

SCREEN

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

NFTS AT 50 SPECIAL EDITION

NFTS SPECIAL

GUIDING LIGHT

How the National Film
and Television School
helped to shape the screen
industries over 50 years





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NFTS AT 50

Centre of excellence

In nurturing skilled craftspeople and visionary talents over the past 50 years, the NFTS is one of the great influences on the screen industries

Over its five decades of existence, the National Film and Television School's impact on the UK's film and television industries has been immense. Its graduates have emerged, trained across a wide range of craft and creative disciplines, to carve distinctive, often award-winning paths in the industry. Some 93% achieve employment within six months of leaving the school, according to the 2020 NFTS *Graduate Impact Report*. Describing the NFTS as the world's greatest film school is not just hyperbole.

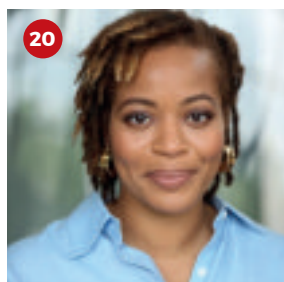
And now, 50 years young, the NFTS's importance to the overall vitality of the UK's screen ecosystem has only come into sharper focus, as a fully fledged content boom creates an almost insatiable appetite for skills and off-camera creatives. While only one piece of the UK's overall training puzzle, the range of disciplines the NFTS supports — from cinematography to casting — combined with outstanding facilities,

teachers and a direct and powerful connection to the industry make it more essential than ever.

Under the astute direction of Jon Wardle, who took up the reins from Nik Powell in 2017, the school is tackling the challenges that will allow it — and its graduates — to stay relevant. From expanding access outside London to enhancing the overall curriculum to increasing the diversity of its cohort, the NFTS remains focused on keeping the school at the beating heart of the industry, in the right place to keep fostering the skilled craftspeople and visionary talents the industry needs.

Through scholarships and bespoke support, one of Wardle's key goals has been to ensure the school truly reflects the UK's ethnic, gender and socio-economic balance, and on that front and many others, the NFTS is moving in a wholly positive direction. Here's to the next 50 years of a great British institution. **S**

Matt Mueller, editor



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Front cover credit: Phil Rowley



INTRODUCTION

Building for the future

1971 was an important year for me. *Melody*, the first feature Alan Parker and I worked on together, opened that year and so, at the age of 30, my life as a film producer had begun. As a newcomer to filmmaking, I quickly learned first-hand the biggest issue facing the industry was the lack of coherent creative skills development across the sector.

The National Film School was to address that gap and make a new generation of trained professionals. Graduates of the school were soon making an indelible mark on the industry, and have been ever since.

The great achievement of the school has been in creating an accepted industry gold standard. I think it's generally agreed that graduates emerging from the NFTS can credibly tackle the technologically challenging demands of high-end filmmaking.

For 50 years the NFTS has served as a hothouse for talent that is now in global demand. Yet, as the industry has grown in stature and importance, one of those early challenges remains — as a nation we still don't produce enough skilled professionals to meet the voracious needs of a seemingly ever-growing screen sector. If the UK is to retain its pre-eminence as a global production centre, then government and industry have to dig deeper, and take a similar leap of faith as that which drove the creation of the NFTS 50 years ago.

Then it was a question of building a credible industry. Now, it's a question of sustaining one.

David Puttnam

President, National Film and Television School

'The great achievement of the school has been in creating an accepted industry gold standard'

David Puttnam, NFTS

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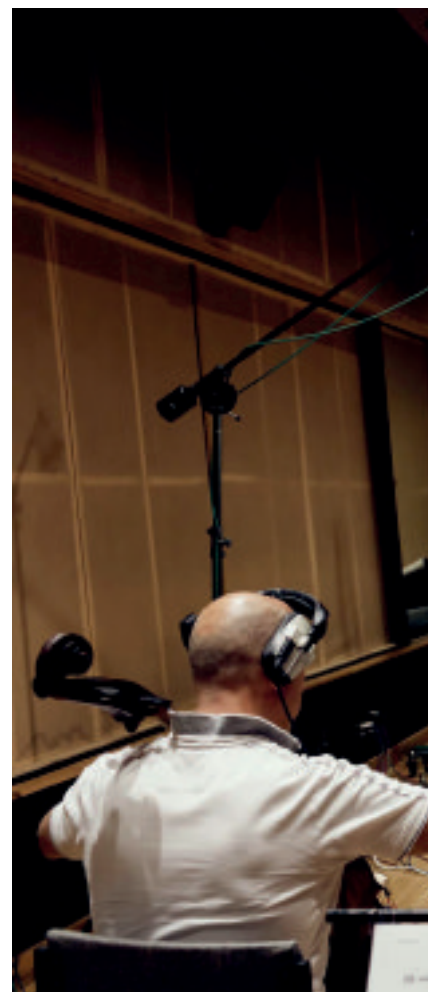
or National Film and Television School director Jon Wardle, the school's 50th anniversary has been an opportunity for reflection. "It's about trying to continually revisit what's the point of a national film school or a national film and television school," he says. "Why did it get created 50 years ago? Are we still delivering on that, has the remit changed, and what were some of the things that made it important at that point?"

Wardle joined the NFTS in 2012 as head of curriculum, becoming deputy director in 2015 and then taking the reins from the school's director Nik Powell, who retired in 2017. These have been years of substantial change, including the 2017 opening of \$27.4m (£20m) 20,000 sq ft of teaching space across two new buildings at the school's campus in Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire, and expansion of courses as the NFTS stepped up to its responsibility to anticipate and address the skill needs of the UK film industry.

National identity

Since taking over as director, Wardle has made expanding access and opportunity central to decision-making. "It's partly about embracing our national identity," he says. "We are the National Film and Television School, we're not the Beaconsfield Film and Television School. That's a gift, and we need to embrace it. There's a big push on outside-of-London production, which is only going in one direction, and we needed to get out and claim our mantle, as well as live up to our responsibilities around that."

The past three years have seen the NFTS open bases in Glasgow, Leeds and central London, with Cardiff the latest addition. This has been achieved — in a nimble and fiscally responsible way — by occupying existing facilities, such as at BBC Scotland and ITV Studios in Leeds. Diploma, certificate and short courses are offered, creating accessible opportunities to students in their own localities.



'That spirit of collaboration, focus on excellence and creative risk-taking is still there, even as the school has become bigger'

Jon Wardle, NFTS

Also around the theme of access, the NFTS has paid increasing attention to the diversity of its cohort. Film education is expensive to deliver, and the school must ensure it recruits students "based on ability, not ability to pay", in the words of Wardle. The school has made significant strides in the direction of ethnic diversity and gender parity, and is now giving urgent attention to socio-economic diversity.

The third pillar of the school's



NFTS composing alumnus Segun Akinola: the school prides itself on training industry-ready graduates

Courtesy of NFTS

‘The broadcasters have been the mainstay of the school’s industry support for more than 25 years’

Jon Wardle

from masterclasses to screenings organised by the students. Plus, it’s a lot cheaper to live here.”

The opening of new buildings, regional expansion and proliferation of courses addressing skills gaps — these are all developments that have caught people’s attention. And few would dispute the reputation of the NFTS for training up professionals who emerge ready to walk straight into roles in the film, television and video games industries. Graduate employment rates are impressive: 93% within six months of students graduating.

But the focus on the industrial achievements of the NFTS, with its state-of-the-art facilities and its close links with film and TV companies, perhaps also colours perceptions that the school’s focus is more on career opportunity than fostering visionary talents. For Wardle, that is totally wrong.

“Yes, the NFTS is about producing the craftspeople who will work across both British content and international production in the UK, who make the UK a place where we train the best cinematographers, editors and production designers in the world,” he remarks. “But it’s equally about fostering new voices who will power the British film and television industry — the Rose Glasses of this world.

“That’s what the school has always tried to straddle. Through Nik’s time and my time we did push more into making sure we are producing the craftspeople of the future, but we absolutely haven’t lost sight of distinctive talent.”

