**Interview Transcript for Clio Barnard**

*(WARNING: this interview contains spoilers regarding Clio’s latest film,* ***The Selfish Giant****.)*

**What did you study and where did you study it?**

I studied here, back when it was known as Jacob Kramer. Honestly, it was my favourite year of my entire education. I really loved it. I’d left home, I was experimenting, it was very free and it was great, so, that’s “*how it all began*.”

**Did studying Art have any influence on your career now?**

I got my first stirrings of being interested in film back then. Obviously there wasn’t the kind of technology there is now, so actually it was quite difficult to access. We did some animation, which I then followed up in my Fine Art Degree, after my foundation at Jacob Kramer, by making film records of my drawings; capturing all these charcoal drawings in stop-frame animations. Also, I guess an Art School education encourages you to question everything, in my case, I was questioning representation, and that has stayed with me, especially in my work. You also learn to be incredibly free in terms of the way you experiment, it seems a weird idea to *learn* to be creative, but you absolutely do, particularly on foundation, we were just encouraged to play, and to understand how valuable that is.

**In your opinion, has the current “Marketisation” of Higher Education led to a stifling of creativity?**

I don’t have any experience of how it is to be a student now, but I can imagine it can be an unhelpful model, if it’s very result orientated. I’m of a generation where we were given grants to study what we wanted. I think it’s tough for students now because the pressure to leave with a vocational qualification is very strong. That kind of pressure does not give a lot of freedom to encourage experimentation or exploration; it’s the exact opposite to when I was at Art School.

**Do you think perhaps now, we will see a more conservative type of film maker/ artist emerging due to this shift in academic values, or could it be the start of a new group of innovative creative practioners rebelling against the system?**

I don’t really know. That could be great, in an ideal world. You’d think you would get a lot more resistance and more radicalism. It must be really tough. When I went to college it was a real mixed bag socially, I imagine that is being narrowed down a lot now. Not being able to afford an Arts Education, and it not being vocational in the way that it was. Arts Education is so often undervalued, whereas I can attest that it is fantastically important, for all walks of life to be able to express themselves, find a voice and tell people how they see the world. What could be more freeing than a genuinely experimental arts education?

**Why did you choose to study Fine Art (at Degree level)?**

After my foundation I think I realised that I really wanted to make my own work. Obviously I could have done that if I had gone to train as a Graphic Designer, but I wanted to continue exploring and experimenting, and I felt that studying Fine Art was the best way to do that.

**What did you do immediately after graduating, for the first few years?**

I went to Dundee and did a post-graduate diploma for a year, so I was in Art Education for five years in total. When I graduated I went and lived in a squat in London, because that was the other thing that was going on at that time, there was a lot squatting going on. I went for a job at a post-production company and they said “you can be a runner or a receptionist” and I chose receptionist, because it was slightly better paid… I was rubbish. I was a hopeless receptionist. But, there was somebody who worked at that company that was kind, and they allowed me to use the company equipment at the weekends. I used this ancient computer called a ‘Quantel Paint Box,’ which nowadays would look very dated. Technology just wasn’t the same as it is now, so I learned some skills there.

**Did you learn to use specialist film equipment just by playing around?**

In Dundee, on my post-grad course, they had excellent equipment, so I had learned a lot already, and by then I was set on making film and video. Digital stuff was really new then, but this was more just me messing around and experimenting. At the time, it was just playing around but simultaneously I had made a piece of film at College, which was exhibited. The Institute of Contemporary Arts (London) had organised, actually it was Tilda Swinton who had curated, this show of short films. The film that I had made when I graduated was curated into that, which was great. So I was also applying for funding at the Arts Council to make my own film. I was really just playing around with ideas and thinking about what the next film was going to be.

**When you were applying to the Arts Council for funding, did you imagine these projects to be your next “big hit”?**

Well, at that time I wasn’t making feature films, I was making short films. They weren’t really short narrative films, they were short experimental films. The Arts Council had a fund that was for Artists who did film and video. I applied to them with a project. At the time I had become really interested in representations of mad women. I was working on this project, and also working on the application to get funding to make that film.

**What do you think of the current state of film funding in the UK, now that the Film Council has been cut?**

I am a little out of the loop in terms of what’s available, but I know the BFI still have initiatives for new filmmakers. I would say that there are always schemes out there for filmmakers and perhaps I didn’t fully realise this when I had just graduated, but there are always people out there who are hungry for new voices and new talent. People graduating should be very encouraged by that.

