Michael Raeburn interviewed by Douglas Field,

15th July 2025, [Interview via Zoom].

A note on the text: false starts, filler words and non-lexical utterances (e.g. 'um', 'hmm') have not been transcribed. Time codes appear at ten-minute intervals in square brackets in bold type.

DF: Michael Raeburn has achieved international acclaim as a director and scriptwriter and also as a novelist. His features, documentaries and experimental movies stand out as groundbreaking works with a unique personal touch and have won numerous festival awards. His films include *Rhodesia Countdown* from 1969 which advocated Guerrilla War to overthrow the minority racist regimes in Rhodesia and South Africa, and an adaptation of Doris Lessing's novel the *Grass is Singing* in 1981. In 1978, Michael wrote the book *Black Fire* from the point of view of the Guerrillas fighting to decolonise Southern Africa. James Baldwin wrote its foreword and personally launched the book in London in 1978. The United States edition, renamed *We Are Everywhere*, was published by Toni Morrison, then Editorial Chief at Random House. Michael's collaboration with James Baldwin continued with the co-writing of the script adaptation of Baldwin's novel *Giovanni's Room*.

For over five decades, Michael has struggled without compromise for a free, independent voice within an increasingly homogenised world. His principal theme is the sense of alienation, frustration and anger felt by a social group that has been isolated and supressed by a bigger and more powerful one. Violence, anger and even madness are the inevitable results. Born in Africa, the greater part of his work emanates from there, and it's appreciated for authentic insider's understanding and vision.

Michael, if I could begin by asking you a few questions about your background, can you tell us where you were born and where you grew up?

MR: Yes, I was born in Cairo in Egypt and I left there after the end, well, a few years, couple of years after the end of the Second World War. My mother was born there and her par – I mean, it goes back a long way, her link with Egypt right through the 19th century and back. And my father was a Scot, essentially, but my mother was very mixed of various origins, Arabic, Jewish, North African and Italian, so bit of a hotchpotch. And then my father moved to Africa as a teacher and became headmaster of a school, and that's where I grew up, in Zimbabwe – then called Rhodesia – from the age of four onwards, and eventually left Africa for the first time when I was 23.

DF: Wow, it's a fascinating upbringing. Can you describe to me how you became a writer, filmmaker, and someone who was so politically involved?

MR: Well, they're kind of three different things in a way, but, I mean, the whole thing in Rhodesia was coming to…being, becoming aware, imagine growing up surrounded by people who – white people who felt that everybody of another colour was inferior to them, which was the hallmark of the British Empire, everywhere, everywhere, everywhere. I remember in my road where I lived at the end of those there was an Indian group living across the bridge and I wasn't allowed to go there. And then of course the staff, I was running around in nature with the son of the gardener called

Peanuts and we were inseparable and I was running around in villages around, you know, with him, and that was fundamental to my upbringing, that life in the African village with the huts and the ceremonies and the rituals and the energy of Black Africa.

So it was a very, very complex upbringing because I had to…the only points of reference was my parents, the friends of my parents, the school I went to which was all white, so the only Blacks that were around were servants basically that I could see. But as a child, you're growing up, so how do you get another more objective point of view of what the British are actually doing, which is trying to "civilise" everybody to make them like them, Christians, dress like them, think like them, be like them, then maybe they would be one day allowed to vote. And the British practice apartheid, separation of skin colour as voraciously as the Dutch and the Huguenots did in South Africa, but with traditional British hypocrisy called it a meritocracy, if you make enough money and if you go to the right schools and you wear a suit, we might give you a vote.

So that was my upbringing and that was…I came out of that step by painful step with increasing kind of anger and shame and pain, making other people suffer. I watched horrendous racial scenes, and eventually you get a brain working and you hear about politics, socialism, and utopias that people dream of. You read *1984* and you start to think, you know, and get a back vision of what you have been landed in on Mars, you know. So that led me all…I think to escape from that world, I became artistic in one way or another, I put on plays and invite all my friends, I made a museum of animals and birds, invited people, always with a commercial – luckily – edge, I made them pay, because it prepared me well for the filmmaker who spends most of his life looking for money to make a film. So that's how I got involved in writing, I wrote from young, escaping the world that I was in.

DF: And do you remember when you first encountered James Baldwin's writing, more or less roughly, one of the first things that you read perhaps or the first time you were aware of Baldwin?

