

**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.**

**SEAN MATHIAS – 19<sup>th</sup> January 2010**

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**SS:** Let's deal with story first. You were responsible for bringing to film one of the most important gay stories of the past twenty years, Bent. What is your view now, sitting here in 2010, looking at the quality and number of gay storylines and characters that are making their way onto our screens in Britain?

**SM:** You know, I can't remember when I last saw a gay film. The last gay film I can remember is Brokeback Mountain.

**SS:** We did some research and from the EDI data from 2008, we can only identify Mamma Mia, Brideshead and Rock n' Rolla. It's hard work finding them.

**SM:** When you mention Bent, that was so particular because it was both an historical and political story, and therefore film. And it held a special place in the whole coming out pantheon. Now we are officially out, there is a real absence of serious or layered gay stories or characters out there, definitely in drama generally, and certainly in film, yes.

**SS:** Coming from theatre, and still working a lot in the medium, do you find there is a similar dearth of characters on stage as well as film?

**SM:** Yes, I think there are. Again, I can't remember the last gay play I saw. I did see a wonderful gay play but I can't remember the title of it, it came from Australia and was at the Leicester Square Theatre, can't remember the title of it. But, on the whole there is very little gay theatre.

**SS:** Why do you think that is? The money side of the business are telling me that it's a commercial business and we have to reach the widest possible audience and these are minority subjects. When I talk to writers, they tell me no one wants to buy those stories.

**SM:** It's a form of censorship, both of those arguments, aren't they? If a story is well enough told, well enough acted and produced, it's going to have a commercial potential any, any story has potentially got an audience. And plays like My Beautiful Laundrette, they were both plays from theatre and put into other media, and were very successful and eloquent about being gay. When you mention gay films, one thinks of that, Torchsong Trilogy and Milk, perhaps. When you mention Milk, it was historical and political, it lived in the context of gay people telling the story, it was actually about that politicisation of being gay, as Bent was about the treatment of gay men in Nazi Germany, they are particular moments in history. But there is plenty going on right now that isn't entirely positive about being gay. I think there is an

absence of voices. I think theatre generally and the film world has become more commercial over the last few years, smaller art house products are finding it much more difficult to get funding. So anything that is not seen as mainstream would suffer anyway. You need the writers, you need new writing.

**SS:** How do you think, as an industry, we could stimulate, inspire and generate better and more work from writers who want to write on a gay theme?

**SM:** I think you need funding, workshops, mentors, teachers, arenas, I think writing is a very lonely and isolated place. I think people need to be taught their craft and it's not just a technical thing, I think they need to be in an arena where they feel encouraged and inspired to have their voice heard. There are examples of that. There are funds that cater to that, but probably not enough. In America, for instance, and I'm not saying it's the great role model because there is a lot of formula in American movie making, but a script will go through ten, fifteen, maybe twenty drafts. Now sometimes, writers will be hired and fired like it's going out of fashion, so I'm not saying it's the ideal situation, but the thought that the script can get better and better and better is a good one. I don't think we have that arena in this country for doing that, not enough.

**SS:** When looking at mainstream television, there seems to be far more gay characters and stories on all channels. It makes the contrast with film more pronounced. Do you think there are any particular reasons for that?

**SM:** I think film basically, is still dominated by Hollywood taste and style. If you're looking at the English speaking world, Australia, England and America, that mainstream culture has not allowed the alternatives in very easily. So again, it's down to making alternative films, art-house films, and they have become incredibly difficult to fund, even with quite big star names, even with quite big star senior directors, with star names attached, have really difficulty finding funding. People have become frightened and the recession hasn't helped. There isn't that extra money flying around.

**SS:** I can count on one, maybe two hands, when we are drawing up the list, the out gay name in British film. Why can you be an out gay leading man or woman?

**SM:** You have to first of all say, does this mean there aren't any gay actors. Then you probably have to laugh. There are a lot in the theatre, so there must be some in the movie industry. So then, it is to do with the perception, that if you are a gay male then you cannot play a romantic lead. Well, it's such a totally ridiculous argument. Whether you're a Brad Pitt sized star, or just a jobbing actor, the whole premise is that you believe in that person playing that character for the period of time you're at the movie theatre. That's the joy of it. The joy is in seeing Brad Pitt playing a psycho killer

**SS:** or Nazi?

**SM:** or Nazi or a gay man. That's the illusion ... that's joy of it. We indulge and entertain and exist in the fantasy. That's why we go to the other world, leave our own reality world. It's even more so (I haven't been to the movies in ages, and I went on Sunday to see *It's Complicated*). Towards the end I started to think, it's going to end soon and I'm going to have to go back to the real world. It's that entering into that world. Meryl Streep is Meryl Streep, she's the most famous actress in the world, but I totally believed her as that character she plays. That's the deal. And that's a good actor.

