BECTU History Project
Interviewee Yvette Vanson
Interviewer Katie Megan
Track No 1

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Interview no: 569
Interviewee: Yvette Vanson
Interviewer: Katie Megan
Managing recording: Graham [G]
Date: 22 June 2007
Duration: 0:47:03

[Track 1]

Have you released the tab on the tape? [laughs]

G: I have. I've done a test recording. [pause] OK, happy with that. It's up to you.

OK. This is an interview with Yvette Vanson by Katie Megan on the 22nd of June two thou.....

[End of Track 1]

[Track 2]

For me that's not enough with documentary-making. You have to have an analysis of it, not by some voiceover. I never did voiceovers in the early days, we never had that; it was proper documentary-making in which you would invite the solicitor for example, Gareth Peirce, who was there representing so many of these miners, she would put her sort of, if you like, the next layer of analysis of what was happening. So we'd have the personal, then we'd have the solicitor. And then we had Michael, Michael Mansfield, talking much more globally if you like about the whole situation, the political situation and the bigger context. And then we'd put it in an economic context, and then historical context. We talked to really old miners in that film about the Twenties and their struggles to save their jobs. This film has become, I mean, it is, it's a well-known film, and it's used, thank... I'm very pleased, because it only[??] got one showing, it's been used throughout, colleges and so on, because it's such a...

It's a landmark film.

It was a landmark film actually, I'm very very proud of it. And... And, and the other thing I'm proud of is, which is very very rare, is that seven years later, or five years later, we did a follow-up. You're never normally allowed to do that [inaudible-1:12] media[??]. And we went back. And the reason I was able to do it is because, the miners trusted me. I had not done what so many people I'm afraid in the media did at that time, which was lie to them and said, 'We will represent your point of view,' and then didn't. We didn't muck about. We showed it how it was. They remembered us of course. We still get, I still get Christmas cards from those miners, twenty-odd years later, you know, I mean it's, they're friends, they've been people in my life. And, we were able to go back and do a sequel, a follow-up, and show what had happened to people's lives, and it was, well, it was quite depressing. The, the coalfields had been devastated. Whatever one thinks about Arthur Scargill, he was right. They closed hundreds of pits, hundreds of thousands of jobs. We don't have a coal industry. We have a bit of opencast mining. And, those guys were right to fight. It was a big lesson.

[0:02:15]

Was... Yeah. It was kind of shown at quite a lot of political events around the time as well.

Yes it was. Yes.

You know, like, the North Staffs Miners' Wives Action Group showed it...

Yes. I went and spoke. And, they showed it at Cambridge University recently, because it was twenty-five years' anniversary of the strike was it? Oh it's been spun off, that film. There's a young artist who has won the Turner Prize called Jeremy Deller, who saw my film, never, didn't know anything about it, didn't know anything about Orgreave, never heard about it. Saw it at an event in Wales, and rang me up and said he would like to recreate what happened at Orgreave as an art event for a big company called Art Angel. And, obviously... At least he did approach me, and I went to meet this company Art Angel, who invested a lot in art. And they got money from Channel 4 to make a film, and they got, Mike Figgis directed it. And they wouldn't employ, they would not pay me or my miner friend, Terry Dunn, who had helped me on the original film, to go back. The idea was that we would go back with Jeremy and we'd meet, introduce him to miners and, you know, do it properly. And they wouldn't pay us. They expected us to... Well they'd pay us peanuts. And we knew they had this huge budget for this thing, and we just refused. Yeah, oh trade unionists you see. And we just said no, we're not going do it. And it was very frustrating. And the final, and I have to say, the final product was just, was, well, have you heard of it? You know, I mean, it, it... They... What they got... In the end what they did is, they asked miners to dress up as policemen and policemen to dress up as miners and try to recreate it to show how it felt to be the other side. Liberalism gone mad. Sorry. Anyway, that's a little aside about Orgreave. [pause] We didn't only do miners' strike things though, we did loads, loads of other things. I'm trying to think what else sort of came next.

[0:04:18]

So, you took on the, the whole issue of the Government's white paper proposing the implementation of a sort of, American style private health care.

Did a lot of healthcare.

You made a few films about that. But in the meantime you were continuing with these ground-breaking charity films, which of course, lots of them won many awards.

Yes, we did a very important film actually called *Stand Up The Real Glynn Vernon*.

The Spastics Society.