In addition to *Saint Maud* writer/director Glass, Wardle namechecks alumni such as Nick Rowland »

IN FOCUS NFTS AT 50

Vision quest

The NFTS has long enjoyed a reputation for training up skilled professionals ready to walk out into careers in the screen industries. But its fostering of distinctive visionary talents deserves equal emphasis, the school’s director Jon Wardle tells Charles Gant

access strategy has been about the “plurality of the offer”, adds Wardle. “What I mean by that is, it was all very full-time when I joined and — over those nine years, not just since becoming director — I’ve always said the school has to meet people in different ways in their circumstances, whether that’s three-month or part-time one-year courses that you can do while having a job, grow-

ing the short-course portfolio, and now blended and online courses.”

Expansion of the NFTS offer, which now includes 17 MA and nine diploma courses in various disciplines, has been made possible because the school owns its own 3.5 acre site. Despite aspirations by previous regimes to move to central London, Powell and now Wardle embraced the advantages of Bea-

consfield, and increasingly students choose to live in and near the town.

“That’s changed,” says Wardle. “When I joined it was probably 70% in London, 30% in Beaconsfield. Now it’s more like 70% Beaconsfield and High Wycombe, and 30% London. People talk about the Beaconsfield bubble. Students come together, there’s real community, and there’s so much going on at the school,

NFTS by the numbers

93%

NFTS GRADUATE
EMPLOYMENT RATE WITHIN
SIX MONTHS OF GRADUATION

154

NUMBER OF HIGH-END
TV PROJECTS SHOT BY
NFTS CINEMATOGRAPHY
GRADUATES SINCE 2015 –
25% OF ALL HIGH-END
TELEVISION PRODUCTIONS
IN THE UK*

90%

PROPORTION OF UK
HIGH-END TV PRODUCTIONS
FEATURING AT LEAST ONE
NFTS GRADUATE

\$5.9BN

US STUDIO INVESTMENT
IN THE UK, 2015-19 – NFTS
GRADUATES WORKED
ON 90% OF ALL THESE
PRODUCTIONS

25%

PROPORTION OF NFTS
GRADUATES FROM
BLACK AND MINORITY
ETHNIC GROUPS (2019-21)*Source: NFTS 2020 Graduate
Impact ReportCourses on offer include
video game design

(*Calm With Horses*), Shola Amoo (*The Last Tree*), Cathy Brady (*Wildfire*), Michael Pearce (*Beast*) and 2013 graduate Andrew Cumming, whose upcoming debut feature *The Origin* is backed by the BFI and Creative Scotland. “They are amazing people, and there are just so many of them that it can’t be a mistake,” he notes, wryly.

Many of the NFTS’s distinctive voices — including talents such as Roger Deakins, Terence Davies and Nick Broomfield, as well as graduates such as Sarah Gavron, Clio Barnard, Amoo and Glass — are participating in the BFI Southbank’s season of films and interviews celebrating the school throughout September. Alumni have also been filmed for the NFTS’s newly launched digital archive, talking about their experiences and what they learned. These include Lynne Ramsay, Nick Park and Anthony Chen. The archive also includes a curated collection of more than 200 graduate films, stills, trailers and original screenplays.

The NFTS’s focus on professional training and developing visionary talents “are not mutually exclusive,” says Wardle. “I think the rea-

‘I can’t think of another school of our size in the UK — in art or music — that offers equivalent access programmes’

Jon Wardle

son the likes of Mahalia Belo and Nick Rowland are so successful is because they know how to work in an industrial model. They meet deadlines, they know how budgets work, they know how to manage a tech recce. Nick walked out of the school and immediately directed *Ripper Street* before he made his first feature. I said, ‘What was the transition like?’ He went, ‘Actually, the school prepared me totally. I went on the tech recce, and I was one of the most experienced people on it. I’d had 60 students to talk to before, and now I’ve got all professionals.’”

Similarly, courses such as editing embrace the craft in all its forms. “We’re one of the only film schools that does an editing workshop on

how to edit fixed-rig documentary,” says Wardle. “My view is that all this diversity of experiences makes you even better at what you do. If you’re an editor, you can get experience editing a drama with one director over here, perhaps one who’s in the Shola Amoo, distinctive independent filmmaker space. And over here, you’re doing a fixed-rig editing workshop. These things all strengthen different muscles. It’s something that we lean into. We produce sound designers who can go out and work in film, high-end TV, entertainment TV, unscripted and games.”

Industry support

In response, broadcasters and television companies have recognised the vital training role the NFTS provides — to their benefit. While the UK film production sector also benefits, the film sector is arguably not as well-placed to give such consistent financial support — especially with studios being headquartered in Los Angeles.

“The school is more supported financially by the TV industry than the film industry,” agrees Wardle. “The broadcasters have been the



Model-making students were tasked with recreating the set of the lunar base from Duncan Jones' feature *Moon* (pictured, Danielle Duncan-Rosembert)

Courtesy of NFTS

'The UK should be really proud to have a film school that punches well above its weight'

Jon Wardle

Powell, Wardle's predecessor as director, famously enjoyed fundraising — an activity that not only helped pay for new buildings and facilities, but also ensured the NFTS could offer scholarships and bursaries to a growing number of students. The school has continued to build on the important fundraising work led by Powell, who died in 2019 — and the scholarship fund is now approaching an annual \$1.4m (£1m). In the last academic year, 80% of UK MA students received some level of financial support, helping with fees that are an annual \$20,300 (£14,800).

"I can't think of another school of our size in the UK — in art or music, for example — that offers equivalent access programmes," comments Wardle, who pays tribute to the support of the NFTS board of governors, chaired by Patrick McKenna, for their help here and in so many areas. "But it's still not enough. You've still got to live for two years, you've still got to pay your bills and rent, and that's hard."

One in four NFTS students over the past five years have come from ethnic minorities — although this can vary between disciplines, and the school is now addressing that.

"Production design is a particular challenge," notes Wardle.

"So we're going to have to do some work around one or two disciplines to make it even more accessible. And on socio-economics,

it's something I feel incredibly passionate about — speaking as a boy from Coventry who

grew up never knowing anyone in the film industry, and finding myself in the job that I'm in."

After much internal discussion about what to measure, the NFTS has now settled on the socio-economic measures set out by the Social Mobility Commission. In the UK, 38% of the population is measured as belonging to the lower of the three socio-economic groups, and at the NFTS that figure is 15%.

"We now are plotting our way forward to 2022," says Wardle, "and we want to increase that by at least 5% each year using our scholarship activity. There are certain donors who are saying to us, 'Actually, *that's* the thing we want to support.' Whereas three years ago it was about female directors or writers — and we still have supporters in those areas — new people come to us and say, 'I really want to support socio-economic access.'"

Wardle is speaking to *Screen International* in the middle of an epic listening session that he undertakes every summer — meeting all 235 first-year MA students for 20 minutes each. These meetings are important for understanding how teaching can be tweaked to better serve student needs, especially given the collaborative way students from different disciplines come together to make films jointly, and how these relationships need to serve and nourish all parties.

"It's detailed, granular work — how do we set a tone about how colourists and cinematographers should work together that doesn't mimic the mistakes of what happens in the industry, but plays to the best of it," he says.

Judging by the students' hopes and fears, though, the NFTS is getting it right. "What I've been hearing is they hope they're going to have the same kind of creative, joyful experience in the real world that they have now," says Wardle. "I was talking to sound designers this morning, and they said, 'The way we work with editors and composers, it's just amazing. I hope that's what it's going to be like when I leave.'"

mainstay of the school's industry support for more than 25 years." However, it is important to note that the UK's Film Distributors' Association, the UK Cinema Association, the BFI and Universal Pictures International are all NFTS funders.

In the craft departments, Wardle sees the school's role as producing leaders: heads of department. While noting ScreenSkills and the BFI are continuing to address a skills gap in the film and high-end TV environment, and that "there's a big desire to open the funnel at the bottom end", the NFTS must also be mindful of its mission — producing, for example, 10 exceptional MA cinematography graduates each year.