MR: Well, I grew gradually aware I think because in Rhodesia where I was, Baldwin, I was doing a London University degree, the university was part of London but exam papers were marked in England, you know, it was exactly that, it was the University of London in Africa. And they didn't do James Baldwin in 1960s; he was not on the list as a writer, so I didn't really know him when I was there. Then I was in France when I was doing post…I did my degree in Rhodesia, then I left and went to Paris and did a PhD writing about cinema, and it was there that I discovered politics and all those writers that have passed from America, Richard Wright, blah, blah, blah had been there to Paris, and Baldwin, so I began to read them. And Baldwin was one of the people.

So, I remember I had those books, those key books, *The Fire Next Time*, the essays, bit of this and that, and *Giovanni's Room*. And after I made my first film in Rhodesia, never to go back into independence after that, I went

to London with all these books, and they're here with me now, those original books of Baldwin. So, I knew about him, and when I walked into the launch of *If Beale Street Could Talk* in Piccadilly, I was familiar let's say with his work. But not in great detail, I'd read some key works, but to see him talking was what blew my mind, to from then that moment on, James Baldwin **[00:10:00]** became the most important person in my life for all time.

DF: So just to clarify a date if I may, so *If Beale Street Could Talk* was published in the US in 1974, do you remember the year of the…?

MR: Yeah, same year.

DF: So, the launch took place in Piccadilly also in…

MR: Yeah.

DF: …nineteen seventy-four. And your impression of him, I mean, it's very vivid from what you've sketched already, was it something in particular, was it his voice, his charisma and so forth, the way you describe it suggests there was something almost magical about his presence.

MR: Yes, it was magical, it was extraordinary because I was drawn…I was in a position to be quite close although a hell of a lot of people and I arrived late, so he was in full flow when I walked in. And I'd only tagging along behind someone who was a journalist who'd been invited, I hadn't been invited there, I tagged along, she said, do you want to come along, so I said, sure. So, I walked in, you know, not knowing quite what was going on, and I found myself pushed towards the front, so he was right there on the podium talking to this vast crowd of people that are squashed into this room.

And I just was drawn by the voice was the first thing I heard as I walked in, it was the commanding, deep voice, warm voice, passionate voice, it was very, very strong. And I was drawn by that, and I continued to be drawn into him by his expressions, his expressivity, the agility of his expressions, his hands, the movement of his hands, and his eyes, and for me he was like very, very African in…he was like a Benin mask. He had these protruding eyes, he called them pop eyes and he thought they were very ugly. For me, they were magical because the mask, the African mask with popping eyes is because the eyes have connected with the spirit, with the ancestors, from the very depths of the soul of each individual, it's a rod that goes straight through and it sees the most powerful thing that exists. That's why the eyes are sticking out, and Baldwin was that, so I forgot what he was saying and just got carried away by him.

DF: And did you then have a drink with him af…did you meet him afterwards, how did your…?

MR: Another extraordinary thing, because afterwards there were drinks and I found myself…the person who brought me went off and I found myself pulled…he was talking to everybody and all that, and at one moment there

was a row going on between him and an Irishman, and I was… So, because there was a crowd, I looked for him and there he was arguing and I pushed my way right up, practically – well, next to him actually, not to begin with, but I listened. And I had been in Ireland making a film called *Ireland Behind the Wire*. I had been in Bloody Sunday when the British shot down and killed people before my eyes. A man had his head shot off by these powerful SLR guns that they were shooting down at the crowd. Bernadette Devlin was talking and I was filming with another guy, so I was actually holding the microphone near the camera.

So that had just happened and so I was very up on Ireland, and he was claiming that the situation of the Irish Catholics was similar to that of the Black Americans in America, and Baldwin thought this was an outrageous thing to say that bore no comparison at all and they were arguing. And I found myself taking Baldwin's side when no one else was talking and I said, what he's trying to tell you is this, this, and this, Baldwin looked at me in kind of surprise, who is this guy, and then carried on the arguing. And it intensified as only Baldwin can do, he starts going mad, you know, his eyes are popping, he's jumping, he's going to explode, and at one point he grabbed my arm and held onto it. And I watched his hand and I was astounded, I was all swept up in this, and then the powers that be of the publisher arrived saying, he's got to go off for a meeting and he was dragged away, and as he left he said, come for lunch at my hotel tomorrow, and that's what I did.

DF: And it would have been a fancy hotel…

MR: Yeah…

DF: …Savoy or…?

MR: …it was very easy to ask where is he staying, The Savoy.

DF: Yes, I imagine he wasn't staying in the equivalent of a budget hotel, he would have been there. And did you get a sense that he was there with – when you first met him – with an entourage of sorts, obviously his publisher and agent…?

