

Bob Connolly

Ray Argall interviewed Bob Connolly for australianscreen on 12 June 2009

Q The clips on ASO, are there any favourites?

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Connolly There were – there were two clips that I – that struck a chord, and the first was a long shot of Popina and literally, well this was when Joseph Medang was killed, he was shot on the battlefield and axed, and we filmed his – preparing the body for the funeral. And at this stage Popina, who was one of the central characters in *Black Harvest* had had just a series of absolutely awful shocks and blows that destroyed his world in a way. And I could see him looking off, sitting off a little bit away from where it was all going on, Medang's people were weeping and wailing and so on, and he was just staring there. And I remember picking up the camera and walking over and sitting myself right in front of him and then just lifting the camera slowly up into a close-up of his face. And just everything went across the face, all the tragedy of the situation. And then he just, at one point just looked straight into the lens, looking at me, really. And it was – it's an odd feeling when you're shooting that because you've got conflicting emotions. In the first place because I'd known him for years and he was a dear, dear friend of mine, I was sort of dying inside because I knew what he was going through. But there was another sort of sense of elation in a way as a filmmaker about what I was capturing. Those two things have always fought a battle with me inside, you know. And um, I just kept the camera rolling, I think for you know, two, four minutes something like that, and I think it's a powerful moment in the film because so much is said in that face and yet nothing's said. And to me that's one of the great things that you try for all the time. Is to, is to have nothing said but everything said at the same time.

Q Do you revisit that in the editing room?

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Connolly Yeah, I - -when I'm looking at the mass of material before I start, and that's if I read your question correctly, there's a series – to make sense of the enormous amount of material, you sort of look at those pillar moments, those narrative pillar moments. And I knew that that would be one, and I remember working towards it. And knowing that in a way all the material as we gradually put it together is a preparation to deliver that sequence, because for me it's a pivotal moment in the film. Do I revisit the emotion in the editing room? Yes. Yeah well that's going back nearly twenty years now, it's a long time ago. But yeah, and I still do, I still think about it now and it upsets me, what happened to those people. But at the same time, you know, I'm just proud to have been around to capture something as, as momentous as that. I mean small in terms of you know, the human drama, it's not on a world stage or anything like that, but for those people they were momentous events in their life, in their culture. And you know, that to me is, that's what you aim for in this sort of long-term ethnographic sort of filmmaking.

Q Going back to the beginning when you decided to go on this career path, to become a filmmaker, talk about that?

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Connolly Well I started off as a trainee journalist at the ABC in 1964, my god. With Mike Carlton, Stuart Littlemore and Bob Ellis, we were the intake for '64. Scruffy bloody ne'er do wells we were too. But um, and the first thing I learnt to do there was not so much to be a reporter but I think I learnt a bit about writing, and the reason is we had this extraordinary chief sub-editor named Sidney Mounsey who was a Marxist, I guess he must have been about mid-30s then, I thought he was one foot in the grave being 20 or something like that. And he used to send – we'd get sent off to do these piddling little stories about you know, traffic accidents and things and we'd have to write our five parts and we'd get called into the sub's room, the sort of u-shaped table and he would be sitting – full of all those old fellas with eye shades and rolled up sleeves, you know, utter contempt for us, except for Sid who tore shreds off us for six months with our copy.

Because we were writing for radio and therefore writing for the ear, which means really stripping everything down to its bare essentials, and it was just the most wonderful preparation. And from that, I was lucky enough to land a job in New York as a foreign correspondent and that's where I did a little bit of filmmaking, not much. I went from that to *This Day Tonight*, I was absolutely terrible at studio interviews and so I started to specialise in order to keep my job at the same-day story, so for about two-and-a-half, three years I'd go out every day with a camera crew and construct a five or six or ten-minute film story. And that was a massive learning experience and fantastic. Then I went from that to do half hour films for *A Big Country* for about five years. And did about forty or fifty of those, made all the stuff-ups you could make. And that was what was wonderful about the ABC back then, they had this massive in-house production, and so you'd – they would give you as much work as you could basically absorb, so I was at any one time about to shoot a film and editing three. And again, just utterly invaluable training.

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We – by that stage I'd been at the ABC for about fourteen years and I met Robin Anderson and she sort of figured I'd been there too long so we basically left, cos we wanted – by that stage the AFC was up and running so you could actually envisage your life as an independent documentary filmmaker. And um, and so we set up our first film which was *First Contact*, but it was made because I'd worked on the David Bradburys as your proper sort of archival-based historical films like *Frontline* and *Chile: Hasta Cuando?* and *Nicaragua* and that was the big thing then, it was archival-based historical documentaries. Observational filmmaking was something that you know, that there's been a bit of, but it wasn't – wasn't at the ABC, we were very insular so we hadn't seen a lot of the great masterpieces of this genre. But when we made *First Contact*, we went around the world for the first time, because it was an independent film, and I got to meet a few observational filmmakers and I started to see all the classic work, and I was just blown away by it, it was extraordinary. And I decided that that's what I wanted to do. So we were very lucky, we

went for a documentary fellowship at the Australian Film Commission, which gave us – and we won one. This is Robin and I and that gave us the opportunity to make any film we wanted anywhere in the world. But the only proviso was that it had to be innovative, it had to be something that got you out of your comfort zone and stretched you. And so we used part of the money to do a 16mm and sound recording course at AFTRS. And I trained in 16mm camera work, Robin thought I was going to be hopeless at that and she wanted to do it. But the only camera that they had for us to use was a big old blimp dary (sp?), and she was a little thing. So she couldn't carry it around all day. So she very bad temperedly gave me the camerawork and she did the sound. Which I think was a good decision, I mean I'm a hopeless cameraman in the sense that all I really want to do is get in focus and vaguely frame. But the great thing is to actually be there when something happens and to capture it.

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Connolly Your question was you know, how I evolved into a filmmaker, and I think the – the major influence for me in fact was way away from the world of filmmaking, when we'd done *First Contact*, which was a standard traditional made for television interview-based documentary with archival film, we both felt very frustrated that ah, you know, it was such a rich story that – and it was very difficult to squeeze it into a TV hour doco. The Australian National University Research School of Pacific Studies asked us to -- or suggested to us we might like to write a book and they would offer us visiting fellowships. And for some odd reason we agreed to that, so we spent about 18 months at the ANU. And I came into contact with a whole lot of historians there, Pacific historians. And what struck me was the tremendous pains that they went to and the exhaustive research, and I suddenly thought, why am – the whole thing about documentary filmmaking in a big institution like the ABC that was churning it out. And that was really the emphasis, the product, you know, all the time. And watching these people spend six, seven years on one project, on a book. And going to the ends of the earth to know everything that was possible to know about their subject, that really appealed to me.

And Robin who'd come from an academic background anyway was putting a flea in my ear about it and she kept on saying, 'I hate the way we worked on *First Contact*, it was rush, rush, rush, using expensive camera crews, you know, we need – you need to master a subject, if you want to say anything serious then you've just got to lift your game in every sense, intellectually, methodologically, artistically and so on'. And that all percolated away for a year or so. And so when we went to make *Joe Leahy's Neighbours*, you know we – I remember the first day that we sort of got there and sitting on Joe's veranda and um, I had this Aaton camera and she had the sound and I suddenly thought, we are completely independent, there is no one sitting over us, there's no executive giving us a hard time, we've got enough money if we're careful about it to spend it as long as we need to spend and that could be years capturing a film. And that was an extraordinary feeling of elation. And I remember it very clearly, and ever since then I've really valued the notion of independence, financial creative independence. And I've always tried to strive for it. Because in this sort of long term observational work it's absolutely – it's a sine qua non, you can't make films without it. I used to talk to film school kids and I'd say that this sort of work you divide into controlled and uncontrolled. There are control elements which are having enough film stock, you know when 16mm film stock was important as an element, having enough time, having enough creative bureaucratic freedom, being able to control all those situations because without (phone interruption)

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Connolly Control, yeah because it's only when you've got those sorry – it's only when you've got those control elements that you can actually afford to relinquish the control and that another absolute sine qua non of filmmaking, it's called uncontrolled verite and that really means not interfering, it means waiting, it means being absolutely passive in terms of – it means developing as far as possible a sort of completely independent stance, it means giving away all your ideological fixations, conscious and unconscious, and your biases and all the rest of it. And just being alert to

the unfolding nature of what's going on. Because if you don't do that then you miss it. The thing we used to do all the time with those Joe Leahy films, those 90 minute films, was every day we would – it was almost like sort of a radar sweep across a screen, you'd be all the time, and because it was so much happening, at the highlands of New Guinea at that particular time in the mid '80s it was a very volatile place, Joe's plantation was the centre of an enormous amount of conflict and so on. And there were big issues being fought out about cultural values and so on. And you had to be completely alert to the twists and turns of the narrative. Because we decided with that film – we didn't want to give away our idea of narrative as being an absolutely essential underpinning of a film. In other words, telling a story. And to do that – I think it's the hardest form of documentary in all sorts of ways, to be uncontrolled about your capturing of material but at the same time to be governed by narrative requirements. You know where you fix on some kind of dramatic situation, you've got to find it first of all, and then you watch it emerge and then you sort of mine it, you chase after it. And try to stay there and to try to recognise the narrative developments of a situation, over which you have no control. And no knowledge about what's going to happen. It's a deeply exciting way of working. And if your first decision making is correct, in other words, where you go, then it can be just a profoundly exciting and stimulating and challenging way to work.

