and your collaborators back to Glasgow and other bits of Scotland as well. I wonder, just to finish, whether you could share with us what we should expect from the film?

PL: I hate talking about a film before it's made and finished. In a strange way I just don't think you ever really know. I suppose in the discussions we had before making it, there's all sorts of questions about what is the best film to make next. It depends on what's happened before. The last one we did, *Route Irish*, was a very, very tough one and I think it's quite good to try and find another way to tell a story in a totally different way. I've got too much respect for the audience really. You hope you'll try and achieve something, but you never really know how it's going to play with them, because that's the other half of the equation, their

Screenwriters on Screenwriting

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

Paul Laverty

29 September 2011 at BFI Southbank

experience and their imagination. You just don't know if it will all click and work.

You're so steeped in the material that it's very, very hard to be objective. But that again is the great thing about working in a team, and bringing in friends and talking about it. Trying to see how you can make it work better. It's endlessly complex and sometimes you're confused, but if you're working with a great team, you feel you just do your best and then it's in the lap of the gods and be fearless about it.

DC: I think we'll find out next year, and also *Even The Rain* which we saw a clip from as well, I believe is coming to cinemas next year. Paul, I want to thank you hugely for sharing your experiences with us tonight.

PL: Thanks Davy.

APPLAUSE