

the press conference with DUNCAN KENWORTHY

The first gush of newspaper coverage about the BAFTA awards hit the papers last week with the announcement of the nominations. In the coming weeks, get ready for it to steadily build into a flood of gossip snippets, worthy profiles and celebrity interviews.

If there is one person who will be welcoming every spread and TV sound bite, it is Duncan Kenworthy, the BAFTA chairman. But he is no stranger to the hype of the movie world. Kenworthy is better known as the producer behind some of the UK's biggest cinema hits, including *Four Weddings And A Funeral*, *Notting Hill* and *Love, Actually*.

Kenworthy is one of those people who rarely gets interviewed, partly because he hates publicity and, let's be honest, when it comes to films most hacks want a star like Hugh Grant or Julia Roberts, not the suit making it all happen.

During his two-year chairmanship, Kenworthy has been integral to elevating the ceremony into a dazzling Hollywood A-list event. He first set this in motion while serving on BAFTA's film committee by switching the awards date to before the Oscars in 2001.

Born in Yorkshire, Kenworthy began his career on *Sesame Street* in the 1970s, then produced the *Muppet Show* alongside Jim Henson for five years from 1976. He scored a box-office hit with his first movie in 1994, *Four Weddings*, which earned him a Best Film Oscar nomination. Since then, he has collected a number of BAFTAs and Emmys.

Now 56, Kenworthy lives in central London. We meet at BAFTA HQ in Piccadilly.

The profile of the BAFTAs has soared in recent years, how much has been down to switching the awards to before the Oscars?

I was keen for the dates to move, not to make a point about the Oscars, but because I sensed that people voting for a BAFTA had in mind who the winners had been at the Oscars. Somehow that had become a part of their decision-making process and it just seemed as though there were some odd omissions. There was a sense that if somebody had already won, do they need another prize? So I just wanted to have a clean sheet in front of all our members, so they would come to their own decision. That to me is the big success. We are the biggest worldwide film awards outside the Oscars, but we do not define ourselves by reference to the Oscars all the time.

What is BAFTA's relationship with Hollywood? Has anyone grumbled about our awards suddenly becoming considerably bigger?

We have very friendly relations and we go over on a trip each November. Before, it was always a matter of going there to persuade all the studios, the publicists and agents to put the awards into the schedule and



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pay for the stars to come over. These days, they are so enthusiastic that it is already part of the studios' year. They seem to know our rules better than we do. Part of that trip is that we always have lunch with the key people behind the Oscars, but I have never ever dared ask, "Did you mind us moving to before you?" because I don't want to live with the consequences of whatever the answer might be. Obviously, we're not going to change now.

How important is the press coverage of an event such as the BAFTAs? Do you get a bit miffed when 'who is wearing what' on the red carpet gets more space than the actual winners?

I don't think it matters as long as people end up knowing who the winners are. It is too much to expect other people to be as interested in our goals as we are. A large part of why there is such press enthusiasm is because it is a glamorous red-carpet event, and I am glad that is the case. That is appropriate and fun. It is entertainment and we spend a lot of time and money turning it into something that will please people. We want it to be the biggest

Portrait
Phil Adams

night of film for the British industry, so anything that contributes to that we will take. And the stars love it. We are the best country in the world for premieres and when they see the crowds in Leicester Square, the stars are like, "Wow! This is exciting." If you go to Hollywood or New York, the premieres are pokey events. I am a fan like everyone else and when I see people queuing for hours, I am thrilled when I have big stars there for them.

I am not at all negative about any of the red-carpet photos. The only coverage I don't like is when people want to focus on the negative, like 'Why didn't more Brits win?' The awards have been going since 1947 and have always been an international event, so why start creating a ghetto where only the Brits win?

OK, what is at the core of BAFTA's work that never makes the papers?

The big two awards shows — for film and for television — are the most obvious and glamorous things about BAFTA because they are broadcast, but they are essentially only the tip of the iceberg. Underneath, we also have a big educational

DUNCAN'S NEWS SCHEDULE

Newspapers:

My daily is *The Guardian*. I don't always buy a paper on Sundays, especially if I have work to do because you get side-tracked. When I do, I get *The Observer* and sometimes — if I can't resist it — I get *The Sunday Times*. That is my tabloid! They have established the *Culture* section as something you always turn to if you want to know what is coming out.



