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Interview with the Creators of *Love/Hate*

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Abstract

On 25th November 2015, Studies in Arts and Humanities (SAH) Journal hosted a public interview with leading Irish film and television producer James Flynn (Octagon Productions) and creator/writer of the ground-breaking Irish television drama Love/Hate Stuart Carolan. The interview was conducted by Conor Murphy (Editor-in-Chief, SAH Journal) at Filmbase Ireland before a live audience comprising students and faculty from the film schools of Dublin Business School, Filmbase and Pulse College. This lively and thought-provoking interview provided key insights into the artistic and production processes behind the making of a successful TV drama. James Flynn gave a detailed overview of the funding and legislative frameworks in which the modern day film producer operates both in Ireland and overseas. He provided a fascinating timeline of developments in the filmmaking industry in Ireland in parallel with his own career over the last twenty years. Stuart Carolan explained how the rich and varied characters that inhabit Love/Hate come into being and offered an insight into the daily writing rituals that shaped the development of character, plot and pace. He also spoke about the significance of casting in Love/Hate on the development of the story. The casting of John Connors, for example, influenced Stuart to develop a traveller theme to a greater extent than initially intended. Stuart's passion for social justice and equality was evident throughout the interview. The interview is replete with analysis of the process of developing Love/Hate including the logistics of shooting in multiple locations and the tight deadlines under which they operated. In addition, James and Stuart offered focussed, helpful and encouraging advice for emerging screenwriters and filmmakers.

CM: James, could you outline for the audience your journey through the Irish and international mediascape over the last 25 years?

JF: Yes, but I have to make the comment that due to the fact that a number of our companies specializes in financial and production services that we have a lot of credits on projects which

we didn't develop and a lot of Irish, German, UK and French companies have learned that the way to survive in developing your own projects is to have a core business and a core income. We set up with a slate of indigenous projects. We spent two years working on *Nora* and we spent three years working on *H3*, so in five years we made two films that we had actually worked on the development of and in our early years we realized that we had to specialize in other areas. That enabled us to be more outward looking and realize that Ireland is a small open economy. It's a country that can attract projects here. We're a hard-working country, we have what I have amusingly heard described as "the unsolicited gift of the English language" and we have great locations here in terms of period drama we're second to none and we do have studio facilities here which are improving all the time and which will be improving in the next two years. So there is now an infrastructure here to service productions as well as develop your own and I think you'll find when you look at the more established companies in Ireland (and they're still small SMEs, we employ six people full-time, we're not a big studio), you'll find that a lot of people have learned that there are three kinds of productions. One is the pure servicing of a production. As an outcome of a meeting in Cannes in autumn 2006, we ended up filming two weeks of exteriors of *P.S. I Love You* in Ireland, even though a lot of the Irish interiors are all shot in New York so it was very strange. We didn't option the book. We didn't commission the writer. It's important to make that distinction but what I have found is that those international contacts have blurred into projects that you start working on yourself. Michael Hirst has effectively never left Ireland since 2006 when he came with *The Tudors*. He stayed here and now he's doing *Vikings* as we speak. How *The Borgias* came about was that *The Tudors* was coming to an end *The Borgias* basically replaced *The Tudors* because there was a scheduling opportunity and money there to do it. Showtime do one large scale European drama every year and that's how *Penny Dreadful* came about after *The Borgias* finished. So it's very much a relationship business and I still think that one of the downsides when you're working on multiple projects is that sometimes your development slate can suffer so everything is about balance. I do think that relationship and infrastructure and reputation and contacts really stand for a lot. We just kept working and we've been a bit lucky in some ways as well. The interesting thing is that *The Tudors* happened at a very lucky time for us as well. I think if you go back to the late 1990s, there was a famous television series called *Oz* and the reason I was aware of it is that at the time we were servicing an incoming production called *An Everlasting Piece*. It was a Barry Levinson film and, after wrap each day, he was working on *Oz* at night time from Dublin. The thing about *Oz* was that it was the first ever scripted television drama by HBO. So they had done no scripted TV drama before and then *The Sopranos* kicked in. So the television explosion happened at that time and we were lucky to be part of it. When *The Tudors* began in 2005 and ran for four years, we tapped into something in Europe that was beginning to happen in America and we became part of that, very much part of the period drama element, but very much part of it. If you go into the cinema now, you'll see an ad for *House of Cards*, which isn't even a television series because it's shown on the internet. We now have all the buzzwords like 'content' and 'screen'. The Irish Film Board is apparently changing its name to 'Screen Ireland'. I still believe in theatrical content because cinema is the greatest medium but there is no doubt now that things are changing. I was at the American Film Market two weeks ago and all anyone was talking about was how to get into television.

