

The Inaugural 4Talent Awards

By Liz Hobbs

What does the British artistic talent of the future look like? According to Channel 4, whose inaugural 4Talent Awards took place on December 5th 2007, it will be filled with a whole cast of unique and gifted individuals, from a human beatbox (or “the Petebox” as he’s better known) to a performance poet who extols the virtues of motorway service stations.

Described by James Estill, senior Producer of 4Talent, as a way to “recognise and celebrate the depth and breadth of emerging talented practitioners from across the whole of the UK,” awards were presented to individuals excelling in fields as diverse as music composition, architecture and social entrepreneurship. Perhaps most impressively of all, the awards were only open to people under the age of 30.

Youth lends itself well to certain professions; indeed, for pop stars and athletes, it’s almost certainly a pre-requisite. However, when it comes to the majority of creative professions, younger subjects are often overlooked in favour of their more mature contemporaries on the (often correct) assumption that their work will not be seasoned enough. The 4Talent Awards recognised a new generation of creatives who are not just “the talent of the future,” but those whose work already exceeds that of many of their older peers and stands alone as excellent artistic work. When interviewing the subjects for this article, however, it became clear that the winners were possessed of not only a raw and edgy talent, but an artistic vision and work ethic that would inspire creative types of any age.

Vanessa Caswill



There is a reason why directors such as Orson Welles, who directed *Citizen Kane* aged just 25, and Richard Kelly, who was 29 at the time that his film *Donnie Darko* was released, tend to make history. Celebrated directors under the age of 30 are rare; celebrated writer-directors even more so. And yet the two writer-directors who won the 4Talent Awards for filmmaking displayed a maturity and accomplishment that would normally be expected from someone of significantly more advanced years.

Vanessa Caswill, 25, won an award for her short film *Pudding Bowl*. Described by Estill as “a wonderfully innocent narrative, (with) perfect casting and lusciously shot,” it tells the story of a child’s ability to overcome adversity (in this case the eponymous pudding bowl haircut) through the power of her imagination.

Caswill’s work is distinguished by an ethereal, feminine quality, combined with visually stunning cinematography and for this reason both *Pudding Bowl* and its predecessor, *A Fairytale Of The City*, are easily identifiable as the work of the same director. For Caswill, this is an important point; “voice is so important in any artistic medium,” she explains. “Every project you work on in the early stage of your career contributes to the development of that voice.”

With several short film and theatre projects under her belt already, Caswill has clearly found and developed a confident artistic voice at a time when most young directors are still experimenting with theirs. It’s not just her artistic precociousness, however, that lends itself to her talent as a director. Caswill also seems to have an inherent understanding of the organisational requirements of a shoot and its importance to the overall process, admitting that she plans the entire film in her head before she commits it to schedule so that she knows the requirements and deadlines way in advance.

A unique and finely-honed artistic voice is also a central feature of the work of 4Talent filmmaker Vicki Psarias. Of Greek Cypriot extraction, Psarias’ passion lies in telling the stories of her community. Her first short, *Rifts*, focused on two warring kebab shop owners



and the short film that won her a 4Talent award, *Broken*, depicted a Greek mother and her children relocating to London in the ‘60s to rejoin the family patriarch. Starring Peter Polycarpou and Michelle Collins, the short demonstrates clearly Psarias’ eye for detail and her gift for storytelling; *Broken* could easily have been a feature film, and the masterful way in which she economises detail, plus her superb characterisation, are what really make her stand out as a talent to be reckoned with.

However, it is not only talent that has brought Vicki to where she is today. At 27, what also stands out is her fierce drive to succeed. As Psarias herself says, “I have always had the mentality that failure is not an option for me—as a creative person, it is easy to get riddled with self-doubt. Breaks don’t come easily and rejection is part of your daily diet as a filmmaker, but you have to keep fighting.” Meeting Psarias, this passion is something that is very obvious. As Estill says, what really stood out about her “was the way that her obvious creativity and talent in crafting such a beautiful film as *Broken* was matched by her equally talented and tenacious approach to overcome the normal—and frustrating—

Vicki Psarias



James Delow, comedian Paul Tonkinson and Ben Fromet



One to Watch

Directing



Vicki Psarias

Vicki Psarias is an award-winning writer-director passionate about depicting the untold stories of her community. Her short film *Rifts*—focussing on warring kebab shop owners—first brought her to the attention of the filmmaking public and her most recent short *Broken* won her a 4Talent Award for Best Filmmaker and was one of the eight awarded finalists for the Kodak Awards 2007 for Best Film and Cinematography.

