EPISODE 3: LORD DAVID PUTTNAM

**0:00:08 Angelina:** Hi and welcome to A Little Bit of Genius. A podcast series run by Nord Anglia Education students; my name is Angelina.

**0:00:16 Hala:** And my name is Hala, and we are honoured to be hosting today's episode with our special guest Lord David Puttnam.

**0:00:23 Angelina:** Lord David Puttnam is known for his impressive career in film production, with his most popular and decorated production winning the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1982, Chariots of Fire. Lord Puttnam retired from film production in 1998 and now sits in the House of Lords of the United Kingdom.

**0:00:40 Hala:** Thank you so much for joining us today, Lord Puttnam, welcome

**0:00:44 Lord Puttnam:** Thank you very much indeed, a pleasure to be here.

**0:00:46 Angelina:** As a theme of this podcast is creativity, we wanted to start off by discussing a quote from Maya Angelou, and it goes “You can't use up creativity. The more you use, the more you have”. So, what are your initial thoughts on hearing that Lord Puttnam?

**0:01:02 Lord Puttnam:** Well, I'm a big fan of hers, and I think, in essence, she's absolutely right. I argue, I teach a lot you know, and I argue that creativity, essentially, is a way of thinking, a way of looking at things. It involves asking yourself, first of all, a series of questions. I'm not sure people are born creative, I think the more you think creatively, the more you let you kind of develop that, I'm not sure that it's left-brain or right-brain, I've been listening to that stuff all my life, but there is no question that it is a way of thinking, it's a way of seeing the world and it's a way of also, of wondering what else you can do when you're looking at the world.

**0:01:43 Angelina:** You said that creativity is something that you don't believe you're born with, so what do you believe inspires people to be creative, or brings out the creativity within them?

**0:01:53 Lord Puttnam:** Well, let me just qualify what I said, I think that are a very, very limited number, probably, of geniuses, but they're such a limited number it's not really worth thinking about, or talking about. I think that in the movie industry, Charlie Chaplin was a genius; I think in painting, Picasso probably was a genius. There are geniuses, even some genius scientists, but they're not us. I know I'm not here to point out that I'm a genius, and I doubt very much if either of you are sitting there believing that you're geniuses. What the rest of us are, is smart people wanting to make the best of who we are, what we are, and what our potential is. That's the challenge to all of us, so I don't think people are born with genius, but I think if you can develop a way of thinking, and a way of approaching problems, you can really raise the game or raise the bar in terms of your own creativity.

**0:02:45 Hala:** Can you tell us what got you into film production?

**0:02:49 Lord Puttnam:** I'd had a good career in advertising I'd reached the age of, I think I was 28, and it was the 1960’s and I thought “Is this what I’m going do the whole rest my life?”, and I thought, the other thing I loved was movies, so why don't I try and turn the thing I really love, movies, into a career? In some sense it's a pretty crazy thing to do. I didn't know anyone the film industry, I didn't know anything about the film industry, but as I said, the era, that particular era, anything seemed possible. Probably as much by luck as by judgment, I was able to put together a movie and it was relatively successful, it was about how I met my wife, actually, at school. That did all right, and then I did a second film which was terrible, really terrible, but before I’d even realised how terrible it was, I was able to a third film, the third film was very successful and that got me in. By that time I kind of roughly knew what I was doing, the first two films, in a sense I didn't know what I was doing, but I think it was a kind of sense that I wanted to find out if I was if I was good, and the only way I was going to do it was by pushing myself to a point where I was outside of my comfort zone.

**0:04:02 Angelina:** Do you have any particular advice that you would give to students that want to follow your path of film production?

