BAFTA & BFI Screenwriters' Lecture Series: Jimmy McGovern
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Jeremy Brock: Good evening, I'm Jeremy Brock, and on behalf of BAFTA and the BFI, welcome to the fourth in our current series of International Screenwriters Lectures, sponsored by Lucy Guard and the JJ Charitable Trust. We're also grateful to United Airlines for flying in our international screenwriters. Every generation throws up an exceptional talent or two, people capable of capturing the mood of their time. I can think of no single British screenwriter who has subjected his own culture to such an extraordinary and dramatic scrutiny as has Jimmy McGovern. His work is always fiercely honest, incredibly funny, deeply moving, and above all substantive. Jimmy McGovern reveals us to ourselves as no other British writer does. You have only to think of *Cracker*, *The Lakes*, *Hillsborough*, *The Street*, *Accused* or *Banished*, all of them governed by an integrity, held together by great storytelling. The British Academy is truly honoured to host Jimmy McGovern as part of a series that celebrates the very greatest screenwriters in the world. Jimmy will be in conversation with the journalist and broadcaster Miranda Sawyer, and then as we always do we will open it up to questions from the floor. Ladies and gentlemen, Jimmy McGovern.

[Applause]

Miranda Sawyer: You alright, Jimmy?

Jimmy McGovern: Great, aye great.

MS: Okay, I think we should start kind of at the beginning. I think we should start with *Brookside*. One of the things that's known about *Brookside*, other than it was really fantastic at the beginning, was that you started actually quite, you know, relatively late. It's not like you came to *Brookside* as a 20 year-old, you came to *Brookside* in your thirties. Do you think that that was a help or a hindrance when it comes to writing? Did you have ideas already that you wanted to get in there?

JM: No. I'd done a bit of theatre but I just couldn't find a voice in theatre, I just couldn't find, I couldn't understand theatre, I couldn't write theatre to save my life. I didn't know that at the time.

MS: Are you saying you didn't like it?

JM: Pardon?

MS: Did you not like theatre?

JM: I don't like theatre, no. But I've got to say I saw a piece by Andrew Bovell over in Australia that was magnificent, so I mean I loved that. Occasionally you see great piece of theatre, but nine times out of ten it's boring and they say to you, "Oh, you should have been here last week, it was great."

[Laughter]

That always happens to me. I just, I was immature. As men especially I think we spend our lives thinking that when we're 30 we'll be mature, and we're not. And when we're 40 we'll be mature, and we're not. And when we're 50, surely. And I'm 66 and I'm still as stupid as ever, it's just ridiculous. But I was immature. I hadn't gone to university or anything like that, and I think I was so lucky to be in the right place at the right time, because *Brookside* was done by Mersey TV on Merseyside, they needed Merseyside writers, and my stint in the theatre had at least given me a body of work. It was not good, but it demonstrated stamina

[Laughter]

You know that was it. And so I think it was that really.

But for 12 months I didn't know what I was doing, nobody knew what they were doing on that show. It was the birth of Channel 4. We were all young, I think the average age on *Brookside* for everybody working behind the scenes was 30, which is incredibly young. And we were trying to get, form a new independent production company, a new TV drama twice a week, and we didn't, we had no experience. I just didn't, and so consequently, the thing that I would do then, is I would follow the storylines slavishly, you know because people who know things had given me this storyline and I know nothing, so I've got to follow the storyline. And without a word of a lie it took me about nine months to realise you've got to give of

yourself to that storyline. I just didn't know that, it took me a while to find that out even.

MS: Yeah, but that's just learning on the job, that's the best way to learn isn't it really. And given I mean, you know, we're not meant to call them soaps are we anymore, but I'm going to call it a soap. There's just something about generating storylines, having to do it quite quickly, once you break away from that idea that you've just got to stick to whatever storyline you're given it must be quite exhilarating, you must learn a lot by doing that.

JM: Yes, it was, to sit… I knew, quite early on I knew I was worth my place. Even though my scripts were not good I could generate story. You know, Monday and Tuesday were the storyline meetings and we'd have about 12 writers round a table, and all desperately trying to come up with ideas, because if you came up with an idea you might get commissioned. Because if it was your idea you've got more of a chance of getting commissioned, and that meant money and your name on the telly, and so it was all very, very earnest and serious. But I knew I could generate story. And also, *Brookside* had an agenda then, it was political, and so we'd all be fighting to get our angle on you know. And the tricks I pulled, you know, I would use, you know the obvious one is, "Listen, I come from here, I'm a working class lad,"

[Laughter]

You know, all that stuff. It was all to earn brownie points and you know. But it was, I could generate story, I became pretty good at generating story to such an extent that I could generate story from the smallest incident, because often you had to. I had an episode to *Brookside* to write and the storyline was, 'Tracy wins a hairdressing competition'

[Laughter]

And that was the story, it was just ridiculous. So I could generate, you know you had to explore the minutiae, you had to dig as deep as you possibly could. And I think I still do that, to excavate. Because you're excavating the story, and you're excavating within yourself, to bring yourself to it. How can I make this me? Everything I learnt, I learnt there. '82 to '89. Honest to God, in those days, this was even before faxes, I think faxes were just about to come out. So we'd have the storyline meeting the Monday and Tuesday, and then they'd work on what was said, they'd start work on the Wednesday on the storylines, and they'd have them ready on the Friday. And they'd post them Friday night, and sometimes if they weren't ready then they'd post them on the Saturday morning. Now, this was in the days on snail post, so you probably got the storylines first thing on Monday. But the commissioning meeting when you went in and argued what you needed to write your episode, you need an extra character, you need an extra location, I mean this is, this is expensive in terms of a soap opera so your arguments have got to be spot on. But the other writers were coming in ill-prepared, they got their storyline on the Monday and they went in on the Tuesday having done about four hours work. I walked up to *Brookside*, it was like a five-mile walk and I did it to be fit. I walked to *Brookside*, got the stories on the Friday night or even Saturday morning as they were being printed, and went home and worked all weekend: Saturday, Sunday, Monday. So I went in on the Tuesday, I'd done 24 hours work on my story - and theirs!

[Laughter]

I knew more about that block that anybody in the room, and I battered them, I absolutely battered them. And I just got, I got, more times than not I got what I wanted because I was so well-prepared. And that taught me something, that you haven't got to be better, you've just to work harder.

MS: And want it as well.

JM: And want it. Oh, I wanted it. Oh my God, I wanted it, I was a mad man. I was, nothing would stop me. By my God, I worked harder than any of them. And I think the harder you work the more you learn as well.

MS: It's interesting because you, you know you just picked a storyline and it was essentially about winning a hairdressing competition, but what *Brookside* was known for then was all the, it was the controversial storylines wasn't it. It was like kind of rape, unemployment, heroin addiction. I mean it's before the Trevor patio thing, but it was more kind of realistic wasn't it really. Coming out as gay, joyriding, people being stabbed. Those things are realistic, but they were seen as being controversial weren't they. Did you pick them because you thought they were controversial or because you thought they were real?

JM: I'm ashamed to say we probably picked them because it would make a good story, and a good story that we all wanted to write. Because you just know a good story when you want to write it. We would know a good story when we were all fighting over the episodes, we'd all want particular episodes because the story was great. So anything that made a good story I think. I's how you define what makes a good story isn't it.

MS: But it's interesting because I think sometimes you know obviously, and I'm speaking as a, not then, but now as a journalist, those storylines generate headlines don't they. *Brookside* got a lot of headlines around what was being written and how it was acted and all that, and it's interesting to me that actually you're going for a story, but it makes headlines always. I mean you know a lot of people take headlines and turn them into stories themselves don't you, but you were making stories that were making headlines, the other way.

JM: Yeah, to a certain extent, but that's only because up to that point, maybe at that point British television was a wee bit tame, apart from the obvious ones: Alan Bleasdale, Dennis Potter. So it might have been that, but I can't for the life of me see why you would tell a story… I always go on about, why has the BBC got a compliance unit?

MS: Because they get sued!

JM: My stuff, dramatist's stuff goes to the compliance unit, and I say, "Why?" And it's in case you cause offence. I say, "Well that's my job"

[Laughter]

That's my job to cause offence. Why are you sending my…" It's just ridiculous. But I'm sure we did cause offence, but I think we had integrity and we told the truth, and maybe it's the truth that causes offence.

