



**One Stop Doc Shop  
Transcript  
Episode 9 – Alice Russell**



**Introduction**

*(Intro music starts – cinema film reel whirring, and countdown beeps)*

Hello and welcome to One Stop Doc Shop, a podcast that celebrates and encourages diversity in non-fiction filmmaking. In each episode, a guest filmmaker will share their secrets on how to make award-winning documentaries.

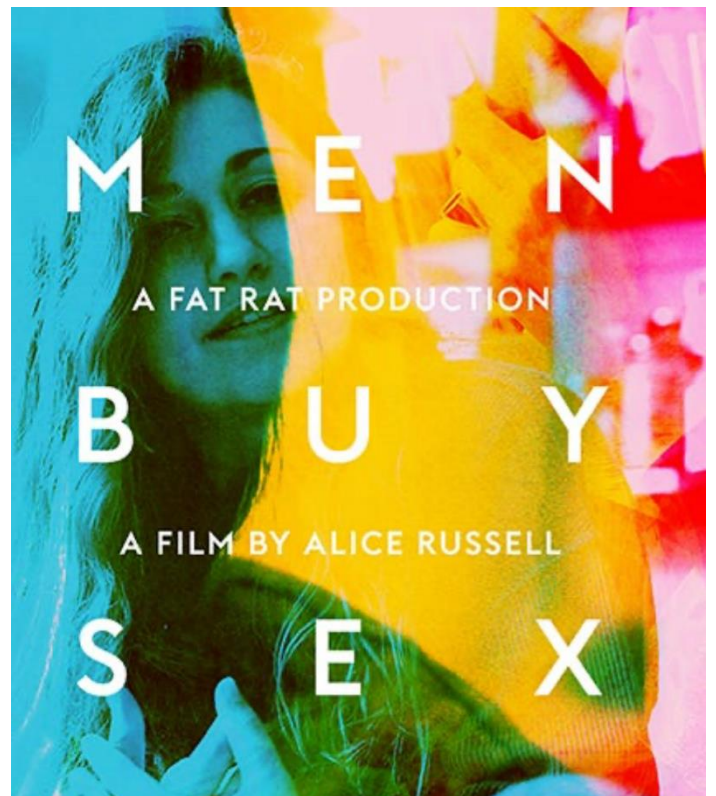
I'm your host Angela Clarke, and this series was made possible with support from Screen Alliance Wales.

My guest today is double BIFA winning director Alice Russell. Her first short film, **Men Buy Sex**, won the SIMA Creative Activism Award and got Vimeo Staff Picks Best of the Month. Her second short film, **Agents of Change** was selected as a festival focus at Sheffield DocFest whilst her third short film **Terra Incognita** followed a team of female activist's scaling the back of reefer ships in the Antarctic.

In 2022, her debut feature doc, **If the Streets Were On Fire** had its world premiere at the 66<sup>th</sup> BFI London Film Festival where it came second in the Audience Award, before going on to scoop up the Best Feature Documentary and the Raindance Maverick Awards at the BIFA's in 2023.

Alice and I talk about her passion for telling authentic stories and finding charismatic characters who inspire her, the importance of trusting your gut, as well as the challenges that arise when you juggle projects over many years. As an aside, we also discussed our shared love of icebergs!

I hope you enjoy listening.....(music ends)



**Angela Clarke**

Hi Alice, welcome to the podcast.

**Alice Russell**

Hi Angela, thanks so much having me.

**Angela Clarke**

It's a pleasure to have you on. So, thank you very much today for taking time out your schedule, I know everybody's always busy, but it's always really nice to speak to people that have made really interesting films and also films that are really complex. But before we get into the details of the films themselves, how did you come into the world of film? What was your path or road into that world?

**Alice Russell**

Well so it's slightly convoluted, so I guess I'll try and do the fast version (*laughs*) which is I went to university to study psychology, and I chose that because I loved it, but I didn't know what I wanted to do. So, I thought, great I can buy myself some time and then I got to end of university and thought, I'm at the end of university and I have no idea what I want to do! All my mates were moving to London and working in advertising and I was just a bit like okay that sounds creative and fun, and I want to be in the city. I basically got a job in advertising, and I hated it. It was so miserable. I was working for a company that specialized in advertising to children...

**Angela Clarke**

Oh wow...(*laughs*)

**Alice Russell**

Yeah, it was so bleak (*laughs*) and I guess I just had a bit of an awakening that year of thinking, what do I want out of a job? I thought I wanted to work in a team, I wanted to do something creative. I wanted a job that means I can learn constantly about the world and ideally something that has the potential for a small element of change. You know, feeling like you're putting something good into the world which was the antithesis of what the advertising world stood for (*laughs*).

Basically, from there I started writing to people and tried to get work in TV and realized that was incredibly hard to achieve. You know at university you get taught to write a letter, and if you write a letter someone will give you a job! Then I realised that no, the way you get jobs is you meet people, and they employ you, and that has been the truth throughout my whole of my career.

And so, I worked in TV for a bit. I really wanted to work on current affairs documentaries like Panorama and Dispatches and spent many years working up the ladder, you know as a Runner, Researcher, Assistant Producer, that kind of thing. Then I did start to work on some of those programmes, (*pauses*) I won't go into detail given that this is going online, but I had very negative experience in TV that resulted in a contributor ending up in a very bad set of circumstances, and it was really devastating for me. Because I was the person that was kind of building the relationships, but I didn't have any power, but

because I'd built a relationship, this person had got involved and then they got completely screwed over by the programme.

Then I was just like, this isn't what I thought it was. I believe in the power of stories, I know that's like a small world thing, it's like a drop in the ocean. But I think they are beautiful vehicles for creating empathy and understanding and giving a positive contribution. I think it's important to treat people in the films with the utmost respect that you can, and to protect them and that is the bottom line. Without them you know, documentaries as an industry will die and there will be nothing and I think it's a beautiful art form.

So, I quit TV and decided that I wanted to try and make my own stuff because it was the only way that I would be able to look people in the eyes and say fully, I've got your back and if you say no, we say no, you know? Then I did the mad thing of trying to teach myself how to use a camera. I went on some free courses as well as just trying to do lots of different freelance work at the time and then slowly over the years that's kind of snowballed. Now I'm working with bigger clients, like Greenpeace is one of the main people that I freelance for and Led By Donkeys and I'm quite lucky now in that I've got some wonderful NGO organizations that I do a lot of work with, that's quite meaningful work for me...(laughs) I said this would be short and it wasn't, sorry (laughs) that's the long route in and I've just been trying to do jobs on the side and then I make my films alongside that stuff.

### **Angela Clarke**

I feel your pain, I think I had a similar experience in TV. For me, your word is your bond, and that's all you've got as a filmmaker and I think it's really difficult to maintain integrity especially when you're part of a bigger unit, if you are a cog in the wheel and you don't have all the power...

### **Alice Russell**

Totally...

### **Angela Clarke**

I think that's why it's so important then when you have an experience like that, moving forward you surround yourself with people that are going to have the same values as you. So going back a few years now to the first independent film that you made, and I hadn't seen this before, so I watched it, and I really enjoyed it. It's called **Men by Sex**. Can you tell me a little bit about that film and maybe explain a bit about what it is and how you came across that subject.

### **Alice Russell**

Yeah, **Men Buy Sex** was my first film as you said, and basically, it's a film with 3 stories of male experiences of paying for sex, but with women lip syncing the male voices. They're real male experiences, but female actresses lip-syncing their stories. That was a very long meandering journey for a short film. It took me two years because I had absolutely no idea what I was doing and was just feeling it out. I mean I think I still feel like that in lots of ways. One of my oldest and dearest friends is Alice Birch, who is a

screenwriter now, but at the time she was working for an on-street sex work charity. We were having lots of conversations about this, and it was interesting just thinking about who these men were that were interacting with women from very difficult situations. We were just having lots of conversations about where the responsibility falls/lies and all the legislative stuff and anyway, we just went on a bit of a long journey of deciding we were going to try and do this film. Alice obviously is super busy and has all her own stuff going on, so she just came with me to do the interviews and helped me get it off the ground and then I carried on from there. We just did interviews and I think we put an advert up on Facebook that just said, "Ever paid for sex?" And then a link through to a survey and we got around 120 responses, which was bonkers!

**Angela Clarke**

Really? I was going to ask you about that because when I watched it, I was thinking, oh that's a wild one I wonder how you go about...