Yes. That, that won a Golden Reel or something. And... But it was important, because it was the first time we, we actually put a disabled person at the centre of the film. He couldn't speak because he was, had cerebral palsy, so his language, when he could speak, was very very difficult to understand. So we had Dave Hill, a wonderful actor, who, who was Glynn's voice, and we just followed him around. It was very simple, we had no money, I mean it was a very small budget then, but we just followed him around. But we start, we sort of scripted it for him, in other words, Tony again, Tony Wardle, wonderful interviews, he just spent a long time with Glynn. Built up trust, really liked the guy, and got him to sort of, open up about his life and what it was like to be stuck in a wheelchair, stuck in, you know, and all the rest of it, stuck in this body. And, a very funny opening to the film, which revolutionised approaches to disability. What is it, what are the things in life, what have I not got enough out of life, out of life? I ain't got enough money, and I don't get enough sex. That's how it started. [laughter] So you were expecting this guy to say, 'Oh well I can't, haven't got access to my bathroom,' or whatever, you know. He's like all the rest of us. Anyway, it did open things up, because he actually became the president of Scope, Glynn Vernon, and went on to be very instrumental in changing policy and opening up issues about disability. And unfortunately he died, you know, not, a few years ago. So that was an important one. And we did a, I did a great little, great little

number, I was very proud of this one, called *Councils for the Defence*, was when all the local councils were being got at by, you know, what did they do? They capped them, didn't they, they capped them, and... There was a big sit-in at Lambeth, and the only film crew that was allowed in to this sit-in in Lambeth Town Hall where all these workers were occupying the town hall against what they were trying to do, was us. So we made this little film, sort of campaigning film about that. That was, that was quite interesting.

[0:06:50]

And then somewhere along the line I also worked for *Bandung File*.

Yes, Rat Race.

Yah. I went to work for... That was quite gratifying. Because Tariq Ali I had always known of as a sort of revisionist, because I was in one party and he was in another party of the Left [laughs], and there was all sort of, conflict. So I'd never really met him. And then he, he, I must have applied for a job, or I rang up, or he rang me I think, I think I was, one time in my life I was headhunted. And he said, 'Come in and meet me,' and I did, and he was running Bandung File with Darcus Howe. And, he, he said, 'I've seen *The Battle For Orgreave* and it's the best documentary ever made,' or something. So, I immediately, flattery won. And, anyway, I went to work for them. And it was a great atmosphere. I mean, it was... There was one white male working there, all the rest were black employees, white women, you know, black women. It was just really, different atmosphere. And, the only slight problem was, I was pregnant by that time I think and I just kept forgetting everything, I just couldn't remember. Maternal dementia. But I met Darcus's daughter Tamara who was sort of, very young, working on reception or something at the time, but she's important later on. She came back later. You always have to remember to be nice to people in this business, because you never know who's going to be, get to a position of power later on, and she did, when it came to the Lawrence film.

So that film you made was about racism awareness training.

Yes. So again, I'd got my team of actors, I'd got Jimmy Marcus back, and we did this. It was quite horrifying. I mean what was wonderful about that company, they were not afraid to take on, challenge stereotypes about black people. I mean it wasn't just about, it wasn't just, you know... It was very very good stuff. And what we did is, I went along and I researched, and sat in on these racism awareness training sessions. And they kept, these people, these facilitators, sort of, saying to people, 'Well, give me names, names with black in them.' So, people would go, blackmail, Blackpool, somebody said, da-da-da. And, on this blackboard there were all these names of places and things which had black in it. And, they were all designated racist. So Blackpool suddenly becomes racist. You know, it was just, completely over the top and ridiculous. So I'm afraid we slightly took the mick out of it in this little drama vignette thing we did. And, that caused a bit of a stir I think as well at the time. And I did a couple of things for them. I did one on BCCI, which was the bank that was...

Caught out.

Caught... You know...

Corruption.

Defrauding. Big corruption and stuff and that[??], another one [inaudible]. [pause] [0:09:37]
What else did we do? Oh yes, the health ones. Well *Kentucky Fried Medicine*. Yes, that was a very important series, that was a three-part series we did. And it was, I was heavy pregnant. I must have been pregnant for a very long time, I don't know, because I was pregnant then as well, but I was only pregnant once, with our son Freddy. But, I, again because we had no internet or anything, we had, we had to find people who were going to, in America who were going to talk about the healthcare, and it was not easy, because there were very very few people who were willing to criticise, risk their jobs. And we, we found some fantastic people, some doctors, a wonderful doctor in Harlem called Mark Nelson, I'll never forget him, who let us film

in this Harlem hospital, and it was the Third World. And there you are in the richest country in the world and you're in the Third World, and no equipment. It was devastating. We did some incredible interviews with people, relatives of a young man who had been left out under a tree because he didn't have insurance so he was left to die; a man, a family man I remember who had leprosy, which is, absolutely treatable, in America, and he had lost all the digits of his hands, because they wouldn't, he didn't have any insurance cover. And we were trying to say in these films, it sounds like scaremongering but it wasn't, these weren't isolated cases, these were, this was going on, and still is going on, because, Clinton didn't bring in a health service for America. And we were trying to say, if you privatise the health service, you will get a two- or three-tier system. And by stealth it's happened.

