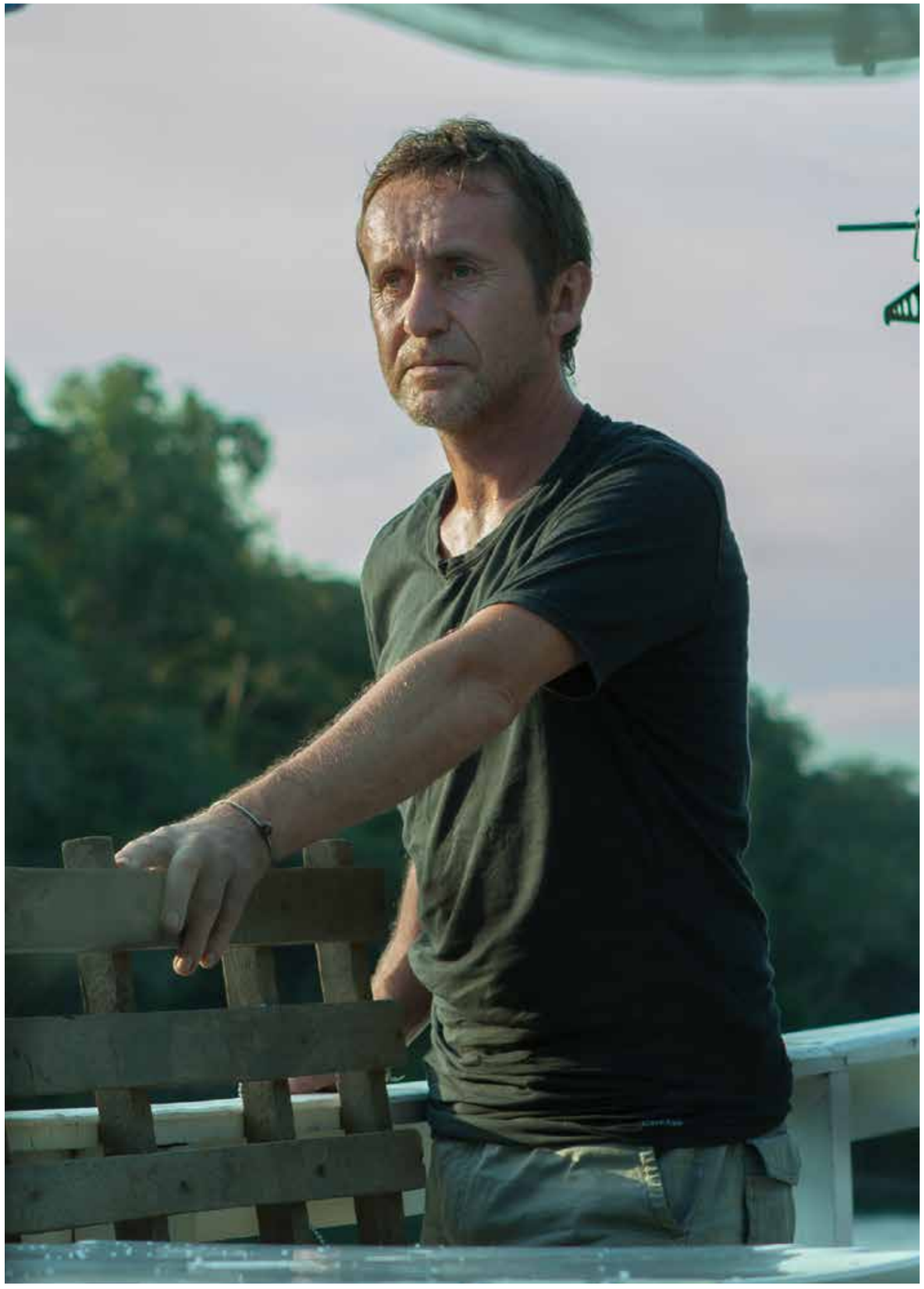

WILLOW MURTON

BRUCE PARRY

ASKING QUESTIONS

In his prime-time TV series, Bruce Parry bought the world of Papuan cannibals and Amazonian hunter-gathers to our sitting rooms by joining in and living their lives. But, as Paul Presley discovers, in Parry's big-screen debut, he returns to the tribes that struck the deepest chords with him, searching for a more profound and universal understanding of how we can all live together on a crowded planet

Right from the beginning, *TAWAI: A Voice From the Forest* feels like a very different project to what we've become used to from Bruce Parry. After 15 years of making documentaries that fell under the label of 'extreme' – going 'native' with tribes around the world, joining their cultures, their lifestyles and rituals, however brutal and hard-wearing they were to experience (let alone for viewers to watch) – *TAWAI* begins with a slow, contemplative hike along a forest stream in Borneo. Sweeping drone footage, haunting musical strings, and Parry earnestly musing on the nature of being at one with the environment.

