

THE BRITISH FILM INDUSTRY

An interview with David Puttnam

David Puttnam is one of Britain's most successful independent film producers with a track record that includes; *That'll Be The Day, Stardust, Mahler, Bugsy Malone, The Duellists, Midnight Express, Foxes, Chariots of Fire*. Here he is interviewed by Roy Lockett who is deputy general secretary of the ACTT.

Is it possible for us to say that there is an authentic British film industry?

No. I don't honestly think that has ever been possible. We've always been an adjunct of the American film industry. From time to time there have been enough people making good films in Britain to give the impression that there's a British film industry. Enough of those people have spent enough of their time working in Britain to look as though one's dealing in things 'British'. But there has never been an indigenous film industry in the way there's been an Italian, French or American film industry.

Why did that cultural and economic domination of our industry come into existence?

I think it started off that way. Film, for good or ill, is an American medium and was grabbed by them very early on. Because we share a language we were never able to throw off that domination. For some extraordinary reason which I can't understand, in the sixties, seventies and eighties, we produced an amazing number of good filmmakers for an industry which in its English language form is inherently 'American'. I certainly don't think there was ever a prewar film industry. Gainsborough was nothing. They were aping American films, and doing them badly. Ealing Studios was the nearest we ever got to a genuinely British studio. In the brief early years of Woodfall it looked as though something might happen, but it didn't. It's too easy to say they sold out. They probably just got better offers.

How significant is financing? Is it simply a reflection of the fact that the multinational American companies have got a grip on the world market and a certain return, rather than

the lottery which making a feature film is without a world market?

That's hugely significant. There's no question that their grip — and they had it by 1930, before sound — is related to the fact that they have many, many more ways of hedging their bets for an equivalent investment, than a British company has. Five million pounds invested by a British company in a British film is a far, far higher risk investment than the same sum of money invested by an American company in a British film, or an American company investing the same kind of money in an American film. They have control of a great number of the international markets. More control of more money than anyone is really prepared to talk about. In many countries, the Cinema International Corporation (CIC) in Britain would be regarded as a monopoly.

Monopoly in what sense?

Monopoly in the sense that they control an unreasonable proportion of the playing time in this country: control of the number of playing weeks per year in British cinemas. I would say that any company that controlled more than 25% of the playing weeks is a monopoly. CIC almost certainly do, certainly the significant playing weeks in the mainstream cinemas, revenue from which we've got to rely on to create an indigenous industry.

If CIC's not happy with your product, then you have an enormous problem?

I think that's an overstatement. You could function perfectly well if CIC hated you. But you'd only have available two-thirds to three-quarters of the market. In American terms that means you're dealing with a monopoly. In British terms — and historically we're a monopolistic society — that sort of proportion has never been regarded as being devastating has it? I always get the impression that the Monopolies Commission is talking in terms of someone owning more than 50% of the market. In America a monopoly is regarded as being effective far, far earlier than 50%.

Do you think the situation has deteriorated?

Yes, it deteriorated a few weeks ago with the incorporation of United Artists into CIC — or whatever it's now called. It deteriorated three years ago when EMI lined up with Warner-Columbia into Warner-Columbia-EMI. It's deteriorated very rapidly in the last five years.

Is this a critique of a market system? That the needs of the audience, the needs of the filmmaker are not met?

Yes, that's what I think. I've supported Alan Sapper (ACTT's General Secretary) for years in the notion that what we need in this country is a nationalised, vertically integrated sector not run by market forces; given a different brief. Maybe the brief is to break even. Maybe the brief is only to lose five million quid a year. I don't know what the brief would be. But I certainly think there should be a nationalised sector of the film industry to compete with the multinationals.

What would you see as the composition of that nationalised sector? Would you see it as taking over a studio complex. . .

Yes, I would.

A number of cinemas in prime sites, demanding of the state a certain cash sum to invest?

