

INTERVIEW

The European Producer: Simon Perry

Andrew Spicer

Simon Perry has been honoured publicly – he was made a Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et Lettres in 1995 and a CBE in 1996 – but, as is so often the case with producers, has had no recognition within British cinema history despite his palpable significance as both an independent film producer and as the Chief Executive Officer of British Screen for nearly a decade: 1991-2000. Perry took over this role from Simon Relph – interviewed for this *Journal* (vol. 11, nos. 2-3, 2014, pp. 236-51) – inheriting principles of ‘additionality’ – supporting films that would otherwise not have been made and taking greater risks than a purely commercial investor: ‘Our economic and cultural strategy is to put into the market films that would not otherwise be there. If enough of those films work, then the example will stimulate the making of more such films, with and without the support of British screen.’¹ British Screen was a public/private partnership, providing repayable loans whose recoupment was taken seriously; Perry described its work as an ‘intervention mechanism’ not a subsidy.² Through some strategic innovations, Perry was able increase the number of films supported and he encouraged British producers to adopt a more European orientation; and, for the first time in the UK, British Screen co-financed European productions.

Perry has always been a passionate Europhile, committed to the concept of a vibrant, diverse and distinctive European film industry and has argued repeatedly that UK filmmakers should disengage from an ingrained Atlanticism – ‘an undue obsession with making films for the Americans rather than ourselves’ – and look to Europe as their main market and resource, both for talent and finance.³ At British Screen he urged British producers to consider ‘the possibility of Europe as the home market, albeit with its immense variegations of culture’.⁴ He fought to ‘break the insularity of Britain’ and ‘project to other European countries that we’re open to ideas they might like to develop with us’ thereby trying to overcome the UK’s negative image abroad.⁵ His campaigning was designed to dislodge British producers’ assumption that gaining American pre-sales was the cornerstone of any financial package: ‘I felt I’d be subscribing to an existing system which has done us no favours. I’d rather use this very scarce money to try to make things happen in a different way.’⁶

In his own productions, Perry strove to make ‘films of cultural integrity made in Britain’, ones that would embody his desire ‘to get away from British social realism, and to make films that reflect not the clash of class but of cultures. We live in a big world and shouldn’t look in our corner of it so acutely to the exclusion of others. ... I want to make films that can be sold all over the world but still have some particular relevance to us. And I wanted to make them with the sort of budget that doesn’t spell disaster if you don’t have a big American success.’⁷ Many of Perry’s films, such as *Another Time, Another Place* (1983), have stood the test of time and remain compelling to watch. Now aged 74, Perry is still tirelessly active in the film industry and has just taken up the position of chair of Encounters, the UK’s most influential short film festival held annually in Bristol.

In this wide-ranging interview, conducted at the University of the West of England Bristol on 28 November 2017, Perry discusses his career and his beliefs as a producer, his stewardship of British Screen, and his Europhilia – including a fascinating take on Brexit – and his tenure as head of the Irish Film Board. It also encompasses his role as an educator and as a co-founder of two crucial organisations – the Association of Independent Producers (AIP) and Ateliers du Cinéma Européen (ACE) – both of which have helped to galvanise the activities of successive generations of UK and European producers.⁸

Andrew Spicer (AS): What led to you taking up a career as an independent film producer?

Simon Perry (SP): I went from Eton College to read classics at King's College Cambridge. I switched to English Literature in my third year, but by then I had become deeply involved in the theatre. I already had a big interest in cinema, but I didn't recognise at that point in my life that one could get involved in filmmaking in Britain. I thought British films were done by Americans. But I was also excited by the theatre, and I liked acting. I did that for a while before starting to direct plays at the university theatre. When I left Cambridge, I went into professional theatre – in those days, you could just wander into a theatre and ask for a job backstage, which I did at Stratford, then at Bristol. I loved stage management. As a child I built and operated a model theatre and I loved putting on shows. I see producing as essentially a way of putting on a show.

I progressed from theatre to television, because it paid better and I could move into production management. In those days – the late 1960s, early 1970s – TV drama was mostly good, and there was a lot of it. I worked for ITV companies in Norwich and Leeds, and I developed skills of physical production which enabled me to attempt independent filmmaking with two micro-budget feature films in 1974-76. The first was *Knots* based on R.D. Laing's book, which I produced with a friend, David Munro, an actor who wanted to be a director. The second was *Eclipse*, a mystery story which I adapted from a novel and directed. But I found directing phenomenally lonely and realised that if I had anything I needed to say, it was not by directing but through the more collaborative work of producing. I think I perceived I'd be doing something more useful, and enjoyable, if I enabled other people with real skill as directors to make films they wanted to make and that I wanted to see made.

So in 1978 I jumped at the offer of a job at the London office of *Variety*, the international trade paper which was then a fat weekly published on cheap newsprint, because it was a wonderful opportunity to learn about the film industry – which I wanted to understand and which was rapidly changing with the rise of home video.

