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IMAGES

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SYNOPSIS

Daniel Blake (59) has worked as a joiner most of his life in Newcastle. Now, for the first time ever, he needs help from the State. He crosses paths with single mother Katie and her two young children, Daisy and Dylan. Katie's only chance to escape a one-roomed homeless hostel in London has been to accept a flat in a city she doesn't know, some 300 miles away.

Daniel and Katie find themselves in no-man's land, caught on the barbed wire of welfare bureaucracy as played out against the rhetoric of 'striver and skiver' in modern-day Britain.

PAUL LAVERTY

WRITER

Rebecca (producer) and I didn't think it would take Ken long before he wanted to sink his teeth into something fresh after JIMMY'S HALL, despite the rumours. It didn't.

It was a rich cocktail that seeped into what became I, DANIEL BLAKE.

The sustained and systematic campaign against anyone on welfare spearheaded by the right wing press, backed by a whole wedge of poisonous TV programmes jumping on the same bandwagon caught our eye. Much of it was crude propaganda, savouring the misery of often pathetic characters in the most prurient fashion. And all the better if they had a drink problem, a sure sign of them wasting precious taxpayers' money.

Little wonder it led to a spectacular aberration. Studies found that the average person thought that in excess of 30% of welfare payments were claimed fraudulently. The truth is that it is 0.7%. It was no surprise to find out that many people on benefits had been insulted and humiliated with a significant number being attacked physically.

This manipulated distortion dovetailed perfectly with the austerity narrative by the government and welfare cuts became a prime target. Who can forget Osborne's speech on the "closed curtains" of the hordes of skivers still asleep in the early morning at the last Tory party conference? Another fact: only 3% of welfare budget goes to the unemployed while the elderly, the Tory preferred constituency, takes 42% in pensions.

But the immediate spark for this story started with a call I got from Ken to join him on a visit to his childhood home of Nuneaton where he has close connection with a charity that deals with homelessness. We met some terrific workers and they introduced us to some of the youngsters they were working with. One lad whom they had recently helped shared his life story with us. It was his casual mention of hunger and description of nausea and lightheadedness as he tried to work (as usual, zero hour contracts with precarious work on an ad hoc basis) that really struck us.

As Ken and I travelled the country, one contact leading to another, we heard many stories. Food banks became a rich source of information. It struck us that when we made MY NAME IS JOE or SWEET SIXTEEN, or even going further back to Ken's earlier films, one of the big differences now was the new world of food banks.

As more and more stories came to light we realised that many people are now making a choice between food or heat. We met a remarkable man in Scotland, principled and articulate, desperate to work, who refused point blank to do meaningless workfare, who was given endless sanctions by the Department for Work and Pensions. He never turned his heating on, survived on the cheapest canned food from Lidl and nearly got frostbite in February 2015.

We heard stories of "revenge evictions" i.e. tenants thrown from their homes for having the temerity to complain of faults and poor conditions. We were given examples of the poor being moved from London and offered places outside the capital, a species of social cleansing. And it was impossible not to sense the echo from some fifty years back when Ken and colleagues made CATHY COME HOME although this was something we never talked about.

Breaking the stereotypes, we heard that many of those attending the food banks were not unemployed but the working poor who couldn't make ends meet. Zero hour contracts caused havoc to many, making it impossible to plan their lives with any certainty and leaving them bouncing between irregular work and the complexity of the benefit system.

Another significant group we spoke to in the food banks were those who had been sanctioned (i.e. benefits stopped as punishment which could be from a minimum of a month to three years) by the DWP. Some of the stories were so surreal that if we had them in the script they would undermine credibility, like the father who was sanctioned for

attending the birth of his child, or a relative attending a funeral, despite informing the DWP of the reasons. Literally millions have been sanctioned and their lives, and those of their children, thrown into desperation by a simple administrative decision. Criminals are treated with more natural justice, and the fines are often less than what benefit claimants lose when hit by a sanction.

This led us to another very important group of people who risked their jobs to help us. Workers inside the DWP who spoke to us on an anonymous basis who were disgusted by what they had been forced to carry out in relation to sanctions. One worker in a Jobcentre showed me a print-out that showed how many sanctions he and his colleagues had given out, together with a covering letter from his senior manager, stating that only three “job coaches” had carried out enough sanctions in the past month. If they didn’t carry out more sanctions they would be threatened with the Orwellian sounding PIP - “Personal Improvement Plan”. For the record, let me address those senior managers of the DWP and their political bosses who have given evidence before the UK and Scottish Parliaments stating that there are no targets for sanctions. You are brazen-faced liars hiding behind legalese, and your workers know it. Specific numbers might not have been given, but clear demands and “expectation” were implicit and they were forced to get the numbers up.

