

JOHN SCHLESINGER

Feature film director

Interviewer Norman Swallow, recorded on 30 March 1994

Copyright of the recording is vested in BECTU History Project

SIDE 1, TAPE 1

Norman Swallow: Let's go back to day one, when where you born and where.

John Schlesinger: I was born in Hollycroft Avenue in Hampstead in 1926, February 16. And I was so long in arriving that my father went off, I think it was my father, went off to the cinema thinking I wasn't going to arrive that night, and I crept in I think. I was born just before midnight on February 16th. And we, my father was a paediatrician, my mother was a very good amateur violinist. So my early years were really filled with music in our Hampstead home, until the war came, and that altered everything.

Norman Swallow: You were at school locally were you

John Schlesinger: I was at the Hall, Hampstead to begin with. And then I was sent away to boarding school aged about 8 to 9, awful idea. And I was sent to a school, St Edmonds, Hindhead. There was a rather eccentric headmaster called Ivor Bully who made us salute the cherry trees outside the front door. We would have to go round in a parade and salute this ridiculous tree. I thought he was crazy.

The thing I remember about those years most was, because it was in the papers and in the magazines there was a very great deal about Hitler and the rise of the Nazi Party. And the interest in that was extraordinary, I as a young Jewish kid felt quite persecuted at school. They would institute things like let's chase Schlesinger, it was a sort of pogrom. I mean the British have been nothing if not anti Semitic I think traditionally.

And I remember the sort of interest in German expressionist films at that time, so almost my first memories of cinema

apart from my grandmother's birthday which was always a day to go to the cinema, quite often the Tatler in Tottenham Court Road and I saw all sorts of things, Harold Lloyd, Charlie Chaplin. A very long documentary I remember called *China and Japan* all about the war in, was it Japan, no China, the Japanese invaded. I remember my first impression of death was very strong. It was the assassination of the King of Yugoslavia on a newsreel and the kind of rictus of a smile that he had when he was shot in his carriage. And I remember a trip to the mint and seeing a man with his head just under, protruding from under a bus that he'd been run over by. So they were very strong images of macabre and strange things which have fascinated me all my life. But at school the sort of films we saw were things like *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, *White Hell Of Pitz Palu*, which was a film that Leni Riefenstahl starred in. It was German movies, because there was such an interest in Germany in that period.

Norman Swallow: And they were visually quite interesting, weren't they

John Schlesinger: Yes, they were visually interesting. The Conrad Veidt film was a great influence I think. Later we saw films like Pabst *Kameradschaft*. My next school I went to at **Uppingham** I had a wonderful, I was in one form which was run by an extraordinary man called Charles Wright who became a rector of a church not far away from here later. And his idea of education was totally revolutionary. We did all sorts of wonderful things. He taught chemistry and analysis of things was by sight, taste and smell. Perhaps it was smell and taste, I don't know. I remember licking bits of arsenic. Anyway he introduced us to *The Last Laugh* which was a famous German film.

Norman Swallow: You've already stated an interest in the cinema began at school presumably.

John Schlesinger: Yes, my interest, we were very severely rationed as children, going to the theatre and going to the cinema were great treats and they were made great treats because we didn't do much of it. But if we wanted to do anything like put on our own plays and make a mess of the dining room and dustsheets, that was encouraged. And we were taught to do things with our hands and I had a box Brownie when I was 9 years old. And my father said now you've got to learn to develop and print as well as take

pictures. So I learned all sorts of thing early on, to do things for myself really. And I've never regretted it. I was really very, very privileged with wonderfully understanding and liberal minded parents who gave us every kind of encouragement.

Alan Lawson: You said we

John Schlesinger: My siblings. I was the eldest of 5 children and we were 3 girls and 2 boys, and it was a very happy family life in those days. Funnily enough I didn't get on with my brother, I do now but not then.

Norman Swallow: Haven't I met him, didn't he work for Granada.

John Schlesinger: Yes he did. He was in publishing, Roger.

Norman Swallow: Yes, I did know him.

John Schlesinger: The n went out on light in Golden Square, so it was always known as Gra ada.

Norman Swallow: When war broke out you were only 13, wouldn't you have been.

John Schlesinger: Yes, I was just about to go to public school, it was the first year. And my parents had a little Queen Ann house, small house in the country that they rented for £1 a week in Berkshire, and we were all moved from London to down there. And my father went into the army and we saw very little of him in those years, because he was in India for 4 years and he was in the Norway campaign. So my mother really brought us up and they were comparatively happy years, although I never really liked school, I wasn't good at the things that a middle class boy was expected to be good at. And I thought there were more important things in life than just playing a good game of rugby.

Norman Swallow: You played a bad game of rugby

John Schlesinger: I played a very bad game of rugby and I hated it, and because of my shape I was always put into the second row of the scrum and I loathed it. I really wasn't very good at school, so I became somewhat rebellious in those days I think which has remained in good stead every

since. I wasn't really happy at school, at Uppingham. Although there were influences like this extraordinary man Charles Wright from who we learned you don't just read Shakespeare out aloud, you get up and act it. And he said I think we should learn a little bit about heraldry and wine and let's learn Spanish and I'll be part of the class with you because I don't speak it. I mean there was a very liberal, in this very rigid school curriculum, particularly during the war because people. I mean there was no art class, I started to do art and then, his name was **Rissic** I remember and then he was called up and there was nobody to replace him, so one didn't have, it was a relief to have a man that was non conventional.

Norman Swallow: Did you act at school, in school dramas

John Schlesinger: I played Viola I remember in *Twelfth Night*. Somebody said I looked like Florrie Ford

Norman Swallow: A young Florrie Ford

John Schlesinger: I suppose a young Florrie Ford. I remember playing Mr Hardcastle in *She Stoops To Conquer*. Timothy Bateson was Mrs Hardcastle. Yes I did act a good deal. I made a film, at my first school, my prep school, which was a sort of a day in the life of the school which included, it was really a day at all, it took weeks, but we had a trip to the seaside and I was rather fascinated by people, the headmaster tried to change his trunks underneath his towel, and fumbling about and I shot it. And then it was banned and it wasn't allowed to be shown to the school.

Norman Swallow: You shot it

John Schlesinger: I shot it

Norman Swallow: And you edited it presumably, the lot

John Schlesinger: Oh yes. Absolutely, 9.5mm.

Norman Swallow: Silent of course.

John Schlesinger: Silent yes.

Norman Swallow: 9.5, I remember that.

John Schlesinger: I remember a sort of magic opening, the school gate was going to be pulled back by a string, and it opened to this school life. Anyhow that was my first beginnings with film. And I remember making a film when I was on embarkation leave just before I went to the Far East when I was in the army, the Royal Engineers. And I made a film, a sort of silly thriller thing called *Horror* about 2 escaped convicts with all my family in it.

Alan Lawson: 9.5 or had you moved up.

John Schlesinger: No, I hadn't moved up, I didn't move up to 16mm

Norman Swallow: After the war

John Schlesinger: Yes, till when I was at university. But I remember, because going to the theatre was such a privilege, such a treat, the first theatre I ever saw was a magic show when I was aged 8 with a couple, a pair of magicians was **Masculin and Devant** who were very famous.

Alan Lawson: Upper Regent St

John Schlesinger: Was it the Egyptian Hall they were in, somewhere like that

Alan Lawson: It was called Masculin and Devant's Theatre

John Schlesinger: I remember going to that, it was the first theatre my father ever took me to and I was crazy about magic, still am. It was near Broadcasting House I think it was near where the Queen's Hall is. Or was.

Alan Lawson: That's right, it was just below there.

John Schlesinger: Where the Promenade concerts were given, where the hotel is now

Alan Lawson: Upper Regent Street.

John Schlesinger: Yes, it was there. I remember that very well. And I then became fascinated by magic and used to every Christmas, all I wanted were magic tricks and there was a shop you could buy them from in Kingsway called Davenport's Magic and Joke Place. And so my pocket money was spent there buying either tricks or jokes like rubber

things with air that you pumped under people's plates so they toppled. I once remember getting a fake piece of dog shit and putting it on my mother's plate for breakfast, and it was the only time my father ever hit me.

Norman Swallow: Did it smell like dog shit as well

John Schlesinger: Oh no, no, no, no. It was just a piece of artificial dog shit. I thought it was a wonderful joke, but then being of a lavatorial mind, it's never left me really. I like those sort of jokes.

Norman Swallow: What about your military service in the Royal Engineers in the Far East.

John Schlesinger: Yes, well. Not very distinguished. I remember the school magazine publishing something which said Schlesinger Major had rather a poor war, as if you have a good war, I don't really understand the distinction. As if war could be really much fun. I was interested, I joined the Royal Engineers, I was up for a university short course and studied engineering at Manchester University for a time and then was very rigorous training which I didn't enjoy very much. And then on the training thing I got really very ill with rheumatic fever and I was sick for quite a long time and in a portion of a mental hospital that the British Army had taken over near Clitheroe in Lancashire. And so we, it was really looking back at seeing the cages incarcerating all these grey garbed women rubbing themselves up against the wires, we were marched down to the gymnasium, was a sort of strange, bizarre sight and I was there for some months.

And almost as soon as I went back into training I broke an ankle on an obstacle course so I was clearly not very good officer material. And in fact failed miserably and became, I remember a great argument with, I don't like explosions much and someone threw a thunderflash at me and made me jump badly and I broke and ankle. And the gym instructor said get up sapper. And I said I can't move. And he said get move. And said I cannot fucking move. Don't use that language to me sapper. And all this went on. And finally they realised I couldn't move and I was sent back to hospital and I remember it was the general election at the time and Atley getting in when I was in the ward. And when I came out the gym instructor, I said I'm never going to go over an obstacle course again if I can possibly avoid it.

And the gym instructor fancied himself as a performer, and the only way round, I formed a sort of concert party in the unit, put him straight into drag which seemed to please him a very great deal. So I never went over an obstacle course again.

Norman Swallow: It is true that you entertained the troops with a magic act, you said

John Schlesinger: Yes I did. I formed, and I had a little magic act and originally did it at all sort of top Hs and Naffe canteens and things like that. And then I auditioned for Combined Services Entertainment. And when I was shipped to the Far East, by this time as an architectural draughtsman, I trained for that at Chatham, I had a magic act and joined CSE as an actor and had one moment of doing magic. But it didn't go on for very long because I didn't like the way we were being treated and we had a very, very bizarre unit in which were luminaries, or future luminaries, like Stanley Baxter or Kenneth Williams and what is the name of the playwright, Peter, who wrote a play about his spastic daughter called *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg*. It was Peter Nichols who was there and actually wrote a play about his days in Combined Services Entertainment in Singapore when it was a bizarre period. I thought we were being very badly treated by the sergeant major who was extremely unpleasant. And I spoke up and got returned to my unit because I was an acting unpaid sergeant. And I was returned to my unit as an architectural draughtsman in Singapore. And shortly afterwards this man who was had up for all sorts of criminal offences committed suicide in front of the entire mess by taking cyanide. Very, very bizarre. I've had some bizarre things which must have affected me, or interested me. I wasn't there when it happened, but Stanley Baxter and the late Kenneth Williams were always full of the stories.

Norman Swallow: We're in the 1940s, the BFI notes about you refer to home movies in the 1940s, Venice, Switzerland, New Zealand, Bavaria, true or false.

