# Debs Paterson Interview

Debs Paterson is a film and TV director. Her recent credits include Halo (Amblin/Paramount+/Showtime), Willow (LucasFilm / Disney+), The Bastard Son and the Devil (Imaginarium/Netflix).

Paterson was honoured with the best debut directing BIFA nomination and named a BAFTA Brit when her first feature Africa United was released (Pathé/BBC Films) in 2010.

In 2017 she was the first female director on the action-heavy TV series Strike Back, which ignited her love of shooting character-led action. In 2018 she was selected by JJ Abrams and Kathy Kennedy to document the making of The Rise of Skywalker, the final film of the Star Wars sequel trilogy. While working on that, she spent a year with the production in Pinewood, on location and at Bad Robot in LA.

Paterson’s showreel is available at: <https://debspaterson.com/portfolio/showreel>

Years ago, Jem Mackay met Paterson whilst working on a film. Here they reunite to discuss her career as a female filmmaker.

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Jem Mackay: Let’s start by going from the most recent backwards. You’ve done Halo, a couple of episodes of Willow (2022) and then Skywalker Legacy, which is a behind-the-scenes for Star Wars (2020), Strike Back, a very heavy action TV series. I believe you were the first female director in six seasons.

Debs Paterson (DP): Yeah, that’s true.

JM: 2017?

DP: Yeah.

JM: And Humans, you were involved in that. That’s a 2016 TV series that explored themes of artificial intelligence. One thing I wanted to pick out was Africa United, which is a kind of drama road movie from 2010. Does this represent some of the stuff that you’ve done, would you say?

DP: Yeah, I think so.

JM: Why do you love directing so much?

DP: It’s a mixture of different things. I think there’s a feeling that nothing else can quite match, which is that at the end of the day something exists that didn’t exist at the beginning of the day, and also that you can’t do it on your own. Filmmaking is a team sport. There just isn’t a way around that. As a director you have your hands on everything and nothing is made by you specifically. And there is, I think, something in those two things that, for some reason, catches me. Ever since I was little, I loved the idea of storytelling for a group of people to be able to respond to. So somewhere in the mix there is why.

JM: From the time when we actually worked together, I can remember that you had a real passion for facilitating diversity. You’ve grown on from that as well. Is it the driving force behind your work, would you say?

DP: It is a big driving force for my work. I was made in Taiwan and then grew up on a council estate in Yorkshire but had a pretty idyllic childhood. And then we were in Taiwan again and later in Singapore. I did my last two years of high school in India and finally returned to university in the UK. Quite early on, I developed a strong awareness that if stories are only told about one group of people, but shown all over the world, they affect the ones who are not represented. I come from a long line of missionaries, so I’m sure that social justice is deeply embedded in me. I just profoundly believe that every human deserves to be seen as fully human. Storytelling hasn’t always done that in the West, so whether you are on camera or behind it, that should be equally important.

JM: I was looking at Statista, which is a website that keeps records of filmmaking statistics. In the top 100 Hollywood movies over the last few years, from 2007 to 2019, less than one in 20 film directors are female. How do you feel about this?

DP: Well, one of the things that you didn’t actually mention, but it is a credit that I’m proud of, is having been involved in setting up BAFTA Elevate. The reason to set that up was working on Humans. I had a very quick rise from starting to make short films in 2007. I made several in a row that happened to do well at festivals, and then in 2010, I was given an opportunity by Pathé BBC Films to direct a feature. It was a really fast progression, and I didn’t know how unusual it was. I had the advantage of not understanding why people in senior positions in the industry wouldn’t want to do that. However, after that, when I was trying to get hired, I found myself really pigeonholed as a female director. They said I could basically [just] do stuff about kids.
TV was on the rise by the middle of the 2010s and I hadn’t shot anything for five years. I’d done a lot of script writing and had a lot of near misses with new projects, but I just wanted to be shooting again. So, TV was definitely good to explore. I had some luck, and I was paid by Channel 4 to shadow across a block of Humans and got a second unit credit across four episodes. That meant that I was now a hireable prospect.