CM: You mentioned relationships and you mentioned your business partner, but not by name. I presume you're talking about Morgan O'Sullivan. Maybe you can give the audience a little background about his pivotal role in Irish film and television over the years.

JF: Morgan is by profession, effectively a marketing genius. For Irish television audiences he would have been the Barry Norman of the 1970s. He was the guy going to Los Angeles to interview movie stars and then in the 1980s at a time when there was no fully resourced Irish Film Board (except for a brief period) and there were no proper tax deals for production, Morgan left RTE and went to L.A. and did the hard slog. He worked at HBO for three years and he worked his way up. Then, Michael D. Higgins extended the tax incentive in the early 1990s and created incentives for companies and individuals to invest in film production in Ireland on the back of the Oscar success of Neil Jordan and that led to large scale investment here including *Braveheart*. Ireland at the time, led by Morgan, was the market leader in offering an incentive. There was no incentive available at the time in Hungary or in Eastern Europe generally so Ireland led the way in the 1990s on the tax incentive. That was down to Michael D. Higgins' vision. And of course, what Morgan had, which nobody else had was that he knew all of Los Angeles. So he was able to go to L.A. and say "Come to Ireland". And it was that simple. A lot of policies in film are driven by structures and incentives and then one hopes that an infrastructure will develop from that. What happened between 2000 and 2006 was that it became possible under European law to access the British tax deal for projects that were deemed British even though they were shot in Ireland and if you look at a lot of the films that were made here at the time like *The Count of Monte Cristo* or *Veronica Guerin* or *Ella Enchanted* or *King Arthur*, they were all British films that were shot in Ireland to get tax deals from both territories. Now by 2006 the British government cottoned on to it and they literally closed the fact that you could be a British film shooting in Ireland. What happened during those six years was that you had a range of Irish crews built up by Morgan and myself so that when the high-end cable television productions came on stream, Ireland had a competitive advantage in that we were putting big budget feature crews on *The Tudors*, on *Vikings* and *The Borgias*. That's unusual. If you go to England or to Eastern Europe, they'll ask if you want their film crew or their TV crew. The TV crew usually isn't as resourced or as experienced. In Ireland, we do have feature film crews working on television production. So that six-year window was very important. There are downsides also to having those large-scale productions. They can inflate prices, they can affect lower budget projects getting made and they can fill studios. So every asset can also have issues as well. We came up with a model where we'd try and do our large budget project in the summer and then have the same crew work on a more competitive rate on a lower-budget project in the winter and in this way provide a full year's work. On the lower budget film you're investing in training and infrastructure. So, the infrastructure in Ireland is now very strong. We need more studios but we've got very good crews. We've got five 'A'-list crews at the highest level, comparable to anyone else in the world. The other thing that happened, if you go back to the 1990s, RTE didn't invest in independent drama. Thanks to a lot of lobbying from Screen Producers Ireland, it became law in the early 2000s for RTE to put 25% of their programming budget into the independent sector. That led to *The Clinic* and RTE started to do independent drama and every year since RTE will do a six-part drama and sometimes two. When you look at the European situation, the spend is nothing like what happens in France and Germany and Scandinavia. Now at least in Ireland you have RTE committed to an independent sector, you have the Irish Film Board (although under-resourced as well) and then you have a very strong tax deal here which is comparable to any other tax deal in the world. Possibly the UK is the only one that competes with it. Right now you have *Vikings*, *Penny Dreadful* and *Ripper Street* shooting in Ireland. That's three A-list crews fully occupied. And there's other stuff happening that I might not know about as well.