John Schlesinger: Yes, there are some home movies which they've got. They've got a sort of fake *Emma* film. There was a famous fake documentary maker called Luciano Emma who did Venice as a series of reflections, and I'm afraid I tried to do the same thing, rather unsuccessfully, on family holidays and that sort of thing. They've got that,

but I can't find my 9.5 mm work unfortunately, I don't know where it is. But it was at Oxford, in my first year after 4 years in the army and the Royal Engineers doing various things. I was shipped back to England and demobbed and went up to Balliol at Oxford. And really then started to come into my own.

Alan Lawson: What was the course you were going to study for

John Schlesinger: English literature. And I had a very good time. I spent a lot of time acting, directing, I did my first play I remember for a play competition, *The Happy Journey from Trenton to Camden* by Thornton Wilder, a fairly fool proof play actually, you know, a family on an outing, four chairs representing the car. And it was a great success and I won the competition and everybody said you can direct, you're very good. And I thought oh well I think I'd rather act. And I was acting away like crazy. I was president of the experimental theatre club eventually. I played with the Oxford University's Dramatic Society. I was part of the company that was the first touring company to France after the war with *The Silent Woman* by Ben Johnson which was great fun. Peter Parker was in it and his future with Jill Rowe Dutton played the silent woman and Norman Painting was it and whole group of us. He came to fame on the Archers. And I had very good years there at Oxford. I enjoyed it and I made by first serious films there including *Black Legend* in my first year which was a 16mm film based on a story about a gibbet which had been many times reconstructed on the downs near where my parents lived in Berkshire.

Norman Swallow: That was 1948

John Schlesinger: It was 1948 and it was, petrol rationing was still in force and clothes rationing. We sent out a little prototype costume for the crowd to be made out of white sheets and blackout material for skirts, and all the local vicars wives sort of rounded up extras and brought trucks of people with rationed gasoline, you know farm trucks and things. It was the beginning of learning to beg borrow and steal which one has had to do ever since really.

Norman Swallow: This was a sound film

John Schlesinger: No, it was a silent film to which we put music synchronised on 2 turntables. So we had twin turntables and dubbed the film at each performance. We had facts, we had commentary and we turned ourselves in vacation into a mobile cinema, this was mine from another college, Alan Cooke who also went on to become a professional director.

Norman Swallow: Was this 35mm now

John Schlesinger: No 16. Then we became more ambitious and we made a film which was a sound film the following year. We were helped very much by somebody who was with Kay Labs called Bob King, who helped us a lot, he subsequently put his son onto us for me to help him, so the wheel came full circle. The first film was a great success, Dilys Powell gave it a glowing review, brains not money she said. And the second film was not such a success although more ambitious in a way. And we blew it up to 35 and Butchers Films, aptly named I may tell you, gave it a sort of limited release. I remember we went, because we were studying the character of the man who was running the company, Jack Phillips, who used to roll his eyes when we said how's it was doing. Don't ask, don't ask. You give me a headache. It was my first experience of sort of Wardour St why do you do this arty farty rubbish. You should go to Camber Sands and do Sinbad the Sailor. That's what you ought to be doing. So it was an amazing experience. I remember once going outside London, not far, I'm not sure where it was, to see the film in a double bill and at the end of it the people sitting next to me said well I suppose somebody had a good time making that. That was called *The Starfish*.

Norman Swallow: Then according to my notes, 1950ish, you played character parts, it says in films, *Oh Rosalinda*, *Brothers in Law*, *Battle Of The River Plate*.

John Schlesinger: That's true, when I left university we had had a rather strange experience with Sir Michael Balcon at Ealing. And Freddie Shaughnessy who was a writer and came to see *Black Legend* which was the film about the hanging which we decided, a friend of my father said why don't you show it in London at the House of Commons in a private room there. So we thought that is rather a good venue for it and we'll give the premiere in London at the House of Commons and there we did. And in fact I'd met

Dilys Powell at a debate she'd given in Oxford, and I said will you come and see the film. And she said if you ever come to London with it, I'll come and she did and gave it this glowing review. And at the same time Freddie Shaughnessy came, I've forgotten how I knew him, I think my friend Alan Cooke did and he gave it quite an extraordinary report which made Mick Balcon summon us to Ealing to give a performance of this film. Well of course it was just an amateur film and the projector broke down and it wasn't correctly framed and the projectionist was snapping back and I said rack down, it's in the film. And it was stopped and a lot of people were coughing and saying well I told you so. Why have we all been summoned to see this film made for £200. And Balcon wrote afterwards, said thank you for bringing your amateur film, I don't know what he thought we were bringing. I think he thought it was going to be of a professional standard. And anyway we didn't get the job we hoped we'd get through it. I wanted to become an assistant assistant. But in fact there were better positioned people, Michael Berkitt was, got in that way, and so did Pevson, Nicholas Pevson's son. They were the two who kind of at the same stage and age got the jobs of assistant assistant assistant at Ealing. And I couldn't get arrested.

And I enjoyed acting and had a certain success as a character actor. So I plunged into rep. And joined, went to Colchester rep to begin with to play small parts, and then I went to Australia and New Zealand for a year which I enjoyed very much with the company. And then joined the radio station in Wellington. Then I came home and continued my career. Someone I met early on in my career was Roy Boulting who was a tremendous encouragement and put me in one or two of his films. Would not just let me just act but say now come here and show you what I'm doing. You can see I'm going to do this sort of shot or that sort of shot. And started to teach in a way.

And I had some good opportunities. I met Michael Powell, who I was part of a company for *Oh Rosalinda*. They had 50 actors dancers and singers and I was one of the actors in that. And he seemed to like me and then gave me a small part in the *Battle of The River Plate* as a result of that. So I had some mentors. And Basil Dearden was a mentor of mine as well. And in the years following my time at the BBC I became 2nd unit director on *The Four Just Men*, Basil was very good to me and gave me chunks of series to do which

the other directors never did. And so I met some people who were very influential on me in those days.

Norman Swallow: We're now in the very early 50s

John Schlesinger: We're in the mid 50s.

John Schlesinger: I've got a note of a film called *Starfish*

John Schlesinger: The *Starfish* I did mention. *Starfish* was the one which was distributed and somebody had a good time in making it remark. That was much earlier, that was the second film I made at university, a lousy movie. Then I became an actor, etc.

Norman Swallow: We've now reached the early 50s, are we now approaching the BBC and Donald Baverstock and company.

John Schlesinger: Yes. During my years as an actor, I permanently felt frustrated. I knew I wasn't a very good actor, limited by my shape and by the lightness of my voice, although I did get BBC radio work. But I wasn't ever really very confident as an actor and I knew that I had more to offer, and so I made with my then agent who wanted to get into films a sort of quasi documentary called *Sunday In The Park* which was a dreadfully facetious piece of work which we made on 16mm, staging many scenes. And a friend of mine who was an editor who I've subsequently worked with, Dick Marden had a producer friend who saw it, James Laurie his name was. He said I've got a friend at the BBC called Cecil McGivern and I'll give you an introduction. So I was given an introduction to Cecil McGivern and the film was seen and shown in fact on the BBC heavily edited. They said it's too long, we want to put it out with an OB about a band in Hyde Park, we'd like to put your film out with it. And they cut it rather heavily but we got paid £60

Norman Swallow: I remember it.

John Schlesinger: Do you, you can't remember it really.

Norman Swallow: It is the first film I associate with your name, late in your career but.

John Schlesinger: It got me so to speak with an interview with Cecil McGivern

Norman Swallow: For the record, head of programmes

John Schlesinger: Yes he was head of programmes. And he obviously must have mentioned me to Grace Wyndham-Goldie of talks because I was asked to do a programme for the *Tonight* show which was by this time on. And they said why don't you do a day in Victoria Bus Station and I said no, I'd rather do Petticoat Lane. So they agreed that I could do Petticoat Lane as a little tiny short essay. And I went with a cameraman who was very famous in those days, Tubby Englander and I knew in my heart of hearts that I was auditioning and they were going to ask Tubby had he done well.

And I did shoot, and in those days, it was my first film ever which I got paid to do, a pittance, but anyhow it was edited by Jack Gold who was one of the editors of the *Tonight Programme*. And that, I never saw it, because it went out, it was sort of assembly line stuff. I never saw it and I vowed from that day on that I would finish my own films, which got me into a lot of trouble, because it interrupted Tony Essex or whoever it was who was supervising. We didn't like each other at all. In fact I wasn't very popular on the programme at all, we didn't get on with Donald Baverstock, or Alasdair Milne really. Because Alasdair Milne was a sort of carbon copy of Baverstock. And I hated being called boy, boyo. I really resented it and continued to resent it long after I'd become better known and came back to the BBC to do *An Englishman Abroad*. Well boy we hear it is going to be rather good, Alasdair said. But Baverstock, I did about a dozen films for them and some of them worked and many of them didn't. And sometimes Baverstock would look on the Moviola and say it's not funny boy. You cut it wrong, not funny. And I thought well he doesn't know anything about it. I didn't get on with him and after a year there I was summoned to the presence and he said you're not worth keeping on boy. When it works, it's fine. But when it doesn't it's not worth it. So I was given the push.

And at that time I suddenly got into a rep that I'd really been knocking on the door of, Windsor Rep, for years and got a job as an actor which was almost my last one, because Richard Briars was a young actor in the company and we were doing some detective play, I forget which. And Huw Wheldon was waiting in the wings and said I'm starting a new programme called *Monitor*. Will you come and make the

opening film. And thank heavens he did. Because that really started the happiest, almost the happiest period of my life creatively.

Norman Swallow: We're talking about 1957, 1958

John Schlesinger: I suppose we are, are we, was it as late as that.

Alan Lawson: What was that first film for *Monitor*

John Schlesinger: The first film for *Monitor* was about the circus

Norman Swallow: It was called *Circus*

John Schlesinger: If called *Circus* if it was called anything, it was just an impression of the circus at Haringay and it was the first year Russians were taking part in the circus and it was just an impressionistic film, made very quickly and which had a measure of success. And Huw then asked me to do more. And I said well if you're going to ask me to do more can I have a contract, because I'll give up acting. And I got paid £50 a week which was a princely sum

Norman Swallow: For *Monitor*

John Schlesinger: Yes. And I was on attachment. You frown, is that a lot or little.

Norman Swallow: It sound familiar.

John Schlesinger: And I remember enjoying my life there very much. I adored Huw Weldon, he was a very, very good producer, and a sympathetic producer and quite a critical one. And I didn't think much of him frankly fronting the programme. I think he moved his hands around too much and rather fond of his own voice. But he was a wonderful producer for me. And after the time that I had on the *Tonight* programme I was really glad to find him. And the team, wonderful team. It was a very happy period and very creative period because we'd meet and say right what are we going to do this month whatever it was. And I did about a film a month for them.

Norman Swallow: Among the team there was Peter Newington, Nancy Thomas.

John Schlesinger: Peter Newington, Nancy Thomas, James, Alan Tyrer, wonderful, wonderful editor whom I worked with constantly and loved him. It was a happy time. I did all sorts of different films. We'd just come up with ideas at the meeting, and it might be I'd like to, it was personal too, I'd like to do a film about Brighton Pier, I'd like to do a film about Brussels Exhibition or painters in Paris, you know.