AS: *You left Variety after two years to take over the National Film Development Fund in 1978. How did this fund work?*

SP: The NFDF provided support for screenwriting as part of the National Film Finance Corporation, the head of which, Mamoun Hassan, wanted someone to run it more proactively. He trusted my judgement to select projects and make decisions with an advisory panel. We had about £7,000 or £8,000 to award to each project, based on its quality and likelihood of being made. Was it a strong story? Was it a story that could be successfully realised as a feature film by the people associated with it? In my time there we backed the script development of some memorable films, including *Room with a View* (1985), *Dance with a Stranger* (1985) and *Defence of the Realm* (1986). We had no particular model, but we wanted to encourage alternatives to the normal reliance on

American patronage and the American market. We felt we had to find ways out of that straitjacket – wider opportunities for more people. For me the NFDF was another ringside seat in the industry from which I was learning and getting known. I was also becoming more and more active in the Association of Independent Producers, which I had helped to found a few years earlier.

Then, in 1982, I was approached by Michael Radford with a proposal that I produce a screenplay he had written which had already attracted the attention of David Rose, the wonderfully enlightened commissioning editor at the newly-formed Channel 4. This became *Another Time, Another Place* (1983), a feature film costing £500,000 about Italian POWs transported to a small Scottish community during WWII, which was selected for the Directors' Fortnight section in Cannes, won numerous awards, and of which I'm still extremely proud and fond.

AS: *Channel 4 provided a great opportunity, didn't it? But what were the main challenges to running an independent film company during that period?*

SP: It was an extraordinarily optimistic time of opening doors and widening horizons. With Umbrella Films, the production company Mike [Radford] and I had set up, I had a tiny office in an eyrie above Wardour Street which you approached through a urine-soaked court. It was so small my assistant and I couldn't both sit at our desks at the same time and we had only one telephone. But we went straight from *Another Time, Another Place* into production of another film, *Loose Connections* (1983) directed by Richard Eyre, a feminist comedy road movie, and from that into *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1984) which Mike directed. The unique opportunity of making and releasing this film in the year of the title brought with it challenges of a bigger budget, all provided by Virgin Films, but there was a real sense that British cinema meant something new and tangible.

Ironically, given our resolve to depend less on the US in order to make the films we wanted to make, there was plenty of money around in those days from American independent distributors such as Miramax and Cinecom, and the classics divisions of the majors. They were all over us in London, looking at all our new stuff, and I started making regular trips to New York and LA to tell them what we were doing. Meanwhile there was solid support from Channel 4, from the NFFC (which put £800,000 into *Loose Connections*) and from tax concessions in the form of capital allowances, all of which made producing British films viable.

But my determination to learn more about the film industries in the rest of Europe meant that I headed for Paris at the end of 1984 to try to set up two new films as international co-productions there. Both were made in 1985-86: the first was *Nanou*, a first feature by a woman director, Conny Templeman, again with strong support from the NFFC; the second was *Hotel du Paradis*, a very personal vision of Paris written and directed by documentarist Jana Bokova with funding from both British and French TV.

After the French adventures, from which I learned an enormous amount and developed ideas that became the basis of a strong belief in the strategy of international co-production, I returned to the UK to join Mike Radford again for our third and biggest production, *White Mischief* (1987). This was a high-gloss, period picture with an all-star cast, shot on Kenya locations and in London studios, a true story about an unsolved murder which from financial and legal points of view was by far the toughest film I have ever attempted.

Although by this time I had a pretty good track record and films I'd produced had made money for distributors around the world, like many independent producers my business skills were poor with regard to my own earnings and building a sustainable

production company. When conditions for producing got much tougher at the end of the 1980s, and when the job of head of British Screen was offered to me in 1990, it came at a propitious moment. I couldn't combine the job with continuing as an active producer, but I did arrange for production of two films that I still had in development to be financed and managed by co-producers. These were *The Playboys* (1992), directed by Gillies Mackinnon and made for the Samuel Goldwyn Company, and a British-French co-production mainly financed by PolyGram, *Innocent Lies* (1994).

AS: *How was British Screen financed and how much autonomy did you have or were you subject to government interference?*

SP: The sense of freedom was truly remarkable. That didn't change from Simon [Relph]'s regime to mine. The only difference was we now had two funds, the second of which was his creation in fact. We inherited the basic £2m-a-year direct grant from the government and the same amount, or slightly more, from the shareholders: Rank, EMI/MGM, Channel 4 and Granada. But Simon had secured, from the famous Downing Street summit with Margaret Thatcher in 1990, an additional £2m-a-year for a European Co-Production Fund, to do with as we decided and to make up the rules. I was accountable to a board corporately, in terms of the managing of the organisation and the accounting, but not for the selection of films to be supported for which I had absolute authority. We didn't even have advisors from the industry; I worked only with my team. I had somebody who was in charge of development and a couple of people who worked with me in production funding. We'd meet every week, look at what had come in, decide who would read what, and discuss and make decisions on what we'd read. That said, when we'd made a decision and when the film went ahead – when the rest of the money was there and it became a project that was happening – I had to write a detailed investment appraisal as to why we'd invested in it. The key criterion was 'additionality'. In other words, could the film be made without us, or were we essential to it being made? We also had to scrutinise the extent to which it was British. Who, in the crew and the cast and the authorship of the film, was British? And new talent opportunities. Did the film involve any new talent as director, writer, producer or actor? And a fourth issue was its commercial prospects, getting a return on the investment. These were the criteria we worked with in every case, and with which we had to show a balance of compliance over time. But, as long as we could always prove this, we backed the films we believed in.

