

IN CONVERSATION WITH

# Ken Loach

Words: **Nev Pierce**  
Portrait: **Mitch Jenkins**

**T**HE PENSIONER WITH THE KIND EYES WHO YOU HAVE TO LISTEN CLOSE TO HEAR: HE'S THE DIRECTOR. HE'S WATCHING AS SLICK-SUITED

businessmen lay on Blair-like BS about security, safety and peace in Iraq... which will be brought about at the barrel of a gun, for barrels of oil and bundles of cash. A snippet will be used of this scene — shot at a plush hotel in Liverpool — but the speech is delivered in full, as Ken Loach sets about his business: collecting authentic moments. He chats with Paul Laverty, the screenwriter of this, their ninth feature together: *Route Irish*. The story comes from Laverty's research into the privatisation of war: the companies 'cleaning up' in Iraq. It follows ex-soldier and security contractor Fergus (Mark Womack) as he investigates the death of his best friend, Frankie (John Bishop), on the titular road, the most dangerous in Baghdad.

"We've been working together for so long, we don't try to analyse the process too much," says Laverty. "I suppose we share quite similar obsessions and passions, but he's also very funny, great fun to be with. It's not like we're talking politics all day — far from it." Together with producer Rebecca O'Brien, they form a close, collaborative team, operating with a distinct tranquillity. The set is so calm it's practically

showed the '60s could be sour as well as *Swinging* — to the Palme d'Or-winning *The Wind That Shakes The Barley* (2006), which deals with the sensitive politics of Ireland's partition within a gripping combat context and a touching family tragedy. Even in his lesser features it's rare to find moments that don't feel true. Famously, he films everything in sequence, handing screenplay pages to actors only a day or so in advance, so they discover their character's journey as the production progresses. This must be the only shoot *Empire* has visited where we, having read the script, know the ending of the film before the actors.

Politically principled — an unbending socialist, he left the Labour Party over its lurch to the right — he is a pragmatic director rather than a highfalutin one. Womack, who is working with him for the first time, tells a revealing story about Loach's methods. "He's got a mischievous sense of humour, a good bladder, and he's got great theories on lunch," he says. "If you're doing an emotional scene he won't let you have a big lunch — he wants your energy levels low. If you try and be sneaky about it, get your roasties or chips on your plate, you can bet your bottom dollar Ken will appear round the corner..."

Fourteen months after visiting the set, *Empire* sent Editor-At-Large Nev Pierce to interview the 74-year-old filmmaker. "When I told a friend I was interviewing Ken Loach, he said, 'Have fun with that miserable socialist,'" says Pierce. "He was joking, but there can be a bit of a gloomy view of Loach and his work. The truth is, he's about as far from dour as you can get. He has a gentle manner, is always inquisitive and slyly funny. Whether discussing film, football or more heavy duty subjects, he often speaks with a smile. He's like a favourite uncle. If your uncle happened to be a world-class filmmaker..."

explosion and you're the director, you get special effects in and they make it explode and you just choose the camera positions. It's much harder to do a good scene in a council flat than it is to blow up a car — from the director's point of view.

**EMPIRE:** Because in a flat you don't have anything to rely on but faces and emotion?

**LOACH:** And quite a constricting location. From the directing point of view, the endless chases and technical stuff are quite tedious, because they all take a hugely long time.

**EMPIRE:** So that wasn't the part that was the most engaging for you...

**LOACH:** It was the easiest part, in some ways.

The difficult part was deciding whether this was the right film to make about war, and about this particular war.

**EMPIRE:** Why difficult?

**LOACH:** Well, because we're still quite close to the actual event of it. And to do something about the horrors... Not just the horrors... An anti-war film about the horror of war is a cliché, but to find the story that delves into the corporate greed and the lying and the torture and the destruction and the tragedy of the Iraqi people — as well as the post-traumatic stress on people from the West who fought it — is a lot to try and put together. To find a story that will disclose all that was the tricky thing. And we thought there were a number of clichés waiting to be done, like the British or American soldiers who go and fight and then they're horrified by what they see. But that won't get you into the corporate world that drove the war in the first place, because they wanted the oil and control of the economy. It's the privatisation of war, through contractor companies, which makes that war different.

