

## BAFTA and BFI Screenwriters' Lecture Series: Steven Knight 29 September 2014 at BAFTA 195 Piccadilly

**Jeremy Brock:** Hello, I'm Jeremy Brock. On behalf of BAFTA and the BFI, welcome to the third and final event in the 2014 International Screenwriters' Lectures, and what a year it's been. We began with a preternaturally articulate disquisition on anti-art, German expressionism and copyright law circa 1920 Hollywood from the intellectual contrarian James Schamus none the less. We then moved on to an equally fiercely articulate counter-proposition from the world-renowned Emma Thompson with performance art included. We are tonight honoured to welcome for our final event Steven Knight who is one of the world's most gifted, prolific writer-directors. His filmography, which I'm sure you know, includes *Dirty Pretty Things*, *Amazing Grace*, *Eastern Promises*, *Hummingbird*, *Peaky Blinders* and the brilliant *Locke*. Steven will be in conversation with Briony Hanson, Director of Film at the British Council, after which as we always do we'll open it up to the floor, but before that Briony will make a short introduction. Ladies and gentlemen, Steven Knight. Thank you.

[Applause]

**Briony Hanson:** Good evening ladies and gentlemen. Very, very short in fact. I just want to say that I'm a huge fan of this series, I think I've been a bit of an addict all along and I'm always intrigued to see how the different processes come to life in what the writers say, but I'm also really struck by the way those differences are outlined by the way the lectures are delivered or the entertainment kind of happens. And you're absolutely right, we went from Kant and Hegel to hoovering and yoga. I think tonight is going to be very different again. I think Steven's ambition tonight was to get very practical, to give you something really meaty to take away with you, so I hope you've got your notebooks handy. I will also, obviously then we'll get a chance to kind of get inside the mind of the incredibly prolific and very down to earth Steven Knight, so I hope you will all take some notes. I'd normally do a list of credits but Jeremy's just done them so I don't need to do that, but we decided instead of doing a kind of stop-start approach to tonight that we would show

you, we want to talk about some very specific areas of the writer's craft, and in order to do that we've selected a range of clips from six of his films which will help to prompt particular areas of discussion. So rather than stop-start as we go along, we're going to show them all at the front. So we're going to show six films, about ten minutes in total, so if you just sit back and relax and relive the world of Steven Knight, and then we'll get Steven on to talk and I imagine the end result will be that you will all discover that there are indeed a million ways to write a screenplay. So let's have the clips, please.

[Clips from *Dirty Pretty Things*, *Amazing Grace*, *Eastern Promises*, *Hummingbird*, *Peaky Blinders* and *Locke*]

[Applause]

Ladies and gentlemen, Steven Knight. Or we could just watch the whole of *Locke*. Steven thank you so much for giving us this hour and a half. There seems to be so much to cover but I think we'd better start in a very, very simple place, at the very beginning. You are particularly celebrated, I might say infamous, for having created *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?*. You went from that to *Dirty Pretty Things*, which seems in anybody's language a quite an extreme jump. Could you talk us through that jump?

**Steven Knight:** Yeah, I mean I was doing two things at once for quite a long time. I was doing television and writing novels, and the television was for a production company that did comedy and drama and also game shows, so you could on any given day walk up a flight of stairs and present a game show idea. So myself and two other people, Mike Whitehill and David Briggs, we did game shows now and again and some of them did okay, and then this one just went insane and really became successful in the US. But at the same time, pretty much exactly the same time, I was writing a fourth novel, and for some reason I was writing it in the present tense, and it was just a description of a scene in a hotel, and when I read it back it felt like a screenplay. So I thought I would do it as a screenplay instead, so I wrote that and then presented that at

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around the same time. And nothing happened for a while, and then it was, what was the screen...?

**BH:** Script Factory.

**SK:** Script Factory did a reading which was great and that helped, and then Stephen Frears picked it up and then it got made. So the two things kind of happened, a lot of luck and coincidence and stuff, yeah.

**BH:** And so *Dirty Pretty Things* was actually the first full-length screenplay that you'd written.

**SK:** Yeah.

**BH:** You hadn't done a couple of drafts of something else first?

**SK:** No.

**BH:** Okay, beat that. Okay. And did you, was there, kind of, how different was the sort of TV comedy, TV comedy-drama, and also you'd done sort of stand-up writing, and you'd done *Millionaire*, I mean how different was that world from the slightly unforgiving feature film world that you then found yourself in.

**SK:** I mean comedy is unforgiving as well, I mean perhaps even more so. I mean I started writing comedy for TV and also for stand-up, and in the early days for people like Ken Dodd, Frankie Howerd; old-school, surreal, brilliant comedians who had got these acts that they had put together over 40 years and had perfected every single... If you saw them, if you saw any of those old comedians on a different night, everything would be the same, identical, because they knew what would make people laugh and they knew what would put people off and stop them from laughing. Anybody who's told a joke knows if you tell a joke in a pub, you get a word wrong or the emphasis is wrong, it sort of disappears. And so from that experience I sort of learned that even if you're not trying to make people laugh, there is absolute, there's an absolute right way and a wrong way of doing something, of saying something, and a joke is the perfect thing. But you know, if you're writing drama, if you think

of it as a joke but it's not a joke, it's not got a punchline but you've got to get it right, and so that was quite helpful. But I found the comedy much more unforgiving, in fact moving into drama was like a relief in a way because you're not constantly trying to make the audience make that noise, that if they don't make it you're dead.

**BH:** And what about the sort of developments and support systems to kind of get, you know, all those kind of products, projects out. You know a game show, a TV drama, a feature film script, I mean how did you navigate your way through the feature film world?

**SK:** In my mind I had, well not in my mind in reality, I had two computers, so there was two different worlds.

**BH:** Two different yours.

**SK:** Yeah, exactly. And one paid the bills and was the TV stuff, but the novels were replaced by the screenplays, in other words that was the sort dreamy end of things, that was the stuff that I was doing for myself. And the screenplays, when *Dirty Pretty Things* took off, it was possible for me to just concentrate on that, and then from then on that's pretty much what I did until *Peaky Blinders* really.

**BH:** And do you think there was anything useful about, or was it completely separate, about the kind of *Millionaire*, light entertainment world when you then translated it into drama?

**SK:** Oh yeah. That light entertainment world, it's very hard, you know it's very hard to get right. Very, it's a very, I mean they're very funny people as well, and very different...

**BH:** You mean funny funny?

**SK:** Funny, they don't take themselves seriously.

**BH:** Oh right.

**SK:** And it's a very odd kind of light entertainment world. But with a game show again you've got to get it right, and you've got to get the, but you get it right by accident as with lots of things.

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Like with *Millionaire* we kept finding that the characters [*checks himself*] the characters! The contestants. Exactly, where they cross over. The contestants would keep taking the money when we were doing tests on it, so we had to keep trying to find ways to keep them playing the game, so we had to invent 'Phone a friend' and 'Ask the audience' and '50:50', but anyway. But those things, so almost by accident they worked somehow, so it is a lot of luck as well.

**BH:** And you made it sound very easy then when you said, "And then I wrote *Dirty Pretty Things*, and then Stephen Frears, and then blah blah blah." I mean presumably that was not like that. Tell us what you had at the beginning, like what did you start with there? You had your...

