

'Enmeshed in British Society but with a Yen for American Movies': Film, Television and Stephen Frears

John Hill

It is a common feature of profiles of Stephen Frears to observe his relative anonymity prior to the success of *My Beautiful Laundrette* in 1985. Yet, this is despite the fact that he directed his first film, the thirty-minute *The Burning* in 1967, made his first film feature *Gumshoe* in 1971 and directed some further twenty 'films' prior to his apparent 'breakthrough' in 1985. Of course, with the exception of *The Hit* (1984), these 'films' were made as television dramas and therefore were not generally regarded as constituting a part of British cinema. Ironically, however, *My Beautiful Laundrette* was in conception no less a television film. It was shot for Channel Four on 16mm on a budget of £650,000 and was not originally intended for theatrical release. It was only following a successful festival screening at the Edinburgh Film Festival that it was decided to show the film more widely with the result that it then went on to become one of the Channel's biggest critical and commercial successes.



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The very first 'Film on Four' transmitted: Ian McKellen in *Walter* (1982)

My Beautiful Laundrette is, in fact, only one example of the way in which Stephen Frears' career has cut across film and television and confused the boundaries between them. His television work in the 1970s was often regarded as the perfect example of the argument that 'British cinema was alive and well and living in television'. Thus, for Bob Baker, writing in 1979, Frears was clearly one of Britain's best film directors and *Cold Harbour*, made for Thames TV, the best British film of 1978.¹ *Bloody Kids*, which Frears made for television in 1980, was one of the first British television films to receive a theatrical release after its television transmission while *Walter* (1982) had the distinction of being the first *Film on Four* to be transmitted – on the very day of the Channel's launch. The films which assured Frears' reputation in the 1980s – *My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Prick Up Your Ears* (1987) and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1988) – were also 'Films on Four' and, although Frears then began to make films for Hollywood, he also returned to his television roots by directing *The Snapper* in 1993. This last film also demonstrated the apparently fluid relationship between film and television evident in Frears' work. It was made immediately after the most expensive and most 'commercial' film of his career up to that point, *Accidental Hero* (US: *Hero*) (1992) starring Dustin Hoffman and Geena Davis. *The Snapper*, by contrast, was low budget, involved largely 'unknown' actors and was funded by and intended specifically for television (in this

case the BBC). As with *My Beautiful Laundrette*, a favourable festival screening led to a theatrical release even though, as with *Bloody Kids*, the film had already been shown on television. The film went on to do good business and, in doing so, put into question some of the standard oppositions between film and television. It was a self-consciously small, television film which nonetheless succeeded with audiences on the big screen, an apparently uncommercial 'local' drama which nonetheless, relative to cost, performed somewhat better than a big budget, 'international' film such as *Accidental Hero*.

Stephen Frears' career therefore throws up a number of questions about working in television and film and the relations between them, questions which have to do with filming methods and cinematic traditions, creative and political freedom, relationships with audiences and cultural address. Frears himself is sceptical of any fundamental difference between making films for television and making them for the cinema. 'I don't know that I acknowledge a great difference any more', he said in 1991, 'except in so far as certain material is more appropriate for television because it is not economically viable for the cinema'.² At the level of techniques, he has often sought to defy the normal expectations of what might be regarded as 'televsual' and what might be regarded as 'cinematic'. Thus, in the case of *Bloody Kids*, made for television, he was influenced by Martin Scorsese's *New York, New York* (1976) and sought to add intensity to the film's story of urban dislocation through a 'cinematic' use of camera movement. In the case of *Dangerous Liaisons* (1988), his first film for Hollywood, he moved in the opposite direction, abandoning 'long complicated developing shots' in favour of 'shooting close-ups', in a style more commonly associated with television.³ Moreover, given his reluctance to distinguish between television and film, it is characteristic that Frears should have found television, especially in the 1970s, to be a more hospitable home for good filmmaking than the film industry itself. 'The first thing I was offered after *Gumshoe*', he reports, 'was the film of *Steptoe*. And at the same time, Alan Bennett asked me if I would do *A Day Out* (1972) at the BBC. Faced with a choice like that, what can one do? I just think it's ridiculous accepting poor films when you can make good films on television'.⁴ As a result, he 'stumbled into a world where they needed films' and where he was 'embraced very generously and enthusiastically'.⁵ However, this world and the 'enchanted conditions' which it provided did, as Frears recognized, depend upon television's relative insulation from commercial forces. 'In television in Britain', he explained, 'you don't have to do anything except good work... one has a responsibility to the material and to the world, but you don't have to make money on it. So, for a long time I made films for people who only wanted them to be as good as possible'.⁶ Working for television also had other advantages.

