

Surround yourself with the best and invest in the creative process, Qumra Master David Parfitt tells aspiring film producers

Doha, Qatar; March 12, 2023: Academy Award winning producer and **Qumra Master David Parfitt** drew on his four decades of experience in filmmaking at his masterclass at Qumra 2023, encouraging young filmmakers and producers to surround themselves with the best professionals and invest in the creative process not just in budget management.

At the annual talent incubator event for Arab and international cinema organised by the Doha Film Institute, Parfitt shared extensive anecdotes from his career, including his lifelong friendship with actor and filmmaker Kenneth Branagh and his rewarding journey of producing acclaimed films such as *Henry V* (1989), *Peter's Friends* (1992), *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993), *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) that won seven Academy Awards, *My Week with Marilyn* (2011), *Loving Vincent* (2017), which was supported by the Doha Film Institute, and *The Father* (2020), among others.

Parfitt's masterclass was defined by an unwavering passion for cinema and theatre, in equal measure. Although he started his career as a child actor, Parfitt says by the time he was 15, he didn't want to be an actor, but his acting experience gave him the background "to understand filmmaking enough to be a producer."

Yet he insists he only knows film production the way he does it. "I learn on every production, and I have done a lot of things wrong. It is a management job, which I took from my parents, who were in retail business." But Parfitt is not just into the business of management. As he advised Qumra delegates, "being involved and investing in the creative process is important."

That has also defined his cinematic journey as a producer, starting off with Kenneth Branagh, who he says, "is responsible for me being in film at all." As cast members in a theatre group, they had plenty of time to themselves. "We were planning our escape since young actors in theatre then had no control on their careers."

Five years later in 1986, they realised their dream with the launch of the Renaissance Theatre Company and moved into producing plays as well as their first film production, *Henry V*. They also produced the Academy Award nominated live action short film, *Swan Song* (1992) with the legendary Sir John Gielgud, shot over a weekend using a prize money Branagh had won.

Parfitt says it was one of the most intense working periods of his life as he was also producing *Peter's Friends*, done only to support the distributors of *Henry V*, which was a commercial disappointment. "Our distributors were sceptical of another Shakespeare adaptation we were producing, *Much Ado About Nothing*. We shot *Peter's Friends*, a comedy, on a fairly low budget in four weeks and the film was a huge hit in Europe."

Parfitt says there is a distinctive edge to working with theatre actors "as they learn the whole lines and don't need multiple takes. They know what they must do from day one." Describing screen actors as "a different breed," Parfitt observes that, "they like to discover in the moment; the result can be extremely brilliant or terribly frustrating."

Parfitt describes himself as being “staggeringly lucky with breaks at all stages” of his career, more so in realizing *Shakespeare in Love*, initially planned with Julia Roberts to play Viola. She had insisted that Daniel Dey-Lewis play Shakespeare. But some four years later, several actors considered for the lead, and US\$20 million sitting in the books, no progress was made. Following discussions with many studios, Parfitt eventually went on to produce *Shakespeare in Love*, which starred Joseph Fiennes as Shakespeare and Gwyneth Paltrow as Viola. The film was a commercial and critical hit.

He says producing *Loving Vincent* was a one-of-a-kind experience for him, a film in which every frame was oil-painted by hand. “We had over 150 artists working in cubicles, over 18 months, painting every single frame of the film we shot. We had contribution from here [in Doha] that made the crowdfunded film possible.”

Being diplomatic is part of being a producer, he tells young filmmakers. “But there is no need to take stress. I find things are quite calm when you get to the sets; crises tend to happen in the leadup.” He also advises aspiring producers not to go out too early for financing. “Take a step back, invest in the creative process and don’t panic. Do not force your decisions on others; always surround yourself with the best professionals and you are protected.”

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About Doha Film Institute:

Doha Film Institute is an independent, not-for-profit cultural organisation. It supports the growth of the local film community through cultivating film appreciation, enhancing industry knowledge and contributing to the development of sustainable creative industries in Qatar. The Institute’s platforms include funding and production of local, regional and international films; skills-sharing and mentorship programmes; film screenings; the Ajyal Youth Film Festival; and Qumra. With culture, community, learning and entertainment at its foundation, the Institute is committed to supporting Qatar’s 2030 vision for the development of a knowledge-based economy.

About Qumra

Directors and Producers attached to DFI supported projects in development and post-production are selected to participate in the event. They will include a number of emerging filmmakers from Qatar, as well as recipients of funding from the Institute’s Grants Programme. The robust programme will feature industry meetings designed to assist with propelling projects to their next stages of development, including master classes, work-in-progress screenings, bespoke matchmaking sessions and tailored workshops with industry experts. This creative exchange will take place alongside a programme of public screenings curated with input from the Qumra Masters.

The event is organised in three main sections: The **Qumra Master Classes** are daily sessions; each led by one of the Masters. The participating filmmakers have full access to these sessions, which are also open to accredited industry guests to attend in an observational capacity. The **Qumra Meetings** are a series of one-on-one meetings, workshops and tailored mentoring sessions between representatives from the selected projects and seasoned industry experts. The **Qumra Screenings** are open to the public and feature projects funded by the Institute through its grants and co-financing initiatives.