Food. Heat. House. The basics, from time immemorial. We knew in our gut this film had to be raw. Elemental.

There were endless possibilities. The characters could have been similar to the young people in Nuneaton scrambling around, hovering over homelessness on zero hour contracts. They could have been disabled, as we found out from experts the disabled have suffered on average six times more than any other group from the government’s raft of cuts, a truly staggering scandal. Many of those sanctioned have been psychologically vulnerable suffering from depression and other mental illnesses. In the memorable words of one civil servant, the easy targets were “low-hanging fruit” which perhaps could be the title of another poignant ballad to join Billie Holiday’s.

The world of benefits is very complicated and changing all the time especially with Universal Credit on the horizon. It took some figuring out. But another key group that caught our attention were those men and women who were sick or injured and who had applied for Employment Support Allowance. The medical assessments for this benefit had been subcontracted to a French company, and then in turn to an American multinational after a series of scandals. The stories we heard, and the practices revealed, were legion. One furious young doctor told me of one of his patients who was dying of cancer, could barely walk, who was deemed “fit for work.” One day he fell at home and cut his head. The was called but he refused to get in as he was signing on the next day at the Jobcentre and feared a sanction that would stop his benefits. He died about three months later. What needless misery and humiliation was caused to this older man in his last days.

All of these people deemed fit for work are forced to spend 35 hours a week looking for work. In some parts of the country there were as many as 40 people for each job advertised. One academic informed me that over the course of the last Parliament there was roughly a variation of 2.5 to 5 claimants for every job advertised. Sisyphus came to mind.

Daniel Blake and Katie Morgan are not based on anyone we met. Scripts can’t just be copied and transported from the food bank or the dole queue. Dan and Katie are both entirely fictional, but they were infused with all of the above and more. They were inspired by the hundreds of decent men, women and their children who shared their intimate stories with us. Faces of articulate intelligent people now come to mind, frightened people, older people tormented by the complexity of the system and new technology, (many of the staff within the Jobcentres told us they would like to have helped more but were prevented by managers obsessed with reducing “footfall” from doing so) young people who had lost hope far too early, some I remember trembling with anxiety as they tried to summarise their predicament, and many doing their best to maintain their dignity caught up in something misnamed as welfare which had all the hallmarks of purgatory. And yes, you opportunist sanctimonious commissioning producers of the crass benefits TV programmes fanning hatred and promoting ignorance, there were some drinkers and addicts with chaotic lives and odd tattoos.

There has always been a vicious streak of state bullying in our society when it comes to treating the vulnerable. All we

have to do is remember the workhouses of the 19th century that insisted on splitting up mothers and fathers from their children just to make sure the gruel was tempered by sufficient cruelty.

The Rev Joseph Townsend, an 18th century vicar, summed it up. "Hunger will tame the fiercest animals," he wrote. "It will teach decency and civility, obedience and subjection... it is only hunger which can spur and goad the poor on to labour."

KEN LOACH

DIRECTOR

There were rumours that JIMMY'S HALL was going to be your last film. Was that ever the case, and if so what persuaded you to make I, DANIEL BLAKE?

That was a rash thing to have said. There are so many stories to tell. So many characters to present...

What lies at that root of the story?

The universal story of people struggling to survive was the starting point. But then the characters and the situation have to be grounded in lived experience. If we look hard enough, we can all see the conscious cruelty at the heart of the state's provision for those in desperate need and the use of bureaucracy, the intentional inefficiency of bureaucracy, as a political weapon: "This is what happens if you don't work; if you don't find work you will suffer." The anger at that was the motive behind the film.

Where did you start your research?

I'd always wanted to do something in my home town which is Nuneaton in the middle of the Midlands, and so Paul and I went and met people there. I'm a little involved with a charity called Doorway, which is run by a friend Carol Gallagher. She introduced Paul and me to a whole range of people who were unable to find work for various reasons – not enough jobs being the obvious one. Some were working for agencies on insecure wages and had nowhere to live. One was a very nice young lad who took us to his room in a shared house helped by Doorway and the room was Dickensian. There was a mattress on the floor, a fridge but pretty well nothing else. Paul asked him would it be rude to see what he'd got in the fridge. He said, "No" and he opened the door: there was nothing, there wasn't milk, there wasn't a biscuit, there wasn't anything. We asked him when was the last time he went without food, he said that the week before he'd been without food for four days. This is just straight hunger and he was desperate. He'd got a friend who was working for an agency. His friend had been told by the agency at five o'clock one morning to get to a warehouse at six o'clock. He had no transport, but he got there somehow, he was told to wait, and at quarter past six he was told, "Well there's no work for you today." He was sent back so he got no money. This constant humiliation and insecurity is something we refer to in the film.

