GUNPOWDER, TREASON AND PLOT

On the Romanian set of the BBC's costume drama starring Robert Carlyle

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In the grounds of a Renaissance palace outside Bucharest, a family in seventeenth-century garb is strolling beneath the dappled shade of the chestnut trees. The father – ginger-haired, bearded and moustachioed – is of ratty appearance, and drags one foot awkwardly behind him; the children run to their mother's embrace clasping fronds of leaves. Suddenly, a deep Scottish voice startles the peace of the sylvan glade.

'SHUSH!' it yells. 'F–ing shut the f– up! *Have you got that?*'

The three dozen bystanders at whom this is directed – all in modern dress – do not look particularly put out; but then, being Romanians, they are used to being dictated to. The owner of the voice, a stocky television producer called Willy Wands, turns apologetically to the strolling family.

'Sorry about that, folks. I am *extremely* upset today, Bobby, and' – he gives the bystanders a further glare – 'it can only get worse.'

'Bobby' is Robert Carlyle, and his presence here in the role of King James I is a measure of the importance of the BBC's new costume drama. *Gunpowder, Treason and Plot* covers 45 years of British history from Mary Queen of Scots's accession to her son's establishment as the first King of England and Scotland. It brims with conspiracy, lust and bloodshed, and is acted with relish by a cast which also features Tim McInnerney, Catherine McCormack and Daniela Nardini – as well as a Bardotesque French newcomer, Clemence Poesy, as Mary.

But the BBC is, if anything, even more excited about those behind the camera. They include director Gillies MacKinnon, who was responsible for *Hideous Kinky*, *Regeneration* and *Small Faces*; co-producer Gub Neal, the guiding hand behind *Prime Suspect*; and the controversial scriptwriter Jimmy McGovern, creator of *Hillsborough*. With Robert Carlyle as the fourth ace in the pack, you have as strong a hand as current British television is likely to be dealt.

Most of this dream team know each other of old. Neal, McGovern and Carlyle all worked together on *Cracker*; Neal and McGovern collaborated on *Hillsborough*; MacKinnon directed McGovern's first screenplay, *Needle*. 'Jimmy and I nearly did other things together,' says MacKinnon, 'but they were never quite right. I always had an awareness of Mary Queen of Scots, because her final battle – at Langside, near Glasgow – took place on the site of my secondary school; so when this script arrived on my desk with Jimmy's name on it, I thought, "Destiny!"'

A tousled, denim-jacketed figure in his mid-fifties, MacKinnon has a lugubrious look to him which reminds one of a cartoon bloodhound. But this belies a ready, deadpan sense of humour, and as the royal family prepares to go through its paces again, his calm presence is like a cool balm after Willy Wands's stentorian ranting. 'I do believe it's time to try another shot,' he says. 'And if it doesn't work, we can always do it again.'

The story of how MacKinnon and his crew found themselves in Romania is an epic in itself. It begins in 1998, when Jimmy McGovern was commissioned to write a feature film about Mary Queen of Scots, which for various reasons never went into production. Three years later, the BBC asked him for a television script about James I to mark the 400th anniversary of the Gunpowder Plot in 2005. 'Then when he'd written the story of James I,' Gub Neal explains, 'he realised that it was a nonsense to have the story of James's

mother strung out there in feature-film hell – so we came up with the idea of bringing the two together as a drama about the early Stuarts.' Neal, in the meantime, was hoping to make a series about Hitler with Robert Carlyle, only to see his star poached for the same role by CBS. 'So I thought, I'll offer James I to Bobby and he can use Hitler as a rehearsal.' (James I, you will gather from this, does not emerge as a sympathetic character.)

Even with the Mary Queen of Scots story scaled down for television, the project was always going to be hugely expensive, and Romania was chosen as the location because the BBC's money would go much further there. 'Our budget is £4.5 million,' says Neal simply. 'In the UK, this would cost us £12 to £15 million.'

It would be wrong to say that the two halves of the drama fit seamlessly together. Although they share the same high production values, each has a completely different cast, and the James I story is altogether more modern: not only does McGovern draw strong parallels between the Gunpowder Plot and 9/11 religious terrorism, but he also has several of his characters talk directly to camera, addressing us on our sofas across the centuries. 'Mary Queen of Scots,' he admits, 'is one story, about the Queen and her love for Bothwell: it's mountains, hills, lochs and passion. And James I is another, about a deeply flawed man in England.'

