

MARY BURKE - GRADUATION CEREMONY SPEECH TRANSCRIPT

HONORARY FELLOWSHIP AWARD ACCEPTANCE SPEECH GIVEN AT THE 2013 FALMOUTH UNIVERSITY GRADUATION CEREMONY

Transcript

“This is my last day on maternity leave so I've only been talking in baby language for nine months, so you're just going to have to excuse me. Thank you very much to the University. I feel humbled to be given this honour at a university in my favourite part of the world. Cornwall is such a magic and beautiful place; it's wonderful to be here breathing in the sea air. A special thank you to Kingsley Marshall for inviting me to speak to the University about five years ago. Without him we would never have set up the Warp Films Internship and we would've not hired a development assistant in Falmouth's former film student Lucile Sutherland, who just two short years ago was sitting where all of you are sitting now. To the students, it's a privilege to speak to your graduation. It's been so nice to meet so many of you on the internship programme and I hope you carry your experiences with us onto great things in the industry. Congratulations you did it, wicked!

Shortly after I graduated with a degree in English and Creative Writing in New York, I followed my heart back to England where I studied abroad the year before. I had no idea what I was going to do with my life, and all I knew is that I fell in love with an Englishman and I wanted to live here. I had no money and about three friends when I got here and it really sucked. I started working at Warp Films as a production assistant for no money while waitressing pizzas in the evening for cash. For more than a year I was babbling loudly in my American office in the soundproof cubbyhole at the Warp Records office in London. That was 11 years ago this past August. In that time I've managed to, as you say, fumble my way up the company stepladder from overly keen assistant to produce short music videos, two features, two series and five feature films.

When we first set up the company in 2002 it was about as low budget as it gets. My bosses Mark and Barry were sitting on space heaters instead of chairs in their shed at the top of the Sheffield Garden office, and I was fishing out paper from the recycling bin to print copies for scripts in London. My first set job was a runner on Chris Morris' short film *My Wrongs*, where I was responsible for menial tasks such as making tea and formatting scripts, but also film stuff like sourcing twin Doberman Pinscher dogs and researching important things like how long rigor mortis lasts in ducks. I never wanted to be a producer; I didn't even know what one did. I just knew that I felt most at home when hanging out with crazy people and doing, as you say, weird stuff. Being on set made me feel alive and it was like make believe, it wasn't like really working. Meeting directors and writers and talking about films was what I wanted to do.

Time passed and as a company we followed our noses, sticking to our guns taste wise and working hand to mouth from one production to another. And then it all clicked somehow. After *Dead Man Shoes* the company grew and with it so did I. I worked incredibly hard and used my initiative to develop my own ideas, finding books and stories to adapt into films as

well as not shying away from grunt work. For the first couple of years I worked with Chris Cunningham and I learnt so much from him about in camera effects and editing and how incredibly important music is to film. I remember auditioning juiced up muscle men for Rubber Jonny DVD artwork and taking pictures of giant steroid guys in their mini speedos in my kitchen. Thinking all the while this is crazy; I can't believe I get paid money to do this. And from then on I was hooked on the make believe.

Most of the time after work was spent raving, meeting musicians like Broadcast and Aphex Twin was so exciting for a young American who used to have to import the records via mail order and wait weeks for them to come to my college dorm room in New York in the 90s. My deep love for music is what made me want to work for Warp in the first place and I think for a lot of the directors who I've produced films with, Peter Strickland and Paul King and Richard Ayoade, that stamp for quality is what made them feel comfortable bringing the films to me.

But it hasn't always been rave up and glamorous champagne receptions. We've worked incredibly hard to produce about 20 feature films and five series in ten years with just four producers. The company has grown into something much bigger than I think any of us could ever have imagined and, although it's often been difficult, I look back on the last ten years and think about how I've had an amazing decade and been adopted by a weird and wonderful family here in the UK.

If I could impart any advice I would say three things. One, be brave, you can't wait for permission to create; you've just got to do it. I would like especially to encourage the women graduating today with even the smallest inkling to direct or write, to harness their egos and stick their necks out. According to the 2013 BFI statistical year book, UK women writers declined from 18.9% of the total writers in 2011 to 13.4% in 2012, the second lowest number in five years. That's just 25 writers. And the picture's even more bleak for female directors with men accounting for 92.2% of the directors of UK films in 2012, an increase of more than 7% year on year. This translates to 165 male directors and only 14 female directors. As I said, today's my last day of maternity leave for my second child and, with the punishing schedules the industry demands, I don't think you can have it all, but you can definitely have a lot of it. Also, be brave with your ideas. Audiences are tired with the same old crap. Use your youth to your advantage and save conforming for when you have a mortgage. Take risks now, falling is learning.

The second thing I'd like to say is learn to collaborate. Films are like babies; you can't make them on your own. Guard your creative decisions and ideas fiercely, and remember a film is a collaborative artistic medium unlike any other, made by creative efforts of sometimes hundreds of people. If you can accept others' ideas you'll develop and grow into the best version of yourself that you can be.

And lastly, remember, life is a party. Take your work seriously but don't let it consume you. Make space for fun and laughter and time with your friends and family. Will you draw upon your love and emotional experiences in all of your work? We are the music makers and we are the dreamers of the dreams. Congratulations again. Thanks."