

Director's Note: *The Journey of 'Essence'*

The Starting Point

In 1967, Paul Badura-Skoda – one of the 20th century's most prolific and respected pianists, recording artists and music scholars – wrote a short but beautiful essay addressed to his students. The title of the essay was “Look to the Guiding Stars!” and its aim was to provide students with some “guiding principles” that should govern their efforts. At some point in time, PBS gave an autographed copy of that essay to his friend – my piano teacher – Eva Anastasiadou-Stange.

In 1997 – shortly before she passed away – Eva gave me a copy of that essay. That text stayed dormant at the back of my mind for a long time; that is, until I started to experience, articulate and reflect on some of the challenges mentioned by PBS; and, perhaps more importantly, until I started to witness a widespread wave of apathy, cynicism, pessimism and rejection of those values identified by PBS in his essay: the values of diligence, persistence, empathy, passion and faith in the profound qualities of human nature.

Fifty years after the essay was written – and twenty years after it was passed on to me – I decided to make that text the basis of my next film project. *Essence* is an attempt to highlight some fundamental truths at the heart of PBS's essay and their continuing resonance in today's world. It is intended as a tribute to human beings and our ability to overcome hardship so as to create and evolve.

A lot has changed since 1967, not least in education. A top-down didactic model of knowledge transmission has largely been replaced by models of constructive learning that put the student's own thoughts, feelings and needs at the centre of pedagogy. This mirrors broader social and cultural shifts, such as increased scepticism towards, and a critical deconstruction of, established authority, continuity, expertise and merit.

There is no question that new practices in pedagogy, communication, and society more generally, have immensely enriched our culture, empowered citizens, renewed systems, and given voice to diverse viewpoints (surely the oxygen of thought). However, it is also true that these same forces have facilitated distractions and counter-forces, a blurring of the line between truth and lies, the glorification of ignorance and narcissism, information overloads, the by-passing of experienced gate-keepers and meaning-makers, individualism, polarisation, talking rather than listening, and a culture of instant gratification. These phenomena are not only toxic for peaceful coexistence, they are also enemies of creativity and inspiration. Empathy and engagement are key to the creative process because they ensure that the product of that process is of relevance to others; i.e. that it establishes a *communion* between the artist or creator and their audience.



Writing 'Essence'



One of the creative challenges faced when writing the script for *Essence* was the extent to which I would retain that tone of authority and experience – some might even call it didactic – which permeated the original text, given especially that one of my goals was to engage a broader audience, including young people who might be resistant to being talked to (and rightly so). This challenge was probably mitigated – or perhaps aggravated! – by the fact that my own tone often is unashamedly didactic; so, in the end, I decided

to follow my gut instinct and blend the authoritative voice of the original text with my own voice. This became easier as I gradually realised that the trials and tribulations mentioned by PBS – the rollercoaster of highs and lows, geeky sophistication and paralysing self-doubt – mirrored my experience of creating *Essence*.

In other words, the script of *Essence* became both the end product, and a manual for getting there. *Essence* became something more (or less, depending on one's view) than a lecture on the challenges of creative work, any work, life itself; it became a personal testimony. Thus, every time I got stuck or started to question the value of my work – and there were predictably many such times – I went back to the script and tried to take my own advice (or, rather, PBS's advice) on how to rediscover my motivation and focus, on how to move forward. This was a risky bet. Failing or succeeding in completing this project would ultimately also confirm or reject the value of the advice contained therein. Jacques Rivette famously said that “every film is a documentary of its own making” and this couldn't be truer in this case.

Filming 'Essence'

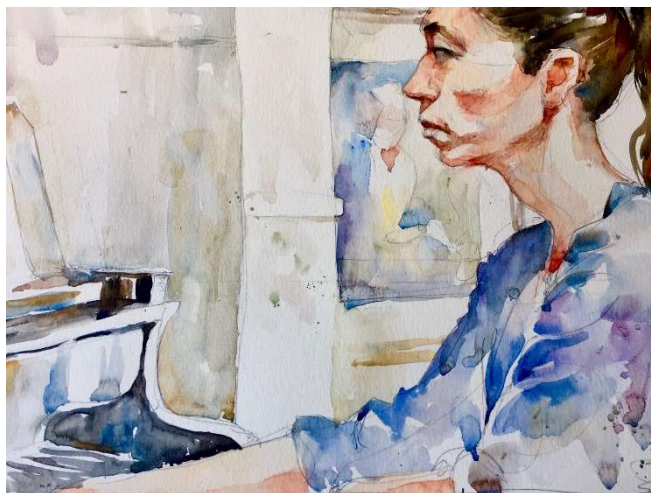
The creation of *Essence* followed a slightly unconventional and highly experimental route. Script development took place in London and at the Salzburg Academy on Media & Global Change in the summer of 2017. On Friday, 22 September 2017, we recorded the narration at Uptown Studios in London. At that point there was no visual script or fixed cues, no music or soundtrack (apart from a determination to use three specific classical pieces, which we ended up recording), and a handful of short, tentative sequences filmed in Paris, Havana, New York City and in Salzburg – a city which for decades has hosted masterclasses, workshops and summer schools by PBS that have influenced some of the world's most important musicians.