Q When you work independently, do you think about who you are making films for or who you might reach?

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Connolly That's a good question. The first, the – the big film we made, which I sort of consider our first serious film to be honest which is *Joe Leahy's Neighbours* that set the pattern for all of them, because that was, as I say, a fellowship film, which meant that we had no responsibility other than in a sense to ourselves. You know they said, do whatever you like, audiences don't matter, although the ABC was -- had put \$50,000 into it, they had no control whatsoever over the material, and would have no say in how it

was shaped. That was up to us. And the only, as a prerequisite as I said, we had to stretch ourselves and do something that was innovative. And for that it was uncontrolled narrative verite, that was our innovation if you like. And we really made that film to satisfy ourselves. And that's been the pattern for me all along, my feeling is, and it's not exactly original, is that you make a film first and foremost to satisfy yourself. That it excites you and stimulates you and it's something that you would want to watch. If you're very lucky other people will want to watch it too, but if you put that criteria first, you're not going to be successful. Now I remember saying that at a vast meeting of documentary filmmakers in China in the mid '70s, and afterwards having people come up with a complete sense of mystification. They couldn't imagine anything more bourgeois and ridiculous than the idea that you would make a film just to please yourself. But what I tried to say was, well, yes, that's the, if you like, the poetic concept of it, you do make a film to please yourself. What you want of course is that it will please other people, and the way to achieve that aim is to make a film that will please yourself. Now I mean I think that's a notion that has led a lot of people far more creative than me to you know, to do the work they do, that's if they even examine it, I mean it's – painters for example and so on. But I think in this sort of work it's the same and I suggest it's a very widespread idea among filmmakers. Hang on – there are a lot of filmmakers who have a very different agenda, they make films to change things, for example, they make films to convince people of something, they make films to teach people about something. That whole sort of tradition of agit-prop filmmaking. I certainly worked extensively in that area and had that mindset. Now when I was younger. But with observational filmmaking, it's gradually fallen away because I just see it in a way um, detrimental to the sort of work that we do, I think it creates hurdles for you.

Q You've made feature length films, what are the expectations of where you might present that? Let's talk about Australia first?

Connolly Of where you might present it to an audience. Yeah, the other thing that happened when we toured with *First Contact*, first time I'd ever been exposed to the notion of seeing a documentary in a cinema, in a darkened room. And that hooked me from the start. So if you were to really scratch me I would say that my first love is to have my film shown in a darkened room. And that people should be held, as Brownlow says, spellbound in darkness. The television, it's nice and it pays for a lot of it but that's definitely the second tier as far as I'm concerned. And nothing that's happened since *Joe Leahy's Neighbours* had led me to abandon that idea. I mean to go to the Sydney Film Festival and to see your film premiered as all of them have been in front of 2,000 people, in a bog darkened area like that, it's just a buzz. And it's where the film has its greatest impact, because people watch it and they attend to it. And that's – and usually the sort of people who go to those sort of festivals are very knowledgeable about film and so they, they um ... they appreciate it. They get a lot of what you're trying to do. But that's not to pee on television, right, which is our lifeblood, it's as I say, what funds it. But for me it's the secondary audience.

Q Your films have had successful theatrical seasons. How engaged were you in the distribution process?

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Connolly We were spoilt from the start with *First Contact* because um, I don't think it's a particularly good film but it's no question the subject matter is extraordinary. The last time in the history of the world that the exploring representatives of one culture make contact with a culture that knew nothing about the outside world. I mean that's sort of Cortez stuff, you know. So in that sense intrinsically it was of extraordinary interest to people. And still is, it's still in release around the world and non-theatrically. Andrew Pike in Canberra who was a film exhibitor but got very interested in filmmaking himself decided to take *First Contact* and a film by Dennis O'Rourke called *The Shark Callers of Kontu*, both wanted our films and to double bill them at the Sydney Opera House cinema. And

I mean it broke the box-office record, there were queues a hundred yards long outside the cinema. It was amazing. And um, and the level of serious criticism about the films was fantastic, unlike television where the level of criticism is almost non-existent. And where what you do see is usually incompetent. Because there's such a mass of material and so on. But getting a film out there just transports it into a different arena. I mean it's what feature people are used to all the time, documentary filmmakers aren't. So that was a very heady experience and one that I wanted to repeat endlessly. Not for the money because you're lucky if you break even in that situation, although *First Contact* did well. And actually paid for all our camera gear later on. But that's the thing, Andrew then distributed *Joe Leahy's Neighbours* and that did quite well, it had a 30 cinema release around the country. It went onto the Film Forum in New York and so on. And all that sort of thing is just repeated, the excellent, not excellent review – well they were they were good reviews, but reviews - thoughtful reviews by professional reviewers which is a great thing to have, even if they're critical of the film, it's just great to be assessed by someone who you respect in that sense. So yeah, we've – that was, *First Contact*, *Joe Leahy's Neighbours*, *Black Harvest*, *Rats in the Ranks*, and *Facing the Music* all had theatrical releases. And we were very lucky to hook up with people like Andrew and then later on Film Australia's distribution arm to have that happen.

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Connolly I might say with *Rats* which was probably the most successful theatrical release, *Rats in the Ranks*, we live in Glebe and the Valhalla Cinema which put it on in Sydney is just up the road, Robin and I used to complain all the time at the Valhalla because the people, the patrons would leave noisily at 11 o'clock and slam their doors just outside here. But I must say when *Rats* went on it was getting full houses and they all left noisily at 11 o'clock, we'd sort of say, oh good, you know, there they were leaving noisily and we had no problems at all with that. I used to go up and, same with *Facing the Music*, I used to go up every second night

and just sit in the back of the hall and just think, and they actually pay you to do this, you know. It's a fabulous feeling.

Q Reviews, it's a much tougher business?

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Connolly Well the other thing is that, it's changing now but documentary has not really been well reviewed until relatively recent years. Because it's sort been taken all that seriously as an art form. And there are all sorts of reasons for that, so often it's perceived as being in a sense limited in that its main objective is proselytising, it's you know, it's either teaching people something or convincing people of something. But the idea of documentary is exploring human character, of having the same objectives as fiction. In other words to explore human character moulded out a real life situation. That I think has um, that's, that's caught on, you know we certainly didn't pioneer anything, but there's a mass of people that we drew inspiration from. But I think what has happened is that those films, partly because of their exposure now at film festivals or perhaps that's a reason as well, a cause and effect I'm not sure about. They are being taken seriously as an art form and that means that people who are serious about cinema look at them and actually assess them, sometimes critically and so on. But it's a nice feeling that that's happening I think.

Q Talk about your most successful collaboration?

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Connolly Well, most successful collaboration, Robin Anderson. I was working as a producer at *A Big Country*, which is a long running documentary series on the ABC and she got a job, she was just out of Columbia where she did a masters. And she came back – she'd done a film course at Columbia with a very prestigious *New York Times* film reviewer, and that enthused her into the idea of becoming a filmmaker. So she came out and got a job as a sort of a temporary researcher at the ABC and I came in after a long lunch once and there was this kid, well you know, 27, I was 33, sitting in a

corridor at a desk, and I sort of did a double take. And I said, 'oh who are you?' And she says, 'well who are you?' And I thought, 'oh okay'. So um, we, I think she moved into my flat about 3 weeks later and then she started telling me to get out, because she reckoned I was becoming institutionalised. So we, not imagining that we could ever make a living as independents we got a job making a film for the Tasmanian Film Corporation on the Franklin River. At this stage not a lot of people had gone down the Franklin River, but god help us we did, an eight person film crew making a 35 millimetre short about the Franklin River in 1980, which is probably the most difficult and dangerous thing I've ever done in my life. And that's when I just came to have total admiration for Robin because she'd never been camping in her life. And it actually got pretty hairy on this river because it's one thing to go down the Franklin, I mean it's a grade 5 wilderness experience. To go down the Franklin in one person rafts with 35mm film and making a 35mm sort of feature, like that, 20 minute short, was as I say difficult and dangerous. And it tests you to the limits and your character and your character flaws are on, on display for everyone and I just came out of the whole thing absolutely lost in admiration for this person. And she very quickly picked up the filmmaking basics and was all the time saying to me, 'we've got to make independent films'. So she was the driver in all that. The, I mean it was a working relationship made in heaven in all sorts of ways because the work that she'd done at Columbia, she did a sociology masters. But she worked with two world famous people, Etzioni was one, and Herbert Gans, and eventually they were so impressed with her work that they hired her as a researcher. And what they trained her in was field observation. And so you know, she came with two years of incredibly high level skills in going into a situation and analysing the dynamics of the situation which in the work that we did together eventually, the observational films we did was just extraordinary. And I learnt a huge amount from her and she learnt on the job as well in a practical sense. But it was just absolutely wonderful to work with someone who was so insightful about, about what was going on. And her analytical powers as well were quite extraordinary. Her sort of courage, her grace under pressure, I mean everything about her -- it was

just a joy to work like that. I mean I still look back and think of just how lucky I was that, that our paths crossed. Not long before she died, when she was very ill and someone from the *New York Times* I think it was interviewed her, when *Facing the Music* was on in New York, and she said, 'what's the secret?' – the interviewer said, 'what's the secret of your success?', and she said, 'well he thinks I'm better at him than what we do, and I think he's better than me'. You know and that just ...