The additionality requirement meant that if the producers found they didn't need us, however attractive the film, British Screen could not invest. This happened with *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994). We'd offered Tim Bevan and Eric Fellner £400,000. Four or five months later they came back and said, "We can make the film without you, because PolyGram are going to do it and Film4 are coming in as well." We'd have made a huge profit, probably about £4million, but the government would then have said, "You're self-sustaining. Splendid." And they'd have cut off our grant. So there was a certain advantage in not getting into films that turned out to be too successful. We were super-successful with *The Crying Game*, but not to the extent that our government support was at risk.

Additionality was so important because if we could argue that every film we financed would not have been made without us, then we were directly responsible for creating economic activity that would otherwise not have taken place. And this economic activity generated employment taxes and sales taxes and so on which, on a rough measure, equated to the amount of government money we put into the film – bearing in mind that of any money we invested, about half of it was government money and half was our own 'private' money. As a general rule British Screen would never put in more than 30 per cent

of a film's budget, typically it was between 20 per cent and 30 per cent. As long as we did that, we could show that the government was putting money into films and getting it all back regardless of how well the film did. It was an extremely sound economic principle and economic argument for keeping our funding going.

We had to make the argument even more strongly with the European Co-Production Fund, which was entirely grant money – there was no shareholders' money in that. Again we had to report back in detail to the government department on the value of the economic activity that had been created. Under the Tories until 1997 I seemed to have to deal with one films minister after another who was proud to announce how philistine he or she was. These included Virginia Bottomley who pulled the UK out of Eurimages, an apparently groundless decision which significantly undermined our efforts to re-orientate British producers towards Europe.

Although our grant was reviewed annually, its renewal was never a significant worry. I added to British Screen's funding by arranging for Sky TV – BSKyB, as it was then – to pre-buy pay television rights to all films in English that we funded, which provided £2.5m a year. It was a 'blind' deal; Sky had no say in the films we elected to support. And it was extremely controversial. It made Channel 4, and particularly Michael Grade, absolutely puce with anger. But I figured it was important because Channel 4 were basically closing the pay-TV window for no additional licence fee and not letting British films go to pay television. Whatever people felt about Rupert Murdoch, I thought it was an important principle that the value of pay-TV rights could be realised by feature films, so I stuck to my guns. It made a big dent in our relationship with Channel 4 – we did fewer films with them afterwards – but it did generate new money for us and it put British films on Sky. I'm completely unrepentant about it.

AS: *You make an intriguing comment in your biography that British Screen should encourage 'Work from British film makers that was both artistically and commercially audacious.' Now, I'm sure all of us can understand artistic audacity, but commercial audacity?*

SP: Well, it's the same thing, really – it's about taking risks. It's about supporting films that don't have an obvious selling point or audience 'hook', but have an originality that is risky but could just work. We felt it was up to us, as decision makers and arbiters of taste, to take a risk on something where we felt, "If they see it, they'll love it." We thought that there are so many film successes which come from left field, as it were, which are different and come from new voices with new ways of saying things, that it was our job to take that risk – to be 'commercially audacious' – because you really don't know if people are going to go and see it; you're taking a huge risk on the audience's reaction. We were going on hunches, I suppose, taking risks that nobody else will take – that's where additionality connects with this, too. We had to be the ones backing films that couldn't raise enough money to be made from commercially less audacious sources.

The Crying Game (1992) is the best example. It almost didn't get financed despite deferments from the entire crew and cast. Channel 4 got cold feet, threatened to pull out, but we were 'audacious' right from the start. We worked with the producer to bring the other funders across the line. It became the perfect example of a British Screen film. We took a risk that nobody else would take to the same extent; we got it right and the rewards were huge. There were other examples where we didn't get it quite so right. But it was always very important to be able to show we were being commercially audacious in a way nobody else was.

AS: *You also managed the Greenlight Fund for the Arts Council. Wasn't that a controversial move in terms of 'additionality'?*

SP: I asked for stewardship of £5million of the money that was going from the Lottery to the Arts Council. I persuaded Caroline Lambert, the former civil servant in charge of the funding, that we could put this money to good use for a new type of fund which had not been tried before, designed specifically to support bigger-budget films – with larger amounts of money than British Screen could normally invest – often by directors who otherwise we might lose to Hollywood.