Out of all the material you gathered and the people you met, how did you settle on a narrative?

That's probably the hardest decision to take because there are so many stories. We felt we'd done a lot about young people – SWEET SIXTEEN was one – and we saw the plight of older people and thought that it often goes unremarked. There's a generation of people who were skilled manual workers who are now reaching the end of their working lives. They have health problems and they won't work again because they're not nimble enough to duck and dive between agency jobs, a bit of this and a bit of that. They are used to a more traditional structure for work and so they are just lost. They can't deal with the technology and they have health problems anyway. Then they are confronted by assessments for Employment and Support Allowance where you can be deemed fit for work when you're not. The whole bureaucratic, impenetrable structure defeats people. We heard so many stories about that. Paul wrote the character Daniel Blake and the project was under way.

And your argument is that the bureaucratic structure is impenetrable by design...

Yes. The Jobcentres now are not about helping people, they're about setting obstacles in people's way. There's a job coach, as they're called, who is not allowed now to tell people about the jobs available, whereas before they would help them to find work. There are expectations of the amount of number of people who will be sanctioned. If the

interviewers don't sanction enough people they themselves are put on 'Personal Improvement Plans'. Orwellian, isn't it? This all comes from research drawn from people who have worked at the DWP, they've worked in Jobcentres and have been active in the Trade Union, PCS – the evidence is there in abundance. With the sanctioning regime it means people won't be able to live on the money they've got and therefore food banks have come into existence. And this is something the government seems quite content about – that there should be food banks. Now they're even talking about putting job coaches into food banks, so the food banks are becoming absorbed into the state as part of the mechanism of dealing with poverty. What kind of world have we created here?

Do you feel it's a story that speaks mainly to these times?

I think it has wider implications. It goes back to the Poor Law, the idea of the deserving and the undeserving poor. The working class have to be driven to work by fear of poverty. The rich have to be bribed by ever greater rewards. The political establishment have consciously used hunger and poverty to drive people to accept the lowest wage and most insecure work out of desperation. The poor have to be made to accept the blame for their poverty. We see this throughout Europe and beyond.

What was it like going to film in food banks?

We went to a number of food banks together and Paul went to more on his own. The story of what we show in the food bank in the film was based on an incident that was described to Paul. Oh, food banks are awful; you see people in desperation. We were at a food bank in Glasgow and a man came to the door. He looked in and he hovered and then he walked away. One of the women working there went after him, because he was obviously in need, but he couldn't face the humiliation of coming in and asking for food. I think that goes on all the time.

Why did you decide to set the film in Newcastle?

We went to a number of places – we went to Nuneaton, Nottingham, Stoke and Newcastle. We knew the North-West well having worked in Liverpool and Manchester so we thought we should try somewhere else. We didn't want to be in London because that has got huge problems but they're different and it's good to look beyond the capital. Newcastle is culturally very rich. It's like Liverpool, Glasgow, big cities on the coast. They are great visually, cinematic, the culture is very expressive and the language is very strong. There's a great sense of resistance; generations of struggle have developed a strong political consciousness.

Describe the character of Daniel - who is he and what is his predicament?

Dan is a man who's served his time as a joiner, a skilled craftsman. He's worked on building sites, he's worked for small builders, he's been a jobbing carpenter and still works with wood for his own enjoyment. But his wife has died, he's had a serious heart attack and nearly fell off some scaffolding; he's instructed not to work and he's still in rehabilitation, so he's getting Employment and Support Allowance. The film tells a story of how he tries to survive in that condition once he's been found 'fit to work.' He's resilient, good humoured and used to guarding his privacy.

And who is Katie?

Katie is a single mother with two small children. She's been in a hostel in London when the local authority finds her a flat in the north where the rent will be covered by her housing benefit – that means the local authority doesn't have to make up the difference. The flat's fine, though it needs work, but then she falls foul of the system and she's immediately in trouble – she's got no family round her, no support, no money. Katie is a realist. She comes to recognise that her first responsibility is to survive somehow.

Much of the story deals with suffocating bureaucracy. How did you make that dramatic?

What I hope carries the story is that the concept is familiar to most of us. It's the frustration and the black comedy of trying to deal with a bureaucracy that is so palpably stupid, so palpably set to drive you mad. I think if you can tell that

truthfully and you're reading the subtext in the relationship between the people across a desk or over a phone line, that should reveal the comedy of it, the cruelty of it – and, in the end, the tragedy of it. 'The poor are to blame for their poverty' – this protects the power of the ruling class.