**0:04:08 Lord Puttnam:** Yeah, get wise. I mean, try to understand the world, and one of the things, I teach MA students, so I teach students who have already got a degree, but what I'm always saying to them is understand what it is that makes great movies, and the most important thing that makes great movies, certainly in narrative cinema as opposed to documentary, is identity; the degree to which you identify with it. I watched a wonderful documentary last night, that you won't have seen as it's not out yet, called The Cave and The Cave is about a hospital built underground in Syria because of constant bombing that's going on, and it’s specifically about a woman who is the hospital manager. This woman is there, they asked her several times “Why is she there?” and she said “Because the children I'm looking after need me therefore I've got no choice but to be here. They're not demanding I'm here, but I know that if I go away, they're gonna be abandoned, so I'm here”. And so back to the business, why cinema? Cinema calls you, it's like being a nurse, I think if you're remotely sensitive to what's going on in the world, the job you're doing calls you and it says to you, you know what, I can be doing more, I could be more helpful.

**0:05:19 Hala:** Speaking of self-improvement, if you could somehow go back in time, would you change anything about your career?

**0:05:27 Lord Puttnam:** No, I really wouldn't because of the outcomes. It's been scary at times, I mean I've taken several enormous leaps of faith, enormous leaps of faith, and I'm very lucky I've been married for 58 years to a woman who's never questioned that, has always basically urged me, yeah give it a go, try that, try that. Some people find themselves with a partner in their life who's nervous, well you know, it's exciting we've travelled a lot. We've lived in the United States several times, we lived all over the world, I travelled all over the world; no I wouldn't change anything, but for the simple reason that if I started changing one or two things, then maybe other things would change, and maybe my life, actually, as a result of changing some stuff, would be less fulfilling or less fulfilled.

**0:06:13 Angelina:** That's really amazing that you can look back and be okay with the failures that took place because you know it helps you in growth.

**0:06:21 Lord Puttnam:** What’s was worth saying, Angelina, I've learned more from my failures I've learned from my successes definitely.

**0:06:26 Angelina:** That's so amazing. When you were a student back in the day did you feel that it was hard to choose between academics and creative work?

**0:06:39 Lord Puttnam:** Haha, I was such a shocking student that my only obsession was leaving school. I hated school, I really did, I really, really hated school so I got out of school as early as I could. I was 16 I left school, but I got to explain, it didn't matter, school didn't matter to me because I was going to be the world's greatest tennis player. So, I got to Wimbledon and I got to the first round, I was 18, and I was beaten horribly by a 15-year-old. I mean when I say beaten, he beat me six one, six love in 20 minutes and in one day I discovered, I was not only not gonna be the world's greatest tennis player, I wasn't gonna be even there was one hundred and fiftieth good tennis player. So, I had an enormous problem, I had left school, believe me one thing, and it wasn't gonna happen, so I thought I'd better get an education. So I went to night school, in those days you could go to night school, and over a period of four years I did nine subjects, I was able to create my own curriculum that was what was great, and I discovered to my amazement that I was a learner. I've been told at school I was useless, and not a learner, but I discovered I was learner, and what I was a learner at is when I could actually choose what I wanted to learn. So, I did a design course and I did a copywriting course and I did a Business Administration course and I did a very smart thing, I did a copyright law course which was on of the best things that happened because that really helped me a lot. So, at the end of four years I've done these nine courses, I was married, our daughter had been born, and I was working in an ad agency; I probably was better qualified, in truth, I was probably better qualified than many of the people that stayed on at school.

**0:08:18 Host:** You're listening to A Little Bit of Genius, a podcast brought to you by Nord Anglia Education students. In the next episode we’re interviewing Andrew Jack from the Financial Times about writing hard hitting news in a clickbait world, “In some ways, creativity is becoming more and more democratic”.

**0:08:36 Hala:** What do you think was your favourite era in your life? Something you wish you could put inside of a bottle and just cherish forever?

**0:08:44 Lord Puttnam:** Having won the Oscar, that was very helpful, I was kind of able to relax. I wasn't having to look over my shoulder all the time, and two years after the Oscar I did a movie called The Killing Fields, which was very, very tough. It was set in Cambodia, though we had to shoot it in Thailand, and I think, I was very fit at the time, and very confident the time, and I made a lot of very good decisions and I employed a lot of very, very good people in hindsight. I knew then, trying to work out, I was 43, I knew then that there was no point in my life where I was gonna be more on my game, does that make sense? You know, I'm sure it's like, I’m sure if you were a singer, there's a moment where you're so confident in your voice and you just know it; your voice is never gonna get better and so you can go out the audience and you can hit that high C and you've got it, you nailed it. Then there's other times where you're learning, you're not quite confident, or there's other times where your voice is beginning to let you down, but there is a moment where you're just you're really on your game, and I think that I was entirely on my game on The Killing Fields. The decisions I made, the people I was working with, it was amazing, and the film is a very, very good movie.