As has often been noted, Frears rarely initiates projects and has tended to be reliant on projects which have been brought to him. Frears has therefore



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A model of small cinema?: *The Snapper*.

been inclined to draw comparisons between his relationship to television and the relationship of contract directors to the old Hollywood studios. 'By going to television', he has explained, 'I chose the path to continuity and stability and regularity. I didn't actually come under contract to anybody, but I did go on and on working'.⁷ As a result, he credits television with providing him with not only continuity of employment but also a regular source of material (from writers such as Alan Bennett and Peter Prince) and the opportunity 'to work regularly with the same cameramen and the same actors'.⁸ For him this has meant that filmmaking has primarily been a collaborative activity and he has been reluctant to identify himself as the primary creative source behind a film. 'People come and ask me questions as if I were an *auteur*', he has said, 'but I'm not - I'm just the bloke who gets hired'.⁹ Thus, while critics have repeatedly sought to single out the recurring elements of Frears' work (such as an identification with outsiders or the crossing of social and cultural divides), it is often the concerns of the writer (Bennett or Kureishi, for example) which are as equally apparent.

Frears has also identified other ways in which television has proved congenial. It allowed him, he claims, a degree of creative freedom which he would not have enjoyed in the film industry. 'I'm not embattled with the TV

companies about material', he explained in 1978, and 'nobody has ever tried to get me to cut a scene'.¹⁰ The public service remit of television has also allowed, and even encouraged, the exploration of contemporary British realities. For Frears, it is part of the unique tradition of British television that it 'embraces the concept of social criticism, not at a particularly ferocious level, but simply by giving an accurate account of what it's like to live in Britain'.¹¹ As a result, he claims that television has often possessed 'more vigour' and been 'more interesting and more expressive... of people's lives than the cinema'.¹² In this respect, he is keen to emphasize that a film like *My Beautiful Laundrette* was not a bolt out of the blue but emerged from a British television tradition. 'It's not so shocking to make a film that is accurate about Britain', he told one American journalist. 'Television has established that as the norm'.¹³ It is, however, a tradition which is inevitably different from that of Hollywood. 'The Americans have an industry, and it's so much easier to make movies there' he has said. However, it then comes down 'to what you want to make films about. If you want to make films about life in Britain, then the Americans aren't very sympathetic to it'.¹⁴

British television's tradition of social observation has also been characteristically linked to a dominant aesthetic of social realism. This too has provided a set of conventions which Frears has both adopted and deviated from. He initially worked as an assistant to the 'new wave' directors Karel Reisz and Lindsay Anderson and worked for the BBC at a time when the influence of Ken Loach was still pervasive. 'When I started getting jobs in television, the great influence – like a giant, really – was Ken Loach. He and Tony Garnett somehow laid down the rules along which the game was going to be played, and they did it on a very high level of intelligence. And it spilled off into other people'.¹⁵ However, Frears never fully inhabited this tradition and his films have often sought to combine a certain commitment to realism with a stylization more characteristic of Hollywood. He grew up watching Hollywood movies and has always been drawn to their power. 'American films have a feel for cinema', he has said. 'They entertain you in a way that other films don't'.¹⁶ As a result, he suggests, he is 'a rather odd combination of somebody enmeshed in British society but with a sort of yen for American movies'.¹⁷

This is also a good way of describing many of the films that he has made. In the case of his first feature, *Gumshoe*, for example, he felt unable to make a straight British thriller which would be convincing and the result was a pastiche of the Hollywood private eye movie which was, as he put it, 'half...dream...and...half...realistic'.¹⁸ This also seems true of the very different *My Beautiful Laundrette*. Although often identified as a seminal 'state-of-the-nation' film of the 1980s, it only partly depends upon the conventions of social realism. Indeed, Frears himself has suggested that, in it, 'realistic material gets treated in a rather odd way'.¹⁹ Such oddness derives from the way in which the 'real' social issues of the film (the new entrepre-