Q What's the greatest moment you had together?

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Connolly The greatest single moment?

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Connolly There are just many ... I can tell the most bittersweet moment. Was standing on the stage of the Sydney Film Festival with *Facing the Music* and 2000 people giving us a standing ovation, and she'd been diagnosed three days earlier with terminal cancer. That was ... that was pretty bittersweet. I mean it was, it was great, anyway, I don't know if I want to go there.

Q How did you work in the editing room?

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Connolly I tended to well, in a way, learning to shoot the equipment, to shoot film and record sound was essential to the sort of – we realised you had to skill up and you couldn't pay people to do it. But when we made *First Contact* independently we were paying \$3000 a week to camera crews. You just couldn't do that, you couldn't stay on location long enough, and so on. So you had to skill up, sounds silly now with digital cameras but 16mm was a serious learning curve to get on top of it. In a way the same thing happened with the editing, when we came back with *Joe Leahy's Neighbours* we had a huge amount of material, a totally new thing for us,

to have this mass of material and to know that we had the material for a full length feature film. And we worked unsuccessfully with one guy for quite a while who just had a really commercial -- he wanted to -- like when Joe -- I remember, the kiss of death for him was, you know, Joe, we did a scene where Joe would drive up with his Mercedes Benz, you know, and um he'd say 'oh it's a diesel it doesn't sound as expensive as a real Mercedes, we'll get a proper Mercedes Benz soundtrack for it'. And I said, 'no you won't'. It's a diesel Mercedes Benz, that's not -- that's telling lies. You know and he looked at me as if I was some sort of idiot. So he didn't last. But we took a while to get rid of him for all sorts of reasons. And we had the 16mm editing machine and not much money left and Robin said, 'well, you're going to have to do it'. And I said, 'what, edit?' And I said, she said, 'yeah'. Because at the ABC where I trained as a director, you weren't allowed to touch the -- if you laid hands on a 16mm camera Tony Wilson or Dean Semler would have said, 'what are *you* doing you flea?', you know. You were the director, you didn't touch the equipment and I had this exaggerated, well not exaggerated because we're talking about people like Dean Semler, exaggerated, well -- heightened respect for artistic ability and their technical ability and so on. So it was a real thing for me to actually have a go at it. And the same with editing. You know, work with people like Henry Dangar and so on all the time. So I just started cutting sequences together and they seemed to work, and I was amazed. So I basically but the thing to um, ah, I suppose for about six months and then I got Ray Thomas to come onboard, great editor I've worked with ever since. And the two of us -- what was the question again, I can't remember.

Q How do you work in the editing room?

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Connolly So that experience was fantastic. And then I realised that what I could do, and it's really important to know your limitations, what I could do was to assemble. And the two of us would work structuring, you know, we'd sort of -- we'd get all the stuff transcribed, we'd look at it all, and then we

would card it, every single sequence had a card which we'd stick up on a wall and then we'd start to shape what looked like the overall thing. And I'd just go away and just beaver away for a few days and then Robin would come in and have a look. And that's essentially the pattern that we developed. I loved the editing room much more than actually the field. That's where I sort of come into my own, I guess in a way. I don't know because I think I've done a lot of it. You realise after you work at somewhere like the ABC for ten years shooting film or directing film and supervising editing, there's a lot that you learn by osmosis, obviously from doing that. And those were skills I had obviously developed. And then I just developed new ones I suppose. In wrestling with all this big material working on big themes and big narratives and so on. So yeah, it was more like I'd sort of do a sequence and then she'd come and look at it. And her judgement was absolutely flawless. She was ruthless, and of course not being there during the donkey work of putting it together meant that she could have a fresh eye to the construction and so on, which every filmmaker knows is a really valuable thing. What made it even more valuable for us is that often that outside person can be a combative situation, but when it's a supportive one, it's fantastic. And the material always grows from it. And then having Ray come in and we developed this – and I say it to people and still so many people don't listen in documentary, they bring an editor in from day one and a lot of them are expecting them to help them with structure and stuff like that. To me that's the filmmakers job. And by bringing in an editor from day one often by the time you get to the stage where you really, really need an editor you've run out of money. And so we always, in the big films worked right through until we say, okay we can't make it any better than this, now we bring in Ray. And then Ray comes in and makes it a million per cent better because he gets it from a series of sequences to a proper flowing film and that's just a pattern that's worked really well.

Q In the editing process, you can't say it will take 4 weeks, six weeks, it just doesn't work ...

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Connolly We take – we've never spent less than a year editing the big narrative films. I learnt that from David Bradbury. He was my biggest influence in all sorts of ways. Because I was working at the ABC when the AFC asked me to work on his *Frontline*, he'd never made a film in his life, and I'd made twenty. And he was totally green but he had this – again he was, he'd come out outside the big institutions, you know, so there was no sort of ingrained culture there that was, that can often have its limitations, and the one he also had of course was this creative independence, because he was being funded by the AFC. Plus he was funding it himself, I mean the guy went without two front teeth for about four months. Cos he couldn't afford the money to get his teeth fixed. And that made a big impression on me. But the biggest impression was that he did not lock off on that film with Stuart Young, the editor, until it was right. And the process of getting it right was just a revelation. Bringing people in all the time, bringing in dozens and dozens of people in screenings, listening to what they're saying, some of it critical, some of it praiseworthy, knowing how to sift between the useful and the not so useful information. And gradually synthesising this process. And getting the film better and better and better and better, but not being conditioned by economics. Which so much filmmaking is, they finish too quickly. I have never forgotten that lesson and I've always tried to emulate the situations that enable you to work like that. And it has to do with creative and financial independence. Well financial independence in a sense that gives you the ability – I mean with film – with *Rats* for example, they approached – Film Australia approached us to make a film and it was Chris Oliver, who was then an executive producer, that said 'we'd like you to make a film with us'. And I said, 'anything you like'. And they said, 'oh yeah you should go out and do some research and we just want you to make another feature length documentary'. And I sat down and I wrote in the letter and I said Chris you want us to work with you at Film Australia, that's great, because I knew some of the culture of Film Australia, cos it's a fairly hierarchical sort of place. And um, I said, that's presumably because you liked the films we make, now I need to tell you how they're made. Right. And I

went through this list of total independence and all that sort of stuff. You know, any compromise on that and it's no deal. So that was the ground rules that we were actually able to lay down. Which was very satisfying.

Q Can you talk about working with Film Australia?

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Connolly Well yeah, I – a lot of people knock that institution but they were very good to us in all sorts of ways, they were very irritating in a lot of ways too. But we made two – we made *Rats in the Ranks* and *Facing the Music* with them, and by and large we were able to make those films the way we wanted to make them. And that's a big thing in this game.

Q Can you talk about the relationships made when you make a film, how do relationships continue, such as Joe Leahy?

00:44:02

Connolly Well with the um, we made four feature length films, two of them about Joe. And one about, well Larry Hand was a central character in *Rats in the Ranks* and um, Ann Boyd in odd sorts of ways they were all fairly similar sort of people, perhaps they were in fairly similar situations in that, that's to do with the criteria that you adopt for choosing, I mean these are very hard things to choose, it's you know, we often took up to two years to choose a topic. And often there was a lot of false starts. Because it's a real leap in the dark in some ways, I mean what you're doing is you're saying now I'm going to sort of attach myself to this situation, which I know a little bit about but I certainly can't read, I can't predict the tea leaves, I don't know what's going to happen. I don't know whether anything will happen. And you have to make – you make this commitment to share their lives. And um, so you, there's a few things you sort of go on, they are caught up in conflict situations of some sort. And there are big issues behind those conflicts, I think that's important. But the people themselves, they're people of high ability, but they're flawed, they're complex people.

