

MIKE LEIGH & JONATHAN ENTWISTLE

Celebrated film-maker Mike Leigh tells writer-director Jonathan Entwistle why first-time directors should not waste their energy making compromises



Q JONATHAN ENTWISTLE Your most recent film, *Another Year*, just screened to great critical success at Cannes. How relevant was the Cannes film festival to you when you were starting out as a film-maker?

MIKE LEIGH It wasn't. To me, Cannes was a bit like the Baftas, it was something that happened to other people. But when it does happen, it's absolutely important. The world focus is there. It did *Naked* [in 1993] a power of good and *Secrets And Lies* got the Palme d'Or [in 1996] and was and remains commercially my most successful film of all. That may have something to do with the subject matter but it certainly had a lot to do with Cannes.

Q ENTWISTLE I'm just wondering if Cannes and festivals like it helped you at the beginning. I could make a short film now and it could be screened in Cannes. Was that something that was available to you when you were starting out? Or was television, and specifically the BBC, the main opportunity for you when you were young?

LEIGH The big difference between then and now is the access to technology. No young film-maker now has an excuse to sit around not doing anything. Anyone can get hold of a piece of equipment and make a film cheaply, and very good films are being made like that. Until the technology came along, it was much more difficult and it remains so if you want to shoot on film. I was very lucky because at a time when the film industry was moribund if not actually dead from the point of view of serious, indigenous film, everything was going on in television. The BBC, especially, was extremely healthy

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and liberal and you could get in there and do stuff. I was lucky to be there for 12 years and work on a number of films with complete freedom which went out to real audiences. TV drama was not inhibited and destroyed by the cynicism and insecurity that now informs it. Mind you, we used to whinge the whole time about not making movies.

Q ENTWISTLE You worked with Simon Channing Williams for a long time. Is it integral to the success of a film to have the right producer?

LEIGH It's integral to any creative work that you have the conditions in which to do it. For a film director, that is having the right people, the right harmony between budget and arrangements, the right decisions being made. That's what a good producer does. Having someone there to protect you and set it all up and who can go out and blag and get the bread. On my film, where it's about talking to backers with no script, no story, no discussion on casting, and they'll find out when they get the film, and the only thing we want you to tell us is how much you're prepared to give us and that will decide the size of the budget... You've really got to have

someone who can deal with that. I think if it weren't for Simon, I would not have made all the features I've made since 1988.

Q ENTWISTLE I don't want to dwell on your method but I work a lot with my cast on the script and I'd be interested to know if you start with the characters and build stories around them or start with a story and then bring characters into that story.

LEIGH Characters first and the story evolves out of that. It's a function of the characters so they are character-driven films, but it would be naive to say that was all there was to it. A film is born in your head the minute you think about it but it's a very fluid and flexible process and there are all kinds of films going on at every stage. It's a sophisticated and complex process.

Q ENTWISTLE How important is realism to you in your own films?

LEIGH My impulse to make films comes out of a reaction to life. I want to capture life and people and place and relationships and society and work and pain and love and weather, and I'm sure you share that desire as a film-maker. It's about realism not naturalism, about getting the essence of something not just recording the detail of the world. I stood at the age of 12 in the hall of my recently dead granddad's house and it was a snowy day and they were struggling downstairs with the coffin and I think to myself: "This would make a great film."

Q ENTWISTLE Given that you can shoot a film now and put it

online the very same day, do you think the movie theatre is going to be only for pure entertainment, films in 3D for example?

LEIGH No. I hope we'll have more choice. Digital exhibition should mean the proliferation of films and more variety. It is ridiculous and deeply lamentable that films are being made all over the world which people all over the world should be able to see and yet there's this ludicrous monopoly of an increasingly substandard product that comes from a tiny sector in Hollywood. The problem for serious British film-makers is that Hollywood informs the perception of the movie-going audience as to what a film is. There's still a resistance in Britain to the notion of a British film. It's not a considered prejudice; it's because the movie-goer is indoctrinated subconsciously into the notion that a movie is a Hollywood movie.

Q ENTWISTLE What advice do you have for a first-time film-maker?

LEIGH Never compromise. People say, "I don't really believe in this project but if I do this, then I'll be able to do whatever I like." This is self-deluding bullshit. Life is short and don't waste your energy on the wrong thing. I was asked recently if I'd ever done a project where I was interfered with creatively, and I said no, because as soon as I realise that's what the situation is, I walk away.

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For a video of the conversation between Mike Leigh and Jonathan Entwistle, visit ScreenDaily.com