



FILM, TV & GAMES CONFERENCE 2015

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Session 7: Pippa Harris, Co-Founder and Head of Film & TV, Neal Street Productions *in conversation with* Clare Wise

Claire Wise led a guided conversation with Pippa Harris in which they discussed the philosophy behind and cross-media approach of Neal Street, cinematic high-end TV series and Neal Street's acquisition by All3Media.

*Summaries of other sessions from the day and a complete report
of the Conference are available from www.bsac.uk.com*

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----------|
| <i>About BSAC</i> | 3 |
| <i>Pippa Harris, Co-Founder, Neal Street Productions</i> in conversation with Clare Wise | 4 |

ABOUT BSAC

The British Screen Advisory Council (BSAC) is an independent, industry funded membership body for the audiovisual sector.

We uniquely bring together the widest possible range of interests, knowledge and contacts to exchange ideas and information about business and policy issues. Our Members are invited to join on the basis of their personal qualities, experience and expertise, and are drawn from the major TV broadcasters, independent film and TV producers, distributors, exhibitors, US studios with major operations in the UK, trade associations, trades unions, training providers and new media companies, such as Google and Spotify.

Many of our activities take place privately, which enables business leaders to freely discuss the fast changing nature of the industry.

On policy, we provide opportunities for industry and policy makers to hear a breadth of viewpoints and, wherever possible, for the sector to speak with a single and authoritative voice. Over the years we have worked closely with the Treasury, HMRC, DCMS, BIS, IPO, the European Commission, WTO, and WIPO.

We also enjoy the support of Associate Members, which are businesses with a particular interest in the sector. These include legal firms, accountancy practices and investment management firms, and are an important port of call for obtaining views and expertise.

We commission and generate research and reports to underpin our work.

We host a series of events that are open to a broader invited audience. These include an annual Film, TV and Games Conference, an Interview Series and occasional seminars. These provide high quality debates and networking opportunities.

More information can be found at www.bsac.uk.com

**PIPPA HARRIS, CO-FOUNDER AND HEAD OF FILM & TV, NEAL STREET PRODUCTIONS
IN CONVERSATION WITH CLARE WISE**

Clare Wise showed a trailer of Pippa Harris's most recent film, *We Are Many*. She had recently seen this and heartily recommended it as a fantastic and thought provoking film.

She introduced Pippa Harris, who, with Sam Mendes and Caro Newling, had established Neal Street in 2003 to produce content for film, TV and theatre. Prior to this, Pippa had been Head of Commissioning at the BBC, where she had worked with David Yates on such programmes as *State of Play* and *The Way We Live Now*.



Since forming Neal Street, Pippa had worked on such films as *Jarhead*, *Starter for 10*, *Revolutionary Road* and *Shrek The Musical*, but was most closely connected in public consciousness with such television series as *Call the Midwife* and the BAFTA winning series *Penny Dreadful* and *The Hollow Crown*.

She asked Pippa to talk about the philosophy of Neal Street. The three fields in which they produced output obviously had very different forms of production and economic models.

Pippa Harris explained that Neal Street had always been intended to work across genres. Sam and Caro had both come from a theatre background and she had primarily worked in television, but the three of them had very similar tastes and ambitions. At the start, Neal Street had focussed on film and theatre alone, and had a first look deal with Dreamworks which had covered their overheads – *Shrek the Musical*, which was still touring, had spanned the entire life of the company.

As the company had grown they had decided to move more towards making content for television, and had started by making couple of dramas, including *Stuart A Life Backwards* for HBO, with Tom Hardy and Benedict Cumberbatch. It was very difficult to run a company purely from a film slate because the overheads and cashflow were very difficult to balance out. In contrast, TV was a much more straightforward model, and one that had much better prospects for growth as it allowed producers to retain IP in a way that neither film nor theatre really allowed.

Clare Wise observed that Sam Mendes had been poached to work on *Skyfall*, the latest film in the Bond franchise, and asked Pippa what impact this had had upon Neal Street's plans.

Pippa Harris said that Neal Street had always made a broad mix of films, but it had been their policy to mix Sam Mendes' work with output from other lesser known directors – for example, they had made Susanne Bier's first English language film,

Things We Lost in the Fire. Due to his experiences at the Donmar Warehouse, Sam had been a very good executive producer in these scenarios, and this had helped Neal Street to work with a large variety of directors and on a different scales of film.

Clare Wise asked if Sam was still as involved with Neal Street as he had been before making *Skyfall*.

Pippa Harris said that he was. He had also decided not to make another Bond film, but even while he had been working on *Skyfall* he had still co-executive produced *The Hollow Crown* and *Penny Dreadful*, and somehow found time to look at cuts and give notes, so was totally integrated into everything that they did.

