



# One Stop Doc Shop

## Live Sessions

### Week 1. Rachel Wexler



#### Introduction

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

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

I'm your host Angela Clarke and this session was made possible with the support of Screen Alliance Wales, Ffilm Cymru Wales and BFI Network funding from the National Lottery.

My guest this week is multi-award winning producer Rachel Wexler. With over 25 years experience in film and television, her feature documentaries have broadcast around the world and scooped up dozens of awards and nominations include an Emmy, two Peabody's, as well as a Grierson, BIFA, Cinema Eye and International Documentary Award, to name just a few.

In 2004 Rachel and her partner Jez formed Bungalow Town Productions and the company quickly gained a strong track record in making highly individual documentaries with some of the best directing talent around.

We talk about what qualities she looks for in a director, what makes a project desirable and what attributes you need to have to be a successful producer.

Rachel also discusses the highs and lows of secure funding, how to cope with rejection but most importantly recognising and celebrating the joy in the filmmaking process.

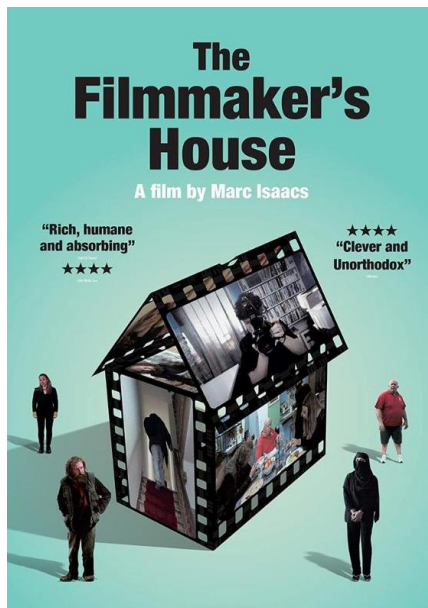
I hope you enjoy listening.....



All White in Barking



Philip and His Seven Wives



**Angela Clarke** - Rachel, thanks for coming along today, much appreciated. This is the first live session of the One Stop Doc Shop so I'm delighted to have you on. But before we get cracking, what was your path into film and television?

**Rachel Wexler** - So I'm 53 years old, so I'm going back a little way. But when I finished school there weren't very many media degrees at all or film degrees, which is funny because there's so many now, but I went to Newcastle Polytechnic, and I did a degree which was History of Art, Design and Film, which was fabulous, but it wasn't practical at all! It was just, you know, scratching my chin and reading and watching things and so when I came out of that it took me a few months, but I found my first job as a receptionist in a very swanky post production company in Soho and I got that job by wandering around with my CV and knocking on doors until someone took kindly on me and gave me a little job to start me off.

And then I worked my way through the ranks and so basically I was a receptionist/office manager, then I worked in a production company, which was very well established but I didn't get much experience in production. But every chance I got, I would go on shoots or lend a hand or be a runner for free, on you know weekends and evenings and I'd just do everything I could. And slowly I moved through the ranks but I had to change jobs quite a lot. So I then went to a company and became their production secretary, but I was really not very good at secretarial work I must say, I was pretty hopeless. But then I got taken on as a PA, and then I got to the BBC, and luckily for me I was really happy at the BBC because for about four years I worked at the disability and community programs unit. It was a whole separate unit in the BBC making documentaries and doing things like you know, *Video Nation* so contributors would pick up cameras and make their own stuff. So, it was great because it was truly diverse and inclusive.

But it was hard for someone as a production assistant to move in the BBC being such a big organization. So, I just up and left one day, I kind of said, I've done everything I can here and I love you all, but I'm going and so just kind of ran out of the BBC into nothing! So luckily, a friend of mine was a music video director, so I did music videos for a while, for about a year. And I did production managing and producing music videos - many Ant and Dec videos, (*laughs*) I must say, there were quite a few! And that was a laugh and I did music videos with rock bands and ended up in you know the most bizarre situations. But that was great because that was like a mini film set. So that's where I really cut my teeth on learning how to grapple with many people, you know, so it was, you'd have up to 40 people for one day, all gathering on set and having to finish a music video in one day.

And that was incredibly good training for film and production management and producing. And then I met my partner Jez, and we moved down to Brighton, and I worked with wonderful filmmakers down there and that's where I really learned about independent feature length documentaries.

So I worked with a filmmaker called Luke Holland who sadly passed away, but his incredible film *Final Account* that he's been making, I haven't seen it yet but

13 the trailer looks amazing, and I knew he was making this film you for the last 10 years before he sadly passed away. Phil Grabsky and his wife Amanda Wilkie at Seventh Art Productions I've worked with them and Phil has just shown his 20 year epic Afghanistan project at Sheffield literally, yesterday.

14 So, you know, these are long standing friendships and that's where I met Mark Isaacs because I was working at a company called Dual Purpose Productions. And that's where he made his first film *Lift*, and I was his production manager on that. So all these filmmakers you know were very important in my life. And I worked as a production manager for many years, and only really started to become a producer when they gave me the opportunity, or I kind of you know hassled for the opportunity, not just to production management but to learn and do the producing side.

14 And for me that stepping stone was very much about going to Amsterdam to IDFA, going to Sheffield Docfest, going to meetings with broadcasters and starting to understand that whole world of funding, and how that got pieced together and starting to actually pull together money for those filmmakers.