But I discovered that what I had thought was the case, that people were suspicious of women, or didn’t want to hire women, or were inherently prejudiced or defending their ground, was not entirely true anymore. I actually changed my mind. It all came down to the fact that there was a confidence gap and if we could figure out how to close it in the hiring process, not in the women who are coming through wanting to direct, but in the hiring process, then probably we could change this.

Certainly, we weren’t alone. There are a lot of other people doing a lot of other things. But I went to BAFTA having had a good experience with that organisation. I said, ‘Look, do you want to work together on this?’ Together with a producer friend called Ivanna MacKinnon, who’s terrific, and the team at BAFTA, we did about six months of informal research speaking to broadcasters, commissioners, producers, agents, guilds, directors, just asking them what was going on, what’s going wrong in the casting process. You know, producers say they want to hire women, Commissioners say they want to commission women. Why are the statistics 50:50 graduation ratio and then, I think it was 87:13 at that time, which doesn’t seem like it’s changed, although certainly in TV directing the gap has definitely narrowed.

The solution that we found to that was this: if commissioners want to hire and producers want to attract women, then if we publish a pre-approved list of women we haven’t worked with but would want to, then that could take the anxiety away. There was lots of other stuff to it, but things have changed, palpably. Things have changed. I couldn’t get a directing job between 2011 and 2017/18. Yet, since 2019-2020, I haven’t had a break. I’ve done four jobs back-to-back and haven’t stopped since July 2020. Right now, I’m in Budapest prepping to kick off the new season of Halo which is Amblin, Paramount +, and Showtime show. They’ve given me the headline seats to kick it off. So, things have changed for sure.

But it hasn’t been that way for a long time, and I think in big movies, what I learned from doing the Star Wars doc, it is hard to teach, and I think you have to be around it to learn: it’s the confidence part of this stuff, not in terms of the director being confident that they know what they’re doing. The financiers and the creative team must grow confident that this person is going to lead us to a good place. That’s the big movie thing right now and you know movies are in a weird moment anyway, so it would be worth comparing the stats for big movies with the stats for TV, which I think are a good deal healthier. Anyway, that’s a very long answer to your question.

JM: So, you think that things have actually changed now?

DP: Palpably. It’s different than it was ten years ago. It doesn’t mean it’s easy, it doesn’t mean it’s solved, but it’s definitely better than it was … for now.

JM: And this scheme called Elevate, Why do you think it was so important?

DP: Well, I think there were two things: One was outward facing, and one was inward facing. I had been aware, when my movie came out, that I didn’t know any other female directors at all. So, I was having to make all my mistakes myself. I wasn’t able to gather from anybody. I had some male friends who were directors, but there’s a huge amount to be said for that in terms of being willing to support people who are both a little bit behind you and a little bit ahead of you so that everybody doesn’t have to make all of the same mistakes, which then costs you time. So, one of the massive advantages of Elevate was that I wasn’t one of the people on the list, having been involved in it as a mentor. There were twenty names on the list, and we met up every month or so.

Some of those meetings were studio sessions with people coming in, others [were] just to create a friendship group, a support group. It’s now three or four years later, and there’s still a chain of recommendations, ‘if-you-work-with-this-person’ kind of thing. And that is hugely important because if you have to make every mistake blind, the chance of being able to build up the momentum that you need to hook bigger and bigger things, and not have a blow up, is really, really small.

The learning curve in this industry is very steep. You need to have a cohort of people who you’re helping to get ahead of you to go on your path. So that’s the inward focus thing.

