

## Jim Broadbent: A Life in Pictures sponsored by Deutsche Bank

04 December 2013 at BAFTA 195 Piccadilly

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**Boyd Hilton:** I'm Boyd Hilton and I'm a Film and TV journalist. That's all you need to know. We've got a brilliant guest tonight, one of our greatest actors of recent times. And this is a man who's worked with such directors as Woody Allen, Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, Baz Luhrmann, The Wachowskis, and many times of course, the great Mike Leigh.

We're going to be talking about his career, looking at some great clips, and there will be a chance for you to ask some questions too. And before we start I'd like to thank Deutsche Bank for their continuing support for this brilliant 'A Life in Pictures' series. Before we bring our guest on stage tonight, though, let's have a look, a reminder, at his incredible career.

Montage of clips

**BH:** Ladies and gentlemen, Jim Broadbent. Welcome.

**Jim Broadbent:** Thank you.

**BH:** Before we get stuck into the nitty gritty of your career, and remind you of some of the great films and TV stuff you've done, let's go way back to the beginning. Is it true that your first acting you did was when you were about five, on stage at your father's theatrical company? Is that true?

**JB:** [Nearly everyone appears?] at the local amateur theatre group, you know, is [A] *Doll's House* so I started with serious work, and that's about the last of it really.

**BH:** Yeah, yeah. Not strictly true. But did you get a fill of excitement at that early age, did it mean much to you? Do you remember much about it?

**JB:** My parents were both quite key figures in that theatre group, and rather than babysitters I would often be left back stage. And literally the smell of the grease paint was there, and it was terribly exciting. And we used to go a lot to the Lincoln Theatre Royal which was a good rep at the time, weekly rep, so again no babysitters, so I

get taken to see quite unsuitable plays. And *Borstal Boy*, or was it *The Choir Fellow*, I can't remember which, or *The Hostage*, one of those.

**BH:** All quite similar.

**JB:** Yes. And *Glass Menagerie* and things. Plays I didn't understand at all, but it was always very exciting.

**BH:** So why did you, you chose to go to Art School rather than Drama School at first, is that right? And then what made you change and go to Drama School?

**JB:** Well the only things I could do at school was art and drama really, the only things that interested me, I wasn't academic at all. And at that time, the notion of being an actor, acting was the only perilous profession. Everyone said 'oh don't be an actor, absolutely out of the question'. So I thought, well I'll, because I was also quite good at art, I thought well I'll go for art and then theatre design and combine my two interests.

I don't know why I thought theatre design was any more safe than acting. I don't know, probably much worse. But then I went to Art School and realised, actually if I was honest, I was much more interested in acting. And there was a wonderful girl at Art School who had been an actress, and she'd been very successful but it hadn't suited her, but she could see that it would suit me so she coached me for my pieces and suggested I try for LAMDA and I went there.

**BH:** And was Drama School everything you thought it would be?

**JB:** More. It was such a complete, the playground I'd been looking for, yeah. It was a real delight, and very, the right balance of fun and a serious approach to it as well, so it just set the tone that I wanted to do completely.

**BH:** And the first thing I remember hearing you in, and seeing you in, and knowing you for was The

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National Theatre of Brent, which was a kind of very comedic thing. Did you feel that was what kind of first established you a bit?

**JB:** Not really. Before that for about four years I did Regent's Park open air, and lots of bits of rep in Ipswich and Stoke and York and places. But then I worked with Ken Campbell on his first big science-fiction play, *Illuminatus*, which opened the Cottesloe, amongst other things, and I had about 12 parts in that, and that was what got me going really.

I remember saying to one of the other guys in week two of rehearsals for *Illuminatus*, I said, 'life from now on will be before *Illuminatus* or after it', because Ken was such an inspiring genius, you could just feel it, that it was going to be really special and that got me going. And then after that the various, I became sort of quite a useable fringe actor.

**BH:** To say the least.

**JB:** Which led to *Play for Today* and all those sorts of things.

**BH:** Gearing up to your film career, the importance of Mike Leigh, and *Life Is Sweet* I think was your first film with Mike Leigh?

**JB:** Yes, I'd done two plays with him before that.

**BH:** But at what point with Mike Leigh, did you find Mike Leigh, did he find you? How did that happen?

**JB:** I'd worked with Stephen Bill who was one of his, Stephen Bill and Sheila Kelly, they were Mike Leigh stalwarts already by then. They were both in *Nuts in May*, you might remember, they were Finger and Honk, the motor bikers in *Nuts in May*. And they were friends with Mike, and I'd been in Regent's Park with Stephen, and he mentioned me to Mike, and Mike took an interest. And I did the classic session with him and then we did *Ecstasy at Hampstead*. That was another huge, exciting thing to do. I mean, that was after

*Illuminatus*, but that was another sort of thrilling turning point job. I suppose Mike Leigh, *Illuminatus* and then National Theatre of Brent are three sort of key points in the journey I suppose.

**BH:** And in terms of your relationship with Mike Leigh, we've got to the point where the first clip we're going to see is from *A Sense of History*, this extraordinarily short film that would show on Channel 4. I remember watching it on Channel 4 at the time, filmed I think at Highclere where they film *Downton Abbey*?

**JB:** Yes, that's my... Highclere is mine I think, not *Downton Abbey*.

**BH:** Absolutely, totally. Well let's have a look at the clip and we'll discuss it afterwards. Let's have a look.

Clip from *A Sense of History*

**JB:** And that was actually Stephen Bill on the tractor who introduced me to Mike Leigh.

**BH:** Oh, fantastic. So, many unusual things about this. Firstly, it's Mike Leigh directing your script, you wrote it, which is very unusual. He's always directing his own stuff. How did that come about, that you kind of created this?

**JB:** I was out walking on my own and talking to myself and came across this voice, this character really. And I kept him, and I thought 'oh, he's new, I haven't come across him before, I haven't played him before.' So I kept him talking, and in being in a documentary mode. The notion of it being a talking to camera documentary came at once.