MS: There's a lot, I mean you worked really hard on *Brookside* and you got a lot done, have you ever in your later years kind of consciously recycled a *Brookside* storyline? Be honest.

JM: Yes and no. In 1989 when I packed in *Brookside*, I realised that, the television writers especially, but all writers, they dream of reaching point where they can write what they most want to write, where they will write only what they want to write. But when you reach that point you realise that to get there, you've already written it.

[Laughter]

It's true, and all the stuff in *Brookside* was everything that mattered to me. At the time I was a trade unionist and socialist, I'm not now, I'm a kind of half-arsed trade unionist and half-arsed socialist. But I was well into Catholicism, you know so all those things were in *Brookside*, and so I just threw myself into it. But those themes have repeated themselves constantly, but I think we all write about the same thing, we just disguise it well don't we.

MS: You write about what's close to you and what matters to you.

JM: We were having a chat over the phone weren't we, and during that chat I actually realised that, and it was when we were, we got talking about *High Noon*. *High Noon*'s always fascinated me, the way men especially, it's all men who fail isn't it? I don't think there's any woman who fails in it, in *High Noon*. But the way men fail and make excuses for failure, and what they do is they realise what they should do, but the cost is too high. The cost of doing the right thing is far too high, and so they don't do the

right thing, and they excuse it all the time. And I've realised that that's, that is what I constantly write about, men and women not doing the right thing because it just costs too much. Sometimes your life, but often your reputation or your friendships or your faith.

MS: And one of the other things that we talked about on the phone is that those situations are heightened if the cost is actually money as well. If you don't have any money backing you up, because one of the questions that obviously comes up with you is this, you tend to write about the working class. You don't write, you have done and you do write about the middle class, but it's mostly working class, and do you want to explain why you choose that?

JM: Yeah, yeah, I just think that if you don't you're missing a trick. In a soap opera especially you can decide the most extraordinary things, that in real life would have enormous financial consequences, but in a soap opera they never discuss the financial consequences, it's always the emotional isn't it. In real life you just wouldn't do that. Often in a drama somebody would take off a ring and throw it away, you what?

[Laughter]

You'd never see that, you'd sell it, you would, wouldn't you? It's just things like that. So that's just an added dimension, the enormous financial burden becomes an added dimension to the emotional drama. The drama is in the emotion, I know but that… But then, I've been writing about a woman under pressure, I don't know whether it'll ever see the light of day, but all she's trying to do is get money, that's all she's trying to do. And it's amazing to see, when a poor working class woman with, three kids she's got, and she can't get money. Which is very common these days, you get sanctioned and that's it. And so she goes somewhere, gets no money, and then she's walking the streets to somebody else, no money. Goes somewhere else, no money. And it's just, it's an amazing thing to write about really, and I don't know why it isn't written about more. It was done in *The Spongers*. Jim Allen wrote precisely that in *The Spongers*, and I urge everyone in this room to see that play. Don't watch it on YouTube, it's all dark and you can't watch it properly on YouTube, but get a proper DVD of *The Spongers* and watch that and see a woman under pressure trying to do the best she can for her kids, and it's incredible, it really is.

MS: But it's very interesting because it's literally what you're talking about with the *High Noon* analogy, that it's actually a cost, and if you are, if you're writing about middle class people that cost is less, it's less of a problem isn't it, that's not really the issue.

JM: Yes, but they would then argue, "But the cost of their reputation, darling," but no, working class people value their reputation too. And so yeah, it's, as in all these things I do it for the story rather than principle, there's no principle involved - I'm a writer. [laughs]

MS: You're doing it for money.

JM: I'd do anything for a story.

MS: I want to move onto, we've grouped kind of three dramas together, and one of them was a very particular drama that you wanted to mention called *Needle*. Do you want to kind of explain why you - the three of them we're going to put together actually are *Needle*, *Hillsborough* and *Common*, but we're going to start with *Needle* - and do you want to tell people about this, because not so many people know this film I don't think.

JM: I packed in *Brookside* and it was about 1989. I packed in *Brookside* shortly after the Hillsborough football disaster for lots of personal reasons and angst and God knows what. And I imagined the phone would ring, I imagined that I would get phone calls from people, "Do you want to write this? Do you want to…?" Nobody rang me at all, I was just a soap opera writer. And then I got one phone call from George Faber. Older people will know George Faber to be like a wonderful executive producer at the BBC, he did *Screenplay* and stuff, in the days when we did single drama. And

anyway, he wanted a writer to write about the needle exchange scheme, which was strong on Merseyside. On Merseyside in 1989 nobody died, nobody died of AIDS on Merseyside through the use of intravenous drugs, whereas in Edinburgh and Glasgow they were dropping like flies, because we had a needle exchange scheme. So there were politics in it: 'Is this right?' Of course it was right, but… But this was my first big break, the phone had rung, and honest to God, I did loads of research on it and just threw myself into it. If I make a mess of this, it's *Emmerdale Farm*

[Laughter]

Because I couldn't go back to *Brookside*. I remember every decision I made, every decision I made, and it came to a point in the story, you just want to impress people. This is going to get done, and for years later it will be my calling card. I've got to impress, I've got to show them that I'm better than the average writer. I'll do things that the average writer will not do. Anyway, I came to a point in the story where the young wife has discovered that her young husband has been injecting heroin and lied to her, and she leaves him. He goes round to her house and her dad opens the door, and it's Peter Postlethwaite, and he head butts him, so he's not going to go anywhere near there again. So he waits for his young wife who has a baby to be pushing a pram in the street, and he comes and begs her to listen while he explains everything. In three drafts, in three or four drafts, he begged her to listen, and she listened, she stopped and listened. And then I did something, which to lots of people will be the obvious thing to do, but to me at that time it wasn't so obvious. I said, no, she's got her free will, and I don't think she'll stop. No matter what he says or does, she will not stop. But the story demands that she stop. So, "Please stop, please stop. You're my wife, you're my baby, I'll never do it again, I love you, I love you. I'll kill myself if you do not stop, please stop, please, please, I'm begging you, stop." And then she'd stop? No. I decided no, you cannot do that. So I then walked around the room for like hour after hour after hour, no matter what he says, no matter what he does she will not stop, and yet I need her to stop.

MS: Shall we show the scene Jim?

JM: She will not stop until she, the character, wants to stop. And often we cheat that moment, don't we? Often we compromise, shoddy compromise, and your character conveniently stops. But on this occasion I didn't, and after something like six hours, six hours this took me, and you'll laugh at it when you see it because it's so bloody obvious now but this, anyway, this is what I came up with. And I think it's the simplest thing I ever wrote, and it's the best thing I ever wrote.

[Clip from *Needle* plays]

That's fine. You don't need any more.

MS: Oh I quite like the rest of it. You want to cut it?

[Applause]

JM: But it's a thing, I'll always remember it coming to me. And Gillies MacKinnon, great director, and he directed it just brilliantly, he got that just right. And it was everything I imagined, he got for me. Anyway the film went out and the next morning I had to go down to the BBC, because the film had got good previews, so I knew… Oh, you know, so all these meetings had been, so I'm thinking oh, you know. So I'm going down, but I got the Guardian and Nancy Banks-Smith gave it a rave. Oh my God, it was amazing. So I read Nancy Banks-Smith all the way down there, and I read her all the way back
[Laughter]
And when I got off at Lime Street at the end of that day I could recite every single word of Nancy Banks-Smith's review. She was a wonderful critic. You know the value of great criticism, it can be, you know great criticism's so rare, but Nancy was… I mean she's around now still Nancy but she's not writing anymore I don't think, is she?

MS: No, no. She does the odd *Archers* review.

JM: Oh right.

MS: But not so much telly. And where did *Needle* lead you with your storytelling, because one of the things that happens in *Needle* is essentially, one of the things I very much enjoyed about that films is that it's not morally ambiguous, but it shows all the sides doesn't it. It shows the sides of people who are upset about the drug users and the people who are trying to stick to a very moral approach, which is to let them have needles, and then the pressure on the politician makes her change her mind. One of the things that I found very interesting about that is that you are known as a moral writer, generally, but that's quite, it's quite ambiguous in *Needle* isn't it?