**SK:** Yeah I had the idea of, which is how anything that I do that's an original begins with a scene if you like, or a set-up sort of thing. I'd been in the BBC for something and I came out of the BBC, Broadcasting House and looked at, you know that hotel The Langham? And just looked at that and thought about that place and what it would be like inside. And I went inside and there was a, what I assume was an African porter, desk clerk, and I wondered what it was like at night and what would happen at night. So when I went home I started writing that scene of someone sitting there and then their phone rings, and he hears someone say, "She's dead, she's dead," and then the phone goes. And that was it, that was the original thought, and then from then on trying to think, well what was that all about then? And who is he, and why is he there, and then you start to build up on the character of who that person might be and all of that stuff. So that happened and I wrote the story and I was quite pleased with it. Not in Final Draft or in any legible form really but it was just written, and I presented it, naively thought, oh well I'll send it to BBC Films then. Because I was working for the BBC, doing things for the BBC at the time, so that seemed the logical place for it to go. And I got a response and The Script Factory thing happened. And you know when it's not what you do for a living, you sort of leave it alone a bit and you're not that concerned about it, and

sometimes, somehow it gets a life of its own and it starts to get momentum. Then it died a death and someone told me, "This will never get made. It's not the right time for this." All of that stuff. And then, and I sort of accepted it, and then Stephen Frears called to say that he'd read it and he liked it so I went to meet him, and he said, "Yeah, it's very good." He said, "But could you make the end better?" I said, "Okay, yeah, fine." He said, "Right, good, there you go," and that was it, that was the script meeting.

**BH:** And he never told you what he meant by that?

**SK:** No, no.

**BH:** So what did you do?

**SK:** I tried to make it better [*laughs*]. As best I could, I just changed it around. And then he then, it's a funny business, it's different here than it is in the US because it's much less definite. You just hear rumours, like you just, "Apparently Stephen's attached to your thing." "Is he?" You know I didn't know anything about that. And then you find that it's started to develop its own life somewhere, and the next thing I know it was going into production.

**BH:** And can you think back to kind of at that point, what were the sort of biggest challenges you had, I mean apart from understanding what "make it better" might mean, but what did you...?

**SK:** Looking back it was great and I wish all script meetings were like that, but at the time I thought, oh well that must be how it is, you just, you get given that sort of freedom. But it was a question of people liking the idea but having a problem with some element of it, and always a different element, and that's very common to the whole process of you know people are nearly there, they're nearly there, but there's one little hitch, there's one little problem. And it takes a sort of coagulation, lots of things happening at once, when suddenly someone comes along and takes the whole package and then that's when you can start to develop it. But Stephen's a different kettle of fish to most directors, you know he's got the clout and he, if he

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says this is going to work then people go along with it.

**BH:** Were there other people involved that kind of helped you in the process; developers, executives?

**SK:** Yeah, I mean, people, I mean obviously when you give it to Stephen and Chris Menges then it becomes a different thing, it becomes their thing, and that's when you learn the value of how really great directors take material and make it better. But they make it diff... It's not that the words change because the words didn't change, but it's the way that it's performed and the way that actors that take it on which was, all of that whole first film was an education. You know the clip at the beginning there with Audrey Tautou when she's dancing, that was a scene that I'd written where Audrey tells Chiwetel some really awful information about her life and how she's trapped and all of that, and it was written as sitting at a table, and then when I was on the set Stephen said, "Audrey's had this thought, and she's said, 'oh, I want to do it dancing with music on.'" And I thought, "This is insane, this is really bad news being broken and she's going to dance around and virtually sing it," and then she did it and it was brilliant you know, and so that's something where it's different, totally different to how you had it in your head, but it's better, and it's great. But the whole process sometimes, it's different, and you want it, eventually when you're a writer you want to try and make it the way you had it in your head.

**BH:** And can you talk a bit about your attitude to research. You said you came out, you saw the hotel, you went off and made it all up. I mean did you go and investigate that world, and have you done that with subsequent projects with you know Russian mafia and concrete?

**SK:** Yeah, you have to because it actually helps, rather than it being something that you think, well I better do this because otherwise I'll be told off, you know. It's sort of, usually whatever you find out that's the reality is so much more far-fetched and outlandish than anything you would make up, and so you can take the reality and bring it

back a bit. So you know, I was early stages of *Dirty Pretty Things* and I decided that he would be a doctor who was here illegally so couldn't practice and therefore was having to do a menial job, and started to find out about how people made a living, and then found out about the organ donors thing, and you know that's not something that would have probably sprung to mind if I hadn't read about it. And then suddenly it becomes the most obvious plot point that that's what happens, he's a doctor and he gets dragged into doing this sort of organ donation and stealing of organs. But the research is vitally important, however, I do think you have to sort of, Ed Zwick said, "Do the research and then ignore it," and you sort of do it like that. In other words, it's there somewhere, you've got some bits from it, but you can't be too restricted by it.

**BH:** And is that what's happened subsequently with you know London underworld or the Russian mafia?

**SK:** Yeah, I mean again the Russian stuff, when you start to do the research of the tattoo business and the language of the tattoos is incredible. And so that again is something that you don't make that up, it's really there, and that gives you a whole strand for the film. So I always think the reality, it's like *Hummingbird* is based on a true story but we weren't allowed to say it's a true story for some reason, I don't know why. But you know there was this Lithuanian nun and this alcoholic ex-Special Forces soldier having a relationship in London two years ago, you know what I mean, and it's like you take that and you think, bloody hell, can you go that far in fiction, and you sort of have to force yourself really.

**BH:** Do you find that, and presumably it can be too distracting as well?

**SK:** Yeah, it can be, you know sometimes the reality, everybody knows in their own life that two things can be happening at the same time that are so radically different to each other, and normally in fiction you choose. Like with *Locke* Tom had a cold when he turned up to start shooting, and normally you would think well someone can't have a cold and

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have their marriage break up at the same time because you've got to choose one or the other, when in fact, as everybody, it can happen at the same time. So in the end we said he's got a cold, so he's got a cold and that's fine you know, because that's what happens in the world, weird things happen.

**BH:** Have you always been on set?

**SK:** No.

**BH:** It sounds like that's quite an unusual experience because, I mean I know that Stephen Frears always likes his writers to go on set, and that presumably was a big part of your learning curve?

**SK:** Yeah, I mean learning so much from him and from Chris Menges as well, and you know Stephen was brilliant, and he's great with writers but you feel like the teacher's pet in a way because he can be quite severe with the rest of the crew and then he looks at you and goes, "Is that alright?" You can feel these knives in your back like, and he's always very sympathetic and good with the writer. So you do, it was unusual because I felt this is how it's done, you know, you stand at the monitor, you're with him at the monitor, and he was always good giving advice. When the Miramax executives arrived on the set, and they were fine, they were nice you know, and I left the monitor and went over and said hello and shook hands, and then came back to the monitor and Stephen's still there and he said, "Always make the money come to you." Hilarious.

**BH:** And that's been your lesson in life.

**SK:** Yes, well no, sadly not.

**BH:** And with subsequent projects when you haven't been the director, have you gone on set and always done that?

**SK:** Yeah, it's a difficult thing because there's no point, if you're just going to go one day a week you can't turn up on that day and go oh that's wrong, you know you can't do it like that because you can't just step in on a particular scene and make a point. So you have to accept that when you, it's a social occasion when you visit the set unless

you're there all the time. But much more relevant now is that you can get rushes on computer, so you've got a coded website and you can see rushes the next day. So if you feel that there's something not right, it's much more effective than going on the set when there's loads of people and you know you're having conversations. But if you look at the rushes you can sort of feel that maybe something maybe isn't going right, and then you can have a proper conversation and say, you know I think this maybe could be different.

**BH:** Are you surprised, were you surprised then when you went on set and saw what they were doing with your script? I mean did you, was it what you thought, I mean apart from Audrey doing you know slightly bringing something to life?