The voice-over became the foundation, the baseline, upon which all other narrative layers were woven. It is a testament to Sam Booth's genius that his performance foresaw and encapsulated the emotional, aesthetic and intellectual palette of the movie with jaw-dropping precision and nuance.

Every subsequent step in the creation of *Essence* – every actor joining the cast, every sequence filmed, every component of the soundtrack added – was the result of an organic process of improvisation, experimentation, layering and gut instinct following a vision that was at the

same time extremely precise and surprisingly plastic, collaborative and personal. The ultimate criterion was the one mentioned by PBS: listening to the “voice” inside, which tells us “if the ‘right note’ has been struck”.

Every production has certain critical junctures that alter or shape it profoundly. Such a key moment came in October 2017 when we were granted permission to film and record at the National Conservatoire of Greece – the place where two of our principal performers – Mara Kaisari and Kimon Maragoudakis – had studied and performed; the place where every week for almost ten years I had had piano lessons with Eva Anastasiadou-Stange. This beautiful neoclassical building – a gem of interwar Athens – has been the hub



of music for decades. Its corridors, staircases, practice rooms and performance halls carry the memories, hopes, fears and dreams of entire generations. It is located in a part of downtown Athens that has been through incredible highs and lows over the years, and it has survived. In *Essence*, I have tried to capture the spirit of this space – which in turn hosts the spirits of those who have crossed its doors.

The second principal filming location was Schloss Leopoldskron where further filming took place in November 2017. Leopoldskron is a location of aesthetic, artistic and historic significance, but it is also, crucially, the base of Salzburg Global Seminar, one of the world’s leading spaces of collaborative work seeking to bridge divides and shape a better future for everyone. The life and work of Max Reinhardt – legendary creator of art and myth, owner of Schloss Leopoldskron in the early decades of the 20th century, and co-founder of the Salzburg Festival – and the values of Salzburg Global, and of the people who work and study there, were major sources of inspiration throughout the journey of *Essence*.

The third and final principal location was El Ateneo Grand Splendid – one of the most beautiful bookshops, located in Buenos Aires. Additional filming took place throughout the city, as well as in other cities such as Athens, Montevideo and London. I was always determined that *Essence* would cross borders; that – within the confines of our very limited resources and pressing timeframe – it would capture as much of the wealth of human creativity as possible while retaining focus and coherence. The same principle applied to the characters – the five women of *Essence* who come from three continents and represent five different stages of life: a veteran of theatre, film and television in Greece (Olga Damani) and four artists making their screen debut (Mara Kaisari, Victoria Cunto, Elissavet Anastasakou and Anahita Guha Choudhury).

Filming for *Essence* was completed in late January 2018. This was followed by a three-month process of cataloguing, sorting, converting, cutting and distilling all the video footage into groups of takes and ultimately into sequences.

During the same time, I worked on creating the full audio track, which involved editing the two layers of the voice-over, editing the original recordings of Bach, Schubert and Brahms, browsing thousands of tracks and testing tens of those against the edited narration, until I ended up with a short list of 22 tracks, which constituted the ‘pool’ from which the music soundtrack was

mixed. I was thrilled to discover the work of two artists whose music features prominently in the film – Julien Boulier and George Arkomanis (who, completely coincidentally, is himself a graduate of the National Conservatoire of Greece).

It was at that point in May 2018 – after having completed the full audio track – that I started editing video; a process which only finished a few days ago. While I wanted the visual narrative to have independence and integrity – and all characters have their own back story and narrative arch, however subtle or invisible that may be – the aim of the video was always to support, complement and enhance the narration. And while music is central to the film (in more ways than one), *Essence* is not a music video; it is, however, partly influenced and inspired by the music video genre.

Your Role

There is obviously no right or wrong way to engage with *Essence* – no preferred or recommended path. However, I always envisaged *Essence* as a multi-layered, multi-sensory, immersive experience with multiple entry points. The original PBS essay; the script; the artwork; the audio track combining the voice-over and the music soundtrack; and the full film, as a culmination of this journey. These are all at your disposal, and you – the viewer – choose which of these, if any, you will engage with, and to what extent. My fundamental aim as a creator of a text was to try to make those 26 minutes of running time worthy of your initial support and of your present attention, and ideally to pique your interest just enough for you to seek the *Essence* beneath its own surface.

The creative gratifications of writing and directing a film are probably obvious. However, one of the most rewarding aspects of this process has been producing *Essence* and, in particular, creating and nurturing a community of funders and supporters. *Essence* was funded through a crowdfunding campaign on Indiegogo, matched by self-funding, and with additional support from Bournemouth University. This film would simply not have been possible without your support, so I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for placing your trust in the creative team and myself personally.

As we now begin to build a community of viewers, we continue to depend on your support so as to take the film as far as we can; to “maximise the audience”. Whether that is a much-needed further donation that would allow us to screen *Essence* at film festivals and competitions around the world, or an invitation to screen the film at your community or organisation, or putting us in touch with potential distributors, influencers and reviewers, or helping share the film when it becomes available online, if you think you can help, please get in touch.

Thank you for being part of our journey.

Roman Gerodimos

London, 18 June 2018

The watercolour portraits of Paul Badura-Skoda, Anahita Guha Choudhury and Mara Kaisari were created by Nikolaos Zisimos in support of our campaign.