**BH:** It's a faux-documentary. Very, very believable. Done in a classic, BBC almost, documentary style.

**JB:** Yes, and that was the original idea really. And I kept him talking in the voice, and kept it going, and then I got back and started inventing his life story, and keeping it going. And then I came up

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with the, until I got the whole arc of this dark story as it comes out. And I told various people about it, but I had it on audio tape, and I amongst others mentioned it to Mike, and he said 'well, let me hear it.' And I gave him the tape, and he said 'well let's do it.' And he spoke to David Orkin who was at Channel 4 at the time, and he said 'yeah, let's do it,' because he was thrilled to have a Mike Leigh film that didn't take two years.

And he knew what it was about, and knew that there was a script and everything.

**BH:** We'll get onto the Mike Leigh method.

**JB:** Yes. And so from me having the idea to it being on Channel 4 was about six months or something. I knew it would never be that easy again.

**BH:** And is it right, because when you first start watching it you think 'oh, this is a documentary about a kind of grand, old aristocrat,' but people actually thought it was a real documentary.

**JB:** Yes, a very close friend of mine turned it on and thought 'oh no, boring documentary about an aristocrat' and turned it off. Yes so, I think if you stick with it you realise that it's not actually a normal documentary.

**BH:** Spoiler alert. But it's quite difficult to get hold of, isn't it? Can you...

**JB:** It's not sold anywhere. I did manage to get quite a good copy now from Channel 4, so we've got, now it can be sourced.

**BH:** Okay, so we won't spoil the excellent... Shall we say it starts off very funny and gets darker as it goes on? Is that a thing you wanted, was that your conception when you found the character? You wanted it to end up in a very strange, dark place?

**JB:** I think it's just my way, really. And it wasn't, I just kept him talking, and it amused me most for it

to get darker. And then it all made huge sense of course, I mean the nature of these great families.

**BH:** As I say, you wrote it. At that point did you think you'd like to do more writing, or was it just a kind of one-off?

**JB:** I really knew from the word go that I wasn't a writer. It wasn't ever going to be something that I'd really do. I didn't have that discipline and I can only really write for one person, or me. Get four people in a room and all different characters and engaging, I don't think I could cope with that really.

**BH:** No, fair enough. Well let's talk about and move on into other film roles, and I'm particularly excited for this next section because you got to work with Woody Allen. And obviously a myriad of actors have worked with Allen over the years, but this has got to be one of his very best films.

Let's have a look.

Clip from *Bullets Over Broadway*

**JB:** I haven't seen that for... almost ever.

**BH:** Have you not? The whole film? Oh it's fantastic!

**JB:** I have seen the film but not for a long time. I must look again.

**BH:** It's fantastic, absolutely. Because you are hysterically funny in it, it's a great film, but you spend an inordinate amount of time eating in that film, so how did you deal with that?

**JB:** The idea of putting on weight wasn't an issue. It wasn't a problem, so I didn't have to worry about it. But it was, I had five different degrees of padding and it was alright. It's good food in New York.

**BH:** Absolutely, yeah. Especially on film sets.

**JB:** Yeah.

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**BH:** How was your Woody Allen experience? Did you have to audition, all of that?

**JB:** No I didn't. I was actually working with Mia Farrow when I got the call, doing this film *Widows' Peak* in Ireland. The day, I got the call the day we started filming, so I thought 'oh, she'd come straight out of the courtroom'. She'd come straight from the courts to Dublin to film, 'oh I can't tell her'. Day one, 'I'm just going to be working with your ex-husband'. So I kept quiet about it for a while until we'd sort of got to know each other and then I said 'I've got some rather bizarre news. I've been asked to work with Woody.' And she said 'oh, congratulations, he's a great director, just don't have a baby by him.' I got the call and got the script, and 'we'd like you to play a comedic role.' He'd seen *Life Is Sweet* and *Enchanted April* I think, he'd been shown those, and it was fine. I was warned, don't unpack your bags for the first two weeks, you know...

**BH:** Because he famously will change his cast. He completely recast one film I think.

**JB:** He had changed, some of it had changed before I got there. Scenes had been shot twice over with different actors. No, I just kept my head down, and the hairdresser and makeup, one of the team used to say 'I watch Woody, he likes what you're doing.' 'Oh good!' I always watch Woody.

**BH:** But that's about the extent of the feedback you got from the great man?

**JB:** Yes. After one scene, a scene I was coming down the fire escape and in the street, and he was over the other side of the street filming. And I did go over and say 'was that alright, Woody?' 'Yes, that was quite funny, yep.' So I took that as a compliment.

**BH:** Absolutely. And is it right, he often says in interviews that he lets the cast improvise, or at least re-do his works if they want.

**JB:** He insists on that, or on this one he did. Make it your own and don't feel bound to it, but make sure you get over the salient points. Each scene was done in one shot more or less, one take. It was a very liberating, wonderful way to work. You didn't know if you were in, if the camera was following you or any of the others in these large group scenes. It was good. I enjoyed it enormously.

**BH:** Were you a fan of his anyway?

**JB:** Yeah, of course, yeah.

**BH:** What are your favourite other Woody Allen films, just out of interest?

**JB:** Oh, some of the early ones anyway. I think *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan*, that area was really exciting.

**BH:** And among the cast was there a feeling of, did you kind of bond with the cast having this experience of being directed by him?

**JB:** Yeah, I mean all that and we were filming in a theatre and we had dressing rooms in the dark Broadway theatre, and that was a very organic sort of experience. And we were like a theatre company.

**BH:** Moving on to Mike Leigh, as we've mentioned, he must have one of the most unique ways of working out there for a film...

**JB:** Yes, that's one way of putting it.

**BH:** We're going to look at *Topsy-Turvy*, we've picked out, because I guess again very unusual for a Mike Leigh film, let alone a role for you. Let's have a look at the clip and we'll talk about it more.

