



## STORYVILLE

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### Interview with Nick Fraser

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**Nick Fraser** has been series editor of **Storyville** since its first run of six films on **BBC Two** in 1997. It now shows more than 40 films a year split between **BBC Four** and **BBC Two**.

Here he discusses the recent renaissance in documentaries and how filmmakers from around the world pitch their ideas to **Storyville**.

#### **How did Storyville start and what were its intentions?**

**Nick Fraser:** Storyville was born out of another BBC programme with an awful name: Fine Cut. That tells you that 10 years ago the BBC had a high-minded, somewhat arty, specialist conception of documentaries. The BBC would run ordinary documentaries - but they also wanted a few that were extraordinary or masterpieces.

After Mark Thompson became controller of BBC Two we wanted to change the name, and Storyville fit very well. Practically, it fit into TV guides; but it also indicated that here was a place for any sort of programme - different styles, different attitudes, different subjects - the only requirement being that they should all be strongly narrative.

#### **What was the environment like for international documentaries when Storyville started?**

**Nick Fraser:** I'd been watching documentaries since the 60s. There are a handful of really fantastic documentaries from the 60s, but after that I felt there was a big blank period. Documentaries were made by very earnest left-wing people whose self-perception was that of educating people and raising their consciousness. My arrival at the BBC coincided with an explosion of interest in documentaries.

**Which films in particular were part of that?**

**Nick Fraser:** The first film was Hoop Dreams – a three-hour-plus film that depicts the life of two black teenagers in Chicago who struggle to become college basketball players, and which took five years to make. It was absolutely extraordinary. I thought that films like this would take the place of the realist novel, that in 10 or 15 years people were not going to be interested in novels written in the style of Theodore Dreiser or Thomas Hardy. They were going to be watching documentaries.

The next film, I think, was When We Were Kings, an astounding film about Muhammad Ali, based on a lot of footage shot in Kinshasa 20 years previously. It's a homage to his extraordinary qualities, and a description of this surreal combat with George Foreman presided over by Mobutu. I had never seen things as good as this.

**There's now a Storyville film nearly every week on BBC Four. Could it have existed in a similar format 10 years ago?**

**Nick Fraser:** Storyville would not have been able to run 40 slots of real quality 10 years ago. Three things have changed. The first is that documentaries now exist independently, or half-independently, of television. Documentaries have become fashionable because there's been a reaction against the platitudes and stereotypes of television. It's no coincidence that this movement has got furthest where the platitudes of television are strongest – ie America.

The second reason why documentaries have exploded is the steadily lowering cost of equipment. It's a transformation. People can now afford to make documentaries. There's no equivalent form of journalism, or writing or entertainment that's been changed so totally as the documentary.

The third reason is that if you go to any documentary festival and look around, you will see that the audience consists, not of old farts – though there's nothing wrong with that – but of people under 30. Twenty years ago people wanted to write novels or lyric poems. That became unfashionable, so then people wanted to write film scripts. Now they want to make documentaries. Everywhere you go in the world there are people who've acquired cameras, have a subject they're interested in – it could be themselves or could be something around them – and want to make a documentary. It has become a very convenient form of self-expression and a contemporary cultural form.

I like to think of it as being somewhat like the explosion of journalism that Tom Wolfe described in the 1960s. All of a sudden people got bored of staid journalism, in the same way that people have got bored of staid television. They realised that journalism implied the possibility of authorship – that if you described something, you had to say who you are and what your relationship is with the thing you are describing. In documentaries at the moment, I believe we are seeing classics comparable to New Journalism classics like Norman Mailer's *The Fight*. Month by month we are seeing amazing films coming out that break all the rules, and break them very successfully. If you think I'm exaggerating because I run Storyville and have a vested interest in doing that, turn to Nigel Andrews - not an impressionable man - in the *Financial Times*, who thinks that *My Architect* is one of the greatest films ever made. Of the crop of this year's films, I think *Control Room* is a stunning film. I've worked in journalism a lot of my life, and it told me things I didn't know about journalism. And these films are all made by people under 35.