**Alice Russell**

*(Laughs)* Finding those people?

**Angela Clarke**

Yeh recruiting. I was thinking did she just casually go around the pubs asking, "Eh I was just wondering if you've ever paid for sex?". *(Laughing)*

**Alice Russell**

Yeah exactly *(laughing)*. I mean it was really shocking how many people replied but I mean not all of them....*(pauses)* you know some people just filled out the questionnaire, but the very final question was would you be happy to talk to us about your experiences. Not committing to being filmed, but just would you be up having a phone call and then it reduced to a much smaller proportion of people. I reckon maybe we had phone conversations with about 12 people and then I think we did audio recordings with six or something, of which three are in the final film.

**Angela Clarke**

Yeah.

**Alice Russell**

It was just really interesting meeting them all and hearing what their experiences were, but the main takeaway after listening to the audio over and over again, which was subconsciously woven into the language they used when talking about these experiences, was this language of entitlement to access women's bodies in a way that I thought I've never heard a woman talk about a man in that way. I'm not saying that it doesn't happen in that way, and obviously there's loads of complicated shades of nuance in buying and selling sex, and all different types of people doing it, for all different types of reasons. But I just thought if you're at a dinner party, it probably wouldn't surprise you in the same way if you were chatting and a guy said oh yeah, I pay for sex, whereas if a woman turned around and said I pay for sex you would be like what, because nobody really talks about that.

And I was just thinking a lot about the inequality around who the majority of (obviously we're talking about just heterosexual relationships here), but the majority of people selling are women and the majority of people buying are men. You can't really ignore there is a gender inequality dynamic here and it just felt like it would be interesting to see these words coming out of a female mouth, to just sort of try and figure out how strange that is and what does it mean. We shot the film in a day....

**Angela Clarke**

Did you!?

**Alice Russell**

Yeh, we shot it in a day. And Denise who did the middle interview, which is the very extreme sex story, I remember when we were filming with her, bless her, every time we were recording I was thinking oh God the lip sync is out. We kept doing it repeatedly and I was like please you can do it again? I made her do it so many times and I was so distressed, thinking this is not going to work. It's not working for some reason. I don't know what happened, but we got into the edit, and it was just perfect. But it totally threw me off, so it meant that by the third person in the afternoon, I wasn't very focused because I was freaking out about the fact that this second one hadn't worked. But anyway, that was a very hodgepodge film. *(laughing)*

**Angela Clarke**

Well, when you watch it, it doesn't appear like it's a hodgepodge film. I think what I loved about it was I had no idea what it was, or I hadn't read about it. I thought I'm just going watch this, and I quite like doing that. I quite like just watching films and ignoring whatever's been written about them or descriptions of the film, just going straight into it and then I was like ohhhh... *(laughs and drops voice)* I was not expecting that!

**Alice Russell**

*(Laughs)*

**Angela Clarke**

And then what I loved about it was the first chap very much sounded like if he'd had a receipt for the transaction, he would have tried to get his money back because she slightly fell short of his expectations! *(laughs indignantly)* I suppose he was almost maybe more typical in terms of how you would imagine the conversation would be around women and women's bodies and entitlement and stuff. That kind of vibe of well I'm buying a service but obviously I wanted something a bit more than this! But the second one made me think about class because of the man's accent.

**Alice Russell**

Mmmm.

**Angela Clarke**

There was a lovely incongruity between his turn of phrase and his accent. Some of his turns of phrases were a bit more surprising and I thought I wasn't expecting to hear that phrase, with a slightly posh voice. The film said a lot more than the eight minutes that it

inhabited, because it made you think about your own judgments that you have about people as well because I was thought I wasn't expecting somebody that had a posh voice to be a part of that.

**Alice Russell**

Mmmmm.

**Angela Clarke**

And then I thought actually I don't really know why I thought that, but it was more the turn the phrase. His turn of phrase felt more like lads in a pub chat, but the accent didn't fit, so that one was incongruous, and then it was brilliant because the lady that fronted that lip sync looked very well to do and lovely and like she wouldn't have said those things.

**Alice Russell**

Yeh, yeh.

**Angela Clarke**

So I was thinking this is a mind boggler (*laughing*) and also because it was in a really domestic setting as well, so it just made you think about things in a different way.

**Alice Russell**

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Angela Clarke**

And then the last man just seemed to think well I know her, so better the devil you know! I also like the fact he said she didn't hurry him; I was thinking okay! (*laughing*)

**Alice Russell**

Well, I mean I think that was the interesting insight, there were kind of two things really. One was obviously so much of this is about fantasy, so much of it is about imagining what this experience is going to be and then you go, and it falls short.

**Angela Clarke**

Yeah, yeah.

**Alice Russell**

But the one that was really fascinating was this idea that you know lots of the men, this was the theme that ran throughout lots of the interviews we did, and not just the recordings but the phone interviews as well, was this idea that you're paying for someone and yet they want to go and experience this connection, and desire a kind girlfriend experience I guess. But you are paying for someone. They aren't choosing you out of sexual desire, they're choosing you out of economics essentially. And so inherently the way in which you're engaging in that direction is always going to be quite strange. And so, it was quite interesting how delusional a lot of the men were around what this encounter was going to be like, but I mean humans are strange and wonderful creatures aren't they!

**Angela Clarke**

At what point did you decide that you were going to lip-sync with women? Did you wait until the point that you were having the conversations with the guys? When did you start to kind of put that visual jigsaw together?

**Alice Russell**

Oh my God this was why it was such a long process. That's why it took so long because originally it was going to be this whole animated series. We were going to have an online platform talking about all the policy and debating the politics of it and stuff. It was so long ago I can't really remember what happened now. But I think just everybody was like please dear Lord can you just finish this film! (*laughing*)

But I think with creative ideas sometimes you have a little seed, and it was definitely thrown around, that idea was thrown around a lot. At the beginning, we were working with Fat Rat Films as well. There were four of us, me and Alice and the others were all throwing those ideas around and I think when you're creating something you tend to go off down different avenues, because you're not totally sure. You're thinking maybe there's a bit more flavour of this or it needs to be a bit more like that and what happens is you just get to a point where you've exhausted lots of those avenues and finally the same kind of feeling around an idea is there, and it grows in strength. It sort of starts off as a quiet whisper and becomes this thing where you think that's the absolute right way of doing this and we just ran at it, getting that on tape and then we knew we had the film, yeah.

**Angela Clarke**

Yeah, I just loved everything about it in terms of the domestic setting of it as well. Just that non-sexual setting. You're just in the kitchen There's stuff around you. Everyday life is unfurling and it's just that notion that somewhere this stuff is going through somebody's mind or somebody's doing that at that moment.

**Alice Russell**

Well yeah, because I think it was just about wanting to make it feel very non exciting and normal because I think the conversations we were having at the time, for example Billy Piper's *Diary of A Call Girl* was around, and I think a lot of the conversations around buying and selling sex is either about people on street, which is the really bleak hard end of it, or you get this glamorized sexy young woman who loves having sex and is selling it and it's so empowering. I think that's problematic because whilst there will be people that live like that, of course there will, because there's all different shades within this industry. But that is such a tiny slice of the pie and to glamorize it in that way, in the mainstream makes people think that is what the majority experience is and it's not, you know.

Women are choosing it because they don't have other economic means and that might make most sense. They might not hate it, but often women are choosing it because it's the best way of making money, rather than choosing it because they love to have sex, do you know what I mean?



**Angela Clarke**

Yeah, absolutely and I think your third male voice that appears, he seemed slightly more compassionate or he certainly named the lady that he was with, but it was just in casual passing when he says something like so I went in and she just she took off her tracksuit bottoms but obviously kept on her top! Just that little phrase speaks volumes and you're like wow that is not a considered an act of passion or love then, is it?

**Alice Russell**

No, exactly?

**Angela Clarke**

I've literally done the bare minimum of taking off what I needed to!

**Alice Russell**

Yes, it's like come on then get on with it. You know, even though she's not rushing him. It's just like come on, get on me and then we'll just kind of you know...

**Angela Clarke**

But he just said it in such an unfiltered way, like he didn't have any expectations that she was going to maybe take her top off. It was just very matter of fact and as you say there was a truth in his as well. I that he was slightly unfiltered about how he said it. So, I just thought it was interesting.