[0:11:16]

And I think one of the things, one of the things, I was thinking about it today, about Vanson Wardle and Vanson Productions, has been that we've been very prophetic. We've always been a bit ahead of the game. I mean, were we that smart? I don't know. Were we just on the ball, were we just politically more aware than other people? But it got very very frustrating at times, because we'd go to commissioning editors and we'd say, 'Look, there's this issue that's boiling and burning up, but it's not right at the front of the agenda. Can we make a film about it?' 'No, not interested.' Four years later of course, the world explodes and they want, they want it, but by that time they use somebody else. An exception to that was Alan Fountain at Channel 4. I mean working with him, I hadn't realised my luck until later on, because he was one of the first people I worked with on *The Battle For Orgreave*. I mean he had a, he was just fantastic. And he really was a commissioning editor who would fight our corner. He would go in and battle. And he battled. We, every single film that I have made, every single documentary I've made, for broadcast, has been censored, or attempted to be censored. That is not exaggerating. I mean, from every one we would have challenges. Not because they were, not because they weren't well thought out, not because it was just fly on the wall, let's throw a camera at it, and... They were thought out, they were researched, we had backup. But they would do incredible things, Channel 4. They would ring up when we were in the cutting room. They'd seen a rough cut, it wouldn't be Alan Fountain, but it would be higher up in

the echelons, and they'd ring up when you were in the cutting room doing the final cut and say... We did one on low pay, and we went right round the country doing this film on low pay. And they rang up on the, the day I'm finishing the film, saying, 'We need to see all the wage slips of these people to prove that they are low paid.' I mean this is people who were working picking carrots in the fields, I don't suppose they had wage slips, it was probably cash in hand. They didn't ask to see the wage slips of, you know, the experts we were talking to. But, that was the sort of attitude. And we would... We have always talked to real people in our films. We've talked to working-class people, we've talked to miners, we've talked to black people, we've talked to, people that didn't normally get on screen. And somehow there was an ethos, well, are they to be trusted? We need to verify everything. Well we always did verify everything, because we, well that's the job. You don't make statements and get caught out; you make sure that what is being said is true, and you do it very carefully. But they were, I mean there were... When we did the second, the follow-up to Orgreave, I remember being called in to, by Liz Forgan, Tony and I, marched in to her office, which was a very rare occurrence as I say, that the actual producers would talk to the actual head of programming. And, we didn't know, what have we done this time? We knew it would something wrong. And, she just said, 'There's not enough blue on screen.' And we went, 'What does that mean?' She wanted more of the senior police officers, senior police officers we had interviewed about Orgreave in retrospect, wanted more of it in. We had a blazing row. Liz Forgan, if you are watching this... You know. I mean, she... Anyway, we didn't. We're not going to do that. We're not going to be told by somebody in... And which is why I got a hell of a reputation in the business, because you, we fought. We didn't... I think, I think we, in the end we had to, something had to be altered, and we had to have a little caption up saying, 'Channel 4 tried to get so-and-so and...' I can't remember what. But we did it. But we didn't put more blue on the screen. But there are unfortunately an awful lot of commissioning editors out there who are not as brave and audacious as Alan Fountain who will fight.

[0:15:15]

The early days of Channel 4 were very exciting. And we had a wonderful woman, Maureen, I can't remember her surname, who was the head of budgeting at Channel 4,

[inaudible], she put the budget up if necessary. She would not be there just to slash and slash, which is what happened consequently. She'd say, 'No, you need more. You're going to have more time, you'll need more on that edit. What about a bit of...' You know. And, fantastic. Proper dialogue about, content, determining form, therefore what do we need to spend on it? You see over twenty yeas one got a bit jaded, because these things were not happening, you know.

[0:15:51]
So going back to Kentucky Fried Medicine, I mean a lot of this would involve filming in America and, you were saying they might have been quite reticent on some levels. I mean, the budget must have been fairly...

The budget was good.

Was it good? Yeah?

The budget was good. You see it was an early one at Channel 4, the budget was good, and we didn't... I mean it was, any budget is always constrained, you can always do with more, but no, it was fine. I spent twenty-odd years in the business, I never went over budget. You don't have to. You have to cut your cloth, and you have to know what you're doing. So as long as you budget properly, and you research it properly, and you prepare properly, and you know who you're going to see and what, do. I mean the interesting thing about *Kentucky Fried Medicine* was, I'd been working on it, we'd been working setting it up for a long time, two-part series, they were sixty-six minutes long or something. No, no constraint of, it's got to be fifty-two minutes, then, Channel 4 let you do what was necessary. And then we did a ninety-minute studio debate. But I was, I'd just given birth, so this pregnancy. I'd finally given birth, I'd had a caesarean, and, everybody said, 'You can't go. You can't go and film.' It was all scheduled, you know, it was just bad timing. And I said, 'I'm not not going.' So, me superwoman, six months – six-week-old baby, six weeks after a caesarean, take the baby, breastfeeding, to America, with a nanny I think, and, but every night, they're all having a nice time and I'm breastfeeding Freddy. Anyway,

what the hell, did it. And I'm glad I didn't miss it. It was a fantastic, it was fantastic, yeah. They were powerful films.