Magazines:

I am not really a magazine sort of person. I subscribe to *The Week*, which is brilliant. Not only are you kept up to date with the key stories, it is also analytical and breaks below the surface of the news. The only other magazine I subscribe to and get weekly is *Variety*. I don't often read the *Hollywood Reporter*. It is a bit like, you are either an Oxford or a Cambridge man with those two magazines. You choose one early on and stick with it. At the newsstand, I always buy *Empire* and I get *Screen International* every Thursday morning and read it cover to cover.

Columnists:

My next-door neighbour is Howard Jacobson, so I always try to read him in *The Observer*. I think he is fantastically clever.

programme throughout the regions developing all art forms in the moving image. We are a charity, with no Government funding, and our remit is in some way to improve the public tastes in visual arts. Most people are not aware that we have nine awards ceremonies a year and, like any parent, all nine are equal in our eyes. It is all about naming excellence through the expertise of our members, and we want to motivate people to do better work to win one of our awards.

You have had some considerable successes with your films. How important are the newspaper critics to the making or breaking of a film?

This is slightly dangerous territory for me because I know the critics won't thank me for saying this, but there are many indicators that point to them being less and less important. Certainly, young people these days get most of their information about films from the internet. Blogs are now probably more crucial than the day-of-release review in a broadsheet or a tabloid. Having said that, what is it that actually makes someone get out of their comfortable armchair and pay to see a film? It is not one thing or one review, but is probably a combination of 50 different hits. For a film to even get on people's radar you need it to be everywhere — in the press, on TV, on posters, on the internet — but the one thing that works best of all is word of mouth.

Newspapers and magazines generally don't give a monkey's who the producer is. Does it bother you being ignored when the publicity kicks in?

I am really happy about it because I dread having newspaper headlines about me. It is a double-edged thing. David Puttnam said to me early on, "Take as much justified credit as you can, because it will help you finance the next film." There is a sense that if you have a bit of a profile it helps oil the wheels. Even within the industry, where all the people know who everyone is, if you have a bit of that stardust, then people will return your calls faster and trust you more. But the last thing I want is to be promoted to the press, because nobody knows what a producer does and I don't think it hurts us that they don't. It is not in my interests to be known because nobody is going to see a film because it is produced by me. They want to know who the stars are or the director.

What would you say has been your worst experience with the press?

I was burnt once at the very beginning when I made *Four Weddings*. Mike Newell (*the director*) got a huge ride out of it, as of course did Hugh Grant (*the star*) and, eventually, Richard (*Curtis, the writer*). About eight months later, a journalist came to speak to me. As Puttnam had said, it might help finance my next

Television:

if I turn on the television it is almost always to BBC News 24.

Radio:

I listen to the *Today* programme, but turn it off when I can't stand it anymore. I drive down to Dorset most weekends, and I will listen to Radio 4 in the car. I particularly enjoy *The Westminster Hour*. I have never been a very political person, until recent years. In movies, you are a bit of a fantasist and I've always lived in a fictional world more than the real world.

Web:

The BBC homepage and Media Guardian. There are several films sites I like, but one of the best is the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com).

Which of the movie mags do you favour?

I have always had a soft spot for *Empire*. It is the one that I buy regularly and I like it because it is for the fans, which in the end is what it all comes down to — people who love movies. When we did *Notting Hill*, there is an opening montage when we were trying to build up Julia Roberts

as Anna Scott, the biggest filmstar in the world, and I got a cover of Anna printed on the front of *Empire*.

film, so I thought, OK. The journalist said, "I know all of you were a very solid team. You must be really pissed off that you haven't had any credit?" And I said, "No, I'm not pissed off at all." When the article came out — I think it was *The Daily Telegraph* — the headline was something like "I want to be famous too". I was in Lisbon making *Gulliver's Travels* (*The TV mini-series starring Ted Danson*) when the clippings came through and I nearly died. I don't blame anyone, but I have learnt since then to be very cautious, and you have to handle fire carefully.

You also had a tough time press-wise about five years ago while you were heading up the production of British films with Lottery money...

