



# English transcript of Raabia Hussain's interview with Nikki Stratton, Marilyn Willrich, Louis Neethling, Teresa Garratty and Giles Bowman

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- translated by Claire Dodds

RAABIA - Hi and welcome back to Deaffest! I'm so excited to be back here again in this wonderful building with this fantastic atmosphere! It's great to see all these people back here again. Amazing! I am Raabia Hussain and you might recognise me from the film *Two Deaf Travellers*. The film was screened here at Deaffest this morning actually, as a non-competition entry, and it was really nice to see it. I'd now like to introduce the two founders of Deaffest. I want to ask them how it all came about. Welcome Nikki Stratton and Marilyn Willrich. Hello! How are you?

NIKKI and MARILYN - Hi! Hello!

RAABIA - Hi! So pleased to see you.

NIKKI - I'm Nikki.

MARILYN - And I'm Marilyn.

RAABIA – Brilliant! How does it feel to be back at Deaffest?

MARILYN - I tell you what, it feels brilliant! COVID shutdowns meant we couldn't run last year, so this is the first time we've all been together in person for three years! To be here today... wow! I feel emotional. It's just so brilliant to be here in person. Such a wonderful feeling. After all those Zoom meetings, and watching everything on the TV screen at home, to be back together in person feels great! I bet you feel the same, don't you Nikki?

NIKKI – Absolutely. It's wonderful. I finally sat watching the films yesterday in the auditorium and I just felt so emotional watching on the big screen, together with everybody else, rather than stuck at home on my own watching on a TV screen. There's nothing better than being here with Deaf friends and colleagues, catching up on what's going on.

RAABIA - The atmosphere is amazing. It's really alive, really buzzing. It's so good to be back in touch with everyone.

NIKKI – Yes, it feels more real.

MARILYN – It brings you closer to each other, more connected.

NIKKI – Yes, it's lovely.

RAABIA – Yes. So, tell us more about how you came to set up Deaffest in the first place. How did it come about? Because it's a brilliant concept.

MARILYN - Well, did you know the festival has been running since 2006?

RAABIA – That long? Wow!

NIKKI – Yes, and we're now in our 14th year! We used to run it every year but in 2017 we changed that to once every two years. That meant we were supposed to be on last year, but we missed out of course, due to COVID, but now we are back and will run biannually from this point on.



MARILYN - The concept came about because we had both been to the Deaf TV and Film Festival before, but that stopped running and we thought that was a shame. We both lived in Wolverhampton at the time, and ran our business from here, so we thought why not set up some kind of Deaf TV and Film awards here at the Lighthouse? There are lots of awards out there for hearing TV and film makers, like the Oscars, the Baftas, the National Television Awards and what have you, but nothing for Deaf programme makers, so we thought why not! There are lots of great film and programme makers out there and we wanted to celebrate their work. We decided to set something up and see how it went, and that's how Deaffest came to be.

NIKKI - The festival has grown year-on-year. We now get entries from all around the world now. It's so great to see that Deaf filmmaking is a growing industry.

MARILYN - We came up with the name Deaffest because we wanted to mark it as a celebration, a festival. Our logo involves hands, as you can see. In fact, those famous hands are actually Nikki's hands, there in our logo!

NIKKI – Shhhh! Yes, it's true, they are mine.

RAABIA – Really? Show me the Deaffest sign, let me check. Yes, I can tell they are! They match up.

MARILYN – We felt it was important to incorporate a sign into our logo. There are a lot of festivals out there that are “something-fest”. We liked how the words DEAF and FEST came together and felt it gave a clear indication of what we were about. We wanted Deaf makers to see we would show their films and programmes here. And of course, BSL Zone has been a fantastic supporter of our work in this area for a long time. We are very grateful for that.

RAABIA – I noticed recently that you took Deaffest on tour. What was that about?

NIKKI – Well, Deaffest has always been held here in Wolverhampton, but we realised that it's really important to work together with Deaf communities in different regions of the country too, because lots of people living elsewhere had not heard of Deaffest. We wanted to engage more with filmmakers in other parts of the UK because we want to encourage them to showcase their work at the festival. We particularly want more drama content, as currently there is not enough.

