

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.

GRAHAM BROADBENT – 19th October 2009

SS: There are always three coming outs, the coming out to yourself, to your friends and family, then there's a professional coming out. What were your experiences of those?

GB: The first one was the internal one. It was the biggest battle through the teens and the very early twenties, I may be, I may not be, I'd rather not be. Then I think the process of finishing university and coming to London and that process of starting to work in films, the very late eighties and early nineties, it was the time when all the gay clubs and straight clubs started to mix, and the lines got really blurred for me where I was hanging out. That led to the second coming out, which my friends and family rejoiced in. But I still found incredibly difficult. I was still lagging behind. There's really not much of a differentiation between that one and the professional one. It's just that in my career, it was only in my late twenties that I started to mix on a more serious level, doing proper work. It was broadly when things became more important. I never hid it; it was probably later in my twenties.

SS: Was there any struggle, or any conflict going on when you were thinking, I want to work in film and I want to be a producer in film. Were there role models? Were there gay producers that you knew that would make you think on a sub-conscious level, that no-one's going to have a problem with this?

GB: No, I can't think of a single one. But I think that was a more general thing in society at the time. Because even now, what's fantastic today and to be celebrated, is that people come out at fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, whereas a lot of us were in our early, mid twenties and that was a time when gay bars had boxed up windows and wire in the windows. Just bizarre. So, I can't think of any role models. I think I was just getting on with the work. Just do the work, and then we'll take it from there. I think inevitably when you've made your first film you're more confident, but no, it was tough, there were no role models. I wish there were.

SS: That's what you are now ... Let's talk about actors first. I can probably count on one hand, one and a half if I really push it, male and female out film actors in Britain. So, where are they?

GB: What are they doing? I think it is very difficult for actors to come out and be gay. I think it an intolerance in the industry in that area. Or a lack of imagination. It's extraordinary for a business that is ultimately creative and requires its participants and its audience to take large leaps of imagination in whatever story they are getting involved in, be in it Up, the Pixar movie, or a straight down the line thriller or drama. Everyone is signed up for that when they buy their theatre ticket or they have started working on the film. But we seem to find ourselves unable as an industry to accept

that actors might be gay and play straight. We're happy for them to be straight and play gay, I say that is one of the biggest areas that could do with being addressed. Why can't we take the leap, when we take it in every other part of the creative industry?

SS: Some people tell me that it is because there is too much money involved. That the industry, when you look at the economics of it, it's simply too big a risk to take. The viewing public won't make that leap of faith. What do you say about that?

GB: The viewing public, I think to a degree, we take what we take to it. Gwyneth Paltrow is American, she plays English. We made a movie with Anne Hathaway, she's American, we cast her as Jane Austen, which was a huge potential faux pas that actually worked out rather well. I think people will take things on board, but sadly it's lagging. The progressiveness of what we ask and expect of our audience and our actors is lagging behind contemporary society nowadays. London in 2009 is a pretty progressive and comfortable place to be. But I find it extraordinary that it hasn't worked out. Is it role models? I don't know. I really don't know. I think it's extraordinary.

SS: Is there any particular part of the industry that might be putting pressure on actors? Is it to do with their families? Is it coming from agents, perhaps from producers? Is it distribution? Is it marketing?

GB: It all ties back to distribution and finance at the end of the day, because that's where it starts. Anyone's response is a response to that. The agent's, producer's response. The agents are deal makers, they make the deals they can make, some are smart and progressive, and some aren't. Producers are probably similar. I don't see any great conspiracy there, other than the economics of what it is. It seems odd that it's there. So it stems back to: is the public ahead of the finance or is the finance ahead of or parallel to, the public? I find it depressing that it's not a progressive industry in that sense.

SS: Isn't it about being brave rather than progressive? Another way of looking at it is through other forms of entertainment. Television in the UK today, for example or the music industry. David Puttman talks about film being a leading edge cultural force, and having to take the initiative to set the agenda as a force for good. Where is the industry going wrong here?

GB: It's got to be about money, hasn't it? It's money and its roles. There are interesting movies being made. My Beautiful Laundrette was one of the first films that gave me hope that things might be ok, and more commonplace than I thought. Will big studios do that? I don't think they will. I think it easiest to suggest the economics don't work. Can people come out? Can you make arresting gay stories for the general public? These are separate issues. The coming out thing is more interesting, as a director or producer or financier or agent, I see no barriers to entry or no problems being gay. But in the acting profession it's more problematic. Will Ian McKellen ever play a romantic role?

SS: The argument I hear from actors is that it's not a problem unless you want to be a romantic lead. And if you want to be a romantic lead, don't come out. This is the debate in the States.

GB: Certainly where we are today, that seems to be the landscape.

SS: Is there anything we could do as an industry to promote onscreen talent feeling safe enough for them to come out?

GB: I think the best way is to prove it. I don't mean to be silly, but prove it. The difficulty is that Rupert Everett, Ian McKellen, Stephen Fry are much proclaimed, national treasures in their own way, and have waved the flag for a while.

SS: ... and they are a certain generation.

GB: It would be more interesting simply to offer other actors the opportunity, and it's likely to be in lower budget films, where the quality of their work is more important and the financial risk is not so big. I would hope that would change quite quickly. You have to hope that.

