Marcus Coates & The Directors in conversation
Part 4

Charles: And Marcus Coates, you said that it was important to you to represent the process of trying to understand, not just depicting or portraying an experience. And in these films, you're not a passive actor by any means, you're stopping to question and argue back. What was that like for you in terms of your way of working as an artist?

Marcus Coates: Well, what I found was, what role was I inhabiting when I was trying to understand? And I knew I wasn't going to fully understand them, I mean, that was clear. I mean, just from one individual to the next, I don't think you can fully understand another's experience totally.

But some of your experiences of psychosis, I knew they were way beyond my total understanding. And I knew that wasn't the point of it. The point was to try and mutually create some language or a way that we could start to attempt to create something that could be understood. And it wasn't even understanding actually, it was the attempt, what the attempt of understanding reveals. And that in a way is process. How do you start to understand? How do you create a situation where you can even begin to relate?

And I think a lot of that was about creating this trust, creating a position where I could fail. And it wasn't about succeeding or anything. It was about going wrong quite a lot of the time. And the barriers and finding a way through those barriers or finding a metaphor for understanding those.

So I think those roles that I inhabited to try and understand were very specific and often not helpful. So to begin with, I know for lots of you, I was a bit confrontational, this rational skeptic at the beginning, just saying, what do you mean you can see something? Or what do you mean you believe in this? I don't believe in ... I was doing that on a very, very basic rational level. And I knew at the back of my mind, this is not helpful, but I had to do it, just to go through that just to even purge that actually, because I wanted to ask those questions and I wanted to get through that.

But then I switched quite unconsciously into a very sympathetic position and a very empathetic position. And after a while that wasn't particularly useful either. And I was finding myself in all these roles that weren't particularly useful. But what was useful was the ability, or what I found was, of moving, finding that I wasn't rooted in any one position, but I had the freedom ... and the amount of play we created to be able to move around and be whoever I needed to be and switch and move. And using that to calibrate in a way who I was.

So I think what I'm trying to say is, I had to lose myself a lot and lose a sense of myself a lot to become you in a way. And I think for a clinician or a family member, that's a very hard thing to do. Because you want to appear stable and you want to be consistent and all this, professional. But for me as an artist, that feels like a big skill to be able to lose oneself and inhabit something that's unknown and potentially a bit scary. But you all made it possible because you supported me and guided me in a very generous way.

Charles: We see you engaging emotionally in various ways over the course of the films. Did any of your reactions surprise you?

Marcus Coates: Yeah, in each of the films I came away being surprised. I think the biggest thing that surprised me was my emotional involvement, my emotional reaction. And although I didn't set out to have an emotional involvement at all, I feel like in each of the films I discovered that that was my path to an empathetic or empathic situation. That's how I could relate. It wasn't me imagining the delusion or imagining the hallucination and trying to make that real for myself. It was really inhabiting the emotion, that delusion or hallucination or whatever it was, created within us both. And relating to that.

So when Anthony, when I was talking to my mother, and my mother wasn't my mother, I was talking to this actor who was playing my mom, Anthony's mom. And I wasn't recognising her as my mom. And she was just reading out the shopping list to me, all the food she was going to get for me. And I found that utterly emotionally devastating. Now, she'd gone. This wasn't my mother reading out this shopping list, this was someone else pretending or not even pretending to be my mother, this was someone else entirely different being an imposter.

And yeah, I found that, I don't want to use the word ... yeah, that was a significant emotional moment for me. And I think that happened with each of them actually. There was a moment where I got onto an emotional level and I thought, okay, maybe this is the territory where I can start to relate. This is my knowledge. This is where I can start to understand perhaps.

Charles: And you, the directors, how was it for you watching Marcus reacting emotionally in those ways?

Mark: Well, the thing is that as we climbed the hill, and I said the horrible things I did, Marcus mentioned something that it impacted him later on. And it wasn't a very good feeling because I felt like I did a bad thing. But overall it means a lot because basically it means that my story isn't invisible. The feelings I had weren't invisible. The actuality of it was real. Even if it was literally in our heads. But the actuality of the emotional response of whatever the hell was going on was real. Rather than just a fantasy unicorn.

Marcus Coates: It's interesting thinking about that, the paranoia, because for me, yeah, I experienced paranoia, but obviously not on the same level as you experienced it. Everyone to some degree experiences paranoia. But it's always such an internal private shameful thing. It's about confronting the stuff you'd be ashamed of.

