

Bringing the lessons home

An interview with Jim Allen conducted in 1995

11 August 1999

Immediately following the release of Land and Freedom, Barbara Slaughter and Vicky Short interviewed playwright and scriptwriter Jim Allen. He spoke of his views on the betrayal of the Spanish Revolution by the Stalinist bureaucracy and his long history of collaboration with the film's director, Ken Loach.

Jim Allen: The film has had quite an impact. Since its launch, we've been travelling all over: I've been speaking in Wales, Manchester, Belfast, Switzerland. Ken [Loach] has been doing Germany—Hamburg and Berlin.

When I spoke in Belfast last week, it was a fantastic audience. They've had 26 years of struggle, so they don't miss a point—a very politically sophisticated audience. The general secretary of the Irish Communist Party was there. He made a few comments, but after the film he said nothing. He walked off with a small clique into the car park. This was on the heels of the piece that appeared in the *Morning Star* criticising the film, which I was glad to read. It flushes them out, because their arguments are pathetic.

I only went to Spain once, but Ken was there all the time. He said that some of the young people who worked on the film kept stopping and asking, is that true? Did this happen? For them it was an experience. It might get some kind of debate, some discussions, some clarity.

It was a hard film to make. It took four years to raise the money. I wrote the film because of my discussions with Ken. With the fall of Stalinism, the coming down of the Berlin Wall, the West said, "That's it. Communism doesn't work. It's finished!" And the likes of [then Labour Party leader, now Prime Minister] Tony Blair and company jumped on the band wagon. "The God has failed. Go back to your factories, your dole queues and forget it. It's the free market economy that works." We wanted to show that communism and socialism never existed in the Soviet Union, that Stalin was a monster.

We were looking for subjects that could project this and I came across a pamphlet of the International Brigades Committee in Manchester. I thought this is it. I phoned Ken. We thought perhaps if we could get about £4 million, we could put a decent film together. After four years we raised less than £2.5 million. It meant having to write and re-write the scripts. The huge scenes in Barcelona, the role of the women especially, all that was included in the other drafts. But we couldn't afford it so I came up with this device of a voice-over, a girl telling people what it was like through letters, because we couldn't afford to show it.

We had £2.5 million for everything—filming, catering, make-up, flying, hotel accommodation—it was a joke. They spend that on television plays! We got finance from all over, bits here and there. But it took four years at least. It's always the same, every film we ever do.

Why was it so difficult, was it the subject?

We have always had problems financing films. *Hidden Agenda* was very difficult because it was about the IRA and the "shoot to kill" policy of the British army. *Raining Stones* was financed by Channel 4. The budget was

only £800,000. The big problem after the film has been made is the distributors. You depend entirely on them. They decide whether to advertise, how much to spend—usually very little. Then we're lucky to find cinema screenings. You can make your film and if they won't show it there's nothing you can do about it.

Whether *Land and Freedom* will get a wide showing, you never know. They make more money out of Arnold Schwarzenegger and the name of the game is profits. They are obviously hostile to the political content. But they would sacrifice their own mother if they could make money.

How did you research the film?

I live in a world of books. So much has been written on the Spanish Civil War. Felix Morrow's *Revolution and Counter Revolution in Spain* and Trotsky. An excellent book to get the flavour of what was happening was George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*. I read everything I could get my hands on. Ken had people going round Spain, talking to people who'd been in the POUM, who'd been involved. The stories and personal accounts all came to me.

I must have written four or five drafts. The last draft was written on the basis that we may have £3 million and then the money dropped. Great scenes went, such as the collisions between the Stalinists and POUM members. The final draft was where we agreed to use the device of the narrator, an old POUM member in Liverpool, dying in a flat and his daughter finds his letters. We could then fuse the action and the letters which conveyed the images you couldn't afford to put on screen. It was second hand, but I thought it worked. That's down to Ken, because he's good at his job.

How did you meet Ken Loach?

Ken and I met 27 years ago. I'd just done a film called *The Lump*. He'd done a film called *Cathy Come Home*. The producer was a man called Tony Garnett, the best producer at the BBC at that time, and he brought us together. I had worked on the docks, so I said I wanted to do a film called *The Big Flame*, where we took over the docks. We made that in 1969 and it went out in 1970. Then we came together for *Rank and File*, *Pilkington*, *Days of Hope*.

There were things we wanted to do and couldn't do. Roland Joffe made two films of mine, *Spongers* and *United Kingdom*. We won all the awards—Prix Italia, and so forth. So we said, "Right, if awards have got any value, it gives us muscle to make things we want to make." We went to the BBC and told them we wanted to make a film on the rise of fascism in Germany. We crossed into the East before the wall came down, talked to old German Communist Party members, discussed the Stalinist policy which divided the German workers and let in Hitler. I was starting to write it, but the project was stopped.

I am not sure if it was stopped for political reasons. At times you can get paranoid about this. It is possible that someone said, "No, we are after big viewing figures and this is not what will fetch the viewers in." It could be

political, but producers have a budget and if they don't spend it well—and by well I mean if they don't get big viewing figures—they can lose their job. So they are very nervous, even more so today. It is almost impossible to get television pictures like *Days of Hope* [on the 1926 General Strike] made because everybody is looking over their shoulder. It's like a League of Frightened Men. Producers will corner you in the bar and will say, "I agree we should make these things ... but you know." He doesn't say it, but the reason is his mortgage, his living. Nobody wants to be a hero. They prefer the safe police material or whatever.