And I think that's what I look for. People who are going to be -- who are going to open up as characters. In I guess in the same way that a scriptwriter works, in a way, what you do is the longer you spend with people, it's like peeling layers off an onion. Oddly enough the longer we spend together the more we all get like each other. And there's that line, you know, to know everything is to forgive everything, I end up -- I've ended up liking immensely all the people that I've worked with. Although we've been through very difficult situations with them. And I think that's part of the reason why, you know, for them we become a really important part of their life for a period, a transition. Like with Joe when he was facing all those colossal pressures and the conflicts and the catastrophes and disasters that were going on, there we were to lend a sympathetic ear. There was no confrontational situation involved, we were basically sharing and documenting what he was going through. Same with Larry, I mean we spent a year in Larry's office. And for most of that year he didn't think he was going to get elected and he passionately wanted to get elected. And so at the end of it we all knew we'd gone through this really close shared experience, same with Ann Boyd, she went through a life crisis in the year and -- fifteen months that we spent with her. And Karen Carey who is the central character in the film that we've just spent eighteen months shooting, the same thing. Director of music at the private girls' school, I mean an extraordinary character, who I've come to know and like. And I know that like all the others they will be friends for life.

Q I'm interested in the drama in documentary. At what point do you reach a barrier?

00:48:04

Connolly Yeah well I started off this interview telling you about that conflict I had when I filmed Popina and his face. I mean later on there was a far greater conflict in that we had actually stopped shooting and we were holed up in this little guest house away from the plantation where this tribal war had broken out where it was almost a no go zone, it was you know, really dangerous. And everything on the plantation was wrecked and there'd

been hundreds killed and so on. And then we heard that – we got word that Popina had been shot and was dying, shot with an arrow. And we sort of rushed out with a big bodyguard and as it happened there was a tribal fight going on about a hundred yards away from where his hut was, where they'd taken him. He'd gone out basically to watch the fight and he was so depressed about the way things had developed that he literally stood there and there were showers of arrows going past and he did nothing to run away. And one got him right in the chest, just missed his heart, got him in the lungs. And so when we got there he was lying down cradled by one of his closest wontaks, friends, you know. And with the big swollen chest and obviously in a very bad way, and my first instinct was after I said how are you and I got this grunt was just to get the camera out. And that still troubles me. Because of this conflict. On the one hand he was a man that I'd grown to love and to admire, and we'd made *Joe Leahy's Neighbours*, we'd been there eighteen months and by this stage we'd been there a year. And he was a man I saw every day and would eat dinner with us all the time and adjudicated the problems we had with other tribal people and so on. Man I respected immensely, and here he was apparently dying, and what am I doing, am I rushing off to get the ambulance, am I getting him the car, no I'm filming him. And that was a – you know, I remember writing, making *Black Harvest* and trying to write about that and saying to myself at this desk, what had I become, what's going on here. And I couldn't come up with an answer about it you know. It was basically I think it's the frog being boiled, you know. You – we'd spent a year getting shot at, and watching people die, some of them very close friends, and I think something happens, something takes over where your moral ethical standards in terms of your duty of care to a fellow human being get attenuated, is about the most delicate way I can put it. But that -- I mean I can't run away from that and there's no point in trying to. That situation is repeated endlessly in this sort of film work, because if you spend a year or eighteen months with people who are in a conflict situation, there's going to come a time when they're in a meltdown situation. It certainly happened with Ann Boyd, for example. In -- and in the Joe Leahy films, *Black Harvest* particularly when everything's

building up on Joe and he's just about to crack. And I knew what that meant, that could be really hairy because Joe was a volatile person. And you know, um, I don't know it's just, when you're working on these films, I think, you know with *Black Harvest*, I used to say to Robin, you know, neither of us are Aeschylus or Sophocles but we are documenting a tragedy of Grecian, of classical Grecian proportions here. This is um, this is two men you know sort of aiming high and struck down by hubris, you know hubris. And you get this sense that what you're doing is really important, that might be pretentious but that's the way you feel. You know I would say, I am documenting something here which is of world historical interest and it will be looked at for generations to come. As I say, that might be pretentious but that's how you get to feel. You know, a place right out of the world spotlight where nevertheless issues of enormous human importance are being fought out by individuals that we're able to get very close to. And to document the issues and not to talk about them, to show them as they are actually happening. And when you get driven by something like that, you're going to step over coals and you're going to suspend some of your natural human responses to people in trouble. I mean later on of course we took him to the hospital. You know, and so on. But nevertheless that's the way it was, that's the way we became.

Q That's something you have to deal with.

00:53:07

Connolly Well I remember David talking about, David talking about a scene in *Frontline*, well it's actually – no it's Neil Davis, the cameraman, the war cameraman who's the central character in David Bradbury's *Frontline*. And he's filming, and there's someone – he's filming this Vietnamese, south Vietnamese soldier who is crawling forward with hand grenades and throwing them at the enemy who are twenty yards away. He does it three times and comes back and then, and Davis knew at least, Neil knew the guy, had been with him a month on patrol and so on. And then he comes back and he lifted his head up and got shot in the back. And just sank

down right in front of the camera. And his eyes just gradually glazed over. And so Davis filmed him dying. He didn't drop the camera and grab him and try and give him a blood transfusion, perhaps he knew that instinctively this was a fatal wound. But it's um, and I remember shooting a war – a battle in *Black Harvest*. And looking through the camera when our own lives were threatened for all sorts of complicated reasons and knowing that there was a certain point where our mob would probably break and run. Because they were outnumbered and that happened one time, and I remember I was so mesmerised by what I was looking at through the view finder that in a way you're transported to somewhere else. And you know, you're someone inviolate from your immediate surroundings. And then someone fired a shotgun not far away from me and I looked up from the camera and here's five hundred people coming straight at me firing arrows. And that sort of brought me back to reality. You know, when you've got a camera and you're in a situation, and I've heard a lot of war cameramen and so on say the same thing, there's no question that having the camera and looking at reality through the perspective of a lens does something to you.

Q How about the danger you've been in, how do you find your place in that situation?

00:55:29

Connolly Well when it, I suppose it's happened to me a couple of times, it happened in New York when I was 21 and reporting the Bedford-Stuyvesant riots and I got separated from a police patrol and got chased by a whole lot of rioters. What, and then it happened to me in Singapore during a riot too. And those were formative experiences and I remember one time being in a car with Neil Davis, as it turns out, and Tim Bowden in Singapore when there was a riot on. And our car got surrounded and they started to jump up and down, it didn't look real good actually. What happens is that in those three situations, I can remember – I carried this with me right into the filming in New Guinea, you're suddenly in control of a situation and then so quickly you're not in control. And you're so far not in control that

you are just – and I looked at Neil Davis who by that's stage had been shooting film in Vietnam for five or six years, and he was frightened. You know, so I was frightened too. And so you get this – and that's seared me a bit, so that when we went to New Guinea, with Robin, I mean, and I remember when the fighting first broke out and these were, the enemies at this stage were people we knew, because when they're not fighting each other they're actually you know, there's a lot of interchange goes on, intermarriage and so on. They would all come onto the plantation and so we knew them. But you'd go into a situation where the, you'd think you'd be filming the two sides fighting this way, and sort of the sky is full of arrows, you have to understand, they're sort of firing arrows at each other, trying to wing each other. And then behind the arrow people are these guys with shields and spears and if they wing someone then they try to go in and finish them off with the spears. Well what happens is the axis of the fighting can shift just like that, so suddenly you're from going from being a bystander looking at a football game, you're on the field, you know. And you're surrounded by one side and the other side are firing arrows and they're coming near you. My instinct first of all was to sort of run for it. And Robin would say, what are you doing. And it used to really annoy me, you know, she'd say, no – and (laughs) – that happened about four or five times where we'd actually sort of find ourselves first of all with the people around the plantation and suddenly with their enemies. And after a while as things got worse the situations got a bit more ticklish, you know. And then gradually as the film progresses, we had to stay further and further away from them. But she – there's no question whether it's because I'm just innately cowardly, or that -- I like to think that she was completely lacking in imagination and experience and had never been in a riot. But I was much more nervous than she was. Until um, the fighting broke out at the end of 1990 for real, when the big casualties started and guns started coming onto the – and then something happened which we went up onto the battlefield one day and um, and we'd been in Brisbane with Joe who tried to get out and go to Australia, then the war erupted while he wasn't – fighting while he wasn't there. And it had involved a killing on the plantation. Which suddenly lifted the stakes. And we went

up onto the battlefield and Robin was saying, 'okay we got to get closer to the enemy's side', who were people we knew, but then they started firing arrows directly at us and yelling at us, 'we are going to kill you too. Because now we know who's side you're on'. We'd always tried to stay – I mean I'm being a bit complicated about this. And then the other side charged and we had to run for it. And we had to run about 600 metres with gear and all the rest of it, and arrows sort of going past us, and people getting hit in all directions and that was when she sort of came to her sense and said, 'shit we could get hurt here'. And I was very glad she did.