[0:17:27]

And we did a follow-up one a few years later, a couple of years later, called *Stitching Up The NHS* where we sort of edited out things and we... Because by that time the whole pressure on the NHS was really growing, and the whole privatisation debate was growing. So we, we sort of, brought it up to date with *Stitching Up The NHS*. That was an interesting one, that was an interesting form of censorship. That was John Willis. [aircraft sounds] John Willis is highly respected and he's a, I'm sure, a very intelligent and respected man, but he's, he hated Vanson Wardle. He really, genuinely did not like what we did. It was the antithesis of everything he believed in. He's pure liberal, the liberal with a small l, you know, and, objectivity, and... You know, we were objective, but we were objectively telling the truth. And he... Anyway, he didn't like it. And we did this *Stitching Up The NHS*, and it had... One of the things I always had to fight for, and always did, making the films, was, publicity. It seemed to me, there's no point in making the damn things if nobody's going to watch 'em. So I always made sure at the BBC, I rang up the publicity people and I always made sure that the press got copies and all that stuff. And, chatted people up and tried to get showings beforehand, and, lots and lots of work went into promoting the things. And I have to say, I think every single one of the films, again, was pick of the day in the press. What happened to *Stitching Up The NHS* is, Willis really loathed it, but he knew that he'd be in trouble if he tried to pull it. So what he did, it had been scheduled to have fourteen trails building up, it was on a Bank Holiday Monday, and he pulled all the trails. So that nobody knew it was going to be on. That was a very smart form of censorship wasn't it. But it got a marvellous review, fantastic reviews actually, so, didn't quite work. A drink of water I think.

[0:19:26]

And then of course, you know, you spoke about how your sort of, work for charity continued throughout your career. Sort of, after about, sort of late Eighties, you focused, quite a lot of those projects were about sort of, animal welfare and...

Yes.

Is that something that's quite close to your...?

Well by this time... Well it wasn't at the time, but by this time, we met an extraordinary woman called Juliet Gellatley, Tony and I. We weren't together as a couple any more, I was married with a baby and all that. And he... We met her. Because she was the campaigns director for Veg Soc, the Vegetarian Society. And we were both absolute carnivores, and, I was terrible, I ate everything in sight. And... But we said, well OK, we'll do this. She didn't seem to mind, she knew we made good films, she said, that's the criteria. So we made this little film for them, campaigning film. And, well, if you sit and watch this footage for three weeks or whatever we had. I haven't touched meat since, nothing, not a piece of bacon has passed my lips. And Tony has gone on to marry her, and, has got twins with her, four-year-old twins. And, he is now very very actively engaged in her own, they set up their own charity called Viva! And we've done other, we did other things. We did films for Compassion in World Farming and stuff like that. So all our films have always had a sort of, campaigning side of them I suppose.

Yes, Food Without Fear, Devour the Earth, There's a Pig in My Pasta.

Yes, that was quite... Oh a lovely, lovely... And the other thing I always thought was very very important, I suppose it's the acting bit of me, the artistic bit, creative bit of me, music on the films was always very important. And we always tried to commission original music, which went against the grain when you got into budgeting meetings, they go, 'Why do you want Alan Lawrence to compose the music?' I say, 'Because it will be better, you know, it'll really work.' And, for *Pig In My Pasta* we had Antonio Forcione, who's an absolutely brilliant guitarist, did the music for that. Because it was all set in a little Italian restaurant. So he did this wonderful music. He also did the music for another film, I think *Making Advances* or something, that was later on. So I've always enjoyed working with musicians on, on things.

[0:21:59]

And then you made a film about the whole issue of the Birmingham Six, focusing on the experiences of, of their wives and, well, the women, kind of...

