

# THE ROYAL CONNECTION

An interview with Mark Hamilton

At 28, Mark Hamilton finds himself in something of a tantalising career dilemma. As a cinematographer for hire, he has made promos, commercials, shorts, documentaries and now, just completed, his first feature, *Capital Punishment*.

But the Bournemouth Film School graduate, who won a Royal Television Society Award in 1996 for best drama short, *Primary Burns*, which he directed, also harbours ambitions to remain at the helm.

To that end, the hard-working Hamilton is also now putting the finishing touches to his feature debut as a director, the enigmatically-titled *Monday 10am*, which he lit and produced too.

The project virtually defines the expression 'labour of love'. Hamilton explained: "After the RTS award, I hadn't got the chance to develop as a director so I wanted to give it another go, to discover whether the first one was just a fluke.

"I remember reading an article in which David Puttnam was quoted as saying that when you embark on a film you have to bear in mind that it's not just for a matter of weeks but something you're going to have to live with for perhaps three or four years.

"I've been doing *Monday 10am* for two and a half years now. I had no money but wonderful support instead from friends and colleagues as well as equipment people like Panavision, Fuji and Soho Images. We shot for three and a half weeks then two months later shot for another week. Six months after that, we did a final week. In between all that I had to keep earning to get cash for my film," he said.

The title of the film refers to the real-life start-of-week test siren at Broadmoor Hospital which Hamilton himself used to hear when he was growing up in that particularly leafy neck of the Home Counties. The story is about the long aftermath of a



tragedy which first unfolds when a violent prisoner escapes under the cover of the test.

Starring Paul Gittus, ex-*EastEnders* Deborah Sheridan-Taylor and old TV favourite Lynda Baron, the drama is currently being readied for, Hamilton hopes, inclusion at the London Film Festival, indeed the festival circuit generally. That way he hopes it might get the sort of platform needed to help generate interest in another film, a comedy-drama called *Dead Ringer*, he has in development.

"Next time round, I would definitely try and raise some development money then get a distributor involved before starting filming. Although I consider *Monday 10am* a great achievement, it was also a hell of a lot of compromise, and I also regret taking on far too much in terms of producing, directing and shooting it."

So *Capital Punishment*, a London gangland/drugs thriller, directed by his old friend and sometime collaborator, Adrian Vitoria, must have seemed almost like a holiday in comparison.

"I loved doing it. We've worked together a number of times before," said Hamilton, "and have similar ideas about filmmaking and shooting styles. It's a relationship built predominantly on trust allowing me free rein to light and shoot the scene how I interpret it while, as importantly, Adrian can spend valuable time prepping and concentrating on the actors' performance."

*Capital Punishment* may be low-budget but it is positively megadollar compared with the peanuts available for *Monday 10am*. Apart from Hamilton's own financial input, the other most crucial wad came from executive producer Peter Edwards who has, for some 10 years now, been a major influence in the young filmmaker's life.

Their connection was first made when Hamilton, who was just about to leave school after 'A' levels including, significantly, photography, answered

an advertisement in his local Berkshire newspaper.

