

FILM AUSTRALIA'S OUTBACK DVD

Interview with David Haythornthwaite

Q: How did you start off filmmaking?

DH: I joined Film Australia in about 1968, from memory, and spent some years here. I came from Western Australia and I came over deliberately to take on this job - there was no industry in the west at that stage.

Q: And you started off as a director?

DH: No, no, you do your apprenticeship as a production assistant like all the rest - like the Peter Weirs, the Brian Hans and the Don Crombys and everyone else - which was quite a good system really.

Q: Could you talk about the outback as a location?

DH: I actually really like the outback. I like the silences when you get out there, when you turn the motor off, and there's just no other soul to be seen and the big empty spaces. I think it's something which is probably in most of us, that feeling of getting back to some sort of unspoilt, big open spaces, something in the Australian psyche to go there. To actually stay there is another matter; very few people I think would want to actually stay there in some of those conditions. I certainly loved to visit it.

Q: What do you like about shooting out there?

DH: What I liked about going on a film like *Outback Supply* was the people you meet. And that's what I like about documentary anyway - the fact that you can go and for a while join in other people's lives, become a part of their culture, their surrounds, their friendship. And it gives you the licence to shift between various occupations and taste what it would be like and I've always enjoyed that, meeting the people and going to places which are not on the tourist route. You're not there as a tourist, you're there to do a job and that's a completely different feeling.

Q: How did *Outback Supply* come about? Was there a script?

DH: *Outback Supply* was a part of a series which was intended for overseas television use, so it was material that was of interest to overseas audiences, rather than for Australian audiences. And it was one of, I think, about six films.

Q: How did you come to find John Thomas [the central character in *Outback Supply*]?

DH: I found John Thomas because I was looking for a truck driver. I was looking for a vehicle (no pun intended) to give me licence to travel through the outback and meet various people and just get a taste, a feeling for the outback and what it's like out there. I was looking for someone who could give me a reason to travel from place to place. So I went to Broken Hill, I liked the country around

was based in Tibooburra which was to the north of Broken Hill. So, I met him and I liked the idea of the little boy [John's son, Norman] because that was genuine. He always travelled in the truck, the locals called him Glove Box, and it appealed to me - the idea of this little boy and his larger-than-life dad travelling all around the outback delivering things - and that's how it came about.

Q: So you would go and visit the sheep stations and the cattle stations?

DH: We were following the truck in its deliveries and, at the same time, I was trying to find extra material, side stories if you like, to incorporate into the main film. I literally asked around the district and said, "Anything going on around the sheep stations?" and someone was doing some shearing so, a phone call later, and we went out there. You probably notice the truck didn't actually go to that station because they had nothing to deliver for them, but we could easily incorporate it into the film because it was on his run when he had something to deliver and it gave a bit of extra colour. It gave me the idea of the mother with the two kids - city girl - and what it was like to be sort of stuck out there. The same with the droving sequence.

Q: How did you get the film together? Was that Film Australia crew?

DH: Getting crew together was a fairly ad hoc sort of thing. It was a matter of who was available at the time and, of course, the camera and sound were always going from one film to another. I think I was lucky because I had a good crew and we kept it to an absolutely minimum because of the difficulty of shifting them around in the outback. We didn't want to have to go into a second vehicle, so the actual crew was just myself, my cameraman and a sound recordist, and that way we could move fairly independently of everybody.

Q: How did you actually shoot *Outback Supply*?

DH: When you're doing a story like that it can be quite difficult because the truck has to make its deliveries and you can't hold them up too long. You get one shot, then the truck's gone, then you've got to chase him for another hour or two to catch up. And although John co-operated as much as he could, he still had to make deliveries. So we had to make several trips in order to get the coverage. At one stage we went to a station where he unloaded fuel and the intention was to remain there the next day and pick up all the extra footage on the station, but around about one o'clock in the morning, suddenly there was John, up, shaking us awake, saying come on, we've got to get out of here, it's raining two or three hours away and I don't want to be stuck. Because one shower of rain can hold up a truck for anything up to two or three weeks. It just goes into a slimy mud and, of course, he's bogged and that's it. So, we all had to leap up, get the gear together and get the hell out of there before we were stuck. Which was difficult because it left me with a lot of footage that I was counting on getting but couldn't get.

Q: You then went on to another cattle station with him?

DH: I looked for some extra cattle material, droving or something. We just had to go out and find them. So we'd arrived completely unannounced, and just started shooting and there wasn't much left of the light for the day. You simply

had to send the cameraman in, the sound recordist, and grab what you could, because we only had one crack at it, we had to get out after we finished shooting. And that material, I think, was some of the nicest in the film.