**SK:** No, it was the first experience of, a real education, because when I first saw the assembly, the first assembly, I thought, "This is awful. This is the worst, this is embarrassing, this is a nightmare." Honestly, and I said to someone else, "This is just the..." And all it was, it's that it's not the same as you imagined it. And then people watch it and they say, "That's really good," and you think, "Oh they're just obviously being nice," because it's not. And then other people who you don't know see it and they like it and you realise you're being an idiot, because all that's happened is the thing you had in your head is, it's different; somebody's done it differently, and it's better. But it's because it's not the same at first, the first time you see it you think, "No that's all wrong, it shouldn't look like that, it shouldn't be like that." And then you sort of realise you have to let go of that until recently when I've thought "well I'll try and do the film that's in my head as well," so that's why I wanted to direct.

**BH:** Okay, I'll come back to that. Let's talk, let's move to the sort of specific craft areas that you said you were happy to talk about. The first one would be structure, and specifically kind of beginnings and a little bit of endings if you like. The clip we chose from *Dirty Pretty Things* was obviously the opening, tell us about how you kind of got into the story, the kind of processes you went

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through to kind of you know choose to reveal when and...

**SK:** Yeah, the opening of that is very specific. I, if possible, try to make the opening of the film an event or a decision which causes the rest of the film to happen. So it's like the pebble that hits the pond, it's like because of that moment in the opening, even if you don't realise it at the time when you're watching it, because of that moment everything else happens and wouldn't have happened if it hadn't been for that moment. So like with *Locke* he indicates left and then changes his mind and indicates right, and that's why the whole film happens. Not so much with *Dirty Pretty Things*, but it was he, I'd decided he was gonna be a doctor who was here illegally, so what would he do? Probably a minicab driver. So it was trying to get London established in a way that is, not like, you know, Buckingham Palace or something, it was London, the people arriving, and he behaving in a way that isn't quite London, he's touting for work. And the opportunity to deliver a line which in its environment is okay, which is, you know, "I'm here to help people let down by the system," which subsequently hopefully has an extra meaning or a different meaning as the film goes on. But in that case it's not that moment that starts everything, that's more establishing him, but I always find it quite neat if the first thing you see is the thing that leads to the rest of the film.

**BH:** And how did you get to that point, because that line is completely, like it's the whole film on the nose right there. How did you get to that, at which point did you have that opening, or did you try a million other ways?

**SK:** No I tried other ways. I was learning, I was a bit more uncertain when I was doing that because it was the first one. And I started exactly as I said, looking at the hotel, so it began with an exterior of the hotel coming down, finding Okwe, and then the phone call. So that was the opening of the film, that would have been the way, the purest way of starting it, but it sort of was a bit weird so it didn't quite work. So it needed something a bit more daylight-y, for some reason, to get into the character. And what I, thinking

back actually, what I wanted to do which didn't quite happen is to have a crowd scene, and then the last person you expect to be the subject of the film. That's right, I sort of wanted to, you know those two people who he picks up? The idea being that you think it's them, that it's going to be about them, and then Okwe comes and he's just the driver, and they're in the back having this conversation, and then they get out but it's actually about him, but it was a bit tricky. So that was the original idea was to sort and try and play that trick of you know, my theory of if you're in London there's a minicab, the story of the driver will always be more interesting than the passenger, or usually it will be, because the driver's probably escaped from Somalia and had this incredible experience just to get here, so that was kind of trying to make that point at the beginning.

**BH:** Can you do the same with *Eastern Promises*?

**SK:** Yeah, that again is an attempt to make the event, the opening event the cause of everything, where the girl loses a baby and you subsequently find out that's what's going to undo the family, the villainous family, but you don't know at the time. So again it was trying to find, obviously at the beginning you want to shock people a bit, you want to get their attention, so you're looking for something that's got a bit of colour and drama to it, but where possible try and make it, without that moment none of the rest of this would happen.

**BH:** And how slavish are you, I mean how slavishly do you think about structure?

**SK:** I should think about it more. I mean it's not clever to not think about it at all.

**BH:** It's worked well so far though.

**SK:** No but it's, it sort of does, but the way I've tended to do things is I just start writing anything and just keep going and then read it back, and then think what's... This is for an original, if you're doing an adaptation of a book or someone else's idea or a true story then that's, it's different, you know what's going to happen. But if it's an original

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idea I find it's much nicer to just start writing, read it back, and then think about what's going on. And in the end you write, it's not very economical because you write a lot of stuff and then afterwards impose some kind of structure on it. But the whole three act thing, I don't know, it's, in Hollywood you know you've got no choice, you have to do that. You have to do the three acts, you have to do the character arc.

**BH:** But can you look back on the scripts once you've written them and see that you have those elements?

**SK:** Sort of, yeah, I mean the three acts, it does, it is really there, intrinsically there in a story I think, as it is in a joke. So you've got the punchline, the set-up, and then the bit in the middle. But the one I have most problem with is the idea that the character has to change, the lead character must change. And in America the lead character must improve, you know and it's absolutely an essential rule, you know he's got to get better, or she. And I'm not sure that that necessarily should be the case and, you know, I don't know if many people change that radically over the course of an event or a sequence you know, and I prefer the idea that they stay who they are. But the rules of the game are such that in Hollywood people actually look for evidence that the rules have been adhered to. You know, where's the end of the first act? And you don't know, so in the end you sort of invent one. But telling, I mean *Locke* is hopefully not like that, and it's much more just one journey. And *Locke* was an attempt to sort of play around with all of those concepts like the journey, and it is a journey and, you know, the future's there and the past is there, and that's the past in the rear-view mirror sort of thing. So, yeah, I can't remember what the question was, sorry.

**BH:** Go back to, just go back to adaptation, you just touched on that briefly, specifically with *Amazing Grace* which we saw a clip of. That's a very different kind of adaptation because you're adapting real life and you're adapting specifically from Hansard, that's right isn't it?

**SK:** Some of the dialogue is from Hansard, yeah, or from the account.

**BH:** And so how much of a different exercise was that, specifically in relation to opening?

**SK:** It's always different. To the opening, the opening of that was more trying to establish who that character was and what it meant, and because it's a period piece you have got the opportunity to do nice big wide open spaces and horses and carriages and sort of establish your world. So it's that, but it's him, a real event where Wilberforce was very sick and he was on his way to convalesce, and he saw someone beating his horse and he stopped the wagon and got out and stopped him from beating the horse. So it was sort of a very precise way of looking at who this person was. And so that wasn't necessarily the thing that changed, that caused the film to happen, but it was, you know, a very quick way of getting to know who Wilberforce was. But with an adaptation, with a book or with real life you have certain definite things that you have to cover, and you have a progression of story which you have to deal with.

**BH:** And you've done that most recently with *Hundred-Foot*?

**SK:** *Hundred-Foot Journey* is from a novel, yeah.

**BH:** And how slavishly were you...?

**SK:** Not really. I mean the thing with that if anybody's read the novel, it covers a much longer period of time and it's much more about Paris and, and in the end it was a question with that of trying to find where the film was in terms of what's achievable. Because if it had been six hours of television you could have done the whole book, but it's very difficult to you know, cinema audiences are very unhappy to jump around and to lose characters and to get new characters late on; it's a very uncomfortable experience and it's just the way it is I think, but in a book you can sort of do that. But in *The Hundred-Foot Journey* it was finding the sequence where they're in that little village, that's where, you know it's taking just a section

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of the book and making that into the film. So you do have to make the decision of what, if you're given a book, what actually will work as a film because they're two, they're so different to each other films and novels.