**EMPIRE:** What comes first, the subject or story?

**LOACH:** They are sort of alongside each other, really. I mean, there's a number of things [Paul Laverty and I are] forever texting each other about. And then out of all that somebody gets an idea for either a moment in time, or a set of characters or one character or an event, and that is a way into an area that you've talked about but not got a specific idea about. On this, it was Paul writing the characters of Fergus and Frankie.

"You want to stick two fingers up

to Hollywood, really."

*Yogic. And this, despite the fact they're heading outside to blow up a car.*

*Yes, Ken Loach is blowing up a car. It's not what you might expect from a man known as a master of social realism. But he's always retained the ability to surprise: from his debut, *Poor Cow* (1967) — which*

**EMPIRE:** On one of the days we were on set, you blew up a car... Are you throwing down the gauntlet to Michael Bay?

**LOACH:** Ha! Well, the thing is: other people do most of the work. If you've got to shoot an

**EMPIRE:** Have you seen many of the American films that have been made about the conflict?

**LOACH:** I've seen some. I tried not to watch them before we did it, because I didn't want to seem to nick anything, because if you've seen them and



then there's something the same, you can't use it. So I didn't see them. I thought it was safer not to.

**EMPIRE:** Did you see *The Hurt Locker*?

**LOACH:** I did. I know some of the people who worked on it. Barry Ackroyd (*the cinematographer*) and Ray Beckett (*sound mixer*), their work was prodigious and technically very good. I think the problem is: it's all shot in Iraq, but where are the Iraqis? I mean, where are they? It's their landscape, but where are they? There's a few stock characters but it removes the Iraqis from the war and doesn't show the terrible destruction that we have wreaked on them. And this was our dilemma, really: we wanted to make certain that when you came out of the film you were aware that the terrible things that had happened had happened to the Iraqis.

**EMPIRE:** The water-boarding scene is striking. We don't usually see torture...

**LOACH:** No, not straight on. Often they start a bit of torture and then cut outside and you hear the screams. What was interesting to us in the scene, apart from the fact this is what the Americans — and by association the British — have done and it's against the Geneva Convention and it's torture, was the dramatic exchange in the course of the scene. The guy who is being tortured starts out lying — and Fergus knows he's lying and we know he's lying — and then he changes his story and we don't know if he's telling the truth or not. Fergus thinks he's still lying. And then he changes his story *again* and so in a way he's changing his story not to tell you the truth, but to stop the torture. That interplay was what interested us.

## “FILMS LIKE THE DEAL, OR THE QUEEN, THEY'RE LIKE SURFACE IMITATION — IT'S MADAME TUSSAUDS FILMMAKING.”

**EMPIRE:** And it's something which you imagine would be the case if it was happening to you; you would say anything to get the person to stop...

**LOACH:** Yeah, exactly. Trevor Williams (*who plays the tortured man*) was fantastic. We started off thinking we'd better do it with a mask and we tried it, but it just didn't work. In the end Trevor said, “Oh look, I'll just do it” — which was incredibly brave of him. And he did it and it took us a few hours. I think it shook him up for several days afterwards. He said he had nightmares — sort of cracked up really at one point.

**EMPIRE:** Your films are renowned for containing incredibly authentic performances, but do situations like that concern you?

**LOACH:** Well, you've got to judge it. I mean, in

the scene, Trevor could have sat up at any time — he wasn't actually pinned down. And there was a guy from the army there who knew about these things. I mean, we took every precaution that one could. But of course it's a worry. You've just got to make certain you do what's reasonable.

**EMPIRE:** Robert Duvall loves the performances in your films and is a big admirer of yours. Wasn't he interested in having you direct *Tender Mercies*?

**LOACH:** Um. Not a specific film. He got in touch but nothing came of it. One or two people have been in touch, but in the end, I find the American industry anathema. And also there's a kind of resistance to playing their game of going to where the centre of the 'empire' is. I guess Africans must have felt the same about being invited to London to parade whatever they could do here for the benefit of the white bourgeoisie. You want to stick two fingers up to them [Hollywood], really. I mean, we went to the States and did one film<sup>1</sup>, but we were a European film on location, which was spiritually a very comfortable thing to be, in Los Angeles. Professionally quite arduous, but it made you feel good.

