MARC ISAACS

Your films are full of great characters. How do you go about making them?

I usually start the project with quite a vague idea, and it only really comes alive when I meet characters. The way that I do that is by just hanging around. If I have an idea about a place, I'll go to that place, and I'll stalk the place, until something or somebody catches my eye. You meet a character first, and then it infects and affects how the whole film is going to unfold. In a way, you want all the other characters to match up to the thing that you're initially drawn in by, and that first person who fires your imagination. You know, you hope that all the characters will be equally as fascinating as each other. Usually, it works out that you do favour one over the others, in terms of the time you spend and their emotional impact on the film. But some of the other characters will have value in different ways.

Do you choose a precinct or place first, and then see who's there?

It's not a rule, but with a lot of the ideas I've had, I usually start with an idea of a place and a theme. I enter into a particular space, which has certain themes at its heart, and then I'm looking for people and characters that will bring those themes alive. It does depend on how interesting the place is, you know, as to how important it becomes in the final film. But, usually, the place is extremely important to the conception in the beginning.

What drew you to Frinton-on-Sea, for example?

I knew that there was a new strand at the BBC about to happen, and Nick Mirsky, the guy that runs it, wrote a brief as to the kind of films he was looking for, and a couple of my films were on that list. I just read an article in the newspaper about Frinton and the

local population campaigning to save these gates, and I sent it to him, thinking that he might be interested. I like films to be open-ended and to find a story, you know, through the process of making the film, whereas this, in the beginning, was quite prescribed: a film about the local population fighting over this seemingly very petty issue. I wasn't particularly set on fire by that. But Nick Mirsky said, "Well, actually, this could be quite interesting. Do you just want to go and have a look?", and I agreed to do that. But it was months before I committed to the film because I wasn't sure of the direction and what it was that I wanted to say through this place. Eventually, at some point, I made a commitment to it, and it became the film that it did. I was drawn to this central idea that these people were imprisoning themselves somehow and shutting themselves off from the world. The gates story could just be a tiny thread and an excuse to look at interesting characters who were shutting themselves away.

So that process where you were deciding whether to make the film was the process of looking for characters you liked and felt drawn to?

Yes, exactly, yes. I would go there regularly. For me, it's really interesting to immerse yourself in a place and, over time, to try to understand how you feel about it. Often, it was totally depressing being there, because it felt like such a small world, with small town values—totally claustrophobic in some ways. Then I started to meet people that I quite liked and had some kind of fascination with, and that's when it starts to become a film. I didn't want to make a film where you just trash the place—go in as an outsider and stitch everybody up. It's really important for me, even if you have mixed emotions towards the characters, that there is a kind of connection as a filmmaker, in order for the audience feel something too. So, once that starts to happen, then it feels like I'm on safe ground in a way. It just has to be something that's kind of working inside of me to drive me forward, really.

Do you always spend quite a lot of time looking for characters?

Yes, although it varies from film to film. I never separate out the usual industrial processes of making a film, where you have a pre-production period, a production period, then a post-production period. Often one thing runs into another. I remember when I was making *Calais* that I'd been shooting for about four or five months, and I felt something was missing in the film. I'd filmed with Ijaz, the Afghani guy; I'd filmed the Jamaican guy, which was actually just over one day more or less; and the English bar owner was a sort of constant in the town, and I'd been filming him. It seemed to me there was something missing. I started to imagine the kind of character that I would like, and it became Tulia. She was quite a late addition to the whole process. I probably shot a lot of the material with the other characters and started filming her story from scratch. So, even in the editing sometimes, we have a break, and I'm out shooting to solidify the story and the narrative, so it's an ongoing process.

What was it that you felt was missing from Calais?

You know, a lot of my films are mosaics, and I hope that the individual parts of the film add up to something more than just the character stories. At the time, Calais had been in the newspapers because of the refugee camp. I was, like, well, maybe that could be interesting, and I went over and did some research. There were lots of interesting things, but, early on, I knew that I didn't want to make a film just about refugees. I didn't feel like there was anything new to say about that as an issue. What was interesting was this sort of transient town. It seemed to me that the whole town was a kind of metaphor for the idea of being a refugee. So, I just wanted to find characters that embodied that somehow, and as many different types of people as would talk about it in different ways. So, you have the English bar owner who considers himself a refugee from England, and by the end of the film, he's driving off to another place, kind of running away the whole time. So, I had him in place, and I had the traditional refugee story, if you like. That was quite difficult in itself because I met so many refugees in the town, and it was only Ijaz that really sparked something inside of me. He was so emotive and so likeable. The Jamaican character came about through stalking that little

area where people get chucked off the bus at the border. But I felt there was something historical missing in the film.

For me, the whole place has a really rich history, and a lot of it is connected to the theme of the refugee, which, you know, you can trace back to the beginning of time. I just started to think about that more and more. I remember, at one point, wanting to invent a character that was going to be a complete fiction to put into the film because I couldn't find anything. In the end, we just phoned around a lot of the English businesses in the town and met Tulia. She was a really fascinating character. But it also turned out that she was actually a refugee from the second war. When I went along to meet her, this story came out of her past and it was just, you know, one of those great moments where you think "Okay, this is perfect" because she had an unfolding story going on in her life that seemed to me to be totally related to her experiences as a kid and, of course, in terms of the themes of the film it fitted perfectly. So, you know, there is quite a lot of dreaming things into existence that goes on during the process for me, because I'm always searching for new elements. So, it's never really over—what the film could be. It's never really defined until quite late on.