And the outward focus thing was that the industry genuinely didn’t believe that there were talented women. They believed it was a launch problem rather than a hiring problem. And by just doing this, we did an open call. It was quite a high standard for entry. You needed to have either a feature film that had released theatrically, or festival acclaim, or continuing drama and festival acclaimed shorts to be eligible at all. So, you had to have been hired. You had to be eligible for high-end TV. But just having not broken through, we were expecting to get maybe 30 applicable people. We had 226 people who were qualified and were not being hired. And so, it was a massive pool of people. It was a huge group that were [being] ignored. Even that, in itself, was a statement to the industry to be able to present twenty names who were legitimately great. They were all hired during the first year and have all kept working.

When there’s a scarcity situation, the danger is that feeling that you have to be the only one. The culture of sharing information, helping-each-other-out culture was good to attack that mindset, which was kind of keeping everybody back a little bit. I think it’s just not true that you don’t have qualified, talented, visionary women out there. Let’s stop pretending that’s the issue.

JM: That’s fantastic. Good news. Let’s talk about Strike Back then. You were the first female director in six seasons …

DP: First and only.

JM: And only? Wow! It is high action. How did you find that?

DP: I really like shooting action. Yeah, there’s something essential about action that puts people under massive pressure. And if drama is all about seeing who people are under pressure at some level, action is almost the most poetic way of doing that! I had a near death experience. I’m kind of intrigued with people getting right up to the edge of themselves, in that way. And also, it’s just really fun. It’s really fun to blow things up!

JM: Could you describe a scene—the highest action scene—that you were proud of, and then talk us through it a little bit?

DP: Willow has some great stuff in it that I really enjoyed shooting and also Half Bad, which is a show I’m finishing off for Netflix. And then obviously Halo, which we’re about to shoot. We’ll have some fun stuff. It feels like there’s bigger stuff on the way.

To give an example… Strike Back is a mental show. It’s like an R-rated A-Team. But it was really fun. It needed a big action sequence in every part, basically in between every ad break there needed to be some kind of chaos. And so, in the course of two episode blocks we got an airport chemical attack, fifteen-person pool hall brawl. One of the female characters fought her way out past a load of bad guys using mediaeval weapons down a corridor and she jumped out of a window. We also did a motorbike chase that turned into a hearse chase.

The fun parts of the process are reading something in a script that is already on the page and then it’s about executing it in a fun and action-packed sequence. It can be scripted beat by beat, or vague. The next step is on me to figure out what we’re illustrating about the character. You know I think about intimate scenes as well as about action scenes. They should reveal something about the character. That’s why you do it in the first place. So, it’s always trying to figure out what it is that the audience is discovering and how we film it with that in mind. It’s a case of very practical breakdowns, working with the stunt department, often working between stunts and design to make sure that the set is facilitative.

Once, we had to do a sequence that had some parkour in it. So, you’re talking about if we want to try and achieve this how can that get built in and maybe we can lose that bit of set, so we can get this bit here.

Prep becomes really important for action. The worst thing you can do is turn up and busk it on the day. I mean, obviously for health and safety reasons, but also because if you do that, you’ve probably wasted about 60% of what you could have pulled off.

JM: You said it was like poetry. It seems to me that you’re wanting to discover about human character as well. I read that you studied the Meisner technique. What is that exactly? And how does it help you in filmmaking?

DP: Yeah, it was an amazing experience. I said about that period before I started doing TV where I had a lot of scripts that would get very close, and then fall apart over about seven years. It was not a financially successful period. My life was hardcore, but Skillset were offering a bursary at that time, that if you needed to go and study something overseas, you could apply for 80% of both the course fees and travel. And I happen to have had a project fall apart. My friend knew about this course in Cuba, which was a Meisner technique course for both directors and actors. I did a tiny bit of theatre before I started out, but I hadn’t been working with actors very much, apart from having worked in casting, so I thought I’d like to add more tools to my toolkit in terms of being able to direct actors better. And I went and did this course—hilariously in Spanish, which I didn’t speak. It was a bit of an eye popper, but even that was amazing in its own way.