Yes, that was... That was purely by chance. That was because Michael had represented the Birmingham Six on appeal, and, Freddy was born in '87, so it was, he was a babe in arms when we started it. But I went to a, I went to a dinner, and, I was sitting opposite Breda Power and Maggie McIlkenny, who were the two daughters, two of the daughters of the Birmingham Six. And these women, they were twenty-four at the time, they were, these young women were fantastic. I just... I mean I've always got an enormous amount from the contributors to our films, I mean they're what made it for me. I'm not talking about commissioning editors, we're talking about the, to hell with that, it's the people in the films who have been absolutely wonderful, and I've got so much from them, and learnt so much from them, and respect them so much. And these two young women just bowled me over. And I thought, why have we never heard their stories? Their fathers have been in prison for sixteen years, since they were four, or, well eight, whatever the sums are. And, so I approached them, I got their numbers and I phoned them up and said, 'Look, would you like to speak? Would your mothers speak? Would, can we give a voice to the women?' Who are still... Because at that point they were still in prison.

Mhm.

And, they agreed. I mean, obviously it helped when Michael was representing, and the wives... You know, people have, people in the press had picked up that I do the films of Michael's cases. I mean as we've said, all this has gone before, Michael, you know, we didn't, I didn't do anything with him apart from one thing, which I cut him out of actually. But... So you know, I'd done all this body of work, and I used to get a bit frustrated by that. But nevertheless, of course, I was deeply interested in his work and the cases he was doing, and it did give me the opportunity to meet them. But if I hadn't got the body of work to say, I am actually a good, an ethical film-maker, I don't think I would have got the jobs. Anyway, I met these women, and, I

worked on this with Ishia Bennison, who was a very good friend of mine, who's an actress as well, but she, she wanted to be involved in this. And she happened to have been in *EastEnders*. So we went up to meet, she was in *EastEnders* for quite a while, but she's also at the RSC, done lots of wonderful work. But of course, [laughs] these women met Ishia, and it did break, it did open a few doors, they loved that, and we got chatting. And they were fantastic. And they had fought and they had been stalwart. And each of these six women had each had six kids, five girls and a boy called Patrick, you know, they all had sons called Patrick. And it had been very very tough. Anyway, they agreed we could do the film.

[0:24:52]

So the first people we approached of course was Granada, because Granada had done these wonderful documentaries and, and dramas about the Birmingham Six and had campaigned very hard. And, we got completely rebuffed. '**We** do the Birmingham Six. What do you mean, the women?' I mean they had known, they must, they had known me, they'd met these women. They'd never seen a story in that, which was very chauvinistic really. So we thought, well to hell with Granada then, fine, we'll go elsewhere. So we finally, very tough, very tough, but we finally got an *Everyman*. And again, I only learnt after the event really, that Jane Drabble, who was the series editor at the time, fought an incredible battle to get that film on. They, people were trying to say it wasn't religious enough, because *Everyman* was a sort of, religious slot. But I mean, there was mention of faith, or lack of it, by these women. Oh it was very moving. Tony did absolutely wonderful interviews with them, very very, I was very proud of that. A very simple film, just talking heads like this, just people telling it how it is. You don't need to do more if it's a powerful story.

Mm.

Yeah, good film.

[0:26:13]

And, then I think, BBC Wales, you made Black Diamonds.

Oh yes, I produced that with a young photographer friend of mine called Martin Dunkerton who had done some wonderful stills during the miners' strike, steelworks and stuff, and he had, he had wanted to make a film. He was very inexperienced, he had never made a documentary. And, so I said I'd help him kind of get it together. And we did a film on Aberfan, the terrible disaster where the kids died, and it was the anniversary, twenty-fifth anniversary I think, the kids had died under a slurry heap in... Is it slurry, did they call it? Yes. You know, coal heap.

Yes.

Yes. And, yes, that was, Jimmy Dibling was the cameraman, a wonderful cameraman. So I got, I'd got, Martin was very inexperienced, I was quite an experienced producer, got a very experienced camera person. And, we did it, you know, it was OK, yeah. And, again, very very, very nice, the commissioning editor there, John Geraint at BBC Wales.
[0:27:18]
And we did another film with him on Somali, the Somali community in Butetown. And that was very interesting as well. Because the Somali, the war was going on for, it's still going on really, but it was at its height in Somalia, and this community, it's a very long, old-established community of mainly sailors who had come from Somalia and lived in the docks. And so we, we did it in Wales, we intercut it with footage of the war. It was, yes, it was powerful. But John was another really intelligent, caring person. And what happened, we found over the years that, as soon as you'd meet a really good, caring, intelligent, sympathetic commissioning editor, they go. [laughs] They just go. And they'd literally either be promoted, hopefully, or sometimes be out the door, revolving doors of commissioning editors. And it almost became, we thought we were jinxed, because we, we'd just get to know somebody and think, oh they're going to commission us, and then off they go. Very difficult.

G: Right, we've got to change the reel there.

OK.

[End of Track 2]

[Track 3]

I can't remember very many others. But it was isolating being an independent producer. So I was one of the first. And so, I kind of knew Alex Graham, who started Wall to Wall, at the same time. But we were, I mean although it grew.....