So just having that for me voiced, yeah, just you voicing my thoughts. And I remember, that was an extraordinary thing for me to have paranoia just out there. And for everyone to hear-

Mark: It was out there.

Marcus Coates: It was quite liberating actually. I remember at one point in the film, you were saying to me, you are your thoughts. And I know that I am not my thoughts. But I don't know if most people know if they are not their thoughts. And I think that's something that a lot of people struggle with. That they are not necessarily their thoughts.

And then I remember saying to you, no, you are my thoughts, Mark. And I think realised, yeah, actually you have really taken over my mind and you are feeding me all my thoughts.

Mark: Well, that's exactly what schizophrenia is in my experience. Exactly. Because your thoughts are not your own. They're like from the ether, they come from nowhere, and you're walking along, and you have this delusional, what the hell's going on? But in fact they're not your thoughts, but they are your thoughts. Wow. That's a funny thought.

Marcus Coates: So yeah. It started to become blurred for me. And I think that's where I found all of you, where I was fighting it. And then there was a level of acceptance where I became all of you a little bit. And it was a bit blurred. Like our ending, Marcus, and yeah, Stephen and Lucy, it was, and Anthony, it was all, yeah, I really felt like I was ... There was a crossing over I think of us, there was some shared territory there.

Anthony: I think I felt a sense of relief when Marcus, towards the end of the film, had that emotional experience that was so overwhelming. It was like actually somebody else can see, actually feel what that feels like. Even though the situation was set up for film production, that was a reality for me in terms of how overwhelming and how intense those feelings are.

And so for somebody else to actually be like, wow, this is a lot, this is really, really, really overwhelming, it was a big thing. So it gave me a sense of relief at the end.

Marcus Coates: And it was only a very small percentage of what you went through, a tiny percentage.

Charles: But in a way it was a simulation of what the real experience was. And even that was powerful enough to move you very, very deeply.

Marcus Coates: Yes, it was with an actor who wasn't my mother. Imagine if it was. I mean, I couldn't go onto that next step to imagine that, that was too much. But yeah.

Marcus Gordon: Going back to where you were talking about how you wanted to be rational at the start. That was very much how I tried to approach my psychosis. It's like, I pride myself in being rational rather than emotional. And so I tried to rationalise my way out of this box of psychosis that I found myself in.

But what you can't do is rationalise the irrational. And the sooner you accept that, the easier it is then to start to recover. So when I stopped fighting my flurry of inner thoughts, it was just basically like in the video where you got that constant stream of those thoughts and questions going through your head, when you stopped fighting that, I found that my psychosis started to get better. And so it was accepting the fact that I need to stop fighting with my irrational self because rationality can't win against it.

Marcus Coates: I really felt like there was a lot of wisdom that came out through all the films. Amazing stuff. That I was personally learning. I really hope that these are life skills that everyone can share in. And I think that was part of my personal motivation when we started talking about it at the beginning. I felt like I was learning so much from you all. You've all had these really significant experiences in life. And I felt like there was so much, as I say, wisdom coming through that. But the fact that you came through that and you dealt with that, first of all, I felt admiration for you. But also I felt like we could all learn from these experiences. Everyone can learn.

Charles: They're all incredibly powerful and moving films, but they're funny too. Did it surprise you, Marcus Coates, how much humour you were picking up in watching the films back or during the making of them? I found myself laughing quite a lot at your films, but not in a way that trivialised the experiences at all. To me that brought out just how profoundly human they were as stories.

Marcus Coates: Well, it didn't surprise me at all because when we had all the zoom conversations, five or six hours each of zoom conversations before we filmed, there was a lot of humour in those conversations. And so I knew. And I think I talked to lots of you about that. Is it okay if we have humour? Is it okay if we start laughing? And everyone said yes, it's fine, it's ordinary, that's who we are. Why would you treat us any differently in that sense? Why would you guard against that?

But when we started filming, I really found that as a place of solace for me, it was a place of, okay, this is actually working. When we found humour, I felt, okay, we're trusting each other, there's something mutual, reciprocal going on there. We are testing each other. Humour comes around because things are unexpected or things are misplaced or there's misunderstanding. But the fact that we could laugh about it and find humour in it felt like, okay, this is improvised learning on the hoof. We are testing this, this is happening now, this is working. So yeah, it was a sign to me as well.

Mark: It was sign to me as well.

