

51st Sydney Film Festival

“The democratic potential for independent filmmaking already exists”

An interview with John Furse, writer and director of *Blind Flight*

Richard Phillips
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Director and scriptwriter John Furse has worked in British television for more than two decades. An accomplished scriptwriter and documentary filmmaker, his recent screenplays include Hellbentand Conversations with an Executioner. He has also produced or directed documentaries such as Living on the Edge, The Time of Our Lives, Helen Bamber—On The Trail of Tortureand Looks That Kill. He spoke with the World Socialist Web Site during the Sydney Film Festival.

Richard Phillips: Could you explain how the film developed?

John Furse: I met Brian Keenan and discussed the plans for a drama documentary not long after he was released from Lebanon. I told him, however, that I wouldn't be involved if it was a *Midnight-Express*-type production that demonised the jailers. He agreed and said that he and John [McCarthy], who was still being held hostage, had often talked about a movie and come to similar conclusions.

I suggested that we begin in isolation somewhere and see what happens—to just fly blind. Hence the title. Two weeks later, we got together on the west coast of Ireland, in a place eight miles from the nearest village, with no television, telephone or newspapers, and spent every waking hour over the next six weeks working on the treatment. I'd do all the probing, pick selected scenes and then work it over with Brian, refining and developing it. I then wrote a long and very complex treatment, which Brian gave to John, after he was released about a year later. He told him that he could burn it if he didn't like it, but John thought it was good and later said that he cried after reading it, because it was so true.

That was over a decade ago, and although money was available, the backers wanted a star director and some big name actors. Danny Boyle [*Trainspotting*] was mentioned, and Ken Branagh was being talked about, but this fell through because Brian, John and I didn't agree with Boyle's

approach. He wanted to do something that would appeal to the 18-to-24-year-old market. Others were suggested, but it stalled for a few years until it was eventually decided that I should direct it.

RP: Could you elaborate further on your general approach?

JF: What interested me was getting behind the mask of conventional political discourse and probing to the deeper issues between the characters. It might sound a bit pompous, but I wanted to explore the politics of the soul; to discover the human overlaps between supposed opposites—the Irishman and Englishman or their guards—and find the common human experiences that touch audiences and make them think. I believe that you're born with feelings first and that words come afterwards. It's always important to remember this when making movies.

RP: *Blind Flight* has a very objective attitude towards the Lebanese guards.

JF: I see things through an economic lens and consider myself a socialist. I opposed the invasion of Afghanistan and the attack on Iraq and believe that the West, with all its economic interests, has no right to be messing around in the Middle East. The problem of Arab dictators has to be sorted out by the Arab people. I was determined not to have any imperialist stereotypes in the film and this shaped my portrayal of the Lebanese guards.

It was quite obvious that the guys who were holding Brian and John were only getting a pittance to survive and keep their own families alive. They were not terrorists in the conventional sense but mixed-up kids. Islamic fundamentalism for them was a way of defending themselves and compensating for their own vulnerabilities.

RP: I understand you only had a few weeks to shoot the film.

JF: We began shooting last year. The schedule was horrific, with eight scenes a day over a five-and-a-half-week

period, in three different countries. This meant 32 days to shoot 280 scenes, so we were under constant pressure to make do with very few takes. The average was less than three takes, with much of the material involving Brian in isolation done with one shot.

I kept thinking of Ingmar Bergman and the performances in his film *Persona*, and Robert Bresson's *The Diary of a Country Priest*. It was a matter of trusting the story, characters, actors, and above all the audience, and going for the essence of each scene.

RP: What have been Brian's and John's responses to the film?

JF: John was very moved and remarked that it was the first time he'd ever seen the guards. As you know, they were always blindfolded whenever the guards entered their cells. Brian, who is representing the film at a festival next week, knows there was a lot of material we had to get rid of, which would have added more layers to the film, but he thinks we've captured the essence of the story.

RP: The film opens with a clip of Margaret Thatcher denouncing terrorism.

JF: The British distributor correctly pointed out that there would be many people who wouldn't remember, or weren't old enough, when this happened, and that there had to be some context. I remembered that Thatcher made some comment about terrorism, and so the production office found her speech to a Tory Party conference in 1988 and we included it. You don't have to use a date or a subtitle, because as soon as you see this ghastly image you know where you are.

RP: And there's no difference between Thatcher's words and those by Blair, Bush and others today.

JF: That's right. Politicians are repeating the same old rhetoric today, which makes the film very contemporary. It's regrettable that *Blind Flight* hasn't been given a theatrical release in Australia, because it was well received at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York—where Ian Hart won the best actor award—and given theatrical releases in the UK. It deals with the serious issue of hostages and how they're treated, and is therefore connected to the situation in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay.

RP: It's virtually impossible to watch *Blind Flight* without thinking about the US torture of prisoners.

JF: Brian and John are patrons of an organisation called Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, and they have commented publicly on what is happening in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. They know exactly what it means, physically and psychologically, to be held hostage. But the brutality they suffered was spasmodic, not systematic. In fact, as we show in the film, the Lebanese guards were even embarrassed when John accused them of

torture.

I've also worked for the Foundation. Although I wasn't surprised about the exposure of torture in Iraq and knew that British companies supplied a lot of the torture instruments—electric prods and stun guns and things like that—it certainly shocked many people in the UK. Hopefully, all the images from Abu Ghraib will trigger some serious questioning amongst the American people.

RP: Could you comment on the situation confronting independent filmmakers?

JF: It's difficult and a profoundly political business, especially if you are trying to make films that have their own personality and deal with important social issues. Everything seems to have gone down-market, and the conception of documentary as a creative interpretation of reality seems to have disappeared. You don't see it on the BBC, which seems to be just recycling the same kind of bland aesthetic.

The irony is that things have never been so good in terms of production technology—you can edit in your own bedroom and shoot for virtually nothing. The democratic potential is all there, but the problem is distribution, which has become more and more monopolised, with people like Murdoch controlling it. I guess in the future, filmmakers will have to become like independents in the music industry, where composers and musicians are now producing and distributing their work via the Internet and other methods.

51st Sydney Film Festival--Part 2

A timely and disturbing drama

Blind Flight, written and directed by John Furse

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