**BH:** And, *Peaky Blinders*, you presumably have a very different way of doing things, because you can, I mean how different is structuring your opening?

**SK:** Yeah, I mean with that again I tried to make the opening symbolic of the whole thing, you know it's a man on a horse in a very industrial environment. So the man on the horse is, what I wanted the idea to be that, you know, people came back from the First World War completely, not only traumatised and all of that, but disenchanted with technology. Up until 1914 people had seen technology solve almost all the major, you know, it was curing diseases, it was making light in the darkness, it was heating homes, it was making everything better. All this technology was getting better and better and faster and faster, and then 1914 and the same technology's blowing everybody to pieces, and it was like a trick. And I just wanted the idea that Tommy, like a lot of people, when he's on his horse that's the old days, that's the pastoral past, it's before all this technology, before all this engineering and industry, and so he's someone who is from a different era, he's a different sort of person. So the opening to that, and the thing with television you've got time to, you've got much more time to have your characters unsympathetic before redeeming them. With a film you've got hardly any time at all, but with TV you can make somebody bad for a long time, and then people love it I think when someone gets, you know, does one good thing and it's almost like a triumph that they've done something good. So yeah, I mean there's much more time and, I don't know, I think actors seem to enjoy it more as well.

**BH:** And talk about endings. Emma Thompson last week was talking about, she reminded everyone of the, was it James Sheridan who said the thing about endings were like, your film is like a sort of series of, scenes are like iron filings

and you have a magnet for your end, and all the iron filings leap up and...

**SK:** If you're lucky.

**BH:** If you're lucky, yeah. What do you, what's your take on endings? Do you know your end, at which point do you know your ending?

**SK:** Yeah, usually, usually. It's usually a good idea, it's the only bit of discipline you have in a way. If you know what's going to happen at the end, at the very end, you can be as free as you want but at least you know which direction you're going into. And it becomes more and more, if you know what's going to happen at the end, it becomes more and more familiar as you go through. It's like, who was it who said, Edward de Bono was, did a talk about creativity where he said if you're at home and you go to somewhere you've never been it gets more and more difficult because you're less and less familiar with where you're going. If you're going home it gets more and more familiar, more and more easy. So he said, if you want to be creative about any, about the Second World War, start with tomatoes or bananas, or something that's nothing to do with it, and come back to the Second World War, find a way back from something randomly, totally different. Find your way back to the subject and you'll find that you're, and it's the same with an ending, if you know the ending, you're heading towards it, it's sort of getting easier and easier because you are getting closer and closer to the familiar territory that you've got in your head somewhere. I'm not suggesting that you write the ending, but you know pretty much where it's going to go. But in the middle you can do anything.

**BH:** That's brilliant.

**SK:** Well it doesn't always, the problem with it is, as I say it's like, it would be much more sensible to do a treatment and stick to it. It would because then you would save yourself so much time, but it's not something I've ever done really.

**BH:** Have you had, can you think of specific examples where you've had trouble with endings?



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**SK:** Yeah, it's usually trouble because, you know, I used to love the way French films used to just go 'The End', and then that was it. And it's like I've had enough, you know, I'm bored, no more. And it would be lovely to do that, but 'The End', those words are the best words in the world for me. 'The End' is like, that's it, you know, I don't have to worry any more. But the ending of, actually the ending of *Dirty Pretty Things* is interesting because we ended it the way you see it now and...

**BH:** Which is back at the airport.

**SK:** Yeah, and certain Miramax executives said, "It's got to have a, you know, this is not a happy ending, this isn't going to work."

**BH:** If you remember, the girl and the guy go in opposite directions.

**SK:** They split up, yeah. And they said that they should reunite in New York. I was like, alright. Because it was my first film I thought, "Great, we're going to go to New York. Fantastic, so yeah, fine." So I wrote the thing, we all went out to New York and we, oh yeah, and we shot, it wasn't too bad but I mean we shot this ending where, you know Brighton Beach with the bridge? And it's very lovely, not lovely it's horrible, but it's very good for filming, and there was a scene where they run across and believe it or not and they meet on a bridge, because they've both gone to New York and they've reunited. Thank God, we showed it to audiences and none of them liked it.

**BH:** Funnily enough.

**SK:** So we got rid of it, yeah.

**BH:** Wow.

**SK:** I know, we shot a whole other ending. Mind you, that's not unusual in film, but yeah, shot this whole other ending.

**BH:** And at script stage nobody thought...?

**SK:** No, it wasn't until we saw them part that I think certain people felt that it was

too down that they would never see each other again, so we did that.

**BH:** And what about with *Hummingbird*, well *Hummingbird* and *Locke*, I had a sensation when I was watching them that I, "how is he going to get out of this," in both of those. Talk about the kind of challenge to kind of structure those ends?

**SK:** *Locke* was easier because I always knew the baby would be born at the end, so that was a good solid destination to head for, and as long as you know that yourself you can mess around with whether or not it's obvious that it's going to happen or... You know I think people think the baby's going to die or whatever, but you know yourself that you've got that in the bag if you like. With *Hummingbird* it was much more difficult because it was, I sort of wanted to end it with him throwing the banker off the top of a tall building, but it didn't work, so a lot of things had to be moved around in that. But that was my first directing experience and it was very interesting to learn what you forget to do or what you miss, and you don't really know until you see it what you've missed out. And then of course there's always reshoots, but when you're on a smaller budget it's very difficult to go out and do them properly. But yeah it was an education in what you shouldn't, what I found myself doing was cutting things close to the day we were going to shoot, and you lose the overall perspective and you forget that you're missing something out and something's not being done, some part of the character's not being justified if you like. But yeah in terms of how that ended, again that was an unhappy, not unhappy but they split up basically, so there's a pattern developing *[laughs]*.

**BH:** Not a romantic. Okay, let's move on to talk about dialogue and specifically about the kinds of challenges that you find writing dialogue, or is it something that perhaps coming from a sort of novel background you find easier than others? I mean talk about the specific challenge of kind of conveying a specific set of information or emotion you know to get to a particular point.

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**SK:** Yeah, you know dialogue for me is the reason for doing, I love to do dialogue and that's for me a script is dialogue and it's, that's the whole thing. And writing action is quite hard and difficult, I feel sorry for people who have to read the direction because it's like it's all present tense movement. 'The car pulls up, he gets out of the car.' I mean of course he does but you've got to say that. You know, 'He walks into the room.' Well, obviously. But with the dialogue then you can sort of enjoy it because I've got a theory which, I don't know whether it's right or what, but everybody dreams, and when you dream the characters, like you dream about your brother or your sister or whatever, and in your dream their dialogue is perfect, it's absolutely how they talk. You know it's not stilted, it's not weird, it's absolutely, that's how your brother talks, you know in the dream that's how. Some part of your brain is able to take a character you're familiar with and put words in their mouth accurately, because that's what you do when you're dreaming, because nobody else wrote those words, they're just saying those words in your dream. So I think if you can turn stuff off, in other words, the worst thing you can do is to say the character walks in, he's got to convey this piece of information, so he walks in the room and conveys this piece of information. In any, no matter how you dress it up that's what they're doing. It's much more interesting to try and invent the character, and I know it sounds ridiculous, but try and let them say what they're going to say. And sometimes you end the scene and you haven't got anywhere, you know you haven't got anywhere closer to conveying the information, but the scene is okay because you've had this conversation between two people that feels real. And it's almost like suspending your critical faculties while you're writing the dialogue, and sometimes as well what I try and do sometimes is swap dialogue between characters and see what happens. Because sometimes a character will say something, and if you give the line to a different character immediately above or immediately below it has a really odd effect on how the whole thing holds together, because sometimes it reveals a motive for that character that is totally not what you

expected, and I think with dialogue the more you play around, the better it is. The more you don't think "I've got to say this right now. In this scene I've got to convey this piece of information," it's a killer if you do that.

