

DISTURBED ORBITER

TONY

40 IMAGES FROM
THE MIND OF
TONY KAYE.
ON ONE PAGE.

The road that leads into the hills above Los Angeles towards the home of director Tony Kaye has as many twists to it as does the tale of the man in question. Over more than 30 years of image-making he has been decorated, derided, dubbed both genius and madman – with many of the most extreme proclamations of his abilities (both good and bad) coming from himself. Were it not for Sat Nav, you might never find his place at all. An appropriate location perhaps for one whose life seems to have been lived – for better or worse – without a map, but who has nonetheless ascended to and remains in an elevated position, even if the vision that brought him here was matched at times by an equal flair for disaster.

On arrival the view is spectacular, but there is one truth that confronts those that inhabit such regions, and it's a fact that Kaye perhaps knows better than many of his neighbours – after all the kinks and bends of the upward journey, it takes only a moment to fall.

At the end of the 80s, Tony Kaye's work became embedded in the British psyche when – this being the era of four-channel television and fewer digital distractions – he made a series of advertisements widely regarded as the most memorable of their time. His finesse for turning potentially mundane matters (British Rail, Real Fires and Dunlop Tyres) into arresting, admired and even mysterious pieces of short cinema earned him more awards than anyone in the industry before or since.

Kaye – who also works as his own cinematographer – came to America in the early 90s to make movies. His first, *American History X*, appeared in 1998 and saw its lead, Edward Norton, nominated for an Oscar. His second feature, *Detachment*, arrived just this year. In the intervening period he made a documentary (which took 16 years to assemble), *Lake of Fire*, which was also shortlisted for an Oscar, and shot videos, including one for Johnny Cash that would win a Grammy.

These, however, are simply the perceived highs of a career cardiograph with more peaks, troughs and flatlines than sanity or survival might ordinarily sustain, but which in the end, proves to be ample testament to both. Between his conspicuous successes, Kaye acquired a reputation for havoc and self sabotage that, even at its most jaw-droppingly bizarre, betrayed traces of the same unrivalled imagination that informed his triumphs.

No one is more aware of all this than he is. Someone, possibly himself, has tattooed the word "idiot" on his forearm with what looks like more angst than artistry. "Preposterous" is a term he uses a lot in reference to his past, although he also sees his crooked path as essential to his survival. "Being successful at that point," he says of the late-90s (a period that would see him embroiled in what's been referred to as 'the most ludicrous legal battle Hollywood has ever seen') "would have been the worst thing that could have happened to me. I would not be here now. There is no question. I would be in the ground."

Such is the volume of anecdotes about him that an actual meeting brings with it a certain amount of trepidation – which is really a good thing, almost an old-fashioned sensation in an age when most Hollywood interviews are micro-managed formalities conceived and controlled to fit into a wider and equally manipulated process of PR.

Any hopes or fears that contemporary contact might entail some of the psychodramas that distinguished his famous meetings of the past (bringing a rabbi, a Catholic priest and a specially flown-in Tibetan monk to a sit down with the producers of *American History X* being perhaps the most notorious; persistently dressing as Osama Bin Laden in New York in the aftermath of 9/11, a debateable second) are defused by an email exchange that suggests a man driven more by an anxiety to create rather than an instinct to confront.

His latest film, *Detachment*, also speaks of a director who is attracting talent and generating possibilities – it could not have existed otherwise. With a tiny budget and a limited time frame it not only looks and feels like a more substantially underwritten production – "I shot it in 15 minutes and I made it look like a couple of hours," he says – it also contains, around a powerful central performance from Adrien Brody, some remarkable work from a conspicuously gifted supporting cast including James Caan, Christina Hendricks, Lucy Liu, Blythe Danner, Marcia Gay Harden and Bryan Cranston. Finally, it seems his prior reputation for off-screen drama is being superseded by his renown as an actor's director and a person who can get things done. "At last," he says, "I'm in a situation where I am warm. I wouldn't say I was hot, but I'm warm and I'm getting warmer."

