

FILM AUSTRALIA'S OUTBACK DVD

Interview with David Roberts

Q: How did you come to work for Film Australia?

DR: I started in the film industry in 1969 with the ABC and then went freelance in 1973, did my first work here at Film Australia in 1976 and have remained a freelance documentary filmmaker since.

Q: At Film Australia you made quite a few films in remote areas, starting with *Country Outcasts* and then going up into the Kakadu to make several films. Could you talk about what attracted you to the remote areas?

DR: I guess because I came out of anthropology at university, there were a number of series where they always wanted one film about Aboriginal people and I was designated to do that. There were two really major things that attracted me to the area. First was the land itself. Arnhem Land is probably one of the most beautiful places I'd ever been in my life, ever. But apart from the natural beauty, there's the Aboriginal rock art there, and there is a sense of the spiritual nature of the environment. The rock art reflects the Aboriginal spirituality, but it's not only about Aboriginal culture, there's a heritage there for all of us. It's a heritage that is unique in the world because you have the first representations of speech in any art anywhere in the world. You have the first representation of three-dimensional art anywhere in the world. But then while the Aboriginal people view the whole land in a spiritual dimension, the land for Europeans has always been a resource and that's the whole history of our coming to Australia, the sheep industry, the cattle industry, farming and so on. And, around about that time, uranium was being discovered in Arnhem Land. Also there were the beginnings of the recognition of Aboriginal land rights and so first claims were going in and it was a very dramatic place to be able to make films.

Q: How did you convince Film Australia to make these films, because prior to that films about Indigenous people weren't very in-depth?

DR: Well, of course, there had been Ian Dunlop's work - some of the best anthropological filmmaking in Australia, recognised worldwide, if not recognised in Australia to the degree which it should have been. As for myself, in 1970 I'd been involved in films at the ABC, *My Brown Skin Baby*, *They Take Him Away* and *Who Am I, What Am I* - two films with Aboriginal singer and activist Bob Randall about what later became known as the Stolen Generations. We followed Bob back to find his family in central Australia - he was brought up on a mission on Croker Island. But apart from those films, most of the films I'd been involved with at the ABC would just reinforce the negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people, and I was trying to find a way of making films with Aboriginal people that would express the positive nature of their culture.

When I did the *Bill Peach's Australia* series, we did one in Arnhem Land and I made a connection with George Chaloupka who was the curator of rock art at the Northern Territory Museum and Art Gallery. He was an interesting

Czechoslovakian who knew more about Aboriginal rock art than almost anyone in Australia other than Aboriginal people themselves. That led to the idea of making some films about the rock art in Kakadu with those themes: that this is an incredible treasure for all of us, that it is internationally recognised as some of the most important rock art in the world, as well as describing its relationship to Aboriginal land rights and spirituality.

So, it was that and being able to do something strongly visual which would hopefully attract an audience on television or as a theatrical short, which you could do in those days. And something which the Aboriginal people could use as a positive reinforcement and tell other people about their culture.

Q: Whom did you have to convince at Film Australia to do it?

DR: It seemed to be relatively easy in those days. I presented the ideas to an on-staff producer. Peter Johnson, who was a producer at the time, had invited me to come and work on a wacky series about crazy sports in Australia, called *G'day Sport*, which had everything from cockroach racing to camel racing, and so I talked with Peter. And then there was an Aboriginal country and western band from Melbourne called, appropriately, the Country Outcasts, who were going on a tour of central Australia. So I thought this would be a terrific way to show the differences between urban Aboriginal people and Aboriginal people in remote areas in a really interesting kind of journey. Thematically, I always like the "journey of discovery" genre, as I call it. And Peter said, "Oh that sounds like a terrific idea, let's do that". And it was actually quite a successful film.

Then I went on to *Images of Man*, which was a film with George Chaloupka. And then, you know, in this industry it's very easy to get categorised so suddenly you're the outback Aboriginal filmmaker person, and things roll on from there.

Q: So you made *Walya Ngamardiki-The Land My Mother*.