Q Talk about how you see yourself adapting to the digital age?

00:01:25

Connolly It's a mixed blessing as far as I'm concerned. We resisted but we, most people by the time we were editing *Rats* in the mid '90s had switched to tape from 16mm from memory, but we didn't because we really couldn't, it was an economic thing, we wanted to keep independence and that meant being able to operate our – with our existing equipment. Instead of having to gear up. But I saw the inevitability of it by the time we came to shoot *Facing the Music*. And also I realised that because of the way we approached that film we were going to be shooting very large volumes of material. And so I made the shift to tape. I started off with a little Sony PD whatever they call them, so didn't like that, so sold that. And then I got a little Cannon thingummy, and didn't like that because basically to get focus you press a button. As opposed to where you control everything yourself. Then I bought a bigger camera which passed, you know, it was okay. I mean it was the right decision but it's odd, you know, my Aaton up there, you know, ten minute magazines and everything manual on it, I don't think I ever lost a foot in 300,000 feet of film, but somehow with tape, I know this is a bit of an old hoary one but I sort of, you know because it's so cheap and so easy and so on, you do get, well I do, I just get careless. But as a – as a um, as a production methodology now, I mean

we've just eighteen month film 200 hours of material of non linear digital editing equipment, it's just extraordinary.

(interruption)

Q We were talking about the digital era. Discuss the discipline of shooting?

00:04:41

Connolly Oh yeah I mean I remember there's a scene in *Rats* in fact it opens the film where it's a caucus meeting which I don't think anyone's ever filmed before, we filmed seven before this particular caucus meeting. And it went for two and a half hours. And I was working with an Aaton with three ten minute magazines. Now shooting digital, if I'd been shooting that meeting, I would have had two hours of material. But I had 30 minutes of material. And it was the right material. So often with shooting digital tape, I'm not rolling when I should be, so something weird is going on. And as I say, I know this is an old chestnut, sort of superannuated filmmakers like me, but I just found shooting 16mm when you know it's \$3 a second, that it's costing you, and that's it's a 10 minute 40 magazine that you've got to put it in a black bag and change it at the end of those ten minutes, it really concentrates the mind and you just shoot when you know it's right. I think it's a bit like – shooting with 16mm is a bit like being a trout fisherman, you know, going to just the right place and then doing it, whereas shooting with tape is like a dredge net trawler. You know, you sort of chuck the net over and just film everything that's happening, I find that a bit, I actually once in *Facing the Music* fell asleep while I was filming. Annie Boyd had been waffling on about something or other and I sort of just nodded off. You know and there it is on film. So you know, I mean trivial but.

Q I'd like to talk about the use of sound in your films. Location sound, music.

00:07:00

Connolly Well *Franklin River Journey* was a propaganda film for a start, a commissioned work, the idea was to demonstrate what would be lost if the river was damned by the hydroelectric commission. And our brief was to go down and to show that in the best way possible, the river and it's absolute beauty. I always saw the central character who we chose to go down on a solitary journey down the river, I saw what he was doing, and he saw it in a way as a religious experience. And that gave me the opportunity to utilise one of my great loves in terms of being a music listener, which is polyphonic and classical sacred music. It just seemed to go really well and I loved working with it. I think music can be a bit of a two edged sword, sometimes you can overdo the use of music. There are two elements here, one is location sound and the use of sound, that's something that -- Robin always did that, that's something that I've sort of always taken for granted. When I um, and the -- and the sound equipment that we used in all of the three -- the four films that we did together has always been pretty minimal, it's a Sony walkman, then we graduated to a radio mic and so on. But it's always very straightforward and just getting the bare necessity. Working on *Facing the Music* I -- I saw music as a really important element, almost an other character in the film. And we made a decision in that film to -- the students would have these lunchtimes concerts every Wednesday and Thursday. We filmed every one of them for a year. You know, about 60 concerts all together. And I was very glad that we were able to use elements of that music to great dramatic effect in the film. I don't know if I'm answering your question.

Q More about in the post production process, when you make those decisions.

00:09::21

Connolly I'm a little wary of it, I know how powerful music can be, but I think it's sort of a, you know, good servant bad master thing, you can overdo it. I know how important it can be, in *Facing the Music* -- sorry in *Rats in the Ranks* we used a Bach violin concerto. Which I think is -- and I think I spent six or eight months trying to find the right piece of music for that,

something that was, it just had to say so many things, that music. It had to send itself up almost in a way, but still be exciting and so on. I went, you know, I went through my entire record collection or CD and eventually it was just listening to this piece by Elizabeth Wallfisch was the violinist. And it was transcribed from I don't know, oboe or something to violin, just was perfect. And I remember calling out to Robin and Ray Thomas, 'I've got it'. And they came down and I played them this music, and we quickly sort of dubbed it onto 16mm and it was just perfect. That's a great feeling to have, doing that. I um, yeah I tend to leave a lot of that – those – I'm concerned in editing with the content, you know, with the, with getting the storytelling right.

Q For *Rats in the Ranks*, what made you come from overseas back to Australia?

00:11:16

Connolly I could be clever and say that we decided it was time we focussed on our own culture and to a certain extent that's part of it. We, we um, there are a number of elements, with *Black Harvest*, which won a lot of awards round the world there as a moment, there was a very big prestigious documentary film festival in Japan called Yamagata, they were the first prize of \$40,000, and we went to that with the film and at the same time there was a parallel festival of Indigenous nations, first peoples, first nations and they were looking for an opportunity, they were very politicised, this was again, the early '90s at a time when there was – and it was very strong here among the Aboriginal circles too, and among a lot of European circles that whiteys shouldn't be making films about other people's cultures. So it was – and um, we got targeted at Yamagata, I mean to an extraordinary extent, where when we screened the film in front of 2000 people a Canadian Indian woman got up and basically abused us for, how dare we intrude into this culture and you're just old colonials, all that sort of stuff. Now that had a bit of an effect on me. And I'd sort of been thinking after ten years in New Guinea that maybe it was, you know, time that we ah, and maybe they had a point, maybe you know, to what

extent can you go in? I mean my defence was, in fact we wrote this little blurb, we had to, and that's what alerted them to us. I said, you know, that there was a culture clash going on in New Guinea of epic proportions, where two people of completely opposite viewpoints are confronted in a situation and each of them don't really understand the other. And perhaps the knowledgeable outsider can shed some light on it. And I genuinely believed that and still do. But then I thought after what happened there that maybe um, it was time to apply these techniques that we had developed in New Guinea in our own, in our own milieu, cultural milieu. But that didn't stop us with Film Australia giving us some money to research going off to Fiji and spending three months in Fiji and coming up with this film about the relationship between a Fijian chief and an Indian businessman, and the town of Bah (sp?) in northern Viti Levu. But at some point Robin went home after about six weeks and I spent another month there, at some point I just picked up the phone and I just said, 'nah, it's not on we can't do this. It's not right'. For a whole lot of reasons, one of which was it would expose, I think the Indian to a lot of potential trouble. Cos if he, in these sort of films, unless people are acting out the situation, you know, you haven't got a film. And for him to say the things that he wanted to say and to do the things he wanted to do it would have got him into trouble. And so we basically abandoned that. But we'd spent all our research money. Now this guy, the Indian was the former mayor of Bah. He'd been the mayor the year before. And so we came home, and I remember we spent all our research money, we had to come up with some idea. And when we'd come back from New Guinea in our street here in Glebe, we got caught up in a street battle about the massive expansion of this hostel, backpackers hostel across the road. And it has brought us into contact with Leichhardt Council and Larry Hand, the Mayor had adjudicated a number of very disputatious meetings. That the street had had. And I thought that was quite interesting, I thought all councils did was you know, empty the garbage sort of thing, but what I didn't realise was that you know, with an area like inner city Leichhardt, which was subjected to huge pressure from people wanting to sort of come into the city and moving into these areas and then refashion the houses the way