So, last year we went on tour and took a number of films and programmes out to the people and that went really well. We went to Cornwall first, and people there were really enthusiastic and very keen to come and watch the screenings and performances. It really gave them an idea of what Deaffest is all about. We then did the same thing in Warwick, and again in Gloucester. But it was really valuable because we took the films out to the community and built those connections. We hope to continue to do this, visiting different areas and putting on a one-day festival where people can get together and watch films, see some stalls, network with others, maybe attend some workshops. And of course, there would be a party in the evening! Deaf people love a party! That would give them an idea of what Deaffest is like.

MARILYN – We also have an art exhibition as part of the festival here, well where deaf artists and photographers can display their work. The exhibition gallery stays in place for a whole month, so it's not just the Deaffest audience that get to see this, but people from outside as well. It's really good. You should go and take a look later.

RAABIA – I will do that later! I'm definitely interested in seeing what's there. Did you intend for Deaffest to be an international festival of film, theatre and the arts? It has a wide scope.

MARILYN – Yes, well, it did used to just be UK focussed, but now... Nikki...?

NIKKI – Yes, we opened it up to become an International Film and Arts Festival. Although we are based in the UK, we welcome entries from around the world, and people do send in work from all over. We've had international performers in the past too, but this year is a little different because of COVID. Usually we bring



in special performers bring in performers from overseas to perform at the gala. It's always nice to see something a bit different.

MARILYN – Hopefully, in two years' time we will be able to bring in some amazing international performers again.

RAABIA – I'll definitely be back to find out! It's been so great to talk to you both, thank you so much. Best of luck for tonight.

NIKKI and MARILYN – Thank you!

RAABIA – Well it was great to chat to them. I'm now going to talk to one of the filmmakers who has made a number of programmes for BSL Zone, several of which have been nominated for awards here at this year's Deafest. This is Louis Neethling.

LOUIS – Hi, pleased to meet you.

RAABIA - It's great to meet you too, Louis. How are you feeling to be back at Deaffest?

LOUIS - I tell you, it is so good to be back! Everything has been on pause because of Coronavirus, and we haven't been able to be here for the last couple of years but it's so great to be back again and see so many people. I've been catching up with old faces and new ones. Good to see some international Deaf people here too. I really appreciate Deaffest's efforts to showcase Deaf talent. It's great to see my work and everyone else's up there on the big screen and to see so many people in the audience watching. I love it!

RAABIA – Now, two of your programmes, *Veneer* and *Four Deaf Yorkshiremen Go Dating* have been nominated for awards this year, is that right? Which categories?

LOUIS – Yes, *Veneer* has been nominated for Best Film and *Four Deaf Yorkshiremen Go Dating* has been nominated in the Best Television Programme category.

RAABIA – Amazing! That's a lot of nominations. Well I hope they both do well. Good luck with that later Louis. Now, I believe you filmed *Veneer* while COVID restrictions were in place. Is that right? Can you tell me how you got on with that? Was that a challenge?

LOUIS - It was really difficult, yes. You might not think so, but it really was a huge challenge to make *Veneer* during Covid because of the restrictions we had to follow were really strict at that time. We had to maintain two metres distance between everybody and we had a COVID supervisor on set at all times to make sure that nobody breached that rule. If anyone got too close, they would shout, "2 metres!!" Of course, that had an impact on the time that it took to film and also the types of shots that we could use. The original script was written with the expectation it would be filmed in the normal way and although we were lucky to be able to go ahead and make the film, with the restrictions in place, I realised we would need to make a number of adaptations to style of filming, like filming in the style of Wes Anderson, which is more of an art style. I borrowed some of his techniques to adapt the piece and it worked well. Also, normally when you film, everybody is there together on set – lighting technicians, the art department, the actors and so on, all in the same place. But in this case, we could not do that because we had to keep our distance, so we had to take it in turns to go and do our thing. The art department would go in first, then I'd send in the camera crew to arrange the cameras, then I'd send them out and bring the actors in, so I could talk to them. All this took more time of course. It was pretty stressful to be honest. A vastly different experience to being on a normal shoot.

RAABIA - And how does that compare to the filming of *Four Deaf Yorkshiremen Go Dating*?