Well, let's take them one at a time. Without any doubt we're talking about an annual investment by government. Not necessarily an investment that looked for a return: the 'return' would be an amorphous one, more in terms of cultural consciousness and an audio-visual education. I find it difficult to argue the studio case because having worked in a four-wall situation and having worked in a permanent shop situation, my own preference is for a four-wall, because in the end film making is a creative endeavour and it can be extremely difficult to motivate permanent staff in the craft grades to aspire to the same things that you aspire to.

You mean by four-wall, a situation in which you go into a studio which has no permanent workforce. That you hire separately all of the facilities and freelance personnel you need for the picture and take them all into the studio?

Yes.

The great disadvantage of freelancing is the economic insecurity which it entails: unemployment and the absence of a guaranteed annual income. The great advantage of free-

lancing is creative mobility — the ability for people to come together in different groupings, in what is essentially a collaborative art like filmmaking. We've never found a balance between that economic insecurity and the creative freedom which freelancing permits.

Well, I think that's absolutely true. Historically, it has been a facet of bad management because what has inevitably happened in every studio with a permanent shop situation that I've ever come across is that sooner or later the permanent staff wage bill becomes dependent on a certain level of production. That level of production couldn't be sustained by projects anyone *really* wanted to make. It was only a question of time before the issue became: 'Well we've got four rotten scripts — script B is the least rotten, we'd better make it because whether we like it or not, we've got 27 plasterers, 14 carpenters and a sound-crew to keep. So we'd better make something.' It's only a matter of time before you start making films which should never have been made. That's happened time and time again.

To change the emphasis a little, why have you never really thought about making a film about football fans and football violence, or a film about racism or a film about youth unemployment? You call for an indigenous cinema but in a sense our indigenous cinema, certainly the mainstream, has never addressed itself to those dominant questions.

It's absolutely true and I can give you a very precise answer. It may not be satisfactory but at least it's accurate and honest. I sat down three or four years ago, with Pete Townsend and Alan Parker, with the specific intention of making a film about football hooliganism. We hoped it was going to be a multi-faceted film: deal with a lot of things. It was going to reflect society and ask some questions. Very early on Pete Townsend brought up the fact that we couldn't find a way of doing it that was going to be attractive and get people to come to see the film without, to some extent, glorifying racism or violence for at least half of the very people that would form its natural audience. Let's assume that Leni Riefenstahl was a Marxist, given the job of making a terrific film about the 1936 Olympic Games. As an artist she couldn't have made a very different film. There might have been the odd scene or frame here or there added or cut, but she wouldn't have made a very different film of the Munich Olympics because film is an emotional medium. If you accept that and if you're steeped in it, as I am, all your

instincts are vying to make it emotional. Everything tells you 'Here's a scene and if we hold that shot a bit longer it will have more impact.' It's a very hard thing to control.

You aren't saying, are you, that the intrinsic difficulties are so enormous that it can't be done?

I've talked to Tony Garnett about this and in all honesty I'm not sure that I personally have the intellectual weight to take on subject matter like that. This is one of the reasons I bow constantly to Garnett as a filmmaker because he has weight that I haven't got. Conversely, I think there are things I can do that Tony can't. I think I know how to address myself to a *large* audience, a compromise which Tony finds very, very difficult indeed. There's the paradox. I'm a more effective film producer than Tony, in terms of getting to an audience. He's a more effective film-maker than me in terms of the density of his material.

I went into shock after I'd done *Midnight Express*. I thought it was a really good well-made picture, until I saw it with an audience and then I suddenly realised that, as much as anything else, we'd been ripped off. We thought we'd made one film, but in the end we'd made exactly the film Columbia Pictures wanted us to make: a very commercial film where the audience is actually on its feet saying 'go on' during the 'tongue biting'

sequence. We thought they'd be under the seats: they were up cheering. That's the kind of misjudgement I realised I was capable of. Don Boyd tells me that *Chariots of Fire* is a jingoistic picture. I don't think it is. I think it's a film about the victory of the individual over the state. He honestly believes it's a film about the state's domination of the individual. I still can't see it, but on the other hand because he says it to me, I've got to believe it. He sat there and watched the film and that's what he came away with.