In the film, he's on his way to reunite with the Penan – one of the last remaining nomadic hunter-gatherers in the world. Parry last encountered the Penan in the final episode of his BBC series *Tribe*, and meeting with Parry today, in the far more mundane surroundings of a members' bar in a central London arthouse cinema, it's clear that the Sarawak-based tribe made perhaps the biggest impact on the way he views life today.

'I chose to go back to that particular group because they were a sea change from any others that I'd ever been with,' he says. 'They had gone through this huge shift that nearly all humans have been through at some point, that transition from hunter-gatherer to farmer, from nomadism to settlement, and this just felt to me like a really interesting place to start our journey of enquiry.'

In the film, as Parry heads along the forest trail, he explains how this nomadic group have been all but forced into a dramatic lifestyle change. How they've finally had no choice but to put down roots as their forest habitat is slowly but steadily being taken over by logging companies authorised by the Malaysian government. The inevitable, unstoppable march of 'progress'.

Parry explains how, from his initial encounter with the group, he felt that something was substantially different about them compared to anyone else he'd met. As the scene develops and he relates his reasons for returning, it's clear that these people affected him on a much deeper level than mere curiosity. 'It's not in the film, but I was in floods of tears as I was walking down the river going to meet them,' he confesses, hinting at the emotions that form the film's core.

Parry felt that rather than making separate films about gold mining, slavery, indigenous rights or climate change, it was better to find the common denominator

'I knew that I hadn't been in contact [since filming *Tribe*]. They'd adopted me. I was this person that was in their "house" and then I leave to go on to this very dynamic, fast-moving life. But they're left asking "Where did you go?" There were three elderly people who were in *Tribe* that had walked for three days to come and meet me to say: "Can you help? We are losing our land. You are British, can you please help us?" So, my journey back there was mostly me reflecting on things such as "Have I been a good son? Have I been a good brother?"'

His reunion with the nomads is touching. An elder of the tribe recognises him straight away and, as they embrace, he unloads a torrent of genuine emotion onto Parry. He's at great pains to assure the 'adopted' son that they are healthy and happy and that all is well, but it's clear in his eyes that it's a front. This is underscored by a conversation with the elder's son in which he states, 'We must only tell him [Parry] the good things, not the negatives'.

The Penan are seeing not just their home being cut away, but their very way of life. 'The trees are going because of the logging industry. There's a potential dam on their doorsteps. There's also an oil pipeline going through,' says Parry. 'They're living in a metaphorical gold mine of riches but they've got no rights to their land. The Malaysian government isn't interested in them. So they know their days are numbered, because a nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle just isn't compatible with a static, farming lifestyle.'

FINDING HIS VOICE

In *Tribe*, Parry's goal while embedded with each different group was to absorb himself into their lives, to become one with the people. His subsequent BBC series, *Amazon* and *Arctic*, widen the scope and allowed him to look at more of the external factors affecting the societies in those regions, while still revolving around his experiences with the people there.

In *TAWAI*, he plays more of an observer role, using the Penan and others to explore a far more existential theme. '*Tribe* was me living with other societies' he says. '*Amazon* was about globalisation and its effects on the world. *Arctic* looked at climate change and how the effects of our globalised trade is going to come back to us. Those different perspectives left me with a very personal understanding of what's happening in the world. But they also left me wanting to be part of the change.'

Despite having a voice, Parry felt that rather than making separate films about gold mining, slavery, indigenous rights or climate change, a better approach was to look for the common denominator to all these things. 'These are all symptoms of something else, symptomatic of how we are living our lives. It became very clear, thanks to the global perspective I'd experienced, that I needed to look at the harder part, the cause of it all. So I chose to make a film that invited us to look at ourselves.'

TAWAI often feels like a very inward journey, an exploration of our own souls and ethics, and the lessons that we can learn from those who live very different lives to our own. Lives that are far more connected to the environments they take place in. As a result, it's a far more measured film than we usually associate with Parry.

'Previously I've existed in the realm of television documentary, but as this is a feature film it had to be more cinematic,' he explains. 'Obviously "cinematic" can go many different ways but we definitely went down the more artistic route. It's a more heartfelt, slow, poetic experience which may be a bit surprising for viewers who might expect me to be cutting myself, or drinking blood, or jumping over cows.'