**Alice Russell**

I'll just say one final thing which was also interesting because we also spoke to sex workers as well to ask what their experiences were in the kind of deep research phase. The beginning was a deep research phase, before we were really thinking about ideas. But you know (one woman) just said I started off selling sex and it was awful. I was working in this place where women were having sex with 15 men a day and their bodies were ruined from that. Like there's a physical cost to that and she said it was hell so she just like decided to move into the BDSM scene.

And she said that was great because then she could have four clients a week and she wouldn't even have to have sex with them. She had a partner at the time, so I said when you get home what kind of happens in your mind? Do you share these stories and she said no, when I get home, I just can't remember anything from my day! And I just found that so striking because I was thinking that is deep trauma. If you get home and you have just wiped it from your brain. Like there's a lot of complicated stuff here sort of, you know....

**Angela Clarke**

Yeah, a lot of unspoken stuff as well. It was interesting what you learn about the women through the narration of the men's experience of it because I think that's what I enjoyed about the film. It spoke volumes beyond the things that it just discussed. The class angles and the expectations etc, so if anyone hasn't watched it, you can go and seek it out on your web page.

So, the next short that you made was called **Agents of Change**, so do you want to tell us a little bit about that film as well?

**Alice Russell**

Yep, so that was much faster and that was filming with an activist called Josh Virasami and he was organizing a protest just before Trump was elected. At the time, I'd seen him, well I'd been to an environmental activism meeting, and around that time there was a big activism campaign called *Bridges Not Walls* and there were loads of banners dropped over all the bridges in London. It was a very white space and I remember going to the meeting because I wanted to get involved with activism, I wanted to go do some activism and Josh stood up at the meeting. He was very passionate, and he was talking about intersectionality and how this space was failing lots of people and I just immediately thought I love this guy. I love his fire, I love his eloquence, his passion and I just thought he was interesting. Anyway, I ended up getting a job going to America where I was interviewing women about tights, and it was just so bleak...(laughs)

**Angela Clarke**

(Laughs)

**Alice Russell**

I was having this weird experience in America interviewing women about tights and I was watching everything on the internet, you know people were organizing around Trump and I felt like I was missing out in this moment that I wanted to be involved in. I saw Josh was organising this party or this protest and I said can I come along and film you? It was fast. I think that film was made in something like five weeks. I went and filmed with him a couple of times, and he told that beautiful metaphor about the caterpillar and the transformation of society and how it resembles the caterpillar transforming in the chrysalis and I just thought I just love your mind. And yeah, so that was that one really. It was very fast.

**Angela Clarke**

At the start at the start of that, and **Men Buy Sex**, did you have a strategy in terms of where you wanted to take the films or what the film's endpoint was going to be? Did you think I want to go to this festival or that festival, because I know certainly from my point of view I didn't have any strategy. I started making the film and the film was the thing that kind of consumed me. Then I thought I will worry about where it goes afterwards. And I've now subsequently learnt you're supposed to think a lot more about that at the beginning. I just wondered if you the same, or did you have a kind of plan?

**Alice Russell**

Yeah, no absolutely the same. When I did **Men Buy Sex** I didn't know about film festivals, I didn't know anything. I didn't know what the cool things were. Like we got *Vimeo Staff Pick of the Month* which obviously now is anybody's dream for making a short film, but at the time I just didn't know what that was.

With **Agents of Change**, similarly I just sort of made things because I felt the insanity that comes on when you're making a film and you become obsessed with something and you want to make it. I think it's a hard line to balance when you're being drawn by intuition, creating something and wanting to do something and obviously I've learnt loads of things now that are so integral to telling stories that make me a better storyteller. But there's a trade-off between being too logically analytical about things and your intuition...

**Angela Clarke**

I think there is something lovely about just trusting your gut and thinking I've met somebody; we've got shared interest, there's a vibe here. There's a connection that you've got with Joshua and obviously you can tell there's a kind of intimacy there and I think there's something quite freeing about that because it can allow you to go down paths and take different angles and options that you maybe wouldn't explore if you've got a bit more of a rigid framework within which you must work from the off. There are strengths and weaknesses to both aren't they? But I think that's what I love about short films, it allows you that freedom to learn to trust your gut and go with it. Did you have a budget for that, or did you do that one off your own back?

**Alice Russell**

No **Agents of Change** was just like completely made with no money at all. Yeah.

**Angela Clarke**

So I think there's something lovely about that because you've got nobody to answer to so in a way you can just kind of roll with it. I think that does allow you to be creative in a way that it helps build your confidence I think as a filmmaker when you can do that.

**Alice Russell**

Totally feeling it out yeh. I think it's quite reassuring hearing you say all that and I think I need to stop deceiving myself because that is how I work. I am slow. It takes me a while you know. I would like more opportunities to tell more stories. But I think realistically I am someone who most of my films will be things that I connect to, and then I will find a way to tell them. That inevitably sort of takes time and needs to be created in a framework where there is space. That has been the way all my films have been made, so maybe that is the way that I make films, I don't know.

**Angela Clarke**

Yeah, also I think it comes back down to what you said earlier about having integrity. You know, it does allow you just to give a bit more assurances when you build those relationships with people as well. You are asking people to open up, and you are asking to spend time with people when you make any film aren't you? I've seen or I've heard other people talk in a more transactional way where they're like well I'm not their friend and that's not what I'm there to do and I think yeah, but also you are there to honour your word and I find it hard to walk away from that and be like right this is the boundaries that we set because it's quite a messy process I think.

**Alice Russell**

Totally and I think I'm not saying that I'm best mates with everybody that I film with, but I genuinely care about everybody and I think people saying I'm not your friend then it falls into this really dangerous extractivism because you're just going in like is this benefiting this person's life, what are they getting out of it, what are you getting out? And I just think you must be so mindful, there are so many ethical dilemmas when it comes to documentaries and one should be thinking about them all the time and making sure that you're not falling into any of those pitfalls, so connection is so important for me personally.

**Angela Clarke**

Yeah, me too. But I think also it was a weird one because when I was watching **Agents of Change** I thought obviously that was a few years ago now that you released it and it had a film festival run. But at the same time, I was thinking how mad it is now, looking at the contents of that film and it had been about Trump and now we are in 2024 thinking God Trump's lurking again....

**Alice Russell**

Yup he's gonna come back again I know! You're thinking how, he was nearly impeached, what the hell?

**Angela Clarke**

I know it's mind boggling, but I thought it's so nuts. When you look at something like that and even in a relatively short space of time, you're thinking history has just repeated itself. So that one felt a bit more pertinent again because you think it's still got resonance now. But yeah, that's interesting what you said about Joshua as well and about activism. I think it's not until you watch something you think, you don't see many people that look like Joshua in that space or that you hear from, to the same degree, and so that intrigued me. But as you say, he had a great energy to him as well which makes that engaging to watch.

**Alice Russell**

Yeah. I think a group of us went and did one of the weapons factory blockades in the UK for Gaza like a couple of months ago and I hadn't seen him in years, and he turned up again and his energy was just amazing. You know how he sort of motivates people and brings joy and you know he's just a special person to be around. I think that has been a theme, apart from **Men Buy Sex**, because it was obviously quite different. But I think all the other films I have made; I've met people who I just think are really amazing and inspiring and want to celebrate them through film and I think that's been quite a strong flavour in all of them.

**Angela Clarke**

Well, it's good to know he's still going strong and hopefully he's still making giant piñatas as well which I very much enjoyed (*laughing*). That was a lot of paper mâché. I had this notion of him trying to wrangle on the Tube with that massive Trump head (*laughing*).

**Alice Russell**

Ah, yes, I think I did actually film him on the Tube, I think there is stuff with him which was just so silly. But I mean what was nice also is because that's so not what you normally see in activism right? The idea of being like, let's have a big party but that is such an important part of the social glue of activism, is having a good time together and a revolutionary spirit and the drums and all that kind of stuff is just as important.

**Angela Clarke**

Yeah, that's the thing. I'm also so used to associating piñatas with like tiny children battering those things and then when you see adults properly whacking into a giant Trump head (*laughing*) I was thinking why do we not do that more? That looks like really good fun. But yeah, I was thinking I really hope she had a shot of him trying to wrangle through the turns styles on the Tube, with a train person saying you can't take that through, you've not paid for a ticket, whilst trying to get it through the doors.