What training have you received?

I got a BA in Media and Communications where I specialised in Documentary and Journalism and then a distinction in my MA in Screen Drama and Direction, both from Goldsmiths, University of London.

What kind of projects attract you?

I write as well as direct, and a lot of my films such as my shorts *Broken* and *Rifts* have been exploring my own Greek Cypriot cultural identity, so telling these untold stories of my community and going on my own journey of exploration are important to me. I want to work on other material too, though, and other people's scripts. For a project to attract me, it is always about the story: does it move, entertain or make me gain a different or deeper understanding of the world on a human level—is it universal? For me, cinema is emotion on screen.

What's the best advice you've been given as a director?

I've been given lots of great advice. My ex-lecturer and mentor John Beacham from Goldsmiths, University of London, who has sadly passed away, always told me to believe in myself and I think that's so integral to filmmaking. As creatives, we are all often riddled with self-doubt but you have to believe in yourself and have passion—it's the only way!

Most significant moment in your career so far?

Making my short films and sitting in a cinema at a film festival and watching my work. A recent one was meeting the Prime Minister Gordon Brown when I was the first filmmaker to be one of the five finalists for the Daily Mail "Make Your Mark Enterprising Young Brits Awards 2007" in the Creative Category, for my enterprising approach to filmmaking. I asked him to do more for the British film industry and he promised to try his best. To be acknowledged as an enterprising filmmaker and to meet Gordon Brown was surreal but unforgettable.

You'll die happy when...

We have world peace and I've made lots of feature films, reached my own personal goals and can look back and feel proud of what I've achieved as a filmmaker and most importantly as a person. ■

difficulties of funding." Like Caswill, Psarias also brings instinctive production skills to her work; she advocates, for example, filming as much material as possible to reduce the possibility of post-production nightmares when shooting on a tight budget.

Another set of enviably talented screenwriters that the awards uncovered were comedy-writing partnership James Delow and Ben Fromet, 25 and 29 respectively. Their sitcom pilot, *Trevor Ending Story*, joins hapless protagonist Trevor Dawson shortly after being dumped by his partner and losing his job in quick succession. If this sounds like another run of the mill "hapless-misfit-struggles-to-find-place-in-world" tale, it isn't; according to 4Talent, the couple have handled the subject matter innovatively; "as dark as the backdrop becomes, Delow and Fromet steer the plot and dialogue with a warmth which always lands them on the right side of seedy," claims the judge who selected them, Davina Earl.

Delow and Fromet began writing together four years ago, following a meeting in 2003 at Channel 4. Realising quickly that they shared not only a love of comedy but also a gift for writing it, they began work on a sitcom script.

As in the case of Psarias, half-measures didn't feature in the pair's ethos; "We've only ever written scripts with a view to getting them onto TV/Radio," explains Delow. "We're very serious about our comedy!" This seriousness translates into a strict working process—when the pair are writing, any parts of the script that don't make them laugh out loud quite simply don't make the cut. That said, the duo also display a refreshing humility when it comes to the editing process: "We've learned to make sure that we're not precious over our material and have honed the art of doing quick and drastic rewrites if required."

Once again, it is not only their natural ability that strikes you when you speak with them, but also their knowledge of the industry that they are moving into and the way in which they treat their art as a business. Continuing on the subject of rewrites, Delow explains that they are "something that every commissioner/producer

wants from a new writer—someone who can take notes and come up with the goods." One gets the sense that with this obvious ability to adapt quickly and readily to the demands of producers, the pair have already stood themselves in good stead for a long and successful writing career.

With the backing of such a recognised brand as Channel 4, which has, in Estill's words "a history of embracing innovative and edgy talent that flourishes—and often struggles—under the radar," the winners of the 4Talent Awards can only expect to advance in their careers.

The selection process was rigorous and the winners were selected from over 700 applicants, a fact which in itself speaks volumes about their ability. But the winners were also indicative of a wider trend; a new generation of creative talent that is not just gifted artistically, but are also media-savvy and business-focused, men and women who understand the importance of investing in their career as much as they invest in their art. For this reason, it seems almost a given that we will be hearing a lot more about them in the future. ■

Vanessa Caswill