**Is this explosion of documentaries that are getting into cinemas a trend you think will continue, and is it something that the BBC and Storyville can be part of?**

**Nick Fraser:** Opinion is divided over whether this is a blip in popular entertainment or something that is likely to continue. I'm cautiously saying that it's a long-term trend. Like I said, it started in America. Documentaries are shown in European cinemas, but they are heavily subsidised and, with some exceptions, they haven't got large audiences. The breakthroughs come with films like Michael Moore's, which have started to perform very well outside America. You're starting to find more and more people interested in the possibility of showing documentaries in cinemas. I don't think you'll necessarily have as many high-scorers in American cinemas as there have been this year, but I think you can expect a more steady flow of more moderate successes. Instead of taking \$60 or \$120 million they may take \$10 or

\$15 million, or even over \$5 million. In Britain it's slower, but you're already starting to see cinema chains getting used to the fact that among all the homogenised offerings in the multiplex it's good to have a documentary here and there. And the documentaries can be quite odd because that's what people like to go and see.

As far as the BBC goes, I think the BBC has always been a patron of documentaries. It commissions its own documentaries and has a huge archive of its past successes. I think the BBC should not only come to terms with this development but embrace it and encourage the production of ambitious documentaries that go first into cinemas, or indeed are shown in cinemas at the same time as they appear on the BBC. It seems to me that the BBC is prepared to do this and I'm very happy about that.

**How do you find all these incredible films for Storyville? Can you describe your job a little bit?**

**Nick Fraser:** The interesting thing about the current documentary movement is that people are just going out and doing it in an almost 1960s way. The combination of economics and this new culture of documentaries means that they are not worried about how world broadcasting is organised; they are worried about how they will get the money for their next film.

As a result, an informal network of filmmakers has arisen in countries all around the world making films for Storyville. We keep in touch through festivals, and through the internet. These people know about Storyville, they get our newsletter, they can see exactly what we are doing, they can look up films that we have shown, and they can acquire some of them through Amazon or some other way.

There are people making documentaries in countries like India, Argentina, China, a lot in South Africa. There are good films made in Israel. In Russia it is difficult, but we have hopes there. In Western Europe the whole thing is very established; also in Canada. But the best films are being made in America. I have to resist the temptation of turning Storyville into an American strand.

**Why are American documentaries so strong?**

**Nick Fraser:** Somehow the new ethos in documentary-making, coupled with the tedium of American mass media, has created circumstances perfect for the production of brilliant documentaries. I also think there's something in the American character. Americans are live-or-die empiricists. There's a tradition in American life and American thought that, if you observe something long enough or earnestly enough, you'll understand it. It goes with the kind of can-do American mentality. And that ideally equips Americans to make documentaries because they spend a long time making them, they are very good at observing, they sometimes have polemics - but on the whole the best American documentaries are not polemical - and the result is very satisfactory indeed.

### **How do filmmakers pitch their ideas to Storyville?**

**Nick Fraser:** People can approach us in different ways. They can send us a proposal, but it's better if they've shot some material. If you want to make a documentary these days I don't think you should be proposing your work just on paper; I think you should have enough confidence to shoot a bit, and if you have an editor friend who's capable of doing a bit of free work, then edit 10 minutes together. The crucial thing for Storyville is the style of these documentaries - and we can't tell much about someone's style off a piece of paper. If there's any lesson for young documentary-makers, it is just to be brazen. If you want to make a documentary and have confidence in yourself, then just go out and make it.