**Alice Russell**

I think I did have that but sadly I didn't put it in. (*Laughs*)

**Angela Clarke**

Well, that needs to be released as a DVD extra immediately. I'd have paid top dollar to see that (*laughing*). You know when you're watching something and you think how did he get that here, there needs some explanation Alice come on and what are you playing at? Well onto your next short then, I was going to ask how that came about, so that was ***Terra Incognita*** in 2021. Do you want to tell us a bit about that film then?

**Alice Russell**

Yup, so ***Terra Incognita*** is about a group of female activists on boarding on a Greenpeace vessel boarding, they're called reefer vessels, which are big freezer boats. They're the last link in the chain of fishing in Antarctica, the last sort of corrupt link that enables smaller fisher boats to stay out for a longer amount of time and exceed fishing quotas and whatnot. These women were doing this action at the end of the world, and I had been employed by Greenpeace to go and document this action. I had this kind of incredible experience in Antarctica which obviously in itself is a very surreal, beautiful, weird, strange place to get to experience. I think I'd been on one expedition, on one of their boats before that. Maybe two at a push.

But when I was on the ship, I was just really struck by how many amazing women there were. There were female boat drivers, there were female engineers, there were female climbers. There was just this real powerhouse of women and often ships can be quite male dominated environments and I think back in the day they were heavily populated with male egos. It's not like that now, but I did feel something very special about being in this strange place with all these amazing women. My job was to document everything that was happening out there and provide news clips or whatever.

But I just sort of suddenly felt oh I think there's a film that I want to tell, and I was just obsessed with icebergs, I don't know if anybody else has as much stock footage of icebergs as I do now. There was just me with this huge tripod running from side to side

of the ship running over to like film another iceberg because they were just so extraordinary.

**Angela Clarke**

They are kind of mesmerizing when you watch them, like the colour is so insane isn't it? The light overall is so insane but then it just looks, with the best well in the world, they always just look fake because there's something so weird about the solidity and the stillness of it, compared to those boats where the sea is so choppy and that's what....

**Alice Russell**

Well, that shot was amazing, that opening shot because the ship was going past so it was acting like a huge dolly and the waves were really still so I was just like oh my God this is amazing cinema, I didn't really have to do anything. Other than kind of stand....

**Angela Clarke**

Yeah, because I was wondering I was like that is super steady. What has she done with that...

**Alice Russell**

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, it was just really calm water and I mean in the region they're beautiful because they're these big cathedrals of ice and around the bottom of the icebergs is this bright brilliant blue and when they carve off, they sound like thunder crackling and it's just like amazing. There's nothing like it, there. Have you been to that part of the world too?

**Angela Clarke**

I've not been there, but I filmed in Iceland on the big lake where they did the James Bond car chase years ago and that's the same. But what was insane was I was with the sound man at the time and the sound man lent me his headphones and you could just hear the crack as you say when bits broke off. But yeah, I mean I could have stood watching that all the live long day.

**Alice Russell**

Oh my God that sounds like an incredible experience.

**Angela Clarke**

I mean the colours were insane, the light was insane, and you are literally looking at just the tip of the iceberg and you're getting that sense of how big they are, and they are so beautiful. But yeah, absolutely mesmerising,

**Alice Russell**

They're so beautiful, but it's also I think Antarctica is such a *(pauses)*, we weren't on the main peninsula we were on the South Orkney's which is just north of the main peninsula and there's nothing there. It's just grey, an infinity of greyness and so the icebergs would kind of puncture that and anyway, this isn't a podcast about icebergs but.. *(Laughing)*

**Angela Clarke**

I mean it could be. We're in charge, we can make it what we want it to be (*laughing*)

**Alice Russell**

And then basically they did this action, and I think for a few reasons it sort of didn't quite get the media coverage that they'd hoped for back in the UK, and I was just like wow we just did this mad thing. These women climbing on this bow over freezing Antarctic waters, it was really dangerous, and you can't really get that across in the footage, but I just thought I want to make something to capture this moment because to me something really beautiful had happened.

You know there was that feeling, there was the women, there was the landscape, and there's this beautiful, beautiful music track by Nom which was actually in a friend's film called ***Another News Story*** and I'd heard it, and I thought it's just such a beautiful, mesmerizing track. So, I'd written to them and asked could I use this because it's just perfect. And then one of my best friends introduced me to Ursula Le Guin many moons ago now, and she has this beautiful bit of nonfiction writing which was a graduation speech that she gave to a university which you hear at the beginning and the end of the film about women and how we see ourselves and this idea that everything is this melting pot... I can't even remember it now, the quote....

**Angela Clarke**

Well, I wrote it down. *'It was on the maps men draw, there is an immense white area Terra Incognita where most women live, that country is all yours, to explore, to inhabit, to describe.'*

**Alice Russell**

Thank you. You know how beautiful is that? As an idea, as a metaphor, yet we're in this place, off the map and women are doing these incredible extraordinary things and I just find her words so inspiring and beautiful and poetic, and it just became this sort of swirling thing. I think the more things that got added in, the more momentum happened, and I was just in my little tiny bunk editing nonstop with one of the main activists getting her to sit under a duvet and asking can you just say the voice over again, but more slower (*laughs*) you know we just looked like lunatics sat there. But we were just having lots of fun making it. Similarly, it's one those things where you don't know where it's going but I showed it to a couple of people and most people were like what the hell is this you know?

**Angela Clarke**

Really?

**Alice Russell**

Yeah. Nothing happened. Then you feel terrible, and I think it was coming around to International Women's Day and Greenpeace are just amazing and Daphne who is the head of the media team there, she introduced me to the international team and one of the guys there was like we love it, we want to put it out. And then *Girls in Film* also sweetly supported it by putting out on International Women's Day. Then it was great

because I just had loads of women writing to me on Instagram saying I love this piece; it really inspired me. And it's so touching when people enjoy the work so much that they want to write to you to tell you. I sort of realized that's all the reasons that I loved it, and I loved Ursula Le Guin's work, and I loved watching them resonate with it too and suddenly it all feels worth it.

You know I think that is the thing when you're making films. It's so solitary and you're just kind of taking a punt on something and don't really know what's going to happen to it and who's going to connect with it. So much of it is you on your own, and it's really exhausting and difficult to have the motivation to keep going. And then suddenly when it's released, and people connect to it suddenly you won't remember why you started on this mad journey (*laughing*).

**Angela Clarke**

It's like when people talk about childbirth, they say it's a pain you quickly forget, and it's a bit like that with films isn't it. We forget all that stuff where you're just sat your own thinking, is this rubbish? I don't know, is this any good? Should I put that bit in? Maybe I'll take it out, I don't know what I'm doing...(*laughs*)

But I loved it because it's visually beautiful and as you say the soundscape gives it that kind of eeriness that those spaces have, because they're so big and so quiet in an insanely beautiful way that think gosh you can really hear yourself think here! And I think just the fact that the quote from Ursula had mirrored that whole notion of there are all these women working away in science that you never hear about, that never get the same spotlight, that never get the same chance to be acknowledged. I love the bit towards the end of the film, where you've got all those lovely stills of women across different periods of time, because they're great pictures and just lovely images in and of themselves.

But it is also a stark reminder as well - why is it still like that? Why don't I know more about these women? I think that's the thing isn't it. It could have been one of those things that could have been very easy to overlook, and the film itself just gives you that snapshot of just like how ballsy they are as well...

Did you climb up that ladder, did you go up?

**Alice Russell**

No, I'm filming I mean I'm no, no god I didn't go on the back of a moving ship. Oh my god.

**Angela Clarke**

You never went on it, because I was going to say, I climbed up a ladder like that once before somewhere I was filming...

**Alice Russell**

On the back of a moving ship?



**Angela Clarke**

Yeah, we were in the Galapagos and the camera man that I was with, who I was directing, we went on a ship that they were checking for like illegal sharks fins and stuff like that and we went on the back of it and it's the most terrifying thing I have ever done.

And as I was watching it and I was like argh trauma because you think, *(pointing north and laughing)* what up here? You want me to go up here? But it's not attached to anything! It just gave me flashbacks to school when you used to try and do those rope climbs and suddenly you realize you don't have enough upper body strength to get anywhere. It's insane.

**Alice Russell**

Wow, massive respect for doing that because that is super hard and terrifying on a moving vehicle.

