

2006 Stanley Hawes Award: Acceptance Speech by John Hughes

Firstly, thank you Daryl, and everyone at Film Australia for honouring me with this award.

I'm absolutely delighted to accept it, while wanting to acknowledge as well that it is the people I have worked with, in every sphere, with whom I share this good fortune. For the work I was able to do at SBS Independent I thank Bridget Ikin in particular. Recent work I've made with Film Australia owes a lot to the skills of Anna Grieve, who has been a delight to work with. And also to the indefatigable Philippa Campey, who is a really independent producer.

If I were to fully acknowledge the people who have helped me make films over the years we'd be here for some time, and the roll call would be one that everyone would agree might also reasonably be acknowledged with this kind of award.

The film culture is an anarchic dynamic of individuals riding the waves and weathering the storms of constant change. And it is a privileged sphere. How fortunate we are, really, to be able to spend our time caring about the world we live in and arguing the toss of what must be regarded next and how best to explore it for others.

I never met Stanley Hawes (Producer in Chief 1946–1970 at what is now Film Australia).

One way of "knowing" him is as a kind of myth. He is more or less a central character in the wonderful, classic Film Australia film *From the Tropics to the Snow*, made in 1962, directed by Dick Mason. David Muir worked on this as well. I think it's a half hour film. How many people here have seen it?

It sets up a kind of dichotomy between the older, orthodox director and the young "creative" who each pitch different treatments for a film designed to attract tourists from the UK to Australia. How to best describe Australia in 30 minutes is the brief.

The film cuts between the realisation of these different versions and the directors debating their approaches in the office of the producer in chief—the Stanley Hawes figure.

The orthodox take on the story emphasises the flora and fauna, the landscape: "Finish with a girl hugging a koala"; we see a picture of a girl hugging a koala. While the "creative" wants jazz and fast cutting. "It's the people that matter," he insists. He's full of passion and enthusiasm: "We have an opportunity to do something really worthwhile."

The Stanley Hawes character sits through all this with the aid of a paper clip that he unfolds and screws up again during the course of the film, occasionally distracted by the attractive secretary who sits silently through the meeting taking notes. The Minister is continually calling up asking how it's going. Stanley says; "Wonderful, Minister. Koalas, yes, I quite agree", and so on. Very funny film.

I did have correspondence with Stanley Hawes at one time – in the mid 1970s, after he had retired from Film Australia. I was trying to get to the bottom of a question I had about access to some footage. Stanley responded quickly, characteristically cautiously and generously giving me the story I was looking for between the lines of his letters.

Decades later, much more recently—in the course of research for *The Archive Project*, I read the files that document the broad outlines of the storms that Stanley weathered.

And so the Stanley Hawes Award carries for me something of that strange sense of familiarity that you get from reading "letters from the front". These files are deeply imbued with the idiom of mid 20th century bureaucracy. Nonetheless you can sense the human experience speaking through these archives from another place, another time.

I remember sitting in the National Archives in Canberra reading these files, with great sympathy for Stanley Hawes, and thinking of Job.

ASIO thought Stanley Hawes was a secret communist, which was absolutely ridiculous. He was really put through the wringer.

Of course, today, this kind of thing only happens to "other" people (the peace activist, the Muslim, the disenfranchised, the "stateless person"). But it could happen again tomorrow. You only have to read Malcolm Fraser's recent article in *The Age* to be aware of that.

The wonderful thing about contemporary Australian independent documentary film culture is not only the continuing tradition of powerful, socially engaged work, but that new generation of filmmakers whose cinema literacy is so lively, adept and agile.

There should be a series that encourages editorial and creative independence for all those Generation Xs and Ys and whatever comes next, who are out there making work regardless.

Documentary continues to offer us startling, thoughtful and moving encounters with actuality that are particular to its tradition. Filmmakers will continue to find original ways to enliven and enrich it.

Dennis O'Rourke said at an ASDA [Australian Screen Directors Association] meeting earlier today that we would all benefit from getting back to the idea that documentary is an art form. When [John] Grierson was asked about the origins of the documentary movement at some point, he said, "We were all sociologists a little worried about where the world was going". I reckon that somewhere in the gap where these two ideas meet is the spark that illuminates the documentary imperative. "We have an opportunity to do something really worthwhile."

And despite the fact that he was bitterly opposed to non-standard lenses, I have to say I think Stanley would have agreed.

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