What is a good character? People talk about it in TV all the time.

Yes, they do. It's an overused term, isn't it? You know, just go out and find some great characters. It's an impossible question to answer, partly because it's a very personal question, isn't it? For me, I like complexity, and I like characters who represent more than just themselves, and that's usually defined by the theme that's in my head, related to the bigger idea. You often meet filmmakers, especially young filmmakers, saying "I've found a great character. I should make a film about them." I always think, "Well, maybe they are a great character, but what do they really represent and what's the film really about? You could follow any number of great characters and themes would emerge, of course. For me, it's a little bit different, because I have an idea of broader themes that they should relate to in some way. I like to find characters to bring an idea alive.

I think a great character is many things. There's something about great characters that means that they're instantly fascinating. You don't always have to fall in love with them straightaway. I mean, there are many characters in my films who initially you may not like, but by the end of the film, you've revealed another side to them and shown something different. You feel differently about them, which is about complexity and also about playing with people's prejudices, you know? Even with Tulia, when she comes on the screen initially your reaction is "Who is this woman?" She looks quite grotesque and she's a complete diva, and you would never imagine that she has the kind of story going on that she does. That's really interesting for a filmmaker. I find that quite fascinating.

Is it important that they're likeable?

I think, at the end of it all, it is important that there's something in them that the audience is going to connect with and like—yes, definitely. For example, with the character in Barking, Dave, when you first meet him you're thinking, "Well, he's just the average racist on the street". And he is, in some ways, of course. I only cast him because there was something about his fragility that I found quite interesting. It seemed to me it was that that was really driving all his insecurities and his quite strong views about what was going on in his town. I felt like if I could get underneath that that would be quite interesting because, for me, that's what a lot of racism is about. Clearly, it's people's own fears, and he seemed like a perfect character to really explore that with. There were plenty of people in that town whom I never would have filmed with because my overwhelming emotion was just one of hate, you know? There was a guy reading *Mein Kampf* in the pub in Dagenham. It could have been a great opening scene, but if there's nowhere to go with it and you just hate them, for me, it's kind of uninteresting.

You know, it's funny, isn't it? If you look at Broomfield's film *The Leader and The Driver*, I'm almost certain you couldn't sustain a film with just Eugene Terreblanche as the main character. After a while, you would just disengage. So, it's a very clever idea to follow the driver, whom, by the end of the film, you have a lot of empathy for.

Do you always know when you're on to a winner with a character? Is it an instinctive thing? An instant thing?

Yes, I think so, though it's not always instant. I think if a character has a really interesting personality, and there's something about them that you know is going to work, just in simple film terms, that's great, and you can usually do quite a lot with that. However, there has to be something more. I mean, when I first met Monty on the street, I didn't know he was a Holocaust survivor. I just approached him because he looked interesting; it was as simple as that. I noticed him from across the street, saw that he had quite an interesting face, and the way he was standing outside his shop, and he looked like an interesting character. So, that was my initial approach to him, but it was finding out this other story that really nailed it for me. So, that discovery was very interesting, but even more important was the fact that he was having this relationship with Betty, the woman from Uganda. If that wasn't there, I don't know whether he would have been in the film because it might have unbalanced it. I had to find something in him that said something about this town and the themes that I was dealing with in the here and now. It seemed to me that, you know, a woman comes over from Africa, needs a job, he gives her a job. He needs companionship ... It had all the right elements there. With Norman, the big guy in *Men of the City*, I discovered quite early on just through talking to him that he'd decided never to have kids and had sacrificed so much for this life in the City. That, for me, gave me somewhere to go with his story. I knew I could reveal things about him slowly to the audience. So, those kind of things are very important to have in the back of your mind, but it goes hand in hand with 'great characters' because there's usually something more if you spot somebody you're drawn to. There's usually a lot going on inside them.

It seems to me that you need to catch a great character at an important or interesting time of their lives. That's almost as important as how good the character is.

Yes, I think that's true. Or you work very hard to shoot moments that seem totally in the here and now and very alive. The thing is, your presence as a filmmaker affects things and creates moments that wouldn't have happened otherwise. So the what's-going-on-in-their-lives question is something that you're a participator in, you know. Just by being there, you're kind of asking people to think about things that maybe they're thinking about subconsciously anyway. It feels very in the moment, then, because you're there asking it, and you know it's quite raw under the surface. Maybe it hasn't been spoken about for a long time. On that that level, there's this funny sort of game that goes on where, when you find the right character, they know why you're interested in them. You know, I never spend much time explaining to characters why I want to film with them. There's a dialogue that goes on—"I'm making a film etc. etc. It's about this and that"— but, really, the important, profound stuff in the relationship is never discussed, apart from on camera. It's sort of, like, they know why you're there, and you know why you're interested in them. It's a fascinating sort of dynamic that happens.