Clip from *Topsy-Turvy*

**BH:** That's your Gilbert of Gilbert and Sullivan fame. Is it true that you needed to be persuaded

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by Mike Leigh to take that role, even though you'd worked with him quite a few times before?

**JB:** Yes, completely. Yes, I thought I was fully underequipped to play the role, and just wouldn't have been anything I would have thought for myself at all, given that it comes through finding the role through improvisation, which was daunting to say the least.

Gilbert was, if nothing else, a genius with words. So you have to, the idea of taking on that and finding a core of a character through improvisation and finding it was absolutely appalling to me and I tried to persuade him that it didn't make sense. But it was a joint process, which we did, and an awful lot of help from him, and we got an awful lot of help from the wonderful research team. We all worked together, that was the exciting thing about the whole process was that this huge cast, all of us going off and doing meticulous research into aspects of 19<sup>th</sup> Century London theatre life and coming back and pooling our knowledge.

So it was a really exciting job: six months rehearsal and four-month shoot I think, so I was booked for the year. Most thrilling job all together I think.

**BH:** And that's his method, taking that amount of time, at least six months to a year to help everyone find their characters. Is it always an exciting, thrilling experience, or sometimes does it feel...

**JB:** I think I've done about seven or eight Mike Leigh jobs now, and the process gets less interesting. Because I mean it is a meticulous process that you go through, and building up very slowly. And initially that is, that journey in itself is exciting. How does he do it? What is he doing? Why is he doing it this way? And then you get the hang of it, and that's liberating, but further down the line it does become, you really do want to cut to the chase you know, because the first months of work are fairly laborious and it's not interesting in itself. The process isn't interesting, some of what you're doing is

obviously intriguing, but it's not, it doesn't have the same... Maybe I'm just impatient by nature and want to get on with filming, but you can't do it that way, and obviously his way is superb for getting a good product.

**BH:** I was going to say, so when you see the end product does it give you an extra feeling of satisfaction that you've been through that whole process.

**JB:** Yes, absolutely. You're far more involved than with any other job really, on that level.

**BH:** We saw you with Timothy Spall in that, and I see both of you are kind of like his go-to men aren't you in a way? It seems that way to me, that you've both worked with him quite a few times.

**JB:** There's a number of us who are in this sort of... Sam Kelly was there, he's done a lot with Mike, and Martin Savage has done a lot with Mike as well since that. That was his first.

**BH:** Do you compare Mike Leigh experiences when you're with them?

**JB:** Inevitably.

**BH:** And in terms of the Gilbert and Sullivan story, were you interested in them? Were you a fan of Gilbert and Sullivan?

**JB:** No. Mike had the idea for me doing Gilbert when we were doing *A Sense of History*, which was six years before we did *Topsy-Turvy* in fact. He sort of fed the idea to me then and lent me his, part of his massive G&S collection which I got into a bit, but didn't really know if it was going to happen so didn't involve myself too much.

**BH:** So it didn't turn you into a massive Gilbert and Sullivan fan?

**JB:** No, but I do love it, when it comes on I do love it.

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**BH:** Are there any other directors who are in any way comparable to that experience, or is it a completely unique way of working?

**JB:** I think it is completely unique. I never worked with Les Blair, he on occasion works in a very similar way. Mike Bradwell I've worked with on stage, he's done a lot of plays with that, with Mike's, sort of Mike's method. Mike Bradwell was in *Bleak Moments* as well, so he'd worked with Mike as an actor. But not really, no, nobody else. I suppose it, some of that work spread into working with Patrick [Barlow] in The Nation Theatre of Brent as well, because Patrick would write a lump, a big piece of script, and then we'd read it and then start improvising it and improvising and then honing, and Patrick would be writing down sort of improvised bits we were doing. So in a way there were elements of that.

**BH:** In all your eight or nine you've done with Mike Leigh, do you have a favourite? Do you have a favourite role or a favourite film?

**JB:** That's got to be one of the favourites, yeah. It's such a glorious piece to be part of. The music and the chorus and the orchestra, and the whole, the different elements of it. The relationship with Gilbert and D'Oyly Carte, and his wife. It felt, it was a rich experience, and it felt like that.

**BH:** That was 1999, and a couple of years later, 2001, strikes me as being the most extraordinary year in your career. We're going to start with an astonishing role of *Moulin Rouge!*. Before we look at it, how did it come about?

**JB:** I think Baz had seen *A Sense of History* at the New York Film Festival and had me in the back of his mind at some point for six years. He must have seen some other work as well and thought, he'll have probably seen *Bullets Over Broadway* by then and thought 'I need an over the top actor. See if that guy's still around.'

**BH:** And a singer.

**JB:** Well, a lot of my singing is done by somebody else.

**BH:** Oh okay.

**JB:** Not all of it. Might talk about it afterward.

**BH:** Yeah okay, let's have a look.

*Clip from Moulin Rouge!*

**JB:** I was going to say, that came straight after *Topsy-Turvy*. So having done all of this meticulous, accurate research into 19<sup>th</sup> Century theatre, and to go over and go straight into *Moulin Rouge!*, went to Australia to do *Moulin Rouge!*, and I had all this knowledge about how the theatre worked and how people behaved in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and this is obviously jam-packed with anachronisms. And I kept sort of saying to Baz, actually... 'I'm not really interested in that, you know.' 'But he wouldn't call him Duke, really he would call him Your Grace.' 'Yes I hear what you're saying but I think we'll stick with Duke'. So there was quite a lot of that, so I had to shed my Mike Leigh disciplines and just do big acting.

**BH:** I was going to say, this has to be one of your biggest roles.

**JB:** It is, yes. It's quite shockingly big.

**BH:** You say that, but it fits in. The whole film is an extraordinary looking, sounding thing, and Baz Luhrmann is keeping up that level of grandiose style of filmmaking. When you're actually making it, how does he kind of instil that tone if you like?