### **A lot of Storyville films are co-productions with other international broadcasters. How does that work?**

**Nick Fraser:** In the past four years I've thought a lot about how the BBC could contribute to this global phenomenon of new documentaries. What I did with the somewhat limited funds of Storyville, because, bear in mind that the BBC doesn't see Storyville as a priority. It likes Storyville, its heart may sometimes be in Storyville, but its real business is the making of mass-market programmes for British audiences. So I thought, apart from finding all the filmmakers, the second thing I should do is to create a set of relationships. I try a lot of creative brokering.

When a project enters the Storyville system and we decide to do it, I can't personally raise the money for the filmmaker. But I say that if you accept our investment, then here are some

other people you should go to. If you are lucky and persuasive then they will give you the money.

We work a lot with Arte, the French and German broadcaster; we sometimes do things with Spain; we collaborate particularly with Scandinavian countries – Denmark has very good filmmakers and there are very good executives in Danish TV; ditto Sweden; ditto Finland. In Finland in particular, where the nights are so long or there's no day at all, they seem to watch a fabulous quantity of documentaries. We also have links with Canada, and I've piled up as many contacts as I can with American broadcasters such as PBS and HBO.

### **Who then owns the films?**

**Nick Fraser:** Obviously, when you go to each partner, you're not unloading all the rights; you're just unloading the rights, country by country, so you retain control of your documentary. It's not like the old days where it was commissioned by the BBC or Channel Four and you handed over control of the documentary to the broadcaster – now you retain control, and that way you become an author and the owner of your own product. In my view that's how it should be. This is the future of documentaries – people should go out and shoot them if they're in love with the subject, and that we broadcasters, if we take seriously the depiction of truth, have to act as sponsors and give encouragement to people who make documentaries.

### **In what other ways do you work directly with the filmmakers?**

**Nick Fraser:** I would tend to look at filmmakers in the way I would hope to have my copy edited as a writer. The fashion at present in television is to micro-manage and basically tell filmmakers in minute detail what they can or cannot do. That's not really what I do. I tend to focus my attention right at the beginning of a project so we all know what we're doing. In the past I have actually gone out on location with filmmakers. When I went to Srebrenica with Leslie Woodhead before he made *A Cry from the Grave*, in two days he'd figured out, with me asking questions, exactly what the film was going to be about. If I have a very clear idea at the beginning of the project what it is about, and so does the filmmaker, we then all know we are working together.

From that, unless things go very badly wrong, I tend to leave people until they want to show me something in the cutting room. If they want to call me up and say, "I'm stuck," that's one thing, or if they want to show me something because they want additional help. But essentially I tend to leave them at it. When I go to the cutting room the sort of questions I ask are, firstly, "How does this sequence correspond to what you are trying to do?" In journalism they call this strategic editing. It can be very late when I'll go down and ask them if they can take another five minutes out because it's a bit slack. I guess what irritates me is that I do spend more time than I want telling people to cut their films, because films are always too long. What I enjoy is the conceptual stuff. And you get good at this – when you are confronted with hours of material as rushes, you can figure out where the centre of the story is. Why is this filmmaker attracted to this particular story? What drove them to film 50 hours of rushes? You can often pick out faster than they can what the interest is. It's where they themselves as a person got into this story.

**How would something like Pascale Lamche's South Africa films come about? She told me that you were instrumental in getting those off the ground.**

**Nick Fraser:** I wanted the films and I asked her if she was interested in making them. That happens very rarely – maybe twice a year – when I'll read things in books or magazines and have a feeling that we ought to be doing a film because the subject is important. In this case I went to South Africa, and as soon as I got off the plane I thought that South Africa was a wonderful place and I was looking immediately for ways of depicting the history of modern South Africa - ie Apartheid, in a not boring way. I had lunch with Miriam Makeba. Then I read a biography of Nelson Mandela and discovered that Mandela had been a lawyer in this part of Johannesburg where there'd been this vibrant music scene in the 50s and 60s. So I went out and bought a book by Anthony Sampson called Drum, which I'd found in a second-hand bookshop. It's a wonderful book. I was then equipped to commission Sophiatown. I then read further in the biography and came to the trial of Nelson Mandela and at that point thought that no one had done a film about this – we must do that as well. So I came back from South Africa with two ideas and I asked Pascale to do them.