15 And that's when we started *Bungalow Town*, when I had done quite a lot of that for other filmmakers, and it was in a series of conversations with Mark Isaacs that we said let's, you know, let's make a film independently together and not through another production company. So Jez and I set up on *Bungalow Town* for the first film that we made with Mark independently which was ***Philip and His Seven Wives***, which was 2005 that came out, and that was a Storyville, and we managed to get a few other broadcasters on board, but we mostly made that for the Storyville budget.

15 But what's interesting is Storyville at that point, they gave us at £80K, and that's 15/16 years ago. To get £80K off Storyville now would be hard, but it was shot literally up the road from where we lived. So the story behind that was that I needed a cleaner because I was just overwhelmed with my two small children and everything, so we got this agency to send us get a very nice cleaning lady called Tracy, and she started chatting to me and I realized that she had quite a story and it ended up that she was one of the seven wives. And so she said one day, 'I've gotten admission I'm one of seven wives, and I live in Hove'. And I went, 'I've got an admission I'm a documentary producer, so can we come and visit you, me and Mark', so then we went to Nick Fraser and that was, he just commissioned it literally on the spot. So that was a very easy one to get commissioned because it was such an extraordinary story and it was cheap to make because it was just up the road from us. So Mark stayed on our sofa bed and we made the film that way. So that's how we started!

16 **Angela Clarke** - If anybody hasn't seen ***Philip any his Seven Wives*** you should watch it because it's an absolutely amazing documentary and apparently Louis Theroux is always raving about it....

**Rachel Wexler** - Yeah, it's one of his favourite docs so he yeah that's why it was on I Player recently, it might still be on there but you can find it somewhere...

**Angela Clarke** - Yeh it's somewhere on the internet. Yeah, it was an amazing film, I had no idea though that was that was how the story came about. I guess moving forward, obviously you know you've got a body of directors that you've worked with for a few years. But in terms of nowadays, how do new directors approach you that you haven't known for quite some time, what's the pathway to that?

**Rachel Wexler** - A good example of that is Matt Kay who I'm currently working with and we met in late 2017 I think it was, a long time ago now! And he had got some support from Film London, and a couple of other places and he was making a short version of the film that we're now making called **Suwo** which is about women sumo wrestlers in Japan.

Now he found this extraordinary world, when he was out there making kind of a music video, and he came across our main character, Hiyori and her friends. And so he was making a short, and he had that funded, but he also did want to expand it into a feature. Now, he'd self funded a one hour film before. And he also had his own production company, Walks of Life Films and Matt's pretty entrepreneurial and was doing quite a lot of short form stuff and he shoots stuff for other people you know and so he was already establishing himself, but what he knew was through looking around that, to get a feature off the ground that you needed a different a different kind of network of contacts.

So I do know that he went to three or four different production companies, but he came to visit us here he just contacted us, now I can't remember how I got his details, maybe through Lisa Marie Russo, but anyway somebody said only Matt Kay is great, he's got this brilliant short that he wants to expand it and I just loved it straight away. And I really liked Matt and I really liked his spirit, he's, he's really on it, you know, he's really knows what he's doing and he has a confidence about his filmmaking, and I watched some stuff that he had been shooting and we decided to work together.

I think the thing about Matt was I do remember the conversation with him, and I think what maybe we offer, is that when someone comes to us, they've already got their access, they've already been filming. He's already put some money into that, or he's already raised some money. That's extraordinary, that's that shows producer skills, and he is director/producer on this, he's not just a director on this.

And it meant that when he wanted to co-produce with us on this, so it's a Walks Of Life Film and Bungalow Town Productions together but we will be housing it, so that means that we, we take the kind of heavy lifting in terms of signing things and doing the financial elements but we do it very, very collaboratively, and that's how we work because we're such a small company, and we only take a very small slate of films.

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And I think that was attractive to Matt. He didn't want to get swamped, he didn't want to go into a great big company and be told we own all your film and you're, you know, we're doing you such a massive favour in housing your film and you're not going to get any say, and the way we work is we basically split it down the middle. It was just like we're sharing this. You've done a huge amount of work in getting the story this far, we know that we can add a massive amount of value with our expertise and our existing contacts, and we'll kind of grow this together. And no producer can guarantee if you go to them that they can make your film - nobody can guarantee they can raise the money.

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All they can do is say, look, you know we think we can add value creatively and we think we can help you meet new people and they might put money in, and we can help you with the distribution phase. So yeah, that was a really good example of somebody, to be honest you know unless it's Jez and my project that we take from scratch, I don't have the funds or the development department to take something literally from an idea or from a written proposal that's much more of a television way of pursuing something.

The way we collaborate with filmmakers is when something's kind of much further down the line, usually, but we know that when they think they've developed it, there's probably another two to three years of development, before it will be really attractive to anybody. So with *Suwo*, we went got into the Meet Market in 2018. Matt was still finishing off his short, but we had a great trailer, we had amazing meetings, but we didn't get anybody actually give us any money at that point, but it was a really valuable thing to do.

