

Interview: John Madden, film director

Originally published in The Founder, student newspaper at Royal Holloway, University of London.

1st August 2012

As a boy at Clifton College, John Madden was, if only very briefly, a peer of Roger Michell, who would go on to direct Notting Hill and Morning Glory. Though they would both take on careers in the film industry, the two were never close colleagues at school, Roger was in 3rd Form when John was in Upper Six in Brown's House.

John enjoyed being at Clifton, a time when he was able to "sow the seeds of a future career". He took part in house plays both as an actor and director. In his last year at Clifton he edited The Cliftonian and produced a recording on the school called: "This is Clifton". It was a collection of sound bites from the college, including an interview with the Headmaster and excerpts from a recital by the choir.

John gained a place at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, reading English Literature. After three years John was running an Oxbridge theatre company, taking shows abroad before embarking on a career in film and television in the UK – starting with crime drama.

"Yes that was a sort of hallowed traditional in British television drama. I did some Sherlock Holmes films, these were interspersed with what you would call 'single dramas' which were one-off either adaptations or original pieces. Inspector Morse was a little bit later. There was a significant thing about that time because it was when the drama output was making the transition from studio taped material, which often was televised productions of stage plays to filmed material, in other words film as the dramatic form, as opposed to studio plays.

I never directed studio material as I had just arrived on the cusp of the transition to film. Inspector Morse in particular was a bizarre breeding ground for a whole generation of filmmakers. It wasn't where I first met Antony Minghella but it was where I became a good friend of his and Danny Boyle was also directing there at the time."

So it was like a sort of director's trainee placement scheme?

It was and it is still the case today to some extent but my film-making generation, pretty much all of them came out of television drama, or the generation just ahead of me, which was Stephen Friars, Mike Apted. The twin pools that tended to feed the community were either television or commercials, the Ridley Scotts and the Aaron Parkers, all came through commercials into mainstream film-making and another group came through television drama/television film.

Jumping ahead, quite a few years, why do you think *Shakespeare in Love* became the success that it did?

It's an astonishing script is the first and most succinct answer to that. It was a brilliant script but it was also a brilliant idea. It's just an idea that had the germ of something looking back on it extraordinarily exciting and accessible, strangely.

Nobody thought the material was accessible to begin with and actually although clearly the hand of Tom Stoppard was the most easily discernible and really the only discernible creative voice in the script it is true to say that Mark Norman, the other credited screenwriter, was the person who originally had the idea and Tom was originally given the assignment as a writing assignment, or a re-writing assignment.

It is sort of extraordinary that the script landed in his lap because it wasn't thought out, he was actually in a relationship with the studio that owned the project but given the fact that he was the author of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and other meta-fictional Shakespeare pieces. He couldn't be more ideal, it was a match made in heaven really. It was a stroke of luck for me that I had the beginning of a relationship with the studio that owned the picture, or that owned the property. It had been originally owned by Universal, which had had a stab at making the film six or seven years earlier.

Frankly the studio didn't have an enormous appetite for it not because they felt it was esoteric but really because they couldn't cast it. It stumbled and fell and it was then put into turn-around and picked up by Miramax. I am under no illusion that it came to a number of directors, many of whom I think shied away from it as I think they feared it would be viewed as in an in-joke, a sort of theatrical in-joke.

On paper, it must have seemed quite strange...

Not to me, I remember reading the script and thinking: 'I can't believe that somebody has been commissioned to write this, or allowed to write this, as I had spent so much of my life at that point with Shakespeare, that was what I was teaching at Yale at the point, I had studied him, I had run a Shakespeare company, it seemed just a gloriously rich idea and rich script but I didn't imagine when I read it that anybody who wasn't like me, with similar tastes as me, would necessarily be that interested in it, except that it was extraordinarily funny and at that point, though not so strongly romantic, it was very emotional.

It was one of those luck ones. Tom and I got on incredibly well, he is just a very willing and humble, ridiculously humble, collaborator that believed it was his job to give the director what he wants and what needs – I wasn't in a rush to ask him to re-write things. It developed into something that landed on its feet, let's put it that way but none of us knew at that point that it would work in the way that it did.

Going back to what you were saying earlier about whether it would be of interest to people who didn't have similar tastes to you, how do you separate yourself from yourself?

I think actually that is the only thing you can work on creatively is if a piece speaks to you in some way then you find something about it which you wish to communicate and bring to life, that you wish to animate so that you can actually allow the piece to

have the same effect on other people as it had on you when you read it – or when you thought about it in whatever form these things take.

I tend to work very strongly with a writer and from a script, I think that's the key to finding a film that works – or bringing a film to life – you need to see it and feel it and realise it in script form in your head before you start making it. I am not apologetic about finding something powerful, I thought, well it's not my concern with *Shakespeare in Love* to worry about how big an audience it would find because if the company wanted to make it and we could make it economically which, relatively speaking, in terms of the amount of money it later made, we made it extremely economically, but it felt like a big film to me at the time – it was a big film but we didn't realise that at the time. I think that's gone on to be the only thing I've ever used – I think sometimes I've walked away from things I probably should have done both on stage and in film– just because I didn't find the connection with them.

What is *The Debt* all about?

That's a thriller, I suppose a psychological thriller is what you would call it. It's about three Mossad agents who are on a mission to identify and capture and bring back to Israel a suspected Nazi war criminal, this is in the mid sixties. He is somebody that they suspect is hiding in East Berlin under an assumed name, in other words, behind the Iron Curtain.

That is the inner part of the story but the story also concerns the same three agents 30 years later and the film deals with the ramifications of that original mission. The thing that is unusual about is that the same three characters are played by two sets of actors. The central character, who is a woman in her sixties, is played by Helen Mirren.

The two male agents are played by Tom Wilkinson and Ciaran Hinds and the younger versions of those are a girl called Jessica Chastain who I am sure we will hear a lot about and Sam Worthington who we already do know a lot about and an excellent actor called Marton Csokas.

What was it like working with Helen Mirren?

I know Helen very well because we did a *Prime Suspect* together so I go way back with her; I have worked with her pre-Queen and post-Queen. She was an icon when I worked with her first time round really, she had a pretty extraordinary resume though significantly of course it is only really in the later part of her life that she has achieved the kind of recognition in film that she always had in theatre and in television in this country.

It was only really with the Queen that she suddenly really leapt into international stardom. It's very similar to Judi Dench who had played smaller supporting roles in film up until the point I worked with her on *Mrs Brown* she didn't really have a film career and was suspicious about whether or not she had the talent!

Helen is extraordinary and she is completely at the top of her game and is so confident and at the same time relaxed, I think, about what she is doing and so on top of her technique and so instinctive that it is a pretty extraordinary experience to work with her, she puts herself totally in your hands which is really amazing, that you can have that sort of talent and be so free with it and so generous with it.

Ashley Coates