**Angela Clarke**

Yeah, but I wasn't as bad because he was still holding the cameras, so at least I could still use two hands. And then somebody had to take up a sniffer dog over their shoulder as well... *(laughing)* it was insane.

**Alice Russell**

I want to see that! *(laughs)*

**Angela Clarke**

Yeh on reflection it was a moment that I thought, why did we do that? It was a bit mental. But just to have that moment, capturing what they are like in that space as well. The women are just really fearless but also, it's really difficult to get a sense of scale when you're in that landscape, because everything's so wide and so as I was watching that that scene, I thought you can never do justice to what that woman has just done.

**Alice Russell**

No, that was that was the thing that was kind of annoying. I decided not to get a voice over and say the water is minus whatever or you know, the propellers are under here, so the audience feel very safe. But I just decided that it was going to become like a love letter to them. And I think as you were saying about not really seeing women doing this stuff, I grew up in the Midlands, in suburbia, and I just didn't know that women did stuff like this like. I didn't have exposure to that.

Particularly being a woman of the 90s, like images of women were either hypersexualized or they were absent from screen. You know the whole Bechdel Test of women in films and now we're so thankful that there's so many amazing writers who are defying that. But I didn't grow up seeing these women. I didn't know that those things existed, so I think there was part of me that wanted it to be like a love letter to my younger self or other people who felt like they hadn't seen women doing those kinds of incredible things.

I feel so lucky now that occasionally from time to time every couple of years I get to go on these ships and film on speedboats. Sometimes I can't believe my luck, and a younger version of myself would never ever imagine that would be something that I would end up doing.

**Angela Clarke**

Yeah, just to be in that space and watch people doing things, those locations aren't like holiday destinations. Nobody goes to them, so that is the privilege of doing that job. I suppose that's one of the upsides of television that you get to go to these amazing locations and you're in a moment where you think I would never see this otherwise. I would never be here. I just wouldn't be in that space and so that's an interesting one then in terms of that was more a kind of opportunistic project.

**Alice Russell**

Yeah. Totally.

**Angela Clarke**

Kind of after the fact, so it wasn't even that you set out intentionally to film, you were there with Greenpeace as part of, as you mentioned earlier as part of a client thing.

**Alice Russell**

Exactly and the footage wasn't going to get used and I just thought I have all this amazing footage. It would be such a sin for it to go into an archive and that's it. And Greenpeace were generous and allowed me to use all the footage and turn it into a short film which I think ultimately, they were pleased with in the end because it meant that it got a wider viewership than it would have done otherwise so.

**Angela Clarke**

Yeah, absolutely, it's a lovely little film and it's beautiful to watch because it is such a quiet and haunting landscape, and they are all so remarkable in the midst of that. So, if anybody hasn't seen it, check it out because the women on it are amazing. I could have watched a feature on that, they were so good, I wanted to know a bit more but yeah, that makes sense in context.

So, I guess, all the while, when you've been making these shorts, trundling on in the background I would imagine for a fair old chunk of that time you'd be engaged making your feature doc, your first feature doc, ***If The Streets Were On Fire***. Do you want to explain what the premise of that film is and maybe tell me when did that first start? When did you get involved in finding those two amazing characters that feature throughout your film?

**Alice Russell**

So yeah, that film is about a young community of Londoners who wheelie bicycle under the banner *Knives Down Bikes Up*. It's a kind of youth movement as an antidote to the rising youth violence epidemic. It's following the leader of this big bike movement and a young father who had a child and turned his life around, away from the world of street crime and biking is his only respite and family. You see how lots of these young people

who live in such proximity to street crime are using biking and this biking community is a way to escape the harsh reality of living in London now.

That has been a six-year labour of love. They've all been quite chronological to be honest, I'm not very good at overlapping just because of the amount of creative energy it takes, but also just the economics of independent filmmaking not paying and needing to stay afloat. I mean someone recently just quite hilariously said what the hell have you been doing; you made this film and yet you've not started on making a new one and I just was a bit like it's really hard to make money and I'm trying to stay flow. You know there comes a point when you must prioritize that because you've spent so long prioritizing your creative love that it's been quite difficult.

But the whistlestop tour of how I met them all was through riding. There's this event called *Critical Mass*; do you know about *Critical Mass*?

### **Angela Clarke**

Yeah I do. You're a big cyclist as well, aren't you?

### **Alice Russell**

Yeah, I'm happiest when I'm on my bike. Hilariously at the weekend my mates said can you just walk next to us? Can you just push your bike and I'm said no, I'm going at the same speed as you just let me like sit on my bike and peddle it because it makes me happy.

I met them all through riding on *Critical Mass* and it was a bit of a long meandering journey, but I just saw these kids wheeling for the first time and was like wow they had such impressive skills, they were so sick, so exciting, so wild and I loved that energy. I asked lots of questions and got led to different people. I was trying to meet up with various people and it always fell through and became a bit of a nightmare. Then someone said you need to speak to this guy Mac, he's the kind of gatekeeper of this community and he runs these events called *Bike Stormz* which are these big ride outs where thousands and thousands of kids come together and take over London. I met Mac and an organization had just released a film which was problematic for the community and so they'd kind of shut their doors and said they weren't doing any filming with anyone.

But I'd sent them some of my short films and kept emailing them and I said look I don't know what this is, but I'd just love to come and hang out. And then after a couple of months, Mac got in touch and said come and meet me at this bike shop which is now sadly closed but used to be this place where any kid could come and get a bike if they didn't have any money. The guys would build them one, like refresh one from the old scrap frames and give them the opportunity to ride, so it was an inclusive place for kids to go.

I remember meeting Mac and he was sat on this stairwell in the back of the bike shop, and I didn't know what the hell I was doing. I didn't have any radio mics on him or anything and there's all this clattering around. It's so annoying because I did this

beautiful interview that I've been cursed with over the years when I've always wanted to put stuff in I can't because the audio is so bad. But he basically just said this killer line which was just, *"In life, you have to put kids on a track. If you don't put them on the track then they're walking on the gravel, and you can't complain when gravel gets kicked up in your face."*

And it was so perfect because in 2008 the financial crash came. The Tories implemented this huge programme of austerity where they decimated everything. Not just for young people, but in particular for young people. Things like mental health support, housing support and youth centres. Everything got decimated and then what happens is, as you see in the stats at the end of the film, there's a period where we wait to see when the cuts start to bite, and the real term implications of the closure of all those things, the removal of those support services. Then five years later you watch youth violence and knife crime going up boom, boom, boom, every year without fail because you've removed lots of these services that help stem the problem.

Anyway, I've gone off on a detour, but I loved that quote because it was so insightful, it was such a poetic and insightful way of describing what's going on in our country. If you don't have things for young people to do, if you are in the most marginalized community, if you can't access something, of course you're going to be like screw everyone you know. Of course, you're going to think why should I play by the rules of the game? It's not really rocket science as to why antisocial behaviour occurs at all.

But from that moment I fell in love with Mac, in the same way that I fell in love with Josh and all the women on the boat and I just thought, I don't know who this guy is, I don't know what this journey is, but I know there's something here and I want to hang out more. At the beginning I think I'd said to him something like I don't really know what this is going to be, maybe there's a version where I can make you a short film that helps you do some fundraising for the bike shop, to keep it open. Maybe it'll take about a year and then I think I don't know how far in we were, but I suddenly realized that this was going to be a much bigger thing. I think in the beginning I thought maybe next year, maybe next year, and then I thought this is going to be a long-haul thing.

It's going to be quite a few years, so bear with me and I kept doing this terrible analogy where I'd say do you want to have a meal in the microwave, or do you want to have a lamb that's just been roasting in the oven for six hours. I think they were all just like what the hell are you talking about, we usually eat fried chicken... *(laughing)*

### **Angela Clarke**

*(Laughing)* They are probably saying oh God that weird woman's back talking about her lamb again, I don't know, is she's never going to make this film? Probably not, because she's constantly cooking lambs for her analogy! *(laughs)*

I think sometimes when you hear stories or when the story of a film is being presented, things are so neatly packaged that you think it didn't happen like that! And I kind of wondered at the start of it, in your head were you thinking this will probably be a short? Because it's such an intimate film based on their unfolding narratives, which obviously

at the start, unless you've got some sort of crystal ball, nobody knows where their journey is going to take them. Nobody's going to know what's going to happen, or that knife crime is going to continue to rise and rise.