CM: *Stuart, over to you. Let get straight to the question. Love/Hate, where did it come from? We look at the journalistic trail and at IMDB and we date it from 2010 but I'm assuming it goes back further than that.*

SC: Yeah. It does and it doesn't. If you're a writer, you've got tons of ideas that you're working on but I think most ideas don't happen. Nine out of ten ideas don't happen. Sometimes in your mind you're thinking about something for many, many years and I suppose it would have been about two years before that I started putting stuff down on paper. But so many times you think you're going to break through on something, and you don't. In my mind I would have had lots of characters worked out or storylines that I knew exactly what I wanted to do. But it's a job and you don't over-invest in advance. I'd done that before. My first play wasn't a commission. I'd given up the day job and I just wrote it but over the time, I realised that you'd work on so many things that just failed. No matter how many years you've been thinking about it, unless it's a 'live' show, you're not 'working' on it. So the moment Jane Gogan in RTE said "Go for it", that's when I really started working on it although I had been thinking about it for two years before that.

CM: *How did it all come together? Did you bring it to James or to RTE first?*

JF: I first met Stuart in 2007 about something else, but in August 2008 I met again with Stuart and the director David Caffrey. They had come to me with very strong feedback from RTE so they were going around to various Irish companies to see who could create a structure and put together a proposal to get some development finance from RTE. It was conceptual, if I remember. There might have been a couple of pages, but it was conceptual. RTE had said they were very interested but that it needed a structure around it for a proposal. So back in 2008 we had a very strong meeting where we were all fired up and excited and we went into RTE a month later with a treatment and they approved it for development expenditure for up to six scripts. The contracts were milestone-based so you get commissioned to do a treatment and then a pilot (which is the first episode) and then some back-up scripts which are maybe a second or third episode. I think we got commissioned from July 2009 for the first series.

SC: That sounds about right. I've no memory for these things...

JF: There was a gap actually because for RTE budget reasons, we only did four episodes in 2009 but we didn't film in 2010 and we filmed again in March 2011 for Series 2.

CM: *At any stage did you think you had a 'keeper' here, the kind of show that would create the phenomenon it has become?*

SC: Well, I knew I wanted to do it. You start off a certain way, you try and make it better all the time. It's about key individuals - Jane Gogan and then James. It's hard to think too far ahead each step of the way because the truth is if you don't get the audience numbers you're unlikely to get re-commissioned. There was a sense of it being like an articulated truck. You put the foot down and go for it. The more support there was, the more we could go for it. And then once you're going, you just keep going. There are certain stories you just want to tell; stories about being haunted by certain things. In terms of 'work', there's a very practical side to it. For one, you've to know story and script inside out. I've read so many plays and scripts. I know how to break them down. It's like being a car mechanic or a carpenter. It's a trade. That's the way I see it. The second thing is a very practical thing in terms of production and you're aware of all the limitations that can sometime be opportunities so that you don't just

have two or three locations. You need the right chemistry, the right team; the right actors. We have these amazing actors like Tom Vaughan-Lawlor, Aidan Gillen, Robert Sheehan, Charlie Murphy, John Connors and Peter Coonan. You can write for them. Beyond that there has to be a reason to do it. You can't just write it. There has to be a reason. I want to write it. I'm haunted by certain stories and certain characters. When you're writing like this, it's very full time. About 70% of your time is spent in your imagination. You're at a desk. You talk to people but you're in this imaginary world. So there has to be a reason that you want to do it. I found that I really wanted to tell certain stories in a certain way and when you have the perfect mix of certain actors being shot by certain directors and the music and everything, you can get a little bit of satisfaction from it. Every year, you'd look back and see things we didn't achieve with an episode and hope that in the next one, we could raise the bar a bit and go further. At the heart of it you want to tell a story that you feel compelled to tell.

CM: Casting is absolutely essential. I was looking back over the cast list for the five seasons. It's an X-ray of all the good and great Irish actors of that time and it's a platform for so many actors coming through. Particularly John Connors...