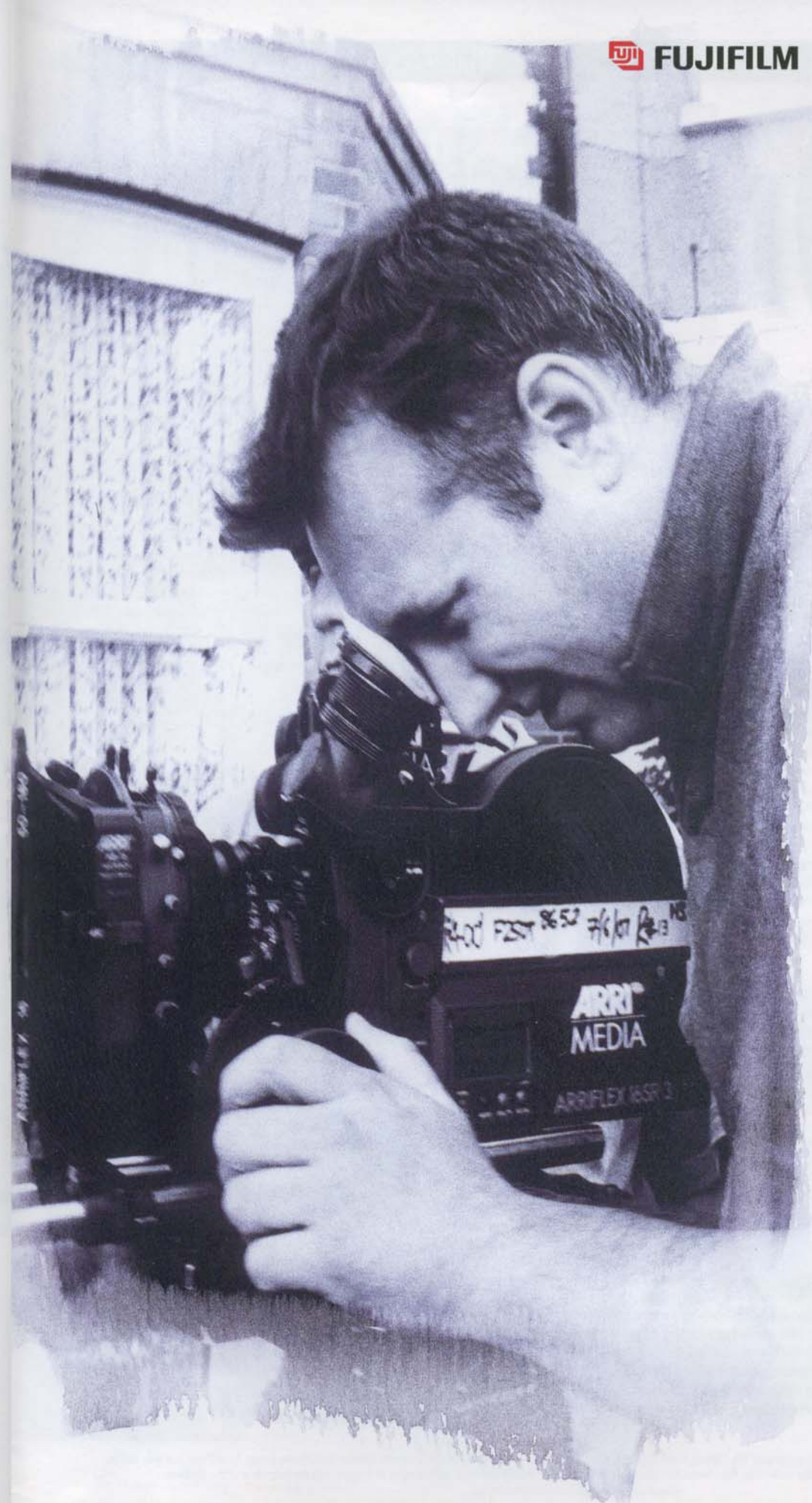
It was for a general assistant to join Edwards and his longtime partner, and fellow ex-BBC man, Philip Bonham-Carter who, for 30 years, have been synonymous with TV coverage of the Monarchy dating back to Richard Cawston's trailblazing 1969 documentary, *The Royal Family*.

Their BCA company - which originally stood for Bonham Carter Associates but is now renamed British Ceremonial Arts, with ex-soundman Edwards as full owner, cinematographer Bonham-Carter still partly involved and Hamilton as a co-director - was about to start up a little Wokingham-based studio.

Apart from the Christmas Broadcasts, which are now shared between the BBC and ITN, BCA has also been responsible for filming the investitures, which includes providing personalised records of the occasion if ordered. Hamilton started in the cutting room eventually, after about 18 months, joining the BCA principals on various locations, including Buckingham Palace, where he got to operate - and still does now from time to time - the robotic cameras.

"We do them about 24 days a year not just at the Palace but also regionally in Scotland and Wales. It's quite formulaic but also very well organised as you must be able to blend in with the rigorous atmosphere of the occasion. "BCA have enjoyed a very good relationship with the Palace for years and in fact have just retained the Investiture contract for yet another two years. Does the Queen show an interest in our work? She and Peter push the thing on all the time."

With BCA's blessing, Hamilton applied to film school and after being first turned down by Bournemouth, who referred him on to Worthing where he obtained an HND in film production, he was finally accepted at Bournemouth earning first a post-graduate diploma then a Master's Degree in film and video production.



"At film school I got a chance to play around with lights, work with actors and direct a bit, of course. *Primary Burns*, which I directed - but didn't light - was my graduation film and I made it at my old primary school in Berkshire. It was about child bullying and I was lucky to have two very good child actors."

But did the success of the short manage to open doors? "It gave me confidence in myself but when I came out of film school I found it all very much a free-for-all. To that extent I was rather disappointed with the 'industry' as such. There seemed to be no sort of structure.

"It was," said Hamilton, "my continuing BCA connection and the contacts it gave me leading to work with other fine ex-BBC cameramen like Ian Hilton, Bill Broomfield and Dave Gray which really pushed me forward."

He also paid fulsome tribute to Bonham-Carter whom he has relished, and still does, assisting. "Without really knowing it, he has been a mentor. I'd love to operate for him as I know I'd learn and observe so much more than what he has already taught me."

After graduating to fully-fledged cinematographer - which Hamilton did without fully realising it until reading an article in a promo magazine which described him as a DP after working on three pop videos back-to-back - there was, as he described it, "no going back."

He sees the future more to do with directing photography - promos especially - than directing per se, "although, as I hope will be the case with *Dead Ringer*, I'll be able to direct something I've been fully involved with." And, yes, there's always that Royal connection. ■ QUENTIN FALK

*Capital Punishment* and *Monday 10am* were originated on Fujicolor Motion Picture

Photos from top: Emily Watson, Helena Bonham Carter and Ray Winstone in C4's *100 Years... 100 Movies*; Ollie Downey, Jonathan Oddy, Mark Hamilton and Stuart Fletcher on the set of *Capital Punishment*; Lynda Baron and Deborah Sheridan in *Monday 10am*; opposite page: Mark Hamilton behind the camera and with the Royal Television Society Award for Best Drama (*Primary Burns*)