[End of Track 3]

[Track 4]

.....as the years went by became more and more eloquent really and more and more, and really more open I think about his feelings and what, how it had affected him. But Doreen kind of, just, I think she projected her hatred of the media or her, not her hatred but her, her reluctance, onto us, it was very... It's one of the hardest things I've had to do. Anyway, we took them back to Jamaica, because, Stephen was buried there, and we had very difficult choices, because we took them to the grave and... And there are some very moving shots of... We did the exact opposite of what you would think. We did it all in long shot. But it was just, devastating. You don't have to be there to, to get emotion. And... Anyway, we made that. It had a big impact. Of course then, by the time, I think, just by the time it came out, or even before it came out, the whole thing absolutely exploded with media and they couldn't, they were everywhere. So our film kind of got a bit lost. But I mean that wasn't the point; the point was to get them the coverage, and my goodness they got the coverage. So that was the first film.

[0:01:05]

And then we went on to do a second film, *Hoping for a Miracle*, where Neville was addressing the TUC. And he did the most remarkable speech at the TUC. And... But again it was very very difficult. I mean I'm, I have to say that, at the end of doing all, the two documentaries and the film, the Lawrences, you know, Doreen invited... And obviously after the, the inquiry that Michael did, and the case had collapsed, and I mean, they had a terrible time, Dorreen, you know, we're fine now, I mean she's fine. It's not, it wasn't personal. I, at one point I thought, is it me, you know, but actually, it wasn't. She just found it so difficult. And she's a different person now, she has relaxed. She's been remarkable. She's raised millions of pounds, she's set up this school for young architects and young, black and white people to train. So she has used her anger and her, the injustice of that, to benefit. And, it broke the marriage though, and, Neville went back to Jamaica where he always wanted to go, and... But I got, you know, very close to them in a way, and very involved in it, and it has, always been very, very sad. And Michael I know is very very sad that he didn't, those guys have not been brought to justice. Maybe they will one day. They'll fall down.

Everybody knows they did it. I think the frustrating thing was that we knew that there was police corruption, we knew it, but we could not prove it, and Michael couldn't prove it in the inquiry, and he, and we couldn't say it. We tried to allude to it and we tried to sort of, bring it out in the documentary, and we did as much investigation as we could, but weren't in... We've never been investigative journalists in that sense, and you need enormous resources, like Granada or, like *World in Action* used to do all these things. Or even, you know, other, other journalists have done that. We've always, not done that, we haven't had the resources. So it was, it was tricky. But, the frustration was that we knew that if we could crack that collusion of the police, then... They protected those boys. And I don't mind saying it on camera, because, I mean, I think we're all very angry about it still.

[0:03:25]
So a lot of people, you know, either in the courts or in your film, were kind of very afraid to come forward, they felt under threat, and, ended up being kind of, there was a lot of unsubstantiated evidence because of that. But also just as a film-maker and the kind of subject matter you dealt with in your career, have you ever sort of felt threatened and...?

Threatened? [laughter] Death threats, yes. Phone calls. Well after Orgreave, I remember, oh dear, you know, and they'd always be when Michael walked out the door, or the, you know, I was alone. And I'd think, God! it really sounds like this guy on the phone is across the road, he knows I'm sort of, standing in my living room on the phone. It was very very scary. It's scary but in the end you go... You know, Michael's had death threats all his career, and it's not that you don't take it seriously, you absolutely do, but you have to live. And also, the big, the more you're in the public eye, the more you speak out, the greater your protection. You're not protected if you hide away. You've got to stick your head over the parapet. What are we here for? You know, you've got to be brave. I mean I don't feel brave sometimes. And one time... I mean, Michael was doing so many different cases, Palestinian cases, the Lawrence case, I mean so many different... You never knew quite where it was going to come from. And one time he was, one Christmas he got, 'Oh that's nice, some

carol singers are outside the door, with a torch,' you know, like a sort of, torch. And then he thought, I don't know that that is a torch.' And they'd set fire to our, the wreath on our front door, and, if he hadn't been in... So that was a bit scary. But one time we were in the office, and, this package arrived. And we probably were a bit paranoid, but we had reason to be paranoid, because we had a, you know, we were aware of what was going on. And, we just, we just rang the police. We didn't like the look of it, it looked, foreign stamps and odd, and we had always, you know, we'd been told to be careful. So we rang, I rang Michael, and he said, 'No don't open it. Get out.' And we got all the staff out, a little/the legal[??-5:35] office, but you know, there were[??], four or five people, out. Called the police. They arrived, da, cars, flak jackets, not guns but you know, nearly. Sealed off the office, da. And they go in, and they open it, or... Yeah. Controlled opening. And it was an award, [laughs] we'd won an award. It was really quite heavy, and it had come from, some eco award from Czechoslovakia or something. [laughter] God! So we were, a little, a little less paranoid after that, we just thought, oh you know, life goes on. [laughter]

[0:06:11]
And then, after the two documentaries, you followed the cause with, sort of, factual dramatization, drama documentary or whatever you like to call it.