they wanted to, plus enormous former industrial sites, and what you'd do with them, this was a vitally interesting and important area of urban sort of living. And that a council played a key role in it as a conflict mediator really. And determining the built environment of the city. And so we – sat here in our kitchen thinking what the hell are we going to do, bugger it, let's just do a film about Leichhardt council. So I actually went to the Film Australia Christmas party and I said to Chris Oliver, you know how we were going to do a film about – in fact, as I remember we had – we were sort of due to pack up and leave and to go off to Fiji when I aborted it you see, and I came home. You know I was going to do last minute research, I had rented a house and booked our oldest kid into a primary school there. And I came home and I said, it's not on. And about – we had about four weeks, three weeks before we were supposed to go and we went to the Film Australia Christmas party and Chris said to me, 'how are you going, are you ready to leave, all set up. I'm going to give you some still photography because you'll need to do some publicity stills'. And I said, 'oh Chris there's been a change of plan. We're not going to Fiji now, and you know how we were going to do a film about the former mayor of Bah, well now we're going to do a film about the present mayor of Leichhardt'. And he sort of went, 'oh my god, alright'. But we had no idea how that was going to, how that was going to work out. And in fact the first three or four weeks of shooting, we thought the film was going to be about the council's interaction with the community. But quickly found out that for the sort of films we make which are narrative observational films, they have a dozen interactions with the community, a hundred interactions with the community every week. And each of them are different, and that's not a film, that's a series of episodes. And I remember thinking about three or four weeks in, we're in deep proverbial here, and then it gradually became apparent that Larry who'd been the mayor for three years was under pressure from the councillors about – he wanted to be the mayor for a fourth year, but there were a group of councillors on this twelve person council who basically wanted to boot him out. And I remember writing an email, or not an email, a fax to the commissioning editor of Channel 4, I remember writing an email or sending a fax to the commissioning editor

of Channel 4 and saying, look I think there could be a story in this guy's attempt to stay as the mayor. And then it became a film not about the – not about the council's interaction with the community, but a political film about the succession or the struggle for the mayor in this sort of political environment. And it was a good decision ... but it was great fun working in your own culture because working in New Guinea, I mean for a start, shooting the Joe Leahy films there were two languages spoken on the plantation, one is pidgin, which we became fluent in after about four months. And that's the lingua franca for a country that has five hundred different languages. And the common language is pidgin, that's the parliamentary language. But the language that the people speak among themselves in this particular area was Tembaka I knew about 150 words of Tembaka, which meant I couldn't really follow a conversation. And so for a lot of the time you're filming major confrontations not having an idea what people are saying. And that's a terrible strain. Often not knowing until you actually get to the translation process at the end of the shooting. You have a rough idea what they're saying because you know the background and so on, and you know the key characters and you know the key topics of meetings. But a lot of the time you don't know what's going on. And so and also culturally a lot you're – I mean we were knowledgeable about Melanesian culture, we'd read the key works and so on. But it is true, you're a stranger in someone else's culture, it's a different language, it's a different way of thinking. You know the New Guinea films were adopted by the ethnographic and anthropological academic world and they're still used widely in universities. And they are used as, as examples of anthropological ethnographic filmmaking. We never really intended them to be that. We saw them as human dramas just set in another culture.

00:20:28

But there are limitations in getting to the heart of things. Whereas I think working in your own culture, which we discovered, working with Larry Hand and *Rats in the Ranks*, where you know, all the -- the game is equal. And the methodology we learnt in New Guinea we were able to apply

absolutely in the same way. And in all sorts of ways the situation was similar, you know, a conflict situation, opposition. Point, counterpoint and so on. And so, I mean basic rules like, we quickly got the, you know, there were three or four factions in Leichhardt council and they were deadly enemies. And there was a political struggle going on of considerable consequence to them. And we were able to move freely among all of them and film intimate situations where all sorts of secrets were being divulged. But the ground rules that we'd established with them were, if we film with one group of people that remains absolutely sacrosanct, we will not divulge anything of what's said or done. And nobody will know about it until the film comes out in two years time. Now that rule in New Guinea was, you know, if Joe was in conflict with someone we won't tell that person what Joe has told us and vice versa. The consequences there could have been an axe in your head, you know. The consequences in *Rats in the Ranks* could have been a loss of faith and confidence in our integrity. But they were, ground rules like that were very useful. And we applied them.

Q How did that work with your work/life balance, filming next door?

00:22:18

Connolly Working in New Guinea was the high point of my personal and professional life. Eighteen months we spent making *Joe Leahy's Neighbours*, we built – basically built a grass hut on the edge of the plantation, and we didn't have any kids then. And so a hundred per cent of our time was devoted to just interacting with the people and in this incredibly stimulating exciting sometimes dangerous environment knowing we were documenting a wonderful unfolding drama. And just being in that culture, in fact it was a real culture shock to come back to Australia because living in a tribal society you do realise what an atomised society capitalist societies are. I mean up there everyone is important. And you're not seen as merely a producer or a consumer. You know the least prominent person is as important as anyone else. Making *Black Harvest* the same applied for the first six months, we took our

eighteen month old, two year old daughter with us, and again it was idyllic, it was wonderful, wonderfully interesting, then the whole thing blew up and you saw the downside of tribal society. Which is like our gardener being chopped to pieces because he was caught out in the open and so on. That's not so much fun. What was the question.

Q How you balance work and life.

00:23:39

Connolly So up there our – we lived on the location, we, the film would come to our door. You know we were fifty yards from – a hundred yards from Joe's house. We were on the main walking track to the plantation from the tribal area. So every, there was never less than fifteen people in the place, and so it was just, we were completely immersed in the film itself, living it out. And in a way we tried to recreate that, I mean Leichhardt council is two kilometres from here. Sydney University where we made *Facing the Music* is one kilometre from here so and Burwood where we just spent eighteen months shooting MLC school, that's you know, fifteen minutes up the road. You try to get as close to the location as possible. The – having a child up there on location was fantastic because we hired two young girls to look after her, and you know, we come in from the field exhausted and the dinner would be made and the fire on and Katherine would be bathed and fed and so on, it was – I wish. With *Rats in the Ranks*, believe it or not Katherine – and we had two kids then, their not governess, what's the word, their child minder for quite a few months was Verity Firth of all people. When she was doing her arts law degree, we were able to you know, I think she was called a production assistant on the budget. And she would look after the kids, but we managed.

Q How did that affect the kids growing up?

00:25:39

Connolly Well they were pretty young, see I mean the last film that I made was *Facing the Music* and that was released in 2001. And then I nursed Robin

until she died in 2002 in March, and I couldn't even look at a camera for six years. You know I just didn't, just didn't want to make films. And spent most of that time just writing the book *Making Black Harvest*, so back in 2000 and whatever it was, Joanna was ten and Katherine was fourteen, I suppose they were fairly, yeah, *Facing the Music* they – we worked in the attic. And I think there's certain music that they can't bring themselves to listen to anymore because over a period of a year you just endlessly played it backwards and forwards. They say that they liked it. You know, Ray, I can remember in, you asked me what was the happiest moment of my life, I remember when we were shooting *Black Harvest*, no, when we were editing *Black Harvest*. And the two of us up there together working on this extraordinary material and our two kids were playing in the front of this attic area with the light coming in on them, just playing there. And there we were, plenty of time to edit and working on something deeply satisfying both in creative terms and all the rest of it and I remember saying to Robin, this is – savour this, this is pre-industrial revolution stuff, this is. You know, this is man and woman and kids, you know, self sufficient, raising the crops and all the rest of it. This is not capitalised atomising, this is not everyone going off and doing their jobs and coming back exhausted at 7 o'clock. This is living and working at home surrounded by everything you love, it was just magic, absolutely magic.

00:27:55

Connolly Well we're in my office-cum-editing room. And that's what happens here, um, I guess. I'm right now, what I'm doing is using the camera to digitise the material from our latest shoot onto our Final Cut Pro computer system, editing system, the main bit of which is over there, that's where we edit the film. This is um, just where I do my work I suppose, this is my work space.

Q How long have you been using this space?

00:28:36

Connolly Since the attic upstairs which is where we edited *Black Harvest*, *Rats in the Ranks*, and *Facing the Music* got turned into bedrooms. So this used to be Katherine's room. So I colonised it, yeah so I guess to answer your question about ah six years now.

Q What's important about working in this space?

00:29:04

Connolly What's important? It's at home for a start. It's um, it's the repository of a lot of the stuff that is a memento for you know, thirty years work I suppose. Um, it's um, gee I don't know, it's my cocoon, it's a great spot.

Q You do a lot of the writing, researching here?

00:29:36

Connolly Yeah. Well certainly a lot of the writing, I wrote my book, *Making Black Harvest* here. And setting everything up, it's the Arundel Productions control room if you like.

Q What do you do when you're not making films?

00:29:58

Connolly There it is.

Q What's that?

00:30:03

Connolly That's my boat. Which I get on as often as I can.

Q Where do you go?