I suppose what interests me is what do you say to the people that are getting involved in these films? Can I just kind hang about with you for maybe 5/6 years? Or do you just say we shall we see where this goes?

**Alice Russell**

I think weirdly quite early on I had a sense that this needed to be a feature film. But it felt a bit mad because I'd barely made anything. I was kind just feeling it out and making it up as I go along and then I'm like writing to the BFI Doc Soc saying I'm going to make a feature, and they're like are you!? And I'm thinking I am yeah... *(laughs)*

**Angela Clarke**

Once I'm finished with my roast, yeah I am. *(laughs)*

**Alice Russell**

I don't even like roasts that is what's so weird...anyway!! At the beginning I think I said to them something along the lines of can I come and hang out with you? Miles wasn't involved in the beginning. It was just Mac, but then I kept seeing Miles around and I thought this guy's amazing, I should make a short film with him. Then I thought no wait, obviously he should be in the main film. But I think for the first couple of years I said maybe it's going to take me a year or two. But what was difficult was not having anybody on board, not knowing where it was going to go, because all the time you're asking someone to believe in you when they've got no idea what you can deliver. And you know various things will come up along the way, and you're saying guys Netflix has said they're going to watch it, that's exciting or you know things that they could kind of understand this is maybe a serious thing.

I mean that is what is incredible. Really the fact that they just like allowed me to keep hanging out with them and I think that's because we were becoming mates. I think for Mac and Miles, particularly Miles, you know Miles' mum said to me he never talks, and I thought that is not my experience. When Miles starts talking honestly with the interviews you would not know, he does not stop talking. There's not even a breath. Miles dropped out the education system young and felt like he was stupid and that he had no hope in life because he was dyslexic and that had never been addressed properly. He ended up rolling with hardcore criminals and had such low self-esteem, so no one had ever sat down and said what do you think, how do you feel, or what do you want?

Miles found his confidence through having the camera. It gave him permission to speak, so it was really hard to negotiate, to be like please don't give up on me, please trust that I'm working as hard as I can all the time. I really care about this. What you don't see is that when I'm not out filming with you, I'm at home editing, I'm always thinking about this film, I'm always trying to get it off the ground. But asking people to believe when there isn't a solid thing behind you is so hard and I think it was only until the premiere at

London Film Festival that they really got what this had all been for, and it was so meaningful. Honestly, I just think that was the proudest moment of my life and I don't know if I'll ever feel like that again. Having all the kids in there, all my mates you know Mac and Miles' family was just such a celebratory thing. Sorry, I've gone off track totally, please bring me back.. *(laughs)*

### **Angela Clarke**

No, no. But I think that's the thing isn't it. It's such a difficult thing because obviously you can tell by the kind of films that you make and just by your personality there is 100% conviction in your belief. You've said I will do my utmost to make sure that something comes of this.

But I think it's hard when you inhabit that space where you're thinking I need to make this work, there isn't an option for it to fail. But at the same time as the clock starts to tick I think dealing with those things on your own for a period of time is stressful because you're in that world of thinking I want to tell them that somebody's shown an interest in the film, but then also the reality is that when you've worked in TV and Film, the statistics are what 1 in 20 or 1 in 30 things get picked up. It's no reflection on whether they're good or bad ideas, it's just the nature of the beast but it's hard to keep that momentum up because you're torn between thinking do I tell them something, because I don't want to give somebody false hope either because when you don't work in that world, it's a really difficult world to get your head around.

### **Alice Russell**

Totally. I think that was the thing, I had this battle because again I was just feeling everything out for the first time whilst trying to be honest and open but also protective of them. There were points where I shared things way too prematurely that never came fruition. And then I obviously felt terrible because just as you said, you've given false hope to people and then I realized that I'm not going to say anything until there's a definite thing. But I think I was filming for about six months before Julia Nottingham came on board, who was the exec from Dorothy Street who's amazing.

And she said I'm not doing on the ground kind of producing, but I'll find you a producer. She set me up a couple of meetings, and I met Gannesh at one of those, who was my absolute solid sidekick from then on and has been an amazing teammate. And then the 3 of us were putting applications together for the Doc Society and that was when we got a development grant and I think the thing with independent films is about keeping going. But I think you must be really honest with yourself because as you say there's almost an element of delusion of just thinking I just have to get this made. You need to keep going regardless and you just sort of try and believe but it is a bit mad because you also don't know.

But I think along the way you know there were signals that we were on to something. We got a development grant and that gave me confidence to keep going, because you're thinking okay this big organization that I've always respected and admired and want to be a part of that family have given me money now, so I've got to take this a lot more seriously, because the bar has been raised. It was me and Gannesh for many years and

then we did a first edit, that didn't work unfortunately for various reasons, and we went back to the drawing board and continued filming. Then we began working with Zana, and we edited with Zanna Wood Dixon who cut ***Poly Styrene: I Am A Cliché*** who's just incredible, and was a real key collaborator in this. The film wouldn't have the heart that it does without her. And then we brought Ruben in to shoot a few of the extra big cinematic scenes, the scene that you see in the market at night, and a few other people on the books, and the composers. I'm really hoping I'm not forgetting anyone!

### **Angela Clarke**

When I was watching it, I was thinking my God I wonder how much footage you had before you went into the edit, because you can tell by the intimacy that you've got on camera, that footage has come from a long-haul period of you just hanging with people. There are some beautiful moments, and for me sometimes it's just in those smaller scenes, as you say with Miles', his body language gives off the energy of a man that is kind of trying to make himself smaller. He's a man that seems to kind of give off an energy, he's quite thoughtful, and as you say he speaks but he keeps himself to himself and is quite chilled.

And I just thought there's such a lovely intimacy with you and him and Mac, especially in the moments where they are both speaking to each other, and you think they've forgotten she's there. And that's a lovely thing to have, but you only ever get that when you spend a long time with people, and you go on that journey in your film in so many sequences but in that environment sometimes there are so many gems in amongst that footage. You didn't set out and say we're going to film blah and blah moments today, and for me the moments in that film that are beautiful, are the moments that just happened, and nobody can foresee that day how that things are going to pan out.

So, part me was thinking how difficult is that to edit? Do you know how many hours of footage you had before you went into the edit, just as a ballpark?

### **Alice Russell**

I don't, but yeah hundreds of hours, loads of stuff. But also, in a way I would say... *(pauses)* miraculously, the scene with the kid who's been shot in the face with the firework, that was actually very early on. That was within the first 3 or 4 times that I went out miraculously, but I would say there were lots of other things as you say where I'm hanging out, I'm not going with a plan, I'm just going to see what happens and film it as it's unfolding.

And so, I think lots of the early footage was almost like live casting, it was never going to make it into a cut. I mean there were some great moments, but they weren't sequences and, in a way, that was the hardest thing to put down, because there were so many of these moments that were gems but they weren't sequences.

### **Angela Clarke**

I'd assumed that you'd started with Mac because as you say Mac is the kind of leader of the club. And then I thought I wonder how long it took you to get Miles on board.

Because I know Miles seems to be a kind of like, I don't know if I'm saying it right, but a kind of second in command, they certainly both seem to be kind of senior in the group.

**Alice Russell**

Yeah, he's an elder who sort of very influential and has been helping get young kids into riding for sure.

**Angela Clarke**

Yeah, because I suppose the other thing that I wondered was, given the size of the events that you're filming at, I was thinking God it be so easy to split focus because I bet there's loads of great characters within that group and I bet there's lots of great sub threads and sub stories. Or were you always clear from the off that you were just going to home in on the two characters?

**Alice Russell**

Well no. The kid that you meet in the basketball court scene, Mike who's on tag, I don't know if you remember him, but he's on tag...

**Angela Clarke**

I do, with the Battenberg cake?

**Alice Russell**

With the Battenberg cake exactly (*laughs*) I love that.

**Angela Clarke**

Yeah, me too but I didn't think that'd be a snack of choice, but there we go! (*laughs*)

**Alice Russell**

I loved Mike, I loved Mike so much. I met him right at the beginning. I met him before I went to film with Calvin the guy with the eye. And he's this tiny little 14-year-old kid, he looked tiny, and he was on tag at that point. I spoke to him and was asking him about what was going on and he just said, if I'd have met all these guys before, I never would have gotten into this trouble, and this had changed my life. But when he spoke, he had this heavy old man voice, but he looked like this tiny child. But when he spoke, he just had the weight of the world on his shoulders.

