The angel's share

Director: Ken Loach
Country: UK
Date: 2011

Extacts from an interview with director Ken Loach and screen writer Paul Laverty by *Total Film:*

Congratulations on the Cannes jury prize. What do awards mean to you?

Ken Loach: "They validate what you do, in that a group of people say that what you've done is OK, and that gives confidence to the distributor and it gives confidence to people in the cinemas to pick the film. It has practical, good results and it gives confidence to carry on and do more."

Paul Laverty: "I have to say, in all honesty, it's not something that's in our conversation, it actually happens much later than when we're actually working on the film. You can never work or plan to win awards; all you can try and do is enjoy the process each day and there's a long journey from first talking about the idea to the wrestling match with the screenplay and the casting and stuff. So, if something like that happens it's almost like a little celebration of the joint work of an entire team. I can't say it's in our mind, we don't do the films to win a prize, but there's a part of you that feels like a child. You're encouraged but at the same time you feel like a child on the playground, so there's a contradictory ambience with prizes."

Where did the idea for The Angels' Share come from? How did you decide to make that you're next film?

Laverty: "I think it came out of a joint frustration - more than that, a fury - at the way young people are treated. So many of them now are sentenced to a life without work, it's like a life-sentence saying, 'Your life is meaningless, you don't count, you're not important to us.' And that's the reality. But when you actually spend time with kids who face that you can see the massive frustration and anger and fury in them, and sometimes desperation. I think what you don't see is their wit, and their life-force and their determination to find mischief and fun. I suppose we really wanted to try to capture some of that life-force: their wit, their fun, their frustrations and vulnerabilities. That was a sense that we had but you have to root it in something, and the community payback - where a bunch of kids escape prison by their fingertips - is a lovely kind of group scenario. They're under stress, they're under control and they've got to be there, they've got a supervisor so you can introduce other characters. If you mix that with the little whisky adventure, how they can plan something, all of that lead us to feel that this might be a more interesting way to tell the story."

It's unusual for a director and writer to work together so much and so consistently, did you find that you first had this rapport as soon as you worked together on Carla's Song?

Loach: "Yeah, pretty much so. You soon see that you share the same basic outlook – that's important – you've got to see the world in the same way, and have similar pre-occupations so that in a way you find the common cinematic voice. I think Paul's work has got more complex as the years have gone by, but there are a quite a lot of previous writer-director relationships, aren't there?"

Laverty: "Ken's had a long time working with Jim Allen, for example, and Barry Hines so it's not unusual."

Loach: "I think the two jobs are so inter-dependent that in order to direct you've got to be inside the script, otherwise you're like a bus driver: the bus rolls up, created by somebody else, and you get in the

driver's seat and drive it. That's a very mechanical way to make a film. In order to make all the little decisions you've got to make in the process of doing it you've got to be inside the project, so that you share the same criteria."

Paul, do you stay quite involved when it comes to the shoot or do you take a step back once the final draft is complete?

Laverty: "This is the great privilege; from the very earliest Ken makes you feel like a filmmaker, that your loyalty is to the film. We've both got very different jobs but we meet in the middle as filmmakers. Like I said, there are many, many decisions to be made and it overlaps, it really does. Often at times when you're doing research before you write the screenplay you'll meet characters, like when we came across Paul [Brannigan], who you feel might fit the part or a location or just something, and then Ken has to steep himself in that world too, and that's part of the discussion; maybe that will take us to another place. Even right the way through to editing, sometimes some of the same questions we've confronted in the writing process, and when we were developing the script, might come up again in editing – so there's all little moments of contact where it's just good to talk it through. I'm always amazed, speaking to other writers… so I've been really spoilt."

When you spot talent, like Paul Brannigan, how do you going about giving them the confidence to think they can be an actor, and are they ever intimidated because of your history in films?

Loach: "I don't think he knew about it us at all… He knew Sweet Sixteen."

Laverty: "Many of them knew My Name is Joe. I think Ken does give people great confidence; it's like a football manager. I felt like that at the very beginning, I think it's a skill and a sensibility. Likewise with Paul, he probably was a bit nervous coming out of his world, but after you speak to people, and have a conversation and a cup of tea, and think about things – you can see his confidence has grown. There's probably about ten different editions of him; you see him in little moments and give him little things and moments, not from the script but inspired by the script and parallel to the script, to see whether he can actually pull it off or not."

Your films are well known for their realistic style, have you ever been tempted to address a social concern in a more fantastical context?

Laverty: "[Looking For Eric] was literally a fantasy, but in terms of an exaggerated or gothic film style…"

Loach: "I can't see it somehow. I think films should be imaginative; they shouldn't be dull and stereotypical. But I'd love to shoot anyone who uses the words 'social-realism' again and the adjective 'gritty' is one that's worn out, I think. Film critics tend to not just see a film for what it is; like it's just a story. Much more than novels, films have to be categorized by genres – and I don't think filmmakers think that way at all. Certainly we respond to the raw material, to the people, not other film references. I've never met anybody that's said 'I want to make a social-realist film' – it's not in the way you see things. It's a terrible term anyway, because it's a euphemism for working-class stories. Social-realism doesn't seem to apply to middle-class people or bourgeois people or the rich. Yet it's 'social', everything has a social context. It's a lazy euphemism that should be discarded from the lexicon of film writers."

Laverty: "The same thing happens with political films. The big entertainment films in the United States are steeped in right wing politics in general, I think: glorified violence, [rich, powerful characters] – I'm stereotyping, but in the general sense I think that's true. But that's seen as entertainment but our films are seen as political, and it's a way of putting them into a cul-de-sac and making sure they don't go into the multiplex. But they would never call that political. I think the terms are just very loosely used."

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