Yes.

The Murder of Stephen Lawrence in 2000.

That was, that was my last but... That was my last film really, wasn't it?

Yes.

Yes. And I did *Doomwatch* was it, before that.

Doomwatch.

But, the Lawrence film was, it was interesting. If you remember earlier, I talked about how, always be nice to people because you never know where they'll end up. Well, Tamara Howe, Darcus's daughter, ended up at London Weekend Television, head of the drama documentary unit, sort of business side. And, she was fantastic, because, no, as far as I know, no other independent producer, certainly small independent producer, at that point, had ever done a co-production deal with Granada. I mean Granada are, I mean they are ruthless, and they now, they are ITV aren't they, you know. I mean they... And they just... But they wanted to do this, they really wanted... It was in the tradition of the Birmingham Six stuff they'd done in the past. And they really wanted it. And, Doreen and Neville didn't want to do it, absolutely. They'd done two documentaries, they'd been on every news item in the world, you know, you can imagine. And so, I, I thought about it hard, Michael, and we discussed, you know, we discussed it. And I said, 'All right, I'll talk to them.' And London Weekend were desperate to get it. And, Paul Greengrass was I think drafted in at this point. But they needed permission. And, so I sat down with Doreen on her own. It took about four hours. And it was a long, long conversation with her in our conservatory I remember. And as I've explained, things were gritty, pressures were on. She hadn't, they hadn't got a conviction, you know, it was, they were very depressed. And, why did they want this, you know, huge new media intrusion? But I just said, 'Look, it's ITV, it's a drama documentary. It sums up... We've done documentaries. Yes, you've had news coverage. But this is a way of kind of, encapsulating, summarising, almost for Stephen's sake, this whole episode. And, you can have the right of looking at the script. You will earn some money,' because, they never wanted to make any money out of Stephen, but they did have a, they didn't get that much, but they got some money. And I said, 'I will be a co-producer, so you know I will be fighting your corner, and if this film is going be made, it's going to be made the way you want it.' Maybe, nobody at London Weekend, [laughs] nobody else knows what I promised, but I mean in that sense I also, I promised their, you know, I would, I would be their, her voice in, in the process. Anyway, it was a long, long hard road, but she did agree. Anyway, we then negotiated a contract, we did it. and I was her, I wanted to keep an eye and make sure... And, and to be fair, I mean, the best, the whole crew, the best intention was of course to do the true story, but I,

we knew that we had to kind of try and get some of the politics into it. On that I failed a bit, the police corruption stuff didn't really go in. It was alluded to, but we never, we never really got it in, but, Paul wanted to tell the emotional story more than anything. And he did a fantastic job. And it was wonderful actors, and, you know, it was, it is a very moving piece, and I'm very proud that I've got my name on it. And we won the BAFTA, best single drama. And, I think it was at that point I thought, I'm going to retire, because I've, won a BAFTA, and I'll go out.
[0:10:08]
What we haven't talked about is, I spent kind of, quite a few years alongside the documentaries, latterly developing dramas, films, and I had had another drama success with *Doomwatch*, which was a two-hour film we did for Channel 5. And there's a wonderful quote, I've got it in here, it was really really funny actually, did make me laugh, about *Doomwatch*. One of the press said, 'Channel 5 producing enjoyable, feature-length dramas? Surely the end of the world is at hand.' From the *Independent*. Because it was a sort of, 5[??], I think, it was based on an old 1970s series, and again, friends, Carol Topolski was one of the film censors in *Violence and the Censors*, her father, Kit Pedler had actually written, co-written, developed *Doomwatch*, the series in the Seventies, which was a cult, with another guy, Gerry somebody. And she had said, 'You can have the rights.' Because he had, you know, those days, those writers kept the rights. I mean that's, doesn't happen now, all our rights, all our rights, I fought for rights. I've got the rights for *The Battle for Orgreave*, I've got the rights to quite a number of my documentaries. But my goodness, I don't think you'd get them now. I think maybe there's a new agreement were you get some, actually, things have got better again. But it was terrible at one point, you had to hand over everything. Anyway, they'd got the rights. She let me have them for twopence-halfpenny. We, we got Roy Battersby, a wonderful political director, on board, and, and a good writer in Ian MacDonald who was a very, is a very well-known sci-fi writer. And we did this two-hour special. And again, it was a kind of spin-off, and all the reviews said, this should be a series, bring back *Doomwatch*, fantastic. No. Channel 5 didn't have the money or didn't have the inclination. It was, it was good, it was good fun to do. And... But, my drama, my, my aspirations to do movies and drama, I mean I had sunk my own money into projects, with Edna