Is it about them wanting to be heard?

Yes, I think so. They want to be heard, and, you know, it could have been the right time five years earlier but nobody was there. So, you create this right time, in a way, and they pick up on it. The relationship is very important, and it's crucial you have time because it's not something that happens in the first meeting. You can meet somebody, get a good feeling about them and they seem to be quite interested in what you're doing, but it's only slowly over time where you feel you have the right, in a way, to ask them more personal questions.

Do you get to that point through filming or through hanging out with people?

For me, it's through filming. It's through the filming process because I separate clearly in my mind reality and the film reality. They're completely different worlds for me. So, for

example, with Norman in *Men of the City*, I did discover quite quickly that he didn't have children. Once I knew that, I didn't want to talk to him on camera about it until I felt that I had a really good bond with him because, otherwise, it would have felt uncomfortable and it would also probably not have worked as a scene. So, it's one of the last things that I filmed with him, but I knew that for about a year, so it's sort of like you file it away and wait for the right time. For me, that method has worked quite well because I think by that time there's a trust there and that's really important. For me, it's crucial that the audience feel that they trust the filmmaker. I see so many films where I don't trust the filmmaker on many levels, and it feels very uncomfortable. It feels manipulative and just cheap, in a way, you know?

It seems, watching your films, that you quite like characters who are on the margins. Is that true? Do you have a preference for a certain type of character?

Yes, definitely, that's for sure. I think there's more drama in the lives of people that are on the margins. I mean, it was interesting when the whole idea for the City film came about because my initial reaction was one of horror. What have I got to do with this world? How could I go into a banking area and find characters that I could have some kind of relationship with? It just didn't seem that this was a film for me. In my initial research, I spent a lot of time looking at the people on the margins, like that Bangladeshi guy who's in the film. It wasn't until I met David, the hedge fund guy, that I overcame that resistance, really. I felt that, Okay, there were many things about him that I couldn't relate to, but there was something quite central that I could—his vulnerability and fragility, despite his apparent power and status—and that actually became very interesting. When I talk to people about the film, he's one of the characters they always talk about and can really empathise with in some way, even though they might have quite strong views about who he is and how he behaves and lives his life.

What does it mean to say that a film is character-led?

Often, it is a line that comes up in a synopsis, isn't it?—a character-led film about this or that. For me, it's probably just about the prominence of the characters in the story, and means that a film is really about human emotions. You might see a Michael Moore film described as 'character-led'; it's a character-led film about the American health system or whatever. But his films aren't about characters, they're about an argument. He sets out to prove a point through quite ruthless exploitations of characters' views and feelings, just to serve his own purpose. I think that what I do is almost the opposite. It is very important for me that a film that is saying more than just what the individual characters' stories are saying, but the way that I find my way to that is through the characters. There is a tension about who is leading the narrative, in a way. In *Men of the City*, probably more than in any of my other films, it is my idea of the City that is leading the film, rather than the characters'. It's a critique of the city. In *Calais*, the place and the meaning of the place and the exploration of the idea of transience is very strong. But I think the characters are so strong that they lead you to that.

It is really important to me that I remain quite open in terms of what I find out in the world out there. That determines how the film is, at the end of it all. I try to keep a really open mind and if I have ideas I am always ready to change them. If I get carried away with a particular character's story, and I'm compelled to film something, that seems fine to me. If that then means that the film becomes more character-led than ideas-led, that's fine. If that is what has touched me during the filming, then I just go with that.

So a film being character-led means that the narrative emerges through your characters?

Yes, but I manipulate a lot and I often construct scenes with characters that wouldn't ordinarily happen in their lives. The most extreme example is the dinner party in Barking where I got two characters to meet each other in a way that they never would have if I wasn't there. There are some filmmakers that will just cast a character and follow them. I don't ever use the word 'follow' because I don't really feel like I am following people.

Well, sometimes I am—there is a situation that is going to happen and I am observing what is unfolding in that situation. But, you know, most of the time I know why I am there and what I am looking for. It may change, and that is great and you hope that it does and that something surprising happens. But there is a clear sense of what this scene might deliver, what it might mean, how it might fit into the wider themes that I am interested in, rather than just following somebody and hoping that something interesting will emerge.

If characters are what is at the centre of the film and they are driving it forward, it seems to me that you are always well placed to get surprises. There's always that potential to be blown away by something happening.

Yes that is true. Good point. The first couple of scenes are quite easy because you are just exploring somebody. You are setting them up as a character. You think of an opening scene that would work in the film and you try different things out. It is quite simple. Once you have gone so far, the question arises, "What is their story going to be? How am I constructing their story in relation to the film as a whole?" That is really tricky. That is when I start to intervene quite a lot and create situations that have potential for a kind of planned spontaneity, if you like. I come up with some ideas. I throw them into the mix. Then I take a step back. It just depends on what is going on in that person's life as to how much I feel I have to do that.