AS: *So was that another form of additionality, in a way?*

SP: Yes, that was the idea. It was so easy to explain, particularly then, because successful British directors have so often been seduced away to Hollywood when their ambitions called for budgets too high to be financed here. We got Brian Gibson back from Hollywood to direct *Still Crazy* (1998), but we also funded Mike Leigh's *Topsy-Turvy* (1999), enabling him to make a big budget period film of a kind he had never attempted before. In order to make *The Land Girls* (1999) David Leland needed a bigger budget and he was to-ing and fro-ing from Hollywood before we stepped in. We funded only six films this way; the fund was just £5million a year for two years. But the initiative was really well-received by filmmakers and the industry at large. I was astonished to see that the Greenlight Fund example was never followed up. The result was that some bigger-than-usual British films competed in the market more effectively than smaller-budget films. It was audacious in its way, but there was a rationale for it. It made sense – countering the 'Hollywood brain drain', which is such a familiar British phenomenon.

AS: *Before we get on to the creation of UKFC and the end of British Screen, how would you sum up your ten years at the helm? What would you say were your major achievements, the ones you're most proud of?*

SP: I guess the European relationships, and the British and other European films that were made using those relationships. Three European examples stand out. The Macedonian film *Before the Rain* (1994) was a remarkably imagined story about the Yugoslav war, with a first-time director, Milcho Manchevski; a beautiful film which won the Golden Lion in Venice. Then *Antonia's Line* (1995) was an Oscar-winning film about five generations of a Dutch family seen through the eyes of women. And Danis Tanović's *No Man's Land* (2001) was another Oscar-winner, from the Balkans once again.

These forays into co-producing European cinema, which represented something that British producers had never done before, were part of a strategy and a climate at British Screen which helped producers during the 1990s to set up British films with co-production structures that enabled them to be made when without these they would have languished. Sally Potter's five-country co-production *Orlando* (1992), Ken Loach's first of many films made with European partners *Land and Freedom* (1995), and a slew of films with 'invisible' European co-producers, notably Gurinder Chadha's *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), all more or less owed their existence to new alliances and a new proximity forged by British Screen with the rest of Europe.

In terms of other achievements, there were simply some films that turned out very, very well, such as Mike Leigh's *Naked* (1993), which I think is his masterpiece; or Richard Loncraine's version of *Richard III* (1995), that is such an inventive and beautiful film in many ways; or exquisitely realised films like Michael Winterbottom's first, *Butterfly Kiss*

(1995), and not forgetting *Wilde* (1997), *Hilary and Jackie* (1998), *Beautiful People* (1999), *Lawless Heart* (2001) and others. Those were all real pleasures and showed that British *auteur* films can work and can be good business. For me it was vitally important that we did good business with those films. Getting great *and* successful work out of really good directors was a huge pleasure.

Getting involved in reciprocal alliances in Europe was a particular pleasure, too. I developed personal relationships with the heads of film funds in Europe and I felt we were changing the way Britain was seen as a filmmaking country through doing a whole lot of stuff in other languages which weren't 'little England' reveries. We were open to working with other countries in a way that had not been seen before. We would do one of their films, and then they would do one of ours. I think the perception of Britain really changed in those years. That was great.

AS: *Would you always fund film by film or project by project, rather than say, "That's a good, solid company. We'll back that company to grow their business?"*

SP: We wanted, often, to do that and with some people, we did. We had an informal arrangement, which was unpublicised, whereby if a film turned a profit for us, then we made a little discreet housekeeping deal, as we called it, with the producer – providing a contribution to the running costs of the company that produced it and some development money. You couldn't apply for this, it just got offered. We did it with Christopher Sheppard and Sally Potter following the success of *Orlando* (1992), enabling her to develop *The Tango Lesson* (1997); and with Marc Samuelson and Brian Gilbert after *Tom and Viv* (1994), which led to *Wilde* (1997). We always wanted to remain not just consistent in our support for *auteur* directors, but for producers as well. We did assess every project that came in on its own merits, but it helped a lot if it came from a producer or a production company that we really rated.

We were more aggressive about recoupment than any other European fund and I was sometimes looked at a bit askance on panels and in conferences across Europe because of it. But it was appropriate to the state of the market, which was much healthier for independent film than nowadays and where, if there was money going, it was only fair that the fund should derive some benefit. It was very important for us to be able to show that we were making a consistent return. At a time when Eurimages was struggling to get 5% of its money back, we were getting 50%.