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We've had loads of different things dangled in front of us, and then they didn't work out. We're working with an agent in LA, we're working with Endeavour Content, and they are on-going looking for money for us and collaboration partners, and we're working with an LA based executive producer Elliot Kotek, who has put, in fact we've all put money into this project, we've all been keeping it going, and that's been really tough to do that. We don't normally do that; we can't afford to do that.

But finally, we've now got BFI Doc Society on board, so we are very, very excited. They've given us a chunk of money, and that money will allow us to get a rough cut. And the problem is for feature documentaries is you can have a load of really amazing material, but until you've got to rough cut, most people won't come on board until you can show them an assembly or rough cut.

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They will come in and go oh we love it but they'll just track it, they'll track it for ages. Or, they might give you a letter of interest, but to actually get the money is really hard, so it's been such an incredible thing to have the Doc Society come on board. And what used to happen was that funders would only come on board once you've got the full finance in place, they would only release money at that point. And the brilliant thing that Doc Society have been doing over the last few years is that they will sign off and start funding you before you're fully financed, so that you can get to that stage where then you can then bring on more money

and that's so clever because they understand if you wait for you know, our budgets are quite high so if you wait for the full finance to be put together, you're just going to lose the momentum. So that's where we are with that one at the moment.

**Angela Clarke** - If you were coming into this as well, either as a producer or a director, you know, in terms of you're more of a novice starting off lets say, hypothetically. What would you say are the various stages I mean I know every project differs....

**Rachel Wexler** - It's kind of fluid and every single one is different, and you never get anything fully go to plan. So even for instance on a project we had \$100,000 being dangled by a funder. We were doing contracts, and then they just dropped us. There was no discussion, something else had gone wrong in their financial world, and they just dropped us. And actually we were planning a whole shoot on the back of that. And then you know we ended up having to scrape together some money. So that's why we've ended up putting more money than we normally would in, because it's so difficult at the moment, but we would only do that if we really, really believe in the commercial viability of something.

So, yeah, I suppose the stages for **Suwo**, going back to that project have been, you know having enough material, cutting together a trailer, having a really good treatment. Going to somewhere like Meet Market, and trying to get it in on that basis, having these initial conversations. There's virtually no development money available for the development stage. Most development money you end up getting when you've already been filming or working on something for literally two years, and they call it development, but it's so competitive.

Like for instance if you go for Sundance funding, from the Sundance Institute - the development money which could be, you know, \$20,000 of \$30,000 or something like that, I haven't applied for it for a while. But you'll be up against people who have you know, 20 minutes plus of selects already edited. So, you're not going to be able to get the development money on the back of a treatment. However lovely it is, because you're competing with people that much further along.

And the American system, and filmmakers in America, because they really haven't had this, but going way back, when I first started producing I was always amazed at Americans and how they're so resourceful, they didn't really have broadcast. At that time they had very few broadcasters that would give money at an early stage of production.

So independent filmmakers in America have always had to be incredibly good at raising money from funny little places - so they'll go to foundations, they have loads and loads of family foundations and soft money in America, so they spend a lot of time grant writing, that's a big thing that filmmakers there do and it's becoming much more like that here, because the broadcaster's like in America, the public broadcaster's there's no development money if you're going down the feature doc route, especially observational films that take a long time. You're

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piecing little bits of money together. The other way, the way that you could do it is if you've got a great idea, you could go to one of the bigger companies that might want to take a punt on it, and might want to take it to one of the British broadcasters, some of them are more interested in feature length documentaries. But mostly they would have to be quite commercial ideas.

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One of the ways to know what's going on is to watch as many of them on I Player or other catch up platforms. And read the credits, see who funds them, see who the production companies are, look at their websites and make sure that you know who's making what. But as soon as you do that, you'll start realizing that most of the big name documentaries and the big name documentary makers are making back stories, so they're making bio's of famous people, they're making sports stories, they're often back stories, archive lead or about big events.

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They're kind of big ticket stuff, you know, or they're commercial or their about crime or famous events or space, so you know you can see the more intimate more difficult films that we tend to make....

**Angela Clarke** - Yeah,

**Rachel Wexler** - ...they're much more piecemeal you know, whoever you are, even if you're one of the big companies but you're going to funders, with a very personal film or a more esoteric film or a little known story or a longitudinal verity film that you can't tell them what's going to happen yet, you know, they want us to know what's going to happen. What's the three act structure? And if you can't tell them that, and you're not a known director, you're going to find it much more difficult to sell that idea.

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So, I suppose, you know, if you want to make a documentary and be in charge of it and have an independent voice as a documentary maker, my advice would be do what me and Mark did, find something on your doorstep and start filming it with a little camera.

**Angela Clarke** - Yeah...

**Rachel Wexler** - And do it on the cheap. You know it doesn't have to look rubbish, you can still use a nice camera and you can still film it well. But don't try and fly to Japan and make a film about sumo wrestlers, we found out that it's quite expensive to do that.

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But luckily Matt was paid to do the short so that meant that he'd had his calling card, and that short got picked up by Netflix and it was beautifully made and won awards. So that was an amazing springboard for the bigger film, but if you don't have that money, you know, it's very hard for us to afford for them to go out filming. Whereas, if it was up the road, we would probably have got it all in the can by now!



**Angela Clarke** - Yeah. Well I suppose that's the thing isn't it, and then as a director I suppose the other question is, in terms of if you don't film yourself, if you're not able to use a camera that again can be another downside.

