

AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMES MACKAY



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It's not surprising that everything James Mackay said to me about his approach to filmmaking and the film industry rang true. He was, after all, the producer of *The Garden*, directed by Derek Jarman. I can say, with confidence, that *The Garden* shaped my idea of what a film is. I believe films should be made as a tool for exploring life, for exploring the relationships between collaborators, and his films are truly collaborative in a way that a commercial project could never be. I was interested to find out how James works when he is producing artist's films.

Q: How did you become a film producer?

When I was at college there was difficulty getting access to equipment, so you couldn't do very much, but I did do a lot of stuff and met a lot of people. I became very adept at persuading people to give me things. I learnt to not take no for an answer. People were looking for help getting their films made, so apart from just exhibiting I would get money from the Arts Council.

Q: How did you come to work with Derek Jarman?

I'd heard of Derek Jarman and I'd seen a few of his films – *Sebastian*, *Jubilee*, *The Tempest* – but I'd never heard about his Super 8 films, and it was suggested I get him to come and show some of his films at the [London Filmmaker's] Co-op. So he showed all these fantastic films and we got to talking about what to do with them, because the problem with Super 8 is that it's very fragile. And Super 8 copies of Super 8 are not very satisfactory. So, with my connections in Berlin and the Arts Council, I started to get money to make 16mm blow ups from the Super 8, and we did a few films. One long one – *In the Shadow of the Sun* – and four short ones. And at that time Derek had a big show at the ICA, a retrospective of paintings. So rather than show the Super 8s, we transferred them to video, roughly, by filming them on the wall, so they could then show these as a program of films. And it was during the second day of filming them off of the wall that we got bored and started playing around with the projector and cameras and started to

make superimposed things. And Steve, who was working with us, the projectionist, he edited it, a pneumatic edit. And from that we made and developed *Angelic Conversations*. The one thing that was really interesting about Derek is that he didn't really have any notion of hanging around, he just start making something, and it just went.

Q: Did he have an idea where it was going?

In a sense he was developing it as he went along. If he didn't have any money in order to do it, he'd just go out and do it. He'd be filming a lot, he was filming all the time really and I think that's why he spent time in the 1970's filming on Super 8. Films like *Jubilee*, the genesis of the film was Jordan's dance sequences, which was shot on Super 8 film – it was actually the basis for the film. He basically started shooting and got people together and then eventually the money became available.

Q: I recently met a fire juggler, and she told me a story about how she was a part of a group of jugglers who were invited to shoot some scenes for *The Garden*. They met Derek in the studio and he presented them with a large rack of costumes, from which they were asked to choose their dream costume. Was he this collaborative with everyone?

Only with people he liked. He would figure out if he liked them or not and then he would give them a lot of input into the film.

Q: The scene with the fire juggling doesn't appear in the final film, was there much that was shot but not used?

Not as much as *The Last of England*. There was a few big sequences that were never used. Simply because they didn't fit in. There was less with *The Garden*. I can't think of any whole sequences that we didn't use. I think that we used almost everything.

Q: How did you pitch *The Garden* to the funders?

We had a sort of assembly of different shots and *The Last of England* had been a critical success, so they were quite easy going.

Q: So they were aware of what his work had been so far?

Yes, there's always that, and it was cheap, so they knew they'd get the kudos from it and it wouldn't cost them too much. It's quite funny, that relationship between Derek and the funders. When he made [*Wittgenstein*], they shot that in two weeks. He was doing 14 hour days, and he was dying on his feet. And they made him work 14 hour days, it was awful. I was crying. Really awful. He thought the only way he could do it was to keep it visually very simple, and then he would work with the costume designer – Annie Symons – and have just the background as black. And the BFI didn't want that. They wanted to have an actual background. These people have never made a film in their lives and they haven't got a clue about cinema. Derek, after all, did design *The Devils*, which is a pretty impressive film, in terms of set design, and if they can't accept that...

Q: When you are working with a filmmaker what is the process of developing ideas?

We just discuss it, talk about it, write stuff down. You kind of put it backwards and forwards a lot. It takes a while to get good, because it has to have a depth to it, it can't be something simple. I only work with a small number of people. It's very difficult to take on more projects because the kind of projects that these people do involve a long term commitment.

Q: What are your thoughts on the way films are funded in the UK?

Why do you have people who are not creative people – basically the civil service – why should they be the judges of what gets made? The Film Council's money from the government is a part of Lottery funding – it's not from another source, it's all Lottery money, which should be for cultural purposes, but they perverted that right at the beginning. They don't use it for cultural purposes, they use it for semi-commercial failed ventures. There's so much money –

they pissed something like £40 million last time I looked a few years ago. It's a real problem. If you apply to the Arts Council, you sign your copyright to them. No other company in Europe does that, it's considered ethically unsound in Europe. And there's also this waiver of moral right, which came in in the early 90s. It's a European law – it gives you, the creator, the rights to your work. But, in this country, you waive that. So instead of actually looking at how other people use a structure where everybody benefits from the work, it's a kind of narrow and commercial process even at the cultural end of things in this country.

The Arts Council are a cultural funding body and the Film Council are a really bad loans company, because the people who run it make most of the money. It's kind of wrong. The Arts Council, who are getting whittled away by the government, is actually a quite good model, because it essentially just identifies artists and gives them money and monitors how they spend it. A very successful artist wouldn't need to go to the Arts Council because they are already making lots of money. But if you are an up and coming artist, or an artist whose work is not commercial, or your work is not being sold, it is a really useful and important funder. It gives the money as a grant and doesn't expect anything in return. The Film Council don't think that avant garde film – artist film, experimental film – has any validity whatsoever, because it's not aimed at a ticket buying public.

Q: Do you think that's why we are just getting boring and uninteresting films in this country?

But isn't that what Hollywood does? Produce boring and uninteresting work, in that it's truly disappointing now, but it used to be that occasionally it was very good. I can't remember the last good film I saw from there. I quite liked that *Darjeeling Limited*. *Zodiac* was all right. I thought the latest *Star Trek* was awful. I think in the 70's Hollywood was fantastic, but then it lost it and now it's just run by civilians. Tilda [Swinton] keeps going to Hollywood to make films, she thinks they're good, and that she can use the system to make good work, but I don't think you can change Hollywood – I think Hollywood can change you.

Q: What are you working on that's coming up next?

I'm working for the Tate, and we're developing 3 projects a year for the next 2 years. Only started 2 months ago – it's a good project. I have some installation projects, one with Lynn Hershman. It's not a film, it's a project in a space for an exhibition in 2011.

Q: What do you look for when you get involved with a film?

I think the most important thing is to see what other people have done previously. I think that's the main thing. They should, as filmmakers, have interesting work. I am very keen to see what they have done before, then talk to them about what they intend to do in the future, and see after that if there is any common ground, and see if there is a project we can all work on. I think that's a fairly standard European approach for the art house sector – to look at what people have done then take it forward, rather than looking at it as a clean proposal.

Q: I think that's nice because you're investing yourself and your time into the filmmaker rather than looking at it as a product. It's a bit more human.

I think that's what the regional film bodies should be doing. They should be trying to work in that way. But they put out these statements saying they are looking for a particular type of film – but what's the point in that? They should be looking at people's work, and seeing what they can do to develop this talent. I think that's one of the things that you're doing that is very important – you're getting people to work together. It rarely happens.

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