What you were looking for in your Dan and in your Katie when you cast Dave Johns and Hayley Squires?

Well, for Dan we looked for the common sense of the common man. Every day he's turned up for work, he's worked alongside mates; there's the crack of that, the jokes, the way you get through the day; that's been his life until he was sick and until his wife needed support. And so alongside the sense of humour you want someone quite sensitive and nuanced.

And for Katie, again it's someone driven by circumstance who is realistic but has potential; she's been trying to study, she failed at school but she's been studying with the Open University. We looked for someone with sensitivity but also gutsy courage. And, as with Dan, absolute authenticity.

Dave Johns is a stand-up comic as well as an actor. Why did you cast him as Dan?

The traditional stand-up comedian is a man or woman rooted in working class experience, and the comedy comes out of that experience. It often comes out of hardship, joking about the comedy of survival. But the thing with comedians is they've got to have good timing – their timing is absolutely implicit in who they are. And they usually have a voice that comes from somewhere and a persona which comes from somewhere, so that's what we were looking for. Dave's got that. Dave's from Byker, which is where we filmed some of the scenes, he's a Geordie, he's the right age, and he's a working class man who makes you smile, which is what we wanted.

How did you come to cast Hayley Squires as Katie?

We met a lot of women who were all interesting in different ways but again, Hayley's a woman with a working class background and she was just brilliant. Every time we tried something out she was dead right. She doesn't soften who she is or what she says in any way, she's just true really, through and through.

How was the shoot?

To begin with, Paul's writing is always very precise, as well as being full of life. This means we rarely shoot material we don't use. The critical thing in filming is planning. It is preparation: working things out; getting everyone cast before you start; getting all the locations in place before you start. To do all that you need a crew, a group of people who absolutely understand the project and are creatively committed to it. And all those things we had: amazing efficiency from everyone and great good humour. That's what gets you through, because it means all your effort is then productive. Working with good friends is a delight and, crucially, we even got a little coffee machine that used to follow us around. That was a key element: a good espresso got us all through the day.

You changed how you edited this film from previous ones. How and why?

We'd been cutting on film for many years but we found that the infrastructure for cutting on film was just disappearing. The biggest problem was the cost of printing the sound rushes on mag stock and also printing all the film rushes. It was more than I could justify so, reluctantly, we cut on Avid. It has some advantages but I found cutting on film was a more human way of working - you can see what you've done at the end of the day. Avid seems quicker but I don't think the overall time taken is any less. I just find the tactile quality of film is more interesting.

Do you make films hoping to bring about change and, if so, what would that mean in the case of I, DANIEL BLAKE?

Well it's the old phrase isn't it: 'Agitate, Educate, Organise.' You can agitate with a film - you can't educate much, though you can ask questions - and you can't organise at all, but you can agitate. And I think to agitate is a great aim because being complacent about things that are intolerable is just not acceptable. Characters trapped in situations

where the implicit conflict has to be played out, that is the essence of drama. And if you can find that drama in things that are not only universal but have a real relevance to what's going on in the world, then that's all the better. I think anger can be very constructive if it can be used; anger that leaves the audience with something unresolved in their mind, something to do, something challenging.

It is the 50th anniversary of CATHY COME HOME this year. What parallels are there between this new film and that film?

They are both stories of people whose lives are seriously damaged by the economic situation they're in. It's been an idea we've returned to again and again but it's particularly sharp in I, DANIEL BLAKE. The style of filmmaking, of course, is very different. When we made CATHY we ran about with a hand-held camera, set up a scene, shot it and we were done. The film was shot in three weeks.

In this film the characters are explored more fully. Both Katie and Dan are seen in extremis. In the end, their natural cheerfulness and resilience are not enough. Certainly politically the world that this film shows is even more cruel than the world that Cathy was in. The market economy has led us inexorably to this disaster. It could not do otherwise. It generates a working class that is vulnerable and easy to exploit. Those who struggle to survive face poverty. It's either the fault of the system or it's the fault of the people. They don't want to change the system, therefore they have to say it's the fault of the people.

Looking back, we should not be surprised at what has happened. The only question is – what do we do about it?