**The film industry in well known for being very male-dominated. How would you advise young women to get ahead in the Film industry?**

Don’t ever think that you can’t. I don’t think I was particularly conscious of it when I was starting out. I had ideas and I wanted to realise them. It wasn’t really until I made these recent films and started being interviewed by the press that they started asking me the question, or that I became fully aware of how terrible the statistics are. My advice is just be blind to it, and to keep going regardless. I suppose what I realise looking back is that I was more determined and competitive than I realised at the time. For a while, in order to pay the bills, I was working commercially as a Director, but my boss really tried to push me into being a producer. This is very common, to have female producers and male directors. But I was absolutely adamant that it wasn’t what I wanted to do. In fact, I did it for a short while, which just confirmed for me that it was not my strength and definitely was not what I wanted to do. I was quite bolshie about it I suppose and said no, I don’t want to produce, I want to direct. I didn’t really realise I was doing that at the time, so I guess my advice is, pretend you don’t know and just keep going.

**What did it feel like to have your first two feature films receive critical acclaim?**

Lovely. Really wonderful and you never know, when you are making something, how it will be received. You don’t know when you are in the process of making something whether it is communicating what you want it to communicate, or how an audience will receive it, until it is reflected back at you, when people see the work or when you finish it. It has been great.

**What is it that drives you to make theses films, particularly working in the same place?**

With those two films, one really grew out of the other. The Selfish Giant grew out of The Arbor. I think what happens, and I don’t know whether it works this way for other filmmakers, but I kind of have a hunch about what I want to make next. It’s always really difficult to explain, it’s usually quite abstract and gradually it grows. You go down some dead ends with it but eventually it always stems from the hunch. Less so with The Arbor. I think that started in a slightly different way, but definitely with the Selfish Giant. Taking this old fairy story, doing a contemporary re-telling and I wasn’t really sure why (at hunch stage) but gradually it became apparent to me, “oh, that’s why I want to do it.”

**How do your “hunches” become apparent? And how do you get it from being “a hunch” to “a film”?**

I know different Artists work in different ways; the thing that I found incredibly helpful was writing proposals and treatments, because it helped me make sense of “the hunch”, to look at it from different angles. For example, with the hunch that became the Selfish Giant, it began by externalising it, having conversations with a producer, then testing and sounding it out, and then, it sounds so *airy-fairy* but going for a long walk, ruminating on it. Then I wrote a page about what I thought it might be. After that I had a meeting with the financiers. I guess I was in a different position then because in the past I probably would have sent in a proposal to some kind of funding scheme, but in this case it was people who had been involved with The Arbor, so I went straight to them and showed them the page, and they said, ‘okay, we’ll go and develop it.’

The next stage was to write a longer treatment and then go and do some workshops – because I already knew the kids that it was going to be about, and I knew that I wanted it shot in Buttershaw, which was where The Arbor was filmed. So it was a case of going back to Buttershaw, doing workshops with boys of a certain age, working on the idea of a giant and who that giant might be. It’s a long process. It was two years before we had a screenplay - before we started shooting, and another year in the making. In terms of research I spent a lot of time in scrapyards, a lot of time with the boys, going scrapping, spending a lot of time with their mums. There was a lot of technical research, because I didn’t know the first thing about cable. I know a lot now; I became a cable-geek. In terms of the writing, there were quite a lot of dead ends. I spent the best part of three months writing an ending that I then completely scrapped.

**What were the biggest challenges or benefits of working on location, on a real Bradford estate?**

A lot of The Arbor was shot in locations used as studios actually. It was a very short shoot, because it was a low-budget film, comparatively, so only 5 or 6 days were shot in Buttershaw, all excerpts of Andrea Dunbar’s play, on Brafferton Arbor. The writing of that film was unusual because it was audio interviews. I spent about two years, off and on, on that street, so I had got to know people very well. That part of the shoot was great. It was really really good fun, although it was also quite scary because it was an experiment and I didn’t know if it was going to work, creatively, but as an experience it had so much energy.

The Selfish Giant, I loved that shoot. I had never shot for six weeks before, but to me that felt really long, it felt like luxury – which I didn’t expect, I thought that I would just be really stressed for six weeks, which I suppose I was, a bit. You have to be incredibly present to direct, the only before and after is in the fiction of the story, and there is something very lovely about not being able to think about anything else, you know, *are we getting a good performance? Do we need another shot over there? Was that a good performance? Do we need to have another take?* For me and the D.O.P., time passes very quickly, because you are absolutely engrossed in it all the time.

**What was it like working with children who had never acted before?**

It was great, I really loved it.I had made a short narrative fiction before, but this felt very new to me. I was very nervous about it, I was nervous about actors full stop, at least with kids I thought, that’s great! They don’t come with any expectations, unlike professional actors. I found that it wasn’t actually that different from working with some very experienced adult actors, in the way that you need to listen to them, above all, and respond to their individual take on that story and that character. Shaun and Conner, who were the two actors that played the leads in that film, hadn’t acted before and they both needed very different things from me. I really loved it. It was not without challenges but I really loved it.

**The film came across as very true to life, almost as if I knew the characters already from my own childhood. Was there any improvisation?**

It was a mixture actually. There are some scenes that were completely improvised. There is a scene of them on the trampoline that is completely improvised. It’s just them being themselves actually, not even the characters. And then there are little bits where they would improvise and I would say, “that’s great, keep that” but the majority of it was scripted.