**Rachel Wexler** - In terms of my advice would be learn to edit even it's rudimentary, you know rudimentary skills, just learn to use the camera, learn to edit, learn to do as many things, learn to do sound, just try and get a second hand broadcast spec camera for a couple of grand and don't think that it has to be....*(pauses)* there's a film that I really loved actually that I don't know if it might still be available at Sheffield's this year that just won the Audience Award. And I met the director/producer briefly, and they'd come over from America very bravely, and it's a film called *Charm Circle*.

**Angela Clarke** - Okay.

**Rachel Wexler** - And it's amazing, absolutely amazing it blew me away, I watched it yesterday.

**Angela Clarke** - What's it about?

**Rachel Wexler** - It's about the director's family. So it's a beautifully intimate verite portrait of her family and her family struggles, so it has lots of themes you know of mental health and it's just a family who have struggled, and she uses the most amazing personal archive from the family. Also her dad's a musician so he sings and plays music a lot in the film. But it's an example for me, if people just look up the trailer or whatever, it's an example of a film that she could make over a number of years, and not everybody's got such an extraordinary family to make film about I must say, but it's a film that was she could make, and she did a very good job of it.

And often it's a bit like writing your first novel as they say, do something you know, write it about something you know, or something that's accessible to you. And there's also a whole argument about this, you have to justify why you're making this particular film because funders will say why you? Why are you making this film? Why have you decided to go make a film about indigenous people in wherever? Why isn't an indigenous filmmaker making that film? So you have to understand and it's sometimes extremely valid why an outsider would make a film about something and I would say that about Matt Kay.

He is able to make film about a world that a Japanese director would find difficult to ask such bold questions in Japan, I think, so he brings a different perspective. And therefore, for me, it's absolutely fine for me that he's a man making a film from Britain, making a film in that culture. But I do think that's a question you need to ask yourself. But if it's quite a personal film, and it's verite, it's much more doable. Like for instance if you were, if you came up with the idea to make a film about a famous person then why you, you know if you haven't got a name, if you're not a known director, and you haven't got access to that person. You're not going to be taken very seriously. If you however find incredible archive, or

you've got access or you've managed to find an angle that somebody else hasn't got, then that's valuable.

**Angela Clarke** - Yeah.

**Rachel Wexler** - You know, you have to have a reason, and you have to connect yourself in some way with that film.

**Angela Clarke** - And I think as well like so much of all of this is about sales pitch as well, it's like we said before, it's about selling that story and bringing that story to life. And you know, with for example Mark Isaac's, one of the other directors that you've worked with a lot, I mean Mark is a hugely established director, and I know it came out last year but given Covid and everything that happened that, **The Filmmakers House** is about to do a big run in cinemas and you were executive producer on this one. So can you explain a little bit about what it is, what the film is and how you came to engage with it?

**Rachel Wexler** - Yeah so Mark is a senior lecturer and he loves doing that and that's a lot of how he earns his bread and butter, he does that. But he's always pushing his own experimental kind of personal creative practice. And Mark has always had a very interesting relationship with his contributors and how he works with them in terms of he's very open about the fact that he will construct things or he will encourage or make things happen within his films.

So for instance a film we made years ago called **All White in Barking** he shows a little bit of footage from one African neighbour being filmed to the white neighbours opposite, who talk about how they're not comfortable with the multiculturalism of the area and the how it's changing and so he says, 'Would you have dinner together', and they go 'Ah okay', and so he makes them come together, but he does it openly so we know as the audience, that he's constructing that, he's making that happen.

So with **The Filmmakers House** he's taking that further. So it's a kind of hybrid, and you don't quite know what's real and what's not real, and it's all set in his house. So he filmed in his house and he wanted to do something different, he wanted to do something that he was totally in control of, and he kind of knew, he knew that no broadcaster was going to give him the money up front for that. They might buy it afterwards, but they're not going to give him the money up front because he's pushing the boundaries, and they don't know what it is, and there isn't anything like that on TV.

So he went and got some money, he got bits of money from all sorts of places in fact, he got some money from Lush, the cosmetics people. They had a fund for independent filmmaking, but mostly to do with conservation stuff I think or environment stuff yeah. Anyway, so he's very good at that, you know he's got long existing contacts and he's well known so you know he went off and sort of put together some money and that allowed him to do exactly what he wanted.

And he did some the editing himself. He did all the filming himself. His cast are his neighbours and friends. Yeah, so, so, he did it completely independently, it's something very different and I think it's very valuable and so I'm in that film a little bit as myself...

**Angela Clarke** - Ah ha.

**Rachel Wexler** - And I'm on as an exec but I was kind of more as a friend to Mark and longstanding collaborative partner, I was there to kind of chat with him, but he really produced that all on his own really I would say, well, most of it on his own, I would say, yeah.

**Angela Clarke** - But again, I think, because that was partly born out of the response that a lot of the big broadcasters were saying in terms of if you aren't coming at the moment with ideas about crime or serial killers, or something that's going to be a big saleable conceit, as it were, from the beginning that it's difficult to make those smaller films isn't it, and that's with a director that's already got a really long, well established reputation for doing films that are amazing that have won lots of awards.