There is also one very fundamental point. You ask why I'm not developing or making films around the major social issues that confront us in this country such as race, unemployment, Ireland etc. I think the simple reason is that I don't think that *issues* make good films, people do. Show me a good tale about an interesting man or woman who happens to be inextricably caught up in one of these issues, and I think I could produce a film that would both work as a piece of drama and possibly have an effect. But to artificially devise a story around one of these issues would, I am convinced, be a certain recipe for disaster on anything other than an educational level.

Crucial people, like yourself and Alan Parker, have come out of advertising. People like Hugh Hudson, who directed 'Chariots of Fire', and the director Ridley Scott have also come out of advertising. What they've acquired from advertising is a real facility in the use of film

A scene from Chariots of Fire. Jingoistic? Or a film about the victory of the individual over the state?



technique: a disciplined use of camera, use of sound, rehearsal of actors and so on. They have all of that impeccable technique but perhaps less of the kind of political and social luggage which is necessary if you're going to start making feature films which are other than pure entertainment.

I think what you say is arguable. Hugh's slightly different from the others. He has the kind of upper class guilt which is a very heavy burden: a desperately guilty old-Etonian, who has never been able to justify to himself the advantages he started life with. Alan works off a kind of working-class anger. Ridley's background probably pre-determined his approach. His father was an Army Major. I think Ridley's probably the one who's varied the least. Ridley is what Ridley is. He was the one who turned up in a suit at the Royal College of Art. They all thought he was very strange. He's probably the most brilliant of any of us. Ridley's a painter who happens to use film. Alan is the most com-

plex character, and certainly hasn't defined himself yet. He is somebody who works off conscience. As for me I'm genuinely going through a transition and I don't know where I am. I don't know how far I've gone or even if I'm really on my way back! I was uneducated till the age of 30, to the point that's almost laughable.

Coming back to the possibility of an indigenous British film industry, by which we mean an industry which makes movies which reflect our way of life, ways of thinking, our problems, rather than one which is a client industry of the United States. They come over here, they hire our technicians, our studios, they make a picture like Superman or Alien or Star Wars. They take it back and it sweeps the market, but we're a hired facility like Hertz. The kind of films you're talking about making are very different from that. Not mid Atlantic, worldwide attractions of that kind. Has it become easier or harder in the last ten years for someone like you, ploughing that kind of lonely

furrow, to put that sort of thing together?

We're as near to having a British film industry now as we ever have been because we've got what the Americans don't have: a wonderful interchange among creators, between theatre, film and television, where a good director, a good writer or a good actor, feels genuinely free to move from one medium to another. That doesn't exist in America. For me personally it's got easier. There's no question. I mean I managed to finance the Bill Forsyth film that we've been working on for a year fairly easily. In the end it was one phone call. I know that on 19 April, 1982 he and I are going to be standing by a camera making a film. It's the first time in my career that's ever happened. In November of one year I can seriously talk about a film I know I am going to start in April the next year. In that respect it's certainly easier.

There has been one other, sort of emotional breakthrough. I'll try and explain this



in terms that make some sort of real sense. I've felt for many years that one of the defects of British cinema has been that we simply weren't very clever. When I say clever, I admire enormously the films that were done in America in the late thirties and early fifties, the films that really had something to say but managed to say it in ways that didn't swamp the feeling that you'd actually been to the movies. The early Frank Capra films. The early Elia Kazan films. Rightly or wrongly, when I walked out at the end of Zimmerman's *The Search*, or say, *On The Waterfront*, I felt good. It seems to me that there were two generations of filmmakers in America who were able to create films about 'something', and to say it in

terms that made you feel that when you paid whatever it was in those days, 3/6d, allowed you to come out of the darkness feeling transformed.

In the British industry we became too didactic, too early. We were making either/or films. 'Carry On' films on the one hand, and hard-nosed films on the other, with very little in between. We weren't being too smart. Now, for example, the film Bill Forsyth's written is in essence an ecology film — pure and simple — *Mr Smith goes to Washington*. It's about two Americans who come over to buy a chunk of Scotland for an oil refinery and end up deciding it's a rotten idea. It's a comedy and I've never done a comedy before — I'm a bit nervous ... •