**0:09:55 Hala:** Do you think at one point in your life, or through your journey, you had to leave some people because you thought your work was more important than them, or did you have to leave work because a certain person was more important?

**0:10:07 Lord Puttnam:** I mean it's a good question, actually. My wife talked about this a lot, I've spent about a third of my married life, I've been married 58 years, I must have spent 20 of those away. That's not great but that's been the nature of my job. We agreed very early on that she wouldn't come on movie sets with me because when we went on a movie set it is a 24/7 job, and frankly, I can't tell you how many times I would have said “Oh let's have dinner this evening” and then had to say “I'm sorry I can't do dinner this evening, I've got to do X, I'm gonna do Y”. So, the amount of time I spent away from my family, I wouldn’t change anything, I'm not going back at what I said, it's just that it's been one of the more unfortunate aspects of the nature of the world I've lived in. I still work in Parliament three nights a week, so that means, my wife is here in Ireland, so three nights a week, during what we called turn time, I'm away again. So, there's that, this amount of time I've been away from my family. When I left the advertising industry, yes I was leaving some people behind, but I also took a lot of people with me, in fact I brought more people into the film industry from the advertising industry then I probably left behind, so that wasn't an issue. Then you've got the other thing, which is on individual movies, you create a team for a movie and you're together for 14-15 weeks, and you live together, like a family, like a big extended family. Then one day that film ends, and you say goodbye to each other and that can be very painful. Now for the next movie you can reform, but if you're lucky you only reform, well, let's say, a third of the people, so two thirds of the people you may never see again. So, yeah, there had been a lot of partings, the other thing is living overseas, the U.S. particularly. At times you make a lot of friends, and then you come home to England, or you come up back to Ireland, and you leave them behind. It's probably a quite a hard thing to imagine, but the reality is it will happen.

**0:12:01 Angelina:** Wow, that was a wakeup call. But when you were talking about it being a 24/7 setting when you're making the film; I've seen something before where it says life is like a movie and how did you manage to handle that because it must have been very stressful to direct a movie and then in a way be in a movie yourself, so how would you deal with the stress?

**0:12:28 Lord Puttnam:** It is stressful I mean the first thing, believe it or not, the very, very first thing the most stressful things you wake up now when you look in the sky, because you are enormously weather contingent. If it's raining, you can't do a bright sunny day shot, and if it's a bright and you need rain, and would you sometimes, you can't do it on a bright sunny day. So, weather, you're constantly planning, you've always got plan A, plan B and that's the pressure. I'm glad I said this because that becomes a way of thinking, my brain works in a way of always working out plan B in the back of my mind; I nearly always have plan B, if this doesn't work how am I gonna do that, if that doesn't work what's the back-up? So, if that becomes your way of thinking. Is it healthy? I don't know, but it's a reality, you have to have, with the way I live and work, you have to have a plan B. Is life a movie? No, I made a point at not getting too close to actors because you can mislead them, accidentally you end up giving them instructions when the director gives them a different instruction. That's not a good idea also because their lives are very transient, that's not a good idea, so I've always kept a distance. The problem with being a boss, as a producer on a movie you are the boss, if you get too close, and I'm sure this is true in a school with the Head Teacher, it's very unfair if you become really, really close to one or two of your of your colleagues, you set up two problems, number one is that other colleagues start wondering, well, why aren't you close to them, are they favourites and does that in some way reflect on them, why aren't they favourite? So, that's the first thing, the other thing is you are dealing in crisis management, and that person, or people, you become very, very close to, one day you have to sack them. I mean I fired a lot of people on movies, it's the nature of that world because it is all dealing with emergencies all the time, and you know it to fire someone you don't know very well it's tough, very tough, so firing someone you become very close to is agony.