MR: Bernard was there, his associate, but that's all.

DF: Bernard Hassell the…

MR: Hassell.

DF: Hassell, the former dancer who became his secretary, is that right, sort of PA…?

MR: He loved Jimmy, they never had an affair and he looked after him, James Baldwin can't sign a cheque, he said.

DF: Yeah, I get the impression from other people that Baldwin wasn't the strongest in terms of arrangements and practical issues, that he was great at writing and arguing and debating but less good when it came to, I don't know, sort of changing a plug or…

MR: That's putting it mildly.

DF: And how did your friendship develop then over in London and was it over a course of years, was it a quick friendship, was it something that you kind of embraced together, sometimes friendships happen very quickly, how was it?

MR: Well, it was extremely quickly, I went to the lunch at the Savoy and – well, I went to his room, he was being interviewed by Bill Webb from the *Guardian*, I think it was when I walked in, and Bernard received me and I sat and listened to what they were saying, they were talking about the British Empire and…because – I can't remember quite what the issue was. But it was the *Guardian* guy who was saying that the situation in America was coming, as bad as it was or something, anyway, I can't quite remember. So, then we went down together alone in the lift down to the ground floor and went and had a table together, and we just started talking and didn't stop. And what did we talk about, well, we talked about a lot of things in a very short time without stopping, he hardly ate anything, the food was there but he was so wrapped up talking with me that he didn't eat, I had to say, you're not eating. That was very much how he was, he was so involved with things that he'd be swept away by and then engrossed by his passion in whatever it was if it was passionate to him.

Well, we talked about obviously a bit about Africa and he asked what I was doing and was rather…he wanted to know how on earth this apparently white boy from a British colony had joined a liberation movement for the Black cause, he said this is unheard of as far as he was concerned. So that was…so we didn't talk much about that, and then we talked about literature, so I said I thought *Go Tell It on the Mountain* was Proustian in its language and its prose and the long sentences and going off on tangents and always coming back to the cause that's being spoken initially.

And he loved this, and I quoted because I had studied literature and French, I'd done a degree in French and I knew passages of Proust by heart and I started off in English and I said, well, I don't know anymore, I can't do it in English. Do it in French, I speak French, and I said, oh. So off I went in French and then he said, and you remember all that, the famous madeleine, **[00:20:00]** it was just so exciting. And there was this connection I can only describe as it had no shape, it had no particular direction, but it was very intense. It was beyond…it was ethereal as well as concrete if you like, which was about facts and figures and at the same time ideas and about life and people, all packed into a few minutes literally because Bernard arrived and said he's got to go off, he was already late, he said, I'm afraid it's going to be a short one, and off he went.

DF: Your description of meeting with Baldwin and then Bernard coming in and saying, come on, you're off to your next appointment, gives a very vivid impression of Baldwin on the one hand as someone who's very sociable and wants to talk and make new friends, but also who's being pulled in different directions. And I wondered if you had a sense with the time that you spent with Baldwin in London whether he had a kind of network of friends, other writers and artists and activists, or whether he was there mostly on the bidding of his agent. Did he enjoy being in London and elsewhere in Britain and have these networks do you think?

MR: Well, in fact I think he – I know he had that before I met him, it was in the 60s that he was more in London. From the time I met him, he was already in Saint Paul de Vence, right, living there when he was over there, so he had real ties to France and the French. And I met him mainly in France, although I'm writing this script for reasons of just budgeting really, I place certain scenes that happened in Paris in London, it doesn't matter, they're in restaurants or somewhere, you know. But he did have this network of people going back to 1948 in Paris, he didn't have that in England, he was always passing through because these publishers published stuff of his that no one else would publish. They published *Go Tell It on the Mountain* I think which had been turned down elsewhere. So, the publisher was extremely loyal to Baldwin and has published just about everything he wrote.

DF: Michael Joseph here we're talking about.

MR: Michael Joseph, yeah.

DF: Yeah.

MR: So, Michael Joseph and he loved that company and he was there for them and that's what held him there and made him come there to sign things. But he was not there for long when I knew him, no.

DF: Did – thank you. Did…in terms of your collaborative work with him which you alluded to in terms of the scene-setting in London as opposed to Paris, could you tell us about your collaborations with Baldwin?