JM: Yes, I think, it's a thing you learn isn't it. It's probably more ambiguous because it's better than a lot of the stuff I've written. You've just got to give the devil the best tunes haven't you? And so you give the opposing arguments, the ones about which you're suspicious, much more strength and depth. But I could see both sides, I could see both sides. I mean I still believe it ought to be available. In 1968, I used to work the seasons in holiday camps and hotels, and in 1968 I shared a room with an Irishman who was injecting heroin, and he was getting it free on prescription. And there was no drug war, there was no drug-related crime, there was no drug-related disease. It was just, if you needed drugs you'd go to the doctor and get a script, and that all stopped in '68 or '69, and that was the start of the drug wars today, when it was driven underground. So I do believe in heroin freely available on prescription only, but I've got people in my family who have destroyed their lives on drugs, so I see that side to it as well.

MS: There's a very, it is a great film and there's a very affecting, kind of bewildering but very believable scene of where, of Danny and his friends essentially are smoking heroin at first, and then they start injecting. But they're all sitting together, and they're all talking over one another, and then they start gauching out from the drugs. It's very believable, and so I wanted to know about your research. You must have spent time with addicts. Did you go to shooting galleries and stuff?

JM: It was difficult, I did spend a lot of time with them. I've never injected heroin in my life, nor would I, I was too frightened of it. Not for any reasons of principle, but because I was too frightened of it. I'm an addictive personality, and I knew, you know. But I've been pissed quite a few times, and so for me that was, his heroin addiction is my addiction to alcohol. But yes, it's very difficult to fix up interviews with heroin addicts, particularly then.

MS: They never turn up, do they? [laughs]

JM: Oh they never show up, they never show up. But there was one guy I desperately needed to speak to where all that stuff came from, and I told him when he came in for his free needles to phone me. I don't drive, but I'd jumped a cab, went down there and got him and spoke to him. And I got, because he's been inside, I needed to speak to someone who'd been inside for some length of time and was also into the stuff. So a lot of that stuff came out of research.

MS: You've basically indicated that you do a lot of research for your work. There's normally a deadline, how does that work? How much research, how hard do you push that deadline?

JM: I know, that's the thing isn't it, I'm sure we've all been there. The research is so enjoyable isn't it? But you've got to start, you've just got to do it haven't you. I hate writing page one. When I was writing *Cracker* we'd do, each story was a three-parter, it would be roughly 150 pages long. So you'd finish one, you know a three-parter, and you'd be knackered, because you'd put a lot into *Cracker*. A lot of me was in *Cracker*, a lot of stuff I knew was in *Cracker*. So you'd put a lot into it, and you'd finish it, and then you'd write: 'Story number two, page one.' And you're another 150 pages to go, it was just so, so destroying. And it's not like writing a novel, they want it, you've got to do it.

MS: But that's maybe the best way or else you never would.

JM: Yeah, probably.

MS: Shall we talk a little bit about *Hillsborough*. It's obviously an incredibly important film and a really difficult film because it's a real story, it's not fictionalised. When you, you've talked about it before obviously, and one of the things that you've said is the story in those situations belongs to the victims, it belongs to the families, but obviously from Hillsborough there's lots of different sides isn't there. How do you ensure that you're representing it in the right way, because even within the families there were arguments weren't there, everyone was very different in their approach.

JM: Yeah. I think it's, with a thing like *Hillsborough* it was easier in that the press had been appalling. You know The Sun front page, 'The Truth', the fans pissed on the dead, that's what The Sun said. They pissed on the dead, they robbed from the dead, and they battered coppers who were bravely trying to resuscitate the dying, that's what The Sun front page said, and other outlets picked that story up as well. So part of it, part of the drive was to correct that imbalance. It happened in 1989 and I came to it in 1996, and for the intervening years…

MS: Could I just ask, how did you come to it? Were you asked to do it?

JM: I wrote an episode of *Cracker* about a lad called Albie who simply went around killing journalists from The Sun.

[Laughter]

But he also had this, he was a socialist, he was a socialist. He worked in a factory, he was a working class man who worked in a factory, but he was an intelligent socialist as well. So he was a contradiction. But at a certain point in the film he decides to act the way people expect him to act, so he shaves his head, and the first victim is a Pakistani newsagent, because that's what's expected of him. And then he went after coppers and journalists from The Sun and things like that. And it was everything I felt. I know I'm going to offend a lot of people here, but from the time I was working on *Brookside* I was on easy street, and all I saw was my brothers and sisters and families and friends devastated.

You know, factory closure after factory closure after factory closure. And there was this massive attack upon the British working class, but it was especially violent against the white working class male. The intellectual left saw them as fascists and bigots, and the intellectual right just attacked them anyway. And I saw his happening. Derek Hatton, part of the militant tendency, oh how the intellectual left despised that man. You know, baulchy, outspoken Scouser with a shiny face. Football fans, oh how the intellectual left despised them. Fascists and bigots and racists and homophobes, all of them. Trade unionists, "Oh for God's sake, wake up, get up to the times. You're fighting a lost cause, those days are gone, get over it." All those working class institutions being smashed, our country being robbed from us. I saw all that going on. Orgreave, the miners' strike. The coppers with bulging pay packets, 65 percent pay rise from Mrs. Thatcher, first thing she did, gave our police officers a 65 percent pay rise, and Orgreave and things like that was the direct result.

They smashed the trade union movement. The strongest union in our country was smashed by overpaid coppers, overzealous coppers. And so I saw all this and I was not surprised that '89 came and Hillsborough happened. You know, "Get in there, get in there you Scouse bastard, get in there." You'd go, you'd be met at railway stations and battered. They'd hit you over the head. "Get against that wall, you Scouse bastard." This went on and on and on. I wasn't at all surprised it happened in '89, and I just exploded. I just made a vow that in future I would see my allies on the left, but working class people would be my natural allies. I just stopped trusting the intellectual left. Anyway, I think *Cracker*, I wrote the *Hillsborough* drama, but that episode of *Cracker* came out of all that. A white working class male just sick of everything.

MS: Yeah, being called scum for so long.

JM: Yes. And he was a Scouser [laughs]

MS: And so that led you to *Hillsborough*, which was…

JM: Yeah, well but then the Hillsborough families found out what was going on and they came and we met them all and we had a big screening for them, and they took, again, the left were finding reasons to object. "Why are you doing this?" They thought I was doing it for the money, that was the last thing, I'd have given the bloody money away. But the families themselves, those who'd been there, they were well into it. "Yes, especially when you killed The Sun journalist, yes!"

[Laughter]

It was just amazing. But then there was a bond formed. And then I went out for a walk, I went out for a walk and it was a beautiful summer's day, and I came back and on my doorstep was Doreen Jones and Jenni Hicks. Doreen had lost her boy there and Jenni had lost two daughters at Hillsborough, and I'll never forget the simplicity. I walked up to them and they said, "Jimmy, we've come to ask you to tell our story." That was it, so we went in the garden and opened up the wine and drank it.

MS: And was it hard, I mean you'd been asked to write this incredibly difficult film to write, and you wrote a very wonderful film, was it hard to get it shown, or was that difficult?

JM: She's dead now, Andrea Wonfor was the chief executive at ITV, Granada as it was then, sorry. And Andrea Wonfor was brilliant. The Hillsborough families have asked me to do this, and I'm at the BAFTAs… And *Cracker*'s winning everything. I never won a BAFTA for *Cracker*, everybody else won, producers and directors and everything. I never got anything.

[Laughter]

MS: I hope someone's taking notes!

JM: But anyway, so I'm waiting for Andrea. Andrea liked to drink and smoke, so I'm waiting for her to be on her third or fourth brandy, and she's the chief executive, and she wanted me to write something for them. So I just said to her, "You know what we should do next Andrea." She said, "What?" "The true story of Hillsborough." And she said, I'll never forget it, "Tell me what you need and you've got it. Now do it."

MS: That's so brilliant.

JM: But that was just amazing. That's what it was like in those days, there were good people like that. But she's passed away Andrea now, it's a shame, but wonderful woman.

MS: Can we show, we've got a clip from *Hillsborough*. It's actually two clips kind of run together, so if you see them –tit's not actually, this is not how it is, but there's two clips that I want to talk about and why're put them together.