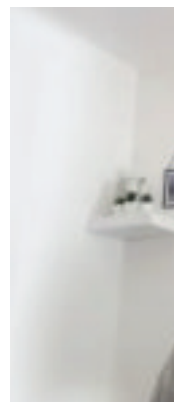
"If you train a composer at the NFTS, they walk out and are capable of being the composer of *Doctor Who*, which is what Segun Akinola did within months of leaving the school. Or they leave the school and they're directing a major television series for Netflix or the BBC. Alice Seabright is a good example — she leaves the school and picks up a six-part series for BBC that she's written and directed. I don't know anywhere else that does that."

Wardle takes pride in the awards attention for NFTS graduate shorts — eight Oscar and 32 Bafta nominations to date, converting to 12 wins — and that's not counting Scottish and Welsh Baftas. Its students have earned more Student Academy Awards nominations than any other film school in the world — and won gold six times.

"I know I'm the director, but I feel like the UK should be really proud to have a film school that punches well above its weight — 500 students in tiny Beaconsfield regularly beat the University of Southern California, New York University, the Beijing Film Academy for the major international prizes around the world," says the NFTS director. "A lot of that is because that spirit of collaboration, focus on excellence and creative risk-taking is still there, even as the school has become bigger and more structured in its processes."

(Right) Jon Wardle





SPOTLIGHT DIRECTORS ROUND TABLE

In conversation

Aisling Walsh, Sarah Gavron, Michael Pearce & Mahalia Belo

In celebration of the National Film and Television School's 50th anniversary, four former students who have all gone on to flourishing directing careers share their memories of teachers, mentors and lessons never forgotten

Since opening its doors in 1971, more than 3,800 students have passed through the National Film and Television School's (NFTS) hallowed corridors and into its classrooms, screening rooms and edit suites. To mark its anniversary, *Screen International* and the NFTS brought together four graduates who have gone on to have successful directing careers in film and television: Aisling Walsh (a student from 1980-83), Sarah Gavron (1997-2000), Michael Pearce (2006-08) and Mahalia Belo (2010-12).

Dublin-born Walsh directed her first feature *Joyriders* in 1988, and her further feature credits include, most recently, *Maudie* (2016). She has also worked on TV series such as the BBC's *Fingersmith* (2005) and TV movies including *Elizabeth Is Missing* (2019) and *An Inspector Calls* (2015).

Gavron directed TV movie *This*

'I went from very early on thinking I wouldn't survive the first year to loving the place. It was my film education'

Aisling Walsh

Little Life in 2003, as well as features *Brick Lane* (2007), *Suffragette* (2015) and, most recently, *Rocks*, which earned seven Bafta nominations this year including best director.

Pearce won the Bafta in 2019 for outstanding debut by a British writer, director or producer with his first feature *Beast*. His second, *Encounter* starring Riz Ahmed and Octavia Spencer, receives its world premiere at this year's Toronto International Film Festival.

Belo, who directed a pair of miniseries — *Requiem* for the

BBC and Netflix, and Heyday Television's *The Long Song* for BBC, both in 2018 — is set to make her feature debut with an adaptation of Jane Austen's *Persuasion* for Monumental Pictures' Alison Owen and Debra Hayward, backed by BBC Film and Searchlight Pictures.

The quartet came together in mid-August on Zoom and this is an edited version of that conversation.

Screen What did it mean to you to be at the National Film and Television School?

Aisling Walsh I was 22. My year were quite young. But because I came from Dublin, it was quite an extraordinary thing. I had been to art school and made little films, and I read about the film school in a magazine and wrote to them. I said, "I'd like to come over and see it," which I did, on the boat and train, and I couldn't believe I got in. It's interesting to be in a place in its first decade. And it was the National

Film School, we were all going to leave and make films. Everybody there was a filmmaker and we all mucked in and helped each other make our films.

Sarah Gavron I had been to Edinburgh College of Art and did an MA in filmmaking. That was the first time I made shorts and fell in love with fiction filmmaking. And everybody there was talking about the National Film and Television School, this place that was impossible to go to but was this Mecca of filmmaking. It planted the seed in my head. I went back to London and spent the next four years in documentaries. But all the time I was having fantasies about making fiction films.

I turned 27 and I thought maybe I should bite the bullet and try for the film school. But I didn't dare try for fiction — so I was going to apply for documentary. Then two nights before the application had to be in, I stayed up and wrote a fiction



(From left) Aisling Walsh, Sarah Gavron, Michael Pearce and Mahalia Belo in conversation via Zoom for Screen International, August 2021

application. They had this two-week course with 20 of us and were going to select five. So it was this scary induction process. I went there for three years and I didn't regret it. It was more structured than when Aisling was there, but relatively unstructured compared to now, I think. Nobody lived there, it was the old Portakabins, and we edited on Steenbecks for the first year, then moved to digital. They had a proper sound studio, but there was a kind of flea-ridden old cinema. Maybe it wasn't flea-ridden, but it felt flea-ridden. But brilliant teaching.

Michael Pearce I was 25 when I went and I was the youngest in the directing group. I had this expectation you had to have worked in the industry before going there. But I applied anyway because I had my sights set on the NFTS since I

was 18. Even doing my degree at Bournemouth in film directing, I saw it as a stepping stone to get to the NFTS. I applied and I got an interview, and I remember walking into the interview room, which was with [then co-heads of fiction] Lynda Myles and Ian Sellar.

Often they get a previous student to do some of the interviews as well. And it was Lynne Ramsay. I was a fan of her shorts and *Ratcatcher*. So I was walking into an interview and meeting one of my filmmaking heroes, and I remember trying to ingratiate myself to her because I'd read she was about to do *The Lovely Bones*. I asked her about it and she said it was falling apart. And I thought, I've just fucked it. I remember coming out, seeing all the students talking about films and moving equipment about, and

I wanted to be there so bad. I was like, if I don't get in this year, I'm going to make more shorts and apply next year. And if I don't get in, I'll just keep applying until I do.

Mahalia Belo I also studied fine art, but knew I wanted to go to film school and I kept researching it every year, thinking, next year I'll apply, I'll be good enough next year. I kept doing that and only applied because I'd started to make fashion films to make some money, and I'd spoken to a friend of mine about the film school who said, "I'm applying." I realised I couldn't hold it off. She applied for production design, I applied for directing, and we both got in. I also had Ian Sellar and Lynda Myles [for my interview] and I got so nervous. I had to take deep breaths and I did a yoga move, and Lynda was like, "It's fine."

Walsh It's interesting to hear everybody talking about the school, the flea-ridden cinema — that cinema was beautiful. I was there in the first decade, the school was nine years old, and every Monday we watched films. You would arrive and watch two to three films and then discuss them. In that first year, we were divided into groups and made a small fiction film, of which we each directed a scene. Then we made a documentary together, and everybody had the chance to do everything. And the school was small — 25 people in a year — so you knew everybody.

‘Stephen Frears taught me a huge amount, mainly in the editing room. He wouldn't say very much, but what he said never left you’

Sarah Gavron

I learned how to write and was encouraged particularly by [NFTS director] Colin Young and [filmmaker] Bill Douglas. Bill came towards the middle of my second year, and we still saw each other after I left. I learned a lot from him. And some amazing directors came to the school: Bernardo Bertolucci, Alan Parker. They would come for a few days at a time and show their films and you would spend time with them. There were always ex-students teaching at the school. Jim O'Brien [Scottish-born stage and TV director whose credits included co-directing Granada Television's 1984 adaptation of *The Jewel In The Crown*] taught me a lot in my first year, and we stayed in touch and later worked together on things. »



Sarah Gavron's 2000 short *Losing Touch*

Gavron We had five directors in my year. Three out of the five were women, which was unusual. We also had Jim O'Brien as a teacher, who was great, and Stephen Frears, who taught me a huge amount, mainly in the editing room. He wouldn't say very much, but what he said never left you. I still feel I've got his voice in my head on a film set: "Why are you doing this? Why are you putting the camera there?"