DR: *Walya Ngamardiki-The Land My Mother* was based on the submission of the Northern Land Council to the Fox Commission where they were trying to represent their traditional attachment to the land. So I simply took what Nugaladi or Silas Roberts had said about their connection to land, and in a script widened that out because what he was saying could be illustrated not only in Arnhem Land, but right down to the centre of Australia. *Walya Ngamardiki* was shot on 35 mm and as a theatrical short and it was put on with Phil Noyce's *Newsfront*. It got a lot of publicity.

I remember back in 1970 with the Bob Randall story, you'd talk about people being taken away and the producer would be saying, "Well, have you got any evidence for this? Can you justify it? It's a bit far-fetched, isn't it?" So I can track the beginnings of [an awareness of] the stolen generation from about 1970 and then you think of how long after that time it was actually recognised in the wider community and even now it's disputed by some.

Q: So let's talk about *The Land of the Lightning Brothers* and how that came about.

DR: *The Land of the Lightning Brothers* had an interesting start. Films often get invented in all sorts of different ways. After *Images of Man* I was on the lookout for possibilities to make more films in the Northern Territory to do with Aboriginal issues, particularly the art, because I loved the art and found it fascinating. And so George Chaloupka got in touch with me and said, there's this fellow Billy Harney and he's the son of an Aboriginal woman and the first ranger at Uluru, Bill Harney, and he's now starting to take people back into his traditional country, which is Wardaman country. He's a Wardaman Aboriginal man and he has become a painter and his art is beginning to be hung in the National Gallery. There are the rock art sites, which in a sense delineate the boundaries of the Wardaman country, with these fantastic figures of the Lightning Brothers. So instead of going to totally traditional Aboriginal people to talk about the rock art, here's a man who's been brought up in both European and traditional Aboriginal culture, who knows the stories and can take you back to the sites. What's really important about this is that he has only just recently negotiated to be able to visit these sites, because they were on pastoral land holdings. Previously the pastoralists had said, no Aboriginal is coming in here doing their funny business with their sites and all the rest of it. Because there was a lot of fear at that time, from pastoralists, that as soon as you let Aboriginal people in and they see their sacred sites, that they're going to put in a land claim. So this was an opportunity to make a film about what the sites meant, about the art itself. It was an opportunity for many Wardaman people to visit their country and their important sites in the country for the first time.

As we started to develop the idea, the Australian Heritage Commission got involved because they were involved in the conservation of Aboriginal rock art sites and they knew of these sites and that they were under threat. In the north they were under threat from uranium mining, elsewhere they were under threat from salt rising in the ground and cattle rubbing up against the paintings. And, in addition to that, you've got the fact that it's all on sandstone, which is beginning to fall apart. This heritage, which is important in terms of who Aboriginal people are in this particular land, is just fading away. So there were various different interests that came together which then made the making of the film possible.

Q: Can you talk about the shooting of *The Land of the Lightning Brothers*, the difficulties of being out on location?

DR: This particular one was relatively easy, because the Wardaman land, or the land of the Lightning Brothers, is west of Katherine in the Northern Territory. There's a major highway going out that way, so transport was easily arranged. Of course, eventually you did go off the highway into the more remote areas. But getting there was relatively easy compared with Arnhem Land where you might be doing a lot of trekking around and be dropped in somewhere by helicopter and have to climb up cliff faces and so on. But you still had to walk reasonably long distances and, as far as I recollect, we shot this on 35 mm. Because these paintings were indistinct, to get the best sharpness and resolution, and also because they're often in difficult areas, shady areas, 35 mm would be the way to go. Also for archiving purposes, these images were kept on the best technology that was available at the time. It meant lugging larger cameras around and big eskies to put your film in. Also

you're dealing constantly with dust, with humidity, and so protection of the stock and worries about scratching of the stock are always with you in those remote locations where you're not staying in a hotel or anything. We weren't even sleeping in tents, we were just sleeping under the stars. So the gear gets a tarp put over it or something like that. You're not in a situation to send rushes back so you've got it all there in the esky, hoping that it's going to be all right.