Anthony: I think this project for me, it kind of signifies our individual journeys, but a demonstration that psychosis doesn't define anybody. It's just something that may affect you on your journey.

Stephen: I think it's okay for someone to watch one of the videos. I wouldn't be offended if somebody saw my video and went, "Oh my God." Or something like that. You know what I mean? So I don't like people standing up for me and saying, if somebody says, "Hat guy's mad," I wouldn't be offended. And I wouldn't want somebody to say, "You can't say that," because I'm not offended by it. You know what I mean? It's okay to have these conversations. Do you know what I mean? That barrier needs to go. Do know what I mean? It's okay to say the wrong thing. You know what I mean? It's okay to have a little thing to yourself. You know what I mean? Rather, the conversation took place and someone tried than fear saying the wrong thing, or fear that they're going to be uncomfortable and not have the conversation. You know what I mean?

Mark: Well, for me, when I first became really unwell, a bunch of us went for a picnic in Greenwich park. And I didn't know what was going on, but I acted like a complete fool in front of my friends. I was quite drunk and we were all quite drunk, but I made a complete fool of myself. There was a bandstand and then there was some musicians playing brass band. And for some reason I had to touch those brass band musicians in front of my friends who I've known for a while. And a couple of them kind of laughed at me and sort of said, "You look like an idiot." And I'll remember that, but it makes me feel sad that they didn't understand that I thought this was normal behaviour, even though I was completely mad. But that kind of thing kind of hurts to be honest.

And then I remember phoning my brother and having that conversation that he was the president. I think he was George Bush or Bill Clinton. And I genuinely thought he was George Bush or bill Clinton. He just laughed at me, and laughed at me. And I'll remember that. And so there's definitely a fine line. There's certainly a balance between nice humour of respectful humour, and just absolutely ripping the shit out of someone just for the sake of it because they look like an idiot. So I think there is a certain line between humour and respectfulness to some degree.

Marcus Coates: Yeah. I certainly felt like in our film, particularly Mark, I felt I was in the privileged position to be able to allow you to laugh at me. Literally you called me an idiot or a doofus.

Mark: A doofus, yeah. Yeah. Everybody's a doofus in my world, but yeah.

Marcus Coates: Yeah. And I was being really stupid.

Mark: Oh, that going down there with the Motorhead?

Marcus Coates: Yes. I was listening to Motorhead and dancing and going crazy.

Mark: That is exactly what I would've done.

Marcus Coates: You were really laughing at me. Yeah.

Mark: That's exactly what I would've done if I was still sick, and I would've gone down there doing exactly what you did. And I guess I'm on the outside looking at that, and it is that, isn't it?

Marcus Coates: Yeah. It's comical. Yeah.

Mark: It is. Yes.

Marcus Coates: But when I came out of it, when I turned the music off and I suddenly back in this sort of mundane reality. I just thought, "Oh yeah, I was a bit of an idiot there." And then watching with the editors to film, "Oh my God, what an idiot I've been."

Mark: Well, yeah. That's kind of the nature of what the thing is. That's exactly what the balance is. I don't know if you have a sister or a brother or anything. It's none of my business. But say for example, you're going down the hill and you're listening to Motorhead and you're doing your doofus thing, would your sister or brother or whoever you have, laugh at you if that was a real situation?

Marcus Coates: If I didn't have headphones on. They would laugh at me because I imagine they'd understand that I was being silly on purpose. But if I think they'd recognised if I wasn't being silly on purpose, I think they'd recognise that and I don't think they would laugh at me, no.

Mark: Interesting.

Marcus Coates: It's a fine line, isn't it?

Mark: That balance.

Marcus Coates: Yeah. And if you're on the outside, it's impossible to judge that.

Mark: And so automatically you laugh because it's so doofus-ish

Marcus Coates: Yeah.

Mark: Of course.

Charles: We're at the end of my list of questions. Thank you everybody. I think that was a really interesting discussion.

Marcus Coates: Can I ask one question?

Charles: Yeah.

Marcus Coates: We're all at different stages of recovery of different things. But do you think this process would've been possible at any other stage of your recovery? Or do you think it was particularly useful at a certain stage, or it might have been particularly useful, or more useful at a different stage?