So you think of if he's struggling to get something away that that is a bit more offbeat, where would that leave somebody that would be, you know, novice kind of thing. And so I think, I think that's one of the dilemmas isn't it, when you when you're coming into this world at the moment trying to make films, whether it be as a director or a producer, it it's just like how do you build up that reputation? What do you do? How do you make those choices? How do you align yourself with people or how do you work out the semantics of which projects to back and which projects not to because it does become pretty complicated?

**Rachel Wexler** - I mean, I think you have to do some research, I think you have to watch as many documentaries as you can. Look up British documentaries that you might want to emulate, look at their careers and think what kind of space do they work in, or how are they getting their money. And maybe contact people and say, can you give me half an hour on the phone, give me some advice.

You know go to Sheffield Documentary Festival, it's not terribly expensive to get there and some of these festivals like Open City - there are some good festivals in Britain where you can go and join in and meet people. It's really, really important to find your peer group. So it might be that there are elder people or more experienced people in the industry that can give you a few pointers, but the way that me and Mark and Jez and, you know, Phil Grabski - I mean I worked for Phil, but you know I see him as a friend and Amanda his wife, they run the company together, we were all learning at the same time. And there's a wonderful feeling of camaraderie, finding those people. And that's one of the reasons why we set up Future Producers School because I didn't feel that I had that enough with other producers. I knew quite a few directors, but I didn't have enough producers around me that were trying to do the same thing as me. So, yeah, I

would speak to people, do your research, watch a lot of films, find out what you like and also challenge yourself.

Why do you want to do this, because it's not an easy life to sustain financially, in America, people have always had other jobs. That's why their films can take 5/10 years because they are doing it on weekends and on their holidays, or the odd days off, you know they are doing other jobs at the same time. It's hard to have a career doing it, but what I would say it's an incredible life, if you don't mind being a bit broke and very insecure!

**Angela Clarke** - Yeah.

**Rachel Wexler** - But the amazing things about it are you meet people you would never get to meet, you get to create incredible imagery. If you love documentary, then it's worth it. But it's not for the faint hearted, and you have to be incredibly tenacious. Nobody knows - I'm going to swear but nobody gives a fuck about your film until they do!

So, you know not to be not to be harsh but I've been, you know, I felt always sometimes the rejection is all absolutely awful. But you shouldn't have to put up with unkindness or rudeness or bullying, that's not acceptable. But the fact that someone might just go, 'Why should I watch this?' Why am I interested in this? Just because you think it's fascinating doesn't always mean say other people will share that view. I haven't got a very tough skin, I've had to learn to have a bit of a tough skin over the years, you know, it's really hard, but everything's out there. There are millions and millions and millions of websites and screening platforms and documentary blogs and, you know, there's so much stuff out there that wasn't there when I started.

**Angela Clarke** - Yeah,

**Rachel Wexler** - So if you want to be in documentaries, you can immerse yourself very fully in it, and really know your stuff. And that will inform your own world.

**Angela Clarke** - I think one of the things that always struck me when I was on Future Producers School was when you said, if you're trying to work out your path for the film work out where you want the end point of your film to be and then work backwards from that, because I'd moved from television and was trying to make indie films. And obviously when you're making it for television you've got an end point so your journey starts with the idea and then you can make it and dump it off to somebody else and that's their problem then to do as they wish with it in terms of marketing or whatever.

And I've never really thought about it in reverse. And so when I made my first independent one, I did everything kind of slightly backwards (*laughs*) because I hadn't, I hadn't thought of it, in that particular way. But I think it can be enormously overwhelming when you first go into it because you know, there's

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such a huge amount of hurdles that face people aren't there when you start off you know because if you get an idea and you think this is great and I've got a great contributor and there's a great vibe there and I think I'll be able to make an amazing story with them and then it's just as you say it's having almost the attributes that you have to have partly to be a director and a producer and think in terms of understanding how to become the sales person in the room, and recognizing as you say, you can be enormously engaged in a project that's your biggest passion and as if you remember my comedy sketch of errors meeting I had with the lovely Barbara who put her hand in my face and said she wasn't interested (*both laughing*) so that was my first encounter of going oh - okay right!

**Rachel Wexler** - (*laughing*) She's quite formidable, she's one of the more formidable commissioning editors, I must say.

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**Angela Clarke** - Yeah.

**Rachel Wexler** - But at least you got a straight answer!

**Angela Clarke** - Yeh at least I knew where I stood with her...(*laughing*). But, um, but yeah I suppose you know that's the baptism of fire isn't it in terms of kind of you're halfway through and somebody goes, No thanks, you're like, oh okay well, I'll shuffle up my stuff...

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**Rachel Wexler** - Yeah and to be able to turn around and say, okay I understand and respect it's not for you but who is it for in your territory? She's German so the next thing is to say, oh do you know anyone that would like it, or what does play well for you on your channel? It's just being able to accept that, and you know that's the other thing is that a broadcaster we've been pitching something to recently that we know is fantastic, we know it is, we just know it is. And we get such an incredible response from everybody. They all love it. But that doesn't mean to say is right for their strand...

**Angela Clarke** - Yeah.

**Rachel Wexler** - It's not personal. They've all got bosses, and they've all got strands - they've all got their crime strands, they've got their thingy strand, they've got their wildlife strand, they've got their history strand, you know, they've got very corralled, very distinctive strands and if your film doesn't fit it, however much a commissioning editor loves it, they can't take it.