*SC: John is an interesting case. John was originally cast as an extra. He was in doing the pipe-bomb maker and he improvised a line. He said: "There's a proper pop in it". I loved the line. I loved his energy. Normally I'm not a huge fan of improvised stuff but I was very drawn to him. I went to see *King of the Travellers* in Galway and I talked to him afterwards and told him I'd like to take that character and write more for him. We became very good friends. I actually learned a lot from John. John is a writer himself. He's written *Cardboard Gangsters*. He takes acting very seriously. He's studied all the methods himself. He knows everything. He's watched every movie, every TV series. We talked a lot about where he went with his character. Being a traveller is very important to him and it's very important to the character and the story. I really wanted to tell that story in a complex way and that's one area I felt hugely proud of. He would have talked to me about using Cant, the Traveller language. I love that we have a line "Get that fain an innik" - - "Get the guy a gun". It was a very rich experience for me. I learned a lot from him. We'd talk about casting. He'd always talk in terms of auras. He thinks that actors have a sense of something about them. I thought that's true. I'd felt it myself. I often think it now when I'm casting for actors. I think in his part he comes across as very strong and kind of noble and so you can play to that as we did in Series 4. And then you can play against that as we did in Series 5. It's a very good example of that creative process. It's not simply that you're at home writing "EXTERIOR, STREET..."*

CM: How intense were the shooting days on Love/Hate?

*SC: David Caffery was the director and he did an amazing job. It was very important that we had a really tight team. There was Steve Matthews and Suzanne McAuley. Beyond that there were the Heads of Department; pretty much the same crew for five years. As each year went by we pushed it out more and more. *Love/Hate* probably had double or triple the amount of scenes that the average drama would have. I felt that added to the pace and moved it all along. You could easily change that by setting a whole load of scenes in a pub or whatever. There'd be no problem then with doing the pages in a day at a relaxed pace. We did it in a guerrilla style. I've talked to other people who are amazed at how quickly we worked. If you're in a location, say a house or a prison, you'd do two days there. For the crew it takes at least an hour to move from one location to another. Sometimes we'd have two moves in a*

day. Two hours of filming, everything moves, have lunch, film again, everything moves again. It's incredibly intense. But it worked out well.

CM: *A question for both of you about the impact of Love/Hate. Here we are a year after the end of the last season and we're still talking about it as if it were on television last week. Pretty much everybody in the country has a seared memory of the experience of watching Love/Hate. Why do you think that was?*

SC: (pauses) I think it's just good drama, good acting...

JF: The interesting thing is that it was at the third series that everything exploded. I thought the first two seasons were very strong but it wasn't until Series 3 that it became what it has become.

SC: I think a lot of the things we did were for moral reasons. That might sound odd but it was like that. There was a great degree of trust between the team. Jane Gogan was very supportive of what we were doing. Afterwards people said, "Well, it was a gangster show. People were always going to watch it". People watched the first two seasons and said they liked Nidge or they liked Trish or whatever. In the third series I think we almost pulled the rug from under that. The third series opens up with a murder but it's about a brutal rape. It's not Sunday night drama where we'll have a little bit of this and a little bit of that. If you look structurally at what we had in that first episode, we had the murder and you stay to find out what happened. But in the second act it's just brutal. It's all shot in the cellar of the Shebeen. It's the most horrific rape and murder that takes up the whole of the second act. And then the third act is simply dealing with the body and burying it. So if you look at it and say "I'm going to get a million people to watch that", nobody will agree. The Sunday night drama audience is used to watch *Downton Abbey*. You're just going to alienate so many people. Who wants to watch rape and murder in that way? The viewing figures from the second series would have indicated that people didn't want too much violence. I remember when Fran was introduced in the second series and there was a dog fighting scene when Luke was attacked. You can see in the figures that there is a dip at that point. You can extrapolate that the audience was looking for something else, something easier maybe, a little more family life. That rape story was partly influenced by Mariora Rostas, the Romanian girl who was raped and murdered in Dublin after which a house was burnt down. I was haunted by that. I'd heard a lot of stories about women in gangland who had been viciously beaten and so I thought that was important. Charlie Murphy is a great actress and that became the third series. It shouldn't have got an audience but it did.