Q: Could you talk about finding the other characters in the film?

DH: The characters that we met were the characters that we filmed. There wasn't the licence to go rushing around and set anything up, we just had to take what we could and that's fairly observational stuff, perhaps a little bit of humour there.

Q: John doesn't say a lot, the narration explains what he does, whereas the sheep and the cattle station characters both explain what they do in voice over. Was that a decision you took or simply that he didn't talk a lot?

DH: John was a guy that didn't talk much. It was that simple.

Q: Can you talk about the practicalities of the shoot - keeping cameras clean and free of dust?

DH: I think one of the main problems in those conditions is the dust. But if you pack up your gear and keep it locked away in cases while you travel, then you spot something that's unexpected, you're in trouble, because by the time you unpack it all, get it fitted together, the shot's gone. And because we're following the truck, we had to be ready at all times, in case something comes up, so Dean [Semler, cinematographer] tended to sit in the passenger side of the car carrying the camera ready to go at any time, which can be very, very useful. But the down side is he's got to be mighty clean at night in servicing the camera and blowing the dust out and keeping it good, but that is the way that Dean always worked wherever he was, which is why he was such a good cameraman. He was always looking for the shot and always prepared for the shot.

Q: What sort of distances did you travel?

DH: I can't recall what the exact distance was between Broken Hill and Tibooburra but that was a lot of time just spent travelling and not necessarily filming just to take our material back to Broken Hill to despatch it back to Sydney. And because John was travelling a lot of the time, picking up the supplies from Broken Hill in order to deliver them to the outlying stations, we spent an awful lot of time just travelling. Long, long drives without actually filming anything. And it was an unsealed road, so it was rough.

Q: How long did you shoot for?

DH: It was about two weeks, from memory.

Q: What was it like working with Dean in those days?

DH: Dean Semler was always in great demand by directors, because he was such a very, very good documentary cameraman. He'd had training with ABC news and current affairs, which is excellent because a cameraman trained with ABC television often had to cover a story themselves, providing coverage they

would edit later on. So a director's job was made so much easier, because of that training. It's amazing the number of feature cinematographers that have come from a news background, like Don McAlpine. And Dean was a guy who always got on very well with people, which again made it very easy for a director, because directing a documentary means relating to people and putting them at ease. And when you've got someone of Dean's calibre, then you shared the load of that. He made people feel very at ease, so he was much sought after and overworked.

Q: Have you got any funny stories to tell about the shoot?

DH: I think one of the most interesting barbecues I've ever had in my life occurred on this particular trip, when we were travelling with John and went right out into the sandhill country and came across a boundary rider for the dingo fence who lived in what could only be described as a completely suburban house, complete with a picket fence around it or cyclone wire fence. Complete with a Hills Hoist, in the middle of absolutely nowhere. Obviously the government department had decided, well we need a house out there for the boundary rider, so they plonked this design straight from the suburbs in the middle of the outback. And the fellow said to us, perhaps you blokes would like to stay and have a barbie with us, and we said, yeah, that would be great. So we all bundled into the back of his Toyota and he drove across the border and shot a cow, and then took to it with an axe and brought it back. Very much like the drovers in the film. We were eating the ribs, which is the first thing they eat, and the sun was setting, and the Hills Hoist was slowly turning around and on it were huge, chunks of meat on butchers hooks, and as we're eating, the meat is still sort of twitching and I thought, that's a really interesting Australian barbie, nowhere else would you get that.

Q: So now you know why they need the Hills Hoist!

DH: The Hills Hoist has its uses. I don't think it was a legal activity that we were involved in actually.

Q: Well, there are no butcher out there.

DH: There are no butchers at Tibooburra. Now I know why.

Q: Okay, can we go into the post-production?

DH: The post-production phase, the actual editing of the material, was particularly enjoyable on this film. It was the first time I'd ever worked with Nick [Torrens, editor] and he brought a lot of skill to it and a lot of fresh ideas and put material together and it was a thoroughly enjoyable experience with no great difficulties.

Q: What format did you shoot on?

DH: The film was shot on 16 mm, colour film, of course, which every film was shot on in those days. We didn't have video equipment and it meant that you were restricted very much by your ratio. You couldn't just go on shooting forever. You had to be fairly selective of what you filmed.

When you're shooting on a ratio - and the normal is about 10 or 12 to one - you have to have a pretty good idea of what you want to achieve but at the same time be flexible enough that if it's not working then be adaptable enough to use what else can be got.

