Opening for Expressions film festival at the Watershed – 6th July 2016

Personal Filmmaking and social change

Thank you …..

I was extremely chuffed when Emma asked me to come along today and say a few words about what I feel is an important and inspiring film festival. This is because for me, Expressions sums up what I feel filmmaking is really about.

I was lucky enough to get involved with filmmaking from a young age, quite unexpectedly, and I have been making films for almost 30 years now.   Although I have worked at the BBC on various tv programmes, alongside this, I have always made my own films about whatever is going on in my life or is personal to me at the time. In fact, it is these films that got me recognition as a filmmaker, rather than the tv series I was making! It is for this reason that I always tell new filmmakers to make work that is personal to them as it is often stronger and makes the biggest impact, whether it reaches the television screens or not!

I believe that filmmaking is a tool I have carried and used to navigate my way through life, to explore complex emotions like isolation, loneliness, grief and bullying. It has also enabled me to examine and put across social issues, politics and human behaviour.   Film can have cathartic outcomes for the participants and also often the filmmaker. It can also instigate social change, and bring people together through its immediacy and universal language.

Film has the ability to make us see the world differently, to give us another person's perspective and to change our perception of the other that we do not understand. Fred Wiseman's documentary film 'Titticutt Follies' made in 1967, about the treatment of mentally ill inmates in a Massachusset's prison hospital went on to influence the way mental health institutions were run in America thereafter. Morgan Spurlock's film Supersize Me, where the filmmaker eats nothing but Macdonalds for a month and gains 20lbs of weight plus damage

to his liver, was on another level a personal victory for the filmmaker, since shortly after the film was released, Macdonalds took the Supersize option off the menu.

Just these two examples show how personal filmmaking has changed the way people or corporations behave and treat other human beings.

Another tip I always give new filmmakers is to trade on the connections and social circles you inhabit. If you have access to a particular social group or scene that is closed to or not part of mainstream society, it can give you unique access as a filmmaker and enable you to open up this world to a wider audience and bridge the gap.

Making a film from inside of a road protest camp in the 1990's, I was able to show the protesters in a deeper light than many news crews were doing. As a fellow protestor I was frustrated at the stereotyped images the media were portraying of these young, committed activists. Because I was living on the protest site, I was able to represent them as fellow human beings who still had their personal and daily lives to live, instead of a one-off performance for the news crew. And so I like to think I enabled new audiences to see the protesters as individuals rather than the tree hugging brigade the media was broadcasting.

Some personal filmmaking could fall into the category of self-indulgence, but as long as it carries a universal message, it can still talk to us as human beings who are all trying to understand and make sense of the world. A film I made about my own grief of losing my mother to dementia, is the most deeply personal film I've made and yet it has been screened at Dementia Conferences to a wide cross section of people – something I would never have imagined. Sometimes as a filmmaker, you don't realize the impact that something in your world that you take for granted and see as everyday, can be seen as something new and enlightening by others. Communicating my grief through film was the greatest challenge for me as a filmmaker, because I had to be prepared to lay myself bare and experiment with ideas that I hoped would communicate the very alien, shifting, nebulous feelings that I was experiencing. It is one of the best things in the world however, when someone comes up to you after seeing your work and says thank you, I so relate to that. It is so deeply pleasing to

hear and it makes what sometimes seems a scary, longwinded and emotional journey all the more worthwhile.

The power of film is its ability to be so immediate, to take you straight into a particular world and place you in someone else's shoes, through the use of sound and moving images. The other special quality of film is its many layers. Fusing voice, music, image, text, art and performance, it can communicate many things all at once. It can take the form of drama, documentary, animation or a combination of any of these - all in all it is a very free and fluid medium, with a myriad of possibilities and potential.

As I am sure we will see today with the diverse programme we have ahead of us, film is accessible to everyone and is one of the most democratic of artistic mediums. It brings together skills in writing, design, journalism, poetry, performance, photography, graphics and many more social skills, allowing everyone a voice if they want to take part. Bristol is a city that pulls together the creative industries that support these skills and if you are a filmmaker you are in the right place. For those of you who want to continue making films, as you no doubt are aware, there are fantastic community filmmaking organizations like Calling the Shots, Knowle West Media Centre and Firstborn Creatives here in Bristol, and in Bridgewater there is Somerset Film and Video. For young people aged between 16 and 19, there is the BFI Film Academy Bristol scheme which opens again this November– a place to really get your career started!

But for now, lets get this programme running, I'm very much looking forward to seeing what looks like a very interesting range of films as well as meeting some of the filmmakers in the breaks. So thank you very much for allowing me to introduce this wonderful festival and lets begin!