MR: Oh, well, it – oh, well, because I had started in '74, well, after this incident of the Savoy and the launch of the book, I got…he told Bernard as he did, give Michael our phone number, you know, I phoned and I was invited down there. So, I went down there and stayed there for several weeks. So my relationship with him grew to become a love affair, it was great, you know, it was…it's hard to…I didn't really talk about this. Do you know, I never…I have all his books, most of which he gave me, none of them are signed, I said, I do not want you to sign my…I don't want to be seen as one of these hangers-on or somebody who's taken advantage of you, because I saw a lot of people round him using him, you know, sycophants and people who wanted something from him. And lovers who were very hard on him, and

why…it was a mystery to me why he was with them sometimes, I couldn't understand the involvement, but anyway, that's neither here nor there.

But so the relationship was a big one, and for me a rite of passage that went on for years, for 13 years from that point till he died. Although I wasn't there when he died, I was up in the middle of Africa and I didn't even know that he'd died. But that relationship was complicated and also it developed into a very caring one between us, he offered, you know, he just…he offered to write the foreword to *Black Fire*. He even knew all about *Black Fire* and what it was about because he knew me and he told an agent he was trying to get rid of that asked me what *Black Fire* was about, he told him, he said, you wouldn't like it, it's about this, this, this, and that, and he hadn't read the book, I was flabbergasted, you know.

So that kind of thing, we had these psychic…I'd know when he'd arrived, pick up the phone at his mother in New York, can I speak to Jimmy, oh yeah, well, he's just arrived, I said, I know. Same in Saint Paul, Valerie the housekeeper, pick the phone, he's just walked in, all these things, they were big ones. We lost each other for a year and then I walked into a restaurant in Paris and there he was sitting staring at me as I walked in. I had no idea he was in France, let alone in Paris, let alone in the restaurant that I wasn't even going to. I was drawn in there to see who was there, I said, I'm going in… I was just strolling in the summer, in a lackadaisical manner and I said, oh, I wonder who's in…what kind of people are in that restaurant, and I go in and see Baldwin. Well, how do you explain that, you see, so…

This led us forward and it led us to the point where we started writing, he asked me to write with him a version of *Giovanni's Room*, which we did over a short…over a few months. And we wrote it together, I'd write a bit to exchange notes or discuss it, and we disagreed with things, we agreed with things. He was very… It was a dialogue play, it was writing his plays, theatre that was his element, film was not, particularly not the use of the camera and the style which I was into, more expressionistic stylistically. It's not sort of social-realism camera work, no, it was **not** just close-ups and reverse angles, that sort of thing. Much more inventive and expressive.

But we had problems with some of that. But it was fascinating, that's all I can say, it was a fascinating experience which unfortunately stopped as – don't know whether I should tell you, I think you know, but the agent at the time, I didn't have an option, I had nothing, neither did he, we just loved each other and we wrote this book, this screenplay together. I was very young, I'd only made a few films, I hadn't made my main first feature film, the *Grass is Singing*, until 1980, so, you know.

So, we didn't have anything written between us, and Jimmy had a habit of spending more than was coming in from his books in those days, he was very famous, but not like he is today, today it's extraordinary what's happened, but… But at that time, he was on the front cover of *Time*

magazine after all. But he was too generous, he bought a house for his mother, he bought this, that, and he gave money away like water, it ran through his hand, and he always spent more than was coming in.

And the agent said, **[00:30:00]** you've got to get an option to write your script. Oh, he said, oh, and he said how much he wanted, he, he, the agent wanted the option, he was allowed to give the option in a contract he had with Jimmy. He wanted $100,000. Well, Jimmy had 0 and I had 0, so he asked some of his friends, I asked some of my friends, I formed a company with the agent at the time, Julian Friedmann in London, and I looked for money, but I was a beginner in the business, so I didn't have great…I wasn't George Lucas, I was running around looking for scrap. And neither of us could get this money together, and then I got busy, he got busy, and it just kind of…

Oh, and also there was a sharp negative reaction to making a film of *Giovanni's Room*, I mean, gay love story at that time in the 70s, not possible, especially when he starts talking about people like Marlon Brando playing Guillaume, they thought that was going to be a disaster because it didn't ring true. How could Marlon Brando be a gay grimy bar [inaudible]. People will just laugh. So we never got anywhere. And to this day, it's never been made, that book has never been made. There have been many, many, many attempts, and even now I tried, I tried, after doing this article for you and the *James Baldwin Review* on writing *Giovanni's Room*, I said I was trying, I couldn't get anywhere either, so… Nobody was interested… I was looking at big directors directing *Giovanni's Room* and I couldn't quite… I'm not a producer, so I was doing my own films and couldn't get it together. And I still get a lot of correspondence because of the article, and James Baldwin, saying we want to help you make this film, but nobody's come up with a $10m cheque as yet. They just say they want to help write the script or, I don't know what.