And I went to his sentencing, and heard the defence talk about what happened to him in his life and I mean it was just awful, what he'd been through. And you're just thinking well of course this kid has ended up in the situation. I mean I think that was one of the main things that I felt very strongly, and I wanted people to also feel very strongly.

If most people had ended up in the situations that these young people find themselves in, they would not have made different decisions or very likely wouldn't have made different choices because that is the nature of how this thing works. But I really wanted Mike to be a character in the film because I just I loved him, and I thought he was so charming and such an underdog. But his life was so chaotic, and I just couldn't make it



work. But I think also this film wouldn't have been made if it hadn't been so free-flowing, and I hadn't just been able to go out on my bike.

There wasn't a whole production team saying we've got the health and safety forms have you signed this off and blah blah blah because I wouldn't have got anything if it had been like that. And of so many occasions where I would go to meet up with people, I'd wait three hours before someone would arrive, or they wouldn't turn up. Or I was there when someone was stabbed. There were just loads of mad things, but yeah Mike, I really wanted him to be a character, but we just couldn't make it work in the edit. And then as you say, it's trying to sort of force a story arc on the film, to give it that momentum and also just to give the characters enough space to really allow the audience into their world and into their heads and not dilute that down too much.

### **Angela Clarke**

Yeah, and I think that's what the film does beautifully because I think it could have been easy in a space like that because there are so many horrific statistics that illuminate and highlight what's going on in some of those areas and some of the things the kids are facing. The reason why I thought the film in and of itself was beautiful is because it just allowed you to just be with those people, rather than it focusing on the statistics, it was kind of looking at the realities.

Miles unfolding narrative for me was interesting because you're thinking well look where that kid started, as he says, he ended up in a gang just by stealth really. He didn't make a choice, he just ended up in one because of the area that he was in. And then the journey that he goes on to come out the other side, then having a baby and a second kid at some point. That's the thing that makes him think look I'm now responsible for somebody else's life, that's the trigger to give him the shift to move away. But also, how difficult it is to stay on the right side of the track.

I think it's so rare that you see something over such a long period of time that allows you to be on that person's journey and then when you look where he is in those moments in the film, where he's talking about the fear of people that he knows who have been in prison that are coming back out, to that big massive smile he's got on his face at the end when they are in the woods cycling. That takes all those years of just hanging about doesn't it, to capture those kinds of moments. Those things in and of themselves are much more potent, because you cared about that person now.

Plus, you can see he grows in confidence which is the other thing that's beautiful. His body language is just... how he stands, and his shoulders are a bit more open. He's not trying to make himself small and slightly invisible in a way. And when he's encouraging the other boys at the end, I wondered was it difficult to not go down the route of being too statistical, or having too many council meetings and things like that? Because obviously you need the council meetings for Mac to allow himself to, and he does very eloquently, air his feelings in those meetings. But was it difficult to pull back and just spend time with him being in and of the moment.

## **Alice Russell**

Yeah, just to pick up on one of the things you said about the scene in the woods at the end. That was at a time when Miles, things were bad because the thing you obviously can't see in the film in the same way we we're talking about **Terra Incognita** is there's so much happening off screen that is very difficult to capture or to communicate to the audience without it becoming text-heavy or whatever.

But stuff was very bad for Miles at one point, and I was incredibly worried about him. I was trying to find him emergency housing and the woods scene came in the kind of middle of that, and what's amazing is obviously when you're editing films, you're trying to show these changes in states. Sometimes they're artificially created or whatever. But what you see on the bus with him just being in a kind of funky mood and everyone else is laughing and having a joyous time. Miles was just heavy, is what it was.

And then just watching him in the woods and that weight just shed, and the smiles cut through, it was just so gorgeous, like this is your happy places. And we wanted to include that scene but didn't really know because it's so incongruous compared to everything else. Also, what does it say that the only place they're kind of happy, is outside of London. But Zana quite early on said I think this should be the end and I was just like oh my God yes, let's do that. That's amazing.

But this was part of my learning journey because I'm really interested in the politics. I love the politics. I love the big picture stuff. I love the ideology. I like all the themes and talking about that stuff. But when we did the first edit of the film, there was just way too much of that and I think through a process of having done it wrong, you learn what is right. And one of the reasons I really wanted to work with Zanna was because I'd watched her body of work, and I'd seen how she moved me in **Poly Styrene: I Am A Cliché**. I wasn't expecting to be moved in that way, and I found myself crying at the end and I just was like this is someone who really has a lot of heart and can bring that warmth to the film. Zana really helped me think about that and kind of pulled that out of the footage really, it was her idea to do some more master interviews and get more of this stuff.

Again, we did these interviews with Miles and bless him, he was just talking nonstop for hours, and I just was thinking I don't know if we managed to get what we needed there, does it work? And then we got it into the edit, and it was just so strong and it was really great and it just became clear that the best way to get people to care and feel political about this story was through connecting with the characters, because the political is in the personal. If you win people's hearts over and they connect to the people, then they care about the situations they're in and the world that we've created for those people and all that kind of stuff.

Ultimately the film became about wanting to change stereotypes about young people and when you meet all these guys, for example the first time I went to meet them was in the park (one of the big parks featured in the film). There were about 500 young kids, all in track suit bottoms on their bikes. All boys, and I remember walking in and thinking my God this is incredibly intimidating. And the moment I walked in through this packed

park, squeezing through bikes, all the kids would say excuse me, 'Sorry Miss, am I in your way'? And they were just so lovely and playful and silly. I mean obviously there are bad apples, of course there are.

But ultimately, they have this look which has been perpetuated through negative stereotypes by the right-wing press, violent kids in hoods and stereotypes of antisocial youth but all these kids just have the maddest stories and come from really difficult corners of the world. They're beautiful and they're rebellious despite that and I fell in love with them and wanted other people to fall in love with them. I think Miles is so generously open and just opens his life to the world and that's testament to him.

### **Angela Clarke**

What it made me think about that I'd never really thought about before was, I'd never thought about the freedom and the exhilarating thrill that people get from biking. You tend to think sometimes of bikes being a vehicle that gets you from A to B. I never really thought for him that it was that kind of emptying your mind, there was a dopamine rush or a euphoria that comes from cycling. Or a high that feels amazing when you do those tricks. I'd never had never thought about that before at all and I love that element of the film because you see cycling in a different way, as well as all the kind of political undertones that came with the story. I wondered had you given much thought to that or does that just become so ingrained in you because you cycle or did your editor notice that as well when you were making the cuts at the end.

### **Alice Russell**

Yeah, I mean that was always so important to me because that's how I feel and the embarrassing question I always get asked is can you wheelie and I'm like no I can't wheelie! Because I was obsessed with filming all the time and anytime something would happen and I'd try and do something on a bike I would be so regretful that I wasn't filming, so I just decided stop and just film because that was what I was there ultimately to do.

But yeah, I love riding, they love riding. There is this incredible euphoria in riding and the camaraderie of being in a big gang and whizzing through the streets fast.

And you know Mac talks lots about the mental health benefits. I guess the middle classes talk about having therapy, and therapy's been so normalized, but they (the kids) don't have therapy and therapy isn't their tool. Their tool is getting out on their bike, and there was a beautiful scene when Mac tells one of the counsellors this, about how the kids are using the bikes to come and connect with each other.

They're going through the same things, but they can come, and ride and they don't have to talk about it, but they feel a sense of solidarity by being together. But as is always the way, there's so many things that you can't put in but that was always important. And part of that is because they all loved these events and they can't wait to get out and do it, but it's also because Mac is so engaging. He's so charismatic and inspiring. He's such an inspiring speaker and there's so many *Bike Stormz* and so many speeches and they all say different things, it was hard to know which was the right one but that one we settled on.

But the euphoria of biking - there were two bits that I knew I wanted to bring out cinematically. It was how do you bring out the kind of euphoria and beauty and skillset. These kids are like athletes, the things that they can do are just extraordinary. How do you bring out the euphoria, and how do you bring out the fear, because that's another important emotion that's quite hard to capture in those observational scenes. They were the two kinds of things that we felt we needed to build into the narrative.

**Angela Clarke**

Yeah, Mac is like some sort of urban poet, isn't he? He's a good public speaker. And has a lovely turn of phrase as well, and a good energy. But it's just amazing when you see somebody command such a big space and everybody is so engaged, it was just beautiful to watch.