**EMPIRE:** What's your perception of the state of the industry in Britain at the moment?

**LOACH:** I can't judge it now. I mean, it's been the same for as long as I can remember, essentially, in that we do a few films here and most of them are aimed across the Atlantic — particularly the ones that have more than a very low budget. One or two of them succeed every year, some fail, but the centre of the industry doesn't seem able to see cinema in any other way, other than transatlantic.

I think that limits what we do. There are always good individual filmmakers — that will always be the case — and there are a lot of writers who can't get their work done, but the producers and production companies who would claim to be the most successful seem to me the most limited.

**EMPIRE:** Because of the type of film they're aiming to make?

**LOACH:** Because they only look across the Atlantic: that limits their idea of what film is.

**EMPIRE:** To some people, 'a Ken Loach film' means a certain, stereotypical thing. Do you feel marginalised in your own country?

**LOACH:** No. I'm not sure I'd say that. I think people don't come with an open mind. I think an *audience* might come with an open mind, but most people who write about films — or certainly, most critics — won't come with an open mind.

Some of them will come with an empty mind, but that's another problem! They'll think they know what the film is before they've seen it. That's always the problem, because you want them simply to take the film at its face value. And I've often thought it would be interesting to show the film with another name on the director's credit, because I think it would be reviewed quite differently. Although I'd be sussed out immediately. It's my own fault; I've been doing it so bloody long! There is, as you say, a stereotype of what it will be — which I would say isn't true — based on things that have been written about, past reviews, sometimes based on hostility. For quite a lot of the films there has been downright political hostility. Particularly a film like the Irish film — the right wing couldn't wait to write about it, not having seen it, saying the most outrageous things. So there's a preconception. The problem is the preconception, I think.

**EMPIRE:** I've been guilty of that, in that I didn't watch *The Wind That Shakes The Barley* for a while, because I thought it would wind me up, politically. But it was very honest.

**LOACH:** That's nice of you. One tries to be. You try not to take any shortcuts, really. But I'm sure a lot of people, particularly with the Iraq film, will think they know what it is. They'll think it will be a denunciation of Blair and Bush and a lot of tub-thumping and obviously that was a film we couldn't make, or didn't want to make.

**EMPIRE:** Have you ever been tempted to do a Peter Morgan/Stephen Frears-style piece on Blair or Brown?

**LOACH:** No. I mean, no criticism of the people who have done it, but as a form I think it's very unsatisfactory. Because you don't know: they might have used those words, but a different inflection; you don't know what the subtext was. These are plainly not the real people, they're actors. It was never like that. And it's in the nuances that you would have a different perception of it. I mean, it's like surface imitation — it's Madame Tussauds filmmaking, really. There's a kind of surface verisimilitude, but the reality of New Labour is not contained in that café conversation<sup>2</sup>, it's in the political analysis of New Labour and its identification with capital and its transformation of the Labour Party from being a party of the centre left to being a party of the centre right — *that's* the interesting conflict. So I've got two objections: A) I don't know whether it's true or not, and B) It doesn't get to the heart of the subject.

**EMPIRE:** In your David Lean lecture...

**LOACH:** The London Film one?

**EMPIRE:** No, this was back in 2003 — it's on the BAFTA website.

**LOACH:** Oh God, is it? Oh God! I can't remember what that was about.

## 5 ways to get into the works of Ken Loach

Selected by **Kim Newman**

### 5 If you like thrillers...

*Hidden Agenda* (1990)

Yes, it's about 'The Troubles' — loosely based on the Stalker inquiry into the Northern Ireland police's 'shoot to kill' policy in the 1980s — but it's also a solid mystery/conspiracy picture with Brian Cox as the sort of gruff copper who ought to have his own series.



### 4 If you like rom-coms...

*My Name Is Joe* (1998)

An alcoholic dole claimant (Peter Mullan) and a middle-class social worker (Louise Goodall) are the seemingly mismatched, actually perfect-for-each-other pairing in one of Loach's freshest, most accessible pictures.



### 3 If you like sit-coms...

*Riff Raff* (1991)

The Full Monty began as a notional sequel to this ensemble piece about building site workers (Robert Carlyle and Ricky Tomlinson included), the petty oppressions visited on them by snooty officials and the wheezes they come up with to fight back.



### 2 If you like war movies...

*Land and Freedom* (1995)

A Spanish Civil War epic, with political history dramatised amid battles, heroics, and betrayals. Loach is plainly up on his under-filmed wars since he's also done the Irish Civil War (*The Wind That Shakes The Barley*) and the Nicaraguan conflict (*Carla's Song*).