**You talked earlier about style. What do you look for in a Storyville film?**

**Nick Fraser:** There are very few things I don't like. I don't fantastically like film polemics. I don't like the use of film as an illustrative aspect of an argument. Films that just baldly state

black is black and white is white just don't interest me very much. Although I've spent a lot of my life writing, I think I have a bias against films where the commentary is too prominent. I think films should explain themselves and I don't think you should dump on top of pictures lots of redundant words telling you what you are seeing. I respect and love films that display beauty and imagination, even when the subject is topical. I think every film should have a vision of sorts; it can be a personal vision or a not-so-personal vision, but you should feel that someone made the film, that it didn't just emerge from some commercial or industrial process. I don't mind how films are edited, as long as the editors are brilliant; and I don't mind what medium they are shot on - tape, film or whatever. We have a policy of not having a policy about style. We believe in diversity, we believe in imagination. We believe in all these things that we hope aren't just catchwords or empty phrases.

**If someone said to you, "I've never heard of Storyville, send me three tapes that show me what you're all about," what would you send them?**

**Nick Fraser:** It's very hard to sum up Storyville with three titles because each month I think of different ones I love. Recently we showed Control Room. It's a contemporary classic of observational filmmaking that tells you an awesome amount about broadcast journalism through the very strong characters - the director, Jehane Noujaim, clearly has a lot of affection for them. I think it's a great film.

Something else we've shown very recently is called Peace One Day, which was financed totally by its maker; we gave him finishing money, which in Britain is quite rare. This is a film that he spent six years making, about his efforts at the UN to create a day of peace where no one would fight each other. I was quite knocked over by this film, and I love going to screenings of it in the company of its maker, Jeremy Gilley, because he's mobbed like a rock star. This is a film that performs so well with people under 30 because it appears to give a semblance of hope to people who are, at the moment, in quite a state of depression about the world.

The third film is called Guerrilla: The Taking of Patty Hearst, and it's the most astonishing archive film. It recreates her kidnapping at the hands of the Symbionese Liberation Army and her imprisonment for over a year, and her final release. It enters into the question to what degree and how she colluded with these characters, becoming herself a 1970s terrorist or street fighter. I think the film is really terrific on many counts, particularly because it displays so savvy a knowledge about contemporary media. This was one of the first moments when the

media covering an episode came unwittingly to dominate it. Everything about the negotiations with these people happened through the media. You have in the film a sort of prophesy of horrors to come – a world where everything is dominated by the media. But it's also a very beautiful film: cleverly made, witty, very black, and very good to watch.

### **What does the future hold for Storyville?**

**Nick Fraser:** I think we'd like to get better at backing big documentaries that do well in cinemas. That would be one primary task. Apart from that, I think we'd like to investigate raising the number of films that are more quirky or individualistic, which capture more of the imagination. The third thing we have in mind related to Storyville arises from the fact that we've had a surprising number of films in the last few years that deal in one way or another with the prospects and current state of democracy. It really is amazing how many young filmmakers there are who are very perplexed by this subject. They don't want to make polemics necessarily about the bias of globalisation; they are just concerned to figure out how the world they live in is supposed to be democratic and what the hell that means. So at the moment we are trying to get together a group of broadcasters to make a number of films on this theme.

### **Finally, what do you most enjoy about your job?**

**Nick Fraser:** What I most enjoy about my job is that, having stumbled through the undergrowths of the media so long, and having always thought there was something wrong with what I was doing, suddenly along come all these wonderful people, who may be half my age, they come from all over the world, and what do they want to do? They want to do exactly what I've wanted to do my entire career – they want to make marvellous, exciting shows full of great characters and they want to tell the truth about the contemporary world. What could be wrong with that?