Unsurprisingly for one with such a keen eye, he is an arresting visual presence himself. With unruly grey hair, an expansive beard and studious glasses, he appears both rabbinical and piratical, which seems entirely appropriate for a man with a record of both insightful work and reckless action. He is also, necessarily perhaps, possessed of a decent sense of humour. When he comes to open the glass doors to his house and then realises he is locked inside it he smiles and nods like a man on good terms with life's everyday conundrums.

Over a large mug of tea and a small bowl of almonds he recalls that, "I was in a dream all the time when I was at school. I distinctly remember a teacher – I think he was my French teacher. Yes. He threw the chalkboard eraser at me once and screamed at me and said, 'I hope you can make a living staring at people and staring at things because I cannot imagine you could ever hold down any other form of job.' So that's what I ended up doing, because directing is just really staring at things and saying, 'What about that?' or, 'What about this?'"

Kaye was born and raised in London and you can still hear it in his voice. He is a determined but occasionally hesitant speaker. Less, it seems, as a consequence of a speech impediment so pronounced in his youth that he would pre-record himself saying, "Hello, this is Tony" simply so he could use the phone, and more, one feels, because he is determined to get what he is saying straight in his own mind.

At times his speech feels as though it has been pressed into service by a flight of ideas that are not necessarily best served by language. Further to this, his house, which covers a considerable area, is strewn with paintings at various stages of completion, some of which look as if completion might never come. One canvas he shows me is so heavy with paint I can barely hold it. He shakes his head as he passes it to me, as though the urge to keep adding to it were baffling even to himself.

While we talk he energetically fills index cards with sketches, words and patterns in ink and paint – occasionally pausing to ask for a title, then beginning another, some of which are the images that accompany this piece.

WHO AM I TODAY
WHAT SHOULD I SAY
STAY! GO AWAY! WELL I SHOULD
PRAY.

He traces the nature and scope of his directorial ambitions to some spectacular beginnings. "My father took me to all the big biblical epics when I was a kid and I was really blown away by them, particularly *The Ten Commandments* when the Red Sea opened. I was also, maybe wrongly so, particularly blown away by the fact that Cecil B. DeMille came out at the beginning and spoke about the movie. I thought that was great. When I went to art school Stanley Kubrick came in. I was only 16. He had just done *2001*. He came into the school and he gave a talk and I had a chat with him. I normally don't do that and we talked for a bit, actually. I had another experience. When I left that school about a year later, I went travelling."

Making his way along what was known at the time as the Hippy Trail, Kaye was in Israel in 1973 when he landed a labouring job working on *Billy Two Hats*, a Gregory Peck western being filmed by Ted Kotcheff (who would later make *First Blood*). It was here that Tony, whose life would go on to contain what he has often referred to as "wilderness periods", would witness his very own miracle in the desert.

"So I am 17, humping about all these things. All of a sudden this bloke says, 'Okay, I want a bush right there.' Some other bloke said, 'We're in the middle of a desert. We can't get your bush.' He said, 'I fucking want a bush right there.' He said, 'I will have to drive for hours.' 'Get me a bush. I want it right there.' So the bloke goes off and we carry on and it starts to get dark.



SEE...
THAT'S
WHAT
I SHOULD
DO
TODAY... I
SHOULD
PRAY VERY HARD

~~can~~ THINGS RIGHT



"So a little bit later, it is getting really cold at night, in the middle of the desert. So the same bloke says, 'I'm freezing. Get me a jacket. Drive into town and get me a fucking jacket.' So some other guy goes off. I said, 'Who is that bloke? What does he do?' 'Oh he is the director.' So I thought to myself, 'That's the job I want. That's the job. That's definitely the job.'"

Back in London he tried to support himself through painting, applied for photography work but it was his efforts on a course at the ICA that eventually brought him to the attention of the advertising industry and he was offered work. "The minute I got there [the agency Collett Dickenson Pearce] I saw all these directors walking around and doing all these commercials and things fell into place for me."