LOUIS – Well, we filmed *Veneer* at the height of COVID, when those restrictions were much stricter. By the time we got round to filming *Four Deaf Yorkshiremen Go Dating*, although restrictions were still in place,



they were much reduced, so it was a lot easier. It was about 8 months later, so the rules were not strict, although we still had to abide by them. Also, a lot of the filming was done outside in the fresh air, which made it a lot easier, so it wasn't too bad. Also, the actors formed a working bubble and they tested for COVID every day to make sure that everybody was clear. So it wasn't too bad. We were able to film in the normal way.

RAABIA – Now, these two works are very different genres. What inspired you to write such different pieces?

Louis – Well, I didn't write either of them. *Veneer* was written by Jean St Clair. Jean has a very dark sense of humour and that shows in the film. Charlie Swinbourne wrote *Four Deaf Yorkshiremen Go Dating*. Charlie loves writing comedy and he has a very different style to Jean, but I've enjoyed working with both of them. My strength lies in comedy – that's usually what I direct.

RAABIA - And what do you feel has been the biggest challenge of working on both of those productions?

LOUIS – Well, they were very different. *Four Deaf Yorkshiremen Go Dating* is much more physical in its humour, very visual and quite blokey in some ways. *Veneer* was much more darkly comic, so very different, and that in itself was a challenge. The humour was much more hidden. It wasn't shown physically, it wasn't so obvious, it was much more subtle and it comes through the language used, so it was more challenging to get that across.

RAABIA - Did you film on location in Yorkshire for *Four Deaf Yorkshiremen Go Dating*?

LOUIS – Yes, we did. I don't know if you know Hebden Bridge in West Yorkshire? Well, just above Hebden Bridge there is a little village called Heptonstall. It's up a big hill but it is a beautiful village, really lovely, and we filmed there.

RAABIA – Wow! What a great experience. You have certainly had to overcome some unique challenges. Anyway, good luck for tonight with your two nominations Louis. It's been really nice talking to you, thank you. Okay, the next person we are going to chat to is Teresa Garratty. Welcome Teresa. How are you?

TERESA – Good. How are you?

RAABIA - I'm good thanks. How does it feel to be back at Deaffest?

TERESA - It kind of feels a bit weird to be back, actually! The last time I was here was I think three years ago.

RAABIA – Yes, and then there was lockdown and so on now we're all back! Free again! So nice to be able to chat to everyone.

TERESA – Very true.

RAABIA – Now, I know, you wrote the script for the film *What If?* What inspired you to write that?

TERESA – Well, originally, I wrote a completely different film! This was pre-Covid, and I wrote a story about going on a date and falling in love. I think there was a fight in there somewhere as well. But because of the theme, you needed to have actors up close with each other, touching each other, and that simply wasn't possible because of the COVID restrictions. So, I had to accept that I could not make the film I had originally wanted to make, and that I needed to write another script. I only had a couple of weeks to get myself organised and do that though, and to make the whole film, so it was a real challenge!

RAABIA - You wrote the script for *What If?* in two weeks?

TERESA - Yes!



RAABIA – Wow!

TERESA – Yes, I just wrote solidly until I had something, then I went over it three or four times to tidy it up a bit and then just got on with filming it.

RAABIA - Wow, that sounds like quite a challenge.

TERESA - Yeah I suppose it was. I had to try and think how to have more than one character in the same room whilst keeping the actors 2 metres apart at all times. It was very difficult to work out how to make that look natural, because it was a very unnatural situation to be in.

RAABIA - Wow, well done, that was a big achievement.

TERESA – I suppose it was. I also wanted to make the film quite light and funny. I think at that time everyone was really bored and depressed because we'd been in lockdown and stuck at home for so long so I wanted something to give people a lift and cheer them up.

RAABIA - So, Teresa, I believe that *What If?* has been nominated in the Best UK Short Film category and also in the Best Screenwriter category! That's amazing! Two nominations! How do you feel about that?

TERESA - I was quite surprised actually.

RAABIA - How did you feel when you first heard you'd been shortlisted?

TERESA - I was genuinely surprised. I was not expecting it at all. I wasn't even expecting to write the film and produce it to be honest, it just happened really quickly. So, I was surprised it did so well, and for people to have appreciated it and to have been nominated is a real honour.