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And they're all pitching upwards, you have to remember that the people we meet mostly are middle men or women, so you know it's not personal, it's business. They can be very nice and they can give you good advice and be you know creative, and interesting and useful, and these are very experienced people, they see hundreds of projects a week, and they know what they're looking at and so use them for advice. So even if they don't want it, see if you can you know, say

can you give me feedback! What do you think, you know, be humble, it's all right to admit you don't know something.

I find that with up and coming directors and producers. It makes you very scared because you think everybody knows everything and you don't know anything so you're scared, and like people pretend they know everything. And actually, it's okay to say, I don't understand that term. Could you tell me what that means? You know what is the film tax credit, or what is the recoupment waterfall, or what is this terminology. You don't lose points if you say I don't know, you know.

So with directors, I would say you can quite often start a project off and get it a long way and act as your own producer. But at some point, it's really useful to go and find a producer, even if you end up producing that together, it becomes too big a job to do both. And at some point directors often need to just concentrate, they just need to start concentrating on directing, and they can have an oversight to the producing, but I would try and find a producer at some point. And that means often going to a more experienced person, and saying, I've come this far, can you help me, you know and find the right person, find the right fit. It can take a bit of time, and trust your instincts about them. I've gone against my instincts a few times in the past, and it never worked out.

**Angela Clarke** - To some degree as well from both a director and producers point of view, making a feature doc it's a big gamble isn't it? So I suppose in terms of you, on a personal level, what are those qualities that you're looking for in a project? Because you know if directors or a project comes your way and you're having to size it up as you say because you keep quite a tight slate, if you're trying to size up what one do I think is going to have legs, in terms of a film that's going to last the distance - what would be the qualities that you would say you look for specifically? What are those things that you think that are undeniable that will sell, that will be a success in as much as we can ever know?

**Rachel Wexler** - Yeah, so probably the most important thing is your character, the cast for me. And what is their context; who are they and what are they trying to do. There's quite a debate about story at the moment because quite a lot of documentaries don't have huge story. For example, like *Charmed Circle* doesn't have a great big narrative arc but it does have a progression, in a way, the progression is a progression of understanding, so the audience goes on a journey of understanding, and there is, there is a small story, you know there is a story but it's not a big dramatic story.

But for me, story doesn't have to be big and dramatic it can be really, really tiny things that happen, but we're invested, but that's because the characters are really strong. And we don't even have to like them that much but they can be really complex, but we want to engage with them, we find out more about them.

So that for me, but also the directors vision, I mean it's very hard to sum up, it's very hard, you kind of know it when you see it. You know, it's all very well when somebody shoots beautiful formal pictures and it's all very glossy and lovely. But if I don't care, then I don't care about the footage. You know, it's much more

important to me to care, and to be emotionally engaged, then to have beautiful glossy pictures and amazing music. You know those things are lovely and they are a bonus, but you know, they're the kind of films we make. We make very much observational films, but if you go to somebody and they're making a big film about you know recently I've just seen the Tina Turner film, great kind of great story, really you know strong film about an icon, you know, but that needed to be more glossy but you see that's a very different animal. That's a very established production company going to a streamer to get loads of money to make, and they've got access to Tina Turner. So, you know, that's a different animal, but the films we make, they are usually not known people, so I have to want to know a lot, I have to care about the characters.

**Angela Clarke** - Yeah, I think that's right I think you have to be hugely intrigued by them and I yeah and I always think if I don't love or hate the person or if I hate them I want to I want to understand why I hate them and work out what it is that's giving you that rub, that you're kind of intrigued by them in terms of why are they such a bristly character or wherever.

And in terms of I suppose as well, like, what would you say would be the most important qualities to have as a producer? You know if you wanted to get into this game and that's what you wanted to do as your job, what are the qualities or the attributes that you think they are the things that have carried me through all the way along because it is a big risky situations put yourself in as you say, it's not more stable of careers, it's a difficult thing to do and you have to be pretty tenacious.

**Rachel Wexler** - I think, for me personally, I just have to think about when I'm enjoying the job. Why am I enjoying it? Because there are often times where I'm not enjoying it. So why do I keep doing it?

**Angela Clarke** - Yup.

**Rachel Wexler** - I suppose the process of making documentaries, is just like series of hurdles, like you say, it's problem solving. It's making something happen; making something exist that never existed. It's truly creative in that way. You come away with a film that never existed and nobody ever asked for probably, and you've made it happen through sheer will, tenacity and collaboration.

So I do love when it's working well, working with a team of like-minded people. When I found documentary people, I did feel like I found my tribe a bit, you know, like they understood and we're all kind of a bit different. We all come from different backgrounds, but we kind of understand. Really, I suppose, the thing that drives me specifically about storytelling, mostly about real people and not famous people, for me, it's about learning about ourselves, isn't it? It's a mirror constantly watching ourselves, and I'm endlessly fascinated by human beings, endlessly fascinated by how we work together, how we operate, how we deal with our sentience, how we deal with nature, how we deal with the other

creatures on the planet, how we behave. And the idea that we can be everything, we have good and evil, we have everything within us, all of us are capable of everything, and the choices we make. And that's the underpinning of all stories.

