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## Interview with Lenny Abrahamson

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Lenny Abrahamson is the director of the 2007 film *Garage*, starring Pat Shortt as a lonely garage attendant in rural Ireland who begins a tentative friendship with his young assistant David, only for events to take a tragic turn. The film develops the focus on marginal characters within contemporary Ireland which was evident in Abrahamson's previous feature, *Adam and Paul*. *Garage* is notable for its lyrical style, minimalist approach to dialogue and action, and the impressive central performances by Shortt and Conor Ryan. Along with *Adam and Paul*, it marks Abrahamson, and writer Mark O'Halloran, as distinctive voices within the current generation of Irish filmmakers.

### **How did the making of *Garage* compare to that of *Adam and Paul*?**

In a way there's a particular excitement associated with making something under the radar in the way that we did with *Adam and Paul*. I felt extremely free in making the film. Nobody knew that we were doing it, and this gives you an impetus to make something great because nothing is expected of you. With *Garage* there was that fear that we would do something and it would fall flat on its face and everybody would think that *Adam and Paul* was a one off thing. I think once we got into the process of talking about it and preparing it the momentum of the project itself took over.

### **Does the first film become a limiting thing?**

There's no way you can approach every project as if it was your first, but I think there's something quite good in that challenge, which is 'can you develop what you've done?'. I was able quite quickly to let go any anxiety I had with regards to how the film would compare to *Adam and Paul*. We talked about doing a number of things, but once we started talking about *Garage*, there was something in the idea that made it feel like this was the project we should do next. When you think about an idea,

there's an immediate gut feeling about whether that is the one or not. You can kid yourself about ideas for a while, they usually kind of fade away, but some just stick, and that one really stuck.

### **Was there any pressure in terms of finding a market for the film?**

I was working with very good people on both films, such as Ed Guiney and Jony Speers, who are driven by their love of cinema. I don't think anybody was thinking about *Garage* in terms of commercial success, in any big way. The expectations were fairly modest. *Garage* would be on the left end of the spectrum in terms of films which Film Four might finance. They knew that they were financing something which was a very lyrical kind of film, very art-house, and not an easy one to market. Film Four were very clear that they were interested in having a long term relationship as opposed to looking at it in terms of a one-off project. In fact, *Garage* has sold pretty well.

**Everybody has talked about Pat Shortt's performance in the film, but that of Conor Ryan as David is quite striking. His acting is so naturalistic; you don't get any sense that he is performing for the camera.**

I'm quite rigorous about casting and I have a good nose for something which is not real, not right. I'm very conscious when I work with people, especially young people, that I'm good at taking away the feeling that they are performing. You might get somebody in for an audition who has a little bit of that, but if you can see something underneath then it's often quite liberating for them if you can remove the need to perform.

I use exercises to free actors from that over-meant, over-played, projected kind of acting. When I'm rehearsing, I play the scene so many times, in a rhythmic kind of way, that you get into this profoundly non-naturalistic thing. But what you're doing is, you're making the scene so familiar that it becomes invisible. That repetitive method is something which I got a hint of from Bresson's films. I don't have the luxury, like him, of doing take after take, but I do it beforehand in rehearsal.

That sense of paring away a performance filters back often into the way that I work with texts. I just take things away, because drama is such a powerful thing that you don't need that much of it. It's a ridiculous metaphor, but it's a bit like seasoning! Chefs say that if you season early enough then you need very little, but if you leave it late you need to put lots in. So you see in some sorts of filmmaking, people pushing drama into scenes that really don't have any. If the scene doesn't have that natural drama within it, then you start introducing these big dramatic chords because you don't have anything else.

**Does that low-key approach to drama, and the stillness within your films, put a lot of pressure on the actors to fill the spaces?**

The good ones really like it. I can understand why actors can be negative about filmmaking because quite often it's very crude. What the filmmakers are doing is they are just slicing chunks out of a performance which is pretty unreal, and they know that either they'll bring the unreality of everything else up, in terms of the art directing, the music, the pacing and the editing, so that it all feels ok for the hour and a half that you're in there, or they'll fix it afterwards in the edit. So the actor becomes just an instrument. But if you're working with good actors and you give them some space, they really like it.

**Do you have to be quite brave as a filmmaker to pare down the drama in such a way?**

I'd like to say yes but for me, I haven't found any other way of working. I can tell the difference between something that's working and something that's not. So for me it was initially just a case of 'how can I find a scene that can work?'. I feel like I'm on solid ground when I do that. I know that territory and it's what I'm good at so, in a funny kind of way, I would become very disorientated if I was putting a lot of drama in.