AS: *What happened to British Screen with the advent of the UK Film Council (UKFC)? I read a report in ScreenDaily from the time that there was a possibility of you continuing some sort of role with UKFC.*

SP: We were literally subsumed, which meant that all our staff, under what's called the TUPE rules, had a right to the same job or an equivalent job. But they don't have to take it; they can drop out and most of the British Screen staff did leave. The UKFC had a chief executive designate – John Woodward – and the whole structure had been agreed by Chris Smith, who led the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, so there was never really a position for me. I had been very critical of the decision to house everything under one roof, arguing continually for a plurality of doors to knock on and for the continuance of European activity and the European Co-Production Fund, which they were being very vague about. I always advocated that it was a good idea to have competition between the support mechanisms. I also felt strongly, and said so, which didn't make me popular, that creating one big organisation was something that wouldn't work well in Britain, because

we don't educate people well to run big publicly-funded organisations. We don't have the equivalent of the *École nationale d'administration (ENA)* in France. The management of big public organisations in Britain is generally very poor, as is the case with many universities, I think.

I was also worried about the criteria the new selection committees would use to decide which films to back. Although British Screen made subjective judgements on what was great and who was great, at the same time there were certain criteria – additionality, Britishness, a loose ‘quota’ for new talent – all of which seemed to be being abandoned. And it was a tremendous personal wrench. Not so much the power, but losing the sheer pleasure of doing the work, and the fruits of lessons learned. I also argued that bringing everything under one roof would not result in streamlining but the reverse. Because British Screen had to account, at the end of every year, for the entire costs of our activity, we were always mindful of our overheads. But precise allocations of responsibility get lost in a large organisation, and the staff and overheads at UKFC spiralled – making it an easy target in the ‘bonfire of the quangos’ ten years later.

I was also very saddened by the abandonment of any European obligations. The UKFC was supposed to spend 20 per cent of its resources on Europe-related activities, but year after year this did not materialise. There was no longer any encouragement for the production sector to work with European partners. With some notable exceptions such as Rebecca O'Brien, Jeremy Thomas, or Mike Downey, British film producers Brexitied in about 2001.

AS: After the demise of British Screen, did you go back to being an independent producer?

SP: No, I never really went back to that. I did some film selection work for film festivals and then started teaching. I ran a course for emerging film professionals at the International Film School in Cologne from 2001-14. I continue to teach part-time at the Aalto University Film School in Helsinki.

In 2003 I went to work for Ingenious Media, a company set up by Patrick McKenna, Andrew Lloyd Webber's tax accountant. I was appointed to build up more activity on the European co-production side, but discovered that Ingenious is the absolute opposite of what I believe creates interesting work. Ingenious was not looking to help films to be made. They were looking for films that were being made anyway and could be put through a tax scheme whereby, through sale and leaseback, the entire cost of the film was raised from ‘high net worth individuals’ to produce a net amount of ‘free money’ equivalent to about 13% of the budget. This was very popular, especially with the big corporations; billions of pounds went through this system, including for *Harry Potter* and all the major titles. But for me it was definitely the most boring year of my life. The only thing I can say is that I was quite well paid.

AS: You moved to a position with which you were much more simpatico, as CEO of the Irish Film Board from 2006-11. Can you describe your work there?

SP: I was based at headquarters in Galway because the Irish Film Board was set up by the now president, Michael D. Higgins, and Lelia Doolan as part of a cultural initiative in the Gaelic-speaking west of the country. But I spent part of every week in Dublin, of course. Ireland is a small English-speaking country which is even more overwhelmed by Hollywood films in its cinemas and in its audience taste than Britain. But what is absolutely wonderful about Ireland, in contrast to Britain, is that they understand the value of culture as an export: Irish music, plays, poetry – the great names, Beckett, Joyce, Yeats, Synge, not

to mention Guinness – which resonate globally through an estimated Irish diaspora of 70 million and far beyond. The country itself only has 5 million people, but the echo of Ireland culturally is vast. So I was fully supported by a government which appreciated the importance of supporting culture with public money. Coming from Britain it was like breathing real oxygen for the first time in a long time. The IFB board supported my efforts to emphasise Ireland as a European country, which was not hard because the Irish had joined the Euro and had been getting plenty of juice from being European. So I could concentrate my efforts on showing them new ways in which Irish films could be financed, especially using reciprocal arrangements with other film funds.

We introduced a measure whereby if a film made money, proceeds to the IFB were shared 50-50 with the producer, a major incentive which created a new kind of partnership between funder and filmmaker and has been emulated since in the UK. There were a good many films during my time at the Board that wouldn't have been made without the relationships we managed to develop with other funding bodies, and also through the instilling of a European mentality into the producers, even more so than it was already.

I had more problems trying to work with Northern Ireland. Nobody wanted to go to Belfast. They just wouldn't get on the train. "Why would I want to go to a place where 'Good morning' is a political statement?" somebody said to me. The other thing was that Northern Ireland Screen was very TV-orientated and prioritised attracting big stuff in from outside, such as *Game of Thrones* (2011-) which was shot there in the big hall where the *Titanic* was painted, over indigenous cinema work. We did do one or two films with the North, but it was always rather prickly. We didn't understand how they worked, and vice versa, I think. Reflecting what is now the dominant preoccupation of cultural industries throughout the UK, the objectives of NIS were overridingly economic, while in the Republic the IFB's aims were always a mix of both cultural and economic.