And then ultimately, we're very self-referential aren't we?

**Angela Clarke** - Yeah.

**Rachel Wexler** - We want to understand ourselves. And I've always liked people. I like meeting people, I usually like most people. I'm usually fascinated or find something to engage with, with most people I meet in the world.

And even though you say if they're acting like an asshole, I can usually think, why are you actually like an asshole, and it intrigues me (*laughs*). Why are you doing that? I might not like it but it's intriguing. So, you know I think that's what drives me. Going back, the qualities are actually having a fire in your belly and tenacity, because if you get kind of disheartened too quickly, I mean we all have our rubbish days don't we, we all have to go to bed with the duvet over our head sometimes and have a good howl and say everything is against me and it's awful, and I do that.

But I do tend to have quite an optimistic outlook. And I think having an optimistic, slightly gung ho outlook....(*pauses*) I always tell this story about my mum went to a dinner party years ago with some friends and one of the friends said, 'We're playing a kind of game and you've all got to come out with your family motto, what would your family motto be?' And one of my mum's friends said, 'Oh, it'll be dark before we get there'. And that had been her family motto and it was hilarious.

And then my mum came home, she asked (she's got four kids) and she asked us all, what would our family motto be and she couldn't think of what our family motto would be. And my brother who lives in America said, well I know what it'd be! We used to go on these massive 14 mile walks when we were kids up mountains and we were really, really forced marched on these bloody great walks, and she always used to keep us going by saying, it's just over the next hill (*laughs*) it's just over the next hill, just over the next level and every time we'd go over the next hill, she just say there's another hill.

And that's what producing is like and sometimes you just want to scream. But that is what it is, you think you've got to the next hurdle but there's always the next one and you don't have very long to stand on the plateau and look over and enjoy the view you don't, you have to keep going. And sometimes, you end up you know in mud and falling over and it's pissing down with rain or, you know, sorry I'm really swearing.... You've got to keep going!

But yeah, there's a downside to that that sometimes. I'm now bit older and sometimes I think you do have to reflect on when that's exhausting you. So a bit of self-care is really important and I wouldn't say it's okay just keep driving yourself until burnout. And I've experienced some pretty near burnout you know



I've been exhausted at periods. And what I would say to people now is do listen out for yourself, your mental and emotional health and your physical health. No film is worth getting ill for. Because people do get ill in our industry a lot, there is a lot of illness.

So that's, you know the caveat, it's just over the next hill, but you should rest every now and again, and sometimes you just go, you know what, my goal was that I wanted to win an Oscar on this film but I didn't quite get there so it's not a failure because I didn't win it, you know what I mean! It's setting what does success look like and sometimes success doesn't look like the same as someone else's success. You know and sometimes you just need to pat yourself on the back for getting through the day. You know, without, you know, screaming, it's really hard, it's really, really hard. I'm not saying it's any harder than being coal miner or a nurse or, you know, it's just what I know, that's all.

**Angela Clarke** - I think the thing with any sort of producing and directing is there's no one route into it! It varies on every project. A lot of it, you're kind of making up as you go along, is what I'm learning along the way! It just, just seems to be I think if you don't scare easy and you've got the capability to kind of vaguely problem solve and just look at everything as okay this is just a challenge that I need to find a way of getting over that hurdle as you say, getting over that next hill. Then I think by and large most things are surmountable. But I think also, as you say, if you set yourself a realistic goal and don't think that I'm going to do all of this in six months and be realistic about the fact that this is going to take a while.

And that whilst I may think it's the best thing since sliced bread, also I think realising in those early stages when you have a couple of the 'Barbara type' meetings and you think okay not everyone's going to love this so you have adjust your tactic. For me it's just finding a project you really massive love to bits at the beginning, because by the time you go through the washing machine, and the various cycles and you come out the other end, a bit kind of bedraggled, I just think you still want to be clinging on to some memory of like I did love that project at one point, you know! But by the time you get washed up... I remember an editor I know would say that would say by the time everybody comes into me they are washed up on the beach, and they've gone through all this trauma, *(both laughing)* you know, and now we have to dust you off and fluff you up a bit and make you re-engage with this film now, and look at it with a fresh set of eyes in terms of, you know, not you looking at your own rushes thinking well it took me eight weeks to get that one shot etc..., and as you say about finding your tribe!

**Rachel Wexler** - Yeh take the moments when you can to enjoy the process. The other thing I would say is the process is key and it is a long process. And every film I've just learned so much. Every film teaches me, and I love learning. I love learning about the contributors and about their world and about a whole new world that I haven't experienced before. I love the process of learning, you know, every time it's working with new collaborators, you know, usually the route to get a film made and distributed is different every single time. So for somebody like me who gets bored easily, having three or four films running all of

all of the time at different stages, all with a different trajectory all about a totally different world. It keeps me interested.

**Angela Clarke** - As you say as a producer as well I think it's that constant evolution of keeping up with what are the different ways to make films, what are the different outlets of money you know how are they all changing and what are the different demands? Because even over the last 10 years things have changed, probably more so than maybe they have over the previous 15 or 20 years in terms of how the landscape has opened up.