**BH:** The clip we showed from *Eastern Promises*, I think that's quite typical of the film where there are quite a lot of quite bare exchanges between those two characters, and they're not saying, you know there's a lot of subtext going on. Can you talk a little bit about how you got to that point, how you worked on that, whether you did that at the point of script or whether you got better when you got to the actors or...

**SK:** Yeah, it's, I mean I think real dialogue that you have in the street, it's sort of quite a brutal business in that all you're trying to do is convey information to people, and you'll do it any way you want. Repetition, cliché, it doesn't matter, nobody's judging that, that's how you talk, you just say stuff that you want to get across. If you can try and get close to that it's good in dialogue, but also I think it's being aware of the amount of stuff that doesn't get said and imagining the mountains and mountains and mountains of stuff that's in people's heads when they, especially a man and a woman who are attracted to each other, and there's so many things not said that you can't say that there are rules against saying. Not rules in terms, but about speed of progression, speed of relationships, all of that's going on, and also in that thing he's going to kill her uncle, and so there's that element of how much does she know, how much does he know? And I often think that people do, it's like in *Locke*, you know when you're talking to your son about something or something really emotional is happening, talk about football. You know, talk about someone else, I'd talk about the motorbike or something, and sometimes that's what people do. I think you go for something hard, especially men I think you go for something you know solid to talk about because I think men talk about things and objects more than women do, and they need it, they need a place to hide so they'll go for football or the motorbike or something. And I think if you can be aware of how

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people do that and the tricks people play on each other when they're having conversations, and sometimes just putting anything, just anything, people can say anything. You never know you know, if you see a transcript of a real conversation it's all over the place, people say the oddest things, but in the odd things that they say, you know. The example I would give, when I was much younger I worked on a building site and there was a tea boy, and he came in with a tray of tea, and in the hut where everybody was working everybody took one and there was none left for him, and his exact words were, "I bastard make the bastard and then I don't bastard get a bastard." Those were his exact words, you know I mean so people sometimes will just come out with the greatest stuff.

**BH:** It'll be in a film near you soon.

**SK:** You wouldn't dare, people wouldn't believe it, but those were his exact words.

**BH:** What about exposition?

**SK:** It's horrible. PC Plot. Yeah it's horrible because sometimes you have to get it out of the way.

**BH:** Right, so how do you solve those problems where you have to convey a piece of information?

**SK:** I try and invent a character who knows nothing.

**BH:** A character who?

**SK:** Knows nothing about whatever it is so you have a legitimate reason to explain to the character while you obviously explain to the audience. And also formal situations where someone, I mean police procedure stuff is great because you've got a real reason to be very specific. Scientific situations where people are very specifically talking about very specific things are very good. The killer is when it's meant to be a normal social situation and someone sits down and says, "So," you know, whatever it is. You know, "So, I understand that..." and they're just telling you the plot, and everybody can spot, unfortunately everybody can spot that a mile off and

so you have to try and find other ways of getting it in, or ignore it. Don't do it. David Fincher says never explain anything. But I mean I think he's lying, I mean I think you have to explain some things.

**BH:** And *Amazing Grace*, you've got quite a lot of you know very, very detailed information to get over. Talk about how you...

**SK:** Yeah, to do that I got, there was one particular thing where it was all about parliamentary procedure and Wilberforce and his allies played this really clever trick, political trick, in the House of Commons. But to explain it, and I tried loads of different ways, and in the end it helped if it was urgent because then you've got a reason for saying it quickly and getting it out of the way. And then it helped if it was in a place that was not expected, so I had the person who they were explaining it to playing golf, and he's standing there playing golf and he's much more interested in the golf, and they're trying to get his attention so they're desperately telling him this information, "Don't you understand, if you do der you'll get that and then that will happen." And then you've got a reason to you know put some sauce on it, make it a bit palatable, but sometimes you have to get that information over because it is true that unless, if it's sort of more of an arthouse film you can get away with it, with baffling the audience because they think it's deliberate. But, you know, if it's a more mainstream film, people know the rules much more and you'll get away with much less.

**BH:** And how written is your dialogue, I mean specifically of course with the films you then go on to direct, but generally how happy are you for actors to kind of take your words and, no not at all?

**SK:** Not at all. I mean it happens obviously but I'm not happy about it.

**BH:** The scene like the one we showed from *Locke*...

**SK:** *Locke* is all word for word, but I mean even though that interchange was different every time they did it, and that

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one was where they started laughing which was fantastic, you know what a gift that was, it was brilliant.

**BH:** And that was written word for word?

**SK:** The dialogue was on an auto-cue for Tom and the actors had it in front of them so, I mean I was, at the beginning of that because it was Tom Hardy I said, "You know if you wanna go off the script and do other stuff..." and he said he doesn't want to do that, which is good. But other actors obviously will change stuff and they have their own ideas and they do stuff, and often it improves it and it's better. Again, it's better but it's different, but as a writer I think it's not, you don't want them to change anything, you know you want it to, even the pauses, and when you're directing you have to do everything you can not to try and just say it in the way you want it said which would be death on a film. But that's what you, I think if you're a writer that's your job to try and defend word for word, but then you have to accept that it isn't going to be like that.

**BH:** Okay. Let's talk about protagonists. I think we actually have an image of some of the protagonists just to remind you all.

[Image showing Okwe from *Dirty Pretty Things*, William Wilberforce from *Amazing Grace*, Joey from *Hummingbird*, Ivan Locke from *Locke*, Tommy from *Peaky Blinders* and Anna from *Eastern Promises*]

**BH:** Can you talk a little bit about how you, we had to put Anna in because otherwise you've never written a woman [laughs], we'll come back to that. Can you talk a little bit about this kind of, the choices you, well to start with kind of do you tend to get into a project because you think of a character, or do you tend to find a premise or a situation? What draws you in?

**SK:** It's more likely to be a scenario or a premise or a thought, I mean except for, well Chiwetel I think, the character of Okwe caused everything. So finding him in that hotel, then deciding, okay who is he, what's his story, what does he do for a living, that created the film. In other scenarios, you know I wanted to do

Birmingham in the 20s and it needed a good, strong central character, so I think the scenario normally comes first. But what's good if it happens is you think of the scenario, you think of the character, then the character changes everything, because the character has got a certain life of his or her own and they make other things happen so that you can... I mean I'm a great believer in reverse engineering, so that whatever you wrote last has authority, and you then go back and change stuff before it, because the thing you've done last is usually an accumulation of stuff from writing so to this point. So you can, it's a pain in the neck it really is, but sometimes, and sometimes you try not to admit it that you've come across something that's better than what you've done, and then when you've done it and you think well I'm going to have to go all the way back now and go through and change that, and change that character and change everything that they do. But in the end you have to do it because I think the later it is the more authority it has, so that you can go back and change the opening scene. But I think it's a mistake to think "I can't do that here which would be good because of what I've already done, you know I can't do that". You should try and do that, whatever that thing is that's come to you on that day you should try and do that.