Norman Swallow: That must be one I noted called *The Left Bank*

John Schlesinger: Yes. *The Left Bank* was that.

Norman Swallow: I've got *Backstage At The Rep*

John Schlesinger: That was Oldham Rep celebrate 50 years rep which was a good one. The one that really we came to loggerheads over at the Beeb was a film about an opera company, a scratch opera company that came to the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, the sort of thing where the chorus didn't change properly so that their trousers were unrolling underneath their monks habits and things like that. I loved the slight tackiness of the company and I've always been fascinated by opera. So to do this was a challenge because there was very little light, and the man who ran the BBC Films, now remind me of his name, he was an army officer

Norman Swallow: Jack **Mewitt**

John Schlesinger: Jack Mewitt

Norman Swallow: I was his assistant

John Schlesinger: You must have been responsible perhaps for this. You may have been part of the anti brigade who said you must be mad wanting to do this film, and the cameraman who was assigned to it said I can't do this, there is no light

Norman Swallow: Who is this

John Schlesinger: Can't conveniently remember his name. And they all went on absolutely, said to Huw, you must be bad trying to shoot backstage at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane

Alan Lawson: David Prosser

John Schlesinger: No, it wasn't David Prosser. If you mentioned a few names of cameramen. A young guy, youngish he'd already shot a film for me about a flower show which I'd done at home, near where my parents lived. In fact it was the flower show at which my mother used to work at, for the *Tonight* show. Anyway it was a big no no and Huw said I'm backing, I wanted, I was determined to make this film. And there was a cameraman who said they're all talking absolute rubbish. Charles de Jaeger who made his name doing the spaghetti tree film, pretending that spaghetti grew on trees. And he said of course we can do this, there is fast stock FPS and we had can a hand held light. And we'll certainly can do this and they did, much to the disgust of Mewitt and Ealing who all said this is ludicrous and they looked at the rushes and were critical. And it was a very roughly made film but it had quite a success when it was shown. And someone was watching it, who was Italian himself, a producer who had been with the Rank Organisation, called Joseph Janni. And I got a message from somebody who worked at Bush House, a friend of his, an Italian. He said a friend of mine has seen your film, likes the detail of it, wants to meet you. So both my passion for opera and my passion for film got me introduced to Jo Janni who subsequently, in fact he said at the meeting I would like to discover you. I said well be my guest. I'd like you to discover me. And as a result of that meeting I found my first feature producer although I didn't know it at the time. He wanted me to go and do commercials for his commercials company, which I subsequently did. But at that time I still was happy at the Beeb and doing well on this programme which I really loved.

Norman Swallow: Another one I remember was *Innocent Eye*

John Schlesinger: *Innocent Eye* was about child art which did have quite a success and was at the Edinburgh Festival and got written up quite a lot. I remember during when it was seen there was a journalist who did a very big article on it for *The Express* I think. I've forgotten. But it is somewhere in my cuttings. And it had quite a success, a bit

sentimental if I look at it now. I haven't seen it for ages.

But they were good days because what the BBC taught me, what making those films taught me, both *Tonight* and *Monitor* was that the shortness of time made you make up your mind very quickly, first impressions were invariably the last. It was no bad thing. And it was a very good training ground. I always had my eye on getting into the cinema and when Baverstock, one of the reasons I didn't like him also, the Boulting Brothers said show us some of your work. And I stupidly asked permission and he said I'm not going to cut my nose to spite my face, no you can't get them out. So I took to stealing cutting copies from the BBC, and the BFI have got them now. So we had double head, 35mm double head and a lot of joins in them, they still exist some of these films in the rawest state. And I thought well fuck you, I'm not going to be told what I can do and can't do by these jumped up nobodies. They were to me, and I was quite determined to get into the film industry through the BBC.

SIDE 2, TAPE 1

John Schlesinger: Well it was in those days, I also had run ins with Grace Wyndham-Goldie too who was quite a formidable character. I didn't get on with her, she adored Donald Baverstock and Alasdair Milne, they were her boys, you know. And we all used to gather on a Sunday night when *Monitor* used to go out in hospitality to see the programme and possibly to gawp at whatever star. I remember when Callas came into the studio and we were all there for the camera rehearsal which she was virtually directing, she wanted the monitor wheeled in and she would say can you show me camera 1's position and then say higher higher higher. Basta. And she checked every position of the camera, quite rightly. She was a great diva.

And it was during those evenings while I was there I used to get into terrible arguments with Grace, because I don't know how it started but I used to refer to my work as film which it was, 35mm film. And I said I'm making films. And she said you're not, you're making television. I said absolute rubbish, it's shown on television but we're making films. We edit it, we photograph it in exactly the same way that any film is done but with the cognisance that you've got to get your audience quickly and the set ups perhaps you'll get closer than normally, use more close ups but you are working in film and she would never accept this. And years later when they had a reunion of *Monitor* and I came having now established myself in the feature film world, she was not welcoming. Well you've used us as a back door to the film industry she said rather tight lipped I thought.

Norman Swallow: You've reached about 1960

John Schlesinger: About.

Norman Swallow: Was *The Class* for *Monitor*

John Schlesinger: No, *The Class* was for *Monitor*

Norman Swallow: It was a very famous film, if I dare say so.

John Schlesinger: Famous. Yes, I liked it and it was a good film. Very interesting how it came about. One of our meetings, and I'd left *Monitor* and I came back to do a

couple of full-length programmes, one of which was about 3 painters living in London and what had happened to them. I thought let's do the same with actors. Let's take some students who are ending their time at drama school and going out into the world and let's follow 3 of them. And Huw liked the idea so I went up to look at final students and that kind of thing at the Central School of Drama, and while I was researching it I sat in on a class run by an actor who I slightly knew called Harold Lang. And he said what are you doing here rather superciliously. And I said well working for. He said Oh *Monitor*, oh my god. And I sat through the class and I enjoyed the class so much that he gave that I started to think I think I'm barking up the wrong tree with the other idea, this might be a better idea. So I saw it and then I rang Huw and said Huw, just had the most remarkable experience watching Harold Lang teach a class. I think we both ought to come up and see it because I'd like to that instead of the other more ambitious and complex idea. He came up and we saw another, what are you doing back here, he said, and bringing Huw Wheldon, well my god, he was very, very scathing about *Monitor*. And anyhow once we'd seen it for a second time and Huw had said yes do it, I said to him we'd like to do an entire programme on you, and his attitude completely changed. And the challenge of the film was to stay in the room and do the entire class. It was really a very, very engaging film to make, I loved doing that. And it was successful.

Norman Swallow: I have a quote from you John, I think you must have written an article in which you referred to *The Class*, the purpose "to catch spontaneously the essence of what we see." That was you about *The Class*.

John Schlesinger: Well, I think we did, I think we had more than one camera. It wasn't something that was rigged at all. There were things that he did like passing a scrunched up ball of paper and treat it like a wounded bird which obviously I'd seen him so and said let's reproduce that. But there were certain things which couldn't be reproduced, that were spontaneous. And it was great fun to try and find a way of capturing it. And it was my last film for *Monitor* and I think one of my best.

And at the same time I had made, I think I'd made it by this time *Terminus* for Edgar Anstey at British Transport Films. And that had come about because earlier on I'd been

asked to show some of my BBC work to British Transport and talk about it as well as the Shell Film Unit which I did. On the night I nearly got killed, which was a very strange experience. I went to the Shell Centre by which time I was directing 2nd unit for *The Four Just Men* at Walton Studios and I came into town with all these stolen films and showed them to the Shell Film Unit and talked about it and they said afterwards it was lovely and thank you and we've got a surprise for you, we thought rather than go to a local restaurant we'd go out and have dinner outside at Hampton Court which was very near Walton. I said oh my goodness, I've just come from there. And I was driving a Sunbeam Talbot and we all piled into the car, went to this hotel for dinner. I was really very tired, I'd been shooting all day and I was up early the next day to shoot my first big sequence with De Sica as an actor, my revered De Sica. And by the pudding stage I said I think I'm so tired I've got to leave, will you forgive me. And they said oh no of course do. I said are you going to be able to get back alright. They said oh yes, we'll be fine, we'll pile into other cars. And I was on my own and had a very bad accident, partly my fault, at the crossroads where the London Road meets the Richmond Lower Road. I had a head on and was quite badly injured and I'll never, it ended both my days of driving when I was shooting, I've never done it since. I don't know why I was telling that story.

Alan Lawson: You were talking really about *Terminus*

John Schlesinger: As a result of these screenings for Shell and British Transport, Edgar Anstey said what would you, we'd like you to make a film for us. I'd always been fascinated by Brighton. I like elegance and I like extreme vulgarity. And it seemed to me that that embodied both. And so I said I'd like to do a film, I researched and photographed and wrote a treatment about Brighton which was very beautifully produced and submitted it to Edgar. And he pondered over it and he said no I don't think so, it's too specialised and not enough about British Rail. So we met for lunch. So I said what about a day in the life of, which is a sort of format that I quite enjoy doing. So *Terminus*, the idea for *Terminus* came about. I spent a month researching it and two weeks shooting it and quite a long time editing it. And it had enormous success and it was shown with a Boulting Brothers film I think with Peter Sellers starring in it as a supporting programme, and had a

great success and won the Golden Lion at Venice. And was on at the opening of the London Film Festival, and all that.

And about this time, by the time this all came about, I'd shown the film about a good deal and I ran a double bill to invitees at the National Film Theatre which I just took in a morning to show both that and *The Class* as a double bill, to which I asked Jo Janni. And Jo Janni saw it and offered me my first feature. And that's really how I made the crossover.

Norman Swallow: I always regarded *Terminus* as a really marvellous documentary. It is still beautiful.

John Schlesinger: Very dated.

Norman Swallow: I don't think so.

John Schlesinger: Well the song's terribly dated

Norman Swallow: It is beautiful to look at and it's very moving.

John Schlesinger: It was very strange, it had a rather snide reception critically. I don't know why. It did well but I remember a sort of rather snide, when I came down for the party after the first night of the festival when it was shown. People were not rushing to say how lovely. Perhaps there is an element in my work of facetiousness which people didn't like.

Alan Lawson: Or could it have been that you were an outsider.

John Schlesinger: It could have been that. The British are nothing if not envious and jealous of any sort success. We are brought up from birth not to be excited and don't get above yourself which is one of the things that I absolutely detest about this country, yet welcome it over the American sort of religion of success and money. Pay your money or don't pay your money and you take your choice.

Norman Swallow: So we're moving into the cinema now. Feature cinema.

John Schlesinger: Now we've got to the feature cinema.

Norman Swallow: : *A Kind Of Loving* was it

John Schlesinger: *A Kind Of Loving* was my first film. I remember I was on a skiing holiday, I wasn't a very good skier, I gave up after two holidays but I was on a mountain and received this book that had been sent to me by Jo Janni called *A Kind Of Loving* by Stan Barstow and I took it with me and read it and wrote in the card from to top of this ski resort, and said I really love this material, please give me the chance to do it. And he had already in a kind of an Italianate way I think already promised it to Jack Lee and had to get out of that and gave it to me. And so started this extraordinary collaboration with this quite wonderful man for me, maddening to other people, and indeed sometimes maddening to me. We had terrible and vociferous rows. But he had a great sense of humour and taught me a very great deal.