**JB:** His enthusiasm and his determination to get his vision on the screen, and his energy, is just extraordinary. He would say 'just a little bit more, could you give me just a little bit,' so 'YES!'. The whole thing was so exciting to be in a musical, and some of the other scenes, it's oh, a sound stage full of dancers and acrobats and music and singing and dancing. It was just thrilling. I mean the energy comes out of all that. It did go on a bit long. The whole shoot was, by the end I

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think we were all going a bit stir crazy. We had to be booted out of Fox Studios and went back to some crummy little sound stage where they'd actually done *Strictly Ballroom* years before, because we were going on so long. But that was just, that was just down to Baz caring so much about his film that he was going to do everything in his power to get it right.

**BH:** I remember when I first saw the film I was thinking, 'I wonder if it is as much fun making it as it is watching it?' There's always a danger with that sort of film that it might be more fun for you guys making it than for us watching it, but this is the rare example where it all comes together. When you're making a film like that, do you think 'oh yeah this is working, this is going to be something special?'

**JB:** Yes, we were shown halfway through a sort of montage of clips of work so far, and we thought 'oh yeah, well that keeps you going completely, and whatever else it's going to be utterly extraordinary'.

**BH:** And what did you think of the idea of you singing Like a Virgin?

**JB:** Yes that was one of the many challenges. Starts off with me singing Like a Virgin, and then Baz had a friend in Sydney musical theatre who came in and did some of the high notes and the more operatic parts of my singing.

**BH:** Have you ever heard any Madonna reaction to your version?

**JB:** No. Well, we never speak.

**BH:** Just checking, you might have done. And is it more fun for you to play that kind of big, huge, over the top character, than maybe, as we'll get to later, a much more lower key, minor key character, or can they be equally enjoyable?

**JB:** Equally enjoyable. I've always liked doing something I haven't done before, or haven't done recently. And I might have thought I'd got

quite big with doing Gilbert who was quite a larger than life character, but then it went even further with this one. And then I loved doing more muted, quiet and sort of introspective characters as well, and they all have their interests and fun for me.

**BH:** We should say you won a BAFTA. This was your first BAFTA win for a film, for *Moulin Rouge!*.

**JB:** Oh was it?

**BH:** I think so, yeah. According to my notes anyway.

**JB:** I was nominated for *Topsy-Turvy*, but I was in Sydney at the time so it rather went over my head. I didn't really notice.

**BH:** But winning a BAFTA.

**JB:** Absolutely.

**BH:** Does winning awards, what do you feel about winning awards? Does it help? Does it change things at all?

**JB:** Yeah, it changes your attitude to yourself really. You think oh, I can be on that list'. That's extraordinary. In a way, I think the Golden Globe was the first. No, the first award I ever got was Venice for *Topsy-Turvy*, and I'd never had any award at all, so that sort of started, that made me awardable.

**BH:** Once you're on a list...

**JB:** Once you're on a list then you can, more comes through I think. They're allowed to award you for things. And then the Golden Globe, and that was completely shocking. I thought, 'oh, that is moving in another sort of direction then'. It's great, I was totally thrilled, over the top. It's very scary being nominated for an Oscar. I seriously debated did I want to accept this nomination, because it was going to be such a weird journey, and I was right, it was a weird journey, but unmissable.

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**BH:** You mean the whole ceremony and all of the...

**JB:** The build-up is massive. I took on a PR person for the first time to handle all that stuff, but you know it's just a change of gear in every respect.

**BH:** Yeah, absolutely. Well the film that you got the Oscar for we'll talk about, which was the same year. So this year, 2001. Did it feel that way to you that this was a kind of, because you also did *Bridget Jones's Diary* as well which was a huge hit, which you had a great kind of a fun supporting role. Was it an incredible year for you?

**JB:** Yes, that whole period, and then pretty much going straight into *Gangs of New York* as well. *Gangs of New York*, *Iris*, all came pretty much on top of each other.

**BH:** Let's take a look at *Iris*.

Clip from *Iris*

**JB:** Just a touch of Tony Blair just creeping in there.

**BH:** Yes, sorry about that. We couldn't cut off Tony Blair before he started speaking. I guess the thing to ask you about *Iris*, you've played a lot of real-life people: Denis Thatcher, Lord Longford on television. But this, John Bayley was alive, did you speak to him, how involved did you get with him?

**JB:** Not at all. I listened to a radio interview, a long radio interview he'd done, and I heard that a lot. I listened to it over and over and over again, but he wasn't available to chat to. Again, straight out of *Gangs of New York*, literally got the plane in the afternoon and started rehearsing the next morning. There was very little rehearsal and I think John was poorly at the time so he wasn't available to talk to at all, but I had listened to his voice. And I think if the voice is there I find it so, so useful to get into and to reveal the character, and that was the main thing. And there was no film of him but lots of stills and photographs. I met him afterwards. I think I met him at the premiere

more or less and he was, he'd already seen it, maybe that was the first time he'd seen it actually, but he was delightful and I think he, the second time he saw it I think he began to enjoy it, and the first time he just thought 'that's not my life. That's not what we were like.' And we knew it wasn't, it's a fiction based on known facts.

**BH:** Absolutely. I think those scenes, that scene is probably one of the best in the film, but those scenes of you and Judi Dench together in the house and the kitchen kind of just dealing with the onset of her disease really seemed incredibly real. Does it take a long time to get the tone of those, you working with Judi Dench, or was it something that was there?

**JB:** Not really. My mother had been through a very similar journey as *Iris*, and so I knew that and Judi instinctively knew how it would be. She hadn't had a close up experience of any Alzheimer's in her experience and family, but she was so accurate that it was the easiest thing in the world to. I knew how I'd behaved around Alzheimer's sufferers, and that was the easiest thing in the world to recapture I suppose in many ways, so that wasn't a job involving heavy research. Richard...

**BH:** Richard Eyre.

**JB:** ...in writing it and directing it, they'd had that experience of Alzheimer's. So it was all terribly, it was all on the page really.