**BH:** It's funny, I was, obviously I've been having my own private Steven Knight film festival, re-watching all of your films has just been fantastically pleasurable, but I was thinking there was no sort of through line, not really much of a connection actually between some of the projects that you take on. And then when I started to think about the characters I realised that actually there's a very big through line, which is that most of your characters are kind of wide-eyed innocents who sort of find themselves in some sort of underworld or you know sort of underground situation, even Locke finds himself in an unfamiliar situation. Can you talk a little bit about why, about what that...

**SK:** I think the interesting stuff comes from when you actually take a strong character and put them in a vulnerable situation. So like Okwe who's a doctor is

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intelligent, he's educated, and because of circumstance he's stuck doing menial jobs in London, and how does he survive? So all of the time it's people who in other circumstances would be fine but have found themselves thrown in... I think if you take a weak person and put them in a vulnerable situation it's just a shame you know.

**BH:** We don't want to see that.

**SK:** But if you take a strong person and put them in a vulnerable situation then you see how they survive and also sometimes make a commentary on why it is that sometimes strong people end up in vulnerable situations.

**BH:** And do you see yourself in your characters?

**SK:** No, well I don't no. I don't know whether someone else might. But no I find that, it's probably there somewhere, but the best thing to do is to switch nearly everything else off when you're writing, you know what I mean? So you're not necessarily passing judgment on anybody or hoping that people will think this person's nice or, just see what happens, if you do it just do it.

**BH:** And how much do you care about kind of backstory. Somebody once said, oh well you have to make your characters do the Marie Claire quiz or you know, it's just so absurd, but how much more do you give than we see?

**SK:** I don't really start off with backstory, but I think the backstory comes bit by bit as you write the character, as the scenes happen, then I think you start to think of a reason why they might behave like that and why they might be like that, and then by the end you've sort of almost got a complete backstory for that character. But along the way I wouldn't fill in the gaps too much before getting to the end.

**BH:** Okay. You'll have forgotten that you've said you'd do this, but I thought we should have a quick game now. When we were talking with James Schamus last week he was remarking, he was very sorry that he couldn't be here tonight, and he was remarking on what

an incredibly prolific writer you are, and he said "Oh I bet he's got ideas, just kind of plots just buzzing around in his head the whole time." But he said, "You should just throw him a character and see where he goes with it," so that's what we're going to do. So Katie who has been helping to prepare this series came up with three characters which I love.

**SK:** Three, oh my God.

**BH:** Yeah, well you can pick any of them or people can shout characters if they want, but I've got a businessman in his forties, lost his job but hasn't told his young family. You can have that one, or you could have a teenage girl who's just discovered her grandmother was a spy and is under surveillance.

**SK:** Oh, do you know, I know someone who that happened to.

**BH:** Well there you go. Damn, we're not going to get to my third and favourite, a trainee firefighter who is afraid of heights but hasn't told his colleagues.

**SK:** Oh my God. Businessman, forties is the least appealing, but is probably quite interesting. I mean let's say, what would you do, you'd start with him in the park, because he's got to do something during the day. And then if he's just sitting there, and again this sort of rings a bell, who was it, someone who knows someone and he used to go and just eat sandwiches in the park because he couldn't tell anybody that he'd lost his job. But imagine if somebody does that and they see, it's a bit *Rear Window*, they see something that happens regularly. You know when, it's true in Birmingham anyway that if you see a pair of trainers with the laces tied hanging from a wire, that's where drug deals are done. So that's like a, that's the sign...

**BH:** Is that what that means?

**SK:** Yeah. So he's sitting there looking at the trainers and then he sees something, you know he sees something happen and basically the bad, stupid thing, he starts either an investigation or he solves something or he stops someone from killing themselves, maybe makes friends

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with someone, where you tie it up at the end so that he's going home increasing fucked you know. He's getting home late and he's saying he's working, and maybe the job he did was awful, it was a horrible job and it was like something really disreputable, and now he's doing something really good but he's lying, he's done some brilliant thing and he goes home and pretends he's done something horrible, the opposite to what, do you know what I mean, the opposite to what you would normally do. You'd normally go home and say oh I've done something really good today, but in fact he's actually helped someone and he's saved someone's life or has done something really good and he's having to constantly go home and lie about, "actually I've made 200 people redundant today," you know which is what he used to do. And then either he falls in love with someone or he doesn't, and then he gets his job back.

**BH:** Brilliant, brilliant. Okay, that's perfect, so are you that person who has a million ideas percolating around at any one time?

**SK:** No, I don't think so. I think if you apply yourself to the, I'll tell you what I think it is, is everybody when you're sitting in the cafe or something, see people walk past you imagine what they're like. And even if you hear a voice in the radio or on the phone you hear them and you get a picture of what that person is like. It's what everybody does I think, and it's just doing that for a living.

**BH:** I wonder if we should pause and take some questions from the audience. I think we have some roving mics so if you wouldn't mind just hanging on till they get there so that this is all recorded. First, there, yes.

**Question:** Hi, when I saw *Dirty Pretty Things* I was really impressed and excited by it, and then actually after the screening I got a minicab home, I had an African taxi driver, I thought this is amazing, it's just like the film, and I asked him where he came from and he said Nigeria. I thought, oh that's great, he must, he was a forensic doctor or something back in Nigeria, and I said,

"What did you do?" He said, "I was a taxi driver."

[Laughter]

**BH:** That's *Dirty Pretty Things 2*.

**Question:** Yeah, so I'm not sure reality is always more exciting than drama. But my question is I guess on the subject of mundane things perhaps, can you talk to us a bit about concrete, because I have the feeling that after Locke the Wikipedia page about concrete mixes probably got more hits than it will ever have. And but I guess the serious side being, how did you come to that idea of having that particular focus in his story and his life? Did it come from a person or you know something you found out, and were you worried when you were writing that, I mean I was gripped by it and I had no idea that I would be, were you worried that people wouldn't be, that it would just be boring?

**SK:** Yeah, absolutely. It was almost a challenge, because it was a very low budget it was, you could afford to take risks, and I really wanted to, the idea was that he's, the central character is the most ordinary person in Britain. So he's married, two kids and he works in construction, and he works with concrete which is the least interesting material imaginable because it's not anything, it's just stuff. And trying to tell a story about that was sort of the point, or sort of the, you know, the central idea. And talking with Tom, you know want this person to wear a jumper and he's going to be completely normal and he's completely ordinary. And the concrete thing, I mean I knew, the other thing is that I wanted to suggest in ordinary people's lives, people who are not policemen or assassins or any of those things who just have ordinary lives, that there is huge drama in everybody's life anyway. So for example when I was younger and working on, briefly, building sites, when the concrete arrived it was a huge drama, jobs were at stake, money was at stake, so I wanted to incorporate that. But also obviously concrete has this metaphorical purpose in the story in that it's, for Ivan it's what he deals with, he wants the solid thing, he takes shapeless things and makes them solid, makes

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them into material, and that's the driving force of his life because he's a rationalist. But by the end of the film he comes to realise that the irrational thing he did, the mistake that he made, the crack in the concrete, the baby is a bigger construction than even the building that he's building. So it was again just sort of good fortune that that worked in a way. And as for being worried that people would be bored, absolutely, you know because we didn't even know if it was a film when we first saw it, we thought it may not even be a film, you know it might just be some bloke. And then it was only when an audience saw it that you realise that they go into it. But it's a challenge in that when you feel that if you're dealing with such mundane topics you have to really work at the cliffhangers and keeping people involved and all of that, so it was sort of like an exercise in a way. But yeah, some of these things were happy accidents, like the concrete working on various levels was good.

**BH:** Down here, and then in the middle.

**Question:** I just wondered if you could talk a little bit about the length of the shoot for *Locke*, and also was he originally written as Welsh or was that a choice?