Q: Did you need lighting for those cave situations? Did you have to take a generator with you?

DR: I'm not exactly sure whether we did, but I think we must have, because we shot these re-enactments of the stories of the fights between the Yagjadbula and Jubaringi, the two Lightning Brothers. We would have definitely had portable lights. I can't quite remember, but in those situations you'd be taking a generator because, apart from lights and so on, you've got to recharge camera batteries and all those kind of things too.

Q: Were there any dangerous moments?

DR: I remember it as being a pretty trouble-free shoot and the locations quite benign. I can remember things like, what are we going to eat tonight and then there'd be four Aboriginal people carrying a kangaroo up, you know, and this is going to be dinner and should we film it or should we eat it or do both, which is what we actually we did. There are those memories of a kind of film production which personally I absolutely love, of being in a remote area and camping under the stars and there's always singing around the fire. I mean, Aboriginal people singing, because they're constantly relating to the spirits in that area and telling them of our arrival and what's going on, what's being done, and so there's this constant communication between people and the land. You know they don't push this on you, it's just something that they're doing.

Q: All very well for the director to love being out there filming in remote under the stars lapping it up. Did the rest of the crew feel the same way?

DR: I've always tried to work with other people who would have a similar kind of view in terms of relationship to the land. But in those days when you worked at Film Australia, Film Australia had on-staff camera people and sound recordists and so you got whoever was allocated. I was lucky I got Andy Fraser, who shot this film. You can go anywhere with Andy and he'll be fine, he's always there. There were some differences in that he came out of a tradition where you'd put the camera on a tripod all the time, and I was always pushing for more verite, more handheld. So Andy would be going, "Oh alright, you know it really should be on a tripod for this". His cinematography you could count on 100 per cent, fabulous cinematographer, and someone who always got on easily with people. So much of the work is not only whether you technically know how to manage the camera or the sound, it's the relationships of the people behind the camera or tape recorder with the people you're filming. And both Andy Fraser and Howard Spry, who did the sound, were excellent at that. I can't say that everybody's as keen as I am on sleeping out. They'd be asking, "How many days are we going to be out roughing it?" and

"When will be getting back to Katherine to that hotel?" So it would be unfair of me to say that everyone loves going to the outback, because they don't, and one has to be very careful as a director how much you demand of people. The crew also has responsibilities that you don't have as a director. They're trying to keep the dust out of the camera and out of the stock and out of their tape recorders and deliver to you technically, whereas all you have to do as a director is relate to the people, you don't have any of that responsibility. I mean, you can just get angry when it doesn't work perfectly [laughs]. So, you have to balance those different areas of responsibility as well. I guess the way I handle that is to say, "Swings and roundabouts again, guys. We're at hotels these nights and out bush these nights." And then find people who will enjoy that bush experience if possible.

Q: Tell me about how shooting changed over that period from say *Country Outcasts* through to *Uluru* in the mid 80s.

DR: From *Country Outcasts* to *Uluru*, there were some changes in technology, but it wasn't as huge as the shift from 16 mm through to videotape, and now the little DV cameras, that I think is really the period of the huge technological shift. But there were shifts in things like film stock. You'd have faster stock, you could film in areas with less light and still get sharp images. But there was a huge difference between 16 mm and working 35 mm. With *Walya Ngamardiki*, it starts with this Dreamtime ancestor coming out of the water, and we shot it slow motion, and watching the footage counter on a 35 mm camera at high speed is sort of like watching a cash register going berserk. It's a scary experience. And then will we go to take two, let alone take seven or eight, which is what we had to do with this case.