You know all your streamers have changed the game in terms of what subjects are considered to be desirable and not desirable and as you see everything's become a bit more commercial. One of the things that I think is always a big mystery that nobody ever really seems to be able to understand is how you get hold of private funding in the UK, in terms of looking for those little secret pots of money. Have you got any tips in terms of where you can go to look for those things or how do you work that out if that's the path that you're looking to take.

**Rachel Wexler** - So my suggestion, because Jez once went to talk to a load of business people, business angels, and they all just said to him, 'Why do you all go and talk to each other for money? Why do you go to other documentary people for money, none of you have got any money!' And he was like, 'Oh yeah, we're all scrambling around for £5000, when there's a lot of money in the private sector, there's a lot of philanthropic money out there as well.' So my advice would be, find the people that want your film to be made.

If it has an issue, if it's a film about, you know, a kid who's going through a difficult time with bullying or somebody who is campaigning to fight for some injustice or whatever, try and find the philanthropic money or the rich people that actually want your film made, that have got a vested interest in it, for some reason and go to them. Go to foundations – but make sure that you don't make a corporate video and that you don't give them the editorial control because it's not their film. They have to buy into what you're doing and you don't sign any copyright over, or give editorial control over to them. We haven't had that much private money in our time but we've had pots of money from people who care about the subject.

**Angela Clarke** - Have you ever crowd funded any of yours?

**Rachel Wexler** - Again crowd funding it all looks like it plays out beautifully and so spontaneously. But there's so much work, it's like a swan gliding along and all this frantic paddling underneath. That's what crowd funding is because most of the money, most of the big pots of money that come through have already been done deals, those deals have already been done beforehand. And then you go you and strategically put them in place. And like the really great thing with crowd funding is you get somebody, a philanthropist or somebody with bit more money, and they say, everybody that gives money on this day I'll double it so that pushes it, it's about making sure that you know you're going to

hit that target pretty much before, and then going out to the, to the world with it, but you know, it's a huge amount of work.

But the other thing I would say about crowd funding is don't offer loads of expensive treats, you know rewards, things like t shirts and things because somebody's got to send those out, somebody's got to make them and send them out. I'd do as much virtually as you can, just make everything virtual and you really low labour, because you're already making a film you don't want to be an online distributor or a T shirt salesman on top, you know.

**Angela Clarke** - Well, that's the thing isn't it but I think it's like anything usually with those things, you end up making your mistakes as you go along and then it's once you come out the other side of it you think I'm not going to do that again!

**Rachel Wexler** - But if you do your research on other people's experience of doing crowd funding, you will save yourself thousands of hours, probably. So, if you're thinking of doing it someone else has done it, they've already talked about it, they've already blogged about it, there is already an online panel from some festival. So do your research before you embark on things is what I would say.

**Angela Clarke** - Well then just one last question. What sites do you like, if you've got two or three sites that you think if I was going to go and check something out, or if I wanted to go and have a think about this particular thing or I wanted to get a latest info where would you go?

**Rachel Wexler** - Well I sign up for all the newsletters, so you know the Indie Wires, or Sheffield Docfest, and Sundance and the Tribeca etc. I sign up for all of the newsletters, from all of the festivals that I would like to go to and from all of the funding bodies like, you know, Chicken and Egg or Sundance. Just sign up for all of their newsletters so they just ping, they just keep coming into your inbox, so I know what's going on or I look in Broadcast or Realscreen.

That way I know what's going on in the industry, I mean it might be later than a lot of people because they'll be in the meetings you know, but they might be having meetings and know about it before me, but it just keeps me in the loop. So then I click on it and I'll look, and then somebody says, Oh, this new streamer has come online and they're taking this kind of doc, then I clock it, and I think okay, maybe they might take this film.

So you know it's just knowing what's going on. But do remember that everybody looks online on Facebook and other sites like they're really having a wonderful time and everybody's really successful and everyone's really excitable, and nobody's having a shit time and nobody's being rejected. That's not true, you're only seeing the positives, and you're not seeing the horrible, horrible amounts of rejection before someone does get that final HBO Max deal. They've gone through probably years of rejection before they get that. So, you know, don't feel horrible about yourself that you're not always, you know, you're not seemingly

as successful. Sometimes if I'm feeling bad about having a bad day and I read those things I'm thinking why is everybody else getting money and I've got no money. But just turn them off for that day and just know that if you're getting through the day and you're making a film you're doing all right.

**Angela Clarke** - Well listen, thank you so much for your time and for your time today it's been super helpful. It's just it's so difficult to just try and get a sense of how all of this works and if people haven't seen some of the films that you've worked on it's worth going to your website Bungalow Town Productions to have a look at some of them especially *Philip and his Seven Wives* because that still remains my absolute favourite, and I think that's a classic example of a phenomenal character that at times is both likable and unlikable but enormously intriguing that you can almost take your eyes off.

**Rachel Wexler** - I hope it is useful for people. And, you know, it's daunting to coming into an industry like this everybody thinks that everybody else knows but they don't.

**Angela Clarke** - You're right there are lots of lovely people that when you go to festivals and things like that, especially somewhere like Sheffield where there are lots of meetings and things you can just kind of join in and go and have a chat. Well hopefully I'll see you in the not too distant future at a festival somewhere.

**Rachel Wexler** - Yeh that would be lovely - take care and keep in touch.

**Angela Clarke** - Thank you bye..

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