I remember this Latvian woman made a short and he was mentoring her during that, and she said she didn't see him all day. Then, at the

'You screened your shorts to your year and the tutors. There were lessons you learned in that dark cinema that I carry with me now'

Michael Pearce

end of the day, he came in and analysed everything she had done — he had been sitting on a toilet with a carefully placed mirror so he could see everything she was shooting through the bathroom door. I also stayed in touch with quite a few of the teachers. Ian Sellar was a lovely, nurturing presence but also razor-sharp. I've got him to come and see films since, as I have Stephen Frears. You do feel like you developed this family of mentors and peers who you can draw upon.

Pearce The main tutor we had was Ian Sellar. We were six directors at the time and Ian is someone I'm still in touch with. I sent him a cut of my recent film because he always has so much wisdom to confer. We'd sit in class and each director would pitch their idea for the short they were going to make. Ian had an uncanny ability to tease out a compelling idea for what might have been an image someone had, and found the heart of everyone's story.

When you finished a short, you would show it in the cinema with



Michael Pearce's 2007 short *Look What You Have Done To My Heart*



Aisling Walsh on the set of her 1983 graduation film *Hostage*

the people from your year and the tutors, and they would tell you what they thought of it in candid terms. I remember one short I made, I had let a bad performance go on screen and I vowed to myself that day that I'm never going to put a bad performance on screen again. There were lessons you learned in that dark room that I carry with me now.

Belo There were eight [directors] in our year. I remember the dread of those critiques, but how useful it was. It wasn't just the films we

would watch; we would also watch the rushes and that was the most exposing thing ever. It made you realise you had to get very good at your craft, especially because you're the director and the other departments depend on you at the school to make their best possible work. We felt a lot of pressure as a result. But we loved it. It built confidence. I came away from the film school with a lot of creative collaborators and deep friendships, but also confidence — and that was priceless.

Screen You mentioned close collaborators. Who did you meet at NFTS that you've gone on to work with?

Belo I've worked with [cinematographer] Chloë Thompson on everything since leaving film school. She did my grad film. We were the only women in our department. I was the only female director, she was the only female cinematographer, and we ended up working together. And production designer Laura Ellis Cricks. She was the reason I ended up going to film school, and I still work with her.

Gavron I work with Maya Maffioli, who Michael has also worked with, as an editor, and with the fact she had been at the film school there's some connection, even though she was there way after me. A DoP I married, David Katznelson, I met there. And Jonny Persey was a producer who I worked with on a documentary [*Village At The End Of The World*, 2012].

Pearce I still work with Ben Kraun, who was a DoP I knew from



Mahalia Belo (centre) directing her 2011 short *Stray*

film school. He shot my recent feature and my past one. Maya Maffioli, who edited with Sarah on *Rocks*, was also in my year. Laura, who Mahalia was talking about, was the production designer on *Beast*. So you really do meet a tribe of filmmakers, which is great.

The thing I miss most about it, in terms of finding your tribe, is that when I speak to other directors now, so much of our conversation is about the industry and about the politics of the industry, and navigating actors' agents and financing and studios and the health of the industry. When I was talking to other filmmakers at the school, it was all about the craft. You were talking about movies you loved or you hated, and why, and what that director did with the camera or how they elicited that performance. That was 99% of your conversation. Now, for me, it's like 40%.

Walsh It's interesting what Sarah said about Stephen Frears. I remember Bill [Douglas] saying to me: "When you go out there,

'We would watch the rushes and that was the most exposing thing. It made you realise you had to get very good at your craft'

Mahalia Belo

remember the picture you saw when you first wrote the scene. That's where you put the camera." To this day, I remember that. I went from very early on thinking I wouldn't survive the first year to loving the place. It was my film education. I learned how to make films. I learned how to write, I learned how to direct, and I wouldn't have learnt in the way I did, had I not gone to the school.

There was a point in my second year where I ran out of money. I had to go away and work for a bit and the school said, "We've got an ex-student who is making a film

and who needs crew." Myself and another student in my year were sent off. He did sound, and I was an assistant director for Terence Davies on the last part of *The Terence Davies Trilogy* (1983). I see Terence every now and again, and I learned so much on that film by watching somebody else.

Gavron At school I was always trying to do the right thing and fit in, and I learned that to be a filmmaker of any kind, you have to strip that away and be true to yourself and be honest with yourself and follow your instincts. Learn who you are and what your taste is and what your vision is. And like Aisling, I learned the craft. The peer group and the teachers were, in some ways, the most valuable thing about it, getting to meet and know those people. There was something about the people you sat with in your editing room, or on your film set, that was so rewarding and valuable and useful.

Belo One of the biggest things I have with my work is thinking

about the opening. Ian [Sellar] would teach us, look at the opening, why you have each shot, the sound of it, even the titles. If you can imagine the opening, the rest of the film hopefully follows suit.

Pearce You just had to come in every day with curiosity and a love for movies. The goal was tune in and listen to your own creative intuition, and that was the thing you had to protect. Any time you tried to do something to be impressive or do something that was your calling card to the industry, the best work never came from that. I try and hold on to that now, to that intuition, because sometimes it's a quiet voice, and it can be swamped by a lot of expectations and demands and pressures for a movie to perform or do well, and I just go back to those first few days of the film school. So that, and meeting a peer group that inspires you. You learn as much from the people you're studying with as you do from the tutors, who were great. **S**

Mark Salisbury

Tube tales

The National Film School added Television to its name in 1982. Tim Dams talks to course leaders and key executives about the value of its graduates to the UK TV industry, and why broadcasters and producers offer the school such strong financial support

Founded in 1971, the National Film School added the word Television to its name 11 years later. At the time, there were plenty of voices in the film industry expressing scepticism about the name change — after all, the small screen was viewed by many as the poor relation.

However, the National Film and Television School (NFTS) moniker reflected already-existing realities: by the 1980s, many of the school's graduates were going on to make their careers in TV. And 1982 also saw the launch of the UK's Channel 4, with a remit to broadcast content created by outside producers.

That same year, the NFTS began the process of widening access to the school, launching a pilot project for continuing professional development, with short courses aimed at all areas of film and television production. Through the 1990s and 2000s, television was given a wider emphasis at the school. The result is that TV is now integrated into the curriculum, across its MA, diploma, certificate and short courses.

In retrospect, the early expansion of the school's remit into television looks particularly prescient given the rise of streamers and the high-end TV content boom. More often than not, an NFTS graduate

will be nestled among the credits of quality TV dramas. Such content has proliferated in the past year — 190 high-end productions started principal photography in the UK between July 2020 and June 2021, with a production spend of \$4.7bn (£3.5bn), the highest on record.

"We have got NFTS graduates working on our productions across the board," says Left Bank Pictures CEO Andy Harries, who references *The Crown* in particular across a range of creative and craft disciplines. He also cites NFTS graduate Nuala O'Leary, who is producing Left Bank Pictures' Robert Harris adaptation *The Fear Index*.

Sister co-founder and chief creative officer Jane Featherstone notes that three NFTS graduates won Emmys for its HBO/Sky series *Chernobyl*: cinematographer Jakob Ihre, production designer Luke Hull and re-recording mixer Stuart Hilliker. "I would love to work with them all again," she says. "They're spectacularly talented individuals."

Set up for success

NFTS's recently published *Graduate Impact Report* found that its graduates are involved in 83% of UK high-end TV production and around 75% of UK subscription video on demand (SVoD) high-end TV production. "It's a great school



'It's a great school for setting up people for success. It provides a solid foundation'

Fiona Lamptey, Netflix

for setting up people for success," says Netflix director of UK features Fiona Lamptey, who has a diploma in script development from the NFTS. "It provides a solid foundation for working in the industry."

Her point is echoed by Tim Bevan, co-chair of Working Title, who says the NFTS is renowned around the world. "The school has incredible facilities, and it properly teaches people their craft," he says. "When they come out, they are absolutely work-ready."

Lamptey has worked with many NFTS graduates during her time at Netflix, and previously at Channel 4, Film4 and while running her

own production company Fruit Tree Media. "They all just have that confidence," she says. "Even though they might have newly graduated, I completely believe in them."

This confidence likely stems from the way students are taught at the school. Peter Dale, NFTS head of documentary, says it aims to deliver a "very practically based" MA course for students, giving them hands-on experience at the same time as creating a "safe place to experiment".