ABOVE AND BELOW: In *Tribe*, Parry made very personal connections with indigenous groups around the world, none more than the Penan of Borneo. His return to them in *TAWAI* brought with it a great deal of emotion. But it was his work in later series such as *Amazon* that opened him to directly explore the external factors that affect people that live off the land

WILLOW MURTON

Part of the change of tone comes from this being an independent piece of work, not tied to the BBC, and not tied into the expectations that arise from being part of such an institutionalised setup. Part of it is also because Parry himself was sitting in the directing seat throughout, the first time he'd taken the reins of a project like this.

'That was hard,' he admits. 'I made every mistake a first-time director can make. The biggest single mistake was thinking I would be able to say so much more than I could. When we started out, I had all this stuff that I wanted to express. Luckily I surrounded myself with creatives and artists, because if I had been left to myself it would have just been me shouting. It would have been a Gatling gun of information. In the end we kind of let go, it was a more flowing experience whereby things are felt as much as they are expressed, that's the hope. So it's definitely more of an art piece.'

TONAL SHIFT

Parry's aware of the risks in a venture like this. The documentary landscape has changed dramatically since *Tribe* first aired, but he makes no apologies for not simply creating a big-screen version of his previous exploits and for aiming at something deeper. 'It is a risk to make a film that's quite slow in this age of ADHD and so on, this world where everyone expects fast hits,' he says. 'But we kind of had to because that's very much what we're talking about in the film. So we needed to come in at a different angle. Its not always going to fall on fertile ground perhaps, but our hope and belief is that it will do so enough for it to nourish in the right places. That in time the film will complete its journey. The messages in there are very topical.'

ABOVE AND RIGHT: In *TAWAI*, Parry explores the deeper meanings behind our connections to the land we live on, learning about meditation from Hindu sadhus at the Kumbh Mela festival or experiencing the lives of those living in the Amazon basin

The film's core message speaks very much towards finding a greater level of understanding about where we are as a society today and what has led to our present state. 'Societally, I think that by and large we are probably experiencing the world in a much more individualistic, separate way,' he suggests. 'I think there's many people that are waking up to this, but I think that the way we've created society at large has at its heart a superiority to nature about it. You can understand why. We've outsourced so much stuff to other nations and places that we can genuinely be excused for thinking we are gods of this planet. That may well end up being a fatal flaw.'

He points to the Penan once more, describing how they live in a place where they can clearly see that if you take too much fruit from the trees, then won't get any the next year. 'It's logical and it's also experiential,' he says, pointing back to *TAWAI's* themes of developed societies becoming disconnected from their surroundings. 'The deep irony is that half of the problem – the reason why we're not treating the planet very respectfully – is that we are still seeing ourselves as being very separate from it, very superior to it. We are still on this journey whereby as the newer generations grow up, they are often more disconnected to the physical realm and more interconnected in a technological way.'

'For a long time I was addicted to stimulation. I needed to travel to get my fix. Now I'm able to let go of some of that'

Nonetheless, he sees *TAWAI* not as a polemic, but as being a potential tool for hope. 'It's not about turning back the clock,' he stresses. 'The film is about reintegrating wisdom, respecting where everything comes from and understanding that everything I touch has an effect somewhere else. I think trying to tell the story of why it is that we are the way we are now can help us try and unlock those bits that aren't working for us.'

FINDING CONNECTIONS

So where does this leave Parry going forward? Having explored the inner connections of our world, is there anywhere left to go?

'I'm definitely not ruling out more travels in the future,' he says, 'but for a long time I was very addicted to stimulation. I needed to go travelling to get my fix. I think that this personal part of the journey I've been on has allowed me to let go of some of that. I'm actually calmer now.'

The film has also allowed him to explore some of the deeper issues related to why we crave those fixes, and examine why that was driving him early on in his career. 'There's this interesting theorising happening right now about what's at the heart of our addictions,' he says. 'Part of it suggests connection is like addiction. I actually think it's the opposite, that the reason for addiction is disconnection. I'm experiencing that a lot of the things that I was addicted to, one of them being stimulation and needing to go, needing to move, have actually dissipated. I feel good about my life and I'm now looking forward to a time when I can feel more connected to the land. I'm beginning to see that I'm not running away from something, I'm moving towards something. That's a big shift for me which is really nice.'

***TAWAI: A Voice From the Forest* is on general release in selected cinemas this autumn. Bruce Parry will be giving a Monday Night Lecture at the RGS-IBG on 2 October. Visit www.rgs.org for more details and to book tickets.**