JF: The easiest pitch for *Love/Hate* was to say it's the Irish *Sopranos*. But that's nearly a lazy way of describing it. I remember in the original pitch, Stuart describing a scene in which Nidge is arguing over the price of a bouncy castle and then wandering around Dundrum Shopping Centre. At some stage there was an element of you going back to the basics in terms of television crime. But in the third series you start to see a whole other layer of stories coming out from the core of a structured thriller series. I also think if you look at a series like *Breaking Bad*, something is always catching up on the characters. By series three of

Love/Hate they were in way over their heads and they're playing catch-up from then on. That's what stayed with them right to the end.

SC: We could have had it light. The figures indicated that we should make it lighter but we did the opposite and went as dark as we could. I remember thinking that this was as far as it went but that at least we'd done the right thing. There was also some criticism of the fourth series that it was too slow. The fourth series was deliberately almost anti-dramatic. I remember meeting all these young lads wanting to be Nidge and I felt a huge responsibility to 15 and 16 year olds who wanted to get into that world. We used a youth group that year in O'Devaney Gardens and Barry Keoghan, who is an amazing actor and doing all sorts of great things now internationally, played Wayne. He ends up dead beside a wheelie bin. Bang. There's no big drama. It's horrible. Debbie ends up dying of heroin in a flat that she can only heat with candles. There's no great drama. Nidge says, "Don't call the cops. Wait until the neighbours can smell her". There's nothing dramatic about that. There's no waiting for what's going to happen next. It's absolutely anti-drama. What we were trying to do was to ... set a moral foundation...but I think what drives the thing is a kind of rage. It's there throughout the show. People identified with it. There's a rage underneath it that makes it alive. There's a forgiving humour in it that people recognize. I find that there's a lot of real grief in it. Most people I've met have been in situations of pain and so there is an emotional connection for the audience. In the first series Robert Sheehan and Ruth Negga (Darren and Mary) are standing above the grave of their brother. It feels real. He says, "I wish he had kids". She laughs, "Maybe he does". It's a real moment that I think people watching can feel with it. At the same time, we undercut the emotion when Darren asks Nidge to stay with his brother's body and then he starts playing with his phone. It never gets sentimental. There's a kind of madness in it. There's an energy in it. The desire was to be as close to real human emotion as possible...

...One of the early criticisms of the show was that the actors were too good looking. The Irish Times said that the actors didn't look like the "ferret-faced skangers down at the Four Courts". I thought that this was really indicative of our mentality. The notion that people in certain parts of the city are 'ferret-faced' is something I find to be a repulsive attitude. The amount of times I've had conversations with people who describe Travellers as 'Knackers', I find that repulsive; physically repellent. What I really hate is the hidden snobbery. It's a whole mentality of talking in terms of, "It's not us. It's those people over there". The funny thing is that at 9.30pm the prisons were quiet. Everyone was watching *Love/Hate*. We've had fellas with bullet-proof vests coming onto the set looking for selfies with Nidge. The people in that world of cops and criminals loved the show and at the same time you get teenagers in Dalkey saying, "this isn't how it is, they should be meaner". When you talk to people who've lost family members, when you talk to people whose brother or sister owes drug debt, it's terrible but they're not any different to the rest of us. People are people. The lies that go on as if drugs are over there somewhere, not everywhere. On the ground there is a different truth. When you read the newspapers, the truth just doesn't come across. Heroin should be dealt with as a medical problem. End of story. The same debate has been going on for thirty years. It's just the same boring conversation about it. If you look at needle exchange centres, you

see lads coming down with bench warrants out for them. There is a kind of tacit agreement for the guards to stay away because we need them to have clean needles. Real addicts are real people. Not just ‘skangers’. It’s obnoxious language. They’re real people. It’s not just about whether someone is middle class or working class. Loads of people are in between. That kind of language is so patronizing. The idea that there’s ‘good’ working class and there’s ‘bad’ drugs gangs. It’s all complex and messed up. It’s all messy. And life’s messy. You talk to addicts and it’s tough. A lot of addicts have issues of sexual abuse, pain, a lack of love. Sometimes they just took the wrong road at a certain point. When I have conversations with people, I talk to them as human beings in a non-patronizing way. I feel like I can learn things from people. We can be friends. One of the amazing things for me after five years of *Love/Hate* is that in a way I couldn’t care less about the drama. It’s done. It’s over. I am proud of it. But for these five years, I’ve made the most amazing friendships and learnt so much. It’s been a way of life. It’s not a didactic, obvious way of telling a story. Underneath there is the rage. In the very first episode there’s a woman at Darren’s brother’s funeral and she says “that bastard judge wouldn’t let me make a victim impact statement”. You can say more in one line than in having crow-barred in some social commentary. The character of Janet, when she’s trying to encourage her son away from crime, she talks about her dad. She says, “You know, they did terrible things to the boys in those days in the borstal”. And that tells you what it is. You see these problems going back three generations of pain, sexual abuse, borstals, whole communities being wiped out; absolute neglect. No playgrounds, no facilities, nothing. It’s the same debate, endlessly going on. And at the heart of it there are people, good and bad. It’s complex. Sometimes you meet victims. Sometimes you meet people who’ve done terrible things who are also victims themselves...and it’s complex.