Norman Swallow: It was very much the mood of the time, wasn't it, the 1960s were associated with that,

John Schlesinger: Well that sort of, for want of a better word those kitchen sink school

Norman Swallow: Those kind of novels, plays, films, all 3 media really

John Schlesinger: It was, yes it was. And you must remember that also after a period social realism of that sort, though it wasn't the first time after all in that before, I'm not sure when the Cronin book was done, there was a famous Cronin book that was filmed before the war that had social realism about it.

Alan Lawson: *The Citadel*

John Schlesinger: Was it *The Citadel*, I don't know. Anyway, it all started with Woodfall and Tony Richardson and John Osborne and *Look Back In Anger* and their insistence on making their own film of that. And paved the way for those of us who came after and I was fairly late on the scene. And not tremendously welcomed by my colleagues. I wasn't really part of Free Cinema, although people always associate me with that, but I was nothing to do with it. I came from television. I remember Lindsay Anderson said to me once, you must set your sights higher than television

Norman Swallow: I always did you should have said

John Schlesinger: I should have said that. I was in awe of Lindsay, he was the leader of the opposition, he always has been. And highly articulate and intelligent and I never felt quite in the same league, though I've changed my opinion over the years. And we were, it wasn't so much about the sort of social background, *A Kind Of Loving*, as the emotional story of lives and compromise and the illusion of being in love and the necessity to compromise when you realise you've made a terrible mistake and you have the choice. Do I run away and give it all up and divorce or do I stick by her, and despite this terrible mother in law. And it had a very big success, except in France where they said les anglais, l'amour, les anglais, and they never released it.

Norman Swallow: And Keith Waterhouse and Willis Hall wrote the script. You've worked with them.

John Schlesinger: Yes, this was the first time. And funnily enough I had been ask to read and possibly direct *Billy Liar* some years before when I was working at Walton Studio on *The Four Just Men* and Sid Cole was one of the producers and had bought an option on *Billy Liar* and given it to me. But there was no way in those days though I was enthusiastic about it that it could be done with me. I had no record of any kind. And then Jo Janni picked up the option and offered it to me after *A Kind Of Loving* and so it was done the following year in order to get *A Kind Of Loving* I had to direct a test of the unknown Tom Courteney. I think it was even before he'd done his first film with Richardson, I directed a test, an 8 minute test which was again my test as much as anybody else's I think and Jo Janni made me go through this and questioned me. And Arthur Ibbetson the cameraman and showed it to the Boulting Brothers and said do you think I can entrust him with a film. That's how I got *A Kind Of Loving*. Then I did *Billy Liar*

Norman Swallow: Marvellous performances from your actors, you always did John if I dare say so.

John Schlesinger: I'm glad you did

Norman Swallow: It's important actually, your relationship with the actors and so on

John Schlesinger: Very and I think that people have been rather snide about it. People have said of course, certain critics. I've never been a critics darling, I'm relieved that I haven't been because they're so busy building you up and then busy tearing you down. So I've always been sort of, I've had my champions and quite a lot of people who've never liked my work very much critically. And I rather resent the fact that people have said over the years oh of course we know that he is good with actors as if it's unimportant. I think it's terribly important, but I've always done character driven pieces, I choose that.

And I've always, I've only had in all my 30 years of filmmaking one really unpleasant experience with an actor which came many, many years later, although he performance is excellent, and that was with Sean Penn, whom I found impossible. Absolutely horrific to direct. But otherwise I've always had wonderful relationships with actors, enjoyed it, created space for them. It is not that I tell them what to do or that I was ever such a brilliant actor myself, absolutely not, I think what you've got to do is not to allow the pressure that is inevitable in filmmaking to affect the actors, never let them feel hurry, hurry hurry. I mean sometimes the light is going and you say I'm awfully sorry, we've got to be rather quick, because there is the cameraman looking through his spy glass saying go now, in this terrible **sounding** remark.

Norman Swallow: Was the fact that you yourself as you said earlier on an actor in your childhood and your youth, that must have helped.

John Schlesinger: I think it helped in that I knew what it felt like to be suddenly in front of a camera at 8.30 and told to get on with it. I remember being directed by Basil Dearden once where he had two sets going at the same time at Ealing and I was on one doing a small part in something. They were shooting on the main set as well, and he kept running between the two. I mean one certainly felt pressure and I've always wanted to create an environment where one is essentially collaborating with everybody and I want that collaboration to be special. I can't work in an area, in an air, with a kind of atmosphere of hostility, like some directors love it. I can't bear that.

Alan Lawson: Terrible way to work.

John Schlesinger: Yes but some people have been very successful at it.

Norman Swallow: You've also haven't you, frequently not all the time of course, used or worked with often the same cameraman, film editors, composers of music.

John Schlesinger: Yes, it varies, less so with cameramen, interestingly. I like to feel you've got footsie footsie out of the way. You don't have to play footsie footsie every time, to sort of get to know somebody and their idiosyncratic way of looking at things. I've worked with actors like Alan Bates 4 times, Julie Christie, William Devane, an American actor, 3 times, Dustin Hoffman twice, one of the few who have. I've worked a lot with Jim Clark the editor and designers Richard MacDonald, the wonderful Richard MacDonald, who died last year, 3 times

Norman Swallow: And music, Richard Rodney Bennett several times.

John Schlesinger: Richard Rodney Bennett several times. Gerald Gouriet a young composer that I work with now about 3 times. I like working with people that, I'm not like Spielberg who has worked interminably with John Williams as a composer. And the cameramen have changed quite often. I worked with a cameraman I didn't much like for the first two films. I worked with a wonderful operator who taught me a lot called John Harris, he was sympathetic. The cameraman used to say well he hasn't done his homework. Well the truth was I didn't really know how to do the homework originally when I was starting. I didn't know how to move the camera, how to break it up into a scene. Now it comes as second nature, it doesn't mean to say that I haven't made many mistakes but instinctively I know the grammar of film very well now so when I'm working with a writer I'm thinking visually and filmically how to, the rhythm of something and all that comes into it.

Norman Swallow: Moving on I've got *Darling* as the next film, 1965.

John Schlesinger: That was my third film. Interesting

Norman Swallow: *Billy Liar* was 1963, *Darling* 1965

John Schlesinger: *Darling* was great in a way. It all started very interestingly, we had at the start of *Billy Liar Housewife's Choice* radio programme, in this instance and often done in reality by a journalist called Godfrey Wynne who was a bit of a laughing stock. And he couldn't pronounce his Ls I think, so we put as many as we possibly could into the titles.

Norman Swallow: So you're John Schesinger

John Schlesinger: Yes, that sort of thing. And he was a bit of a prima donna, and arrived saying why isn't there a second assistant to meet me. All that went on. Anyhow, subsequently we had lunch, he said I want to have lunch with you, I've got an idea. And he said I've come across a very interesting situation of a syndicate of show biz and business people who have rented a flat to keep their common woman in, and she committed suicide, and threw herself off a balcony in Mayfair. And Jo and I, Jo Janni and I thought this is a pretty good basis for a film, and at that time Freddy Raphael was a shit hot writer and we went with him and had another meeting with Godfrey Wynne and he was rather snooty about basing it on Godfrey and said I'd like to write an original screenplay, and did. And it was dreadful. And bore no real connection with reality. And Jo very rightly said listen, I don't think, you haven't really studied the scene. I know a woman who could fit into this category and we wanted to do a story not the story about the suicide but the story of a woman who could never make up her mind, always was flitting from man to man to man because she always thought there would be something better round the next corner. We followed such a woman that Jo knew which at this stage of her life was rather well married financially and she told us all sorts of things and we took her round to restaurants and openings of art exhibits and all sorts of things. And she provided a very good basis for us. And then having told her husband what she was doing wanted to divorce him, so the last part of the film which was very good and based on a shooting party in Scotland had to be completely altered because she issued an injunction to stop the film being made. So I remember rewrites about Italian counts going on at the last moment. And that again was to star Julie Christie, she having taken over from Topsy Jane in *Billy Liar*.

Norman Swallow: Very good

John Schlesinger: She was very good, and she won an Oscar

Norman Swallow: Didn't Freddie Raphael get an Oscar.

John Schlesinger: Yes, Freddie Raphael got an Oscar, so did

Norman Swallow: It was nominated as Best Picture

John Schlesinger: I'm not sure if it was nominated, I got a nomination for Best Director, and the costume designer, Miss Harris, and I've forgotten her first name, she got an Oscar.

Norman Swallow: But Raphael actually won

John Schlesinger: Yes he did win, the 3 of them, it got 3 Oscars. I'd had a quarrel with Freddy because he was in Greece being rather grand like some writers are, saying directors only fuck up my material, and there were things that weren't working and the opening of the film was ghastly, we'd shot it the first day of shooting, it was dreadful. It didn't work at all. And we were very deeply unhappy and Jo wanted Freddy to come back from Greece, but he said don't let's bother, let's get some one else in. And of course that's a red rag to a bull of any self respecting writer, so there were terrible hostilities on that. We've all patched it up, we patched it up at the end of the film when we did need to reshoot. And I remember at the Oscar I used to suffer terribly badly from migraines with severe vomiting, and the night of the Oscar Jo Levine who had taken over the distribution of the film had given a party in London. He wasn't going to be at the Oscars, it wasn't such a big deal in those days. And we had a party in London to celebrate the 3 nominations and we went to bed rather late and I woke up really early wondering who'd won. And I suppose rather hoping that Julie particularly would win, and I didn't care if nobody else did, with a terrible, terrible, terrible headache and Jo's wife, Stella Janni, rang at 6 in the morning and said we've heard the results, you haven't won, well I didn't expect to, but Freddy has and so has the costume designer and so has Julie. I said I've got to ring Freddy with this pounding headache and by this time our relationship was strained to say the least. I rang him and said congratulations and I knew at that moment I was going to throw up and said many congratulations, I think it's well deserved, [noise of throwing up].

Norman Swallow: I hope he forgave you for that.

John Schlesinger: I don't think he knew, he didn't hear, I'd rang off immediately. Bang. Got too late to the bathroom.

Norman Swallow: He wrote your next script

John Schlesinger: Yes, he did, he wrote *Far From The Madding Crowd*. Yes, and he's writing another one now, I'm back here to work on a totally different departure for me.

Norman Swallow: We'll come to that later. *Far From The Madding Crowd*, Freddy again. 1967. What about that, Julie Christie again, and Alan Bates again.

John Schlesinger: Julie Christie, we were sitting in the dubbing theatre, yes, yes, we were sitting in the mixing theatre of *Darling* all saying what should we do next for Julie, because Julie I think was under contract to Jo at the time. And, you see we are talking about days when getting films off the ground was easy. We had been financed by Anglo Amalgamated with the first two films which by Nat Cohen and Stuart Levy, and *A Kind Of Loving* had made a big profit in England alone. And you could do that then because an 11 week shoot we had which was by today's standards generous, it seemed tight to me. And we had, it cost about £185,000 to make. Nobody got paid much but we were happy to be making films and it was princely compared to the BBC.