### 1 If you like teen movies...

*Kes* (1996)

A boy and his kestrel, schoolyard miseries, coming of age yearnings, Brian Glover... the Ken Loach film even his political enemies love.

**EMPIRE:** You talked about how the media presents certain issues or questions in loaded ways. So, Ireland is always talked about in the context of violence, not about whether partition is right or not. It could be said it's the same with Labour: it's talked about in terms of spin, not in terms of the politics.

**LOACH:** Hmm. Well, I think that's the problem with a lot of these issues: Israel/Palestine is current. Particularly in relation to Egypt. It's always presented from the point of view of the safety of Israel. David Dimbleby was on last week and he was asking people on

the panel: “But what about Israel? Will Israel stay safe?” You might say, “Would the Palestinians stay safe?”, 'cause they're getting three kinds of shit beaten out of them. That's the *real* political correctness — not being unfair to lesbians — the real political correctness is in the ideas of the establishment and how they're defended.

**EMPIRE:** You've been well-known for your views on Israel — is that something you've been tempted to make a film about?

**LOACH:** There are some obvious films to make and there are some great stories to tell, but I don't think I'm the director to do it.

## Footnotes

**1** Bread & Roses (2000), set in LA, starred Adrien Brody as a lawyer helping two Latino sisters seeking justice in their working conditions and pay as janitors.



**2** The conversation in question allegedly took place at a dinner meeting where Gordon Brown agreed not to stand against Tony Blair for the leadership of the Labour Party on the understanding he would succeed him. It was dramatised in *The Deal* (2003).

**3** Loach showed his love for football in *Looking For Eric* (2009), which starred legendary ex-Manchester United player Eric Cantona. The director is a shareholder in Bath City FC and he'd like to see you at their ground, Twerton Park.



**4** He has been married since 1962, to Lesley. His youngest son, Jim Loach, has just made his own directorial debut, *Oranges and Sunshine*, which opens on April 1.

anything. You know, if we were doing something together we'd both put what we think ought to happen and common sense prevails. You just sort it out. On the other hand, that's at the script stage. It's partly true of the shooting stage, but just to get through the shoot you've got to be pretty clear about what you need and how the day will run. Because the moment you are not clear it will fall apart, because there are so many elements to balance. Obviously, someone will come up and may say, "Suppose we do this?" and it's possible, but the odds are it will throw out the sequence. So you sometimes have to be a bit more decisive when you're shooting. But when you're cutting, I think you're much more open. We never share it with people outside the film, but between the producer, Rebecca (*O'Brien*), or Paul or Jonathan (*Morris*), who is cutting it, it's very collaborative.

**EMPIRE:** Is there any correlation between the experience of making the film and how effective the film turns out to be? Have you ever had a terrible time making a movie and the movie has turned out to be great?

**LOACH:** No. I think the film that was the hardest for me was the first film I did, because I had a producer who didn't see things the way I did. And that was just a constant battle and the film is consequently quite a mess.

**EMPIRE:** This is *Poor Cow*?

**LOACH:** Yes. Partly my own immaturity. But *Kes* was a much better experience — from the point of view of the production aspect. *Poor Cow* was... *Nell* (*Dunn*) wrote a lovely book and the

of that period... It's quite a sexual film...

**LOACH:** Yeah, well, I was younger then! (*Laughs*) Um. Yeah, well, it's a very sexy book, really.

I think it should have been more so. But some things I just got wrong, you know? On the day, you get things wrong. You will always get things that go wrong on the shoot because it's such a finely balanced, fragile project, but so long as you've got no egos trying to dominate for the sake of it then you should be fine, really.

**EMPIRE:** Have your methods changed significantly over the years? You're now in your sixth decade of making films...

**LOACH:** I know. It's bizarre, isn't it? Horrifying! They haven't changed significantly since *Kes*.

I think you see other ways of operating: it's mainly to do with working with a script and working with a writer. And I think the danger is that you get glib — you get the feeling you've done this before so you know exactly what to do without thinking it through. So what I always try and do — well, it happens anyway — is to start each job with a feeling of panic and nervousness and not knowing what to do. Then you've got to work it out from first principles again.