He says the agency's founder, John Pearce, "was like a baby Steve Jobs. The same kind of character, an entrepreneur who loved artists, was an artist himself and had this deeply ingrained sense of pushing for good taste. Then they just employed the best people. They became very arrogant in the sense that they didn't pitch for any business, they would just wait for business to come to them. They would do it on their own terms. They had complete control."

Control, both of work and oneself, turns out to be a recurring theme. In the early-80s Kaye made a commercial for Olivetti, "pretty much the first or second thing I ever made. It was a massive success. It won awards at Cannes and I went mad. I self-destructed. I went round the bend."

Having started his own agency, he quickly became notorious for the kind of behaviour he felt at the time was commensurate with the character of an artist, but which would see him ostracised by the industry and even arrested. Military uniform, bringing a doll to meetings, insisting on speaking through intermediaries and taking out newspaper adverts proclaiming his directorial prowess are but the tip of an iceberg he managed to both create and collide with, the primary casualty of all this being himself.

By the mid-80s he had lost his house and his business. "I went to the cinema for five years," he says of this period, "and watched everything. Without even understanding six eighths of what I'd even seen or why it was like that. I just sat there and watched one after another because I knew I had to do it. I had to do it. I had to go to film school. I didn't go to film school. I didn't know what the fucking thing was, what a camera was, I had no idea."

Though some in the industry were doubtless glad to see the back of him, there were others who recalled what he was capable of. Late in the decade a phone call from Jeff Stark, a former colleague, secured him the British Rail commercial, the first of the projects that would see him reascend to the top of his profession as quickly as he had disappeared.

It would take almost another ten years for him to cross the Atlantic and assemble a major feature film – *American History X* – only for the process of transmuting triumph into disaster to repeat itself again as the film was being edited. Nervous of any external interference on the project, Kaye – who is a devotee of The Beatles both as a band and a creative collective structure – was in the process of cutting it together when he was called about making a video by Paul McCartney.

With tangible regret he recounts how, "I turned it down in the end because... what a fucking idiot I am. That could have changed my whole life actually. I didn't want to do it for him because I didn't want to leave the cutting room of *American History X*. I was too frightened that they would all come in – the people. The massive problems hadn't started yet but I had the fear of God in me that they were all going to come in and descend upon me. If I'd have done it, it would have got me

out the way for a while and I would have come back and it [the movie] would have been sweet. I would have made a music video for Paul, I'd be off to the races, everything would be fine. It was a great track. It was an interesting idea that I had. The budget was good. I am a cunt, basically!"

What happened instead was that he would fall out with the film's producers in what would prove to be an even more spectacular refraction of his previous escapades. His famed attempt to expedite the process by bringing religious leaders into meetings led only to his exclusion from the final edit. He tried to remove his name from the picture, and endeavoured to sue the Directors Guild of America for \$200 million when they refused. An attempt to change his name to Humpty Dumpty and thereby force the issue brought him to the attention of Marlon Brando, who, perhaps recognising that Kaye was operating more from a sense of creative obsession than obstinacy, befriended him, and the two enjoyed a close relationship until Kaye's Bin Laden period in 2001 ostracised even Brando, and the second wilderness period was thus begun.

Reflecting on it now he says that, "when I did *American History X* all the bravado and all the big talk, chest beating and, 'I am this and I am that and I can do this and I could do that' – it was really from a place of very deep fear with no confidence at all. I was trying to will myself into a situation, into a winning one, whereas deep down I just thought to myself, 'This is so preposterous of me' – in Los Angeles, in Hollywood making a movie, directing a movie and going into this company with posters, movie posters on the wall of real movies. In myself, from where I was from, my background, it was just impossible for me to win through and I was intimidated and just wiped out like a bit of insignificant dust because of that. It wasn't them [the film's producers] that wiped me out, it was myself, because deep down I had no confidence at all."