And then the styles of filming changed, as I said. You know in the 70s they were still staying on the tripod. Verite was still fairly new. And then, getting off the tripod was one thing, getting off the tripod and actually walking around was something else again. All these things which we take for granted now. Everybody's got a little mini DV and everybody's a cinematographer, and you just pick it up and you press the go button and it's all supposed to happen, and of course it doesn't, because there are so many more skills that cinematographers and sound recordists have. So while we can all get an image, whether we can get a good image or an interesting image is another matter. And then it's not about the technology. One of the great things about working with good cinematographers and sound recordists is that you've got other creative minds on the job. Lots of times I've walked into a situation and thought this would be a good shot and the cinematographer's walked around the other way and I thought, goodness, that's much better, isn't it. Filmmaking is very much a team effort that starts right at that research and writing stage, through to the collaborative effort at the editing stage. What is it that somebody used to say to me, "Bring on the technicals". It's like bring on the other creative minds, please.

Q: Did you actually write scripts for the *Lightning Brothers*?

DR: With *The Land of the Lightning Brothers*, I asked George Chaloupka to send me down as much as he knew about what Bill Harney was doing, and I got in touch with Bill. We did have to develop a script for it to go through the

various administrative processes at Film Australia. So I wrote a script. We didn't stick to it exactly but it was a framework, a starting point. So there's the script that's written at that stage, there's the script that's rewritten during the editing and then there's the narration script which is written after all of that. I find it interesting to remind people that it's better to cut the film and then do your narration writing rather than write the narration then cut your film. I've grown up as an apprentice through the ABC, as a researcher and then an interviewer and then finally a director. There's less opportunity for people to learn those skills now, if they don't go to a film school, because being an apprentice on a team doesn't exist so much any more, so neither does that learning opportunity.

Q: Can you talk about the music for *Lightning Brothers*?

DR: Well, for *Land of the Lightning Brothers*, I wanted to ask Charlie McMahon and the Gondwanaland people to do the music because I'd met Charlie out in Alice Springs at some stage. I love their music. They had fantastic rhythm and an interesting mixture of the didgeridoo that Charlie played and the synthesiser and so on. I remember talking with Charlie about life around the campfire when we were filming. I was actually always burning my hand trying to turn tins or pick the billy out for tea, and Charlie, who actually has a false right hand like a hook device, said, "I never have that problem, I just hook up the tin of baked beans and hold it straight over the fire". Anyway, we were talking about his music and I said, "I love the rhythm and you've got some funny sort of noise that happens there, it's like a drum but it's not a drum". He said, "Oh yes, when we do a lot of rehearsal, our neighbours upstairs always say the noise is a problem. So one time the synth player, he had this big broom and he was banging on the roof replying to the yells from upstairs, and I said, 'That's an interesting rhythm, bang, bang, oh we could work on that and get a new piece going'." They're a very creative lot, that Gondwanaland mob.

Q: So that's in the music.

DR: So that's in the music and they did a wonderful job. I remember pieces like *Ephemeral Lakes*, which is wonderful in capturing that sense of the spiritual essence of the land and also travelling through it and that interesting mixture of the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relationship to land.

Q: David Ray was the editor. Can you tell me about that process? Was the story there or did you have to work on it?

DR: The story was there. In the post-production of *Land of the Lightning Brothers*, there were a few things that were quite difficult to manage. While the story was there, we found that there were too many vested interests in the project. Once the film was at rough-cut stage, you screen it to the various parties involved. At that stage each liked it but would say, "Let's add this in, let's add that in, and let's expand it so it's not just the Wardaman people, so that it has reference to sites in South Australia or Western Australia." So you've got the thing cut and pasted and going well but then additions in narration. As we all know, the art of doing a film is to not have it too wordy, to let the images and actions speak for themselves, rather than start speaking

with the first frame, finish when the end credits go up. So there was a lot of difficulty in managing that process.

Then there were interesting technical things to manage. In the recreations of the battle between Yagjadbula and Jubaringi, the two Lightning Brothers, we wanted to do all sorts of special effects like the lightning that they blow out of their mouths and so on. So this had to be etched onto the film - things that you could just do with the tap of a keyboard with modern computer editing. But Ray Thomas, who edited the film, is not just someone who knows technically how, but the creative mind that constantly suggests - maybe this is an opening sequence rather than what you had there, and we could do this with music. It's a wonderful creative time, these various stages of filmmaking. I know when I see rushes it's always a complete disaster and how will we ever get a film out of this. And then, the editor will put together a sequence and it's like, oh, relief, you know something's going to work. And from then on, it starts to get better and better. Then it gets worse again and you get all this other input and then finally you get through to the end. But, of course, it's never finished, you just run out of time.