But to take, for example, the moment towards the end of *Garage* when Pat Shortt is eating dinner and drops his knife, realising the significance of what has happened to him. It's such a dramatic moment, but it only works because the level of drama has been so pared down through the film that this small gesture really affects us. Do you feel you have to trust the audience to come with you?

You do. And you have to trust yourself as well. That's a really interesting example because it's one of my favourite scenes. It's quite interesting how that came about.

I had remembered a time when I was much younger when I had a phase of panic attacks, and the first time that it happened I was in bed. I was eating something and I had this terrible panic attack and everything froze and stopped. When I came out of it five minutes later my mouth was still full with the mouthful that I'd had. I remember this very vividly, this physical feeling of suddenly the floor falling away. So I talked with Mark about that and we decided that we'd have that be the moment, the only vivid moment of realisation in the film.

Again, in the sort of perverse minimalistic way that I like, well then what do you do? You back off when you're going to do that. So the scene is shot three quarters from the back. I just wanted enough profile of him to see his reaction. But that thing of stopping, putting your hand over your mouth, lots of people get a lot out of that scene. But it is a good example of how such a small thing can really matter. But to go back to your question, if you don't know where that is happening in the sequence, and if you don't trust that the sequence carries the dread that you think it should, then that would be a sort of nothing.

**It is one of many wonderfully observed moments in *Garage*, such as the scene where Josie pours David a Fanta and puts his finger in the glass while waiting for the fizz to subside. Little details like that, at what stage in the process did they emerge?**

That scene emerged on the day. Sometimes they just come up in the playing of it. It was Pat saying, do you know what I used to do as a kid. And it was such a big, fat greasy finger! Again, sometimes there are ideas which Mark will have in his head at his desk. Lets say Trabolgan, which Sully mentions as his holiday destination; it's such a brilliant detail that is straight out of Mark's head. The small stuff of putting out the oil, that was all improvisation, and messing around on the day. If we ever did deleted scenes there are some great scenes which aren't in the film. There are two whole characters gone out the film.

**In fact, the original cut was over two hours. What is gone from it?**

Some great stuff. There was a great character called Nancy who would relieve Josie when he needed to go on a bank run or something. She was like the angel of death. She was a very negative, slightly scary presence in his life. She would just talk about people being sick all the time. There were two great scenes with her in it but they just weren't necessary in the end. If you're going to go with such a bare style, first of all everything that's there has to be very carefully placed. Particularly if you don't have music, as you will see everything that's wrong. I'm very proud of that with *Garage*. I don't know very many films which would play just watching the action.

The other thing you have to do, if you're going to be that minimal, is to make sure that everything you see is a step forward in the logic of the film. In a funny sort of way, even though I'm so anti-three acts, you get back to a very pure concept of action because you ask, 'why is he there?', 'what is he doing?'. Because if you're going to ask the audience to be as open to this tinyness as they need in a film like *Garage*, they should never wonder why they're watching what they're watching.

**There was a danger with both *Adam and Paul* and *Garage* of sentimentalising the characters. How aware of that were you when you were filming?**

We were extremely aware of that. That would be my fear. I think I could have made an even colder film out of *Garage* because Josie is kind of lovely. But it's true to the character and it's also true to Pat. And there's something so moving about those characters, and they really are around, extremely kind people who are very marginal. The amount of kindness going a begging, wandering around the streets with nowhere to be given, I find really moving, and Josie is very much that kind of character. The only person he can give anything to is David, and the horse, primarily, is the object of his simplest act of kindness.

**The scene with the down syndrome kid in *Adam and Paul* is central in de-sentimentalising the characters.**

We had talked about whether we should have a full-on attack on somebody. But in the logic of *Adam and Paul*, the guys are so incompetent that they couldn't actually try anything on anybody who was *compos mentis*. It doesn't fit the Laurel and Hardy quality of them. But that was a really great solution that scene, very harsh without requiring any stupid action.

**Is there any scene in particular in *Garage* which you felt served the same purpose?**

His use of the word 'nigger'. Who puts that word into a film for their protagonist? Those scenes were not easy to shoot. Nobody likes that word. It's an awful word. But also having porn movies playing on set was difficult. I thought that was all good because it did destabilise the comfortableness of the shoot. Which is important, because Pat is lovely, some of the scenes are very funny and were very enjoyable to shoot. But it's important that even on the day you know that this will be a bit disturbing because you can feel it on the set.