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neurial culture of Mrs Thatcher, race, and homosexuality) are filtered through a style of heightened *mise en scène* and cinematic quotation, including, for example, what Frears refers to as his homages to Nicholas Ray and Vincente Minnelli.²⁰ In the same way, the film cuts across and mixes different generic codes with the result that the film is not simply a 'social problem' film but also a romance, a comedy and a thriller (originally envisaged as a kind of Asian *Godfather*). In some respects, then, it is this 'halfway house' status (part television/part cinema, part British/part Hollywood) which has distinguished many of Frears' films and, perhaps, points to one of the reasons why the films which Frears has actually made for Hollywood have not proved quite so distinctive.

Frears' move into Hollywood filmmaking, therefore, raises some interesting questions. For Frears, making Hollywood films has been a 'completely different' experience from working in Britain: 'They give you access to things that you never dreamed you would have and they put pressure on you that you never thought was possible and sometimes it's exhilarating and sometimes it's frightening. It's a proper industry.... They are very good at it and they make films that entertain audiences all over the world and that's quite humbling'.²¹ He sees his move into Hollywood filmmaking as a way of reaching more people, but through a combination of European intelligence and popular American entertainment. A film of his, he suggests, may 'spin off into fantasies and B movies ... but it has to have some sort of emotional truth and some reality to it'.²² He has also made a point of not moving to Hollywood and sees himself wrestling with the 'problem' of 'how to be English and make films for a large audience'.²³ He distinguishes himself, in this respect, from a director like Alan Parker whom he suggests has abandoned his 'Englishness' and remains unable to reconcile his desire to make "'international" films' with 'his belief in Ken Loach'.²⁴ Interestingly, he suggests, that Alan Parker's 'best film' is, in fact, his last film to be set in England, the television film, *The Evacuees*, made for the BBC in 1975.²⁵

This is, however, an argument with a bearing on Frears' own career. Frears has argued that a part of his appeal to the Hollywood studios was his experience of shooting quickly and without unnecessary expense. He regards *Dangerous Liaisons* as comparatively low budget for a Hollywood costume drama and was conscious that he 'didn't want to be caught making a film for a lot of money where the possibility of earning the money back would be less than good'.²⁶ This strategy proved effective in the case of *Dangerous Liaisons* and *The Grifters* but partly came unstuck with the less than successful *Accidental Hero*. In these circumstances, the more modestly-budgeted world of television offered an attractive retreat. 'You discover what the international market is like and it's very rough', Frears has explained. 'So you try to protect yourself and in that situation the BBC offered circumstances in which I was less likely to lose my arms'.²⁷ The resulting film, *The Snapper*, moreover became a success despite 'clearly looking inwards' and paying 'no respect to mid-Atlanticism'.²⁸

For David Thomson, the contrast between the two films is striking: *The Snapper* ('small, quick, cheap, funny, raucous, and overflowing with life') 'might have been made', he suggests, 'in the space (and on the budget) of one Dustin Hoffman tantrum'. This leads him on to the more general conclusion that Stephen Frears' work for television is actually superior to his work for Hollywood. Television films, such as *A Day Out*, *Sunset Across the Bay* (1975), *One Fine Day* (1979), and *Walter*, he argues, will increasingly come to 'look like models of "small" cinema – rich, honest and touching' whereas the Hollywood films, such as *The Grifters* and *Dangerous Liaisons*, are likely to be seen as little more than 'empty entertainment'.²⁹ It is, of course, possible to quibble with Thomson's judgements of individual films – *The Grifters*, for example, is certainly a more arresting piece of genre cinema than he allows. Nonetheless, his defence of 'small cinema' is a valuable one and a good indicator of the important role which television has played in supporting British film production. Frears himself has argued that 'there is no British cinema ... it is gone'. 'What happened', he goes on, 'is that we've been hiding behind television money. Using it to make films'.³⁰ However, what his own work has shown is how television has, nonetheless, permitted the emergence of a different kind of British cinema – precisely a 'small' cinema, rooted in local realities, and devoted to the kinds of experiences which Hollywood characteristically ignores.

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BIG PICTURE

SMALL SCREEN

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