Q: Could you talk about the narration and the decision to use Bob Maza?

DR: I wanted to work with Bob Maza as the narrator in *The Land of the Lightning Brothers* because I'd worked with him on two other films, *Walya Ngamardiki-The Land My Mother*, and he did the narration for *Three Dances with Gulpilil*, which we made at the same time. At that time there was a demand to have more Aboriginal participation in the filmmaking process, but also I knew Bob personally away from the world of filmmaking and he was a very accomplished actor, his talents are shown in all sorts of feature films. But most of all he had this wonderful resonant voice, a beautifully rich voice, which for me at the time helped conjure up the spiritual essence of what the narration was trying to connect with, I guess. I thought it would be a travesty to have a European narrator, male or female. These were the days when narration was still a very important part of the filmmaking. I look back on that now and I find the pace really slow and maybe a bit lugubrious. I look back at the whole film *Walya Ngamardiki-The Land My Mother* and I think it's so slow, and part of this is due to a change in the pace of life and what's demanded on television and a whole lot of things on our lives. I'm sure it sped up a lot since then. But apart from just saying the narration, Bob contributed a lot to its writing and the wording of it, as the film needed to talk to other Aboriginal people as well as European people.

Q: Who was its intended audience?

DR: For *The Land of the Lightning Brothers*, the planned audience was to get it on television. Not the ABC or SBS, but commercial television. That informed a number of the decisions about the music - Gondwanaland were very, very popular - and the pacing of it, and the fact that it would be half-hour. And also to do with what I tried to do in the film (you never quite know whether it worked successfully or not). We had a whole section in the Gregory National Park being opened up for tourism, so it had a slightly travelogue feel about it on one level, but that travelogue itself was interwoven with this matter of the Aboriginal relationship to land and some interesting history, European history

and the exploration of the Victoria River. So it's trying to weave a few things together and, in retrospect, you never think it's that successful, but it's the best you could do at the time.

Q: What did you enjoy about the remote areas you've travelled to?

DR: I guess, in the Arnhem Land escarpment, I've experienced the most beautiful landscape I've ever seen in my life. Camped at a place called Djarrwambi, and looking at the reflections of the escarpment in the billabong there with white sand, you couldn't find a better place on earth. In the situation like that, I can't help but be overwhelmed by a really magnificent environment. And because you are surrounded by the rock art and Aboriginal people singing to the spirits of the land, it's not some fantasy that you have in your own mind. I mean, you're surrounded by people that hold that connection and you can't help but be affected by that.

Q: What is still with you from these experiences?

DR: After some 30 years making films in remote parts of Australia, what affects me most is the sense that we live in this land with two completely different stories about the land - the Aboriginal story and the European story. And the incredible significance of trying to weave those two stories together in a way that makes sense to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia. Otherwise, I feel that we can't have an identity as non-Aboriginal people in this land, the Aboriginal people's identity is stomped on unless we recognise it, and we're diminished unless we recognise what their true connection to the land is. I feel very passionate about that - that we really need to do that.

Q: What do you think is the appeal of the outback to urban Australians?

DR: I think for urban Australians the outback still holds a sense of adventure and a sense of mystery. I mean we all know it in some way to be the heartland of the country, even though most Europeans live along the east coast of Australia. And, everyone is affected by these incredible wide, open spaces. You know, we talk about the big sky that's over the landscape and it's just paradise to be in your swag on a cold night with a little mulga stump fire going, and these stars which are just so incredibly bright when you're there.

And I really do think that there is a growing interest in Aboriginal connection to land, but one of the sad things is it's the urban people who are interested and support Aboriginal land rights and so on. You can see by the reconciliation marches. But where Aboriginal people actually are, there's a difference in attitude, and in a way that's sort of always been the case and I don't know that that gap is closing all that much.