JM: Can I say, you'll see something shit. You'll see some appalling writing, but there will be an explanation after.

[Laughter]

[Clip from *Hillsborough* plays]

MS: Right, shall we talk about the bit at the end. So where he's saying, "Shall we open the gate?" to the policeman who's called Duckenfield. What do you think about the line that he says?

JM: It's a key moment both in the history of Hillsborough and in the drama. They allowed a crush to build up outside the ground, and to relieve that crush they opened up a gate. You just don't do that, even if it's a pantomime or an opera you do not bring loads of people into a confined space like that. They will die. But they opened up this emergency gate and two or three thousand people went in down a slope, it's a key thing. So in the writing I wrote, it was a key decision and he lied about it and all that, but in the writing of the drama I wrote, "Mr. Duckenfield, Sir, will you open the gate?", and then we cut to the opening of the gate. And then the lawyers come on, and my God the lawyers were all over this. If you want hassle, have a go at the British police. My God they've got lawyers galore, and the richest trade union in the world is the

British police federation, it's extraordinary. Anyway, there's lawyers all over it, and the lawyer comes back to me and he says, "Jimmy, you can't do that, you can't have the guy say, 'Are you going to open the gate', and then cut to the opening of the gate. We need Duckenfield to say, 'Yes, open the gate'." So anyway, I said, "Oh God." So I add, "Yes," he says. The lawyer comes back. "Jimmy, you cannot say that. You've got to have the words he says. The verbatim." And I said, "But he didn't say that, he's only saying he said those words because a lawyer has told him to say he said those words. Nobody talks like this." And they said, "Nevertheless Jimmy, that's what you write." So at this key moment in the drama, he goes, "If there is risk of death or injury to anybody outside the ground…" And it's just, oh my God. But, and now I wear it as a badge of honour because I know, you know you are occasionally asked to stand up and be brave. Most of us, most writers are emotional cowards, we say yes to everything and we don't like offending people. Most of us are cowards, but every now and again we have to stand up for something. But very few writers are asked to make themselves look bad, to make themselves appear to be a bad writer, because that's what the drama demands. That's what the job demands. How many writers would say yes to that? Make yourself look like a crap writer at this point Jimmy, because otherwise you don't get it made. And so it was a strange moment for me.

MS: And also, I mean it's the kind of thing that might stick out for you as a writer, but actually when you're caught up in the moment I don't know that you notice quite as much.

JM: You don't, but as a writer all the compromises you're like that aren't you. Everything, every little compromise, you know it, you wait for it don't you.

MS: The other thing that we chose some of the clips for, for that particular point, was that the marrying of real life footage that you know a lot of us were watching in real life, and the drama as well. How did that work? Did you find that easy or hard? Was it easy to do technically?

JM: I kind of left that the Charles McDougall. I wrote it as if there was no, that we had all the money in the world. And in effect we had no money at all, everybody wrote it for the bare minimum, everybody worked on it for the bare amount. We did it for the cause. So we had to have that, we had to merge the two, because if we'd simply shown our crowds there would have been like 120 people there. And like when they go on the grass, I've got the camera up there looking down on grass, because you couldn't put it there, because everywhere was empty behind. And I think this was before the days when you could paint stuff in or anything like that.

MS: One of the key things about *Hillsborough* is actually something that comes up a lot in your work, which is the difference between law and justice. That's what the whole film in the end, the second half of the film is about really isn't it. And actually it's a theme that runs right the way through your work isn't it, that the law doesn't work in the way that you think it's going to.

JM: Nobody even thinks about it. Until you're caught up in something, not many people in this country realise that law and justice are totally different things, and that law can be incompatible with justice, and law is designed to keep you away from justice. And you don't find that out until you're embroiled in it, until you're the victim of an injustice, or you child gets killed. Families of the Marchioness victims found that out, the Hillsborough families found that out, all the miners at Orgreave found that out. Law and justice are totally, you know… Gerald Nabarro, is there anybody old enough to remember Gerald Nabarro? Old Tory, he switched didn't he. But anyway, he was banged to rights, I told you, it was like a traffic offence. He has a big handlebar moustache, and I think he went from court to court, he was banged to rights, getting thrown out of parliament, probably even jail. Anyway, he fought it and fought it and he was acquitted, and he came down the steps, he was guilty as sin, everybody knew he was, and he came down the steps and he said, "British justice, the best that money can buy."

[Laughter]

He was brilliant. And do I think that's, it's just shocking the way that law gets in the way. The Birmingham Six, the Denning quote. He was faced with incontrovertible proof that the Birmingham Six had been fitted up, and he said, "Best not go there. Because to go there is to accept that the police lied, and all the things we had to accept, that is an appalling vista, best not to go there, keep them inside." That's what he said.

MS: But it's interesting isn't it. If you think about the times that you've been writing in, so from the '80s to now, and the fact that you know later on you've done an entire series called *Accused*. So the law, it's not changed, but I think maybe ordinary peoples' attitudes towards the law and towards things like the police telling the truth or not has become completely different. I sometimes think that you know the attitudes of punk, like what Johnny Rotten what kind of you know was saying back in those days, everybody thinks that now, everybody agrees. And so those attitudes have kind of changed whilst you've been writing really haven't they?

JM: Yes, but, that's true, but I don't think it's the same argument. I think you're talking about respect for the law and understanding that coppers can lie, that's all changed, yes. But still the, just the pure realisation that the law itself, without the people, the letter of the law itself is a hindrance to justice, absolutely shocking. Your child's been killed and the bastard who killed him is in the dock at the inquest and you'll hear him say, "I will not answer that question on the grounds that it might incriminate me." Everybody accepts it, it's just amazing. And as I say, people realise far too late this essential fact of our life: law and justice are incompatible.

MS: Shall we play another clip? We've got another clip here from *Common*, which is a film, well a TV drama that came out last year, which also concerns the law.

[Clip from *Common* plays]

[Applause]

Right, so that was your way of explaining the joint enterprise doctrine. Do you want to just quickly, I don't know if we should quickly explain what the story is really quickly.

JM: Oh God, yeah. The story, Johnjo is asked for a lift by these four lads and he takes them to a pizza place, and they get out to warn this boy in the pizza place, you know to shut him up, or possibly even to attack him, we do not know. But in the course of that attack, or that confrontation, an innocent bystander is killed. But poor Johnjo, Johnjo is blissfully unaware of this in the car, they get in the car and they drive away. But they all get done, they all stand trial, or face the prospect of standing trial for murder, because Johnjo was in with the group. And these days association is often guilt. To associate in the same group as a murderer is to stand trial for murder, because you have played some part of it. That guy Grayling who was the Justice Minister wasn't he, he's just packed in, he's somewhere else now I think, he was the Justice Minister, we wrote to him. Because they make great play of the fact, foreknowledge, you must have foreknowledge… Or, sorry, you must encourage. To stand trial for murder along with the main perpetrator, along with the person who wielded the weapon, you must have in some way encouraged then boy who wielded the weapon.

So we said, "What does encouragement mean?" And he said, "Even a knowing look would do it." You know it's just ridiculous. It's used, in London it's used against black lads, and black girls, but mainly black lads, and in the North against the working class in general. So you can see what's happening. And some of the cases, you wouldn't believe some of the cases. I spoke to the High Court judge, and he and a mate, he and another High Court judge were going into school to explain joint enterprise, because he said the kids find it hard to understand. And I said, "They don't find it hard to understand, they find it hard to believe, that's why you're going in." The slightest involvement in a

murder - particularly murder because there's no flexibility in the sentencing, you all get life - the slightest involvement in a murder and you too get life. It's horrendous.

MS: It is horrendous. When you wrote *Common* you were obviously addressing this issue in particular, but the law is not only always without justice, it's also quite complicated isn't it. So there are elements within your, when you're writing that you have to simplify don't you. It isn't exactly as it would be, is that true?

JM: No, all the time, but better, it's far better for lawyers to say, "Oh you got that wrong McGovern," than for a viewer to say, "I don't understand any of this." You have to keep it simple, or you just have to keep the drama moving and the story moving. But even the law of joint enterprise, it isn't even a law, it's a common law, it's been formed by precedent. Judge after judge after judge throughout the years have introduced facets of joint enterprise, so now there's a big body of joint enterprise law, but it's common law, it hasn't been passed by parliament ever.