Lucy: I do remember us talking about this, about if it would've even been possible during psychosis. Because we talked a lot about relationships with people during psychosis, and whether it's even possible to have a fully functioning relationship. I remember saying it depends on what stage you're at, sort of where you are, what you're believing at the time for me anyway. So I don't think I would've been able to do it, either when I was in it I definitely wouldn't, and freshly coming out of it. I think for me, this project happened at the perfect time because as I said earlier, I feel like it's given me a sort of closure. I don't know. But I don't think it would've been the same if it would've been fresh. I think it would've been too fresh, or I would've had a lot going on. I feel like it happened for me at a good time.

Stephen: I probably would've felt like it was too soon, and it would've been sort of tempting fate and could sort of start it back up again. Yeah. I felt like I wanted that space to be me again. So I think there needed to be a bit of a distance for me sort of thing.

Marcus Coates: I was really aware that I was demanding a lot of all of you in this process.

Mark: For me, it'd be kind of like, you know really antisocial jokes? Say for example, someone dies, someone famous dies, and then someone makes a joke two weeks later. That's dead antisocial. But 20 years later, it might be a little bit more acceptable and that's kind of where I was in my recovery.

Marcus Gordon: I think for me, I probably would've still tried it if I was still a more in my I guess my bad 15-year phase. But I probably would've been experiencing hallucinations through the entire experience. And I would've just tried to enjoy it while hiding it, while still telling you about it. So it would be harder, but I would've still done it.

Anthony: I would've found it just too mentally intrusive I think, if I was unwell. And since going through this process is I use this project to get employment, so for me it came at a

really good time and it's helped me go onto other things. So that was really important for me from kind of wrapping up the project, I guess.

Marcus Coates: Some of your films they're quite distressing actually to watch. If you're confronted by someone who says, |"You're making me fear psychosis more by watching this film, because this is distressing me. I'm going to fear psychosis now." I don't know what you'd say to that. Are we creating more stigma by showing these distressing scenes, by showing the truth of it?

Anthony: It's always possible for that to be the case. But I think judging from the conversation from everybody here today is that yes, it's demonstrated the experience and how horrible that can be, but it's also demonstrated the vulnerabilities within that as individuals. And that's one of the myths of psychosis and mental health in general, about the stigma side of what somebody is capable of when actually people are more vulnerable than anything else. And I think that'll probably come across more in terms of content, and also from the discussions that will also be played out.

Stephen: The more stories I hear of people's experience. I think in most occasions, if people are having bad thoughts or the thoughts are telling them to do something, the bad thoughts are usually about them more often than not, or they're telling them to hurt themselves. I think that is one of those myths that needs to be dispelled that this is a dangerous thing. It should be avoided. I think most of us when we're unwell, are probably in more danger of hurting ourselves than anybody else. And it has been a long running sort of problem. And part of the stigma towards mental health, it has been misrepresented and obviously that needs to change.

Anthony: But it would be interesting for the conversation to be opened up during the actual exhibition period for people to comment on that, because that kind of feedback, I guess, will be invaluable for any future projects done by anybody in terms of how they portray mental health or mental illness in media and film.

Marcus Coates: There's something that struck me in all of your films and you vocalised it in yours, Lucy, this idea of not being afraid of experience.

Lucy: Actually what I was just thinking about in terms of, although watching the film may either make you possibly fear someone who has psychosis or having psychosis yourself, the lack of not fearing experience has been the biggest thing I've taken from it. But also I think the film's, mine particularly from watching and filming my film, I feel like it was filmed on such a human level that I know personally I chose not to dramatise it because I wanted it to be something that you could relate to on a human level, the things that you can understand and you can comprehend. So hopefully it won't make people fear it more, but it'll just help them to understand. But as I said, I don't think you should fear experience. If anything it should make you want to not have psychosis, not at all. But I think it should make you more curious about things like this and about exploring them rather than fearing away.

Marcus Coates: And what do you think about the decision of actually not appearing in the film, but only your voice appearing, not visually appearing? Did you prefer that role being a voice as a director?

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Lucy: I found it very interesting because obviously we are very different people, you and I, Marcus. Especially because the experience I had, I was very young and I'm female, you're male. It's very different. We talked about it. It's the different sort of background and whether that mattered or not. And I found it interesting to not be the person experiencing it myself and to watch it from almost a whole different person experiencing it. Because I think the conclusion I came to is it doesn't particularly matter. .

There's an element of it that that changes your experience, but I don't think it matters because we're all people having a human experience, and we're all experiencing things differently anyway. Yeah. But I did. I found it very interesting to not appear in it at all. My hands were in it, but to not appear in it at all was actually quite strange for me I think. When I'm talking about my experience so much, but you don't actually see my face. I always thought it was quite an interesting decision. But the more I thought about it, I think it's quite a good one to just have it be something that's... I don't know how to explain it. But yeah, it was definitely interesting.