Clare Wise asked how involved Caro was with the full range of Neal Street's work.

Pippa Harris said that Caro was mostly involved in the theatre side. She thought that one of the factors behind Neal Street's success had been that there was a sort of interwoven DNA, where talent or relationships that started in one field could cross over into others. For example, the writer Heidi Thomas had been in meetings to talk about writing *Call the Midwife* when she had come out with another idea about the last days of the Russian Royal Family – they had considered whether this might make a good TV show, but then after speaking with Caro this had developed into *The House of Special Purpose*, an amazing play that had run at the Chichester Festival Theatre.

One of Neal Street's biggest strengths was that that actors and writers, and directors to a lesser extent, liked that it was sort of one stop shop, so that even if an idea did not quite fit on one format then there were immediate opportunities to use it in a different way.

Clare Wise observed that Neal Street had recently been bought by All3Media. She asked if this cross media approach had played had increased their appeal to prospective purchasers.

Pippa Harris said that the major appeal had been the television business side, which was where most of their turnover came from; also, there was not really a tradition in the UK of people buying film or theatre companies – not because they were not potentially profitable, but because the TV route was a much more well-trodden path and because scripted content was undergoing such a renaissance. When Neal Street had been put up for sale there had been no shortage of interest from people that were looking to expand their scripted slate.

Clare Wise said that presumably most of the value of the company derived from its IP, which mostly came from their television side.

Pippa Harris said that film and theatre obviously had different revenue models: in general, the theatre world earned revenues through fees, but once a show had recouped its production then it would be earning on a royalty participation basis, which was quite similar to TV. In terms of their feature films, Neal Street had never really generated much of a back end from their work.

With regards to the sale to All3Media, she welcomed All3Media's very federal structure, where companies were given the freedom to work independently and did not have to reshape their operations to fit into wider corporate structures. She hoped that Neal Street would be able to continue to work in the same way that they always had, hopefully successfully. The relationship was working well so far.



Clare Wise observed that All3Media had been bought by Discovery just before they had made their initial approach. She asked if, in addition to the similar philosophies, the opportunity to partner with such a vertically integrated organisation had been an attractive part of the offer.

Pippa Harris said that Neal Street was now at a stage where they wanted to continue to grow, and in particular, Discovery had inroads into the US market that they otherwise would not have had access to.

Clare Wise had always understood that TV producers were able to take their programming to the international market and to sell the rights to broadcasters directly. She asked if Neal Street would be able to continue to do this under All3Media, or would All3Media handle the sales.

Pippa Harris said that, if Neal Street produced something that All3Media wanted to distribute then this would clearly be a win-win scenario for both of them; however, if All3Media did not want to be responsible for distributing a piece of content, then Neal Street would be free to find their own partner.

Finding the right partner for a project was always quite time consuming, but it had been important for Neal Street that they knew and had a good relationship with the people who would be selling their shows.

Clare Wise presumed that All3Media had been particularly interested in Neal Street's upcoming TV slate. More series of *Call the Midwife* and *Penny Dreadful* had been announced, but would there be any more series of *The Hollow Crown*?

Pippa Harris said that they had just finished shooting another series of *The Hollow Crown*, and Benedict Cumberbatch had reprised his starring role. The first series had covered Richard II, Henry IV and Henry V; the new series would cover Henry IV and Richard III.

These had been made for the BBC and would be distributed by NBCU; this relationship had worked perfectly and she really appreciated the enthusiasm for the material and the direction that they had taken this to in the international market.

Clare Wise asked if the partnership with Sky Atlantic on *Penny Dreadful* had been similarly strong.

Pippa Harris explained that this had not quite been the same situation, Neal Street had partnered with CBS, who were distributing the show, and Showtime had helped to develop it.



Sky Atlantic had been a fantastic creative partner and had been unrivalled in terms of the marketing support that they had given to the TV broadcast, including putting posters up everywhere – their Head of Marketing had told her that Sky had the second biggest advertising spend in the UK, after the Government.

Clare Wise asked Pippa if she would be continuing the day-to-day management of Neal Street.

Pippa Harris said that she, Sam and Caro had committed to staying on for at least five years. So far everything had been absolutely great and All3Media had been terrifically supportive, so she could see no reason why this would change.

Clare Wise observed that All3Media already had their own established TV production arm. She asked if they were pushing for Neal Street to do more film work.

Pippa Harris said that All3Media were very interested in film and theatre and had recently agreed to work on a theatre project with them; this would be their first foray into the world of theatre, and she predicted that they would take things on a project-by-project basis and experiment to see what worked for them. Some of Neal Street's current film projects had been in development for a while, so the rights were already tied up with a whole range of other partners.