Lochs, of course, are hard to come by in Romania, though in other respects the country seems little removed from sixteenth-century Scotland. Heading out of Bucharest towards today's main location, Mogosoaia Castle, we pass higgledy-piggledy haystacks, an old man with a herd of goats, and a number of farmers driving ancient horse-drawn carts with their wives bobbing uncomfortably in the back. 'John Prescott should get a couple of those,' says Gub Neal. 'Then we could call him Two Nags.'

Anxiety about horses is a recurring motif of conversations on set. We have not been long at Mogosoaia – a magnificent cloistered palace – when a grey mare bolts across the gravel; it is captured among the caravans and ridden back to a chorus of barking from half a dozen stray dogs. ‘If Clemence fell off and broke her leg, I would really feel up shit creek without a paddle,’ says Gillies MacKinnon of his leading lady – who subsequently reveals that she has hardly ridden since falling off (and breaking her arm) at the age of 7. Kevin McKidd, who plays Mary’s fearless lover Bothwell, speaks apprehensively of ‘great smelly creatures with short reins’, and Steven Duffy is no more confident in the role of Bothwell’s arch-enemy Lord James. ‘Gillies always has a list of questions on his call sheet,’ he says, ‘and one of them was, “Does Steven know how to dismount?” I had some riding lessons at home in Scotland, but then when I got here I realised that the horses only understood Romanian.’

McKidd and Duffy both worked with MacKinnon on *Small Faces*, and their loyalty to him is obvious. ‘I’m not keen on TV work,’ says McKidd, ‘and Gillies is the only reason I’m doing this. His directions are always bang on: he demands the truth of you, in a very gentle way; and he asks your opinion, which is quite rare. He’s not got much vanity of the “This is my film” type: he’s willing everyone to pull together. You feel as if you’re part of a repertory company.

‘I always remember him ringing up and offering me a part in *Hideous Kinky*. He said, “It’s only a little part, with two days’ filming, but I’ll make sure they happen fourteen days apart, so at least you can have two weeks’ holiday in Morocco.” Not many guys think like that.’

From Mogosoia we move to the nearby Media Pro Studios, built in the Fifties to a Soviet blueprint and recently refurbished. On the 26-acre lot, sets are being hammered together on a scale unimaginable in Britain, where

standby carpenters cost £300 a day as opposed to $6. Here is the façade of the Palace of Westminster; around the corner, an entire Edinburgh street; next to the canteen, the courtyard of a generic Scottish Castle. ‘Watch your feet,’ says art director Andy Harries as he leads the way into the castle’s Great Hall: ‘we have blood on the floor from a previous massacre.’

Gunpowder, says Harris, is ‘a hugely ambitious project. I’ve worked in the industry for 25 years, and I’ve built more sets for this than everything else put together.’ He is full of praise for the studios, but the job is not without its headaches: ‘We have a shot the day after tomorrow when Mary arrives in Leith, and we haven’t built Leith yet.’

Harris is another MacKinnon loyalist, having worked with him on half a dozen films. ‘I’ve known Gillies since he was at Glasgow Art School, and he’s never really changed. He’s a very visual person, and when we talk he’ll say, “Make it look like this painting or that painting.” For this we talked about Rembrandt, Goya and Piranesi – but chiefly Rembrandt.’

Although Harris’s research was tireless, the fact that much of the action takes place in an amalgam of Holyrood Palace and Edinburgh and Stirling castles will be a red rag to those who care about historical detail. Indeed, the whole question of authenticity looms so large over this project that Gub Neal and Gillies MacKinnon have developed a line of defence which veers from close reasoning to bravado and occasional hubris. ‘What history gives us is context,’ insists Gub Neal. ‘It’s a wonderful setting in which to tell a tale, but to be hamstrung by factual accuracy would be very, very demeaning.’

So, in Jimmy McGovern’s script, Mary Queen of Scots and Bothwell fall passionately in love, even though the historical Bothwell was – in the words of Mary’s biographer Antonia Fraser – ‘a man either inspired by family tradition of advancement through queens, or plain personal ambition, unmarked by any trace of sentiment or sensitivity’. Similarly, a pivotal

episode in James I's story has the young James agreeing not to take revenge on the English if they cut his mother's head off. 'James wanted the English throne, and he hadn't seen his mother since he was nine months old,' says John Day, author of the most recent life of Mary; 'and by agreeing to be recognised as Elizabeth's successor while his mother was still alive, he made Mary expendable. But to say that he actually connived at her execution is vastly exaggerated and a bit silly.'

'We're not making a documentary,' protests Gillies MacKinnon, 'nor do I think we should be. Without wanting to equate Jimmy with Shakespeare, he's remythologising Mary just as Shakespeare did Macbeth. It's the characters that drive a story, and in the end all I care about is getting to the bottom of them.'