How do you collaborate with Loach?

Usually I come up with the idea and then I meet with Ken and we sit down and we thrash out the direction. Then he goes away and I start work. Ken is very much a hands-on director. He's involved in every stage of the scripts. I might write half a dozen scenes, then we sit down, tear it apart and put it back together. It's the only way to make it work. Because we have the same politics, basically, that's no problem.

When you write in isolation, you can't see the wood for the trees. Ken is like a laser beam. I curse him at times, but he's always right. He will come and look at the material and say, "That's great Jim but, I think this." And he is right, because I've been so deep in it that I can't see it. That's how we develop the script together.

Then there is his method of shooting. There is a long scene in *Land and Freedom* where the peasants are discussing collectivisation. It was entirely scripted and we got two American people living in Madrid to translate it.

Among the peasants in the scene were three actors, the rest were non-actors. They were hard peasants. But a lot of them didn't understand their own history. Then an hour before shooting, Ken says to them, "Forget the scripts"! They've learned the scripts, but what is more important is that they have learned the politics of what they are discussing. The American quotes statistics, which they would not know about, decrees, and so forth. Then the Stalinist says, "You can't take over the land from the landlord"—the landlord being somebody who sided with Franco. Then the Frenchman or one of the Spanish people comes back and says, "We want all the land of the employers!" Then they went over the question, which may not have occurred to them, that if you allow a man to keep one acre, everybody to keep one acre, that's the seeds of capitalism again. All these points came out. Ken just let them go for it and it works.

Ken always shoots in sequence, so the actors never know what's happening the day after. I've done films where on the first day everybody sits round the table and they all have the script, allowing them to clear up any confusion. Ken will never allow them to see the script. He gives them a page before they start shooting, maybe the night before. They've no time to rehearse the dialogue and situation in their heads. So when they shoot it, it's kind of a spontaneous creation, something that has just occurred to them. They've had no time to intellectualise it, to rationalise, so it comes out fresh.

In *Land and Freedom*, they knew they were in a war and someone was going to get killed, but they never knew who. They were saying, "Is it going to be me, is it going to be you?" No one knew, and you get that tension on the film.

Ken takes chances, because he works with one camera. It appears chaotic, but it is within a very disciplined framework. They'll have one camera. If it catches the scene, it catches it, and if not it doesn't. So you get this kind of newsreel effect, a jagged thing. You don't know what's coming next.

*Could you tell us about the problems you had with *Perdition*, your play about Zionist collaboration with Hitler's Nazis?*

Perdition was a very bad experience. I got my bank statement the other day and my overdraft, the lowest it's been, is now £3,000 despite the fact that I've written about four films in six years. We were £20,000 out of pocket for the libel action and that's a killer. A publisher was involved and he paid a lot. But it's very time consuming. I've followed this for six years.

I got an apology from the *Telegraph* and £5,000, which didn't cover anything.

We never got it on the stage except a shortened version at the Edinburgh film festival, where it appeared for one night. The bloke who put it on said, "I've never ever known such pressure, I'm a nervous wreck. The phone never stopped ringing, from all over the world." One Zionist leader in London said to Ken Loach, "I've got six friends who are very powerful, and we'll stop it going out."

A big producer in the West End did agree to stage it. Within 24 hours he phoned back and said to Ken, "I'm sorry, forget it, I've had phone calls telling me if I put *Perdition* on, I will never open again on Broadway. I'm sorry."

The campaign they orchestrated with the press was incredible. It was attacked in America. I was sent a 20,000 word article printed in the *New Republic*. I replied in 1,000 words to make sure I got it in. Three months later I got a letter back saying, "You will be given the same liberty as any other writer in our magazine"—100 words or something, in our letter column.

Arising out of that came the libel action. For two years I think my earnings were about £10 a week, plus I was going through a bad time personally because of my wife's illness—phone calls, abuse. You've got no idea what it was like.

A group of us put it on for a week in London, in some secular society. We showed the shortened version. It was packed, mainly by Jewish people, because this was a chapter of their history they didn't know, like *Land and Freedom* for the Spanish people. I am not exaggerating, there were some people crying, old people, because of the facts that came out in the play about the Zionists doing everything they could to disorganise the Jews, in Hungary, etc. I said to Ken, "If ever I win the lottery the first thing I'll do is hire a theatre and put it on." Apart from that there is no chance.

*Did you write *Land and Freedom* as a way of developing the consciousness of advanced workers?*

Everything we do is pushing in that direction. That kind of subject can be both dramatic and I think of great learning value for people to watch, to understand their own history. In the case of *Land and Freedom*, somebody had to say, "This is not a god that failed, this is a god that has never been tried." This is still the objective to strive for. The collapse of Stalinism may have discredited socialism and communism, but don't allow them to use that as an Aunt Sally. Somebody has to answer the Blairs and the rest of them.

You've got to make it dramatic. You start giving lectures and it's bad writing, bad art. You know what the driving force is, but then you've got to create the drama, the structure, the characters, who will articulate the ideas without making speeches. Sometimes you slip up. In *Raining Stones* there were no political speeches, but the politics were there. It was saturated in politics, of people struggling to survive, in this landscape. That was for me the driving force of *Land and Freedom*. It was also a good story, a good tale to tell.



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