

Simon Beaufoy interview - Big Issue

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It's only to be expected that screenwriter Simon 'Slumdog Millionaire' Beaufoy should have all the right lines, and he dutifully trots them when Big Issue in the North catches up with him at this year's Bradford International Festival. He tells us he loves India; he's not interested in money; Yorkshire will always inspire his work, and so on. It's all so easy to say, now that he's written the Oscar-winning screenplay for yet another internationally-successful film.

But even with a writer as successful as Beaufoy, actions speak louder than words. For a start, it's remarkable that Simon should return as a guest to this festival in the first place, when it would be easy to decline, claiming a busy schedule, exhaustion or family time after months on the awards trail. In fact, not only does he return, but he does so as the festival's new patron - an invaluable endorsement to his craft in the city he grew up in - even stepping up to do an impromptu screentalk for the audience at Slumdog's screening.

But, most telling of all, he brings his new little gold friend with him to Bradford. "It's not even in a protective case or anything", whispers a member of staff at festival venue the National Media Museum. In fact, he happily hands his Oscar to anyone who asks (and even a few who don't), posing with audience members after the screentalk until everyone has a picture. "Everyone wants to pick it up, then they go 'wow, it's heavy', and then they smile," says Simon. "It's a very lovely thing, I've been surrounded by people smiling for the past few weeks."

June finally sees the UK release of *Slumdog Millionaire* on DVD. Based on the book Q&A, and directed by *Trainspotting*'s Danny Boyle, it follows the story of Jamal, a slum kid from Mumbai who finds himself on India's version of Who Wants To Be A Millionaire.

Notably, the film only escaped a straight-to-DVD fate in the first place when Fox Searchlight stepped in and saved it from the bargain bin after Warner Brothers decided they wouldn't be able to sell it to cinema audiences. Not necessarily bad business, just bad luck - even Simon never dreamed it

would cause the frenzy it has across the globe: "There's no reason why Slumdog Millionaire was ever going to win an Oscar, no one ever thought it was going to win any awards when we started out on the work, because it didn't have any of the things that those sort of award films need, they need big stars, they certainly don't need subtitles, they certainly don't need to be in Mumbai, which most Americans have never heard of, quite genuinely."

It is the winner of countless awards, including eight Oscars, and has brought the attention of worldwide audiences back to British film-making. But more than that, it has opened up new possibilities for Bollywood, which until now has been restricted to pure escapism, explains Simon. "There was a very interesting debate about whether you should show slums in a film.

Bollywood films are very aspirational, they start at the middle classes and work upwards, they're about very rich people getting married really. They never look down towards the slums. They were sort of outraged that we'd done that for a while. There was a debate about whether you should do that in a film at all, and why a bunch of westerners should come in and do it.

"We pointed out that Danny and me had spent most of our lives talking about working class Britain in one form or another, I mean Trainspotting was not Heritage Scotland, no stags bounding across the moors, and The Full Monty's the same. You could see Indian filmmakers going 'yeah, we could stop making these flipping films about getting married', this might actually open up some doors, and I think Bollywood's going to shift itself slightly. Not very much, I don't think, because it's a very strong tradition, but I think they'll start using elements that were off-limits to them before.

"The day after the Oscars, on the front page of the LA Times, Anil Kapoor was centre stage going 'YES' and holding up his Oscar, and he hadn't even been nominated for an Oscar, let alone winning one, but there he was. He's hilarious, and a lovely man, and he will be now a Hollywood star.

"He was incredibly humble and generous, and it was only later down the road he realised that he was touring round with us at the back of the pack being slightly ignored, by the Western media, and you go to India and he literally cannot take a foot outside without people throwing themselves at him."

"You make a film and then it grows beyond you, it's out there doing its own thing, it's got into the culture. The front page of The Sun was 'Scumbag Millionaires' when the guys from RBS and HBOS went into front of that committee. The same with the phrase 'the full Monty', suddenly it was everywhere."

The Full Monty was, of course, Simon's first hit film, and although it was the first of its kind, it pioneered a new Brit flick formula. But its success was even more of a surprise to Simon than that of Slumdog: "The lovely thing

about The Full Monty was that it was done entirely un-cynically. It was just done on a low budget with a bunch of people who managed to scabble the money together at the last minute, and really believed in the little film we were all trying to make."

"I'm a real firm believer that there are more important things than money, and I think part of the reason the film's done so well is that it's come out in the middle of a financial crash. I'm no great lover of that show Who Wants To Be A Millionaire. When I started reading the book I thought 'oh no, I don't want to make a rags to riches story, it has to be about more than that' because money is not a great motivator in my life or, I believe, in most people's lives really, there are more important things.

He actually means it though. Reports that Simon turned down huge money to write a Hollywood blockbuster are apparently true: "Someone said 'would you like to write Wolverine II', and my manager said 'yes he would'. I said 'I've never even saw Wolverine I', but she said 'it's alright, it hasn't been out yet'. It's a whole other world, doing sequels to a film that hasn't been released yet, and I don't even know who Wolverine is. I think I'd do a terrible job at writing about Wolverines.

"I never got into film-making for the money in the first place, and I'm getting extremely well paid for what I do now without having to do blockbusters. I'm very lucky to wake up pretty much every morning and be eager to go to work on something difficult and interesting to do."

Simon has been very keen to talk about being intoxicated by India on trips there, both as a backpacking student and a working writer, but what – if anything – has he brought back with him beyond some wonderful footage?

"The generosity of the people, the open-heartedness of pretty much every Indian you meet, and it doesn't matter whether they're on the side of the road, living in a tin shack, right next to 18-wheeler trucks, or someone very rich, because Mumbai has some of the richest people in the world, they would treat each other and me the same.

"I don't think you could have made Slumdog in any other country, because of that open-heartedness, and that sense of joy they have. I fell in love with that what is the opposite of what you would see perhaps in a city like London, or New York, and Beijing even, where people might want to take your wallet off you or take your camera, no one had anything nicked out there, people in the slums just wanted to come up and chat, but they would meet you as equals and I found it very humbling. I took that away from the place, that sense of generosity of spirit."

"I've written five films set in Yorkshire, so it must have had a big impact on me. There's a very specific Yorkshire sense of humour, and I've grown up with that, it's always been part of the way I look at life and try and write my films – the worse things get, the better the joke. Laughing in the face of adversity seems a very peculiarly Yorkshire thing to do, and that's part of the reason this theme of the triumph of hope – no matter how bad things get – has probably come out of being born and brought up here.

"I made a film called *Yasmin* a few years ago that was about the British Asian population in Keighley. That sense of cultures coming together in a really unlikely place, because really it's kind of bizarre that a place like Keighley or Bradford should have such a large Indian and Pakistani population, because it's so inhospitable to the Indian temperament – it's cold, it's rainy, it's overcast – so it's always interested me how these worlds have come together and how they cope together."

Bollywood films will now, hopes Simon, have the freedom to explore new avenues. American audiences, arguably the most influential in the world, have taken to heart a film completely removed from the formulaic Hollywood comfort zone, and Hollywood itself has thereby been alerted to the financial potential of such films, throwing the studio doors wide open to the rest of the world. And all this from a film that almost went straight to DVD. Warner Brothers must be cursing into their cigars.