Most of the time I had enough money, until the recession really hit. Following the 2008 crash a Treasury report seriously questioned whether Ireland could afford to support culture in the new climate. There was an outcry. Key figures in the film industry – Gabriel Byrne, Brendan Gleeson, Neil Jordan – proclaimed the importance of film, and they were joined by economists who argued for culture's multiplier effect across the world and its power on behalf of diplomacy, trade and tourism. Although that put an end to the threat to the Board, we had to cut out budgets.

One thing I'm flattered by is that although I left seven years ago, the guidelines and allocation of IFB funds for different purposes have hardly changed at all. They seem to feel they work as they are. We had a fund for Irish production; one for creative co-production, meaning minority co-productions with other countries; and a substantial fund for documentary. Supporting documentaries had been something I was only able to do once at British Screen – *One Day In September* (1999) – but in Ireland we consistently supported feature documentaries, a timely discovery for me. The other wonderful discovery I made in Ireland was the animation sector there which is really strong, young men and women trained in Dublin by Don Bluth before he went back to Hollywood, who then set up their own companies – Brown Bag, Cartoon Saloon, Barley and others. There are six or seven animation companies in Ireland that are world class in a sustainable business making series that are sold over and over again to television, as well as beautiful animated features like *The Secret of Kells* (2009) and *Song of the Sea* (2014).

I take pride in feature films we supported such as John Carney's *Once* (2007) and Lance Daly's *Kisses* (2008), and in a filmmaker like Lenny Abrahamson – to my mind one of the great European *auteurs* – think of *Garage* (2007) or *Room* (2015). I made a little legacy to the IFB by negotiating a good deal on John Michael McDonagh's *The Guard* (2011) – mischievous, politically incorrect and wickedly funny – which turned out to be the

most successful Irish film ever and returned a small fortune to the IFB from the Irish market.

AS: *Even more obviously European was your time at Film i Väst in Gothenburg, Sweden, 2015-16, which operates the largest regional film fund in Scandinavia.*

SP: That was short-lived but interesting in its way. I was appointed for two years to run the fund for international – i.e. non-Swedish – production, but it suspended after a year to allow all Film i Väst’s resources to be put into trying to save the crisis-ridden Swedish cinema. However, during the first year I was able to support more than 20 films, including some of which I’m very proud. As in Ireland, I was able to invest in filmmakers with strong voices and interesting imaginations, people with signatures. One was Juho Kuosmanen – one of the most interesting directors coming out of Finland at the moment – and his first feature *The Happiest Day in the Life of Olli Mäki* (2016), the true story of a Finnish boxer who had a tilt at the world featherweight championship in 1962. It’s in black and white, in Finnish and brilliantly acted by the three principals. It won the Un Certain Regard prize in Cannes. We also supported another Finnish film, Dome Karukoski’s *Tom of Finland* (2017), about the cult gay artist whose real name was Touko Valio Laaksonen; and, from the UK, *Their Finest* (2016) and *Viceroy’s House* (2017).

Regional funds tend to be very economically driven, which can lead to variable quality in the films they support, and I was concerned to ensure that we did not miss out on good, original work as a result of Film i Väst’s sometimes unrealistic economic criteria. Overall, my feeling from the experience I had there was that the fund’s regulations, combined with Sweden’s lack of incentives to underpin co-productions, were in danger of becoming too harsh to allow it to operate in an interesting and useful way. There are now many other countries and regions offering more conducive conditions for producers with strong projects. Having been involved with Film i Väst informally since the days when it blazed a trail for European regional funding, I was sad to find I was happy to leave it prematurely.

AS: *Can I ask you more generally about what you see as the importance of Europe and European funding for British producers. There was always the scepticism about producing ‘Euro-puddings’, wasn’t there?*

SP: Yes, but it’s out of date. That really died in the 1990s, with the new European Co-production Convention, the big overarching treaty which now has 43 member-countries and is extremely user-friendly. You can use that treaty to make any film in a co-production with any number of participating countries and the co-production process doesn’t have to dictate what’s shown on the screen. These days almost every European film that achieves any visibility, apart from a few very small local films, is a co-production. There are certain stories that lend themselves to being ‘natural’ co-productions but nowadays almost every film can be co-produced, invisibly. It’s often a matter of taking some work to wherever and doing it there. Equally, it can simply be a matter of another market being interested in a film and feeling they can release it because they believe it can work there. So the Europudding tag is history now; it’s not an issue. Co-production adds to the cost, but you just have to make the call between what it’s going to add and whether the extra money raised is worth it. In Europe now, the decision to make a co-production is generally a decision to make a film at all.

The films that work tend to be strongly identified with one culture. A film that comes from somewhere specific tends to work better than one that’s concocted. The films

that have come out of Romania in the last ten years are all conspicuously Romanian, but they're co-productions because Romania has very little money. The key to co-producing is knowing how to use the mechanism, where to find the money. How to use a regional fund in a way that keeps the funders happy, is invisible to the audience, and comes up with enough money.