**BH:** It's a very intense film to watch. Is it an intense experience making that kind of film as well?

**JB:** Not really. It's a laugh. With Judi particularly there's a lot of laughter, and we seem to work in the same way – a lot of laughter and then when it gets close to the moment of doing these rather awful scenes the focus is on that. That was one of the great delights. You can't be intense all day, your energy would just die completely so you have to balance it.

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**BH:** So you mentioned it, at the same time you'd just come off of *Gangs of New York*, so we have to ask about that. That was an epic shoot as well, months and months. How long did that, were you on set much?

**JB:** I suppose it must have been six months or so, to and fro to Rome.

**BH:** And the two people I have to ask you about, Scorsese, what was he like to work with?

**JB:** Scorsese?

**BH:** Yeah.

**JB:** In a word? Extraordinarily brilliant, and exciting, and very communicative. But some of those scenes that we were working on were so massive, hundreds and hundreds of extras, and to see sort of classic huge shots that come follow the characters down off one boat, across the dock and up onto another one. I mean huge, long, long takes, and most magnificent just seeing someone orchestrating that, the General, is just extraordinary. And he's always in good humour and always approachable to ask him about some sort of curious piece of cinema history and he'll give you the time of day. No, he's wonderful.

**BH:** And in terms of your performance and in terms of his getting your performance out of you, is he the opposite of Woody Allen? Is he giving you a lot of feedback all the time?

**JB:** I wouldn't say the opposite. No I think these guys, once they cast you, they by and large trust you to get on with it. Obviously there was elements, I can't honestly remember him being difficult. I think some of the filming logistically was extremely difficult but I don't remember having any great struggle over any of our acting. We got on with it.

**BH:** Because the other question I was going to ask, Daniel Day-Lewis of course famous for his method. Did you see that there?

**JB:** Yes, that was all going on.

**BH:** And what do you think about that kind of approach to acting?

**JB:** Well it seems to work, doesn't it? I couldn't manage it for a moment. I'm far too light-minded. I would flit off into any bit of gossip or game of cards or anything. No, it's remarkable and it's clearly worth it, but it's each to his own.

**BH:** In terms of the rest of the cast working with someone like that, do you just all carry on as you usually do and you're just dealing with that?

**JB:** Yeah. You learn to respect each other's space in different ways. There's a lot of us there obviously in some of those scenes, so we're all hanging around playing football or something, he's not going to come in in character and upset us, and we're not going to go up to him and start telling him about recent television.

**BH:** I want to mention some of your TV work, because *Longford* I want to mention. You are one of the rare actors who has done a lot of television, a lot of great television, won BAFTAs, a lot of great films. Do you think about that at all? Is it one or the other, or are these just roles and you take the roles as they come along?

**JB:** It is the script and the role principally, but I love television and I love, I think the sort of balance of work and time is perhaps more suited to me. I like the quite quick, I mean film can be quick as well in a similar way, but the budget of good television I think suits me rather than the budget of huge films.

**BH:** Absolutely. What is the difference of experience in making a big Hollywood film, say for example Spielberg, you worked on the last Indiana Jones film, massive production.

**JB:** Yeah, I wasn't in much of it.

**BH:** You were in enough of it.

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**JB:** No, I wasn't in the big, the massive scenes. Yes it is a different level of, a different experience. I'd be interested to do one of those sort [of] big, massive action things which I've never done really, not been in the heart of. I think *The Borrowers* is the closest I've been to one of those.

**BH:** So you'd like to be an action hero?

**JB:** Yeah, absolutely. There's still time.

**BH:** Yeah, completely. Other films at that time I wanted to mention, *Hot Fuzz*, which is on every other week on television. A lot of people's favourite, particularly on ITV2, was that as much fun to make?

**JB:** That was real fun that was, yeah. I mean all those brilliant, young comedians.

**BH:** Edgar Wright, Simon Pegg, Nick Frost.

**JB:** And Bill Bailey and Kevin Eldon, lots of those guys, and then there was us. Karl Johnson and Stuart Wilson and Ken Cranham, so there's a load of old cronies and these exciting, young, energetic ones. It was a perfect blend really. We had a wonderful time.

**BH:** You have done a lot of comedic work, and going way back to National Theatre of Brent which we talked about, you are a great comic. It strikes me that, and I was talking to Emma Thompson about this here last week, that she was saying how British actors are steeped in comedy and they find the comedy almost in everything they do. Do you feel that way, that that is an important thing for you?

**JB:** Yeah, there's a great line in *Illuminatus*, "it's only true if it makes you laugh," which has sort of been a bit of a something I've carried with me. If you do get it right and it is true then it will make people laugh, and comedy is, that's from my viewpoint where comedy comes from. They're very closely tied, and drama I always think should have elements of humour in it.

**BH:** But do you think it's a particularly British thing? A lot of great British actors started out doing comedy.

**JB:** I think it's probably true, yes. I haven't thought of it particularly, but I think there's a lot of that, if you do a lot of stage work, anything you do on stage you just savour laughs, whatever it is you're doing. So maybe it comes from that. You know you just want, you get your approval by getting a laugh. Chekhov, I mean particularly Chekhov actually because they are comedies. Ibsen is darker but you want to find the humour in that and get people laughing because it means you're getting it right to some extent.

**BH:** Among the many films we could have picked out to show clips, *When Did You Last See Your Father?* was a kind of really moving, interesting script. Was that a script you thought, oh yeah, this is going to be a juicy, meaty role?'

**JB:** Yeah, it's a sort of iconic book isn't it, a wonderful piece of writing. And to be in it and in that complex story was irresistible.

**BH:** And, complete contrast, *Cloud Atlas*. Do you feel, a film like that, a massive undertaking, working with this fascinating duo The Wachowskis. I feel it's going to be a kind of unique film that might be underrated and rather undervalued. Do you feel that way about it, and what was that like as an experience making that?