In the years that followed, Kaye's story evolved into Hollywood folklore, almost a bedtime story for aspiring talent on how not to behave. Though chastened, the man himself never stopped working, going back into advertising and raising the money to complete the project that had been intermittently occupying him for years, *Lake of Fire*. Released in 2006, the documentary, over two and a half hours, manages to offer a non-judgemental and at times gruelling insight into the abortion issue in America, and by extension reveals something of the psychology of the continent itself.

The film is a remarkable accomplishment, a fearless and sustained exercise in balance and control that proved a critical success and remains a definitive record of an endlessly divisive issue. Afforded another chance to direct a feature, a thriller called *Black Water Transit* in 2009, ill fortune struck again. Seemingly through no fault of his own, Kaye's film became mired in a legal dispute between producers that still prevents it from being released to this day.

By this point he might have been forgiven for giving up entirely. Instead, he pressed on and made *Detachment*, a stylistically bold tale of a teacher adrift in the American public school system, which illustrates that, for all his prowess in and around the camera, he is also a director who can lead even seasoned performers into vivid new demonstrations of their art.

Actors, he says, are at the core of what he does. "One of the reasons I got so upset with [Edward] Norton on *American History X* was because I fucking fought for that guy." [Norton would eventually have the editorial input that Kaye was denied] "We were mates and there was no question about it – I got the best performance from him ever. Okay, it's not that he hasn't been that great in some other films, but I got the performance. I got the defining Edward Norton performance. I just felt he wasn't protective of me and what we had at the end. But it was me, I don't blame him, it was me, I was insane. I was passionate about what I was trying to do and we made a great film but that's what I do. I can get performances from actors that they don't even know they've got."

"When you look at my commercials," he continues, "there are characters in them, more so than in a lot of commercials back then. There is always one character in a commercial or something. There are performances but obviously performances are much harder to really notice in a commercial. I spent masses and masses and masses of time finding the right person for the right role in TV commercials. Hundreds and hundreds of hours went into selecting what I considered to be the right person."

Might it be this friction between art and commerce, and how best to fashion one at the behest of the other that has always been driving and dividing him? "Yes, I never thought of it like that but, yes, you are right. To me, it is all about that struggle about trying to make art, irrespective of if you are any good or not but, just trying to make it because you feel a compulsion to do so, wherever that's coming from, and then you have to make a living or you have to... until I ended up, for whatever reason, trying to make films. I saw this as a great art form and one that I didn't want to abuse in any way."

"So it is very important for me. This is a commerce and this is what I do and, as far as movies go, it is about making movies that a lot of people want to see and they're engaged in. But it's also about getting art into the cinema and there is never enough art in the world. It amazes me, however many doodles you do or scribbles or paintings, you just can't fill up the world. It's just impossible. It is like more wall space, more space in the air, more cyberspace. There's just an eternity of space and why not add more art in it?"

With his excesses behind him it seems now as though others are again prepared to help underwrite his mission. The epic anecdotes of his past, he sees as gestation for what he endeavours to do today. "I hope now I am at the beginning. Now it's a good time because I've had a good apprenticeship. I've had one of the best apprenticeships – I think of all time, actually. I can't think of anyone who has had a better one and still feels very hungry at this point, very hungry. Which is great, because somebody in my position could be very cynical at this point. I'm not. I have a good attitude, I have a healthy viewpoint on where storytelling is. I mean, it doesn't matter if it's the cinema or if it's on somebody's iPad, or on their iPhone, or on the television. That is irrelevant to me now. I don't care."

"What is meaningful to me is just to be within the process or to have a process, to conduct a process under the auspices of the way that I think it should be done – which can change all the time, depending on who I'm working with and what they want. But that's not to say that I want to live the journey based on other people's choices and thoughts, and to have my own voice drowned out." That seems unlikely; despite the best efforts of both himself and circumstances to silence him in the past, Tony Kaye is clearly not a man about to go down for the third time.

Visit Tony's new website, abovethesea.com



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THERE'S JUST AN
ETERNITY OF SPACE
AND WHY NOT ADD
MORE ART IN IT?
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