AS: But you feel strongly, don't you, that British producers have not understood these opportunities. In an article for ScreenDaily in March 2014 you commented on the "apparent complacency of the British production sector. Most producers seem to accept that the films that define British cinema are initiated by British businesses, represent British culture and artistic expression, and will be financed by a small handful of domestic backers with two or more typically working in tandem." I suppose you had in mind that combination of funding from the BFI, Film4 and BBC Films. Is a problem for British producers that they've got too much on offer, as it were, nationally to bother with Europe?

SP: Not really. My argument was that what's strange about Britain is that they've got so much *less* money than most other countries, and much less than any other country of equivalent size, that it's very curious they don't look abroad more. What's stunning to me is that there's so *little* money in Britain to support filmmaking, much less than in France or Germany, or even Denmark. Britain has so little public money for the kind of new films that make a difference, and there is now no market money for British films in the mid-budget range, any more than there is for German films actually. And if the BFI, Film4 and BBC Films are always working in tandem, that reduces the number of films that come out of those organisations overall. But most British producers, if they can't perm some combination of the 'big three', none of which is big financially, they don't do the film. If they do realise they're going to have to go somewhere else, they go to an American major or maybe to a heavyweight sales agent if they can find one, though that option has almost disappeared now. Sales agents are fast becoming a dying breed because of the rise of the global platform majors that don't operate territory-by-territory. Most useful agents as are left operate out of Paris or New York; meanwhile China is becoming a major force in our business and tilting the centre of gravity.

I know you want to talk Brexit. I think this is having an unexpected effect. Britain hasn't been co-producing much with anybody in Europe for years now, since 2000 and the advent of the Film Council. But although co-production is not the mechanism of choice for the British, producers have begun to realise that when Britain leaves the EU, British films made solely with British or US-UK money will not qualify as European films when they're sold into the European market. This is very serious because European films have a bigger value on the European market than non-European films. Even for a big company like Working Title, even for films distributed by the majors, the value of British films, if they're not European, is going to go down. The only way around this is for British films to be made as official co-productions with other European countries and to achieve European status that way. This is leading, for example, to more interest than I've seen in 20 years in Britain re-joining Eurimages. Even some British producers who poo-pooed this in the past are seriously thinking, "Maybe we should get into this," and of course it's still possible. The treaties will be unaffected by Brexit. Britain will still be a member of the European Co-production Convention, which is the treaty everybody uses. It's also got a special bilateral treaty with France, and with Germany to allow television co-productions. I think, funnily enough, that Brexit is making British producers and film executives suddenly acutely aware of what the loss of European status means to their product, and it starts them thinking, "Maybe we should be making our films in a different way."

The Irish are worried, but I don't think they need to be. Ireland gets a lot out of the fact that they're the only English-speaking member of Eurimages, they're really the co-producer of choice for many people who want to make films in English, and they've always been very open to co-production. We will have to wait and see what happens with the internal Irish border. There are issues around this becoming a hard EU border, but my view is that this won't be allowed to happen and that the Nordies could end up with the best of both worlds.

More to the point is the question of how the UK's inward production is going to be affected by Brexit. This is what everybody cares about in Britain – the politicians, the BFI – they seem obsessed with the big numbers of inward investment. They don't seem to care nearly as much about indigenous production. So is Brexit going to affect inward production? I'm not sure. It depends how obtrusive the border controls are. Will people need visas to come and work? What will the work permit situation be for actors and technicians coming into Britain? I would imagine it will be made as easy as possible for Hollywood companies to come and make films here. The politicians won't let Brexit affect that unless there are aspects to be considered in relation to other industries. So I don't think Brexit is much of a threat there. But I do think that, paradoxically and ironically, Brexit is suddenly turning British filmmakers into more Europe-conscious people.

AS: That's encouraging, in a macabre way. What I've read is that the plummeting pound would increase inward investment and the more gloomy prognostications conclude that we're going to see more and more concentration on a few major productions, with fewer films and less diversity.

SP: I think that's very likely. But I think that agents who sell films, they're aware of the value of British films in Europe. The one type of European film at the moment that crosses borders significantly is British films and every effort will be made, both here and by other European countries, to allow that to continue. On the other hand, looking ahead and given that in all probability there will be a rise in the number of global companies – it won't just be Netflix and Amazon, there will be others soon – will these be based in London if they can locate in a more Europe-friendly industrial centre? That's much less likely.

AS: My last question has two parts. How would you define the role of the producer, what qualities are needed? And why do producers, who are competing with each other for commissions and finance, band together? What benefit have you gained from being in several associations?