There are different types of method acting. There’s Strasbourg’s methods. There’s Stella Adler and there’s Sandford Meisner. The Strasbourg is all about how to find experiences you’ve already had and associate them to the thing that you want to go through. You’re using your past experience and bringing it to the role, which some people love, and some people feel is traumatic. Adler, I’m less familiar with. But Meisner emphasised that if you describe your best ever vacation or imagine your best ever vacation, the imagined ones are going to be better. His theory was: don’t pull it from your past. Imagine yourself into circumstances that you can feel, and then use the feeling in the scene. So, there’s a technique that you use to practice emotional facility, and there’s a repetition technique. But it was intensive and amazing for teaching directors how to learn to be emotionally literate and teaching actors how to take their literacy and try and construct it into a story. It was bonkers, and absolutely brilliant. I loved it.

JM: Learning has got to be a key element in terms of getting on in the industry. I understand that you shadowed people like Chris McQuarrie?

DP: Yeah.

JM: Tell me about that experience and what did you learn from that?

DP: I came back from shooting Strike Back, having fallen in love with shooting action. I’d done a tiny bit of action on my film, and I’d really enjoyed it, but then doing Strike Back taught me that I definitely want to do more of that! And it’s annoying that there aren’t more women that do it, but I then landed back in London from shooting in Budapest and realized that McQ, as he calls himself, was shooting Fallout in London. I’d met him at a barbecue during the seven years of scripts at an actor friend’s barbecue, and we’d both investigated the same subject matter, so I shot him an e-mail saying, ‘Look, you know, can I come and shadow for a few days?’ And he said, ‘Yeah, come along.’ So that was incredibly generous of him and extremely useful to see but was only about a week. Where I learned the most, was from doing the Star Wars doc, which was an opportunity that came completely out of the blue. And [one] I nearly said no to, because I was very focused on directing and directing TV at that time. I don’t do documentaries. But it was one of those things where you just can’t say no. I’m glad I didn’t say no.

JM: I’ve got a photograph of this. So, let me show you. Maybe you could describe what’s going on and then carry on with your story?



Fig. 1: Debs Paterson shooting a documentary about the making of Star Wars. Courtesy of www.directorsnow.com.

DP: That’s in Wadi Rum in Jordan, which is a beautiful place to shoot, with Daisy obviously doing a little stand up in the desert. After doing Strike Back, a friend I’d met at a film festival with my first short film ten years before had become one of the execs at Lucasfilm. She dropped me a line: ‘We’re looking for a female second unit director on the show. Can you recommend anybody?’ And I said, ‘Yeah, I can. Here’s a list of names, but also, can I add my own name to that, please?’ And she replied ‘Of course!’. I got called in to do an interview with Callum Greene, the exec. We met for breakfast, and he said, ‘Look, I’m so sorry. JJ’s just met the person that he’s going to bring in LA (we were in London). JJ hasn’t come over yet, so the second unit gig isn’t available anymore.’ That went to Vic Mahoney. He’s brilliant. He’s doing the sequel to Old Guard right now. But he said ‘Look, but I really enjoyed your stuff. I wanted to meet. I figured what’s the harm in giving you breakfast?’ I had a very nice ‘almost’ breakfast with Star Wars, you know. And I was like, ‘Oh well, one of those things.’ And then about three months later, I got a call. He said ‘Look, I know this isn’t what you do. We need somebody to shoot The Making Of. I thought of you. Do you wanna just come and take the meeting and see what you think?’ And I thought, this is crazy, but then it was Star Wars, right? But they were really serious. JJ and Kathleen Kennedy, who’s a legend, were like ‘we’re very serious about bringing female filmmakers into the Star Wars deal.’

I figured I might as well roll the dice. It was the best decision I could have made. It was seven months of all day, every day. I had two DP’s, documentary DP’s. I was operating camera myself as well, which is a really brilliant experience, getting used to the feeling of a 35 and a 50, what you got on, how it feels and how you position yourself when you’ve got that lens on, if you don’t have time to change.