**EMPIRE:** You've always got to boil it back down?

**LOACH:** Yeah. And the moment you think, "Oh, I know this, I've done this before, this is what we do," you're lost, because it just won't have any originality.

**EMPIRE:** Your work still retains the sense that it could surprise, whereas some directors who have been making films for several decades can

I was understudying Lance Percival, who was another comedian, but I got to know Kenneth Williams a bit as we were travelling around the country. He said, "Be on time, dear. Be on time."

**EMPIRE:** You've got John Bishop in *Route Irish* and you've often cast comedians in your features: Crissy Rock in *Ladybird Ladybird*, Ricky Tomlinson in *Riff-Raff* and *Raining Stones*. Was it consciously done?

**LOACH:** Yeah. The first time we did it was before *Kes*, actually, in '66/'67 in Liverpool. With a writer called Neville Smith, we did a film about Everton football club and the supporters and we just cast it from comics in Liverpool. I've always done that. They're very good, usually very good.

**EMPIRE:** Have you ever cast somebody — a non-professional — and then thought, "Oh, dear...?"

**LOACH:** No. I've cast actors and it hasn't worked out and sometimes you just have to bite the bullet and say, "Look, I'm really sorry: it's not working." It's only happened once. In smaller parts if you cast somebody and they don't turn out right, you shoot the back of an actor's head!

**EMPIRE:** You turned 18 in 1954. Do you feel the world is better now than it was then?

**LOACH:** No. The world is a much worse place, I think. In '45 we had probably the best reforming government we've had, in the Atlee<sup>6</sup> government. It was still a social democrat government, it wasn't a socialist government, but the consciousness of people was that we were a collective and we were stronger together than as individuals. And obviously out of that came the health service and public ownership of utilities and transport and a sense of collective endeavour. People had made that sacrifice to win the war, so there was a general sense that things would get better from there. The consciousness was: we've achieved things and we have things that will never be taken away from us, like the health service, like public ownership of the mines, of the transport, of the gas, electric — it was *ours*. And now, that's gone, we've just given it away... Allowed politicians to give it to their friends. And the cult of the individual, from '79 onwards, which New Labour has followed and which dominated the party, has just killed that. So the consciousness now is not: "How can we work together?" It's: "How can I get on, at the expense of you?" So that's pretty horrible.

**EMPIRE:** Finally, most importantly: have you seen *Star Wars*, or *The Empire Strikes Back*?

**LOACH:** I haven't seen it, I'm afraid! The word 'empire' to me means imperialism!

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**Route Irish is out on March 18 and is reviewed on page 54.**

## "I TRY TO START EACH JOB WITH A FEELING OF PANIC AND NERVOUSNESS, AND NOT KNOWING WHAT TO DO."

actors were good — that was all fine<sup>5</sup>. The problems were my failure to really be clear about what it was I was doing. And the production trying to do another kind of film. So that was a cock-up.

**EMPIRE:** What kind of film did you feel that they wanted to make?

**LOACH:** Oh, I think something much more glamorous, really. And half the crew was an old film features crew and half the people came from television, from my world, and they didn't mix very well. The old features side thought we were amateurish and we thought they were unimaginative and predictable. I wasn't mature enough to bring it together.

**EMPIRE:** It still stands as a remarkable snapshot

be predictable, even if still admirable. So, perhaps that's why it is?

**LOACH:** I hope that's why it is. And it's also a lot to do with the script. A good story will surprise you when it's unfolding, but looking back it will seem inevitable. I think both Paul and I are very aware we just constantly need to stand things on their head. And also — and this is irritating — because we've done so many, there is the sense that some reviewers feel that they know what the film is going to be before they've seen it. We've tried to be different while still staying true to the basic ways of making a film.

**EMPIRE:** What's the best piece of advice you've ever been given?

**LOACH:** Be on time, I suppose. Be on time, be prepared. I mean, the very first job I got in the business was understudy in a West End revue.

## Footnotes

<sup>5</sup> *Poor Cow* stars Carol White and Terence Stamp; segments are used for flashbacks in Steven Soderbergh's 1999 film *The Limey* (starring Stamp).



<sup>6</sup> Clement Atlee was Prime Minister of Great Britain from 1945 to 1951. In a 2004 poll of professors, he was voted the greatest PM of the 20th century. This is probably his first appearance in *Empire*.