**SK:** No I wanted him to be from a working class background so that he could legitimately be from a very poor background, but a lot of the accents we had to rule out. Birmingham, Liverpool, London all come with a lot of baggage and all of that, and also Ivan is this character who calms people down, he deals with crises, and Tom said, "The person I know most like that is Welsh," and he said, "I will do him." Because he said, "I don't do accents, I do people that have that accent," so he said, "I'll do him and he'll be Welsh," so he did that which was great. And he listened to *Under Milk Wood* Richard Burton a lot beforehand so got all of that. When the film came out a Welsh newspaper tracked down the person that he'd based the thing on and they said, "How does it feel that Tom Hardy's based his character on you?" He said. "It's fine but I'm not Welsh." [Laughs] He's not Welsh,

but he remembered him as Welsh for some reason.

**BH:** When you were writing him what accent did he have in your head?

**SK:** I can't remember, a sort of flat, I don't know, that's a good question actually, I don't know. Probably a bit northern, he couldn't be southern, it would have to be a bit northern because it's so down sort of thing.

**BH:** Because you've quite often written in accents. Do you, like with *Eastern Promises*, did you think of those accents as you were writing.

**SK:** Yeah, yeah, because I think when people have an accent they talk in a very interesting way. They say things that people wouldn't say if they were speaking in their native language. I remember once when I was working in radio, we were on strike or something and the shop steward was originally Belgian, and he was making this big speech to everybody, we were all really riled up, you know we're going to go on strike. And he said, and what he'd, he'd translated directly from the Belgian, and he said, "The management have put their feet in the saucepan, now they have to stir the vegetables." And everybody went... "Oh, yeah..."

**BH:** Question there.

**Question:** I just wondered what your kind of daily writing ritual is, and also how many projects you work on at a time.

**SK:** Yeah, normally there's two or three things going on at the same time. I try to write early, as early as possible, very early which is why I go into, west coast is great because the jet lag, you're awake at like two o'clock in the morning and you get like six hours before anybody wakes up. But yeah early is good, stop mid-afternoon. I mean I'm exaggerating a bit actually, but stop two o'clock, two thirty, something like that. But yeah so try and do, I've found early is the best time.

**BH:** Given that you have written a play, novels, theatre, you know, everything; do you always know, you know, did you

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know *Locke* was going to be a screenplay?

**SK:** Oh yeah yeah. But interestingly, well it's interesting to me, three different theatre producers in, one in Italy, one in Germany, one in Greece have asked permission to do it as a stage play.

**BH:** Of course they have.

**SK:** So that's great, so we're going to then, now we're talking about doing it as a play here and also in Los Angeles, with a one off or just a short run where it's just him on-stage with the other actors off-stage. Possibly, it might not work, I don't know, but it's worth a try.

**BH:** And then you can come back and do the musical later.

**SK:** Then we do the musical. Then the ballet.

**BH:** A person down here and then one up here, and that mic at the back.

**Question:** So how did you sell the idea to Tom?

**SK:** Well we met about something completely different, because I was being asked to write a different project for him, so as we were having the meeting I started talking about this idea then being like a theatre piece but for film. And we sort of made a deal that I would write that thing if he did that, but I mean then I wrote the script and he wanted to do it so that was fine, but it was like a lot of things on *Locke*, it was luck as well.

**BH:** At the back, yep.

**Question:** Question about text versus subtext and your love of specificity. When you're writing something you're directing yourself, is your version of the script different than what you hand out so that you have it all there for you and avoiding line readings, or do you do specific versions of scripts for different actors so that they know information that other actors do so that they deliver what you have in your head?

**SK:** No, I mean I do one script and distribute it so that everybody's got the same thing, but in terms of how the actor deals with it, I think it's always a good idea to allow them to have their own interpretation, but and also try and mix it up a bit. So for example with *Locke*, halfway through the process I got in, I wrote to each of the actors other than Tom and suggested a different motivation, a different reason for doing what they're doing. For example with Ruth Wilson I suggested, what about if you've wanted to get rid of him for years and, you know, this is your chance, this is your opportunity to get rid of Ivan Locke, and so she did it that way for a few, and the two things were, you could cut between the two which makes you think that everybody's got lots of different motivations at the same time. But no I don't do different versions for different people.

**BH:** When we were talking before, last week, you said something that I had not spotted about *Locke* which was that it's twelve characters, two of whom you don't see and you don't hear, but they're really vivid characters.

**SK:** Yeah, Stefan is the one I like most and you don't ever hear from him, you just can imagine he's a good bloke.

**BH:** Down here, someone's got the, yeah.

**Question:** When you wrote your first script did you keep your day job and keep doing that?

**SK:** Oh God yeah.

**Question:** So were you progressively writing that for years and years, or was it something that just kind of...

**SK:** Basically, I mean it overlapped, a lot of things, I can't remember to be honest, but it overlapped a lot where it was a period of doing television, *Dirty Pretty Things*, and *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* was taking off as well, so it was all getting quite busy. And then *Eastern Promises* happened very quickly actually after that, and it was all going well. But in terms of the day job, I now



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think of writing scripts as the day job, and directing as the fun.

**BH:** Yeah, the mic's just behind you.

**Question:** Really enjoyed your work for years, glad *Peaky Blinders* is back, hurrah. This scene in it that's amazing, well there are quite a few scenes in it that are amazing that really leapt out at me, where Cillian Murphy's character basically talks someone out of raping Annabelle Wallis by saying that she's rotten with venereal disease. So it sounds like he's slagging this woman off in the most awful terms and saying the most awful things about her, but actually he's rescuing her. And that's just a sort of, I don't know if that's the Tommy does a good thing scene after basically being a bad character?

**SK:** Yeah, exactly.

**Question:** Are scenes like that in your mind from the start or do they suddenly come to you as the character develops?

**SK:** They suddenly come, I mean I think, as I said before if you plan it all in advance it's very rational, because you can't help but be rational if you plan something like that. But with that I sort of got myself into a difficult situation because I didn't know how to get Annabelle out of there short of him, you know, I thought he could go and shoot him or whatever but then you'd have to deal with the body and then, so I just thought well you know, what's he going to do? And it's true that the whole series was a sort of a, not a battle, but trying to keep him unsympathetic for as long as possible, and in the end even, I think Cillian said this, "This is a real bastard. You know he's awful this person, can't he do something nice?" But that was the, I think that's one of the first moments when he, you think, but doing it in a way that is also horrible is good because obviously he doesn't suddenly give a load of money to an orphanage you know, he's doing something good for, doing something bad for a good reason I think is the best you could say about him.

**BH:** There was another question, yes sorry, over there.

**Question:** Staying on *Peaky Blinders*, can I ask you about literary influences?

Because I watch *Peaky Blinders*, I see Birmingham in the 1920s, but I think of Brighton in the 1930s. Is Graham Greene an influence on it?

**SK:** I've never read *Brighton Rock* I must admit, no I haven't. I'm massively badly read. But no I mean interestingly that was pointed out to me as possibly the only bit of research that was in print. In other words, basically nothing was written about Billy Kimber, all of those people. The only bits that I knew about was from my parents telling me stories about their experiences when they were kids in Birmingham, because my mum was a bookies' runner and my dad's uncles were peaky blinders, they were racketeers, so it was, this was family lore. But I wouldn't aspire to be anywhere close to Graham Greene.

**BH:** Question at the back, somebody, yeah there.

**Question:** Hello. Apart from *Peaky Blinders*, do you see using Birmingham or The Midlands as a metaphor, as a backdrop for some more interesting stories?