We were treated quite mercilessly because we had public money. We had to make a certain number of films each year, come what may, and some of them weren't very good. There was a period when it seemed to me as though every newspaper editor in the country had said to their journalists, "Bring me a negative story about the film industry every week that includes the words 'Lottery Financing', 'Low Budget' and 'Catastrophe'."

There was a very long run of negative stories, much of it was by Alexander Walker (*Legendary Evening Standard film critic who died in 2003*). He had taken it upon himself to basically end the Lottery financing of films through his reviews. I took great exception to someone who was passing his judgement off as objective criticism while he had a wider mission. He would never give a good review to a British film that had Lottery money in it. I thought that was shameful and I was angry, but in the end there was not much you could do about something like that.

You have worked with some serious A-listers.

What do you think of the control they exert on their publicity?

It is an understandable reaction, but it is a game that may have escalated out of control. It is like politics and spin. If the press were not so ready to pounce on anything that diverged from the party line, then there wouldn't be such a desire to get everyone talking from the same sheet and controlling every utterance. Because the image of an actor sells that film, it therefore directs their careers, so they want to control how that image is handled. It is their brand.

It seems that in this country more than anywhere else, that we love building people up, then tearing them down. There is something basic in people's interest for drama and conflict. If something is just generated by the press to create a story where there is no story, it is unfair. I feel for actors when they are torn down unfairly. But if they have done something stupid, then it is fair game.



by Rob McGibbon

No interview would be complete without some discreet product placement. We aim to be a bit more up front, so feel free to pull **The Blatant Plug...**

The Orange British Academy Film Awards: Sunday 19 February, BBC ONE. Britain's biggest and most glamorous night of film!

What have you brought to BAFTA during your stint? I hear you've taken charge of the publicity trailer this year and pulled in some serious favours...

Attention to detail is something I have brought. For better or worse — I think for better — I have treated my two-year term as if it were a movie because that is one thing I know how to do. I am in a nice position of being able to take time off, so I have made no films in these two years, this has been the absolute centre of focus. I am as hands on as chairman as I am when producing, which means I get involved in the nitty gritty. I have art directed the promotion poster this year and I have also written, directed and produced the film trailer. It was an idea we had last year, but everyone said it couldn't be done, it would be too expensive.

The script was to take classic movies about treasure and digitally replace the treasure with the BAFTA award. After a lot of research and through a mixture of cajoling, pleading and blackmailing, I made it work. I chose 14 clips from major movies and then I twisted the arms of all the studios to give me the footage free. They all said, "We never do this!" But they did. I had to get to the likes of Quentin Tarantino for a piece from *Pulp Fiction*, Peter Jackson for *Lord Of The Rings* and George Lucas for *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Star Wars*.

I got all the digital work and editing for nothing. The only costs were shipping the originals from LA and tape costs. It will come in under £10,000 when it should have cost in the region of £400,000.

I think this year's BAFTAs will throw up a few surprises. Most of the serious contenders are independent films, not films from the big studios. I am delighted that we have such a wide spread of films and actors up for awards.

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Duncan Kenworthy's FANTASY FLYERS

What would be the Fantasy Headline of the story you would most like to read?

On a serious note, any of these: "Cancer Cured", "Poverty Ended" or "Bush Resigns". For fun, I would be happy to see the headline: "Low Budget Lottery Financed British Movie Gets All Best Picture Awards and Takes One Billion Dollars At The Box Office".

What would be the Fantasy Headline involving yourself?

The one I would like most at the moment would be something like "BAFTA Film Trailer Boosts TV Ratings And Increases British Box Office".

What would be the headline you most dread?

I dread almost any headline that has my name in it.

Who would you most like to interview and what question would you ask?

How about William Shakespeare, and I would ask: "Would you like to write a movie, and have you ever thought about directing?"

What question would you never answer?

I don't like it when things get too personal, but I have never refused to answer something. I think you can always divert a question. It is a bit like exam technique. I got a First at Cambridge, which basically proved I was very good at exams. My technique was always, if you didn't know the answer, just try and re-define the question.

What would you like the headline to be on your obituary?

I honestly have no idea how I would like to be remembered. Maybe something simple like "Yorkshireman who made one or two really good films dies".