DF: Yeah, show us the money and then let's, yeah. Yeah, wish I could help, Michael, I could…happy to read stuff and always happy to talk with you, but yeah, not the money. Yeah, that's a fascinating point and I think it is really interesting how the film *If Beale Street Could Talk* came out a few years ago and then we've had the success with the Raoul Peck documentary and there are rumours about a biopic of Baldwin that might be coming out, and I keep hearing of various things in the pipeline. But yeah, I think *Giovanni's Room* would be…it would be great to see that if it was done sensitively and done well, not least because I think the novel reads like a film script in many ways, there's something…

MR: Yes, it does.

DF: …very visual about that. I want to return if I may to something you mentioned early on as we were chatting. And it was when you mentioned with regards to a *Guardian* journalist how when you first met Baldwin he was being asked about Britain and about his views on this country. And I wondered if you recall conversations that Baldwin had regarding his views

on Britain, and not least because in interviews that he gave, including one with Paul Gilroy for *City Limits* in 1985, he made some quite kind of amusing remarks about Britain, but also some very serious points about Britain's empire and colonial past and present. And I wonder if these were subjects that he touched on, because he seemed to be quite ambivalent about Britain and British culture.

MR: Well, I think his opinion about colonialism, whether it's British, Portuguese, or French, it's all much the same. He did go to Senegal, he didn't go to any English language country, that I can remember. I told him a lot about Rhodesia, because I'd lived through that, all the heroes of my junior school, the school – what do you call, you're a member of a group, it's a British tradition in schools, part of this house, that house. Well, they were all heroes of the British colonial history who had murdered, killed, and strung to trees Black people who refused to do what they said. So from a Black person's point of view, all the history had to be rewritten after independence because it was… I went to a school called Blakestone where a guy fought off the Shona who had risen in 1896 to drive the British away. And he was the hero, not Nehanda, the spirit medium they'd strung up on a tree who's the hero of the Blacks today. The tree still stands there in the middle of a street.

So Baldwin was interested in that and I talked mainly about that, he wanted to know about that in the country and how I had come to terms with all this and what I had lived through. I told him a lot of how I had friends mixed race called coloureds who lived in a coloured area, went to a coloured school, and they weren't allowed to go to the toilet or sit down anywhere in a white area. Everything was divided up. And for him, that was just unsurprising, but just the detail interested him. So, his opinion was a standard in a way opinion about tyranny, about big empires squashing, flattening and how human nature repeats this. He had always gone from the particular to the large, this was his great power, hence the way he treated the race thing, this was not American white, American Black person, it was two human beings.

And the famous conclusion that we can all of us become racist, we can all of us become Adolf Hitler, we are all the same, we are all homo sapiens, and we are all the same. So, for him, skin colour was an exasperating, irritating, superficial subject which he dealt with all his life, but he didn't deal with it, he dealt with what lay behind the projection of emotion into skin identification, (which is truly…like to very wet skin, is skin deep, it's superficial) and that's what interests him, and I think that's the power of his writing. But I often wonder how many of his readers absorb the depth of his thought which was colossal. I mean, if you read the analysis below analysis below and it goes deeper, deeper, deeper, it spreads out like that, right across everything, like all great writers, that's why he said, I just want to be known as a writer, not a Black writer, an American writer, a gay writer, a short writer. Why do I have to be put in a box, that was a great frustration. Don't know if I've answered your question there, but it's a big question.

DF: No, that's really insightful, thank you. And thank you so much for your time and your generosity, Michael. Is there anything that we haven't covered, particularly in relation to Baldwin and Britain that you would like to add, no need if nothing springs to mind, but I just wanted to give you the opportunity.

MR: Well, I think we've probably dealt with about five per cent.

DF: Well, maybe we can…

MR: Of what this man was and achieved and was carried away by, and certainly the effect **[00:40:00]** he had on me. As I say, it's…yeah, it's been just an incredible privilege to have been put into that place by complete coincidence really. I could may well not have gone to that…I happened to be with that person who took me along. If I'd missed her, meeting her by two minutes, I would never have been there. I would never be the person I am.

DF: Thank you for sharing those insights, Michael, and I'm glad that you were there at that moment and for sharing that with us, thank you so much.

MR: Thank you, Douglas.

End of transcript