**JB:** It was a fabulous experience. Most of my work was actually with Tom Tykwer, not with The Wachowskis.

**BH:** Oh, of course. Three directors.

**JB:** Because they did three stories each. But it was just really exciting to be playing so many roles and going from one set to the other. On one day you'd be one character with Tom Tykwer, next day you'd be a totally different character with the other directors. And it was so, they had altogether that excited energy that

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Mike had with *Topsy-Turvy* and Baz had with *Moulin Rouge!* and this one, and Gamble had with *Illuminatus*, and Patrick had with *The National Theatre of Brent*. All those really exciting jobs where there's such an enthusiasm and weight and inventiveness and creativity going into it. Yes I think it was a bit disappointing how it was received, and probably very disappointing from their point of view because they put so much into it. But it was a wonderful job to be a part of.

**BH:** Why do you think it was, do you have a sense of why? Because it's so ambitious to intercut these seven stories, as you say to have all of playing all of these different roles. You play, to remind you, Captain Molyneux, Vyvyan Ayrs, Timothy Cavendish and a Korean musician, and *Prescient 2*. Such an ambitious, unusual idea. Do you think people just didn't get it?

**JB:** I don't know really. I think it's probably a hard one to sell, because it doesn't relate to anything else that current audiences see. And it was an independent film.

**BH:** It was like a \$100million independent film.

**JB:** Yeah, I think the most expensive independent film ever. And Warner Bros., I think it was Warner Bros. [who] had the distribution, but it wasn't one of theirs so maybe they weren't quite as enthusiastic about it as if it had been one of theirs and didn't really get the weighty push it needed really.

**BH:** When you see a film like that put together finally, what was your feeling about it when you see the final, kind of the three-hour, and all of the stories intercut and all of it?

**JB:** It's a bit like seeing a Mike Leigh film when you don't know what the other characters have been up to in the bits you're not in. It was wonderful; we were just blown away with it. The wonderful scale of it and the vision.

**BH:** Well in sharp contrast, let's come bang up to date with this year's release, *Le Week-End*. This complete contrast to most of the roles we've seen, this feels like almost a kind of a low-key character to play, and you're almost underplaying this character. Was that how you approached it, was that something you were aware of?

**JB:** No, well I think in a way it's, the character is closer to me than most characters I've played. Whether that means he's an underplayed, low-key, muted chap or not I don't know. I didn't have to stretch and do, it certainly wasn't *Moulin Rouge!*. I wasn't called upon to do extreme acting, and it was a genuinely wonderful experience to get into playing that sort of naturalism which is not something I've done all that much.

**BH:** Sure. Let's take a look at the clip.

*Clip from Le Week-End*

**BH:** Yeah, underplaying is the wrong word; it's just incredibly naturalistic. The film, and particularly the relationship between your character and Lindsay Duncan's character as we can see there just feels so real. Again, is that all in the script? Is that you working with Lindsay?

**JB:** It's in the script and then we had quite a bit of rehearsal, Lindsay and Roger [Michell] and I, and Hanif [Kureishi] around, we sort of worked on it a bit until we found the reality of it, which is all there in the script really. Then it is a matter of us finding it and Roger enjoying it and condoning it, and us getting on with it really.

**BH:** So you say it's one of the closest characters to you. When you read the script did you think, 'oh this is similar to me?'

**JB:** Well some of the character, but I recognised a lot of it, a lot of Lindsay's character, Meg's character I recognise as similar to me. Because it was a relationship I recognised, and we both, both characters sort of swap roles within a

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relationship to some extent, and I recognised so much of it which is why it was so attractive for me to do it. It seemed an honest, perceptive piece of work.

**BH:** Do you know, did Hanif Kureishi write it for you, did he have you in mind? Do you know?

**JB:** I don't think so, no.

**BH:** No? Just magically it came about. The other great, Jeff Goldblum is the kind of, the two of you have been married for ages and you're, and Jeff Goldblum comes in as this completely unique, loud, semi-obnoxious American. He looks like incredible fun to work with.

**JB:** It was a delight. And I think we'd done sort of three weeks together the two of us bumbling around Paris, and then the last week Jeff arrived with this blast of energy from the New World and completely shook us. It was a wonderful sort of coup de cinema on Roger's part, and so it was a fantastic delight when Jeff arrived. It was quite hard for me, to a degree. I'd just worked out how Lindsay works, which is before a take she likes to be quite quiet and focus, and my jabbering on was not particularly appreciated. And then Jeff arrives, and his way of working before a take is, 'okay let's play the movie game. Now, you say Dustin Hoffman, I say *Midnight Cowboy*. You say Jon Voight, I say...' Right and 'Action', on we go! So he's completely motor mouth before a take. And I'm between the two of them and trying to keep him happy and trying to keep her happy is quite a difficult position. I was the moderator I suppose.

**BH:** Absolutely. So he's not a million miles away from his character either?

**JB:** Very, very close I think. And that was written with him in mind.

**BH:** And you filmed that pretty much in sequence, is that right?

**JB:** Yes, absolutely. That was part of the delight of it. The first scene we shot was actually while we were on the train going to Paris to shoot the whole film. And the last scene we shot was I think the final scene with Jeff pretty much.

**BH:** That's a pretty unique experience, isn't it, to film something in sequence?

**JB:** The whole thing was very, a very light crew, no generator, no heavy lights carried around and no trailers, we just changed in flats that the French crew had borrowed for the day for us to change in. The whole thing was very organic and easy and lovely. You know every day, found the best little bistro next door where all the crew would go and eat and have lunch, and it was all set up, it was delightful. Really fun.

**BH:** A couple of things I wanted to mention. The few who haven't seen it, they must go and see it, I think it's still on, around. There's one scene where you're listening to Bob Dylan on your headphones, it's just kind of observing you listening to him, Like a Rolling Stone I think is playing. Again, was that there in the script?

**JB:** That's there in the script. Yes, very much. Something that I think Roger was particularly keen on putting in and having that moment and that particular song. Very expensive I think, but it was deemed to be necessary and vital and worth it.

**BH:** And the great moment is when you first meet the son, Jeff Goldblum's character's son, who's kind of getting high on dope in his bedroom, and you're just watching him. That's a great scene. And then you do proceed to kind of get a bit high yourself. Is that kind of fun to make that kind of scene? And he was great in it.