I think that, morally, those things are fine and also necessary. That is my approach to documentary filming. I don't consider myself an observational filmmaker in that sense. I have this deep frustration when things just feel unsurprising—when you are out there with the camera and nothing is happening and you are feeling totally frustrated about how boring and banal the reality is that you are a part of. I guess everything is filmed these days. We have seen everything before and for me it is only these personal interventions that rescue the film and create something authentic. It is sort of the only thing that I have, because I feel like a lot of the time everything is so well explored. England and London are quite familiar to me in some ways, but I am

constantly looking for those surprises. That is why it takes so much time. That is why the time spent with the characters to discover who those could be is really crucial.

How long were you with Laura Anne on Some Day My Prince Will Come*?*

Well, I made that film over about a year and a half, but we would go five days every month or something, because it was in Cumbria. That film came about through Channel 4 wanting to do something about first love. They wanted to make a series, actually. My film was the only one that ended up getting made and it was never shown anyway. It's still on the shelf somewhere. There was a complicated history to the film and because it went on for so long, you know, Commissioners left and came and went, and Channel 4 sort of changed in the meantime.

I thought it was a lovely film.

I took a long time to find a really interesting setting for the film, as if I were making a feature film. For me, it seemed like a great place to make a film about first love—these two little streets by the sea. You have to get on with the people there because there is nobody else, and kids were able to run free. They were sort of free-range kids. They had the railway line there and the sea. It had all the elements for me to create scenes, because there was a lot of creation that needed to happen. You certainly couldn't just turn up and point a camera at kids. I mean, it was totally dull most of the time. So there was a lot of intervention that had to happen in that.

What sort of stuff?

Well, for me, intervention is a kind of dialogue with the reality that you are faced with. There is a scene in *Some Day My Prince Will Come* where little Stephen is snogging his girlfriend on the rocks. Now, I used to watch him snogging at bus stops all the time. As a

filmmaker, I was thinking, "Well, it is not actually that filmic to film at the bus stop. It would be very grabbed and messy and, you know, noisy." So I wanted to capture some of that kind of early teenage sexual stuff that goes on, but in a way that felt comfortable. It is a dodgy subject matter, quite controversial in some ways, but totally a part of their experience as kids. I thought, "Okay, I am just going to get them to sit on these rocks." I set the camera up and sort of tortured them, kept them there for about half an hour, and asked them to kiss each other and they did. In the film, you watch it and it is fine. You don't think about the set up. So it is those kind of things where I am drawing on reality, but trying to find ways to film it that are more intense, more interesting in film terms. But that always has to be balanced with your own personal morality as to how far you can go with that. You are the only person that can judge that, really.

Do you think it's true to say that in character-led films the narratives are more human-sized? More real? More three-dimensional?

Yes, I think you are right, in a way. If you look at documentary films that have hit the cinemas over recent years, they are not the kind of films that I make. They are films that purport to offer quite a strong view on particular issues. I mean, in a film like *The End of the Line* there are characters, but I don't remember a single character from that film. I remember the issue, the argument. It remains a slight mystery to me as to why those films are in the cinema and not the kind of human dramas that I make and other people make, which is what we go to see all the time with fiction films. We don't watch a fiction film for its sense of an issue. You go there and engage with characters and the issue comes out through them. It has almost gone back to an older idea of documentary that it should just be about an important issue. Creative documentary seems to be something that stays on the margins and just exists in film festivals and the occasional screening on television. It makes me very angry because I feel that, you know, I see great films all the time that are in festivals, that only a festival audience gets to see. I know that when people discover these films they are amazed that they exist. They just don't get enough exposure.

The other type of film that you get in cinemas quite a lot is a story that just feels gargantuan, like One Day in September. *It is so huge and unique it is sort of unimaginable in lots of ways—or* Deep Water—*very big, epic stories. Whereas in character-led films the stories are more human-sized because they're about relationships.*

Yes, I think my films are sort of both ordinary and extraordinary. They are ordinary in their premise and in being about ordinary people. I am not seduced in the slightest by sensational stories. For me, personally, I am much more interested in ordinary people's struggles and dramas than a big sensational story. Within that, when you start to dive into people's lives and explore their lives with certain themes in mind, there are always surprises that feel extraordinary to me—not only extraordinary in the details of people's lives, but also in how they are on the camera and in the emotions they are expressing to you. Just the basic, universal human stuff is endlessly fascinating, you know? It tells you so much more about how we live and who we are than a big sensational story. That is often a one-off, outside of reality.

Do you find it liberating to be free of the 'overarching narrative'?

Yes, yes, totally. I am just not a narrative filmmaker like that. I don't think "That is a great story. I must tell that story." For me, documentary filmmaking is a process of discovery and very bound up with my relationship to the world and to life. Every film, for me, is a kind of dialogue with reality and a discovery of reality that reflects back on my own life and how I feel about things. It's that personal journey all the time that sets me alight. That is what I am about; that is what I have come to understand about myself.

I was just watching a Ray Stephens film called *Shanghai Pharmacy*. It starts with shots of the port in Shanghai, from his hotel window. The first 30 minutes is just observations of street life, you know? It is sort of fascinating but nothing is happening. There are these banal questions from behind the camera. Then they enter a pharmacy

and the rest of the film, 80 minutes or so, is all in this pharmacy, watching people coming in, buying medicine and learning about the society through that. It can get a bit boring but there are moments in that film that are so much more alive and authentic. The fluidity of it is really exciting. You never quite know where it is going. There is a freedom to it and a sort of love of life, in a way, which you don't get in a film that just has this grand narrative from the beginning.