00:30:11

Connolly I just keep it at Birchgrove. Yeah it's a 30 foot sloop and I race it in the summer. Sophie and I do with a few friends. And we go off to Pittwater in

it and live in it for a week or two at a time. And it's um, it's impossible to think about anything else other than sailing when you're on a boat. I've had a boat – first boat I got was in 19 – gee 1965. Because I lived in um, Sydney and I used to sail a lot as a kid, I used to do a bit of racing and so on. And it just suddenly seemed absurd to me that I shouldn't use the water more because I love it so much. So I bought a little 24 foot yacht for a few thousand with a whole group of friends who gradually fell away from it, because they got seasick and stuff. And Robin was very sympathetic and kept on saying, yeah, yeah, buy them out. So I ended up with it myself, and what you do – this is my third boat, and you just want to get one that's bigger each time. And so I just save up and sell one and get a bigger one.

Q How do you do in the races?

00:31:23

Connolly Not bad. Not bad, I've had this boat for um, two years now. And it usually takes me a year to learn how to sail it. This is called a Farr B30 and it's a very, it's – I won't go into too much detail but it's – it just takes a while to learn how to tune them. And to make them go fast because tuning means adjusting the sails in a particular way, it's like the wing of an aeroplane, it's got to be exactly right, and if it isn't you don't go fast. So it takes about a year to get to know it. To get to know its foibles, stuff like that.

Q Other activities that are film related – the Robin Anderson Awards, tell me about that?

00:32:17

Connolly Well when Robin died both our kids were going to MLC school in Burwood. And which is a fantastic school, my younger daughter is still there. And um, the school – she was – on one of the advisory committees of the school and she was very well respected as she was everywhere. And um, a group of people sort of assumed that I would want to set up some sort of a scholarship, you know, in her name or sort of an award of some

sort just to perpetuate her memory at the school. And suddenly all this money came in. Dick Smith donated \$10,000, just straight off like that, I got to know Dick years and years before making films with him. And so I went to see the head mistress, Barbara Stone, and um, I said, 'well we'd like to set up some kind of a, you know, memorial award at the school for scholarship'. And it just, then I said, 'it would be nice if it was somehow connected with filmmaking'. What's happened in the last ten years I suppose with the development, the explosive development of non-linear – you know, digital cameras and editing systems, is that the kids have taken it up. And it's now a very well established discipline in schools. And a lot of kids are making films, being introduced to the whole art form for the first time. And Barbara Stone said, well you know, why don't – rather than restricting it to the school why don't you – are there any awards for student filmmakers in high schools and things. And turned out there weren't that many, there were a couple, nothing sort of established if you like. So the head of art out at the school, Craig Malyon and I sort of sat down with people like Paul, Paul Byrnes and Jan Chapman and we came up with this idea of a student film competition for high school kids studying film at school. And it – initially we restricted it to the inner west schools because Burwood is in the inner west. And I think the first one was 2004, and from then it's just grown exponentially, it then went, a couple of years later it went state wide, now it's national. And as far as I know it's the largest student film awards in the country. And um, the Australian Directors' Guild of which you are the distinguished President. And the Australian Film and TV School have massively come onboard with prizes and providing some funding. And ah, and so on. And so – and the film school, which is the greatest compliment, because a lot of the people from the film school were on judging committees and presenters of prizes and things, and they suddenly were exposed to the quality of the work that some of these kids are doing, which is basically unrecognised, you know, and they're just blown away by it. And the film school's actually changed its curriculum for documentary, and other early intake stuff, based on the experience they've had with the awards. And I hasten to say it's not just documentary, it's in fact, documentary is turning out to

be the less, the less popular aspect of the awards. It's – the most popular category by far is fiction. And so we give awards for fiction and for non fiction and for animation. And for mobile phone films and stuff like that. And it's, it's now about its sixth year and it's going gangbusters.

Q You watch a lot of the films?

00:36:10

Connolly Yeah, well I'm usually on the judging panel with say four or five other industry people. And we've had a terrific eclectic bunch of people, you know been involved in it. What I've been trying to do is to sort of connect up the industry to this school activity too. And it's no criticism of school teachers as such, but not many of them who are teaching film now have had professional industry experience. And so what we try to do is to expose both them and the students to industry professionals, so that the directors' guild, you know, has a mentorship program and they can become members. And it's – some of the prizes are short courses at the film school. And we – each year we have a seminar, a two day seminar where industry professionals come in and we get a lot of school teachers come along to that, and they just get a much more hands-on industry based grounding in filmmaking basics. It's hard work because we haven't got much money. And there's only two of us basically running it. But it's, it's satisfying.

Q Show me some things around the wall?

00:37:44

Connolly That's my partner Sophie who makes films with me now as a co-director. She's a multi-talented – she's an animator and an artist and a musician and a filmmaker now as well. And she drew that – and she entered in that – what's it called, is it the Archibald? Yeah she entered it in the Archibald. It's me. Looking like a brick shithouse. But um, and she's got my mantra up there, 'control uncontrol', right. That's that whole notion of in order to relinquish control – in order to relinquish control you have to have control

in some areas. So she wanted to stick that up there so she did. What else is there? I suppose that's my kids, that's Katherine when she graduated from Columbia. That's my, I suppose my one of my better works, that's a *First Contact* nominated for an Academy Award, Robbie and I went over there and it was very interesting because the New York Times and the New York – no, the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times had us as a favourite in the documentary category. But of course we didn't win, we won – we lost to a magnificent film, which I have no worries about acknowledging. Ah, that's Robbie and I in 2001. She's wearing a wig because she'd lost all her hair from chemotherapy and we got an IF Award for Living Legends, which I think cos the word had got out by that stage and people knew she was crook, and I think it was a nice thing for them to do. That's a Walkely Award up there I got a Walkely Award for the book, *Making Black Harvest*, which is one of the – it's given me a lot of satisfaction winning that because I thought it was rather nice to sort of cross from one field to another and to get a Walkely is something I prize a lot, I value that.

Q Any particular mentors that you've had?

00:39:55

Connolly Sid Mounsey? Have I got anything of him?

Q Was he someone you would call a mentor?

00:40:03

Connolly Oh absolutely, hugely so. Yeah, because not only did he teach me how to write, I mean when I say write, I think it's been a skill that I acquired on the job and has stood me in good stead for a long time - I've written three books and done a lot of narrations and stuff like that. It's a -- it's just a terrifically useful thing to have as an observational filmmaker. But he also – cos I was a cadet journalist and I was going on an independent trip around the world when I had to land in New York in June '66. And I was still a third year cadet. And I had the chance of spending about four weeks

in the New York office in a sort of a training situation. And I – the head of the office was a guy named Charles Buttrose who went on to become the Deputy General Manager of the ABC, but then was in charge of the ABC's New York office. And his main job then was basically booking orchestras for the – because the ABC ran all the orchestras, and the journalist, the foreign correspondent was a guy called Peter Barnett who after about four or five weeks had to go to Australia and he was there for I think a year or something. And Charlie Buttrose had taken a bit of a shine to me for one reason or another and he wrote off the general manager, 'why don't we keep this kid on'. I found myself the ABC's North American correspondent at the age of 21. Knowing sweet FA I should add. You know and just barely trying to keep my head above water. But you know, covering for example, the '67 mid east war in the security council, the Bedford-Stuyvesant riots, the whole Vietnam war, sending off the ten, you know, thought pieces and analysis stuff a week. It was extraordinary. And I came back and was expected to join the news department again, which I did but then *This Day Tonight* was just starting out, the precursor of the *7:30 Report*. It was in its second year, this was in '68. And they offered me a six month contract, they weren't – they were bypassing the usual ABC way of doing things which was to have staff people, they just went around, they cherry picked who they thought were good potential people like Mike Willessee and Peter Luck and Gerry Stone and Richard Carlton, all these sort of people. And they said, we will give you a six month contract and try you out. My mother said, 'oh don't do that, you've got a job for life'. And um, Sid Mounsey, I was sort of dithering a bit because I had reasonably good career prospects opening up in the news department and Sidney Mounsey called me in and he said, Connolly – no he didn't, he said, 'young Connolly, young Connolly if you don't take that job I will never speak to you again'. And so I took it. And um, was very glad I did because I sort of went on from there. I did a longer documentary in my holidays while on *This Day Tonight*. And um, it's still, it's a film, -- it's not on your website but it ought to be, I'm still very proud of it. It's a film called *A Lion's Holiday*, first documentary I ever made. And it's about a scheme where the Lion's Club down in Avalon which is a

northern Sydney beachside suburb, each year bring a group of Aboriginal kids down for a holiday by the sea. And so we concentrated on one family, middle-upper middle class family with a swimming pool and nice house in Avalon. Then we went up to Brewarrina and found one of the kids who was coming down, an eleven year old boy who's background – his circumstances were a bit desperate. And then we just made a film about the interaction between the two. And it really laid the pattern for the work that I eventually did in – that sense of an interesting potential situation. Interesting people, just go there and see what happens, you know, hang out. So anyway, I digress.