They were the restrictions on all filmmakers in the early 70s.

Q: Can you talk about working at Film Australia in the 70s?

DH: My main recollection of the 70s at Film Australia was long lunches at the Paris to Peking Restaurant around the corner. Filing cabinets full of wine, you know, after lunch [laughs]. Seriously... working at Film Australia in the 70s was a very exciting period because Film Australia at that stage was also moving into drama material. And, I'd say, Film Australia fulfilled a role as one of the major studios in Australia for developing drama and developing drama directors and in new and innovative documentary.

Q: Do you think that there was an appeal to an urban Australian audience to see the outback?

DH: I think, in the 70s anyway, there was more of a move towards urban documentaries, more gritty, real-life, observational documentaries than there was in the traditional outback type of thing. Because this particular series was for overseas television, it was, I think, a much more bland approach in its content and its form.

Q: If you were making it for yourself, what would you have done what would have been different?

DH: If I was simply given the job of coming back with a film from the outback then my approach would have been completely different and it would have been to stay in one place and look much deeper into whatever characters I found and not have so many characters. And explore more of the life, of some people in the outback - probably not issues so much as people. But this was for overseas television and it was designed to show a bit of travel, a bit of scenery, a few activities, which made it an entirely different sort of film.

Q: Any special moments that you could describe for us while you were out there shooting?

DH: When it rains out there, you can actually see sometimes the rain falling on the horizon somewhere - just a little contained area - and if it happens to fall on the road which you are approaching...well, I couldn't believe how slippery that red country is, it was like driving on grease, and at one stage we really thought we were going to be stuck out there for two or three days. We were literally sliding from one side of the road to the other, no control whatsoever, until we got through it and it was fine, we were in dust again and off we went. But we were very worried that we didn't have enough food - or beer - to get through!

Q: Did it rain often out there?

DH: Well, it's odd country, as you know. Although the overall average rainfall is less than ten inches, probably, it can all drop in a week or two and flood the whole country or one station will cop it and the next one won't. It's very, very strange country out there. Very unpredictable.

Q: What can you tell me about Norman?

DH: Norman was just John's son. I liked the idea of big dad and young Normie who'd become a truck driver later on, probably - don't know, haven't seen him. But we just took it as it came, we didn't have to do anything special with Normie, he just went with dad every day and he knew how to open gates and turn truck engines off and things like that. In the final scene of the film, John is taking his boy into the city of Adelaide where he often went to deliver and pick up things. I got him to go in and buy some toys for Normie. It's something that John wouldn't normally have done, but I thought it'd make a nice sort of round-off to the film. You might notice that Normie chooses a tractor and John says no, take the truck. Looking at the film years later I think that was a bit of a mistake, because you're not just recording an event, you are actually interfering by creating the situation which you then record. I was fairly innocent and I thought it'd make a nice end to the film of "like father, like son", but in retrospect, I think he should have taken the tractor and not the truck 'cause it looks like John was forcing him to go towards the truck. But his father only said to take the truck 'cause I had told him to. That was a mistake.

Q: It sounds like there was a lot of mateship and camaraderie. Is that something you feel personally when you go out there?

DH: I think what's really good about going into a remote area, and this can be not just the outback, is the completely new experience that you have. The completely non-city, non-urban experience, where you're responsible for looking after yourself a bit more. And meeting people who are completely different to city people, utterly different. And tuning into their lives for a while, trying to understand how they operate and what they have to go through, what the kids go through. And that I find really fascinating and very, very enjoyable. And you are greeted very much as a friend.

Q: And what's different about these people?

DH: They, the people in the outback, are probably what we city people always think of as the quintessential Australian. It's dry humour, it's a slower kind of assessing you, not as sharp, not as slick, sometimes suspicious. But they are very much comfortable in their environment and you are a stranger in their environment. Turn it the other way around, like John, when John was in the city he was quite uncomfortable. He didn't like going to the city.

Q: In terms of the landscape, what did you find beautiful?

DH: When you get to those really desert areas, where there's very, very little scrub, low-lying spinifex, sand dunes and that vast canopy of sky, you can actually stand in one spot and turn slowly around 360 degrees and what you see is exactly the same the whole way around, that's always fairly beautiful and overwhelming at the same time. It puts you in your place a bit. I'll never forget

once, stopping on the side of the road in the middle of the night, turning off the engine and just having stars that were so bright and so plentiful that you almost felt them pressing down upon you. That's an experience you never get in the city. And you start to think a little bit about your place on earth and who you are and what you are.