**SK:** Yeah, I want to use Birmingham as much as possible because it's, yeah, it's not, I don't know why it's been completely, I think it's the accent or something. But it's been, it's not been a venue for drama and it should be because it's a great big industrial city with lots of stories and a fantastic history. And the worst thing though you can then do is say; you know our poor old region, what's wrong with our region, why don't you do something with our region? The only thing you can do is make something, try and make something that doesn't feel like it's from a region at all. It's from everywhere, it could be anywhere you know, but it just happens to be in Birmingham. I mean the reason I did it is because as I say the stories were family stories and my family grew up in Birmingham so that's what I wanted to do. But I've got plans to do stuff in Brum as much as possible, and I'm even, I'm gonna try to put together a group of people to get a sound stage in the south

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of Birmingham where features and television can be shot, just because I think if there's a stage there then that will generate the, you know, ancillary industries and get things going. But you know the BBC are doing stuff, they've moved the Academy up there for writers and people and, you know, I think that it's not just Birmingham, anywhere, anybody who lives in any city anywhere should look first at their environment and see what the stories are that are from there.

**BH:** It's strange; I wouldn't have thought to ask you about Birmingham except for *Peaky Blinders*, because I would ask you about London,

**SK:** Yeah.

**BH:** Because London is your massive character.

**SK:** I've done, I feel as if I've done London now, you know what I mean, three's probably enough and so I thought I would look at a different place. So I want to shoot things there, and I also want to set things there as well.

**Question:** Given that you're someone who's worked in both film and television, and you mentioned earlier about the sort of requirements that Hollywood often puts on you when you write for film about the beginning, middle and end, and also given that the supposed sort of golden age of television over the last sort of ten and fifteen years, for new writers and younger writers would you advise working more in television to begin with? Do you find that television is a better environment for writers than perhaps working in film is at the moment?

**SK:** There's more opportunities definitely, I mean you've got more chance of getting stuff made I think, because also there's this thing of the writers' table is it called, where everybody sits round a, you know you get lots of writers working on a particular project so you do get a chance to actually sit down and do stuff. It depends on the project. If you've got an original idea that is a long saga then obviously do television, but television is great at the moment, actors are really enjoying it. And partly I think the screens

are better now, you know, ten years ago people were watching telly on these little bulbous things, and now you know you've got proper big screens and so it's worth making the production values high, and that sort of ups everybody's game I think. But if I were to advise I would say try and do everything, but telly is probably more likely to be the place where you'll get some paid work. It's not easy at all.

**BH:** There's a question right at the front here. There's a mic behind you.

**Question:** You touched on endings Steven, I just wanted to know, you kind of talked about...

**SK:** When's it going to end?

**Question:** No, but with something like *Peaky Blinders* and TV in general, where it can depend completely on a commissioner or anything, in your mind have you got where Tommy Shelby is in 12 years time, or do you just view it as each series, this is where Tommy's going to be, this is where Tommy's going to be, this is where Tommy's going to be...

**SK:** No, as with a film I've got the ending in mind where he is, and I'm not joking, he is Sir Thomas Shelby, and it's the start of the Second World War and the first siren goes off and that's it. But I mean, you know what I want to, what I'm trying to do with the whole thing is look at someone from his background, can he get out, can he escape ever? Because he's English and, you know, the class thing is even worse then, but can he, even if he becomes rich, which he does, even if he gets knighted which maybe he does because his political chicanery with various people. I don't know how it will work yet, but he will do deals with various politicians and he will end up getting knighted. Even then he's still nobody. You know maybe, or maybe the answer is then he's accepted and he's fine, but I think the former is more likely.

**BH:** We're very close to time people so just maybe one or two more, one there, and then there, and then there.

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**Question:** I was wondering, you talked about how you've written stuff and actors and directors have made it different and you've seen it for the better. When you're directing your own material and you've got your vision of how you want it to be, how do you step back and have the objectivity to see if something is better or if it's just right or wrong?

**SK:** Yeah, I know what you mean. You should be able to tell if it's better or not. You know it's very, it sounds very simple and crass, but you know somebody performs something and you're happy to take the credit for it. You think, that's really good and I'll pretend that was my idea, but when it's not right that's when it gets awkward. But you know actors, they know the game and they know that sometimes you have to insist on something, but you should be able to tell. The difficulty is when the actor is so huge that no one can tell them, will tell them anything.

**Question:** A lot of your characters seem to be outsiders and on the fringes of society. Do you identify and do you see yourself as an outsider or a rebel, and how do you find the diverging voices for these characters, including the female characters? I mean because I think it's absolutely amazing sort of the difference in each of the characters; a black male, a white female, an African person, so how do you approach that as a writer?

**SK:** It's trying to, if you can get, if you can correctly do how someone talks I think it's a good way into who they are as well. Some people in the way they move and act you can sort of, if you observe how they talk and their dialogue, real people I mean, then you can sometimes get a good access to who they are and where they're from. And then try and turn it around so that someone who you'd expect to be like this, make them like that, the opposite, because that's always the case, not always the case but often the case that you know people are not going to fit their stereotypes, you know. And then in terms of, not a rebel at all, too cowardly to be a rebel, seriously. You know there are writers in, around the world who are genuinely in trouble because of what

they've written and that's not me at all. But in terms of my own, I mean I had quite an odd background so it was a bit outsider-y, not terribly but just a little bit, and so you do get that feeling, I find it easier to identify with that person who's left out.

**BH:** There was a question, yeah.

**Question:** If you do find yourself working for a Hollywood major, how do you negotiate if they get around their obsession with the three act structure?

**SK:** You don't. You don't, I mean there's no point. Basically, they've come to you and said, "We want you to write X," or Z, *World War Z 2*, you know. So there it is, so that's what you're going to do and you've agreed to do it, you know the deal, you know the parameters. You know also, I mean personally I have no problem with the way they operate because basically they're running the business, they're not building a building, they're making something out of a lot of fog and mist and it's not solid. And they want to know they're going to at least get their money back, and the way, the easiest way to do that is make it similar to something that's already made money, so they'll keep repeating something until people stop going. And therefore you know that, you know it's a business, and there's something good about it. You know I like Hollywood, I like going there. It's very simple, it's about money, you know it's about money, it's fine. And they're very good people and very creative people, but ultimately it's an industry and they're there because they have to make money, and so anything that guarantees that is going to be good. And so therefore I think they think well, that thing with three acts and an arc and the character who became better worked, so that's what we have to do you know. But I think it's a bit like saying a painter does a painting that everybody loves and it's 40 percent blue paint, so from now on you have to paint paintings that are 40 percent blue, because it worked before. You know I think that that's the, putting it at its most blunt, that's sort of I think the film industry, which is why constantly the bats and spiders and superheroes and stuff, you know.

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**BH:** We're not quite going to end there, it's too depressing. I want you to do me a favour, we haven't talked at all about the things that are not the dialogue or that are not the characters, that's not the structure.

**SK:** My least favourite bits, yeah.

**BH:** And one of the things that I was so struck by, *Locke* is you know my film of the year from last year, one of the things I was so struck by when I eventually got to read the script was how beautifully it was written. And I wonder if you'd just do us a favour, because I don't think people had the chance to see, to read this script. You've not got your glasses now, can you do it without?

**SK:** No, oh God no.

**BH:** I wanted you to just read this very short introductory page from *Locke*, just so you can see, kind of hear the flavour and the richness of the description. Would you?

**SK:** Yeah, of course.

[Reads the first scene from *Locke*]

**BH:** Ladies and gentlemen, Steven Knight.