McGovern himself makes a distinction between recent and more distant history. 'If you work on something like *Hillsborough*, where some of the people involved are still alive, you have a moral duty to get it right. But when the story is 400 years old, and the facts are disputed, your duty is to take a clear line and stick by that. You can't state all the competing arguments.'

The actors, at least, seemed only too delighted with McGovern's script. 'I really liked the intensity of it,' says Clemence Poesy. 'It's full of this energy that keeps getting wilder and wilder, so that as an actor you just have to go for it.'

'What he gets right,' says Steven Duffy, 'is that he forces you to look at both sides of the issue. Nothing is black and white. There are no heroes – they're all playing to win, and they don't mind how they do it.'

McGovern has always been an overtly political writer, and the issue with the greatest contemporary resonance in *Gunpowder, Treason and Plot* is terrorism. 'In a just and holy war, the Church accepts that innocents may have to die,' declares one of the plotters, like a seventeenth-century apologist for

suicide bombing; while James – with Rumsfeldian zeal – sees his enemies' activities as an excuse to 'lay waste half the world'.

'When something of massive importance like 9/11 happens,' says McGovern, 'it makes you search for your place in the history of humanity. I always argue that you must condemn violence; but then you should have the guts to say, "What brought these people to this level of bloodthirst? What is the source of their grievance?" '

In the case of the Gunpowder Plotters, it is James I's refusal to grant Catholics the toleration they expected. Catholicism has been a recurrent subject of McGovern's work, and he admits that his Jesuit education tinges everything that he does: 'It's always there – the whole process of the severe examination of conscience, whether your own or somebody else's. I think that's gold dust for any writer.'

Gillies MacKinnon says that he is glad McGovern's Mary Queen of Scots script never reached the big screen. 'I think that a lot of the guts would have been taken out of it. Feature films today are all about conforming to the general knitting pattern of what a commercial project is: Mary would have had to be a heroine, whereas the character that's emerged is much more complex – more neurotic and vain and flawed.'

Britain, he argues, has 'emasculated itself' as a country that makes films. 'It's getting very hard to do anything that doesn't fit into an obvious category – which is a lot to do with the American influence. Yet the most commercial films of the last ten years – *Trainspotting*, *Charlotte Grey*, *The Full Monty* – were made by people who simply had a passion for cinema. We've got to get back to that or we're doomed.'

Robert Carlyle believes that McGovern and MacKinnon are both rarities – the former for the quality of his work, the latter for his depth of knowledge and clarity of vision. 'Gillies and I talked about various films that had

influenced him – from *La Reine Margot* through to various Japanese things I didn't know, like *Throne of Blood* – and it was quite fascinating. It makes you feel safe: that you're with someone who really knows what he's doing, and what he's trying to achieve.'

Those for whom James I is synonymous with the Authorised Version of the Bible will be dismayed by the cruel, Machiavellian – not to mention actively bisexual – figure cut by Carlyle. (One of the most entertaining things in the drama is his sparring with his Danish queen, whom he forbids even to pretend to love him.) 'He was a bastard,' Carlyle says bluntly. 'But you have to say that he was a man of his time. Life was cheap, and he went along with that to protect his position and power.'

To his odious character is added a deformed appearance. This Carlyle achieved not through elaborate make-up, but by wearing a built-up shoe. 'It's a simple thing,' he says, 'but sometimes the simplest things work. I did a role on stage years ago where I just put a stone in my shoe to create a slight limp, and it's amazing how much difference it can make.'

According to Gillies MacKinnon, the most exciting thing for a director is to coax something from an actor that neither of them had bargained for. 'When we walk on the set in the morning, we know quite a lot about how it's going to be, but there's always the possibility of finding something more in the character that Jimmy has constructed for us. That for me is what it's all about – and I get that 100 per cent from Bobby.'

He has one scene above all in mind. A red-blooded Catholic leader, Thomas Percy (played by Richard Harrington), visits James to plead for toleration, and is told that he can have it in return for one thing – a sexual favour. 'We didn't know how far they would go,' says MacKinnon, 'but boy, when it came to it, they really went for it.'

‘It’s a brilliantly written scene,’ agrees Robert Carlyle. ‘We thought, “How are we going to play that?” – and I have to say, Richard looked pretty nervous. But I’m really pleased with it, because there’s something quite disgusting about it. And that’s always what you’re looking for – a moment where you can let the character take over and leave your own self behind. You want the audience to think, ‘*Ugh!*’