

FILM AUSTRALIA'S OUTBACK DVD

Interview with Jeannie Baker

Q: How did *The Story of Rosy Dock* come about?

JB: Being in the desert I couldn't help but notice a very distinctive red plant, distinctive because it was red and it was beautiful. So I asked people about the plant and was told it wasn't native to Australia, in fact, it had come from the Middle East. In places I would see a landscape that was a monoculture of this red plant, a monoculture of Rosy Dock. And where Rosy Dock stretched as far as I could see to the horizon, nothing seemed to be living there except rabbits. So I started asking questions: what happens to the native plants and the native animals and the birds in places like this? What can they exist on?

I happened to be reading a book on central Australian plants and beside the description of Rosy Dock, there was a little snippet about the fact that Rosy Dock was grown as a garden plant by a woman in Broken Hill and it escaped from her garden to the surrounding lands and the same woman then moved to Alice Springs and took her garden plant, the Rosy Dock, with her and it escaped from there. So in my story I had this woman not actually living in Alice Springs but I kind of felt I could give myself freedom to play with that same idea and the same eventuality of the Rosy Dock escaping into the wilderness.

Q: Why were you in the desert in the first place?

JB: Initially I was in the desert, in a sense, by accident. I'd been asked to give a community workshop in Alice Springs and it was my first experience of central Australia and I just loved it. I knew I had to come back and explore. I had to see more. So about a year later I took myself back and I spent a week on a camel exploring parts of the desert. We travelled quite a long way on camel, and wherever we happened to be that night, we would camp. So I saw a part of the desert it wouldn't have been easy to see any other way. I also did exploring on my own, exploring with friends, and the more I saw the more hooked I became on the desert. It was a kind of love affair, I just felt very emotionally connected to that land.

I was really surprised by the desert because coming from Europe I had a preconception that the desert was a lifeless, barren place and it was anything but that. The part of central Australia around the McDonald Ranges where I spent the most time, it's mountainous - everywhere you go you get a different vista and there's so many surprises and so many very different kinds of plants growing. Also the landscape changes with the light and the colours are glorious - like the deep rich red earth and bright blue sky - and it just kind of got into my bones. I just loved being there.

Q: When did you get the idea for *The Story of Rosy Dock*?

JB: I got the seed of the idea for the film probably on my second trip and then I did another trip because, on going back to my studio in Sydney and thinking about it, I realised I needed more information. So my third trip I went back with specific things in mind, and that's when I started storyboarding the book, which was the way I began the project. It was about a year into the book that I storyboarded the animation.

Q: Can you tell me the story of going out to the desert alone?

JB: Having worked out a storyline I realised I needed to spend time at the beginning of the Fink River where the story begins. It's Aboriginal land so I had to get permission from the Aboriginal people to be there, and they were happy for me to be there if I agreed to teach an hour a day at the school. And that was a fantastic opportunity to be in touch with the community. Through being on their land and seeing them in it every day, some of the details in the film come from that experience. For example, there's a detail of three Aboriginal children, tiny children riding a horse bareback. They would catch these wild horses and sometimes they'd have no clothes on, tiny children, three or four, one behind the other sitting on a horse, riding bareback. Another image I often saw was a group of Aborigines sitting on the river sand in a circle under the shade of a tree.

Another place where I spent a bit of time was the end of the River Fink. When the river is in flood, occasionally there's enough water for it to go into the Simpson Desert, which is about 700 kilometres from the beginning of the Fink. It gets to a point where the river water divides into fingers and I wanted to follow one of these fingers to the point where it disappeared into the sand, so I contacted people living at the nearest homestead to that place and they said they would be happy to take me if I paid them. I arrived on their mail plane and we set off into the desert, it was about a six-hour drive. I'd bought the best maps I could find with me and we followed one of the maps. The river kept going, there was no water, but it was obvious there was water underground because there were trees and bushes growing in the river sand. We actually went a lot further than we expected and got to a point where the river did seem to end and that's where they left me. As they disappeared into the distance in a cloud of dust and I looked round me, my first thought was, I've been really stupid, there's nothing here. But then when I really started looking I was amazed at what I saw. I'd bought reference books with me so that I could identify various plants and it got to the point where I'd found so much that it was overwhelming. I thought I'll never make sense of this, but I did. And understanding what grew there and what lived there gave me freedom when I got back to my studio in Sydney to then make up my own compositions.

Q: How did you record those experiences for your storyboard and animation? Did you take photos, drawings?