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

2016 I, DANIEL BLAKE
2014 JIMMY'S HALL
2013 THE SPIRIT OF '45
2012 THE ANGELS' SHARE
Jury Prize - Cannes Film Festival
Audience Award - San Sebastian International Film Festival
2011 ROUTE IRISH
2009 LOOKING FOR ERIC
Prize of the Ecumenical Jury - Cannes Film Festival
2007 IT'S A FREE WORLD
Screenplay Osella - Venice Film Festival
2006 THE WIND THAT SHAKES THE BARLEY
Palme d'Or - Cannes Film Festival
Best Cinematographer - European Film Awards
2004 AE FOND KISS
César for Best European Union Film
Prize of the Ecumenical Jury - Berlin International Film Festival
2002 SWEET SIXTEEN
Best Screenplay - Cannes Film Festival
2001 THE NAVIGATORS
Children and Cinema Award - Venice Film Festival
2000 BREAD AND ROSES
Jury Award - Temecula Valley International Film Festival
1998 MY NAME IS JOE
Best Actor for Peter Mullan - Cannes Film Festival
Best British Independent Film - British Independent Film Awards
1996 CARLA'S SONG
1995 LAND AND FREEDOM
César for Best Foreign Film
FIPRESCI Prize and Prize of the Ecumenical Jury - Cannes Film Festival
1994 LADYBIRD, LADYBIRD
Prize of the Ecumenical Jury - Berlin International Film Festival
1993 RAINING STONES
Jury Prize - Cannes Film Festival
Best Film - Evening Standard British Film Awards
1991 RIFF-RAFF
European Film Award - European Film Awards
FIPRESCI Prize - Cannes Film Festival
1990 HIDDEN AGENDA
Jury Prize, Prize of the Ecumenical Jury
Special Mention - Cannes Film Festival
1986 FATHERLAND
1981 LOOKS AND SMILES
Prize of the Ecumenical Jury, Special Mention - Cannes Film Festival
1979 BLACK JACK
1971 FAMILY LIFE
FIPRESCI Prize - Berlin Film Festival
1969 KES
1967 POOR COW

DAVE JOHNS

DANIEL BLAKE

Who is Dan?

Dan is in his late 50s and he's a guy who's worked all his life as a carpenter. He takes pride in his work and he makes these little carved fish in his spare time. He's an honest bloke, he's very straightforward; he's got a good sense of humour. He's very dignified and if he says, "I'll do something," he'll do it. He's been looking after his wife who had a mental illness but since she died he's a bit lost. Then he has the heart attack, a doctor tells him he can't work and he finds himself against this authority, these jobsworths, who won't budge. That's the thing that raises the hackles and he tries to deal with it in his own way by being quite frank, keeping his dignity using his sense of humour. But he's finding it harder and harder because they've got everything stacked in their favour. The system's wearing him down.

Then he meets Katie who's come up from London with her two kids and they've become friends. She's up against it and I think he probably sees Katie as a cause. He wants to help, even to the point where at first he doesn't realise he's in a bad place himself.

How did you come to be cast?

Oh, God! Unbelievable! I'm a stand-up comic. I've done bits and bobs of acting in theatre mainly, and last year a producer I'd worked with said to me that he'd just had this actor's brief come in. He said it was improv, comic - right up my street. So I just wrote an email to Kahleen [Crawford, casting director] and I said, "I'm a stand-up comic, I've done a bit of acting. They said you're looking for somebody, I don't have any CV or anything, but here's my website." And then a couple of weeks later I was called in to meet Ken. We had a bit of a chat about stuff I was doing, and we talked about my dad - he was a joiner in the north east, so I knew something about Dan and his world.

Then I did a casting, and the first person I did my improv with was Hayley [Squires] who went on to get the part. We did this scene, it worked great. Personally I was happy just to have met Ken - and then they called me back. Finally, after a few more times he phoned us: "Hi, it's Ken," he goes, "would you like to be in my film?" I'm going, "would I like to be in your film? Do you think I have to think about it, like?"

How did you find filming?

First day, to tell you the truth, I was shitting myself, I really was. There's a sad little voice in your head that goes, "You're going to get caught here. You're going to get found out here, you cannot do this," and I'm going, "Go away," you know. But Ken was lovely: he said, "Just think it." It sounds so obvious, but suddenly it was like a door opened, you know. You're drawing on all sorts of experiences, like thinking about my dad, and his life and how he was. I mean, this might sound a bit arsy, but it's like it seeps into you. You're not just going, "Oh this bloke wrote these words and I just have to say them." If you think it and you live it, it seems to go inside you, and it seems to come out natural and real. The minute I sussed out what he meant by that everything seemed to come into place.

I'd really like to thank Ken for going with me on this and making me something that I didn't know was in us. To be able to channel those emotions in a drama - I mean we did this one scene where it was just Katie talking to me in a room. I knew there was people around, but I never even twigged they were 'til I heard Ken go, "Okay, end it there." I was still crying in the corner, do you know what I mean?