She felt that one of the reasons why All3Media had been quite so keen on Neal Street had been the cross fertilisation between film and television that they offered. They were not the only organisation that had moved into this space: film stars were increasingly moving into television in a way that they never before had, and fifteen years ago the equivalents of Juan Antonio Bayona or Eva Green would have never been interested in working in a TV production like *Penny Dreadful*.

She welcomed this change, and felt that the movement of talent across media formats had been a really healthy development for all sectors.

Clare Wise was fully aware of how difficult it was to make an independent feature film, and welcomed the possibility that a greater back end participation might come through from television and theatre.

Pippa Harris said that her previous trailer, for *We Are Many*, had been a project that she had worked on outside Neal Street. She had had a long established relationship with the director, Amir Amirani, who had been putting the film together

for about nine years. Amir had started raising funding through Kickstarter – they had not accessed public money from any of the usual sources. They also did not have a distributor, so were self-distributing the film, which was something that she was in no hurry to do again. However, this did mean that she knew exactly which screens the film would be showing on when it was released, and also exactly what the box office would be. This had given her real insights into the nature of the industry from a perspective that producers did not usually get.

Clare Wise asked if Kickstarter were also helping with the P&A.

Pippa Harris explained that the rest of the film had been funded through private investment, that all of the producers had put some of their own money in and that everybody involved with the project had deferred their fees or worked for less than their usual rates. Everybody had felt that this was telling a really important story – it was about the various things that were going on in the run-up to the Iraq war. It would be good if as many people as possible could get to see it.

Clare Wise observed that Danny Perkins, who had been speaking earlier, had described how Russell Brand had released his film on YouTube to try to reach a larger audience. While this was not really an option for a commercial film, she asked if raising money from Kickstarter had helped build momentum from word-of-mouth, rather than having to spend money on conventional distribution.

Pippa Harris said that this was a very cinematic film and, while they would be selling the TV and VOD rights in due course, it really had to be viewed on the big screen in a room full of people in order for it to have the greatest impact. For example, Amir had taken it to the Sheffield Documentary Festival, where there had been huge standing ovation.

Clare Wise observed that *Call the Midwife* could garner up to 11.4 million viewers in the UK alone, a figure that most film makers would dream of achieving. She asked if there were any lessons that film makers could learn from TV around how to build an audience.

Pippa Harris said that people still wanted to go to the cinema for the right films. She was under no illusions that they could achieve the same viewing figures as *The Avengers*, but she certainly thought that this film would fill out the Picturehouses and the Curzons. There were many ways of reaching the audience that you wanted.

Clare Wise observed that, as David Abraham had mentioned when he gave the MacTaggart Lecture, and as Danny Cohen had previously also spoken about, one issue that might emerge after the Election could be that Ofcom might seek to discuss Terms of Trade. Now that Neal Street was part of a vertically integrated conglomerate, she asked if her thoughts on this issue had changed.

Pippa Harris recognised that this was a difficult area and clearly the Terms of Trade were important to preserve: in recent years the protections that they had given producers, particularly the increased freedom to exploit IP, had completely underpinned the growth of the UK scripted sector, but also the factual side of the business. Chipping away at these protections was fraught with risks and it would be very difficult to differentiate between different sorts of production companies and to

define exactly who would or would not be able to benefit from them. She would be very wary of any changes.

Clare Wise invited questions from the audience.

Rhianna Dillon, Radio 1 Film Critic observed that a number of TV series had recently been made into movies, including the two *Inbetweeners* movies and the upcoming *Spooks: The Greater Good*. She asked if, particularly given the cinematic scope of Pippa's TV series, she had ever been approached to turn any of these into films.

Pippa Harris had not as yet, but this was surely just a matter of time; she particularly thought that *Penny Dreadful* would make a brilliant movie.



However, this was an area where producers had to tread carefully and for every smash hit success there were numerous other TV to movie conversions that had not been quite so memorable. She felt that the things that viewers wanted from a TV experience were not necessarily the same as what they wanted from a trip to the cinema, so success was never guaranteed.

Fiona Clarke-Hackston, BSAC had recently met the person who had the rights to *Call the Midwife* in Bangladesh, who had said that the audience over there completely dwarfed the UK audience, being about 34 million, from a population of 156 million. She asked Pippa whether she considered international audiences from unconventional territories when making commissioning decisions.

Pippa Harris explained that the show in question was a Bangladeshi production that had reinterpreted *Call the Midwife* for a local audience, so although their production team had worked with the UK teams, it was a separate show.

The short answer was that she did not consider the appeal to audiences beyond the core territory when making shows, but was always delighted when content found success in foreign markets.

Clare Wise thanked Pippa Harris.

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