JB: When I'm working out ideas for my storyboard, I always do a lot of drawing on site. When I draw something I'm really looking at it and I'm really taking from it the elements that work for me. Often when I look at the photograph I'm a bit frustrated because the things that really interest me aren't shown in enough detail and I find it hard then not to just put down what the photograph shows me rather than think it through for myself. So I like to work from drawings, but that's not always possible. I also did a lot of photographs, worked a lot from memory, worked a lot using my imagination. Also I worked a lot with experts. I would go to the Australian Museum, I would ring up people who could answer questions that I would have, so I worked in all those ways together.

Q: How are the collages made?

JB: My collages mostly are quite small - they're about 11 inches high by 17 inches across [approx 27 cm x 42 cm]. They look like they're three-dimensional but, in fact, they're shallow relief. I try to give an illusion of depth in the work, to make it look more three-dimensional than it is. I use a lot of natural materials, many of them I've actually collected in the desert. So, for example, I use the actual desert sand. I'd use river stones, feathers, parts of plants. Often the actual plant that I was portraying didn't work because the scale was wrong, so I then had to look for other things that had that same scale in miniature.

Q: How do you put them together?

JB: Most people assume that I work with all kinds of implements like tweezers but, in fact, I work just using my fingers. I've worked for so many years in this way that I don't find it difficult - that to me is the most natural way to work.

Q: What about the size of the team that works with you?

JB: I had seven people help me make the film. Initially I just worked with Peter [Sheehan], a cell animator. His skill is drawing and he worked out the pacing, how quick each movement should be. So we worked out the speed at which every character should move and that determined how many in betweens, how many drawings were involved in each movement. Once we'd sorted that out Peter left and I had two other people join me. Norman [Yeend]'s skill was in artwork and animating under the camera, so he helped me make the animated parts. Adam [Grace] was more a thinker, he worked in special effects. In a lot of what we were trying to do, we didn't really have precedence that we were aware of, so we did a lot of experimenting and playing, and Adam was really helpful there. Then a bit later Anne [Bowman] joined us. She was also very skilled at making the animated parts. Then after about three months, the whole team, which at this time had been working from my home, moved to an animation studio and then Pavel [Kyrál] and

Graham [Sharpe] joined us. Pavel was skilled in making animated parts but he was also a cameraman and Graham was a cameraman and then each of us, as well as working on making the animated parts, would spend a bit of time in the camera room actually animating under the camera.

Q: How does that actually happen?

JB: I started the animated film with a lot of the artwork already done on the picture book, *The Story of Rosy Dock*. I designed the picture book so that the double-page spread size was the same proportion as the wide screen in a cinema, so they were ideal then to work as backgrounds for the animation. But then it was important to me to think my ideas out totally fresh because it wasn't a book, it was a film. I wanted to create some new backgrounds for the film and then, of course, there were all the characters that had to be animated, so that was where most of the work was. We worked on what is referred to as multi-plane animation so some of the artwork had a number of different levels. If you imagine a tabletop, the artwork is on the tabletop and the camera is above it and so the collages would be the backgrounds to the animation. Often we would have a sheet of glass on top of the collage and then the moving parts would be moved across the glass, but in the camera and on the screen, it looks like the moving parts are actually moving across the background itself.

Q: How did you do the lightning?

JB: At times we actually incorporated live action into the images. For example, there's a scene where there's a lightning flash and we actually used a real lightning flash, but in the wider view, where I have a collage background, we had the sky of the collage as a piece of glass and we blacked it out. And then where the lightning flashes into the sky, we left that free, so that we had a piece of black paper which we then took away and then flashed light underneath it so it comes across as a flash in the sky.

My experiences working on animation have been the most intense working periods I think I've ever had. It always comes back to the budget, because it means one only has so many weeks one can work on the film and somehow everything has to get done. It's fantastic to work with a team because other people bring fresh ideas and they have skills that I don't have, so it makes a lot more possible than I could do on my own. But they're working from nine to five, so when they'd finish their day and something wasn't quite right, the only way to get it right is if I try and take it that bit further myself, so I'd often work hugely long days. I'd have to be very organised in allocating the work for the crew because what they couldn't do I would end up doing myself. It's not the way that I would always want to work because it's a huge pressure and I didn't get a lot of sleep. But for short bursts of time, it's a fantastic opportunity.

When I do an animation I don't go into it lightly because I know there's going to be such a huge amount of work involved and I have to sustain my passion for doing it, because if the passion goes it becomes dead. And I also have to sustain my link with the desert so I did a number of trips. There were a couple of times where I felt I was losing it, that I was becoming a bit too much removed so I'd take myself back into the desert again.