And then any meeting I wanted to be part of, any department I wanted to get to know. You learn the inside out of a big machine like that, getting to tell a story about it! And the doc, I’m actually really proud of. It’s a really lovely thing. We shot with them for seven months. Then I did Harlots. So, I went to shoot that and then we had three months to edit at Bad Robot in LA. While they were cutting the movie, we were cutting the doc upstairs.

We nipped into watch the latest cuts of the film, when they were doing the reviews to come back and say: ‘Oh, that that’s gone, we better change that!’ Yeah, it was invaluable as a learning curve.

JM: These are some of the highs of your career, but what about some of the lows? There must have been times when you doubted yourself. How did you get through?

DP: Oddly, right before the Star Wars came up, I was genuinely wondering whether I would need to not do this anymore. I wasn’t sure that I could be a person that I wanted to be and be a successful director at that time. I do think things have changed now. Back then, we were seeing people, who I didn’t respect as people, getting ahead, and seeing people, who I did respect as people getting the crap kicked out of them emotionally or professionally.

It isn’t to say that I’m a perfect person, but I aspire to be a decent person, whether or not I succeed. It was amazing watching JJ Abrams, who people had told me was a decent human being. The press wasn’t wrong. It was great to watch somebody day in day out, someone who was just very decent all the time, how he gained control of the set or how he had everyone’s respect, whilst also being decent. I loved seeing everybody getting excited for the best creative idea and leading with that, rather than with a need to be in control.

I’ve done my fair share of therapy and research leadership, because directing is a leadership role and directing at any scale truly is a leadership role. Leadership that is often as much about collaboration and allowing other people to do their thing, as it is about marching forward and doing yours.

I had seven years of learning things relentlessly the hard way and not making any money, really scraping by. But then you learn a lot from those times, don’t you?

JM: Yeah, definitely! Your career has gone through a whole load of different stages. What advice would you give to an aspiring film director, particularly one who is a woman?

DP: Just for the record, I think it must be quite odd coming through as a guy right now, given that there’s such a vocal dialogue about—which is completely true—that there hasn’t been a level playing field, and it is really important that women and people from economically diverse backgrounds or people from racially diverse backgrounds are given a fair shot. That is true, and there does need to be an overcorrection, in order for that to be levelled. But it is about everybody being able to work. It’s not about, you know, guys shouldn’t feel like there’s no room for them. It should be about everybody having a fair crack.

I think the people that you travel with are really important; and being prepared, learning how not to have a scarcity mindset, not being scared of helping other people get ahead of you and knowing that there will be enough space is a really important thing; figuring out what your special source is also matters. I call it Movie Maths. But whatever you call it, it’s true to say that people need to be able to spot a clear line between what they can see that you’ve done, and the next thing that you want to do. That’s just true and that ain’t gonna change!

It took me a really long time to figure out that people wouldn’t see Africa United, and then let me make the next film that I wrote, which was a historical drama about the Dutch art forger [who] hoodwinked Hermann Göring. There was no connection between those two things. The key is being able to offer proof in the pudding.

Whether that’s making a short that can illustrate the feature, so you can see that these ingredients are in here. Now we want to add this to it and make the next thing. I call it Movie Maths: a + b needs to be able to directly lead to c and that’s a real thing. That is the difference between people being willing to back you or not. I think the clue is going the extra mile and being willing to invest in relationships. People change jobs and turn up in different places.

Find a way to get time on set, ideally get paid work on other people’s sets so that you can learn from what they’re doing well, and what they’re doing badly. If I had my time again, I would work as a boom op because you’re right next to the action the whole time. Sound people always get paid, and you see absolutely everything. So yeah, try and figure out how to learn from other people’s mistakes rather than having to make all of them yourself.

JM: Thanks very much, Debs. Real gold! I’m sure people will get a lot from this.