Dale adds that documentary students who enter the industry will likely start as a researcher or assistant producer. From that point, they will usually move quickly up the ladder. "They come out almost fully formed; they just need to know the table manners and the etiquette of television a bit more."

While at the school, students have access to top-end facilities. "They are using equipment that we are using now in the industry," says Lamptey. "In terms of that practical experience, they're not five years



NFTS graduates are involved in 83% of UK high-end TV production



Ebele Tate directs her 2021 graduate short *The Visit*

Courtesy of NFTS

behind — they understand the industry they're going into."

The NFTS has its own industry-standard film studio as well as 4K television and rehearsal studios, dubbing theatres, editing suites, music recording studios and animation studios. The school also has more than 50 film and digital video cameras, from the Arri Alexa through to the Sony FS7.

"There is probably nowhere like it in Europe in terms of the sophistication of all the equipment and studio space," says NFTS head of screenwriting Brian Ward, who studied at the school from 1978-80. "It's a very modern and streamlined place and we're heavily plugged into the industry, yet it still retains a kind of maverick spirit that it always had as a school."

Ward says the quality of the students is a key reason for their success in the industry. He recently finished interviewing for the coming year's screenwriting MA intake. "We had 180 applicants for 10 places, most of them from the UK,"



'We've got NFTS graduates working on our productions across the board'

Andy Harries, Left Bank Pictures

he says. "We are getting the cream of the crop."

Ward has noticed a real change in applicants' interests in the past five or six years, reflecting how the industry has been upended by the streaming revolution and the increased focus on high-end TV. "Seventy-five percent of people who used to apply would say they wanted to write movies, and do TV on the side. It's completely the other way round now."

Dale also ensures television is a firm focus on the documentary MA. The course is not simply about turning out accomplished feature documentary makers, he

says, but is broad-ranging in its focus. Branded content, TV series such as *24 Hours In A&E* through to Sundance docs are all part of the mix. "I'm determined to make sure we put out people who are industry-facing in a more open way," says Dale. "Because they do need to earn some money when they leave."

NFTS director Jon Wardle echoes Dale's point. "We do some television disciplines no other film school in the world offers, like entertainment television — we have a whole MA in making shiny-floor shows and game shows. We embrace television in all its forms."

Not everything has to be taught as a two-year MA course at Beaconsfield. Dale is also passionate about the short courses offered by the NFTS, which help film and television professionals further their careers. Short courses have proliferated in recent years, and range from a two-day course in self-shooting through to courses on production accounting and location sound recording. They are available across

all the NFTS's UK locations, and some are offered exclusively online.

Meanwhile, Ward emphasises the school's "strong and direct" connections to industry. In the three weeks before Christmas and the three weeks after they graduate, the MA screenwriting students will have meetings with top producers, broadcasters, streamers, directors and agents. "We never have anybody who says no," says Ward. "Our writers and their work are seen by the industry."

Two-way street

The industry connections work both ways, not just to the advantage of the students. Amid intense competition for top talent and a pressing need to expand and diversify the TV and film workforce, industry executives are keen to connect with and encourage the up-and-coming generation of writers and programme makers.

The BBC, for example, has a "very potent partnership" with the NFTS, says Rose Garnett, director »

Courtesy of NFTS



The NFTS runs an MA in shiny-floor shows and game shows. "We embrace television in all its forms," says the school's director Jon Wardle

of BBC Film, who recently joined the NFTS board of governors. Last year, the BBC and the NFTS struck a three-year deal that sees the corporation sponsor 10 NFTS courses — six MAs and four diploma courses. Up to 20 scholarships are funded by the BBC, each with a commissioning or production mentor. The BBC also sponsors 100 free NFTS short-course places overall. Senior commissioning and production figures at the BBC also provide masterclasses and join networking events to get to know the students.

The NFTS and the BBC have a shared spirit of public service, observes Garnett, with a focus on building Britain as a "space of global excellence in film and TV making, at every level". From its creation, Garnett says the NFTS has "validated" filmmaking as a career choice that is worthy of proper qualifications. "It gives film a sort of validity and seriousness, and makes it vocational and skilled, as opposed to something that you could happen upon or was a luxury choice." As such, she believes the NFTS is one of the reasons why film and television now collectively play such an important part in the British economy.



Riffy Ahmed (centre) directs her 2020 graduate short *Al Sarab*



'The school has incredible facilities.

It properly teaches people their craft'

Tim Bevan, Working Title

Beyond the BBC, many other broadcasters and individuals support the NFTS. Sky, Channel 4 and ITV are each key partner sponsors. Channel 4, All3Media, Hat Trick Productions and Netflix

are among its scholarship donors. Left Bank's Harries, for example, donates £10,000 (\$13,600) a year to help fund a bursary for the school. Left Bank will also take placements from students to work on its productions.

For Harries, this is not just about philanthropy — he supports the school for business reasons too. Like many others who back the NFTS, he recognises the symbiotic relationship the school has with the industry. "The way to maintain the reputation of this country for delivering fantastic shows is to keep up our commitment to training



'We need to make sure NFTS continues to encourage excellence'

Jane Featherstone, Sister

and schools of excellence like the NFTS," he says.

Bursaries and scholarships are vital in ensuring a diverse student cohort. "Accessibility is important," says Dale. "The industry wants different voices, and sees us as a good way of getting them into the industry."

The need for a pipeline of diverse, highly trained talent into the industry is greater than ever, argue many producers. Across film, TV and animation, there is talk of huge demand for crew amid a production boom that has only got bigger since lockdowns eased. "It is so busy, the industry is flourishing," says Lamprey. "But we haven't got enough people to service the films that everyone is making. That's not just Netflix, but the whole industry."

Like many senior industry figures, Lamprey stresses the importance of investing in talent to meet demand and says the NFTS is a "great foundation" for doing so. Featherstone echoes this point, explaining that the NFTS is critical to the continuing success of the UK in producing homegrown shows as well as attracting international productions. "Our industry is professionalising itself more and more as it becomes bigger," she says. "It's experiencing a big growth spurt in high-end scripted and high-end factual in particular."

"In the past, we as an industry have been guilty of undervaluing training and education but the stakes are very high now," adds Featherstone. "We need to make sure the NFTS continues to be able to train people and to encourage excellence. Those are the people we want coming into the industry." **S**

Cast a wider net

Casting directors Shaheen Baig and Jina Jay turned to the NFTS to set up a new training course, looking to make their profession more accessible and more diverse. Charles Gant reports

The UK has for years been recognised as a major centre for casting, with many of its casting directors working on big US studio films shooting across the globe. The status of the industry received a boost in 2020 when Bafta introduced a casting category for both its film and TV awards.

What has been lacking is a formal training scheme — with the inevitable danger that social connections become the easiest route to access the profession. Hence the nine-month certificate course in casting, introduced by the National Film and Television School (NFTS) last year, and supported by the Casting Directors' Guild of Great Britain and Ireland.

The course came about after conversations between casting directors Shaheen Baig and Jina Jay. “I didn’t go to university, I’m working-class, I’m from Birmingham. We felt we were seeing less and less representation,” says Baig. “We started having a conversation about how we open up the industry — because casting is so often viewed as a closed shop, and there aren’t visible routes into it. We wanted to make it much more visible and much more accessible.”

Baig and Jay approached the NFTS, which immediately agreed to the proposal and helped shape the course structure. Both casting directors run busy companies, and turned for assistance to Jane Arnell — a casting director they had both assisted in the past, whose own credits span four decades.

Led by Arnell, who also has experience as an educator, the casting course runs in the evening and occasional Saturdays from the NFTS central London office in Golden Square (and via Zoom



The NFTS casting course gives graduates the knowledge to walk straight into casting assistant roles

Courtesy of NFTS

when required due to Covid-19 restrictions). Topics include: working with actors, directors and producers; casting etiquette (such as the difference between an audition, a pre-audition, a self-tape, a screen test and a chemistry read); union agreements; contracts; and specialist fields such as street casting and casting children.