MS: So it's harder to change as well.

JM: It was introduced, the first judge to use it used it to stop the aristocracy dueling. So all the seconds and the surgeons would get done for murder if somebody died in a duel, that's why it was introduced, and now it's being used against black kids in Tower Hamlets and Hackney, and up in Hull and Grimsby and Liverpool. It's just a tool, as they say in there, I think it's a tool just to clear all the feral youth off our streets. The big, sorry, the big proponent of it was Tony Blair, he was well into it.

MS: When you talk it's really obvious the stuff that makes you passionate, the stuff that you want to write about, it's injustice. It's completely, you know, clear. There is a lot of injustice in the world, do you not ever get completely battered down by it, by the fact that these things happen, that you feel compelled to write about them? It's quite a dark path sometimes.

JM: This is a case in point, because *Common* came about because I opened up a letter from a woman who had a loved one inside. There was a murder and this boy was nowhere on the scene, but he had to confess to GBH or face trial for life for murder, so he confessed to GBH and got ten years, rather than do life. It was reduced to six with various things. Anyway, I opened up this letter and exactly as you said I said, "No, I've had enough, I've had enough of this. I'm not going to get involved in this." So I was just about to write back and say, "Thank you very much but I'm too busy/old/tired." And then I looked at the date on the letter and it was a month old, the letter was a month old. So I turned the envelope over and she'd sent, she'd used the wrong postcode. So I said to myself, I can't let this woman think I sat on this letter for a month whilst her boy's inside for… And so I phoned up intending to say, "I haven't sat on this letter, you posted it to the wrong address." But as soon as you get the human voice on the end of the line, that's it, you're hooked. So that's the reason I was into *Common*. I didn't mean to do it.

[Laughter]

MS: I'm slightly conscious of time so I want to move on from those three kind of very particular dramas to *The Street* and *Accused*. I wanted to play something from *The Street*. Shall we play that and then talk about it I think might be quite good.

[Clip from *The Street* plays]

[Applause]

So we could talk about the format of *The Street*, or we could talk about your age. So that is a very funny, poignant, it's a beautiful piece of writing that particular episode. I mean it's all lovely, all of it's brilliant, but that's an amazing thing. But it is you know, you said yourself you're getting older, these things are, how much of yourself is within this character? And I hope you're not trying to top yourself at every point.

JM: No, no, no. I have thought about that a few times, but at the moment no.

[Laughter]

It's, when you baldly express it like that, that at 20 years of age a year is a twentieth of your life so far, and at 65 it's only a sixty-fifth it's terrifying, but that's the stark reality, that's why time goes so quickly as you age, it's shocking. I'm absolutely terrified, I really am. So yeah, there was an awful lot of me in that, but what we got on *The Street* particularly was, we trawled for writers, we trawled for stories. We didn't entertain the notion of the writer, our point was there are so many writers but there are very few stories. So we trawled for stories, and we got them in, and we picked the ones that I could write if the writer failed. It was a great luxury. And often the writer did fail, and I would rewrite every single word, but particularly in the first series, I think in all of them on *The Street*, the writer got sole credit, even if every word was changed. But that notion of sitting back and thinking, 'Yeah, I could write that', but then commissioning a writer. There was a writer, we hired a writer who was a drug dealer, and he hadn't written a word, he'd never written a word in his life, but he had this story. And I thought, 'Well if you write about drugs, or this person who doesn't know anything about drugs writes about drugs, yours will be more immediate', and so we commissioned him.

MS: And how do you find, because you do that a lot, you work with other writers don't you, and obviously that's going to involve some form of handholding or rewriting the whole thing. How do you find that; do you enjoy it, or do you find it frustrating?

JM: I absolutely love it, I absolutely love it. It's the fact that you haven't got to write page one yourself.

[Laughter]

MS: You just go, "That's rubbish, start again."

JM: Well exactly, you aren't writing. Once you've got a 60-page script in you are no longer writing, you are re-writing, and there's a massive difference there. We're onto a story about Reg Keys. Reg took on Tony Blair in Sedgefield after his son was shot dead in Iraq. It's an iconic moment of the 2005 election was it? I can't remember, anyway, but Reg Keys making a speech in front of Cherie and Blair. Why have I said that? Why have I got onto Reg Keys?

MS: I don't know, maybe because we were talking about writers.

JM: Yeah, oh that's right. And eight years ago I interviewed Reg Keys and I said, "I'll do that, I'll write your story Reg." That was eight years ago and I didn't do it. Anyway, it came up again, and the next time we got Bob Pugh, you know the actor Bob Pugh, we took him down to meet Reg and we interviewed Reg all over again, and Bob Pugh wrote the first draft, and then he got me going. So it was just, just one way of getting over, getting over that page one paralysis. So it's a really interesting way of working, and often of course the original writer will have scenes and pages that will remain all the way through. The original writer will be writing, you'll know when it's good, but you'll know it's personal. You'll know the writer is writing it from somewhere in here.

Alcoholism, we've had a story like that on *The Street*, that was deeply personal to that writer. And the energy level will be sky high. There won't be any bullshit, there won't be any tired regurgitation of clichde because often the writers were brand new, they couldn't identify what was a clichu and what wasn't. So all that was going on as well, and it was a dream. And to get writers into a room and sit with them and just get this ugly little beast of a story and send it out a beautifully fully-formed animal that the writer couldn't wait to get started on. Hours and hours and hours of work in that story room, but that's often what we did. It was a beautiful process. And apart from one writer who we sacked because he was an arrogant bastard,

[Laughter]

Apart from that, I think every other writer who did *The Street* and *Accused* would say that it was a good process. And we treated them fairly with, you know we'd give them title and we paid them full

whack. But we ended up, often, at its best we ended up with some lovely stuff.

We had, a couple of interesting mantras we had. One was, the best stories, don't get me wrong, we failed often. But at its best we had simplicity of narrative and complexity of character, and I think that's a wonderful mantra for a TV drama. What you do not want is simplicity of character and complexity of narrative, that's ridiculous. That's what we had, because characters are complex. There was that, and the other one was, at the end of it all, the story reigns supreme, leave your ego at the door. And they got battered, the writers got battered. I had them in tears sometimes, they really got a hard time. Because all that mattered was the story, nothing else, not your ego, not your training, not your ambitions, the story is all I care about. But when we got it really, truly right we'd end up with something approaching a final draft that was bloody good. And then we wouldn't leave it at that, we'd have another go, and any trace of the writer was taken out. Any sign of effort, you expend more effort to disguise that effort. It's as if, at its very best, it was as if we found a story in the street. The seeming absence of the writer, the simplicity of the storytelling, surely we found this story in the street. And hours and hours of work, to even get to the seeming absence of the writer and the lack of effort takes even more effort than you've ever envisaged, you know it really does. But at its best that's what we got.

MS: And at its best, that's what you're about isn't it, the absence of the writer. You don't want to be, although we may think we know what a Jimmy McGovern drama is, you don't want to be known as a kind of writerly writer do you?

JM: No, I always thought, I always call myself, I think we've only ever had one writer in Britain, that was James Joyce… Not Britain, sorry, Ireland and Britain! Oh my God, sorry. But all the rest of us are storytellers, and so when we forget that we're storytellers we're in trouble aren't we. We're telling a story thank you very much. It was a great way of working, I had, it was a really fertile period. We had great meetings, great meetings. I promise you, you would have, any writer in this room would have loved to have been there because it was just no holds barred. You'd have been upset, you would have laughed a bit, you'd have cried a bit, but at the end of it you would have gone out with something far better than what you came in with. There was me, Roxy Spencer and the writer and we just battered it. Hours and hours and hours, it was a fascinating thing. You know just some really good stuff. The alcoholic was, sorry, that one was Stephen Graham, he's an alcoholic and he gets told he has a son and he thinks it's going to redeem him, and the son turns out to be Down's Syndrome, and there's just a wonderful simplicity there. I think we nearly got that, there were flaws in every one, but we nearly got that just right.

MS: I'd like to play just a scene from *Accused* actually, which I think is a pretty perfect scene.