It seems to me that in mainstream British TV, which used to be full of these quite life-affirming character studies and portraits of people, documentaries are all very narrative-driven now, even when there isn't really a narrative there ...

Yes, that is the ridiculous thing, isn't it? You have to deploy a narrative voice over—a narration to make you feel like there is a narrative when there isn't. It is ridiculous. You know, I was thinking about this the other day. I am filming outside a court at the moment, just telling mini-dramas outside a London Magistrates' Court. It is quite fascinating, and one of the characters that I have been following came out from the Court having had his trial. He was quite animated and in the back of your mind you are thinking, "Well, we should sort of ham this up a bit." Then I thought, "No, fuck it. I am just going to shoot it as it is and just film his reaction." It is a strange sort of desire for sensation all the time, isn't it? It is odd that we can't just look at life and the small details and be moved by that anymore.

Why have documentaries that are portraits become so unfashionable? Is it just the pressure of viewing figures?

Yes, I think it is just a question of ratings, basically. It is the feeling that audiences won't stick with it; they will get bored of it. On a deeper level, I think we are probably quite an apathetic, disengaged society these days, where ordinary things maybe don't really matter that much anymore. It is a feeling in the atmosphere that ordinary life is somehow not important. It all has to be dressed up as entertainment.

Do you think character-led films will come around again?

You know, I think they are always there, but certainly in much smaller numbers. If you go to film festivals, for example, these films are being made all the time. It is just the television 'landscape', to use a horrible word that they always use, that has changed.

Do you think it might swing round, given that there are fashions in documentaries?

At the same time as being quite pessimistic, I always have this sense of optimism, because I feel like the more shit that we are fed, the more space there will be for something different. So I am all in favour of more shit, because it gives me a bit more space when I go along to speak to the BBC or whatever. But it is disappointing, because for newer filmmakers it is much harder for them to get the space and time to find their voice. When I made the *Lift* film, I was literally given the money and had no pressure whatsoever. I could just go off and do it. I would never have made that film if I hadn't had the support and freedom that Channel 4 gave me at that time. On the other hand, if you are totally frustrated with the industry, you know, everyone has got their own camera and a laptop. There are a lot of filmmakers going to see Commissioners with material they have shot by themselves.

If it's true that character-led films depend on intimacy, how do you go about creating intimacy?

I think when I'm filming, if I'm not really getting close to the person in question, then it feels a little bit dead to me. It feels you're just skating over the surface of something. So I think, by nature, I kind of look and search for that intimacy with a character, and it really only works if you genuinely feel something for that person. You can't create it; you can't manufacture it. Sometimes, I might start filming with somebody where there's something that's drawing me to that person, but, for whatever reason, it feels like it's not

working. And you should just give up then, really, and recast, because it's so important that you've got that going on. Usually, I think, it comes from that very first moment where you decide to cast the character. You feel something for them—you feel a kind of genuine empathy in some way—and then the intimacy just comes, you know?

Does self-shooting help with intimacy?

Well, I only ever shoot myself, so it's a bit hard for me to know. There have certainly been many times within films when I've said to the AP, "Can you just wait outside?" because I've felt frustrated that I wasn't getting underneath the skin of the character enough and I've thought that if I was only there by myself, in a way where we could both be totally relaxed, it would make for a much more revealing moment. I remember when I was filming with Tulia in Calais that her motivation initially for doing the film was to do with her business. She thought it would be good exposure, and it was only through time that we built a relationship and she started to understand me and I understood her a bit more. But every time we would go around to her house she would lay on a huge spread, and we'd never get to do any filming. It was really frustrating. I wanted to just turn up and be in her life for a couple of hours and create something magical and instead all these barriers would be there. So one time I just turned up unannounced, and it was just after she'd had problems with the bank, and that's when that scene occurred where she talks about wanting to take her own life. I could tell that there was stuff going on. It's just that I wasn't able to access it, and being on my own in that moment helped tremendously because if I'd been with somebody else she would have been distracted.

Patience is important in creating intimacy.

Yes, you really have to wait for the right moment. There are so many things that need to come together to make a scene work, especially if it's a scene that you've been planning for a little while. You've got ideas that you want to talk to somebody about and you have to wait for the right moment. When I spoke to Norman in the City film about

him not having kids, it was after the day that he'd finally resigned from his job, and I went home with him and he was a little bit drunk. There was a lot in the rushes that was total nonsense because he was playing up to the camera and stuff and I had to find the space of the garden and get him out there. And smoking is always great, because it helps people to relax. So he was out there smoking. And I often talk to people quite briefly before I start shooting to try and create an atmosphere and a mood so I'll say things like, "Can you just smoke in the garden and really try to think about this question and just start talking when you feel like it?" And nothing is happening; they're not saying anything. But there's an atmosphere because they're already thinking something through and then, seemingly miraculously, they'll just start talking. And then, even if they don't say anything, it's really interesting. And I say to them, "Look, if you just want to pause, just pause and stop talking and start again."

