

Independent researcher Sham Sandhu interviewed some of the people featured in the “Pink Portrait” collection.

The views and opinions expressed here are those of the individual participating in the interview and do not necessarily reflect the views of the UK Film Council.

BERWYN ROWLANDS 05.02.10

SS: Do we have a crisis in the British film industry? Is there a lack of gay films, gay stories, and gay actors?

BR: No, we don't have a lack of gay actors, we don't have a lack of gay directors, no we don't have a lack of gay writers, and we don't have a lack of gay people who want to see content. I think if there's a lack of anything, it's clearly opportunities for all those people to make their work. I think it's difficult, in our situation where we create gay content, you've got to look at that the context of film making full stop. I think there is clearly a funding issue at the moment, which is affecting everybody. I am kind of also encouraged by what I see. There are clearly funding models that have been adopted by American filmmakers which are based on recoument and therefore, the more our writers realise that, writing a story and a director directing, and producer producing, stories within a certain budget, I think there are enough examples of the successes from the states of LGB content. It won't make you an awful lot of money, but it will pay for your job and pay for your existence and it will recoup the money.

SS: Particularly in the lesbian market, looking at returns on DVDs- the return on investment is phenomenal – they return their investment many times over, right?

BR: Yes, like anybody, you're not going to invest unless you're convinced you're going to get a return. So I think, that's the secret, and through Iris and through the feature film strand we have, we have always been lucky to screen LGB features which have modest budgets, and seem to have producers and investors who are quite relaxed because they know Logo might buy it, Here TV might buy it, DVD releases, On demand obviously, will provide a return. I do accept that cash flow is something else.

SS: So, look for someone with deep pockets to help you finance it, I suppose?

Thinking about the features side of your festival, some of the people I have been interviewing for this project have been asking, where are the cross over hits? There are so few of them. Some of the people have been saying the economic argument is that we're a minority and they need to make an impact on the mainstream stage. Do you think there is a reason why we don't see the features you programme in mainstream cinemas?

BR: I personally think that the whole issue of crossover is something that we waste an awful lot of time worrying about. At the end of the day (and I'm not being flippant) there are stories to be told, and I think that we should be faithful to telling the stories. You clearly have a responsibility to identify who you think your audience is going to be. From a personal point of view- as the writer, but also from a commercial point of view - as the producer. So, I don't think you should go on and do it 'willy-nilly' and ignore the real world, but I think you should start from a basic assumption that there are stories to be told and we need to tell these stories. We also need to make sure there is an audience for them as well. Sometimes this thing called crossover happens. For me, the issue is: Brokeback Mountain was a short story, was taken on by Focus Pictures, it became this financially successful film. But for me, my points of

reference are that, it was a story which became a film, which was culturally accepted by a crossover audience, meaning straights went to see it.

SS: A similar project this year is 'A Single Man'. I was reading an article today in the paper that Tom Ford had explicitly said in publicity that it's not a gay film- which caused a lot of controversy within the gay community.

BR: I was in the States at the time when he said it. And I remember talking to people who were flabbergasted. They really couldn't quite understand where he was coming from. It was almost like denying an orange is an orange. I'm sorry, it's an orange- don't pretend it's an apple.

SS: Was it purely commercially driven, that statement, do you think?

BR: Having said all that, I can also understand what he was saying. Because if you accept what I was saying earlier, that a film is a film, it's a story, why label? The labelling tends to come at the back end, no pun intended, but at the back end of process, at the getting the money in. When you're looking at poster designs, you're looking at the marketing, the blurb that goes out, the PR. The question is how do you hit all the right notes?

SS: When I ask interviewees to identify where the problem in the industry is located, the answer I am getting is, 'it's the writers, stupid'. Basically, we have to do something to celebrate, and encourage writing and to create a bigger body of work from them. What do you think?

BR: I'm not convinced that we don't have enough writers, and that we don't have writers who have got something to say. I actually think it's more of an issue for producers. It's producers who find projects that excite them in the traditional sense and go about finding ways to make sure that those stories are told. Whether it's by the TV route or the cinema route. I think that I would know if there was a crisis or a lack of writers and stuff. Are there writers that could improve on their work? Of course that's always the case. But no, I'd actually disagree with that statement for what it's worth.

SS: Why can't we name (on more than one hand) gay film stars who are British? And I don't mean people who do a lot of theatre and occasionally do film, I mean film stars. Particularly with women but also with men. Where are they? Do they not exist? Can you not be gay and be a leading man?