“We wanted it to be a course that people could do part-time because we know most people have got jobs or families,” says Baig. “We wanted to make sure it wasn’t just London-centric, and that we could attract people from all over the country. By doing one evening a week, it made it kind of feasible.”

Student support

For the second year of the course, the bursary scheme is being expanded to cover not just fees but also a pot for travel and accommodation. Last year, students living long distances from London would



‘We wanted to make casting much more visible and much more accessible’

Shaheen Baig, casting director

rush away to catch trains. Now they have an opportunity to stay the night — work and family responsibilities permitting — and participate in activities such as theatre outings.

Baig cites tech savviness as a vital quality for an assistant in a modern casting office, as well as resourcefulness, communication skills (“being personable and polite” with clients, talent agents and actors), organisational flair, ability to work in a pressured environment, discretion (“super important”) and, of course,

a passion for film, television and theatre. A successful casting assistant will also, Baig explains, be “somebody who is fairly robust”.

The course aims to give graduates the knowledge and confidence to walk straight into a casting assistant role — and that is proving to be the case. “Our industry right now is booming and it feels like there’s not enough assistants,” says Baig.

The first batch of 14 students graduated in May. A couple have gone into full-time roles at London theatres, one into a talent agency and one joined Baig’s own team, while others have been freelancing with casting directors including Aisha Bywaters, Sonia Allam, Kevin Riddle and Jay herself.

“Other casting directors are contacting us now and asking, ‘Who’s available?’” says Baig. “We could never have imagined that so many of our students would be working, but also working in really fantastic places.” **S**

Tim Reckart animating
Head Over Heels



SPOTLIGHT SHORT FILMS

Cream of the crop

NFTS students have been making short films as part of their learning since the school's inception, many earning plaudits from Bafta, Oscar and international festivals. Screen selects 10 of the best shorts across animation and fiction, and talks to the directors about their filmmaking journeys

Animation shorts

Second Class Mail (1985)
Dir Alison Snowden

A bittersweet blend of humour and pathos, Snowden's *Second Class Mail* tells of an elderly woman who receives a very special parcel in the post: an inflatable male companion that is amusingly distant from our notions of a sex accessory.

"I liked the idea of her sending away for an inflatable man doll as a way of contrasting her innocent character," recalls Snowden.

"I wanted it to have a naive, clunky style for the most part. I was still learning the basics of animation, so I designed the storyboard to be within my ability. I found learning walk cycles hard but managed to cheat by covering some of them up behind moving umbrellas or an aerial shot. Necessity is the mother of invention."

Oscar-nominated in 1986, the film allowed Snowden to collaborate with other NFTS students, including Nick Park and her now life-partner David Fine, with whom she has since worked on projects including *Bob's Birthday*,

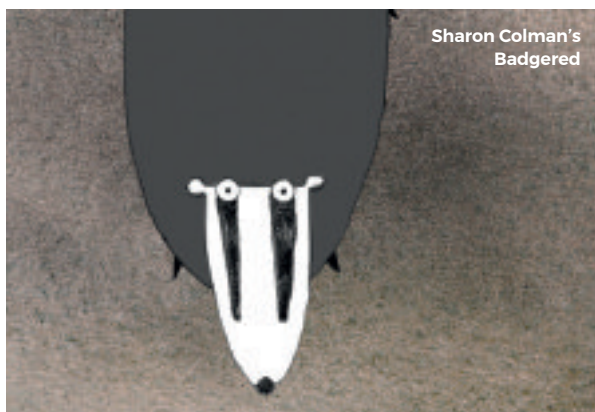
which won an Oscar in 1995. "My animation skills have definitely improved since those early beginnings," she says. "But I try not to be too critical as it reflected a moment in time. I really enjoyed my time in the NFTS animation department making the film."

Badgered (2005)
Dir Sharon Colman

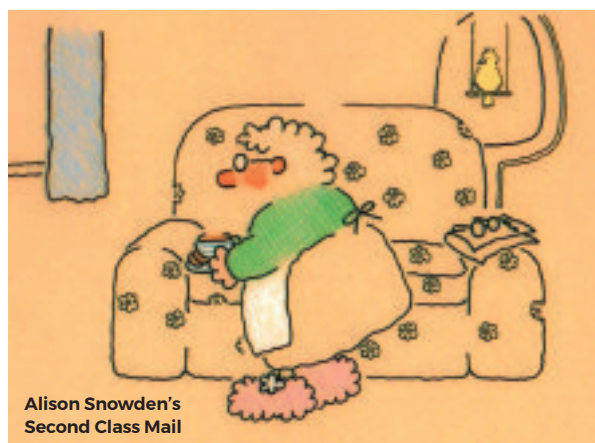
In Colman's charming traditional animation, a badger finds his peaceful hibernation disturbed by the installation of nuclear warheads near his underground home.

"Because the idea came from the darker side of human behaviour, using satire and quirky characters was successful in telling this story," says the filmmaker. "I had no idea whether it was going to work or not."

Work it did, with *Badgered* nominated for an Oscar in 2006 and bringing Colman to the attention of DreamWorks Animation, where she worked in the story department, earning credits on *How To Train Your Dragon* and *The Croods*. She has gone on to work for other Hollywood studios (including on Warner Bros' 2014 *The Lego Movie*)



Sharon Colman's
Badgered



Alison Snowden's
Second Class Mail

and is now making her own independent short.

"I love *Badgered* for many reasons," says Colman. "It wasn't until I came to the NFTS that I was able to combine my illustration background with a style that seemed to work. [For me], the animation has to work around the design, and sometimes things don't move as planned. The badger's front legs were too small to support his body when he lay down, so his large nose hit the ground first. Instead of fighting it, I let the design dictate how he was going to move. Sometimes unplanned humour is the best."

Head Over Heels (2012) **Dir Tim Reckart**

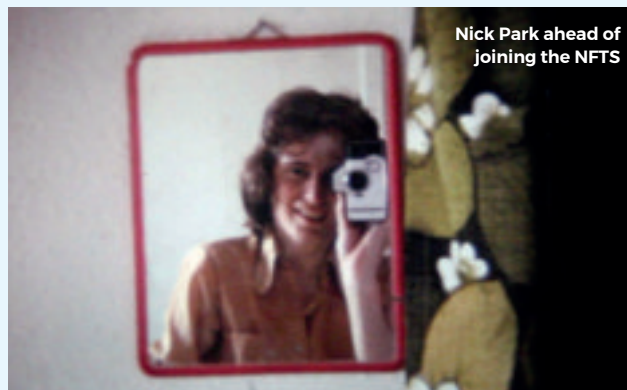
"The idea began as a single image — a house where someone lived on the floor and someone else lived on the ceiling," explains *Head Over Heels* director Reckart. "This brought me to the idea of a married couple who have grown apart."

The dialogue-free film tells the

story of a couple living in the same house but on parallel tracks: her above, him below. "Stop-motion was the perfect medium, because I wanted it to feel tangible," says Reckart. "There's a lot of symbolism, but I wanted the audience to invest in the reality of the world. Stop-motion brings that tactile reality to the screen."

Head Over Heels premiered in Cannes Cinéfondation and was Oscar-nominated in 2013. It also landed Reckart his first studio directing job on Sony Animation's *The Star* (2017). He credits the NFTS for preparing him to make that jump.

"We had room to explore and be creative, but the faculty didn't shy away from making demands on us to elevate our craft," he says. "Immediately after the film's release, I was tortured by little regrets, moments where I wish I had animated something differently. Over the years I've forgotten all those little things and can admire what we were able to do with very limited resources."



Nick Park ahead of
joining the NFTS

A Grand Day Out (1989) **Dir Nick Park**

A Grand Day Out (pictured below) might be the most well-known student film in history, introducing the now-legendary characters of Wallace and Gromit. Park's 24-minute graduation film took him a total of seven years to make. Luckily the school let him continue to use the facilities after his three-year course was over, and Aardman Animations hired him part-time and supported him to finish the film, which was made for only \$16,500 (£12,000).

Park was the first pupil to use the NFTS stop-motion studio. He and fellow student Joan Ashworth had to persuade the school to buy its first 35mm stop-motion camera after some disastrous early rushes using a 16mm.