Norman Swallow: Mind you nearly 30 years ago

John Schlesinger: Yes we are talking about nearly 30 years ago. And everything has changed since then and radically changed. And *Far From The Madding Crowd* was an MGM picture, and *Darling* had had to be taken over because we had wanted to re shoot the opening by Jo Levine who I think, it is interesting that the film was hugely successful in America more so than here, and yet it never seemed to have turned a profit, at least my participation never showed up much.

But anyhow we made *Far From The Madding Crowd*, it was a big, big epic film, really. And we'd been sitting previously in the dubbing theatre saying what should we do next. And Jim Clark, the editor, said why don't we make *Tess Of The D'Urbervilles* with Julie. I said it's not a bad idea but it had been done we discovered by MGM already. So

it was decided we should all take a look at *Far From The Madding Crowd* which I read having been in New York to launch *Darling* very successfully. I sailed home for the first time on the Queen Elizabeth No 1, and read *Far From The Madding Crowd* on the journey and I phoned Jo from Southampton when we arrived saying I think this is definitely the film to do next with Julie. And so that's what we did. By this time I was working in the theatre quite a lot and I was while we were preparing to shoot *Far From The Madding Crowd*, I remembered that I'd worked with Freddy on a script of *The Severed Head* which was made by somebody else and I loved the idea of it, but the casting, it was my first run in when I was being held to sort of ransom by a producer, not Jo, about casting. We made a list of people who could do it and I wasn't allowed to have first choice. He went to the bottom of the list and said you've said Lawrence Harvey's acceptable why don't we star him. Although I loved Larry Harvey, he had been in *Darling*, I didn't see it. So I never did it and I got out of it and I remember being pressured by my agent saying, you know a bird in the hand, you don't know how the script of *Far From The Madding Crowd* is going to turn out. But meanwhile I was working at Stratford for the Royal Shakespeare Company and I was preparing to do the production, and in fact did it, with Peggy Ashcroft at the Aldwych of a Marguerite Duras play, *Days In The Trees*.

And at weekends, Richard MacDonald was down in Dorset looking for locations and I would go and join him and we'd motor around what he'd found during the week. And he was a tremendously creative designer who would bend the script, Hardy says do this in a wooded glade, the sun will change all the time, you'll get different shadows, why not do it there's a wonderful ancient Roman fort outside Dorchester, why don't we do it there. Brown grass, the white of a dress, the red of the Sergeant's Troy's uniform, it was to be my first colour film. And he was very influential on how that film looked, wonderful, wonderful designer.

So we made it, I think we were too slavish to the book, too in awe of the classic nature of it, it took a long time, a 6 months shoot in all seasons. But was a very long film, 2 hours and 40 minutes. And we had a big royal premiere in London which went so so. And then went off to America and almost immediately where the smell was bad. The smell that the press, the people who were handling the press said I don't think it is going too well. People don't like it too

much. And the opening was a disaster in New York. And I remember my agent coming over, he was then married to Natalie Wood, and she became a great friend, and at half time, I flew my parents over for the premiere, it was a big charity do in New York, and it was absolutely, it was ghastly. It didn't go well, and half time, the interval, my agent and Natalie said I think we better go. I said what do you mean go. He said I think we better go. I said what's happening. And they were looking puzzled. And the New York Times notice had come out which absolutely clobbered us into the tarmac.

Norman Swallow: On what grounds.

John Schlesinger: They just didn't like it. Slow. You know, I can't remember the notice. They said don't go back, let's stay having a drink, we don't have to go back. I said I do really. I couldn't believe it was a flop. I went back in, and afterwards people filed out, almost like wildfire the reputation of the notice had almost got to everybody including my parents and they're not show biz at all. And I said are you coming to the party at the Plaza, and they said no darling, I think we're a bit tired. I think we'll go back to where we're staying.

And I went to this Plaza and this great room was a sea of empty tables, about 3 occupied. I had a sleepless night staying up with friends saying what went wrong, what went wrong. The next day I had to get on a plane and arrive in Hollywood my first time there, sitting next to the head of publicity of MGM who kept saying you've got to be so careful what you do next. What is this *Midnight Cowboy*, it sounds very odd. Do be careful. So it was a dreadful 5½ hour trip at the end of which various executives of MGM met us and said you must be awfully tired, we've cancelled the party tonight. Well now I'm hip, I know what that meant. They weren't going to spend the money.

Norman Swallow: You know what being tired means.

John Schlesinger: So that was that.

Norman Swallow: You're off to Hollywood for *Midnight Cowboy*

John Schlesinger: No, the premiere. No, no, to work on the script, we hadn't got a script of it. Yes I was going to go out there but I was flown out for the premiere. There we

were, Julie Christie and I and a great queue of limousines that night and no party to go to afterwards, but the premiere to show up at saying look at all the Kluge lights, and there we were deep in shit for months at the farmyard, isn't this extraordinary and ludicrous

Norman Swallow: It all sounds a bit terrifying to me, these American premieres.

John Schlesinger: It was terrifying. It was absolutely terrifying, but exciting in a way. We still couldn't believe we were a disaster. And all these famous Hollywood people were coming up the stairs to the circle and we were hiding in the manager's office of this theatre being told, we'd made our appearance we'd done all that nonsense on the platform outside the theatre being interviewed by a disinterested **Ahmed Archer** who knew I think we were a flop already because they knew what had happened in New York and how bad the notices had been. So the bush telegraph was operating fully. And then somebody said Edward G Robinson's coming up the stairs, where, where, where, and I had to go out and see. And Ruth Gordon and various people. It was a big Hollywood premiere and no party after it.

So licking my wounds I escaped from Hollywood as much as I could. I was very unhappy and very lonely there and went to San Francisco as often as I possible at weekends, because San Francisco represented a more European face. And I was around there and met all sorts of people. But at the same time I was working on a script with yet another writer, *Midnight Cowboy* and the producer said you really have got to get to work now and stop fussing about the last one. Onto the next. And so started a rather wonderful winter, my first in LA on the beach and we rented a house in Malibu and we worked from there. It was great fun. And the script was sort of gradually coming together.

Norman Swallow: This is Waldo Salt

John Schlesinger: Waldo Salt, yes. Wonderful. He hated writing, he was a wonderful writer but he hated the actual act, of facing the blank sheet of paper and he would put off all the time actually committing to paper. We had to in the end ring him and say tomorrow you're delivering 10 pages, yes. Yes, yes I promise. And the following morning dawned and we were all waiting at Malibu and no Waldo, we'd ring. Are you coming, yeah, well it's all in my head. Well

is it on paper. No, it isn't on paper yet. And that's the way we had to get it out of him, by deadlines.

Norman Swallow: He obviously got it in the end

John Schlesinger: He certainly did,

Norman Swallow: And well worth getting out too

John Schlesinger: Absolutely. None of us knew it was going to have the effect that it did. We just felt free to make, I'd read the book on the advice of a very interesting painter living in London, an American painter called Kaffe Fassett whose since become a very well known for embroidery and tapestries and things like that and had an exhibition at the V & A. And Kaffe was a friend of mine and I wish I'd listen to his advice more often, because afterwards he said, after recommending that I read *Midnight Cowboy*, he said there's a book called *The Elephant Man* you should read. I didn't take his advice. I read it but I didn't do it. Anyhow that was how *Midnight Cowboy* came about.

And you know I was there for the first time in America, no strings, I was beginning to get well known here but I was totally unknown over there except for *Darling* and so it started, so started this American connection. Yes.

Norman Swallow: Forgive me for interrupting, you had a marvellous cast again.

John Schlesinger: Wonderful cast

Norman Swallow: Again your superb relationship with actors and getting them to give their very best.

John Schlesinger: It's very interesting, Hoffman was the first cast. I'd only see *The Graduate* and I thought he's not right for Ratso Rizzo, but Jerry Hellman the producer said I've seen him in Henry Living's *A* off Broadway and he's a wonderful character actor and you should meet him. And he had the good sense to dress in a dirty old raincoat and we wandered around 42nd Street and all those areas and he blended in perfectly. By the end of the evening there was no question he wasn't the right man for it.

And Voight followed much, much later. We thought we'd found our cowboy. We tested him and the casting director said you

must see John Voight. We said we've seen his photograph and he isn't our idea of the cowboy at all, this kind of round, Dutch, big nostrilled, blond face. No. But she said just meet him, so we did, and he read for us and we added him to the list of people being tested and he still didn't get the role. Nor did the man we all thought did would, but there was another actor, a Canadian actor called Michael Sarazin. And what you do when you're testing is that you make pre test deals with agents and studios, meaning if they get the part this is the fixed price that we're going to pay. And he was under contract to Universal, Michael Sarazin, and we did the test, decided much against the casting directors will who much preferred Jon Voight that we would go with him and Jon Voight had already rung me and said thank you, it was a very fair test, I hope we get to work some day. Sarazin came in for costume fittings. And then Universal, his representatives, tripled the asking price and got so greedy that Jerry said fuck them. And we went back to the tests again and decided that Jon Voight's every bit as good, if not better. It was terrible for poor Michael Sarazin and Jon got the role

Norman Swallow: It worked out well in the end

John Schlesinger: It worked very well in the end.

Norman Swallow: That got an Oscar as the Best Picture, or you got the Oscar

John Schlesinger: It got 3 Oscars. Writer, director and best picture.

Norman Swallow: And Dustin Hoffman was nominated

John Schlesinger: Nominated, and so was John Voight. But sentimentally I think out of, John Wayne got it for *True Grit*. I think they were more generous at the BAFTA awards. I think they got awards here.

Norman Swallow: A very great film

John Schlesinger: It's just been revived, 25 years. They've reissued it, we remixed it and stereo phonically

Norman Swallow: Did you

John Schlesinger: Oh yes, I had a lot to do with it. It's on now.

Norman Swallow: I've now got 1971, *Sunday Bloody Sunday*. So you're back in the UK for the time being.

John Schlesinger: Yes, back in the UK. It is my most personal film. It was a film I'd wanted to do for a some time. We started talking about it when we were on location for *Far From The Madding Crowd*, before we ever came to do *Midnight Cowboy*. And Penelope Gilliatt who had written a script that I'd rather liked, she was a film critic, and I liked the film script that she'd written which she'd asked me to do, it was never done, but she asked me to do it when I was making, after *Billy Liar*. Things take so long you see. You start talking about a subject 2 films away and it can take 3 or 4 years sometimes for it to see the light of day. And so it started way back, *Sunday Bloody Sunday*. And when *Midnight Cowboy* was such a success, I was offered big pictures and at the same time United Artists who backed it said what do you want to do next. I said I want to do *Sunday Bloody Sunday*. They said what's that. So we sent them a script which was pretty ahead of it's time, let's face it. As was *Midnight Cowboy*, they would both now raise a great many eyebrows. It would never get made today, *Midnight Cowboy*

Norman Swallow: Really

John Schlesinger: Never, not in the present climate, they would show us the door. And *Sunday Bloody*

END OF TAPE

SIDE 3, TAPE 2

Norman Swallow: We've just started talking about *Sunday Bloody Sunday*

John Schlesinger: The cast came about in a kind of interesting way. We had worked on the screenplay, Penelope Gilliatt and myself, very much with Vanessa Redgrave in mind. And we offered it to Vanessa and she turned it down. I saw *Women In Love* around that time, and I'd never been a great fan of Glenda Jackson, I thought she was rather strident and when I was doing *Timon of Athens* at Stratford in the mid 60s, she was in the company, and I never liked her much. And then I saw *Women In Love* and I thought she was so remarkable in it that we offered it to her, and she accepted.