O'Brien, we had a screenplay of Maud Gonne I really wanted to do, we had, a wonderful script called *Algeria* by Greg Dinner, *The Fanmaker* by Alex Williams, which, a wonderful, wonderful sort of fantasy kids thing. And on it went. And I worked with some really interesting writers, Bonnie Greer and Kerry Crabbe and, developing stuff. Christina Reed. All sorts. And really, didn't get any more. Because you get branded: you are a documentary maker. You may be able to creep over into, science, you know, drama-doc, but basically, that's what you do, put you in a hole, pigeonhole you. And, you know, I got frustrated. And, I think at the point... Well we, we won a BAFTA for the drama, so, my forehead was quite flat from banging it against brick walls, so I thought it was time to stop.

[0:12:56]
So... So you've got, maybe any plans to...? I know you're not making films at the moment, but, the possibility...

It's quite interesting that people still, I still get emails, frightening, I must be in some books somewhere, saying, 'I've got this project. Would you like to...?' No thank you, no thank you. But, you know, then, there's, people come forward. But you know, it's very hard. Somebody came, a lovely producer came from the BBC, 'I saw Birmingham Six. I'd love to follow it up, wonder what's happened to those women, what's happened to them,' you know. Well some of them have died unfortunately. 'Shall we do it?' So, this was a few years ago, I thought, well, let's give it a go, you know, that would be very interesting. Nope. No commission. Had a lovely idea... In fact, one of the things that really did it for me actually, there was this fantastic idea. Benjamin Zephaniah, a wonderful black poet and writer who, a dear friend of ours, did a poetry in residence at Tooks Court, which is Michael's chambers, very unusual. And followed Michael around, followed other lawyers, and wrote these wonderful poems, very political poems about some of the cases, real cases and things that they were doing at the time. And we, I, as soon as I heard he'd got it, I thought, great film. Benjamin, Michael, injustice, poetry. But, Vanson Productions, uh-uh, political, they won't want it, you know. What can I do? Get a really, really, really great director on board. David Leland. Never done documentaries, loves Michael, loves

documentaries, always respected. I knew him well, always respected my work. Said yes. Fantastic. So we thought we could do an hour and a half, we could do a long one, you know, like a story or whatever they're called. Channel 4 put us to do a budget, which I paid for; we developed, David Leland wrote the treatment, thank you, you know. This is a good film-maker we are talking about here. And, they said no. And I just... I mean so at that point, those... When they start turning down that kind of talent... I also set up a company with Benjamin, Zephaniah Films. Because I was sitting next to Alan Yentob at an award ceremony where we had won an award for one of the, the Lawrence documentaries, and I, I was talking about racism in the media really, and, you know, come on, where are the black faces? And, and I said, 'Well I know Ben.' 'Well why is Benjamin not all over the BBC for goodness' sake, he's brilliant talent. And he's written these wonderful children's novels.' So we set up Benjamin... And, and Yentob encouraged me, he said, 'Yeah, come on, do it, send us some stuff,' you know, 'you're right, you're right.' So we set up a little company, we, you know, sent, we did treatments for his, his wonderful kids, teenage stories, novels he had done. Nothing. Nothing. I think he's done one radio play or something. I mean it's, it's iniquitous. You know, you have talent like Benjamin, and you have talent like David Leland.

[0:15:52]

And actually, you talked earlier about, sort of, I talked earlier about the isolation. I remember, when I did *Taking Liberties*, my first film at the BBC, that very first miners one, the person that rang me up first afterwards was Jim Allen. Jim Allen wrote all those wonderful scripts for Ken Loach, *Hidden Agenda*, you name it, you know, he did *Raining Stones*. He was just a wonderful, wonderful guy who I had known politically, early on. And he rang up and said, 'I've got, I've got Ken 'ere. We've just seen yer film love. Fantastic, bloody great,' you know. I mean, what an accolade, my first documentary on British television and Ken Loach rings up and says, 'Well done.' Yes. These people are wonderful. Tony Garnett, Roy Battersby, Ken Loach, Jim Allen now deceased. Where are the new, please, where is the new generation? If anybody's out there watching, be brave. Don't just think about making money, making fly-on-the-wall documentary, you know, I shouldn't be too scathing, but you know, go for it, say what is in your heart and say what needs to be

said. There are so many injustices out there. And I really, you know, I think, there is a small band of people who struggle to make these kind of films and we need more. We need more.

OK. This is the end of the BECTU History Project interview with Yvette Vanson.

[End of Track 4]

[End of Interview]