I think one feature of your films is that they quite often contain revelations and confidences, which is obviously a product of intimacy.

Yes, it usually comes about through having filmed with a character for a period of time and questions arising in my mind that I want to ask and explore with them.

There's the girl who talked about being abused in Travellers.

Yes, yes. With a lot of these revelations they've often been discussed briefly with myself before you've seen them in the film. So, for example, in the *Lift* film, the guy that comes in and talks about his parents dying in the space of a few months together—we'd had almost an identical conversation outside the lift just before shooting that. It's a question that young filmmakers often ask, "Can you talk to somebody about something or should you just film it straight away?" And it's not a science and you never quite know, but often you can have brief explorations with a character about these kinds of intimate things in their life. And they can repeat it in a very emotional and authentic way, and it doesn't seem any less powerful for it. And it helps you, in fact, because you can be armed with

the right sort of questions and find the right way to enquire into those things if you know a little bit about what's happened, rather than just literally shooting in the dark all the time.

I think that making films in the way that you're describing—very patiently, basing it on real relationships—gives you not just surprises, but also great moments. Like when Steve's dad comes out of prison in One Day My Prince Will Come*, and he's looking at him, saying, "Your hands are smaller than I remember."*

Yes, yes, I love that moment.

He's like a little animal trying to get to know a bigger animal.

Yes, exactly, yes. I remember there was so much planning that had to go into making that scene work. I mean, I had been filming with Steven for a while. I knew that his dad was in prison and we'd written to tell him about the filming. He came home and Steven was at school, and so I had to meet his father briefly, knowing that Steven would be home in an hour or so. There's a lot of drama making sure that you can get it all: shooting Steven coming back into the house and then being in this chaotic situation because there were loads of other kids around and there were sisters around, and trying to create a sense of clarity to the situation, ignoring all this madness around you and trying to keep the frame and make that work and hoping something interesting is going to happen. But in a situation like that you are guaranteed that something interesting is going to happen. He hasn't seen his dad for a long time ... you just want to position yourself to be able to be there in a way to observe that happen.

There is so much that is under-appreciated when you watch a film, and rightly so, because you shouldn't be thinking about that as a viewer. But for filmmakers or young filmmakers wanting to learn their craft, it's so important to know how to get yourself in

the right place, and position yourself in order to observe something. There are so many obstacles to overcome to be able to just be there in that way.

Character-led films are often more reflective. They're almost about thinking. You often ask questions like "Are you happy? Have you ever been in love?"

Yes, for me, that works really well. It's like in *Men of the City* when David is there on his screen making money or losing money and, at the same time, I know there's this story with his kids going on. He's sat there working and also printing out photos of his children, whom he's lost. It's all happening in the same moment, and that's a great time just to throw in a very simple but thoughtful question. He cuts me quite short; he's sort of "I don't really want to think about that". But still, the great thing about film is that it's just as powerful because you totally read what he's not saying and what he's not prepared to talk about, and there's no escape from that when you're shooting, so it's always quite interesting. And I always look for those moments of reflection even within a supposedly busy, dynamic scene.

There's lots of reflection in The Lift*, as well, with people just thinking aloud?*

Yes, it's very driven by existential questions, and it's a very pure film because it's a unique space in which to deal with those themes. But the themes are there in every film of mine, even though they might have very different spaces with a very different visual feel to them.

It struck me that character-led films can often feel a bit nebulous—like you can get a bit lost in them, as a viewer.

It probably comes down to this question of what is a narrative. I'm quite fascinated by the line that a film takes and it's something that I'm never really aware of until a decent

rough-cut stage in the editing process, or maybe even further. Because it's very fascinating and freeing to just follow your nose and your instinct when you're out there shooting and documenting. It's a great feeling to just film whatever you're drawn to. There's always something connecting all these ideas and I have faith that what's connecting them, what's making them relate to each other is always going to be there because they're coming from me. Then, when I then sit down in the edit, it's another process of really clarifying those ideas and making them work on the screen. And sometimes you're probably right: films can seemingly go off on a tangent. But I love that; I love the sense of having the ability to create tangents, as long as you don't feel lost and you sort of understand why you're seeing what you're seeing and what's going on. For example, in *Men of the City*, I filmed quite early on the guy talking about saving the woman from drowning in the Thames. And when I was filming it, it seemed like a really pivotal scene, though I had no idea where it would play in the film. But when I sat down with my editor and we discussed the meaning of the film, we knew quite early that that scene would be almost the centre of the film, an anchor. It's like a moment of humanity in a world that seems quite inhuman. But working it into the narrative was a very tricky and delicate process. You could see it as a distraction in the narrative of the main characters, something that's getting in the way. But, for me, it's not that at all; it's a pivotal moment.

The narratives in character-led films often don't pay-off in a conventional way. I was thinking, for example, of the gay guy in Frinton on Sea, where the narrative never quite concludes.