Meanwhile we were looking for who the doctor should be and there were a lot of possibilities. And it was offered funnily enough to Harold Pinter who turned it down as well. We thought the script needed some work, I did, and so did Jo Janni, and we offered it to Harold and we thought he might both play it and possibly rewrite a bit of it. And he turned it down and so did Paul Scofield. And Peter Finch at that time wasn't even available. And with some hesitation we gave it to Ian Bannen, good actor, wonderful actor in certain parts. Then he wouldn't do tests but he would appear just sitting with whoever we were interested in for the boy, there were several people we tested.

And I was very, I had a funny feeling that we were making a mistake and Penelope said oh nonsense dear, you're being fussy, and Jo Janni said no, he's very good. And the casting director said he would be fine. And we weren't. I can't tell you why quite. It just didn't work, it wasn't coming across. And it wasn't that he was afraid I think of playing a gay character, I don't think it was that. He just wasn't holding his arms out so to speak, embracing whoever came to see him as a doctor should. He wasn't, it wasn't working. And the result of this, I had a scene cut together because there was a day when he couldn't work, had been to a party the night before, which upset me a lot. And I was worried. I was very worried, it wasn't working.

So Peter Finch suddenly, *Man's Fate* which was going to be done by Fred Zinnemann at the time never came off. And he was suddenly free. So we made a change which was a big

risk. Because I suddenly thought Peter Finch may be too old for Murray Head, let's get them photographed together, when he came to watch a shooting near the Carlton Tower or wherever it was. And he caught someone with a stills camera and said no, either you want me or you don't. I'm not going to. It was a terrible period. It was really ghastly having to get rid of somebody whom I liked and admired

Norman Swallow: Half way through the shoot this was

John Schlesinger: A month into the shoot. Anyhow Peter said I'd like to do it. I had a secretary at the time who was very, very close to Ian, and so I couldn't even tell her we were seeing. I was shooting, I came out in terrible herpes which is originally why I grew a beard, and it was a terrible period because I didn't want to hide behind producers and agents, I knew I had to tell Ian myself, it just wasn't coming across. So we made the change. And once Peter joined the cast, everything went, it was total change. Everything slipped into the place. And he was quite, quite wonderful

Norman Swallow: He was a nice man wasn't he.

John Schlesinger: Yes, he'd had his own problems. We'd had problems slightly on *Far From The Madding Crowd*, he wasn't a happy man then. And by *Sunday Bloody Sunday* he was in a much better emotional state. I think he had married Alita by this time. Anyhow there we were and it had a great critical success

Norman Swallow: And again a few nominations

John Schlesinger: 3 nominations I think.

Norman Swallow: I think I'd like to see it again. Is it around

John Schlesinger: It's on television. Yes. I don't think it's likely to be revived. It's a film I was glad to have made. That was the only time I think I could have made it. It was ahead of its time, it really was. And they were scared of it, they were scared because I think that gay characters as long as they were limp wristed and stereo typical that was acceptable, but to put, I remember my father saying now what is this film about that you're making, when I was preparing it. I told him the story. And

he said must he be Jewish as well as everything else. But they were scared because there was a perfectly nice, very good doctor who was Jewish, was also gay. This worried them, because he had no appearance of that.

Norman Swallow: 1971, the next film I've got down was a leap of 5 years, *Marathon Man* in 1976

John Schlesinger: You're missing out one of my favourite films

Norman Swallow: Gracious, what's that

John Schlesinger: *The Day Of The Locusts*. I don't know why, I remember Ruth Gordon when I finally got to know her after *Far From The Madding Crowd* said that will teach you leave those fucking classics alone, she said, wonderful actress. And there I was plunging into another American classic, *Day Of The Locusts*, one of the best novellas ever written about Hollywood

Norman Swallow: I've still got a four year gap, 1971 to 1975, between *Sunday Bloody Sunday* and *Day Of The Locusts*

John Schlesinger: What happened. I don't know what I did next

Norman Swallow: Theatre maybe

John Schlesinger: No. Ah well, ah yes of course, I now remember. It was my first big set back, I've had many since but I had a period of really dreadful setback and one has to face these because nobody is going to be on a winning streak all the time. In fact commercially speaking I've not had that many string of successes commercially, interesting films maybe, but not commercial ones. Because I had no idea that *Midnight Cowboy* which was way out on a limb would make money, it wasn't the reason I made it.

And afterwards I was set to do *Hadrian VII* for Columbia, and we had a script that I loved by Charles Wood. But there was, this was just, my first time, I prided myself with going with unknowns in leading roles, perhaps someone better known opposite them. And Columbia got very cold feet about Alex McCowan, who created the role in the theatre, and we had gone back in the script to the *Quest For Corvo*, the AJA Simon's book about the writer who the play is

about, Baron Corvo. Well it was a terrific adventurous script, unusual, and we got turned down and put into turnaround the day before Christmas I remember. And we had even tested Dustin Hoffman, I'd rung him and given him the script and he said it's a very interesting script, I don't know if I could play the Englishman part of it. I'd like to have a go but I want to test for it. And we tested him and the day we were all going to look at the rushes together, I'd had one of those plunger coffee pots, and got too near it, plunged it down and it slipped, the plunger, and it all went into my face. So I couldn't go immediately to see the dailies with him and he was catching a plane to New York that day. So we never got together on it and his manager said it's an awful risk, and it's uncommercial, and be careful. And despite the fact that I'd won the Oscar, had wonderful critical acclaim for *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, it was my first big set back. I couldn't get arrested with it. UA who had been my great champions, no it's not commercial, we don't want to do it. And so I said fuck the cinema for a bit. And I was offered a musical and I got intrigued by the idea of doing a film on stage which was the life of Queen Victoria, called *I And Albert*, dreadful, disaster really. But it enabled me to do something which was quite interesting and as a result of it I was asked to do some opera. So I spent that year, 1972, doing *I And Albert* and making a section of the official Olympics film, *Visions Of 8*, and I chose to do the marathon race.

Norman Swallow: That was Munich, 1972, of course. And *The Day Of The Locusts* was your next feature

John Schlesinger: Yes

Norman Swallow: Again back in the States

John Schlesinger: Back in the States, and my first real Hollywood film, and a film we just adored making. It was a, I can't say that the actors were all wonderful. I had a tough time with the actors on that one. I didn't terribly like Karen Black, she was good in it. She wasn't pretty as she should have been, and Bill Atherton, who was my I think he's going to be a star number, was very uptight and I had some difficulties with him. Donald Sutherland was wonderful in it, and so was Geraldine Page in a small part. And so was Burgess Meredith, who was nominated.

Norman Swallow: And Waldo Salt wrote it again.

John Schlesinger: Waldo Salt wrote it. And I nearly abandoned it because it was originally with Warners and they clearly didn't want to spend enough money on it and started to get cold feet long before it finished. And I said having been through the *Hadrian VII* oh why bother, they're only going to piss all over us. I was very, very negative and the producer persuaded me to go back to work. He said you know you've got to work with Waldo and I did, and got more and more hooked and said we've got to make this film somehow. There was a swap of producers, I sold it to the Paramount people, which is hotly disputed at Paramount. There was one head who wanted to do it and there was another that hated the whole idea because they saw it as anti Hollywood.

Anyhow it was controvertial, it got mixed notices and it was a disastrous flop at the box office. I remember it going to Cannes, it was my first film ever at Cannes. And it starts very quietly and again we were all in the front of the circle, there was a noise at the beginning, I think there were a lot of people late comers, and where's my seat and everything else. I thought well they're an awfully rude audience, we've been booed at the press show. Barry Diller who had just taken over Paramount, tapped me on the shoulder, he was sitting in the row behind me, we were in the front row. He said why do we sit here being insulted by these awful people, let's go. So I walked out with him. We walked along the Croisette. He said you know I don't know what this is going to do box office wise, probably not very well. But you should be very proud that you got to make it and I'm very proud of the film. It was a nice thing to hear and we had a very nice dinner and then went back for the end. And went for another dinner at the Casino which Paramount were hosting. Anyway it went better that night. Nevertheless, now having been villified, terrible reception here, suddenly all the critics became experts on Nathaniel West, I think half of them never read it. And Dilys Powell

Norman Swallow: Nathaniel West wrote the novel

John Schlesinger: Yes, on which it was based. Dilys Powell was the only one that really gave it a marvellous notice, god bless her. And oh I remember a press show and that awful business of going to lunch with them afterwards, why should one, you don't after the first night in the theatre go and sit down with Jack Tinker, why should one. And there

were people that I knew coming into the Ivy or wherever it was upstairs, waving and looking away, rushing away as far as possible while I sat at a reasonably empty table. And I thought to hell with them. I hated the critics really. I only remember the bad ones and one or two

Norman Swallow: Dilys Powell's always been very

John Schlesinger: No she's not always been. She's not always liked everything I've done.

Norman Swallow: She's honest

John Schlesinger: She's honest. The thing is I think there are vipers amongst the film critics. I think Alex Walker who was a great champion of mine, we barely speak now. And he has been in accurate and vicious about some of my work. I think David Robinson is very fair, likes the cinema. There are certain people who just don't like one's work. There are people who don't like quite a lot of directors' work. And people I've never quite understood while certain off beat filmmakers have been turned into such idols. I've never really warmed to the Peter Greenaway films. But he is a sacred cow until they suddenly attack him, which they've done

Alan Lawson: Setting them up

Norman Swallow: They feel they have to perhaps.

John Schlesinger: I hate the whole principle of it. Even worse the preview system that is now in force where you preview a film and turn everybody into critics. Of course they like that position

Norman Swallow: They say that those that can, do; those that can't, criticise.

John Schlesinger: Exactly. Or Eunuchs at a gang bang is another description.

Norman Swallow: Moving on I've got *Marathon Man*, 1976

John Schlesinger: Very interesting. After having made *Day Of The Locusts* I realised controvertial. Bob Evans who had been one of the people who ran Paramount and was very much against *Day Of The Locusts*, didn't want it made and he was

busy producing *China Town* at the time, and when we had cut it together we took it over to Paramount to show, a sort of cast and crew showing. And we had made some quite severe cuts, Bob Evans came and he said will you come and have lunch at my house tomorrow. And I did. And he said I'm going to tell you something, I don't like the film. I think you've done it terribly well, I don't like it, never have, never liked the idea of it and you've harmed it in the cutting. I said what do you mean. He said I think it's too short. Now to hear that advice from a film executive is very, very rare. So I started to listen. He said you've cut something out, now what is it, I remember from the script there is more. I said well we've cut a certain amount of the dwarf. I said I remember that as being very good scenes, why have you cut it. I said well it's a very long film, something. He said sometimes a film can be too short. Put it back. I thought that is amazing advice. We did and it was better.

And so when *Marathon Man* from Bob Evans came through the door I said well I think this is a man to be reckoned with and I'm going to work with him and I would like to do a more commercial film. Here was an opportunity not to have to wait around for months on end to see if we've got the money, which had started quite frankly with *Darling*. I remember *Darling* didn't get off the ground that easily. I had to go to what I would describe as viva examinations in front of the Film Finance Board saying she is so unsympathetic, why should we care for her. And I said have you ever heard of a close up which denotes loneliness, or mistake or whatever. People are awfully stupid that you have to deal with. Anyway *Marathon Man* was an opportunity for me to make my first really mainstream film at Paramount with no waiting about and I did it.