Q: What was the initial process with the script?

JB: The Rosy Dock plant gave me a storyline, a vehicle to work around, but there are also other elements in the desert that I passionately wanted to incorporate: the beauty of the landscape, the textures, the variety of plants and animals and the birds, these amazing colourful birds. The magic of that place I can't really put into words but I wanted to give that feeling, that sense in the images.

Q: When did you approach Film Australia and how did it come to be produced by them?

JB: I approached Film Australia with the animation storyboard and from previous experience I knew it was going to take a while for a decision to be made. So I'd allowed that time in the working out of the total project, which is why I started the animation storyboard a year into the book. I'd allowed four years for the whole project, because I liked the idea of launching the film, the picture book and an exhibition of the artwork simultaneously. So maybe it was nine months or so later, Film Australia agreed, yes, they would like to produce the film, and it was probably about six months after that that we actually started working on the production.

Q: Can you talk about the relationship you had with Film Australia?

JB: One of the things I feel very grateful to Film Australia for is the freedom they gave me. They just gave me freedom to make of it what I wanted and it wasn't an easy project to work on, because parts of it were experimental, they didn't always work out first time. For example, in making the flood, we tried various ways to make that work out. Eventually, what seemed to work the best was working with four different layers of acetate film and dripping resin on to that and the resin would then be set and we would move each layer of the acetate with the resin on at a different speed and just getting the speeds right, getting it just right, was quite tricky. To make the rain, again we tried various ways and it took a while for it to work out. The budget couldn't afford a rain machine, so we had to find a way of simulating rain without using a rain machine. We experimented with garden hoses and all this had to be done at night so that we could then superimpose the effect of the rain on top of the collages later, but it didn't work straight away. So after a long day working on the film, night after night after night we played with hoses trying to get the effect of rain and eventually we got there.

Q: Who were you making the film for?

JB: I was hoping that the audience for this film would be a totally general one, that it would work for children but also for adults.

Q: And where was it screened? In theatres?

JB: It wasn't actually. It was screened at film festivals. A big audience was schools, so it was the video more than anything.

Q: Will you make any more animations?

JB: I hope I will make more animation but there's one thing that has disappointed me a bit. In my original artwork there is a huge amount of detail and I kept wishing that the 35 mm film stock we were working from, which for most people is a huge luxury, was 70 mm, so that it would show up all the detail. So my hope is that technology in the future will improve to the extent that it is possible for me to show the detail that I want and the texture I want in my work without it costing the earth.

What I hope I've shown in this film is that the outback, it's a desert, but it's very much a living place. And what I hope I've shown is the extraordinary diversity of the desert when it is healthy, when we treat it well, when humans don't abuse it and the balance of the desert isn't changed too much by the consequences of our actions.

Q: On a personal level, what was memorable for you?

JB: One of the most memorable, magical moments for me of being in the desert was walking along one of the tributaries of the River Fink. It was a very narrow gorge, if a bird sung, any noise would vibrate and echo, there was an amazing texture and colour in the rocks and the sense that maybe I was the first person to walk in that place. I just felt so far from anyone else, and totally exhilarated by the feeling of that place and the magic of that place. Another moment that will always stay with me is being in my tent, one of the first nights alone, in the Simpson Desert and the tent being surrounded by dingoes howling. It was the most eerie sound and I was scared and I didn't know if I was in danger and so I made the most terrible noise I could, from deep inside. It hurt my throat for days afterwards, but they went [laughs]. I scared them away and after that I felt totally free.

Q: What was it like to camp out there alone?

JB: Before I went into the Simpson Desert I talked to a lot of people about that place and a number of people told me, look it's really dangerous, you shouldn't go on your own, take a gun. Why should I take a gun? Well, camels could attack you, male camels, but most of all dingoes, dingoes are dangerous. And I wasn't sure what to believe. Often people give you advice

and they don't really know the place themselves. But I spoke to a couple of old men who'd actually spent time in the area where I wanted to camp out and they just told me, look you'll be fine, just use your common sense, there's not really much that could happen to you. And I listened to them and decided to go by their advice.

For me, the only way to work on a project like this is to spend time in that country on my own, because it's only when I'm on my own, left with my own thoughts, that I really get the feeling of the place and I really take the ideas as far as they need to go. And being there on my own, in the Simpson particularly, were some of the most magical times of my life. It's experiences like that that make me who I am and actually make me feel very strong.