SP: For me the producer's primary role was to ensure the director had the resources he or she needed to make a good, hopefully great, film. It was my job as a producer to create a congenial space, within the financial constraints of the film's budget, in which an *auteur* director – one possessing a striking, unusual imagination – could create something that will live on in the minds of its audiences. A perfect film, however many individual energies may be harnessed to bring it to fruition, is one impelled, informed and finished in every important detail by a single and singular imagination. Films that have this stamp of singularity are creatively all of a piece. I worked with Mike Radford three times and on each occasion trusted his imagination to create a visual experience that could seize hearts even more fiercely than minds. I've always thought that films have a unique power to move, to influence, to excite, to change, more swiftly and profoundly than any verbal means of communication. In the end you hope that your films will be remembered, will live on for the audiences who watched them.

Of course, as the producer I have to do the financial stuff and negotiate the best possible deal for the film, but it's all to that end. And the producer has one vital, unique function: to be a film's first audience. We say at ACE – which I'll come on to – that the producer carries a unique collaborative responsibility throughout the whole process of a project's development, production, marketing and delivery to audiences. The producer's objectivity is indispensable, something which the director does not have.

Why do competitive producers band together? It's a good question. I was a founder member of the Association of Independent Producers (AIP) in 1976, later its chairman for three years. Its formation was triggered by Harold Wilson's announcement of a Working Party to examine the state of the British film industry, under the chairmanship of Sir John Terry, the head of the National Film Finance Corporation. AIP wanted to be part of this review because we felt that British cinema was moribund – as was the British Film Producers Association, the existing body, which was dominated by the Hollywood majors' vested interests. As independents we had common issues we wanted tackled. We were a ginger group and lobbying body and we initially campaigned for a National Film Development Fund to support the writing of indigenous screenplays. We wanted to support the efforts of independent producers to make low-to-medium budget, commercial films and not be strangled either by the exhibition duopoly of Rank and EMI or by the American studios. Later we tried to get the government to introduce a levy on blank video tapes and to force television companies to pay licence fees for feature films that reflected their value and their importance in television schedules, their popularity with viewers.

It was incredibly difficult for any of us to raise finance, and so we produced a handbook that listed companies that were worth approaching, that kind of thing. We had our own monthly magazine, *AIP & Co*, which was circulated to every MP. We were trying to get the government to take the film industry seriously. I have also been a long-serving member of the British Screen Advisory Council (BSAC) for the same reasons. It's an independent body that provides advice to the government and policy makers about developments across the whole audiovisual sector. Whether we're always listened to is another matter but, as with AIP, the exchange of knowledge among professionals, and the mutual support, is valuable.

I also helped to found Ateliers du Cinéma Européen (ACE), a European training provider and producers' network established with support from the new European MEDIA programme in 1993. It's for experienced producers – they complete a programme of advanced training through three workshops in a year – and is based on mutual trust, collaborative working and openness to new ideas. Its practical aim is to encourage and enable international co-productions. We select a new group of up to 20 producers each year and work with consultants to offer shared experience and knowledge. I have been president of ACE since 1996 and in recent years I had seen more and more of the funding from around Europe which sustains ACE fall away, just as had happened to other European training organisations. But my 'sabbatical' second year at Film i Väst afforded me the time to undertake a radical re-structuring and to move ACE's headquarters – after almost 25 years – from Paris to Amsterdam, thanks to new funding from the Netherlands Film Fund. We have new money and new workshop bases, too, in Prague and Helsinki. After a year of the new structure, with an excellent new team, there are real signs that ACE has been revitalised and can count on a more sustainable future. The ACE Network now includes almost 200 active producers from 45 different countries across Europe and beyond. Producers need each other, they need collective strength, because being a producer is not for the faint-hearted. But it's still a life I've loved.

¹ Quoted in Angus Finney, *The State of European Cinema: A New Dose of Reality*, London: Cassell, 1996, p. 127.

² Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 115.

³ Derek Malcolm, 'The Italian Connection', *Guardian*, 7 July 1985, p. 11. Perry also commented: 'the Americans make American films much better than we do. Britain has suffered from being a Hollywood annex and the tendency among British film-makers has been to think of cinema as an American medium and to struggle to emulate what is essentially a foreign culture.' John Pym, 'Perry in Nineteen Eighty-Five', *Sight and Sound*, 54: 4 (Autumn 1985), p. 247.

⁴ Philip Kemp. 'Simon Perry: British Screen's new chief looks to Europe', *Sight and Sound*, 60: 1 (Winter 1990), p. 2

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Pym, 'Perry in Nineteen Eighty-Five', p. 246

⁸ There was no opportunity to discuss his role as an exhibitor. In 1986, Perry acquired and refurbished the Regal cinema in Cromer, Norfolk; see William Langley, 'The Battle of the Little Big Screen!', *Daily Mail*, 4 May 1985, p. 7. Until 1998 Perry was chair of Film Network an independent cinema company that built – in innovative joint ventures with London borough councils – a three-screen complex in Greenwich that opened in September 1989 and a six-screen multiplex in Peckham (October 1994).