Stephen: Yeah. I enjoyed the experience of being the director of one of these films. I don't think it would've felt natural to me to sort pretend to be myself, and act out a scenario that happened a long time ago. I'm not an actor, I've never had ambitions to be one. That would feel like an unnatural environment. And although I've never been a director either, I enjoyed the experience. I thought it was great to have the opportunity. It was all good.

Anthony: I enjoyed that process for two reasons. One that my story then, even though it is unique to me, it wasn't personably identifiable. But equally, even though it was my story that was being told, it could have been anybody's story with a similar diagnosis, or very similar to somebody else's experience, and that therefore made it actually quite universal. Instead of just person specific, even though it was an individual story.

Mark: I personally thought it was brilliant that I didn't have to be in it, and that Marcus was me and I was thought. And my experience where me and my thoughts were separate anyway. And so I thought that kind of highlighted the disparage of this isn't me, because it wasn't me. But Marcus was me, but my thoughts were not me, so therefore it kind of reflected it very well.

Marcus Gordon: I'm honestly not sure how it would've worked with me in it. You went through a lot and everything you went through would probably be a trigger. So if I was on stage going through that experience, I probably would've gone through an episode. So yeah, I don't think it would've been feasible for me to be in it.

Marcus Coates: It was all really fascinating to see all of you grow into this role of being directors, and your different styles of directing, and how you took that on. That was also a fascinating thing for me, how your individual personalities really came to the fore there, and your skills as directors and guides really were quite formidable for me. So I was very grateful for that support in the moment. I felt like you had my back there, although you were putting me through it, I felt like you were taking care of me as well.

Charles: Could I ask, picking out from what you just said, Marcus, did any of you find the process of making the films or watching them back triggering in any way?

Lucy: There was one moment I did have a bit of a moment. And it was we obviously voices recording, and the voices recording was taken from actual voices I used to hear because I used to write them. I used to draw things. I used to write things. And I'd given Marcus this writing and I said, "I want the voices to be my voices," so you could hear exactly what I heard because it was exactly what I heard. But there was a moment and they said, "Do you want to hear the voices?" I was like, "Oh yeah, of course." And then I put the headphones on and I just sort of froze. And then Marcus was like, "This probably triggering."

And then I was like, "Yeah, I'm fine." But it was a bit of a strange moment, I'll be honest. But particularly because I'd been in a good place of not really hearing much at all for a long time. And then to hear it and Gus was like, "Well, let's start the intensity." It was a very strange experience. It was slightly triggering, but I'm still glad I did it because I'm still glad I wanted to hear what he was hearing, and also confirmed that it was correct. So still glad I did it, but it was slightly triggering. Yeah. Bit strange considering they were exactly my voices. Yeah.

Marcus Coates: Well, that authenticity was incredible.

Lucy: Oh I know. Yeah.

Marcus Coates: The fact that you documented everything they said and what they looked like. Yeah, it gave me a whole world to enter into

Mark: Watching the film for me. I just thought, "You know what? That was pretty intense." It was kind of intense. And it reminded me of some kind of dark times. And so I thought, "You know what? Forget this, I'm going to get a busted bricks and get a haircut." So I just got a haircut. Kind of helped ease the stress.

Marcus Gordon: Hearing my intrusive thoughts for almost two days solid, that was a little unnerving because every now and again, it would just rise in intensity inside my head. So it's like, you know how you walk into a pub and there's a few people talking and it's fine. And then it's heaving and it's just like this monotonous tone of voices. It's just all encompassing, it was like that.

Marcus Coates: So it was not pleasant for you?

Marcus Gordon: It was fine. It was at a level that was completely manageable, but I was surprised it actually happened because it was just a sound train.

Anthony: I think it was definitely like an emotional journey, like kind of reliving everything. Because I spoke a lot to Marcus about a lot of my experiences, but I guess kind of putting it all together and seeing it in a film is a little bit like having a balloon and then just letting it go and just watching it sort of disappearing to the sky, if you like. Which was actually quite a nice feeling ,because it's not everything that I always need to hold onto all of the time and constantly carry with me every day.

Charles: Thank you everybody, we've done something good this afternoon. Congratulations on your films, I can't wait for the world to see them.