[Clip from the *Accused* plays]

[Applause]

I've watched that about five times for the research, it still makes me cry every time.

JM: It's funny isn't it because in the '80s I'd sit and watch TV, you'd see Alan Bleasdale and you'd have all these wonderful actors and you know you'd go, "You don't know how lucky you are. Look at *Brookside*, the pieces of wood I'm working with you bastard."

[Laughter]

And then suddenly, but then you realise, the script gets the director it deserves, the director gets the writers, the script that he deserves or she deserves, and so on. But the funny, I've got a funny story to tell about that. Derek, I'm the fifth of nine, he was the final child Derek, so he's had it easy. But he's the sports betting guy on the Daily Mirror, so he does all the sports betting and all that like you know. And he phones me up and he goes, "The prices for the BAFTAs are out Jim." I said, "Oh yeah, yeah." He says, "Olivia Colman for Best Supporting Actress is 100/30 against. I said, "Get everything on

it! Get everything on it! Get me on it, get me on it!"

[Laughter]

Anyway, I think he had, he got 30 quid on with Ladbrokes and they wouldn't take anymore because they realised he knew something. And of course she pissed the Best Supporting Actress.

To get, I mean that was a good piece of, it's written from, you can tell it was written from here, but there's that as well, you know what I mean. Those logical points about, you know, "You'll see your son again, I'll never see mine." That clicht about, "I lost my son too that day." "No you didn't, he's in prison, my son's in his grave." All the sheer, cold logic, and then you come to write it. "Don't you dare tell me you fucking bitch about your fucking son dying…" And I'm walking around the room doing this, and Aileen would come in, Aileen would come in often and there would just be tears everywhere. I just think that if you don't write like that, I think two things: you cannot expect your character to laugh unless you too laugh with a joke, and you certainly, certainly cannot expect your characters to cry unless you're crying writing it. How dare you, how dare you. Tears have got to be flowing to expect a character… And if you get the sheer, cold logic of the ice in the veins, because we're all like that, cold vultures. And ally that to passion and energy, you know you've got something I think. But only at certain, if you did it too much it would be too much.

MS: You'd have a heart attack.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

MS: Also part of the research I read quite a lot of reviews of your work, including Nancy Banks-Smith, actually. And she, she said one thing which I'm going to refer to, and then I'm going to refer to another critic. Actually I'll do this critic first, because this critic said that he thinks that you have a 'loathing of redemption'. And I'm not quite sure about that, but I did notice at the end of that scene that some people would have had the two, those women were friends initially, they would have had them hug or do something at the end of that scene.

JM: And I wrote, 'they hug'. But I work with David Blair a lot, and if you ever get the chance to work with him, work with him. He's that rare animal, he's done every job in the industry, started off as a gofer and so he knows jobs inside out. But he's a brilliantly talented director and he directs with his heart and his head. And I've written, about four occasions now he's directed a script of mine in which two women hug at the end, and he's always denied me it, except at the end of *Common*. At the end of Common he said, "You can have it." It's interesting, you know where your weaknesses lie, and so often I'll not listen to anybody, but very, very rarely. Very, very rarely. I listen to everybody normally. Very, very rarely I will refuse to listen, I'll know I'm right. But at moments at that when you think, yeah, you're suspicious of sentiment aren't you, sentimentality. We all know our weaknesses, sentimentality's one of mine for sure. So you listen, you listen when you're in areas like that.

MS: And the other critic, Nancy Banks-Smith, she, when she was writing about *The Street* which she really loved, she said two things. One, she called them plays rather than dramas. She actually uses the word play all the way through. And the other thing she talks about is plausibility versus poetry almost. So she says that, essentially what she's saying is that some of your storylines are kind of implausible really, but it doesn't really matter, they become a kind of poetry. Do you want to talk about those two things, first of all the play aspect, and secondly the sort of plausibility aspect.

JM: Well we brought back single dramas, but I can't claim everything for that because it was Paul Abbott, he did a series called *Clocking Off,* which some of which was bloody marvelous. And so I clocked that, 'Oh aye, I see what Paul's done there'. So when we did *The Street* we had Paul's stuff in mind, and all the early days of British and American television, *Wagon Train*, they all were recurring series but they all told individual dramas. And that way we had total

flexibility. Put it on the street, for God's sake anybody can be on that street. Total flexibility, we can tell any story we like and it can be a single drama, and we can pretend it's a series. But actually it's not a series, it's a sequence of single dramas. Anthology is the word that was always used. So there was that, it just afforded us flexibility and the ability to write single drama.

MS: And the other aspect is, she basically said that some of the stories are completely implausible, but she likens them to poetry. So that's quite a difficult thing to do isn't it, if you take a story that is, and push it to its limits almost, you are stretching people's, stretching the credibility I suppose.

JM: I think in particular you'd have in mind the one about the man who killed as a child. The manlike as a child and he bumps into the mum of the child he killed, and she tries to get to him, and they meet through the crack of a door, and they have this massive conversation through the crack of a door. In reality of course he wouldn't be allowed anywhere near where that woman lived, that would be one of the terms of his release, there's all sorts of stuff. But the stuff we were questioning; guilt and atonement and forgiveness, and the way we made both of them totally articulate. The man especially would not, that kind of man would not be that articulate, but I despise those dramas in which the British working class struggle to use big words. I let them use, I mean dockers, the dockers in my city are the most intelligent, learned people… Well, they used to be before they were all sacked, they're all scabs now

[Laughter]

But they were the most intelligent, learned people because, they're truly internationalists because they work in mobile factories, those ships are mobile factories. They knew everything. And they would talk politics and internationalism and use all the big words and never apologised for them, and these were the lads who left school at 14 years of age. So I love that idea of letting characters who perhaps should be inarticulate, be articulate. I think that, from there comes the, it's not an accusation of poetry, but from there comes the word poetry.

MS: No, it was a celebration, I'm not saying she accused you of poetry, she called it poetry.

JM: Oh she was in love with that series, I know.

MS: Yes, she definitely was.

JM: Particularly about the one about the boy who killed as a child, I thought she really loved that one. Funny story about that, oh she's here, Andrea Calderwood's here. Andrea gets me, Andrea, forgive me for this. Andrea commissions me to do an adaptation of *Border Crossing*, which is a Pat Barker book about a man who killed as a child. That's about right, isn't it Andrea? [points into audience]
So I write a version that's something like 40 pages long, and a version that's 160 pages long. And I give them both to Andrea, and I give her the money back, and I said, "I can't do it," because it was too close to James Bulger. But it was only in the writing that I discovered that. But that's what I fell back on when we wrote this particular thing. In fact, it was the 40-page version really wasn't it? This 40-page version came out, I did some more work on it, but it was from a failed attempt to adapt… I've never adapted a book in my life and I never will because I know I just haven't got that, I cannot do it.

MS: I'm slightly aware of the time because I know that the audience here are very ready to ask questions, but I wanted to ask just a few kind of I suppose not quite general but more technical questions really. So how, obviously it's very important for you to have control over creative decisions, but how much do you collaborate with producers and directors? Do you ever just, you know what's your ideal relationship in those, with the writer-producer relationship and writer-director relationship?

JM: I think, me personally, I think what you want is a brilliant script editor, and there seems to be fewer and fewer of

them, that's the thing. I'm not going to work with RSJ again, but despite the disagreements we've had, I'm mature enough to tell you that Roxy Spencer was a brilliant script editor and I will miss that relationship. Somebody who's prepared to tell you it as it is, and somebody you respect, so when he or she says, "This isn't working," you go back to it. So I think that was the key thing for me, a great script editor.

MS: And do you have that now when you're working on projects, do you look for somebody who will do that with you?

JM: I think I'm going to have to because I miss it, I miss it so much. And often there's nothing said. A funny story, actually this young script editor on *Cracker* is now a major player in the industry, so be careful who you upset, you're going to need them. But this, her first job in British television was to go out and get me a packet of Benson & Hedges

[Laughter]

That was her first job. But she attended the storyline meeting, the script meeting, and she came up with an idea, eager to please you know, and really eager to please. And bright, bright as a button. And came up with an idea, shit, it was shit. No, no. And came up with another idea, and another idea, and round about the eighth one it was breaking my heart, and I had to say to her, I said, "That's a good idea." And it was no better than the other ones she's come up with, but I actually went away and made it a good idea, you can do that. Because it makes you think, it makes you attack your script from somewhere else. It can often be useful that kind of thing. So any kind of input is useful, even input you think is wrong, as long as you use it you. It's, I think you use people as sounding boards, and the more you respect the sounding board… Everything comes from you, no script editor's going to write your script, everything going to come from you anyway, but if you respect the sounding board it's good isn't it.