CM: You’ve set the bar very high for those coming through in terms of making contemporary television drama projects. Who is going to step up to the post-Love/Hate space? What is the panorama facing somebody looking for a career in the film and television sector in Ireland?

*JF: Television is absolutely booming at the moment. If we look at the example of Love/Hate, it was financed in 2009 by RTE and a tax deal and a small advance from ITV Global. If we were doing Love/Hate now we could get a foreign advance from the likes of Red Arrow or Content. People would put serious non-Irish money into it now, which wasn’t around in 2009. The television industry is all to play for. I do believe that the likes of Google, Microsoft, Hulu and everyone getting into the content business, there will be a huge outlook for television drama. It’s also a bubble and I believe that a bit like the internet, there will be a huge downscaling in the next five to seven years when very expensive dramas are made and they don’t get the figures. There will be a big slump. I also believe in theatrical feature films and there will always be a big audience for cinema. The films which are struggling at the moment are the low and medium-budget films from three to six million euros, which are harder and harder to make. You are either making very low budget films effectively out of subsidy or else you’re making a blockbuster. So what has suffered is the six to ten million dollar film. *Little Miss Sunshine* or *Sideways*. That kind of film is very hard to get made and the only people who are keeping those movies alive at the moment are stars who want to win Oscars and who will lend their name to movies like *Still Alice*. Against that, feature film is*

going to improve. There has always been what you might call ‘funny money’ in the business. Rich people making investments. Since 2008 that sector died off but it’s beginning to come back now. As we come out of recession, the medium budget film sector will open up again. As long as government policy remains focused on jobs and the tax deal and upgrading the Irish Film Board, there is a future for film here. What would be really great would be if RTE would invest more substantially in feature film as every other broadcaster in Europe is required to do and I do believe that there will be a strong lobby to change that in the years ahead.

CM: *What has the resistance been up to now?*

JF: Frankly, independent drama was not really on their radar until 2003 and then they were forced to do it through legislation. Without that there would have been no *Love/Hate* and we might not have any independent drama. So we have that and now we need more legislative change. It’s a large state organization. In the UK you have Channel 4 and BBC Films. In France you have Canal Plus. In Scandinavia, you have television stations investing heavily in more films. I think we were lucky that in RTE there was a commissioning editor who was excited by content. A lot of it is down to people but legislatively we do need a national broadcaster who is going to invest in feature film. Take the example of *Room*, a ten million euro film, which is probably going to get nominated for at least one Oscar and *Brooklyn* which is breaking records in Ireland will definitely get an Oscar nomination; twenty million quids’ worth of film which has probably brought ten million into Ireland. I’d be surprised if RTE had any significant investment in either film; maybe fifty or sixty grand. In France if you have a ten million euro film, you’ll have Canal Plus in for two million. Legally, they are required to do so. I think we need to look at changing that. The other thing worth mentioning is what happened in *Love/Hate*. There is a British model and an American model for television drama. The American model is all about the writer. Stuart was the Showrunner on *Love/Hate* before we even knew there was such a thing. That’s a way forward. They’re very resistant to that in the UK still. There, you’ll have the owner of a company (someone like me) who hires a script editor and the script editor then goes off and deals with the writer. The director has more power than the writer and that’s still the traditional film model. It will be interesting to see if more writer/producers like Stuart emerge. I think that’s very important for the industry as well.