

# LIFELINES



**NAME: GILLIES MACKINNON AGE: 61 OCCUPATION: FILM AND TV DIRECTOR**

**Y**ou have to take responsibility as a director. When everything looks completely impossible, everybody is incredibly relieved when you do the thing you have to do. You can feel the relief that

somebody has made a decision. You know that's what your job is in a crisis, and I love that part of it. I love that energy and slight feeling of danger and imminent catastrophe.

I was an arts teacher and then I was a detached youth worker for years. That's where I learned about directing, I think, because you have to try to have an insight into the person you're dealing with. That's where I learned to direct actors. The rest of it was just smoothing off the edges.

I grew up in a one-bedroomed tenement flat in Glasgow. My father was a policeman. We always expected a frantic knock at the door.

My brother Billy and I were always being chased by the local police. We used to go to

**'I would wrap myself in newspapers and sleep in doorways in Soho. It was an adventure'**

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the building merchants and steal a sheet of corrugated iron for a gang hut and literally get chased by the polis up hills and in and out of closes. It wasn't going down well with my father.

I went to Glasgow School of Art when I was 18 and then I meandered to London. It had a very strong pull for me. From the age of 15 I used to hitch-hike down to London and sleep in the streets. I would wrap myself up in newspapers and sleep in shop doorways in Soho, then go to the art galleries for two or three days and then hitch-hike back to Scotland. It was a romantic adventure.

I was a youth worker from 1978 into the eighties, the time of the Specials and racism. The most challenging part of it was that I was asked to try to make contact with a group of kids involved in the British Movement, who were causing a lot of trouble. It was a very edgy relationship and I had an intense dialogue with one of these guys, who saw himself as a conscripting

officer in Kilburn. This guy was really bright and we used to talk for hours. With the other boys it was more difficult. They were like a pack of wolves.

It was a huge decision to go to film school [at the age of 34, married with two children] and reckless, probably. There was absolutely no guarantee it would work. But I guess I was overcome by the desire to do something that I had let slip away from me.

The thing you have to know about Hollywood is it can be a lot of fun. I spent a few years either out there or going there and I knew one thing, which was that I didn't belong there so I'd better enjoy it – and I did. I met every actor under the sun and went to parties with them.

A critic once said to me that all my films are about outsiders. When I looked back, I discovered it was true. ■

Gillies MacKinnon's new film, *Zig Zag Love*, starring Robert Carlyle, is on BBC One on March 16 at 9pm.