MS: And how do you keep out the kind of, while you were saying that I was thinking, well it's fair enough if it's someone young and trying and coming up, but quite often part of the problem with television or indeed film is the kind of layers of management, the middle management who want to get involved. How do you keep their ideas out?

JM: Well I, all the time on *Accused* and *The Street*, I shouldn't say this because the BBC will have a go at me, but I've got to say it, I never actually saw one note from the BBC, they were all fed through other people. So if the note had been say, 'What's all this crap on page eight?', it would come to me, 'Jimmy, have you thought about an alternative to page eight', so it would be diffused. I was mainly protected from it, and I worked closely with the people I work closely with. But I know I'm in a privileged position, I've been at it for thirty-odd years now, and I am trusted to a certain extent. They ask me what I want to write, they don't tell me what to write, they ask me what I'll write. So I know how privileged I am, I do understand that. But I was protected from that, and I don't think I could work any other way, I really don't, it must be shocking to get notes, notes and notes and notes. One of my first, I won't name names, but a script editor who had a brother who was a writer, and he got his brother to rewrite all of us, every writer on the series got rewritten, and some of them were really good writers, and he just commissioned his brother to write it.

MS: Okay, I'm going to, I've got two more questions then I'm going to throw it open to the audience. How in your illustrious career, how do you think you've changed as a writer, or haven't you?

JM: Oh that's a good one that. I've got this analogy, you start off life and you've got this creative angel on your left shoulder, and this emaciated critical devil. And you're thick, you don't know anything, but you've got energy and enthusiasm, and you're right, and you're creative angel's telling you it's marvelous, and the critical devil can't get a word in. But as you, I think as you get more and more experienced the critical devil and the creative angel sort of equal each other, and I think that's

pretty good then, you're doing good work then. But as you get a little bit more, as you age a little bit more the bloody critical devil is bigger now, hence the paralysis of page one. I can't, I know how to start this drama but it's shit, this critical devil is telling me that it's shit, so I can't get started. So there's that. I know I've known more than I've ever known about writing, and I think when I do it it's better. I think some of the stuff that I did on *The Street* and *Banished* even, some of the stuff I did on *Banished* was better than a lot of the stuff that I'd written prior to that. But my God, it's harder, you know I find it much harder, it doesn't come easy. And that's another thing I tell myself, when I was churning it out and people were picking up BAFTAs on my work

[Laughter]

It's true, if I had known then how hard it was I'd have charged them a hell of a lot more. I only know now how hard it is.

MS: And you just quickly mentioned *Banished*, which I have to say I got completely addicted to and watched them all in one go. That one seems, I mean to write was that, you've just said it was very difficult, to watch it was much more of a kind of romp to watch, was it?

JM: Yeah, but I wrote that in a totally different way. I wrote nearly four episodes before we got the green light, because I was writing it as a 19th Century novel. And I really enjoyed the writing of it, I really did, and there was some good stuff in there. But I think we went wrong, well we went wrong because we got BBC Two which is you know. "Oh how dare we have that Scouser on our channel. Get him off. This isn't *Wolf Hall*."

[Laughter]

But that was the attitude. But really early on this convict woman says to this guard, "Do you want a shag or a wank?" That was really early on. There was a critic who said, I know exactly where that came from, "a grubby drama," because this convict woman from the East End of London uses words like shag and wank. This grubby drama, so there was a lot of that going on. But it was, it was undeniably flawed as well, I'm not going to hide from that. It was undeniably flawed, but some of it was really well written.

MS: And what are you working on at the moment? What stories are you interested in at the moment?

JM: We're now making *Reg*, which is the story of Reg Keys. Tim Roth is in it and Anna Maxwell Martin, and they're just magnificent. Anna Maxwell Martin, she's just phenomenal. I love her, I just love her to bits. She is, she can do that unusual thing, she can transcend the socio-economic group, the class, she can play downtrodden working class fairly convincingly, which is unusual for a woman from her background.

MS: Olivia Colman also.

JM: Olivia Colman can, oh yes, yes she's brilliant. Anne-Marie Duff can. Well Anne Marie Duff's Irish and the Irish can do anything can't they.

[Laughter]

You can't tell with the Irish. So there's that, but I'm doing this thing about a Catholic priest and a Catholic parish, and it's what I first came into television to write. I could tell you that story about, in the days of Michael Wearing, trying to get this… I would go in, I went in, this was the first approach. "It's a seven-part drama, Michael, about the seven deadly sins." "We're not doing seven-part dramas." "Oh okay, I'll come back." "It's a ten-part drama about the ten commandments, Michael." "We're not doing ten…"

[Laughter]

I ended up with, "It's a four-part drama about the four seasons of the year in a Catholic parish." "No, no, we're not doing that." So it ended up as a single film, it ended up as a single film.

MS: *Priest*.

JM: *Priest*, yeah. But now, that's what I always wanted to do and now it's come full circle, I'm doing it now. And things

have moved on but the Catholic faith, I'm not a practicing Catholic, but the issues remain the same. And you see, on Merseyside we've got brilliant Catholic priests, wonderful Catholic priests, and that they're of the poor and dispossessed. They're just wonderful people and they get involved in social action, they're just wonderful. So although it's ostensibly about a Catholic parish, I think it will be state of the nation. But I'm finding that very difficult.

MS: Are you going to do it as seven deadly sins?

JM: No, it's just going to be story of the week along with this priest. I hope to do it, I hope to nail him. In some striking ways he will resemble me

[Laughter]

I think we all do that though don't we.

MS: That's great. I'd like to, it seems time to throw open to the audience. You are really keen, look at you. I haven't even said throw it open to the audience and your hand's like that. But we have a mic, and this gentleman definitely was the first person I saw, but anybody else please feel free to ask questions to Jimmy.

Q: In light of what happened since your Hillsborough was first broadcast, and in light of all the evidence that's come to mind, what would you have changed, if you were making it now as opposed to then what would you have added? Because in a way it's a more of an upbeat ending compared to what it was at the time.

JM: Yeah, I've been asked to write another part of that story. There's a new inquest ongoing. Obviously because it's an ongoing inquest there's certain things you cannot say that have been said in the absence of the jury, but it's looking really promising, it really is. But the big thing for me was the pathologist. We had to apologise. Katy Jones was our researcher and she was amazing. Katy Jones died recently, she was a wonderful researcher at Granada, more than a researcher, a producer. A brilliant, brilliant talented woman. And she, in the original Hillsborough she'd go up to interview the original Hillsborough coppers who wouldn't talk to me. "We're not having that Scouser anywhere near us," they wouldn't talk to me at all, but Katy was Mancunian and petite and beautiful, and she'd put a little short skirt on.

[Laughter]

And these macho coppers would tell her everything. "What do you wanna know love?" And they'd tell her everything.

But Katy got everything spot on, everything, she was brilliant. Because there was a chance we'd get severely sued, and we didn't get, there was one complaint got through, and Katy was devastated by it. And it was the bloody pathologist who put pressure on a witness, and if only we knew then what we knew now, you know we wouldn't have apologised. We apologised. And we had to cut, we actually cut it, when it was repeated we cut that scene. But the man was guiltier than sin, and if we'd known then what we know now we wouldn't have apologised at all. In fact, we'd have gone in harder on him. And we didn't know the extent of the changing of the witness statements. Every copper who had anything adverse to say about the police and their actions that day had their statements changed.

MS: It's over 100 wasn't it.

JM: It's extraordinary. And anything adverse about the fans was exacerbated, was built upon. And that's fair enough they said. If we could all change our statements at will there would be nobody in prison. There wouldn't be, would there? So I wish I'd known the extent of the way the police changed their statements as well, I'd have gone in a lot harder on that. But apart from that we got it pretty spot on.

Q: [inaudible]

MS: It did also change things as well didn't it?