Yes, there's a certain mystery surrounding his story, and part of it is that in reality he told us something that I couldn't ever use in the film, so in that situation I was treading quite a fine line. I think you understand his homosexuality quite quickly. But still, there's this other something mysterious going on that you never really pin down, that's true. For me, I feel really intrigued by the idea of leaving people wanting more—not out of arrogance but because I think there's something that happens in film where you watch

and it's really satisfying if it's not wrapped up, and not closed off. I want it to kind of carry through and stay with you, and as a filmmaker you're in control of that. You can keep a certain mystery or magic to the stories that you're telling, and I think that, for me, is born out of a sort of attitude towards life really; there should be mystery—mystery but not confusion. Confusion is bad.

So open-endedness is an advantage, rather than a problem?

I think so. I really encourage and embrace the open-endedness of films. You've invested in these characters and the story, and then it almost starts again when it ends. There's that sense of the story continuing on in the viewer's mind, which, for me, seems something to aim for because you're raising questions all the time. There are more questions than answers, and I want to leave the audience with questions, so that they reflect back on their own lives because that's what I'm doing myself. Every film leaves me with questions and I don't know whether they ever get answered. They're almost unanswerable. They're just an ongoing exploration from one film to the other. At the end of *Calais*, the English guy drives off in his caravan; we've said goodbye to the Afghani refugee in a queue; and the Jamaican guy has gone to a hotel, having not got his bus back to Jamaica; and we've left Tulia having celebrated her husband's birthday. In a way, the next chapter is ready to unfold and that's maybe what you start thinking about when the film has finished. You close a chapter in people's lives, yet you know it's ongoing. You leave the characters in a state of uncertainty, which is much more real.

When you're making a character-led film and you're meeting characters, do you ever worry that a narrative is just not going to emerge?

No, I never worry about that, funnily enough. I think hard about the progression of the film. I'm always agonising over a sense of progression and asking "Can this sustain an hour?" "What is this thing that I'm creating here? How is it going to unfold and what is the development?" But the 'What is it?' process is very different from thinking there

won't be anything or that nothing is going to unfold. I have total confidence that something will emerge. I just don't know what it is exactly. There are always real low points in a filming process where you feel a bit stuck, or you know a particular scene is coming up because there is something happening on a certain date that you feel has some kind of potential, but maybe you don't quite know what it's going to deliver, or you worry that it might get cancelled. But, over the years, you learn to both surrender to these doubts and insecurities and think around them. So, no, I never worry about there being a lack of narrative.

Does the fact that character-led narrative is not obvious, necessarily, mean it's more satisfying when it does emerge, because you found it?

Yes. I remember when we were cutting the Barking film together and it just seemed like there was one surprise after another, and it felt really satisfying. And even in the City film, you don't quite know where it's going and who's going to appear next. That comes about through an openness in the shooting, and freeing yourself from being tightly controlled about the narrative. For me, it's really enjoyable. A lot of TV execs would be terrified of that sort of open-endedness and not knowing where the film was going. And it's a real problem if you're being discouraged from that, because I think that's where you really find your own voice as a filmmaker, in those moments where you go off the prescribed path. But that's just my nature. I've never been the kind of person to stick to the rules in that way. You shut so many doors if you're living in a fearful state all the time about trying things out. It's better to fail spectacularly having tried, than make something that just feels okay—it has a clear narrative, but actually it's totally dull and uninteresting.

The overall effect of your films emotionally, I would have said, is they are often quite sad or bittersweet. Why is that?

I don't know really. I think comedy and tragedy are so bound up with each other that it's impossible to separate out. I could never imagine making a pure comedy, because, for me, there's no comedy without sadness and tragedy. It's all bound up in the same idea.

Is that kind of heartache a result of making character-led films, in the sense that that's what the human condition is like?

Yes, I mean, that is what the human condition is like. I wouldn't be interested in making a film about somebody that was just seemingly always happy and life was wonderful. It's not how I feel about life. You know, some days I'm totally fucked off and depressed; other days I have these great moments of joy, and that's just how I feel. I think that there's this sense in the society that we live in that we have to be happy all the time. People go around saying "I'm fine. No, I'm fine", and you know underneath that they are on the verge of a nervous breakdown. I just think that without dwelling on people's misery—because I don't want to do that—even in the sadness there's optimism, because all the characters in my films, I think, are fighting and staying alive. There's a sense that if you relate to these people and you can identify with them that gives you some kind of hope, through their ability to survive their problems. I don't want to have to make a happy film just because that's what a broadcaster might want, to cheer up an audience after work. No, no—the opposite. I want to reflect what I feel about life and about being alive.

That's a feature of good character-led films, isn't it? That there is layering and complexity.

You do get comedy laid over tragedies. I'm always looking for comedy. I mean, in a character like Monty in Barking, there's so much tragedy in his life, yet what makes him a great character is that he is able to laugh. I always remember the moment in *Calais* when, at his lowest point, the Afghani refugee guy is in tears. It's freezing cold; he's got nowhere to go; and I'm saying, "Well, why don't you just stay in France?" because he's

got the opportunity of claiming asylum there. And there's a moment of silence, and he just says "I don't like French people". And when the film is screened and people watch that, they are crying but then they are laughing and that's how life is, I think.

What sort of person do you need to be to make character-led films?