I also wanted to ask you, there were some shots I thought how is she doing that, on the bikes. You were super low down in the shot, there's a bit I think you're going over a bridge or something and there's people coming past you closely so where were you sitting on the bike? I was thinking how is she doing that? I can understand what she is cycling on! I don't understand what's going on here (*laughs*).

**Alice Russell**

So that was Ruben. Most of the excellent riding shots are Ruben. He is an incredible cinematographer and is a bit of a mad scientist and is up for adventure, so we had this kind of cargo bike with a seat on the front, it's an electric powered cargo bike.

**Angela Clarke**

Ah, yeah, yeah.

**Alice Russell**

And so, he's sat at the front with a big, I can't remember what they called but the crane arm things...

**Angela Clarke**

Easy rig.

**Alice Russell**

Yeah, exactly with the camera attached, and I'm sat behind him with the monitor and because he's just so up for the thrill of it, he's just throwing the camera around. He's dangling over the side and just getting all these incredible wheely shots.

**Angela Clarke**

Right. Yes, because I was trying to figure that out. I thought she's amazing at cycling and holding that camera I thought what is going on.

**Alice Russell**

I mean honestly no, no, no like I realised at the beginning, when I was trying to shoot stuff on a phone whilst I was cycling it was obviously just terrible. And then there was

one session Rubin had got all this amazing stuff from a *Bike Stormz* and I thought great thanks so much. Then he couldn't come to the next one and I thought you know what, I'll do it. I'm sure I can do. It's fine (*laughs*) and there are just loads of pictures of me in this Easy Rig, which looks hilarious, but the footage was just so bad, (*laughing*) but I was like thank you Ruben, I don't know how you did it but he's just an incredible cinematographer.

### **Angela Clarke**

I thought that's an insane shot and also because it was so low to the ground that I was thinking how are they cycling, it should have been obvious that there had been a cart but I was just thinking how are they doing, I thought have they fixed something just above the wheel and then I thought no because there's movement and so it was boggling my brain a bit.

At the start of that journey, you never know how things are going to land when it comes to an end and how audiences are going to warm to it, and you mentioned briefly early about like having the final cinema screening and having everybody there. I think it's always surreal when you see your own films in cinemas because if you're used to things being on TV, you never really get to hear an audience respond. You might hear what people say, or you might read what people say on Twitter, or X, but we don't viscerally hear people. So how mad was that for you and for the guys?

### **Alice Russell**

It was so amazing. I think you're totally right. You know on the one hand, in one sense sorry the TV thing is incredible obviously because it means a much wider audience is going to see it. But as a filmmaker, it's anticlimactic, because it's gone out into the world and you've no idea you know! Whereas when we had the London Film Festival premiere, the audience was just incredible, and I could never have imagined what that would feel like ever in my life. I think that's why it was such a special evening because I've had shorts screen at festivals before. I think maybe I saw ***Agents of Change*** with an audience. I can't remember if I saw ***Men Buy Sex*** with an audience but it's just completely different because you're obviously in a collection of short films.

But everyone's come to see just this film, and everyone laughed in the right places and boomed in the right places and the energy I've never honestly, the hilarious thing is I'm sure like everybody on your podcast has said this because everybody after LFF was like that was the most electric screening I've ever been in. All the filmmakers were saying that, but I've never experienced that in the cinema before, the electricity in the audience and when the credits rolled, just the support and love. You could just feel the overwhelming amount of love in that room. You know it makes me emotional kind of thinking about it now.

We all got on stage, and I just turned and looked at Miles, and Miles' face was just covered in tears, like completely wet, and then it just set me off and then we were all just crying and there was like a five-minute standing ovation. It was just, there's something so special about going to the cinema and watching films altogether and going on the roller-coaster of that journey. There is this beautiful *New Yorker* article

which I keep telling people about a university in America where a scientist was scanning people's brains whilst they're watching Hitchcock films.

And there's this incredible kind of synchronicity that happens with specific films in terms of how they're obviously plotted with suspense and stuff. But your neurons fire at the same time as the people's next to you, in the same part of your brain and so I was just like thinking about that and being in the cinema. Then a year later we did the cinema release and a selection of Q&A screenings and similarly it's just always wonderful, you know in the way that you are today, it's amazing to hear that people have thought about this stuff and kind of see all these things that you maybe almost even forget as well because you've just been doing it for so long. But the audiences are just always so thoughtful and supportive. And yeah, it's a special experience.

**Angela Clarke**

Yeah, well that's the thing and I think there are moments sometimes as well, it can just feel like such a long journey that you just think will I ever get there, will that day ever come and then when it comes, it feels a bit like a dream. In a way I imagine it's a bit like a wedding. You've been building up to this thing isn't it, then it's almost like you must remind yourself to enjoy the event in the moment because it's what we've all worked towards. This is the thing that I thought or kept hoping that I could do, but now it's finally here and then it feels a bit surreal.

**Alice Russell**

Definitely.

**Angela Clarke**

Also, in my head I was imagining outside that cinema there was going to be a ton of bikes locked up (*laughing*).

**Alice Russell**

Do you know what, the thing that was disappointing was none of the boys rode. I was the only person that came on my bike because they, well it makes sense, in their culture, but I was imagining we were going to all do loads of tricks together and hang out, but they don't have bike locks first of all ....

**Angela Clarke**

Ahhh okay.

**Alice Russell**

And they all wanted to dress nicely which is fair enough. So, they didn't want to come in their sports gear, so they chose to have a fancy evening out. But just going back on what you just said. Honestly, I don't know if I will ever get married or that's the way that I will live my life, but I feel like the London Film Festival premiere was the equivalent of my wedding. Just having the most exhilarating emotional experience, being surrounded by all these people you love, particularly because there was so much jeopardy.

Before London Film Festival, we had this six-week period where we were raising £25,000 to get us to our London Film Festival premiere without which we would have had to pull out. The fact that we climbed this humongous mountain before going to LFF and then being there and on stage and being like wow, we did it. But it is also totally obliterating and surreal. I loved that day, but it was also so intense and kind of almost like out of body experience that it's a bit overwhelming. And people to this day have said I was at your premiere and I'm thinking, sorry I just can't really remember anything because it was so overwhelming. I've never experienced anything like that in my life but, very thankful.

**Angela Clarke**

Well, it's a lovely film and hopefully as you say it's on the BBC as part of the Storyville strand so that can keep living in those audiences for a long time and raise awareness of all the kind of issues that people face. And it's one of those things that when you watch it, it just seems such a mad thing when you think what Mac's asking for and what he's saying are simple ideas and it just feels so wild that people don't get that. That's the thing that's almost the most bonkers about the film. Why does nobody understand that it's complicated for these kids to cycle in other areas, it's not a complicated idea that he's promoting. I suppose just seeing the fact that there are people's lives who's are moved and changed within that film shows that what he's saying is true. You can do something amazing with this. And so just the very nature of making it to the finish line and getting that product out in the world will probably hopefully leave a legacy that will show people that this is what's possible and these projects are amazing.

**Alice Russell**

I hope so and I think so many people think about this community as being antisocial youths in hoods and that audience is probably the BDPC audience. I've had several people get in touch with me after watching the film being like I used to be really intimidated by this crew I just thought they were hooligans and now I know and that is an incredible legacy. If it means that the public are more understanding, engaging and generous and celebratory of what they're doing and don't see them as a menace, that would be a really great thing to have come out of the film. And in real world terms Miles was the stunt rider in Daniel Kaluuya's film *The Kitchen* and *Gassed Up*.

**Angela Clarke**

Cool.

**Alice Russell**

Yeah and loads of the boys were in *The Kitchen* and lots of the boys have gone on to like do stunt riding on *Top Boy* and there's real world kind of tangible outcomes for them which is really cool.

**Angela Clarke**

No stunt riding gigs for you though yet?

**Alice Russell**

Not yet sadly not.

**Angela Clarke**

Give it time Alice, give it time. It will come.

**Alice Russell**

Give me 10 years!

**Angela Clarke**

Thank you so much for speaking today I've really enjoyed it and yeah, good luck with everything in the future.

**Alice Russell**

Thanks Angela yeah, it's meaningful and thank you for the retrospective because it is quite easy to kind of forget the big journey that you've been on and it's really nice to look back. Thank you for chatting to me about it.

**Angela Clarke**

Thank you for coming on, much appreciated.

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