What did you learn about the benefits system from the story?

Well, I was amazed, 'cause, you know, the last time I signed on employment benefit was probably in the 70s when I left

school. It was the Labour Exchange then. You went down and you said, "I haven't got any work." They'd go, "Okay then, well you sign on. What sort of work are you looking for?" And then you went down and collected your money. I don't think people actually realise what they try to make people do now: it's all to get them off the system. I believe it's to sicken people. That's come as a shock to me. I think it's 50 years since CATHY COME HOME this year. And nothing's changed.

How did you prepare?

Well, I went on a woodworking course. There's a place down in Byker – Under the Bridge – where people who are homeless or have problems can go there and restore furniture. Then the furniture gets sold in the shop so it's self-funding. They've got a guy there who's a wood carver, so I went in for two days and learnt how to carve the fish that Dan likes to carve. I did one from scratch myself, you know, sanded it all up and gave it to my daughter. It meant I could handle the tools properly in the film and when we did the scenes of me woodcarving it looked authentic. And actually I found it quite therapeutic, to just, you know, sit there and sand a bit of wood. My daughter couldn't believe I'd made it myself. Neither could I, to be honest.

HAYLEY SQUIRES

KATIE

Who is Katie?

Katie is a 27-year-old woman from South London who has a daughter of 10 and a son of 7. She is very bright, wants to learn but two years prior to her moving to Newcastle she was a victim of a revenge eviction in London. She was renting a house from a private landlord, made a complaint that the boiler wasn't working and was chucked out, which is something that is rife in London at the moment. So she had to get out of her house and as a result of that was placed in a homeless hostel by the council. She ended up living there for two years, before the council got in touch and said, "We can offer you a place - but it's in Newcastle." She's got no choice – she has to move. But she's never been to Newcastle before. Mum's back in London, she's not very well, so she's got nobody up there.

When we first meet Katie the very first scene is her going into the Jobcentre for her transferral appointment, to register the new address and go over her Jobseekers' agreement. She ends up being half an hour late with the kids because they get lost - they don't know the city. And then she's told that she's going to be sanctioned. That then means she doesn't have any money for a month. So when you first meet me I'm already done over.

How does she meet Dan?

He's at the Jobcentre for his own reason, he tries to help me, there's an argument and we get removed. From there we form a friendship with each other because we're in not dissimilar circumstances. I mean, he's a 60-year-old man who's fallen ill and he's trying to get back to work. He's lost his wife through illness and he's met with the bureaucracy of it all, you know, of not being able to use a computer or meeting the demands that you have to meet. At the beginning he looks out for Katie, helps her with the heating and the cooking and the kids. Katie ends up in a situation where Dan takes her and the kids to a food bank. She hasn't eaten for a few days; things get pretty drastic there.

What is your background and how did you come to be cast?

I graduated in 2010 from Rose Bruford College. I did a degree in acting. I write as well as act, and I've just started on a screenplay. I had a very quiet first two years coming out of drama school and then things picked up and I've done bits of TV and supporting roles in films. I'd done a couple of tapes for Kahleen, the casting director, but I'd never met her in person. I got a call in the summer, last year, to say Ken Loach's new film's casting and he's just meeting women and girls from London that fit this age group. Don't know what the project's about, there's no script, there's no sides, he just wants you to go in and have a chat. So I met Ken and Kahleen and we talked for about 15 minutes. It all went from there.

What did they ask you about?

They asked me about my life, where I grew up, what my parents were like, what they did for a living. I grew up in South London and then when I was 14 we moved to Kent. They wanted to get out of London. So I spoke to Ken about the transition of being in London and moving to a small town. We talked about what I would be doing if I wasn't acting, my brother, my family. If I hadn't got on well at school then I don't think my situation would be too far away from Katie's. Friends of mine are in a similar position, not to the point of sanctions and all the rest of it, but on their own with children. I've grown up surrounded by it.

How did you find Dave Johns when you first met him?

It was so nice because we just talked. I'm not saying all actors are vain but a man in his sixties who's been in the game

for however many years, you're used to going and doing audition after audition and presenting a version of yourself each time you go in. Whereas with Dave, he was cracking jokes while we were in the room so that made it very relaxed and very calm. It didn't feel like he was trying to show what he could do – it felt like we could just talk to each other and anything that they needed to see was going to come out of that.

Was this film different to others you've worked on?

Yeah it was completely different. I mean I do very little theatre. I trained in theatre but I've only done one play since I left drama school, everything else has been screen. Normally you get your sides, get your character breakdown, if you're lucky you get the full script to have a proper read. And of course with Ken you don't. One thing I picked up was he very rarely used the word 'improvisation,' he said 'conversations' instead. Then he would go, "This is what the situation is, this is where you've been, this is where you'd like to get to and now just talk to each other." And it was lovely.