**How do you summon the courage to write something that deliberately heart-wrenching and bleak?**

It was a curious process for me, because I hadn’t really done it before. When I was writing the first draft I remember writing the bit when Arbor goes to the door and Mrs. Swift opens it, after Swifty had died, and I remember feeling really moved by it. Then I went back to what is called a “beat sheet”, which is used to figure out whether a scene is working, and it becomes quite technical, you disengage from it I suppose. But when I had to write those scenes again it was tough. I’d get the kids off to school, and I’d think “Oh God, I’m going to have to write that scene now.” And I’ve only got however many hours before I have to go pick them up again. I did sit and sob my way through writing them, but the thing is I had no idea whether that emotion would be communicated.

Right up until the last day of the edit, where we had to lock picture, at which point you really really can’t see it anymore; I can’t see it, the editor can’t see it, you hope, but you become so close to it you become almost desensitised to it, you can’t see it objectively anymore and you actually need other people to reflect things back at you. So I had been watching it over and over and there is a point where you get quite bored of it, when you have been sat there in the cutting room for four months. The very last time we watched it, before we locked picture, it got me. This is a terrible thing to admit, but all I could think was “all he’s got left is that f\*\*\*ing horse.” I have had quite different reactions to the ending. I really wanted to leave the ending quite open so you could feel hope in it, or you could feel whatever you wanted. It’s quite hard to craft an open ending.

**It is very rare that you walk into gallery and burst into tears when looking at a great sculpture or painting because it affects you so immediately or deeply, but with Film this can be a regular occurrence. What do think it is about Film, as an artistic medium, that has that very visceral pull?**

I have had it at the theatre, and I have had it in front of a painting once. When I was at Art School, not so much at Jacob Kramer, but more so when I was doing Fine Art, Narrative was “The Enemy.” Structural film had happened in the 70’s when representation was the enemy and after that narrative was the enemy, because it was seen as this conservative, manipulative thing. Secretly, I liked storytelling, but I understood why people were critical of the manipulative nature of storytelling.

With the Arbor, it has quite a conventional narrative structure. When you are dealing with a real story, having that structure manipulating it can feel really wrong, whereas with fiction it can be a much easier negotiation between what is real and what is represented. I suppose my motivation for wanting people to cry over the death of Swifty is hoping that they would feel something for him and be moved by his death, and feel something for Arbor too.

When I was making the film I met kids who I really cared about and felt were undervalued, and I wanted themto be valued. So in a way that was my motivation for using the vehicle of conventional narrative, which is actually a very natural shape, it’s like a wave – it starts, then you get a peak, and then it resolves, so I don’t think it is fundamentally evil. I think it’s good that it was questioned in the way that it was, at the time that it was, and we shouldn’t abuse it. I suppose I felt quite a clear reason for doing it.

**I have noticed a lot of films made recently opt for a very open ending, particularly Independent films. This might be intended to give a more accurate portrayal of the uncertainty of life, but often they just end up frustrating their audience, by leaving them in the dark. What do you think the benefits of having an open ending are?**

I think it’s tricky, because the other side of that is things that are too tied up. There is a film that I think is fantastic, Michael Haneke film called ‘Hidden’, it has a very open ambiguous ending, I know that some people hate it. Anyway, it’s absolutely brilliant, and I think he does that because to resolve everything too neatly sends everybody back out into the world feeling reassured. And we shouldn’t feel reassured. We should feel that something needs to be done, or changed. If we see the story and then feel reassured then we’re not going to do anything about it. But he did that absolutely brilliantly, and I think that is quite different from an open ending which is frustrating, because it feels as though the filmmaker or the writer couldn’t resolve it.

If I talk more specifically about the Selfish Giant, there was an alternative ending written and shot, just in case the other ending didn’t work, which I suspected it wouldn’t (which is where it does end.) There was going to be another race, which would have been a more conventionally uplifting ending, which was that Arbor ran the race for Swifty, and that’s when he was meant to see Swifty watching him from the bridge. We shot it so that we had the option to change the end. That flexibility in some ways was down to the Producer understanding the creative process, knowing that it was worth doing that extra day, spending all of that extra money, to shoot this, because it could be crucial, but you except that you are not going to know until the end of the edit whether it is the right ending.

**So why did you choose the heartbreaking ending?**

There was a lot of debate around that, which I found really useful, between me and the editor and various other people that were involved in that stage. It was always, in a way, the ambition to end it where it ends, but you can’t do that unless everything else in the film is right, and allows you to end it there. I think it can be very difficult to craft an open ending that doesn’t leave you dissatisfied.

**And finally, what are your plans for the future?**

I have just finished a draft of a screenplay and I am about to start the second draft. It’s probably too much in a state of flux for me to discuss at this point but I feel like I’ve got all the building blocks in place, which was tough, getting to that point. I’ve got a lot of research and development to do to really push it to the limits.