**JB:** Yes, Olly Alexander, wonderful, wonderful young actor. They're so good these chaps. Impeccable, I thought he was American when I first met him, impeccable American accent. A lovely scene to do.

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**BH:** And what are you smoking in that scene?

**JB:** It wasn't anything illegal.

**BH:** I just thought I had to check.

**JB:** No, I couldn't cope with that these days.

**BH:** It must have been a great joy. This kind of film, a meaty role opposite great other cast comes along at this point. Does that feel a rare experience when you get a script like that and get offered a role like that?

**JB:** Yes, rare scripts, good scripts are rare anyway. Not two a penny, it's wonderful when they turn up, really good ones.

**BH:** I'm going to open it up to the audience in a minute, but before I do, we've looked back at various films, we've mentioned all of these great directors. Great actors, we didn't really talk that much about working with Meryl Streep as Thatcher and all of that, but do you think, was there ever a plan first of all, when you go right back do you think you wanted to do great films, great TV, or does it all just, one after another these great roles came along? And now you've worked with all of these people, do you have a thing you're most proud of?

**JB:** Most proud? No, I'm proud to be here. Proud to have got this far and still be doing, of the whole. And I suppose I was always ambitious from the word go. I mean all actors are. All of us when we go to drama school, we're all ambitious to have huge, successful careers. But I think I wasn't particularly impatient. I was prepared to, I mean I loved all the stuff I've done all the way along the line, with quite a sort of beady eye on what I might want to do next. It's sort of getting the balance of enjoying where you are then and thinking what you want to do next. But I think the whole game has suited my psyche really, I sort of enjoy it but when I'm getting bored with it, look for something new and different and spread the net wide and hopefully keep working.

**BH:** Well it's worked out pretty well so far. Excellent, we've got time for some questions from the audience. So we've got some roving mics. If you have a question put your hand up, and maybe say who you are and where you're from. Gentleman there at the back.

**Question:** Thank you. *Le Week-End* I thought was an incredible piece of filmmaking and a masterpiece, but I have to ask you some questions. I asked Hanif Kureishi this and unfortunately he metaphorically ran off. I was deeply offended by the portrayal of Birmingham in the film and I find it highly offensive. Hanif Kureishi, he knew he was busted because basically he was being place-ist.

**JB:** Sir, what is the question?

**Question:** The question is, your character is place-ist. He's offensive towards Birmingham. He portrays it in a negative light and his justification in the character.

**JB:** Yeah, well, blame Hanif really.

**Question:** Well he ran off, he wouldn't answer it.

**JB:** Oh well, I don't know Birmingham very well.

**Question:** To make the statements that your character does in the film, you said it was close to you, is actually quite offensive.

**BH:** You're not really offended? You're surely...

**Question:** I am, I'm incredibly offended. In the same way that...

**JB:** Well the character's offensive but...

**Question:** The character arc should have had some justification for his acts and see the demonstration of what the concurrence of his actions were, but it wasn't, it was very, very offensive.

**BH:** Very, very. Well.

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**Question:** I was, I'm sorry I was deeply offended. It's a masterpiece piece of filmmaking.

**JB:** I think you should have taken it up with Hanif.

**Question:** I did, and he ran off.

**JB:** I should have said, no I can't say this.

**Question:** But it is. If you go back to, I mean David Edgar for example who's a very famous Birmingham writer would have described the characterisation as stupidly stupid.

**JB:** Well I think if Birmingham's big enough it can take it really.

**BH:** Any less Birmingham-centric questions? Yes, right at the front, just to test the microphone speed. There's a microphone on its way, sorry, just so that we can all hear. Sorry, here we go.

**Question:** Hi. I just wanted to ask you, when you get a script, what swings it for you to take the role apart from who the director is, who the co-stars are? Does that make a big difference or is it, even if the role is very miniscule in a big-budget film, would you still take the role?

**JB:** It's always a massive equation. Ability to get to the end of the script first of all. I mean it has to be the script. The script is the main thing. And then is it a script that surprises and interests and all those things, because it's not derivative or repetitive? And then is the part surprising and interesting to me to take on? If those two things are covered then you start thinking about the money, the location and the personnel, you know. Maybe the money becomes the first thing you think about depending on your situation at the time. But it's always the script and the character really, and then if it's a good script the chances are that the director who's attached is also good, and the other actors who are going to be attached are also good. It sort of builds up.

**Question:** Thank you.

**BH:** Gentleman up there, yes. Mic on its way.

**Question:** What's your ratio do you think of the number of scripts you read to the roles you take?

**JB:** The ones I read, or the ones that are sent through to the agent?

**Question:** Exactly. How many film scripts are sent to you, that of that number roughly what do you take. One in 20? 100? 200?

**JB:** No it's, the percentage is relatively low. The number I do is quite a relatively high percentage of the ones I get sent, or the ones I actually get to read. But even so, we have a sort of quite a good instinct between us, agent Sally Long-Innes, to spot ones they know I'm not going to be interested in at all, so I won't really have to read that one. But it's actually, there isn't a vast number of scripts arriving, and quite a number of the ones I do read are pretty good. But not all good enough.

**BH:** The gentleman just behind.

**Question:** Hi, hello. Are you tempted ever to return to the theatre, or are you quite comfortable now as an actor in front of the camera?

**JB:** The last theatre I did I think was about six years ago, and before that it was about three years before that maybe. And I always say that I'll do, that I'm equally happy to do whichever, but the tests show that I do more film. So I think probably if I'm honest I do prefer doing film and television. I love theatre, but I love new theatre, new plays. That's what I always started doing, and I'm never a great one for Shakespeare and the classics, and those are the ones that an awful lot get done, and there's not enough new theatre comes my way that is really exciting. To do the Pinter that has been done three times in the last ten years doesn't really interest. I'd love to do Pinter per se, but the fact that it's so familiar to us all is a bit of a downer from my point of view

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when I get to think about it. And there are lots of other examples.