Q Are there any – do you have a strong personality trait that makes you good at what you do?

00:44:13

Connolly God I don't know if I'm the one who should answer that. Um, I think I get on with people fairly well, and then again some people I don't get on with. I'm not universally liked. Which is fine. Um, I um ... I'm fairly determined. When I get onto a film I get very obsessive about it. Very obsessive. Like I'm obsessive now, I'm itching to get back to digitising. Ah, I don't know you'd have to ask someone else that, I'm very lucky that I think, you know, I tell my kids who are in the process of getting really excellent educations, you know, that if they – if they fall into – or if they choose a profession that it's an utter pleasure to go to work, you know, and that you get a huge amount of satisfaction out of then ah, that's what they should do, because that's what I've had. You know I mean I've been able to work at home I've been able to -- I don't like working for institutions I wasn't very good at working for institutions, I found them difficult places to be in, I didn't like school much. You know, I didn't – sort of the ABC was, I have a huge gratitude towards it but you know, the whole sort of office politics sort of stuff just takes so much energy away and you know, it's – so working as a freelance independent filmmaker you just can channel all your energy where you want to channel it. I think also working as an independent forces you to be very disciplined and I

think I am quite disciplined about what I do. I don't – you know, I probably work longer hours than a lot of people, and you just do it because that's – you're able to do it and because the work is so, is so interesting. The thing I love most about filmmaking I think – and I say this, Robbie's relatives were medical people and so on, she used to say this, she used to say, we are so privileged in what we do. Because in a way an awful lot of people are the engine drivers, they keep the show rolling. But what people in the creative professions can do is, they're in a way the passengers, you know. They don't drive the ship they travel on it, somewhere. In a way. My dad was an airline pilot. He loved what he did but essentially he used to say himself, I'm a glorified bus driver. But he loved it, it was difficult, challenging, work which required massive responsibility and high levels of training and all the rest of it. But ultimately it's doing the same thing. When you set out on a film, a big project like that it's this artefact that you're creating out of nothing. And you've got something to show for it, I mean I've got all my films, you know up in DVDs and in 16mm prints and so on. And it's like an artefact that it's there, it's made and then you sort of leave that aside and then move onto another one. And all the rules are, you know, what's the word, you start from the beginning again, you're just as scared, you know, you're just as excited, it's just as hard. It's just that it's a whole new set of um, of challenges that require a whole new set of responses from you. And it doesn't get any easier. It's not like my brother in law, ex-brother in law who's an orthopaedic surgeon and specialises on knees. And he basically makes a fortune but – and he's been doing it for twenty years and each knee he does gets a little bit better than the last one and he gets a bit more bored with it.

00:48:11

Which is why he rushes around driving rally cars and learning how to fly helicopters, like a lot of medicos. That sounds like, it's a little bit arrogant on my part, but you know what I mean. I mean the creative life is a – cos that's the way I look at it. I sort of divide – this sort of filmmaking is less creative than other aspects of filmmaking, I mean a lot of documentary filmmakers bridle when I say that, but it's true. When we go out to make a

film, it's – the shooting process is analytical, you know. And requires analysis, patience and the ability to get on with a widely disparate group of people. And the ability to sort of divine the sort of patterns that are emerging. But as a cinematographer, I don't – I could never shoot a scene and direct people, I mean all my life I've spent doing the opposite, of being a passive observer of stuff. You know. In the editing there's a good deal of creative process goes on. But anyway I digress as usual.

Q Talking of cinematography, show us that...

00:49:22

Connolly Well that um, you know there's a famous probably the grand old man of world documentary cinema is a guy called David Maysles, no Albie Maysles, one of the famous Maysles brothers who pioneered observational filmmaking. And I remember he lives in New York and he's got an office on the Avenue of the Americas. And I think I was there with *Black Harvest* and you know I met him and he invited me back to his office and we went into his room and into his big office where he's got a whole lot of people working for him. And he pointed reverently at this funny looking old camera up on the wall. And he said, that is the camera that shot *Salesman*. And I went, oh, you know. Which is, you know my favourite documentary film, it's an absolute masterpiece. So that is the camera that shot um, well um, *Joe Leahy's Neighbours*, *Black Harvest*, and *Rats in the Ranks*. It weighs a bloody tonne and it um, you know it's um, there's nothing automatic on it, it's um, and it's got a magazine that lasts for ten minutes and 40 seconds then you've got to unload it and reload it again. But if I could shoot film I'd still want to go back to that. For all sorts of reasons.

Q These were meant to be very light cameras?

00:50:55

Connolly Yeah, that's right. That's exactly right, mind you that lens, I got that lens, I had an ingénue 6:1 but it just really wasn't that crash hot you know what I

mean. And when I was shooting *Rats in the Ranks*, by that stage I was in love with the idea of blowing it up because we used to blow our films up to 35mm. And the aspect ratio of the ingénue, all those cheaper lenses, it's 10 by 8 and this has a 16 to 9 aspect ratio. And it meant that you could effortlessly blow it up to 35mm. But the lens is – it's \$25,000 lens that one. I got it for twelve, it's extremely heavy and it completely unbalances the camera. And I think I still have one arm that's still a little bit bigger than the other one.

00:52:07

Connolly Of course I didn't have glasses then so ah, I have to take my glasses off. But there we go. You know there's a scene in – so that's how you hold it. I once had to replace this bit here, it was \$1800 just for that piece of wood, you know. It's a French camera and as you well know they're just a wonderful piece of work and um, there's a photograph in – in fact it's on the cover of my book, which I think I can find somewhere, where is it. *Making Black Harvest*, I used it – oh thank you very much. There's the same camera, that in the – in a quiet moment in the middle of a tribal war in New Guinea in 1990. That's Joseph Medang, closest friend and confidante who was killed in battle about three days after that photograph was taken. You know, this is the camera that I took on the battlefield every day and ran quickly with. There's a scene in the early fighting scenes in *Black Harvest* where we – when they first raided an enemy village and then the enemy counterattacked and they, 'Bob, old bidduabai come', which is 'the enemy are coming, look out'. So I turned around and started to run and of course I took my eye off the eye piece but kept on filming, and when you do that the light gets in, in the film so all you see is this haring down this track with this thing, as usual displaying a very healthy degree of cowardice. Anyway. And then this thing up here on the left is um, when I was finally persuaded to um, to give 16mm away that was the first (phone interruption) ...

00:54:09

Connolly This was a – this is a Canon so I began shooting *Facing The Music* with this. But you know, the whole essence in particularly in that film where there was a lot of music we were shooting, you know, and music playing, music performance, you really do need very precise focussing. And with this thing from memory, yes that's right, look at this. Push auto focus. And that somehow just deskilled the whole thing, you know to push a button as opposed with an Aaton, you know with its big sort of focus ring, with incredible precision what's more, because the viewfinder is just so wonderful, fibre optic viewfinder and you can just see everything and have real manual control over what you're doing. It's a proper cinematographers camera, you know. But this is an ambulance chaser's camera. And that was what I was using to shoot *Facing the Music*. And there it is, push AF, push auto focus – you know when you're looking through the thing because the lens is not very good it's not very clear, you can't really tell whether it's in focus or not. So you push this button, you know. And I thought after about three weeks, 'no thanks', you know. So I got a predecessor to this one, which is a um, a much different kettle of fish, it's a really good – it's a Sony, and the interesting thing about this if I can find it is that um, as I said, this camera had a magazine on it, and at the end of ten minutes, and I never ever worked with an assistant, you'd have to take that off and put it in a black bag, and open it up, and put the roll of film in, thread it through there, not being able to see what you're doing. Take it out of the black bag, one up this side, you know, dispose of your, your exposed roll of film and then load another one in. I got it down to about – how long did it take you, Ray? I got it down to about four minutes. You know, something like that. Anyway, ten minutes. So then with a camera like this on the other hand, I finally started working with a thing called a compact flash, it's not in there. I think everyone knows if you're a still photographer, and you stick this on it. And ah, you know there's 75 minutes or whatever it is of um, of material on a thing the size of a postage stamp. Which you can reuse continually. So that is a revolution, there's no question. And it basically means that you can just keep on – keep on shooting.

00:57:25

Connolly This one you sort of can hold it up to your shoulder, but not very well. And with these sort of cameras, you know, that your lovely second unit, you know you sort of hold them like this, which I just don't like. I prefer putting a camera on your shoulder. You know, cos you just get more balance and I'd be – take me a lot to persuade me. And also because it's a very good lens, a relatively good lens. So I go for the bigger camera when I'm shooting. If this is of interest, I'll be a monkeys' uncle. But still, this is the most self-indulgent waffle I've ever gone on ...

END TRANSCRIPT