BR: They clearly DO exist. Let's agree on that. And I think it's extremely disappointing that this sector is almost in the shadow of premiership footballers. And also, looking as a Welshman, Gareth Thomas coming out as gay Rugby Union star.

There is an assumption that because it's 'lurviedom', that it's a sector where it would be very easy. But the problem is, within our sector, I think it is very easy to be open about your sexuality. However, we are part of an industry that engage with the wider public, this creates the issue of perception within the wider public. The question I would ask is, is the wider public ready for a leather clad motorcycle riding superhero who happens to do c*ck in his private life? I think that is the question - and it's the answer to the other one. I think we are still uncertain how the wider arena will respond. Clearly we need brave people. That is where we can become complacent. I'm not trying to come up with an answer that is trying to protect the actors who are not out, because there probably a valid reason.

Having said that, I'm not really that keen on knowing an awful lot about the private lives of actors anyway. Because it does affect my enjoyment. I really don't want to know. I just want to see the film. Having said that, as a young boy growing up on Anglesey, having a role model would have been useful. But now that I'm forty three, I don't think I necessarily need that.

SS: If we look at the Stonewall figures on bullying and teenage suicide- surely we as an industry have a responsibility to create role models in every form in front and behind the camera. Is there a particular part of the industry you think is holding back its actors or encouraging them not to come out? Is it the agents, is it producers, is it directors?

BR: I think it's all of them. Anyone who is involved in this industry and it looking at the money- all of them would have a legitimate interest. The agent, because they want their share, the actor- him or herself- and the producers. I think all of them collectively. I would also stress with the wider public there's a perception that we don't actually know. So, let's find out. But then we'll have to find someone who is brave enough to say... I'm gay. I think we should look at Rupert Everett and what it did to him. It probably revitalised a flagging career.

SS: But he's now advising young gay actors not to come out to anyone.

BR: Yes. For me as a Welsh speaker, issue of representation and being visible are important. People used to argue that there wasn't enough content on the big screen and small screen from Wales representing Wales- and when you did have something the sense of representation and responsibility was so great on that one piece of work. We just need more volume don't we? We need more examples, more opportunities.

SS: If I was a twenty year old actor, who's doing well and has aspirations to be a leading man, let's say I want to be Colin Farrell, with a Hollywood career. I'm British and I know I'm gay. What advice would you give me?

BR: It depends on how much they want it, and how much they are willing to change themselves- their true self. Who they are and what they are. If they are convinced that total happiness and well being and contentedness when they are eighty will come from having a gigantic Hollywood career, that is their decision to make. My gut reaction is probably that this is the wrong way forward. When they are eighty, they may look back and think- those eighty years went by really really quickly, and did I make the most of it? Did I have opportunities to share my love and so on? I think that is a question for the individual. I would hope, because I am not an actor, but I have a public life, and my sexuality has always been something that I have explored publically. The journey has been a public journey that hasn't seemed to impacted me in a negative way. But, I'm not an actor and my sexuality leading a film to make money isn't an issue really.

SS: Is there anything the industry can do to create more role model generating films and stories?

BR: I'm not convinced there is a crisis yet. If at any point I felt there were not opportunities to tell stories and there were not opportunities to make the films, if I honestly felt that was the case, I would quite happily encourage someone to have a fund somewhere to encourage LGB content. But at this moment in time looking at the films coming through Iris, there is an awful lot of stuff out there, and with a lot of people with things to say. I believe that the mechanisms that we have are open and if I were to believe that they weren't open, I would be very concerned.

SS: Are there any particular themes coming through at the moment – that you think the community has something new to say about?

BR: The interesting thing at the moment is there will always be the coming out films, obviously. But generally what seems to be coming out is how normal we are supposed to be. I get quite disappointed when people say we're normal. I rather like the idea of being different- that's the whole point isn't it? We do things the majority of people don't do. So, there seems to be a general sense of wanting to persuade people that we are really normal- and that's fine. I think the queer cinema wave presented the 'paedos', and psychopaths – that was right just to shock ourselves. We're now in this normalcy and we've become really boring. And I think if we're not careful, we may become as boring as the mainstream. I hope to God that doesn't happen. With Iris, I am seeing enough examples of feature films where we are clearly capable of saying something jolly and different.