SS: Would you make those decisions? Let's take *In Bruges* for example, if Colin Farrell were a gay actor, would you have cast him in that role?

GB: It wouldn't have been my decision; it would have gone down the line that we were looking for an actor with profile who could help us get the movie financed. So, the currency what I got to play with is in a sense pre-filtered, they wouldn't have that profile if they were gay. It wouldn't be right for the financing if there were problems with their profile.

SS: Let's move onto stories, why are there so few gay stories? Is it because it doesn't matter, we're living in this age of acceptance? Or is it that it's just not interesting anymore? The stories just aren't there? Does it matter, and if it does, where are the stories?

GB: It must matter to a degree. Because it's not representative. Where are the stories? Are there good stories around? I started the conversation by saying it's all about stories. Find great stories, find remarkable stories. I don't see remarkable gay stories. I think *Brokeback* is a very good example of the very best talent getting behind a story.

SS: Straight writer, straight director, straight cast.

GB: But nonetheless, it brought the film to an audience. In terms of what I do, we look at things going, is this a story we can make? Is it a certain size? Will it attract an audience? Will it attract certain talent? Can we take it to an audience and get it financed largely by an American studio? Because that's where most of our business is. We don't get those stories. What would be intriguing would be the very best talent to get behind some decent gay ideas and try and take that to an audience, but I don't see that happening.

SS: A couple of years ago Stonewall produced a survey looking at gay bullying in schools, the statistics around suicide were horrifying. When we look at these figures, anyone in the industry has to look at our responsibility for providing positive, uplifting stories that are going to make some kind of dent on those figures. Do you think about that yourself? Is this something you think about when choosing which projects to work on?

GB: No, to be honest. Because what we do to make films at a certain level, I think you can make smaller films, our business is about making films that will make an impact internationally, therefore they require cast at a certain level, stories at a certain level, this is commercial money making these films, no subsidy or a combination of subsidy, tax break or broadcaster, so I think not. The argument would be, where are there more mainstream gay stories you can find? I haven't come across them. We have a limited slate, maybe ten or twelve projects, we're not looking for anymore and in all honesty, it's difficult to get films developed and made. It's

always difficult but I haven't come across those stories and no, I'm not searching them out. I'd love to make smaller, more interesting gay stories, but that's not our business.

SS: Some people think with digital, it's going to be easier for writers, directors and producers to get these smaller stories out there, do you think that's the answer?

GB: That is an answer. Definitely, niche programming will happen at a more desperate and more accessible fashion. Everyone will find a mechanism to download and enjoy those films. It has to be a reflection of the UK in the last twenty years. Things have changed massively, so you get the feeling in TV and music too. We're probably rather behind.

SS: Have there been experiences in your career - any levels of homophobia?

GB: No. I was discussing this with a friend of mine who said, "it's not the army is it?" It's not, it really isn't. I think probably going back to where we started the conversation; it's probably most difficult for actors. But they are not going to be mistreated in any day-to-day one-on-one way. There is an argument that gay and lesbian actors as a group are mistreated. But no, I've never had any issues at all.

SS: There's never been any discussions when you're putting together finance for a film and where there are elements of a story that might be suspect?

GB: The film that we're working on now, there are four or five characters, one of those characters is gay. I do have a certain sense of responsibility that this character, with the writer who is straight, to get a very contemporary reflection of what that character might be like. Rather making his story too boring. There were certain conversations about whether he should be coming out, and I said "look, he's sixty five it's 2010, he came out a long time ago, and it's really about what he's doing from here on in." I think there is a certain responsibility to get those things right and not to play to clichés. Where there is an opportunity like that, there is a responsibility to make it progressive and interesting and subverting lazy expectations of what a gay character might be like. It's only one character, but it's interesting.

SS: And you haven't sensed from the States any feeling of 'can you rewrite that character?'

GB: No, they were completely fine. In fact the film is an adaptation, but we've invented this character. When I think back to Four Weddings I think it was an extraordinary moment with Simon Callow.

SS: I'm a young producer and I've found a great story which has gay content in it, it's not mainstream, broad film, but it would be a great niche film. What is your advice for getting that made, given the stats show it would be difficult.

GB: I think weirdly, make the budget commensurate with the audience. I think what's interesting about gay films is you possibly get an enhanced section of the gay community going to see gay films. So they have a niche value, a commercial value. I think people long and yearn to see a bit of their life reflected back, or their dreams reflected, or their imagination reflected back. If you can offer that up to a gay audience, I imagine a larger percentage of the audience will be cinematically motivated than just a general mainstream audience. No-one is going to stand in your way, they will just celebrate it.

SS: If I was a nineteen year old actor who knows I am gay and I want James MacAvoy's career, what advice would you give me?

GB: Because I'm not an agent, it's a question of which way to do things. It's either the Trojan horse of doing things from within. People are still coming out rather late. So there is an argument of speaking from a position of strength. Will Young came out after winning Pop Idol. It must be the case that good talent, and to be a working successful cinema actor is terrifically difficult, there aren't many around anyway – not just the gays - its hundreds of thousands of every persuasion that are not getting movies green lit. You'd hope they could be brave and be themselves, and it would happen. We're not there yet. I wouldn't advise one way or another. People have to work out their own routes to success. But it'll change. Success is not that far away. Prove people wrong, that's all you need to do.