**BH:** So do you get offered things? If you got offered something like *King Lear* would you not want to do that?

**JB:** I don't know.

**BH:** That's not a no. Thank you. Oh, now we're going to test the microphone really with someone in the middle in the second from the back.

**Question:** Hello. You said tonight you started acting when you were five years old.

**JB:** Yeah, and I stopped when I was five for the next 20 years.

**Question:** Ah. I've seen quite a lot of your work, but I wonder if you've ever played a character under the age of fifty?

**JB:** Yes, I must have. Yes, the, I think, Warner Purcell in *Bullets Over Broadway*, he looked under 50, didn't he? Not so much, no. I wasn't doing films much when I was under 50.

**BH:** Your early TV work you were doing, you did *Only Fools and Horses*.

**JB:** Yeah, [Roy] Slater, he aged over the years from quite a young man. There's quite a lot of stuff initially. *Play for Today* and things.

**BH:** I guess part of your question; you have played quite a lot of characters who are older than you are.

**JB:** Yes, that certainly started, I mean *Iris*. I've had quite a battle actually to decide not to play any septuagenarians or octogenarians for the while because it was becoming too, the scripts I was being sent, too many of them were old, old men. I thought 'well I'm only 64 now' and this has been going on for some decades. So, sort of resisting

some of the really old ones. That will come in time anyway.

**BH:** Oh right down the front. From the back to the front. Sorry, mic is on its way, sorry.

**Question:** Hello, I'm Michael from National Film and Television School. What was difficult for you in the whole journey, and how did you work on that?

**JB:** Sorry, what was...

**Question:** What was more difficult when you travelled to this journey?

**JB:** The journey of the career?

**Question:** Yes, career. How did you work on that if you had a problem somewhere when you were travelling, because a huge journey, it's not easy for everybody. So how did you overcome those hurdles you faced?

**JB:** It's part of the game. I mean, if you're going to be an actor you know it's not going to be easy and you have to be obsessed to take it on. And if you don't have that obsession you're going to duck out at the first opportunity, so it's part of the nature of the business. You know it's going to be tricky from time to time for all sorts of reasons, but we're all, just only do it because we have to really so that's the answer. You just keep doing it.

**BH:** Thank you. Ah, there's a little rash of questions. This lady at the end, there.

**Question:** Hi. I was just wondering if there was any actor or director that you would like to work with that you haven't already?

**JB:** Yeah, loads I'm sure. On the whole I like the surprise, I don't write to them and say 'Dear X, I would love to work with you.' I've never done that. I probably won't mention any that I particularly want to work with because you never know, they might react and think 'oh, he's a bit keen.' The surprise when some of these guys do

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come through it's wonderful. It's the old actor's joke. When the phone rings in the green room, 'is that Spielberg? Tell him I'm busy, I don't want to know.' When you actually get that call it's sublime.

**BH:** Definitely the opposite of a pushy actor.

**JB:** I suppose, yes.

**BH:** This gentleman, there. Oh sorry, carry on.

**Question:** I just wanted to say, you could maybe jump in with Edgar Wright again and do *Ant-Man* if you were trying an action.

**BH:** Edgar Wright is doing *Ant-Man*, whether you wanted, you could jump in there and do your action role.

**JB:** Oh right, yes.

**BH:** We'll be in touch with him.

**Question:** Hi, I'm just wondering, two related questions I guess. First one, is there any roles that you've passed on that with hindsight you wish you had taken, and alternatively is there any roles that you've taken either in theatre or in film that in hindsight you wish you hadn't?

**JB:** Yeah, both. The ones you pass on, there's been one or two that have gone on to be hugely successful. I think, 'well that goes down in the rather big black book of missed opportunities'. But no, I haven't actually regretted any of those things, and my reasons remain the same. One of the answers to your question was a script comes through, is it something I would like to go and see? That's one of the big things. Would I want to be in that audience, and then if not you can't really put your weight behind it. So I passed on a few things that would not really have been my cup of tea as an audience member, and they have gone on and appealed to vast audiences but they wouldn't have included me, if you see what I mean. So I don't really mind. And for the other ones, not really regret any, taking any role

particularly, no. It's all grist to the mill. All experience.

**BH:** Thank you. I think there was one more question there. Oh yes, the lady just behind.

**Question:** I was just wondering, has there been a specific film that's had a kind of, an effect in terms of a role that you've taken, where it's always kind of stayed with you? Or a specific film that you've taken the role and has had a bit of kind of an impact on your kind of career and your life, and you've enjoyed working on it?

**JB:** All have had an impact on my career, because as I say, most of the jobs I've done, I've done because I've really wanted to do them, and I've got a huge amount out of them. But do mean the role particularly?

**Question:** The role in general, like is there one specific that's really kind of...

**JB:** Not particularly I don't think. When I first started working with Mike Leigh on stage, his way of working I got totally and probably too much into the idea of the character I was playing, but that was sort of, that it was, learned a lesson there that it was best to actually leave a character on the set and not take it home. Inevitably all those things feed into your life one way or another.

**BH:** Thank you. On that note, oh we've got one more question from the lady I've just noticed on the second row. In the middle.

**Question:** When you left drama school, did you have a vision of the actor you wanted to be, and have you become that actor?

**JB:** No. I had, I wanted a long career, and I wanted to be, I probably wanted to win an Oscar, and probably...

**BH:** And a BAFTA.

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**JB:** And a BAFTA. And wanted to be, stay in posh hotels at some stage in my life. But I've never had a list of jobs, roles I've wanted to play, and I've always found the roles that people come up with are more surprising than any I could come up with. A lot of those roles they would never have occurred to me to put myself forward for, or to ask about, and almost all of them are beyond my imagination for what I might do. And so I've stuck with that really.

**BH:** Thank you. Thank you for a great last question. I think we've run out of time, so I just want to thank you all for coming, some great questions, even the one about Birmingham. And particularly to thank Jim Broadbent for being brilliant, thank you very much.