Overall it's been the best experience I've ever had - it makes me a bit emotional thinking about it! Ken is a hero of mine, having watched his films and knowing what he's all about and what he represents. Same with Paul and Rebecca - the work they've done over the last 20-odd years is amazing. It's been unlike anything I've ever done before, what with not knowing what's coming and placing a lot of trust in your director and also your crew. But it's great to be able to tell that story and be that character. And it hasn't been like being part of a cast – it's been like being part of a crew. There's a calmness and a support you get from everyone who's involved. It's like a safe circle that they're all on the outside of and you get to be in the middle.

REBECCA O'BRIEN

PRODUCER

How did this film come about?

I think basically both Paul and Ken were getting itchy feet. Paul had been doing research into this area and encouraging Ken to get involved. As usual, Paul came up with some interesting stories and it became irresistible. Then Ken and Paul went and looked at a few places; they went to a food bank in Glasgow and they went to various places in the Midlands, they went to Stoke, they went to Nuneaton where Ken grew up and places like that too. In part it was to see where might be good to shoot but also to explore the extent of the stories and meet people that Paul had contacted. That was in the winter and then Paul went away and I don't think he started writing until March or April [2015] actually, even May, and then very soon there was a script. I was doing another film but as soon as that nished, we made a decision that it would be worth doing this, and quickly. I think we all just felt that it's so current and so vital to tell these stories that we decided to go for it and just do it while it's completely relevant and hot.

What is the film about?

It's about the struggle to survive, a story that returns again and again in different times and circumstances.

Were you concerned that such a story might lack inherent drama?

Not at all. Paul Laverty's outrage and his constant ow of research allows him to nd the stories that are worth telling. And then his ability to build a framework to hang the stories on is so good that he makes it seem effortless.

How was I, DANIEL BLAKE funded?

Well, as ever, our wonderful French partners are on board. Why Not Productions and Wild Bunch sales company cash-owed us throughout pre-production and preparation. We decided to go very quickly, in July in the end, so I put my application in to BFI and also the BBC in June, and I sent them a script as soon as I got it. That's a very quick turnaround for them but BBC Films came on board - the rst time we've had BBC Films equity - and the BFI did as well. Because it was so quick, I think they'd spent a lot of their money this year so we didn't get maybe as much as we normally might but our French partners were brilliant in helping to ll the gap. They also brought Les Films du Fleuve, our Belgian partners, on board again and we did a co-production with Belgium as well as France. Overall it's a slightly lower budget film than some of our recent ones because it's a much smaller cast - it's more of a chamber piece really.

Why did you choose to shoot in Newcastle?

We chose Newcastle because it's a very defined city. We wanted something that said proper urban centre, and also it's very beautiful. I suppose you want to demonstrate that these stories happen to people in great cities and in good parts of the country, and not just in places that are obviously down-at-heel. In Newcastle, there's a real cross section of people and places. It's also got a very dramatic look to it with its hills and the gorge of the river and all the bridges. There's something very strong about it as a place. I've always wanted to film here myself and I think Ken has too.

What was the thinking behind bringing Katie up from London as a parallel to Dan's story?

Dan's story might have seemed a bit bleak and thin by itself and I think you want to show that there are people who will support each other - there is kindness out there. Katie's story works very well because it's a counterpoint to what Dan is up against. Katie is struggling but in a different way. It would have been too linear if it was just Dan.

It was suggested that JIMMY'S HALL might be Ken's last narrative feature, but here he is back on ghting form. Do you

feel like he has been re-energised by the subject matter? Yes. It's fantastic for both him and Paul to be doing something that is so immediately political and so important. It's absolutely current and there's something vital about making it. That vitality feeds into Ken and Paul and it shows itself in the film. It's still tough for anybody to make a film but the subject matter and working with the actors telling the story absolutely inspires Ken. I agree, I think it's fantastic seeing him so energised. On some days I think, 'God, if we could keep doing this forever...'

Does political filmmaking even exist in Britain at the moment or are you ploughing a lone furrow?

I'm sure there are some people who are concerned, but people shy away from politics so much. They think it's the kiss of death but I think with the younger generation becoming increasingly politicised, as the Corbyn vote indicated, there is a new interest. There are some political statements made by directors and even more so by artists, but I don't see a lot of political stories out there. You would think there would be more and yet Ken remains the spokesperson for all ages and has a lot of young fans. If you look at our social media, we're well followed: I think that's partly because there are very few people who will put their heads above the parapet and are not afraid of being overtly political. Being older helps you: you've got nothing to lose so you can say what you think.