**0:14:40 Angelina:** From what I'm hearing about being a filmmaker, when you look at it, on social media for example, it's usually very simplified and they make it seem as it's not that hard of a job rather than maybe being a business man or engineer. So, now that you're in the House of Lords, do you find a relationship between being a filmmaker and a lawmaker?

**0:15:03 Lord Puttnam:** No, what I am aware of is, I will forever be that guy who won an Oscar, I can't escape that and sometimes it’s very useful and sometimes it kind of gets in the way a bit. No, I think that a lot of things I learnt in film industry have been very, very useful to me in the house Lords. One of the things is in the House of Lords you get very few resources, you're there, you are a lawmaker, but you know you share a desk; I walk around and I live off my iPad and that's come very easily to me, I think because I've always, you know, I've done half my life sitting on packing cases in a factory in the corner doing my job while something else is going on the other end of the factory because that's where we're shooting. I've lived that kind of life, but for a guy or a woman who's used to having an office, and used to having staff, and used to having people around them, I think they've found it much, much more difficult, much more difficult. They’re used to structure; I've lived and worked in quite an unstructured way, most of my colleagues at the House of Lords have had a very structured lives and I think they've found it infinitely tougher. The other great benefit is that because movies are very goal orientated, you know at the beginning of film what you're trying to achieve, you're gonna do that, and that probably takes two years, two and a half years, sometimes longer. Legislation is a bit like that you know the piece of legislation you're working on it can take 18 months, two years to achieve it but you're very goal orientated, the same way, you've got a specific thing you want to do and then one day, it's like running one day you cross that line, you've done it, or you hadn't done it, that comes quite naturally to me but some people who had continuous lives where they're you know, this year, and then next year, and then the following year are similar, that again is difficult for them, very difficult, so I know, I think largely I've 90% benefited from my background I'd say.

**0:17:04 Hala:** This is kind of a playful question, but do you have any hobbies you'd like to share with us?

**0:17:08 Lord Puttnam:** Hobbies? I think it's gonna sound awful I think my hobbies been my work. I love I love my work I teach I really love teaching.

**0:17:16 Hala:** That doesn’t count, haha.

**0:17:17 Lord Puttnam:** Oh, gee whiz, what a way okay let's try and think of a hobby. Well, for 70 years next August the 29th, I've been supporting the same Football Club, does that count? So, I was taken along - my dad took me to Tottenham Hotspur Football Club 70 years ago next August the 29th and I'm kind of passionate about them. I mean it's been a life of incredible amount disappointment, one or two heroic moments, but I don't trust anyone who can switch football clubs. So, no you can't suddenly become a Manchester United fan, that's not good enough, it's in your blood, there's nothing you can do about it. I guess that does qualify as a hobby. I watch an enormous amount of movies and, lucky thing for me is that movies are as much a hobby as well as a job for me. I see a huge amount of films a year, I probably see 50-60 films a year. That’s a lot of movies.

**0:18:24 Hala:** When you watch movies do you like critique them like judge the way the cameras angles or how they were crying, you know one of the scenes or something?

**0:18:34 Lord Puttnam:** A bit, if I'm doing that, then I'm not really enjoying the film. I know I'm watching a good film when I forget that I'm watching a film, if that makes sense. When I get absolutely absorbed into the story and I really care about the people in it, I care about the outcomes, then I'm watching a good film. I'm probably more critical at this point in my life than you are, I'm very critical of performances, again it's like camera moves, the moment you're noticing a camera move, there's something wrong with it. The whole point of moving a camera you shouldn't notice it. The greatest editors are able to make you not notice the editing, great music and movie score, great music score, is if it feels so natural. There's a great line I use when I'm teaching of them, Bruce Springsteen's, he said “A smash hit is something you've never heard before, but it feels like it was always there”, does that make sense? That's like a great movie, it feels like it was always there but you've never seen anything like it before.

**0:19:36 Angelina:** I actually have a question when it comes to producing your films. I'm someone that sometimes I envision things a bit too creatively, and the outcome doesn't match, has that happened to you where you envision the film a certain way and it doesn't come out as you wanted it to?