Norman Swallow: Was it your idea

John Schlesinger: No, no, no, they sent it to me. They sent me, Bob Evans sent me the book. And then I spent a year working with Bill Goldman on the screenplay, I didn't co write it but I had a lot of ideas and I liked the book. I liked the idea of making a thriller, I liked the genre of making thrillers. And people were saying oh god it's a terrible comedown, why are you doing this, and all this kind of thing. I got criticised for doing it and bad notices particularly here, good notices in America. And it made money and it earned me a little more rope with which

to hang myself and reunited me with Dustin Hoffman, and Larry Oliver which was a highly theatrical piece of casting which Bob Evans had insisted that I met with Larry here.

I said but he'll never be able to do it, he's terribly ill. And I had a meeting at my house with him and he was terribly feeble, and he had had this muscular disease, and his voice was high pitched and right there. And he was in a terrible state. But he was interested in getting back to work. And he said, he got camper as the afternoon wore on, he said I'm going to go through the script and see what physically you can do. So we went through the script and I said this is the moment you run. Couldn't run dear boy. Can't run, I can walk fast. And by the end of the afternoon it was clear that he was really interested in playing, I do love the sound of this monstrous man. And the exciting thing about making the film was to see one of great giants getting better.

Norman Swallow: He was very good

John Schlesinger: He was excellent in it. And the thing about him I think is he's given his fair share of terrible performances on film, because people simply leave him alone. They say well he's the best actor in the world, what do we need to tell him. Well you need to tell every actor something. We had a little code. I used to say Larry can you make it more intimate. He'd say you mean cut off the ham fat. He knew exactly what I meant. And he was wonderful in it. And although they were strange bedfellows Dustin and he, Dustin always wanted to improvise and Larry wanted to learn the lines, which he had difficulty in remembering.

Norman Swallow: He got a nomination

John Schlesinger: Did he

Norman Swallow: According to my notes.

John Schlesinger: Did he, I don't know

Norman Swallow: What is the next movie

John Schlesinger: The next movie is *Yanks*. *Yanks* came about in a sort of interesting way. Colin Welland came to visit Dustin on the set, they'd been in a film together, they were friends and Dustin was having an off day, he wasn't in

the best of moods, was being difficult getting him out of his dressing room. We had had a bit of an argument about something which he wanted not done the way I wanted to do it. And I said to Colin what are you doing here. And he said I'm trying to peddle a film about a pop group in America, British pop group touring America. I said oh, that sounds fun. He said I've also got another idea, I'd like to do a film about the Americans in Britain during the war, American soldiers. So I said that rings a bell for me. I remember them. And David Picker who used to be the production head at UA had a position of the same sort at Paramount, and said I love the idea, I'd like to do it. So Colin was commissioned to do it. We advertised for stories in a kind of Warrington newspaper, Wigan, and places like that, for memories of the Americans there. And out of these letters and response came a very interesting love story that we kind of paid her for and used as the spine of the film and did a lot of research talking to Americans who had been in Britain. Colin did a tour of America with my assistant. And so Yanks which was the last film I made with Jo Janni

Norman Swallow: And Colin Welland,

John Schlesinger: Colin Welland who wrote it. But he couldn't quite manage the American side, so an American writer came in to do that.

Norman Swallow: Very good film.

John Schlesinger: I think so. It's not one of my favourite. I don't know why, I don't know why, it's a bit sentimental.

Alan Lawson: A nostalgic time.

John Schlesinger: It is a nostalgic film and I loved doing it. And Vanessa Redgrave who turned us down for *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, she accepted it with alacrity. She wanted to be in it. And the lovely Bill Devane who I worked with on two other films. The distributors didn't want him, he did a most wonderful test, very funny man he was, off his own bat. He'd read the script and wanted to do it. And sent me a little message saying I know my sexual attraction is in question for this role. So he did a test at the end of which he turned to the camera after he'd done the scene and said now John since my sexual attraction has been in question, I'm finding it extremely hard to get an erection.

And if I don't get this part you may have to have the responsibility that I'll never get an erection ever again. And this was shown to distributors and they thought it was so funny he got the role. There was no objection to it.

Norman Swallow: Very good, very clever of him. He was good.

John Schlesinger: He was excellent. So the film, of course it brought Richard Gere a big role. I thought he was excellent in it but it wasn't the breakthrough film for him, it didn't make him into the star we all hoped. And we had an unknown called Lisa Eichhorn who was in fact American, but she managed to put on such a convincing Yorkshire accent and I remember, I've always been rather fussy about faces and she had some very badly capped teeth and when we did the first test with Richard, Lisa on camera looked bad around the mouth. And Jo Janni who was never quiet on these occasions, had a much louder voice than anybody should have had, could be heard saying to me, my god she looks like an old woman, her mouth is so terrible. No John you must be mad, she is terrible, she is such a terrible mouth and terrible teeth. So quietly I said I think the cap job is very bad. And I rang my dentist and said how quickly could you recap somebody's teeth. I'll pay for it. It was about £800. I sent her in. He said I can do a much better job. And I said to Jo I'd like to test her again and I didn't tell him. I just didn't tell him, I was taking this big financial risk. So I had her teeth fixed. And the next time we tested her again with some other girls and this time Jo on the set said she looks much better, she doesn't look like an old woman. What has happened. When we saw the rushes we sat next to each other and he said she looks really quite good. I said shall we cast her. He said, what do you think. He asked everybody else. And everybody said she looks much better. Yes let's cast her. So I said that's just cost you 800 quid. And then I confessed to the story.

Then I had my first, not my first disaster, but my first really big disaster was about to happen.

When I finished *Yanks* I read a really interesting original script called *Honky Tonk Freeway* which was a script I really enjoyed and I read it twice in one day and vowed I would do it. And it cost a lot of money. EMI wanted to back it. I said you realise this is a very expensive film. They said it will cost what it will cost. And we made it. It did

cost a lot of money. It was very ambitious and I thought it was very funny. But when we showed it to Universal, it was a disaster, one of the worse screenings I've ever had. And I was in deep trouble.

Norman Swallow: The critics, did they like it.

John Schlesinger: No, nobody liked it.

Norman Swallow: Nobody liked it.

John Schlesinger: Well it got one critic who said do come and see this film, it will make your August. And it was released very badly deliberately and nobody was behind it and it was a disaster. And people were saying I committed professional suicide. I came back to the National Theatre after it, just at that time I'd done my first opera production at Covent Garden, *Tales Of Hoffman*, huge success. And this came out and I was absolutely clobbered down the loo. And I thought I was finished. And I came back and did a Sam Shepherd play for four people, *True West* at the National and I gradually got my confidence back by doing something very small. And then what happened was I had been working for some time on a screenplay with Steve Zellian of *Falcon and The Snowman*. And we were at Fox and maybe as a result of *Honky Tonk Freeway* and everything it got put into turnaround and I could see that we weren't going to make it and I came back to England to do *Separate Tables* for HBO and *Englishman Abroad* for the Beeb. So

Norman Swallow: That's 1983

John Schlesinger: Umm. And then after that we got financed for *The Falcon And The Snowman* which I then made for Orion, who were the old United Artists, a lot of the people who welcomed me. So that was how that got made. And it was the time when they said go to Mexico, do everything you can there to cut the budget. These were periods when things were getting tougher and they continued to get tougher

Norman Swallow: Ever since. You've made several features since then.

John Schlesinger: Oh yes, I've kept going.

Norman Swallow: *Madame Sousatzka*, *Innocent*, *Aspen Papers*

John Schlesinger: No, I didn't make *The Aspen Papers*

Norman Swallow: Sorry, you were going to.

John Schlesinger: I made *The Innocent*, no I talked about *The Aspen Papers* but I never made it. I made *Pacific Heights* was more commercially successful, my last American film. But the thing I have to be honest, things don't get easier as you become older and as the industry is becoming more and more orientated towards demographics, test the film, make it appeal to the lowest common denominator, star casting will get it off the ground if we can open the picture, meaning with somebody, certain actors can open a picture, certain people don't open a picture, this is the distributors talking. So I was able to do, I had Timothy Hutton and Sean Penn who were two young hot actors for *The Falcon And The Snowman* and they said go and do it all in Mexico which we did. By this time, I lost my father during that, he died and I couldn't get back from Mexico City and Sean Penn was being very difficult. And I said here I am not doing something which I would dearly like to do, which was go home for my father's funeral, and Sean Penn, and I've got to put up with all this ludicrous temperament from someone who has had too much smoke blown up his arse by his agent and manager and things. So I got very irritated, but he was excellent in the film and the film had some good attention. It wasn't a commercial success. And I don't know what happened after that. Then I did another opera which I didn't enjoy doing

Norman Swallow: Which one

John Schlesinger: *Rosenkavalier*.

Norman Swallow: *Believers*

John Schlesinger: I think I did *Rosenkavalier* first

Norman Swallow: *Believers* I've got as 1987.

John Schlesinger: *Believers* I'm not sure I should have done. It was never really a good enough script and it was one we made. It was quite interesting, it was about supernatural things which have interested me so I got into **Santarea** which is sort of Cuban Caribbean religion which is very widely practiced in New York. And it was quite interesting to get into, because I found that thrillers and

certain things you exorcise certain, I don't say you can cure yourself but I put in things that terrify me. And certainly when somebody gave me some beads to wear when we were doing an animal sacrifice scene in *The Believers* I wore them. Superstition isn't something I associate my life with but

Norman Swallow: You had a good day's shoot after that

John Schlesinger: Yes, but it was sort of interesting. And then from that I went to,, what did I do after that, *Madame Sousatzka*, which was a film I loved making.

Norman Swallow: You're now back in the UK

John Schlesinger: Yes it was now back in the UK

Norman Swallow: Dame Peggy Ashcroft, Twiggy.

John Schlesinger: Yes, wonderful. And music above all. The first musical film. I really loved making that We never had sufficient money to do it. We never could open it up quite wide enough. It was a lovely film. It became the royal film that year and then for some reason it got dumped. And it was shown at Venice and people, I got some really quite hostile notices for it being too sentimental.

Norman Swallow: What's wrong with that now and again

John Schlesinger: Well I know. Anyhow it was shown, and I really enjoyed making it. It was one of the happier experiences of recent years. And after that I was asked by von Karajan to go to Salzburg to do 3 operas, one after the other. The offers came in to do *Boris Gudunov*, to do *Tosca* with him. And I said no to both. And then finally having had such a bad experience of *Rosenkavalier*, I vowed I'd never do an opera, through my own fault really. And he was very insistent, and he said come and do *Il Ballo Maschera*, *The Masked Ball* of Verdi, again with Placido Domingo who by this time had become a good chum, and I'd done very successfully *Tales Of Hoffman* with. So I agreed to go to Salzburg and for a year I had to work very hard on the production, because I thought if I'm going to work on this monstrous, notoriously difficult man, von Karajan

Norman Swallow: It was almost the end of his time

John Schlesinger: It was the end of his time

Norman Swallow: His last season

John Schlesinger: Yes, and he died 9 days before we opened. I got on very well with him and he was a man very much of the theatre, he was interested in all aspects of the production. And I took a British team, the first that had ever gone to Salzburg, designers, costume designer, assistants, choreographer, everything. And we had a very, very successful time. Critically luckily I can't read German, so I don't know what they said, I don't think very nice things. But the audience loved it, it was televised and it was all terrific, a very happy time with the success of it. And then I went back to America and did *Pacific Heights* with Melanie Griffith and Michael Keaton which was reasonably successful. Then I did *A Question Of Attribution* for the Beeb, then *The Innocent*

Norman Swallow: That won a BAFTA award.