The simple story — told in Park's now trademark stop-motion style — follows Wallace and his faithful dog Gromit, who build a rocket to go to the moon to see if it's really made of cheese. For years Park had drawn early versions of his man and dog in sketchbooks, but it was during a student placement on Jim Henson and Frank Oz feature *The Dark Crystal* that he

had the idea for Wallace to build a rocket in his basement.

Park recalls that making the short seemed tortuously slow — it took 18 months just to film the sequence of Wallace building the rocket. As he entered a sixth year of production, he decided to simplify the script just so he could definitely finish it.

Park describes his NFTS days as "fertile ground... I already had the animation bug in me" — he had previously studied at Sheffield Polytechnic — "but the school was such a playground to develop the craft of storytelling. The critiques from tutors and other students were really helpful."

A Grand Day Out was acquired by Channel 4 and won a Bafta but was beaten in the Oscar race by Park's *Creature Comforts*. "I had worked on *A Grand Day Out* for seven years, then made *Creature Comforts* in three months at Aardman, so I pipped myself to the post," he laughs.

Looking at *A Grand Day Out* now, Park can sometimes "cringe with embarrassment because the characters look a bit cruder... it's like seeing early Mickey Mouse. But part of me is also flattered and honoured that it's a student film that's still known today."





Anushka Naanayakkara making her 2016 animated film *A Love Story* (pictured below)

Animation shorts

(continued)

A Love Story (2016) Dir Anushka Naanayakkara

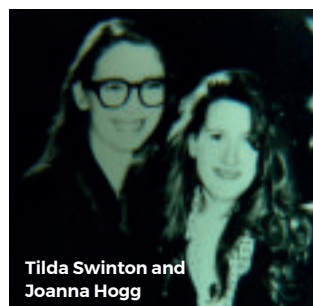
In *A Love Story*, a pair of woolen stop-motion heads experience a dialogue-free rollercoaster romance, from infatuation to heartbreak. “We wanted to see how far we could stretch the limitations of language just using texture as a medium,” says Naanayakkara, who credits production designer Solrun Osk Jonsdottir and lead cinematographer Yinka Edward as her key creative collaborators in developing the look and feel of the film. “Eventually

we decided a multiplane set-up was the best technique to give the wool the freedom it needed to convey the emotions of the characters.”

While Naanayakkara describes working on her complex animation as like “walking in a dark tunnel for a long time”, she is grateful to the NFTS, which “supported the team to make the best film we could”. It received numerous awards including a Bafta in 2017. “I was once asked at a Q&A, if I had unlimited money and time, would I continue to work on *A Love Story*, and the answer would be no,” she says. “That’s not to say it’s perfect, but wanting to improve it might take away some of what makes it connect with people.”



Fiction shorts



Caprice (1986) Dir Joanna Hogg

Hogg’s graduation film *Caprice* — full of 1980s colour, music, dancing and fashion — is not an obvious calling card for the sensitive, quieter dramas she went on to create. “I was having a typical early-20s identity crisis around who I was and what I looked like,” she recalls. “The film is exploring my love of fashion and Hollywood musicals and also the pressure of

looking a certain way. I was aware even back then the film would be full of love and joy for something, but a darkness around it as well.”

Tilda (then credited as Matilda) Swinton stars as a woman obsessed with a fashion magazine who sees a more complicated side when the publication’s sections and articles come to life. Swinton and Hogg had known each other from school and had collaborated on a previous NFTS project of Hogg’s that was never completed. “The whole question of identity and interest in fashion were themes and issues that we both shared. It was a real joy to work with her,” says Hogg.

Of course, Swinton continues to be an important Hogg collaborator, appearing alongside her daughter Honor Swinton Byrne in the director’s two latest features, *The Souvenir* and *The Souvenir Part II*. Those films are loosely autobiographical and revisit the tumultuous time in her life when

Tilda Swinton in Joanna Hogg's 1986 graduation short *Caprice*



Hogg attended the NFTS. "I found myself completely immersed in that world again, that was interesting," she says of her recent work. "I don't think I'd be doing what I'm doing now without attending the NFTS. I was still shaping my thinking back then, and the film school was challenging me a lot. I needed that."

Hogg recalls that her tutors "saw and understood what I wanted to do, even if it was very different to what other students were doing, more stylised".

"They were very supportive but I wish with hindsight I'd opened up more about what was going on with me personally, and allowed them to help me more," she adds.

Like many filmmakers with their student work, Hogg says she is now "slightly embarrassed" by *Caprice*. "It's so naive in a way. Even shortly after I made it, I wished I had connected the story somehow to reality more. But at the same time, it was quite a thing to pull off at that time."

Madonna And Child

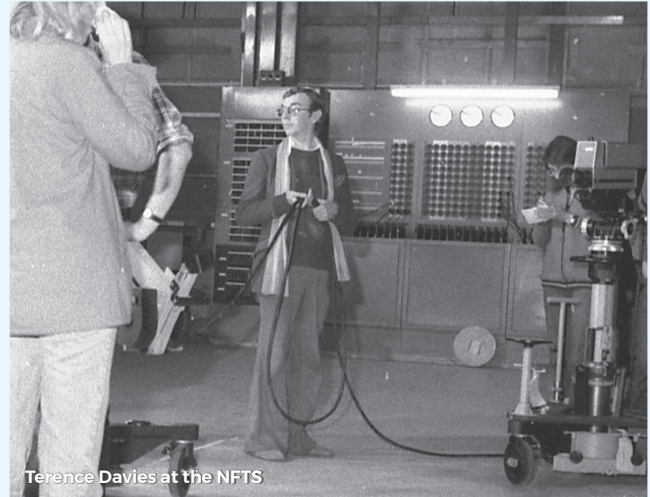
(1980)

Dir Terence Davies

Davies released his first short film *Children* in 1976, backed by the BFI. It was only after he was accepted at what was then the National Film School that he thought of continuing his protagonist Robert Tucker's story with his second short *Madonna And Child*, which became his graduation film. He completed the trilogy with *Death And Transfiguration* in 1983.

Madonna And Child follows a now-middle-aged Robert as he struggles to reconcile his Catholicism, family duty and work life with his closeted homosexuality. "The trilogy is really about despair," says Davies. "I was working through that spiritual angst. I realised I was gay when I was about 11, and because I was a devout Catholic I was praying on my knees to be forgiven."

As with *Children*, he shot *Madonna And Child* in Liverpool, in less than three weeks and on a "very small" budget. "Thank goodness the crew was very sympathetic to the material," says



Terence Davies at the NFTS

Davies. The film does include some graphic scenes, such as the view of one man clutching another's buttocks as he performs oral sex. "Shooting that scene of the buttocks, it was funny that I was the only one who was embarrassed," says Davies. "I remember thinking, 'Why did I write this?'"

The themes of the film and its explicit moments did raise a few eyebrows at the NFTS. "There were one or two staff members who thought it shouldn't have been made," he recalls. But most staff and pupils were very supportive of his vision.

After 1983, festivals tended to programme the films as a trilogy, and Davies remembers some very mixed reactions along the way. "One journalist in New York wrote, 'These films make Bergman look like Jerry Lewis,' which I guess is in some ways a compliment," laughs Davies, who doesn't rewatch his earlier films but says he learned a lot during the making of the trilogy.

"My feelings towards my work are always ambivalent. I am conscious only of the mistakes. Being a Catholic, we can't enjoy anything!"



Terence Davies' 1980 short *Madonna And Child*



Slap (2014)
Dir Nick Rowland

Rowland's *Slap* earned him Bafta and BIFA nominations and landed him an agent — not bad for a first-year short. The film stars Joe Cole as Conner, a teenage boxer who likes to experiment with female attire and make-up. “I’m interested in hyper-masculine environments, and what you feel like if you don’t fit those expectations,” says Rowland, who continued to explore similar themes in his debut feature *Calm With Horses* (2019).

He co-wrote *Slap* with fellow student Islay Bell-Webb, who recalls they worked on about 20 drafts of the script. “To me, a queer nonbinary person who was grappling with my gender identity at the time of writing the script, it was a very personal mission to make sure Conner’s struggle was emotionally authentic,” says Bell-Webb.