JM: It did. Well there were questions in parliament and there was, the sad thing that happened, Jack Straw… The previous Home Secretary was a Tory, he

became leader, something of the night about him.

MS: Oh, Michael Howard.

JM: And he happened to be a Liverpool fan, so he was going to help. I think it was shown when he was Home Secretary, but then Jack Straw became Home Secretary and he was sending memos to Tony Blair. Anyway, they had to do something, they had to be seen to do something, so he appointed Lord Justice Stuart-Smith as a kind of scrutineer, to have a scrutiny of the new evidence unearthed by our programme. And he came up to Liverpool and he just did a hatchet job, and the families got nowhere, but we didn't know that Jack Straw was liaising with Tony Blair behind the scenes saying, "It's okay Tony, I'm on top of this, don't bother." Tony Blair sending memos, "Why are we doing this? Jack, why are we doing this?" "Oh it's okay, Tony," he wrote back, "I'm on top of this." I'm sorry to bang on about this, it's my pet thing. If the Labour party is anything, it's a vehicle for social justice, I'm sorry to go off about that.

MS: Another question. I saw you, yes, hello.

Q: Thank you so much firstly for the talk, it's wonderful, but I was wondering, the story room you described for *Accused* and *The Street* sounds very similar to the American writers' room style. And I don't know anything about, I hope to, but I don't yet know anything about writing in England but it seems that people tend to write alone. And I was wondering, given the dearth of script editors as you were saying, is there a place for creating that kind of culture of writers' rooms here, and what would be needed if you think it is a positive thing.

JM: I'm so glad you've asked that question because it comes up every so often. You know the BBC, they are so far behind the times, but every now and again they talk about the writers' room, we shall have to emulate the American writers' room. The cost of the American writers' room is prohibitive. Those guys get paid an absolute bloody fortune. I subsidised the BBC. On *The Street* and *Accused* I was taking scripts that just were not working, the scripts were not working, and because of the commitments we'd entered into with that writer I would rewrite the entire script and get paid nothing, get paid absolutely nothing. I was subsidising the BBC because I cared so much about the programme. I mean I would love it, we could produce something really special if they would fund a writers' room properly. And have a group of four writers, four or five, we don't want too many, four or five writers, a guy or a woman in charge, and map out every story beat, every story beat, week after week after week every single story beat, and only then send the writer away to write it. You've got four or five, six experienced people, wonderfully experienced in storytelling, mapping out every single story beat, and then you're sending an experienced writer away to do it even better, to bring something else to it, to bring a passion and a vitality to the writing. It couldn't fail, but the BBC will never fund it, they will never fund it, they haven't got a clue about that kind of thing. They rely on people like me to subsidise them. I was knackered, I was knackered. So it wasn't really a writers' room, I don't know what I was, I was like a backstop, an unpaid backstop. It would be wonderful if you could just do it, if the BBC would do it for once and fund it properly. Put me in charge!

[Laughter]

MS: Okay, another question. Go on, I saw you. Sorry, I'm going right down the middle, I'll look to the ends on a bit. Hang on, you've got to wait for your microphone. Here it comes.

Q: You talked earlier on about your time in the *Brookside* writers' room and how you used to fight for some stories, and the stories, how you fought for those stories, and which stories you fought for depended on how you defined a good story. And I'm quite interested in how, if you can remember, how the 30 year-old Jimmy McGovern defined a good story, and whether that has changed to now, 30 years later.

JM: I think it's probably stayed the same. You know a good story. If you think of the story as the big horizontal, that's your

story. You know this big horizontal is a story you've come up with, and what you immediately see is four or five key scenes, and you know you can't go wrong because those four or five key scenes are the verticals that will hold up this big, long pole. And as long as you see those four or five key scenes you know it's a good story. "Oh yes, the husband finds out." I can remember one, it's a vague one about, we were always looking for stories for the Grants. Because in a soap opera…

MS: They were the best.

JM: Well they could act.

[Laughter]

They could. What you do as a soap opera writer is identify who can act and you write for them. And of course you get, there's all sorts of restrictions aren't there. If they're a minor character that week they can only do three scenes. Well yes, okay, but they're the Grants and they get three 12-minute scenes.

[Laughter]

That's what you did, you were always protecting yourself. What got me onto that? Oh yeah, it was a long time ago but as a Catholic I saw it instantly, the daughter, I can't remember her name.

MS: Karen.

JM: Karen, Karen Grant was going to have a baby, or Damon's girlfriend was going to have a baby, I can't remember what it was. But I saw that clash of, [to audience] I'm sorry I'm spraying you all there, I'm so sorry.

[Laughter]

I saw that clash of old Catholicism and the modern age, and if that baby was ill. And the first key scene I saw, I remember coming out with it and nobody had seen it, "No the baby's ill, the baby's born ill. This is the scene, the young mother comes in and catches Sheila Grant baptising that child." I don't know whether we ever did it, I can't remember ever doing it, but that to me is story. A woman, because Catholicism teaches you that in an emergency anyone can baptise, we can all give that sacrament. But when you're the mother of that child and you see somebody else doing it, "How dare you do that." Just really, I don't know, I saw that, "Yes, we've got to have that." And I remember just laying it out at the meeting and people going, "Bloody hell, the bastard. That's good."

[Laughter]

But they didn't have my background; I was taught by Jesuits, they didn't come from where I came from.

MS: Another question, yes.

Q: We haven't heard you say very much about *Cracker*, which always seemed to me to be a really transformational piece of television. And I think I watched all of it, but I always knew when I was watching an episode that you didn't write. Paul Abbott for example has gone onto great things, didn't write *Cracker* as well as you did. Is it really true that when you met Robbie Coltrane you said, "I'd imagined him being thin."

JM: Oh that's shocking, yeah.

[Laughter]

God, I know there are loads of writers in this room so you'll identify with this. Me and Gub Neal, I'd done nothing. I'd done Needle, which had been praised by Nancy Banks-Smith, but basically apart from, that I'd done nothing. But Gub Neal, the kind of producer you dream about, he saw something in me that nobody else had seen, and he wanted me to write this drama series called Cracker about a psychologist. And I turned it down twice. I said, "Oh, I'm doing my drama series about a Catholic priest

[Laughter]

I'm not going to need that gig." But when I found out they weren't going to do the priest I said to Gub, "Is there any chance of me doing it?" So we were after, it was so funny I mean, I had certain actors in mind. I was a huge fan of John Cassavetes, both as a writer and filmmaker and an actor. I really loved

him, he had that kind of energy I admire, you know never ever stop. John Cassavetes was dead then I think. So Gub says to me, "What kind of character, what do you see him as?" And I said, "A thin, wiry guy. Loads of energy." He says, "Coltrane."

[Laughter]

But I trusted Gub because he'd seen something in me, so I thought he must be coming from somewhere. So we're travelling up to Scotland, to Glasgow. We go to Robbie of course, Robbie doesn't come to us. We've got to go up to Scotland to see Robbie at his house on the shores of Loch Lomond or somewhere. So it's about half past ten in the morning and I'm like that, "Oh God, I don't fancy this at all, trying to encourage this man to take this part. Why are we doing this? Why do we need him? Why can't we just cast an actor who's right? Why have we got to get a big star?" and all that, you know the usual things that a writer does. But basically I find it difficult to talk to actors, particularly big-name actors. So the fatal flaw, I had a drink, I has a whiskey. And then that settled me down a bit so I had another one.

[Laughter]

Anyway, got off the train and I was legless, and this is about half 11 in the morning by the time we got up there, and we go to meet Robbie and I just blurted everything out. "I saw him as a thin man, Robbie. I saw him as a tiny, wee thin man. You're a big fat bastard."

[Laughter]

But he'd seen, I think he'd seen the first script and he'd seen what was going on, and I think he wanted it, I think he wanted it. So he tolerated me I think. But it was nervousness really. I think that's why so many writers are fond of a drink. We're solitary people, and yet we have to go out and meet people, and we don't like it, and we just calm down.

MS: I am aware I have completely run over. I'm really sorry, look these people are telling me off, I've so run over. I'm really sorry, I've got me hours mixed up. Anyway we've really run over, been very bad. But I just wanted to say thank you so much Jimmy, you were absolutely fantastic.

[Applause]