RAABIA - What is your greatest memory of making *What If?*

TERESA - Oh, that's a hard question. A really tricky question. I think it was just nice to see the actors working together. It was only the second time Chris Laing had been involved in a film. The first time was when he was just 15, and he'd had no opportunities to be involved in anything since. *What If?* created an opportunity for him to get back into acting, which was lovely. And he's such a fantastic actor as well. Amazing!

RAABIA - Well I've watched *What If?* and it's a wonderful film Teresa. Very moving. Were there any creative challenges or any barriers that you faced when making the film?

TERESA – When writing the script? Well, COVID obviously was a challenge, and the regulations around that, which I've talked about already. I'm not so used to writing light and humorous stuff. I usually write much darker and more serious stuff. So it was quite difficult for me to write something funny but not cheesy. Hopefully I achieved that!

RAABIA – And will you continue to write?

TERESA – Yes, I think so, because nobody asks me to direct their stuff, so I'll have to keep writing my own stuff!

RAABIA – Well, it's been brilliant talking to you Teresa and good luck for tonight.

TERESA – Thank you.

RAABIA - I'm now going to talk to Giles Bowman who is the studio director for *This Is Deaf*. Hi Giles. Welcome back to Deaffest. Is it good to be back?

GILES – It's great to be back here. I've been coming to Deaffest for many years. I really missed it during the COVID lockdown last year. I know that people still kept making films which is really great, but it's really



great to be here in person and to be able to talk to other film and programme makers, and to network with other Deaf people again.

RAABIA - Was making *This Is Deaf* challenging?

GILES - Well, you were involved in making it as well, so you'll know the answer to this already! I'm just so proud of the team. Everybody involved worked really well together as a team. I feel so privileged to have worked with such fantastic people, and to have met the fantastic contributors too. The quality we have within the team is wonderful and everyone works so hard. There were challenges, of course, especially at the start because of the COVID restrictions, but everybody worked together to work out how we could best make use of the space and get the shots that we needed to make maximum impact whilst still keeping our distance from each other. Studio filming can be tight at the best of times, and we were limited only having four people in the room at any one time, so we had to set up a screen elsewhere with the camera outside and so on. It was quite complicated, but we all helped each other out. It was very odd to be filming in such a strange environment, but Ahmed Mudawi, our presenter, was wonderful. He's such a lovely presenter to work with. You know that, of course. It was great to work with him. I'm delighted the programme has been nominated for Best Television Programme. It's a real honour just to have been nominated. Let's see what happens this evening.

RAABIA - How did you react when you found out it had been nominated?

GILES - Well, I wasn't hugely surprised because I knew that we had all worked really hard on the programme and we are a fantastic team. I think everyone felt really proud to see it on the shortlist though. I think that the quality of the contributors and content is great. We've had contributors from all over the UK and we have been all over, interviewing people who have all been so interesting, so that's why it's so good to see all the hard work from everybody in the team being acknowledged through this nomination.

RAABIA – I agree. What is your favourite memory from making *This Is Deaf*?

GILES - There are so many to be honest. It's hard to pick just one. Really the crew, the people that I worked with on this. They were such a great team. The whole production team was completely Deaf run, and everybody got involved. We worked collaboratively and everybody was able to contribute and speak their mind. It was so enjoyable to work on a production that was so Deaf-inclusive. It made everything so easy. It was easy for people to work together, to collaborate and communicate. When people on a production communicate in different way, and cannot easily make themselves understood, it can be difficult, so to work as part of a completely Deaf signing team made it a really relaxed experience.

RAABIA - It felt really natural and freeing, I agree, because everyone understood not just the language, but Deaf culture, Deaf history, Deaf community, and so on. It was very inclusive.

GILES – I agree. You just felt it in your gut. You are right. I agree.

RAABIA – Indeed. Well, thank you so much for talking to me Giles.

GILES – My pleasure.

RAABIA - Best of luck for tonight. I'll keep my fingers crossed.

GILES - Well, it's great just to be here in this beautiful weather!

RAABIA – Maybe a spot of sunbathing later then?

GILES – You never know! Thank you. Take care.

RAABIA – Goodbye. Well, good luck to all the nominees for tonight. I'll be keeping my fingers crossed for them, and I hope you will be too. Goodbye!