**To shift the focus slightly, to what extent do you think that it's useful to talk about your films as Irish?**

For me, I think there are two ways in which you can talk about your film as Irish. The good way, as far as I'm concerned, is that it should be about where you're from because you're always looking for a local reality to give you some sort of universal truthfulness. I feel that the stuff we've done so far has been pretty

engaged with the culture. Irish in a broader sense, in terms of some programmatic idea or thematic idea of a national cinema, I don't understand that. I'm open to some critic saying you are a subject to these influences and it's coming out in your work, but for me internally, I can't think like that.

For me, I think there is a very deep truth which I'm trying to get at in *Garage*, which is not really about Ireland at all. Although it's set in rural Ireland, the rural is a context in which you can look at isolated lives, of which there are many in cities as well. But places like that do exist in Ireland. I don't think what I'm trying to say is look at how miserable rural Ireland is. For me, what's radical about *Garage* is that it's got the sensibility of a European film applied in an Irish rural context. The issues are really more metaphysical and existential than they are social, at least for me.

**In relation to that, there seems to be a tension in the film between the possibility of some sort of transcendence and Josie's very real rootedness in his environment.**

The way I would characterise that tension is between the transcendental element and the more mundanely psychological or social. I think first of all, if you are going to be transcendental, you need something to transcend. You need to be somewhere in order to then turn that around and bring something else through it. It's like the poet who starts with a very simple description of what's on the table and, by the end of stanza three, has broadened it out into something of bigger insight. That method of the concrete blossoming into the universal.

But I would also say, in a funny sort of way, I think that in *Garage* you see myself and Mark much more vividly as two axes than you do in *Adam and Paul*. In *Garage* there is a quite interesting tension artistically. I settle into *Garage* much more in the last third because I think that's really me. I can recognise myself much more in that part of the film than in the beginning of the film. I am always fascinated by the capacity that film has to become something other than just a narrative form or just a way of discussing people's psychology. I'm not interested in experimental cinema, where you drop everything else and just try to go to the pure form or the purely transcendental, but I think that tension between those elements does exist in *Garage*.

I don't think I'm going to be able to answer the question as to whether *Garage* is a completely realised film for a while, until I watch it again in a couple of years time. I watch *Adam and Paul* and I feel that, although I don't think it's as good a film as *Garage*, and there are bits of it where I know we didn't have the resources or I made mistakes, but I do feel that it is a completely realised film. Maybe a better way of saying it is that there is a purple patch in the middle of *Adam and Paul* that I can watch from top to tail and say that's really nice, that if I was a musician I'd say the passage is perfectly played. For me in *Adam and Paul*, it's from when they arrive in the park to the Bulgarian scene. Everything became golden. In *Garage*, for me it's the last 20 minutes of the film where I feel like it's note perfect.

**To take things back a bit, looking at your short film *3 Joes*, which you made in 1991, you can see your cinematic style emerging even then.**

If I was making *3 Joes* now I'd take 10 minutes out of it! What I was interested in at the time was people like Jarmusch. I'd watched *Stranger than Paradise* and I thought, I love these black and white scenes where three people sit at a table for 10 minutes and don't say anything. I couldn't wait for people to see it because it was such a finger up to what was going on in Irish cinema, which was this really earnest, meant, terribly socially aware cinema. I was just interested in the feeling, the texture. What about filmmaking? What about the joy of looking at something that's well made. Something that's beautiful. Why is that not important? I can recognise myself in the film, although a much younger version of myself, and very unskilled. All the same, there are some lovely moments in the film.

**Were there any conceived projects which happened between then and *Adam and Paul*?**

There were. After *Adam and Paul* I went away for a year. Then I came back and I started writing. There was one good short I wrote, which I didn't get funding for from Filmbase. Then I wrote a feature length script called 'The Nightwatch'. It was this strange film set in a forest. I was interested again in isolated characters and this dealt with charcoal burners.

I've since found out that lots of people still live like that in Poland. I wrote this script and got money from the Arts Council, but then I decided I didn't like it any more.

There's nothing that I wish I had made. Nothing good came my way until I read the scenes that Mark wrote for *Adam and Paul*. I think I'm quite funny that way, in that I'm quite late to everything I do. I'd love to have 5 or 6 films behind me instead of two. Now I feel

quite liberated as a director, because I feel like I know what I want, I know what I like. I think I'm much more able than I was then. I didn't make lots of bad films, probably, in those years. But I think there were probably about 5 years before *Adam and Paul* when I had graduated, I was ready, but I was nervous and I was putting it off. But if you don't think it's going to be great, there's no point in doing it.