**SS:** It seems acceptable to go one way, i.e. Heath Ledger in Brokeback, that's perfectly fine, we accept that, it gets Oscar nominated. Why do you think every part of the production chain in Hollywood and the UK refuse to allow audiences to even try going the other way? Let's say Rupert Everett is on record advising young actors not to come out.

**SM:** Rupert Everett did famously revive his career by playing a gay character in My Best Friend's Wedding. So there's an example of being gay and playing a gay character. But each story is different. I'm not expert enough about the Hollywood system, but I would say really one word at the end of the day, money. It's all about money. It's a big business and they don't like anything that rocks the boat.

**SS:** Is it the same here?

**SM:** I think it's less so here, but I think people are frightened. Brokeback Mountain is interesting because they are both playing straight men who had experiences of gay love affairs. Not quite the same as being gay.

**SS:** That's still dangerous, though?

**SM:** It is dangerous, but they are both at pains to tell us in their publicity to tell us they were straight. I think it's very brave to be gay, to come out as gay.

[Short discussion around a certain young British actor]

**SS:** The fact that we can't name them, the fact that when you talk to Stephen or Ian, they say, we were never going to be leading men, we're character actors, and so we're safe. Sir Ian says after he came out, he played John Profumo ...

**SM:** Although he was a leading man in the theatre. I think the rules are slightly different in the theatre. I know there are a lot of gay leading men in the theatre, and we accept that.

**SS:** Is it something to do with the audience at the theatre?

**SM:** I think it's something to do with the collusion in the theatre, seems to be personal to that individual audience. So whatever goes on, on stage, that chemistry is unique for that time. Something about film presents itself as reality, and that reality is unquestionable, unchallengeable. It's on celluloid and it cannot be smashed. I think there is a sensitive issue attached to that. What Hollywood is afraid of is that gay men playing a straight man, might in some sense smell of something dishonest, create some sort of suspicion. That they simply can't bear. Well, of course it's hypocrisy. It's hypocrisy that's driving that, because it's about money, while I think in the theatre, there is an audience that can individually collude with the performance. There's a cloak and dagger thing going on.

**SS:** Is the film world more sucked into the celebrity age and culture that we are living in? All the stats lead us to believe it's easier to come out now than ever, but somehow the celebrity age has become so powerful, it won't allow us to suspend our disbelief.

**SM:** I think the celebrity age has a lot to answer for. However, ironically the celebrity age has created this thing of wanting to know absolutely every detail about a person's private life. I think we need to create an arena where people feel if the young actor who is gay, he feels he can come out. There is too much pressure put on young actors, and middle aged actors to not come out. That's the problem. It's not a question of shall they come out, they are told not to come out.

**SS:** Which part of the production or supply chain is telling them not to do this?

**SM:** I think agents and producers and casting directors on the whole are in collaborations. I think directors sit somewhere in the middle of that group of people that they work closely with, and the actors. And anything not to jeopardise you not getting future work. And conversely, straight actors have been asked to play gay because it's fashionable.

**SS:** Like Colin Firth in *A Single Man* ... Let's say I'm a seventeen year old young gay actor, I want to be a leading man, let's say I want to be Colin Farrell, I know I'm gay. What advice do you give me?

**SM:** Be yourself. I think, and I mean this completely whole heartedly, I think to be gay and to be out to a certain number of people, to everybody would be the most awful burden to live under. So, I think what you would do to your soul and spirit, and your psychology would just not be worth it. So for me, I would say. Be yourself, be true. Come out.

**SS:** And from there, the work would just get better?

**SM:** I can't believe with the way the world is changing, if it's in your star, if you're talented and you're good at your job, good-looking enough to be the romantic lead, then I can't believe this is going to hold you back. I find that hard to believe.

**SS:** As a UK industry, is there anything we could do to improve both onscreen representation, stories, off-screen representation, particularly on the technical side of the business?

**SM:** I don't work enough in the film to feel qualified to answer that question. Well, I just think if there was a reflection of the reality of life on screen, rather than the clichéd characters, or the extreme characters, which sometimes are very amusing and entertaining. Let's face it the British love a bit of camp, but if there were an equal number of serious gay characters, layered gay characters, which would help it enormously. I suppose the most difficult thing about the representation of gay characters is that often they haven't felt real enough. It's complicated, but that comes back to the writers. I think most things in our industry start with the writing. If there was more nurturing of scriptwriting and ideas were being aired. That happens a lot in theatre, but not sure it happens enough in cinema.