They had quite a challenge to shoot the 24-minute film on 16mm in just four days and with only five rolls of film. The shoot was in Slough, near the Mars factory. “We could smell caramel all the time,” laughs Rowland. But Slough

proved convenient because they could move quickly between locations. “It was a location that had a lot of different options for us.”

Rowland says he “owes a lot” to Cole, who he met at Cambridge’s Watersprite Film Festival. “He was so supportive and was also generous to introduce me to his agent.”

Attending the 2015 Bafta Film Awards at London’s Royal Opera House off the back of *Slap*’s nomination, Rowland recalls the experience as “so surreal... We were film students out on the Sunday night, we bumped into our heroes, we had such imposter syndrome. The next day we were back in school having lessons. It was a special experience.”

Rowland made two more shorts before leaving NFTS: Sundance-selected *Out Of Sight* (2014) and graduation film *Group B* (2015) starring Richard Madden. He is especially grateful for the mentoring he received from Ian Sellar and Brian Gilbert.

“I have all of my notes from their classes. Any time I’m shooting, I revisit those notes,” he says. “The day before the *Calm With Horses* shoot, they both called and gave me a pep talk. They don’t have to do that. They really care, and you feel that even after you leave the school.”



(Right) Joe Cole
in *Slap*



Lynne Ramsay's
Small Deaths



Lynne Ramsay
receiving her NFTS
honorary fellowship
from John Hurt in 2012

Small Deaths (1996)
Dir Lynne Ramsay

Ramsay was studying cinematography at the NFTS when she made the unusual choice to direct, not just shoot, her graduation film *Small Deaths*. “I was dogged about it, and they [NFTS heads] gave in after I annoyed them for three years,” she says with a laugh.

Ramsay had been writing short stories since she was a child and

that inspired *Small Deaths*, which is a triptych of vignettes: a young girl witnessing trouble in her parents’ marriage; two girls seeing a group of boys abuse a cow; and a teenager being let down in an early romance. “It’s all these tiny moments in a girl’s life growing up, the disappointment in humanity,” Ramsay explains.

With an even smaller budget than the directing students, the film was something of “a home-

Joachim Trier's *Still*

made thing that my family helped with" — Ramsay cast her niece and brother and shot one sequence in her mother's house. "We had hardly any time to shoot, and I did no coverage at all — one scene just had two shots," she recalls. "Everyone said, 'You won't be able to cut this.' But I said, 'Yes, it will work.' They were pleasantly surprised when I made it work."

Small Deaths was submitted to Cannes, where it won the jury prize. "It was at the time when the main jury would watch the shorts as well, and the jury president was Francis Ford Coppola," says Ramsay. "To be a student and come into that environment and win the jury prize from Coppola, that totally blew my mind."

During her time at the NFTS, Ramsay veered beyond her course, also attending sound classes, workshops about working with actors, documentary sessions, animation classes and much more. "It was like having a toy box to play in," she says. "It's an amazing school!"

Small Deaths production designer Jane Morton, editor Lucia

Zucchetti and DoP Alwin Küchler (who shot the film's third sequence) went on to collaborate on Ramsay's *Ratcatcher* (1999) and *Morvern Callar* (2002). "Those relationships were so important to me," she says. "When Derek Jarman came to the film school, he told us, 'Filmmaking's hard enough, I have to work with my friends.'"

Looking back on *Small Deaths* today, Ramsay says: "It is its own little oddity, but I think it captures these little moments. There was a purity to it."

Still (2001) **Dir Joachim Trier**

Norwegian director Trier was only 23 years old when he entered the fiction directing course at NFTS. "I grew up in a film family, and I had filmed my whole life, making skate videos and things like that," he says. "I came in with a sense of visuals, but I was nervous about directing actors, and the NFTS was such a great place to learn about that tradition."

His first NFTS short was 2000's *Pieta*, which earned him interna-

tional attention. For his second short *Still*, he recalls: "I was 25 and I wanted to put everything in one short film."

The film shows a man at the end of his life looking back on past relationships and moments. "We wanted to go between the different spaces in the mind of this dying old man, rambling through notions of time and memory," says Trier. "I wanted to emulate the stream of consciousness like in the great novels of Marcel Proust or James Joyce."

Still was unusual in that Trier didn't collaborate only with NFTS students, instead working with two friends back in Norway, co-writer Eskil Vogt and editor Olivier Bugge Coutte (the trio still work together frequently, most recently on this year's Cannes title *The Worst Person In The World*). "*Still* is a great example of Eskil, Olivier and myself being stupidly ambitious but learning a lot together."

One person who responded to *Still* was one of Trier's filmmaking heroes, Nicolas Roeg: "He found it fun and playful, and gave me some great advice."

While the trend in the UK at the time was to explore more gritty realism and humanist storytelling, Trier was immersing himself in watching stylised cinema, which shows in the shorts he made during his time at the NFTS (which also include 2002's *Procter*). "When I graduated, I realised that type of character-driven story was what I wanted to do," he says. "So the NFTS really played into that. It gave me good craft skills, the procedures to develop, shoot and edit. I still stick to some of the things I learned then for how I run my sets today."

Looking back on *Still* 20 years later, Trier says: "In many ways it was a mess of a film but I'm very proud of it. It's an honest attempt by a young artist aiming too high, but I was learning along the way." **S**

Profiles by Nikki Baughan and Wendy Mitchell. The 10 best fiction and animation shorts were selected by *Screen International* from a shortlist of 30 NFTS student films, including all Oscar nominees, a selection of Bafta nominees, and other acclaimed and award-winning titles.

Game change

NFTS alumni share their thoughts on what the school can do to make even more of an impact

Rienkje Attoh

Producer, So & So Productions (*A Moving Image, Noughts + Crosses*)

"By continuing its status as a trailblazer and forecaster in the industry. The National Film and Television School has a responsibility to represent, champion and nurture some of the best creative talent in the UK.

By doing so, it will continue to positively impact many more lives for years to come."



Emily Morgan

Producer, Quiddity Films (*I Am Not A Witch, Supernova*)

"The NFTS already does an amazing job with scholarships and bursaries for students who would not be able to attend the school without financial support — but the more the better."



Anthony Chen

Writer/director/producer (*Ilo Ilo, Wet Season*)

"I might be biased but, hands down, the NFTS is the best film

school in the world. Moving forward, it would make further impact by having a larger international footprint beyond the UK. I don't mean this by setting up shop outside of the UK, but by using its international alumni to build networks internationally that will pave the way for more NFTS students and alumni to get noticed and build careers globally — given the many foreign students it has nurtured over the years, such as myself."



Laurie Nunn

Writer/producer (*Sex Education*)

"It has been amazing to see more women and people of colour given the opportunity to write for film and TV over the past few years, but sadly the statistics are

still woefully low and this is the same across many departments in the industry. I would love to see the NFTS create more shadowing and mentoring opportunities on actual film sets, for people who may not see a career in the film industry as an attainable or viable option. Having more diversity behind the camera not only creates more interesting film and TV stories, but is essential to creating a more equal and less toxic industry. This has to start with young people obtaining the much-needed skills to properly pursue a career within it."

Sarah Gavron

Director (*Brick Lane, Suffragette, Rocks*)

"The NFTS has so much to offer anyone who has any interest in film, in any of its guises. It would be great if the school could spread its influence as widely as possible. I know the NFTS collaborates with other institutions, but I wonder if they could do even more outreach and work in schools and youth hubs, with people who haven't traditionally had access to the industry, but will enrich it with their stories, ideas and talent."



Jamie Simonds/Bafta/Shutterstock



David Yates

Director (*Harry Potter* episodes four to eight, *Fantastic Beasts* franchise)

"To double down on the commitment to ensure students

from every background are able to access and benefit from the school's resources, so we build as diverse and eclectic an industry as possible. The more diverse the range of voices within our business, the richer and more relevant it will become. And to continue to build closer and more engaged relationships between the school and the wider industry, to ensure students get as much industry experience alongside their formal training as possible." **S**

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