John Schlesinger: That won a BAFTA award.

Norman Swallow: Was it repeated on Monday

John Schlesinger: Yes. No reference to who directed it, except on the credits, most extraordinary

Norman Swallow: Where

John Schlesinger: In any of the publicity

Norman Swallow: Really,

John Schlesinger: None at all. Could have directed itself. I was furious. The BBC is so inured into well it's drama. Drama is about writers

Norman Swallow: It certainly was in the *Radio Times*

John Schlesinger: It might have been in the *Radio Times*.

Norman Swallow: It was.

John Schlesinger: I didn't see it. What happened there

Norman Swallow: *The Englishman Abroad*, they're two television things aren't they, *The Englishman Abroad* and *A Question Of Attribution*. Did you like coming back to it.

John Schlesinger: Yes. I enjoyed doing those two. First of all they were the wittiest scripts I've ever had. I adore Alan Bennett's writing. They were great fun to do. I had a wonderful producer in Inness Lloyd, alas who died just after we finished shooting *A Question Of Attribution*, it was his last production. It was working under, the BBC hadn't changed. It was still the same sort of parish pump

Norman Swallow: But no Grace Wyndham-Goldie

John Schlesinger: No Grace Wyndham-Goldie. It was very enjoyable. I enjoy working here, even if you've got no money, every now and again that doesn't matter. You're not previewing it and you're not saying is this going to be understood by the lowest common denominator, that's it. And that's wonderful.

Norman Swallow: I thought both were superbly played.

John Schlesinger: Beautifully acted. Very well cast.

Norman Swallow: By you

John Schlesinger: Yes, but the casting is half the battle, if you make a mistake in the casting you've had it, as I have on a number of occasions. But on the whole I've done alright by the cast, the cast has been very good. And then I did *The Innocent* which the jury's out on. I didn't like Berlin and I didn't like the German producers. But there we are. We never had enough money, we were always running short. It was a very difficult shoot. Lovely actors, Anthony Hopkins, Isabella Rossellini and Ian McEwan writing from his own novel. And we were having differences over the release but I hope it will come out in May, in the States, I don't know whether it will come out over here. That brings us up to date

Norman Swallow: What now. You did mention something earlier on, you were working on something.

John Schlesinger: I'm working on about 6 things. See which orange doesn't come down rotten. I had a film that I very passionately wanted to do which ran into, ironically

terrible problems because nobody wants Jon Voight. Jon Voight was going to star in it with Sally Field.

Norman Swallow: Really. Why not

John Schlesinger: He's not box office. Now, if you don't have one of 12 names sort of you're in trouble. Everybody is chasing the new hot star or the established star. Oh it's terrible now.

Norman Swallow: It was not like that

John Schlesinger: Never, never.

Norman Swallow: So in general you're more pessimistic than you were.

John Schlesinger: Absolutely. Totally.

Norman Swallow: Except for the BBC

John Schlesinger: No, I don't say that. I think there are things, if you can make it for a price. Of course it's difficult once you've had that size canvas always to think in those terms and I don't think the future of the British film industry can depend on things that small. You've got to think much bigger, you've got to think in broader terms. And I've got a script that I've been sent which I like very much which could be shot here but we've got to get a star for it before we get the money. BBC have asked me to do something and they've turned down something that I want to do which may be done by Channel 4 but I don't know yet. So I'm dealing in terms

Norman Swallow: This is a film you want to do

John Schlesinger: Umm. It's very, because you get something cancelled just as I did all those years ago with *Hadrian*, it's difficult to start up again because you're on one particular railway line and suddenly you've crashed into the buffers or come off the rails more like. And I had a film that I was going to do in Vancouver starting now which got cancelled and the foreign money didn't like the idea of Jon Voight starring, they couldn't raise guarantees on him, and really is very tough. And he would have been dead right acting wise. But you know they weren't prepared to buy that, the distributors.

Norman Swallow: Presumably you haven't deserted the theatre and you never will, will you John.

John Schlesinger: I've been asked to do a play which, but the theatre, I really owed everything to Peter Hall, he gave me my first job in the theatre at the Royal Shakespeare Company and then I went with him to the National as an associate director. But films always formed a more important in my life. I was booked to do *You Can't Take It With You* at the National, and when a film suddenly, *The Falcon And The Snowman*, got its money, I asked them to release me from it because I really wanted to make that film. And that didn't go down too well at the National, so I haven't been asked back to the National. Even though it's a new regime, I'd be unlikely to be asked there. And an opera I was going to do fell through for all sorts of different reasons. So I can't tell you exactly what I'm going to do next.

SIDE 4, TAPE 2

Alan Lawson: The situation you've been describing in fact is more or less a repeat of what Don Sharp told us, he set up lots and lots of films and he had them crash down at his feet. Is it shortage of money, is it cold feet at the box office

John Schlesinger: Well I think one has to face facts, that there are younger people coming up who are getting some of the opportunities that I got 30 years ago and they're talking about well he's a bit old now. The other thing is track record. They have very short memories about a body of work, that doesn't come into the financiers head and I've had a very good, reputable body of work. But I think they look and say well he hasn't made many commercial movies and that kind of thing, so people begin, age coupled with perhaps lack of commercial success makes it more difficult to get something that you want to do off the ground, particularly as most of the stuff I want to do isn't mainstream. I'm not a director for hire like many people are, just take an assignment and do it and do what they're told. I don't do that, I want to do things that personally appeal to me. I've always been attracted to difficult subjects, they're not on the whole terribly optimistic, people don't walk into the sunset hand in hand. There is a certain sort of cynicism about some of them and an irony which I like very much, which is not in the American dictionary so to speak, they don't understand that. And I, one is searching for something that one thinks could be commercial but it would be disastrous to try and make a commercial hit. Nobody can manufacture that, they don't know what is commercial

Norman Swallow: And it varies, age by age

John Schlesinger: It varies, no question. So it is very very difficult to, you can't manufacture a hit. I could do with one, no question, and once I had one it might be easier to get off the specific things that I want to make off the ground. So it's a sort of period where I don't want to retire, although god knows I'm old enough to do so. I want to go on till I have a heart attack when I say cut, or action, and I don't care which, and I hope it is immediately fatal, that one isn't a wheelchair case, unable to do things.

Norman Swallow: Ford went on a long time, and so did De Mille.

John Schlesinger: But you must remember, one can try, so did Cukor, so did

Norman Swallow: So did Charlie Chaplin

John Schlesinger: Yes but when you think what happened in later life to some people, they were crucified. When you think that DW Griffith who was a great innovator, was an alcoholic and penniless in some downtown LA hotel until they gave him some job. That Mickey Powell, arguably one of our great filmmakers, ran into nothing but difficulty after *Peeping Tom* because everybody suddenly became so prurient and said how dreadful it was, outrageous, and he was one of our really great filmmakers. It is very difficult to keep going. All my contemporaries aren't working it seems to me. They should be. One doesn't use

Norman Swallow: Ken Russell

John Schlesinger: Not much. He has done, made some rather strange choices, and has been busy trying to be as outrageous as possible. His early films I really admired, and I liked *Tommy* and I liked *Women In Love*. But some of the more, it seems that he's wanted to scandalise people in a way.

Alan Lawson: Live up to his trademark

John Schlesinger: And that I think is a pity, I think he is very talented. So is Dick Lester, so is Karel Reisz, so is Lindsay Anderson. Lindsay Anderson has made wonderful films but I think is sitting there waiting for the perfect script. You've got to go out and make a script work. You cannot sit back and wait. This afternoon I've got a meeting about something else, tomorrow I've got a meeting about yet another project. You know I'm working all the time trying to get scripts better or making calls to agents saying what about so and so, such and such an actor.

Norman Swallow: You must get plenty of scripts, I mean you personally.

John Schlesinger: I get a lot of bad scripts. I get some, but I don't get, I'm not first in line for wonderful new

novels which I can get off the ground. I haven't got a company. I'm not really an entrepreneur

Norman Swallow: You're a creative freelance.

John Schlesinger: Yes, but entrepreneurs are not very thick on the ground, particularly in this country. I don't think the British are very good with running with the ball in terms of film. The BBC certainly isn't, in getting things sold. They don't think it's important, they think it is just television. But I disagree. I think the wares, I call it BBC Unenterprises. And when I did the two spy things, I said well now put them out on the same thing. Put them out as a double bill, it would have more life. Would they do it, no. Finally CBS Fox this year have put out the two separate things but not on the same

Norman Swallow: The same two

John Schlesinger: But not together which they should do

Norman Swallow: The same year, the same theme

John Schlesinger: Yes. I don't think people really know about selling. We're not very good at getting out there to sell our wares. Do you.

Alan Lawson: I agree with you

John Schlesinger: I think we're very, very bad at it.

Alan Lawson: There it is, take it or leave it rather.

John Schlesinger: It is a pity

Norman Swallow: You were using the word commercial a lot, what about television commercials, you haven't mentioned that.

John Schlesinger: Yes, I love doing them.

Alan Lawson: Do you

John Schlesinger: Yes, yes. Nice money, that's important, gives you a chance not to do something that you really don't want to do. You can work with new people, new technicians. I met two cameramen through commercials that

subsequently shot movies, a designer, an actress. I shouldn't call her an actress, it's not politically correct is it. An actor, a woman actor. Can't call her a lady. That's politically incorrect too. Unbelievable what political correctness is doing to creativity.

Norman Swallow: But you're still doing commercials.

John Schlesinger: Well yes, trying to, whenever I can. Did several for a Spanish bank last year. I like doing them, love doing them. Short, sharp shock.

Norman Swallow: And you can use quite a bit of imagination nowadays.

John Schlesinger: Well I'm waiting to hear if I'm going to do a music video, my first. I've had quite a good idea for one but I've heard nothing more so I imagine it's gone to somebody else. I don't know.

Alan Lawson: You've obviously enjoyed life.

John Schlesinger: I've been very fortunate. I've had a very good, rich life in all fields

Alan Lawson: If you could start again would you want to change.

John Schlesinger: If I wanted to change, if I had the pick to be wonderfully good at anything I would have liked to have been a conductor. Because I think if you're a good conductor you can go on and on and on and on. And the exercise does good for your heart.

Norman Swallow: That's why they live to be so old

John Schlesinger: That's why they live to be so old. No I'd loved to do that, to have been a conductor would have been, if I'd have my life over again. But I've been very lucky and I've had an interesting varied life. I have an American life, a British life, I always come back here. My roots are here, my heart is here really in many ways, my family is here, friends. But I like America too. So I regard myself as very privileged.

Norman Swallow: I think we're all privileged having you create things for us. Thank you for today too.