**0:19:56 Lord Puttnam:** I've made 30 movies and what you just described is 15 of them, hahaha. I mean I cannot tell you, and what's worse is about a third of the way into the film you know, you know it's not working, you just know, but you've got to finish it anyway. And that's a nightmare because you're going to work every day knowing that all you're trying to do is make the best of a bad job, that's painful. Conversely, at least five of the movies, I'd say, I knew very early on that something special was going on, and that's the most wonderful feeling. I mean it's actually a beautiful feeling, a film crew, normally around 140 people, working really well together is a very beautiful thing, it's like a dance, a well-choreographed dance, everyone knows what they've got to do and everyone’s doing it before you've asked them to.

**0:20:47 Angelina:** When you won the Oscar, did that change anything for you? Did you have a boost of self-confidence or did you get more inspired in filmmaking or what change did it do to you when it comes mentally and also like physically?

**0:21:01 Lord Puttnam:** Hmmm, it got rid of a lot of excuses. Up until that point, either there were films I wanted to do that I couldn't get the money for, or I couldn't do, so all of a sudden that removed some excuses because it looked like, for example, if I hadn't won the Oscar, I could never have made a movie called Local Hero, which is maybe my favourite film of anything I've ever done. I could never have got the money together for The Killing Fields or The Mission, so it made things possible for me. On the other hand, by making things possible it actually thrust a lot more responsibility on me, people started looking to me to solve their problems as well, so my position within the film world altered, in some ways beneficially, in some ways in a quite different, difficult way. Say people are looking for me to solve problems because they thought that because I had an Oscar I could solve their problems, that was quite tricky

**0:21:54 Hala:** So, do you ever like say no?

**0:21:57 Lord Puttnam:** Not enough. My wife would totally agree with that. I don't find it easy that is the same reason you just said, because I've been so fortunate, because so many great things have happened to me in my life, the opportunity to help people is enormous and the obligation, or the pain of saying no, is that much more, is that much more great.

**0:21:23 Angelina:** So, since our overall idea of this podcast was to talk deeply of creativity, I wanted to end it off with this last question which is do you believe that creativity can change the world?

**0:22:38 Lord Puttnam:** Yes. I think that stories change the world, narratives changed the world. I think the world’s in a bad place at the moment, but we won't go into that, it’s too depressing, but I think that we're missing out on narratives. You know, Plato, go back two and a half thousand years, Plato said it's the storytellers that changed the world and I think he's right. We need to develop narratives that we can believe in because if we can believe in the narratives, we can then believe in the values. I don’t know, I would love the idea of world peace, but I'm not sure we achieve that, but I do think what's interesting is that people do have shared values and if we could focus on our shared values, and this, incidentally, comes right back to Nord Anglia school, the school you're at. Why I love Nord Anglia, why joined Nord Anglia, is that I think that it does have a shared value, and what is important to me is, because your parents tend to be movers and shakers, they tend to be people who are in positions to actually make important decisions, and if the school can help you develop values and develop narratives which turn you into really valuable human beings, that's probably as much as we can do. So, yeah, I think, not so much creativity, but if through creativity we develop narratives, and through narratives we develop values, that's about as much as any of us can hope to achieve.

**0:23:59 Angelina:** So, Lord Puttnam, it has been so wonderful to speak with you today and unfortunately that's all the time we have for this episode, so thank you so, so much for sharing your thoughts and experiences and you've been a fantastic guest to speak with.

**0:24:14 Lord Puttnam:** Been a pleasure. Honestly, honestly, you're both terrific, I think you're both gonna have a fantastic career

**0:24:20 Hala:** Before we sign off, thanks to everyone for listening. We hope you've enjoyed this episode and if you want a little bit more genius, subscribe to this podcast

**0:24:28 Angelina:** Once again this podcast is brought to you by Nord Anglia Education students. If you would like to learn more about Nord Anglia Education you can visit us online at [www.nordangliaeducation.com](http://www.nordangliaeducation.com). We’ll be back again soon so thanks again for listening and have a great day.

**0:24:45 All:** Goodbye!