I think you have to care about people, basically. If I think about the reasons why I made films, I think about the craft, I think about the form—all those things—but what really matters is the way that you deal with the characters, and I think you have to be the kind of person that really, genuinely cares about the people in your film and is engaged with their struggles, their dilemmas, their situation. If that isn't genuine, as a viewer you feel very, very awkward. I remember watching *Capturing the Friedmans* and feeling like it was a fascinating story, but totally questioning the motivations of the filmmaker all the way through. I felt like the filmmaker behind the camera was rubbing his hands with glee at this amazing situation. You know, it's a grand story, and it's fascinating, but then the question of 'why' comes up and I'm left with that more than anything else. And, for me, it's not enough.

Do you need to be quite a genuine sort of person?

I think you do have to be genuine, but I would never sit here in front of you and say that I'm not manipulative or even quite ruthless when it comes to the point, because I am. But I try to treat people as fairly as possible.

A rounded sort of person?

I don't know. I don't know if I'm so rounded. I think you have to be quite humble, but you also need a certain kind of arrogance to be able to make a film, because you have to have a confidence and a belief that you've got something to say. And you have to be

the kind of person that is sensitive to those big themes that we all seem to be intrigued by.

I wonder if it's harder to make character-led films if you're young? That's what I mean about being rounded, really. Do you need a certain amount of life experience?

Well, you meet some 20 year-olds that are extremely mature and have a sense of what it is to be alive and you meet some that aren't. For me, that's crucial: you have to know something about life and have some sense of maturity. It's partly about who you are. It makes total sense to me why I've ended up doing what I'm doing. I was a goalkeeper when I was at school; they are always the outsiders, leaning against the post, observing the game and occasionally being called into action.

Is character-led filmmaking teachable?

That's a really interesting question, because I teach and sometimes you want to pull your hair out because you think the way this person is thinking, they are never going to make an interesting film. And it's a terrible thing to say in some ways. Yet you know when you meet somebody if they've just got that human something. You know, even if the film will be structurally a bit of a mess, they will have something going on that could really communicate. So I think you can encourage people, but I'm not sure it is teachable.

So it's more a matter of channelling?

Yes, yes, exactly. It's something that you have and you can learn to channel in the right direction.

What would you say to young filmmakers who want to do what you do?

I think that people should just do it, you know? I feel really strongly that it's so easy just to start. Just film! Film away and at home, film anything and just find your own way of doing things. It's really important that people find their own voice, because otherwise I think you can get lost quite easily. I do believe that if people have the desire, they will find a way to make their own films. And I think, over the years, the most interesting films have come about that way. If you actually studied the backgrounds of documentary filmmakers who really make their own quite individual films, there'd be no obvious route as to how people got into it and how they found their way through. Just film and film and film. Take it home and edit yourself and try to make sense of what you're doing. It's no different these days to just having a notebook if you want to be a writer. Just pick up a camera and start shooting.

Do you think that films that are character-led come closer to art than documentaries often do?

Hmm. I've always felt really uncomfortable about the word 'art' being associated with documentary. But having said that, what's really interesting, for me, is those moments in a film that work on the level of art. That's what you're searching for all the time, those moments. I'm trying to capture, I suppose, a sort of poetry of everyday life. That's when it really comes alive for me, when there's a kind of surprising poetry to the moment. What's most restrictive is this sense that you're just there recording reality. Or just 'interviewing' people—like it's just a question and answer session. I never use an exchange with a character if it feels like an interview. There has to be something else going on there. It has to have some magic and atmosphere. Interviews don't have atmosphere. They're just interviews. There's such beauty and transcendence in your dealings with characters sometimes that they just blow you away. And that's the high. You're always searching for those moments. In a film, there are probably only a small number of them but, in a way, those moments really are what you build the whole film around.

What's the goal of character-led filmmaking?

I don't know. What is the goal? I think that I want to make a film that touches people—it's as simple as that. If it doesn't do that or it doesn't do that in as powerful way as I imagined it could, then it's a failure. I mean, films are always a failure on many levels. You never make a perfect film—you can forget about that. I think that the goal is to find characters and tell stories that really tell us something about the way that we are living.

What is it that you want a viewer to come away with? Is it asking questions or is it to come away with a better understanding of something?

I want people to reflect on those themes which are both timeless and universal and also very current: to give time to those themes, to reflect on them, and to question themselves. In *Men of the City*, it's definitely a kind of critique of the City; it's a dystopian vision of the City, definitely. But the issues of what the City does to people and the human cost, and is it right, is it wrong ... I feel like my job is to raise questions about all that, rather than to provide answers, because I don't have answers. At the time I was making that film, I was privileged to be able to reflect upon these great themes during a moment of complete meltdown. But even if you live outside the Square Mile, the themes in the film are themes that affect us all. You might think you're outside of it, but you're really not. I think we live in very arrogant times. There's a sense that the way we live is the only way. I want to question all of that and strip all of the nonsense away, and create some space for us to actually take a step back and reflect on how we are living. That's sort of what I'm doing when I'm making the film, and if other people get that too then I think it's quite a valuable exercise. I tend to turn to the characters in a film for some kind of comfort. The human aspect is sort of all we have, really. If we forget about that, then we're deeply fucked, you know?