CATHY COME HOME came out 50 years ago in November. Do you see this film as a bookend?

There are very powerful parallels. I do see this film very much as a bookend to what happened fifty years ago but it's a different story. I think this film demonstrates that there is no safety net for vulnerable people now, just as there was no safety net then. Now they have created jargon to neutralise the plight of desperate people. People are described as 'benefit units,' you have to prove 'conditionality.' It's absurd. But there are many parallels with the past and I think it makes a big point that Ken is making a film about these issues fifty years on from that powerful moment. I think it just says that we need to keep making them.

KAHLEEN CRAWFORD

CASTING DIRECTOR

Describe the casting process for I, DANIEL BLAKE.

We get the script and we always start with geography on Ken's films. Almost the first question I ever ask Ken is to draw a map to show what area I can get people from and we agreed it had to be Newcastle or Sunderland or even places like Hartlepool. But we fairly quickly narrowed it down quite a lot - we wanted it to be Geordie. Then I went to actors' agents and looked at actors. There weren't lots in the right age group, but there were some that were fantastic - yet maybe too well known. Ken just wanted it to be really simple, something the audience would just watch and not be cluttered with preconceptions of a well-known local actor. Once we'd done a lot of the actors, we also looked at the comedy clubs and at singers and musicians.

You quite often look to comedians. Why?

I just think Ken over the years has had so much success doing that, even sometimes just in smaller parts. They're people who know how to present themselves and to perform to an audience and they're just really rooted. Dave Johns actually heard about it through a friend and so he wrote us an email.

What were you looking for in your Dan?

It's partly intuitive but Ken was saying that the things that were important to him were just a real, good, working man; the type of person that the story is about. He wanted it to be someone really grounded and local and just to have the voice. I mean, there are so many different versions of a Geordie accent. It's like in Glasgow there are so many different Glaswegians. Dave falls somewhere in the middle but he's very recognisably Geordie. He also feels like someone who could build things, things like furniture. Also, it's not maybe something that we made too explicit but I think that Dave just kind of gets the politics of it all. He comes from a certain background, he understands why this is unfair and he understands why the system shouldn't be like this. He remembers what the system used to be like and the values that there used to be that we've lost.

Do you ever know it's the right person the instant they walk in the room?

You do sometimes - but then sometimes you're proven wrong. We like to have a chat, you come back, you try some stuff out, then you re-jig the chemistry and you try them out opposite different people. What is really exciting is seeing the process unfolding and seeing those people unfolding. Give them another scenario and something entirely different would come out of them. Here, a huge part of it for me was the chemistry between Dave and Hayley. There was something quite special there. They brought the best out in each other.

What were you looking for in their characters' relationship?

I think it was really important to us that it wasn't a romance. I think that there are energies that you pick up from people when you know that they're a bit 'flirty Gerty from number 30' as we say in the office. There was nothing like that here - it was just a really nice, natural energy between them.

Why is Hayley Squires right for Katie?

Hayley is really interesting, a really special talent. We took to her quite quickly and she's just mega smart. She's got the right voice that Ken wanted to hear - something really recognisably London. We need to know that she's very far away from home. Hayley's also got a lovely warmth but she's got a real fighting spirit and I think that you need that for Katie. You need to stick with Katie - she's not a victim because she's 'a victim' - she's genuinely a victim of circumstances.

Hayley was a real well of ideas in the improvisation auditions and she gets rhythm and all that stuff because she's a writer. Hopefully she does justice to Paul's dialogue.

CAST

Daniel Blake **Dave JOHNS**

Katie **Hayley SQUIRES**

Dylan **Dylan McKIERNAN**

Daisy **Briana SHANN**

Ann **Kate RUTTER**

Sheila **Sharon PERCY**

China **Kema SIKAZWE**

CREW

Director **Ken LOACH**

Screenplay **Paul LAVERTY**

Director of Photography **Robbie RYAN**

Production Designer **Fergus CLEGG and Linda WILSON**

Recordist **Ray BECKETT**

Casting **Kahleen CRAWFORD**

Costume Designer **Joanne SLATER**

Editor **Jonathan MORRIS**

Sound Editor **Kevin BRAZIER**

Music **George FENTON**

Line Producer **Eimhear McMAHON**

Producer **Rebecca O'BRIEN**

Executive Producers **Pascal CAUCHETEUX Grégoire SORLAT Vincent MARAVAL**

Australian Distributor **TRANSMISSION FILMS**

International Sales **WILD BUNCH**