

Robin Hughes

Ray Argall interviewed Robin Hughes for australianscreen on 3 June 2009

And away we go. OK, great. We discussed the clips that were on the site, and at the moment, there's - I think there's several Chequerboard clips, so I was just going to go broadly, of the films and the work that you've done, are there any particular moments that stand out, that you remember?

Robin 02A/43:21 One of the problems in answering that, Ray, is that I've been involved with so many series, um, you know, so that it's - I always find it a bit difficult when people to ask me to list my credits, because there are literally hundreds. And each of them have had stand out moments for various reasons, so it is like, you know, the - choose which child you like if you've got 18 children. You know, if you've got hundreds of films, it's a bit difficult for me to say that. I mean, there's no question that of the things you've got on site, that because the *Chequerboards* are the ones that are there, that was a great start, not just for me, but for a number of of people who worked on that, who've gone on to better and brighter things later. It was a real turning point too, I think, in the history of Australian documentary, and, um, and so, you know, the *Chequerboard* series as a whole was very significant, but then later, there were other things that, um, meant a lot to me, um.

So, with *Chequerboard*, what was the - what was - what were the changes it made?

Robin 02A/44:35 Well, I think, um, you know, remember, *Chequerboard* started in the later '60's, really early '70's, and it was at a time when, on television, and that, remember, was where a very large section of the documentary industry was developed. I mean, there were 2 strands to documentary film development in Australia. One of them was television, and what happened inside the public broadcasters. And the other one was the film strand, a lot of which happened here at Film Australia. Um, and on the television front, there'd been only the sort of documentary that we now think of as a *Four Corners* documentary, which was basically taking issues and looking at them through the eyes of experts. And *Chequerboard* was quite revolutionary, because we moved right away from looking at

the broad social issues that we were looking at, because in the late '60's, early '70's, those social issues were huge in the community. There was a lot of change - huge amount of social change going on historically, and so what we did on *Chequerboard* was look at those through the eyes of the people actually experiencing them, so they were people in the situations which shaped their lives. We - we didn't use any experts. We didn't use - we used minimal if any commentary. It was a combination of interview and a small amount of observation. And that was really quite revolutionary.

Robin 02A/46:21 And so, for example, in the *Chequerboard* series, I remember I interviewed, um, one that is on site, which was at that time - priests were beginning to - leave the priesthood. That was the first interview of that sort of thing. I did the first interview that had ever taken place in a prison in Australia. We had to go to South Australia for it, because at that time, Don Dunstan was premier of South Australia, and so, really big things were opening up there. It was much better - much more liberal government - we were able to get access to things. So, we did the first prison. We did the first film that'd ever been made that showed the lives of gays - of homosexuals. We looked at the gay movement. You know, footage that's still shown at - at you know, during special - weeks of that sort of film. Um, we - there were just so many firsts from that time, and so it was very exciting. And we had a sense that we were taking part in influencing. We did a couple of major films on people who were poor - on really. And we felt that it had, because it - often made big news in the newspapers, and so on, and the stories would be picked up and taken on. Because people found this, which we've now got so used to on current affairs, but this case history way of talking about social issues - people found them - found that really engaging, and so they took it up, and they took these stories to their hearts. And we felt that it had an influence on things like the Henderson enquiry into poverty and so on. We had this very - we were all very young, and we all had this sort of feeling that we were participating in something important. So *Chequerboard* was important, and working with us on that was Tris Miall, who then went on to - he - he'd arrived from England, and - and joined my little research team. In that research team was Tris, Aviva Ziegler, Stephen Ramsey, a number of people who then went on to make their names as documentary filmmakers. And then, move, in Tris's case, into feature film industry.

I felt there was a real intimacy with the - people in front of the camera there. That was obviously something quite new. How was that received? By people - the bureaucracies, the agencies, the broadcasters?

Robin 02A/49:06 Yes, that very closeup style, which was again new. You see it now, but then it was new. And, oh, yes, and I forgot to mention some of the other people in the team - Geoff Burton - started as an assistant - camera, and moved to being a camera on *Chequerboard*. Tony Wilson came onto - so, you know, there were - there was a - yes. And that very intimate style of interviewing. It was the foundation for us of the observational method, although that was an interview, we did a certain amount of observational, and for me, that got quite exciting - for me personally. And later I got very interested in taking that further. We didn't know that over in America, Wiseman and the Maysles brothers, and so on were doing all of this. What we did know was that cameramen like Bill Steller who was at the ABC, and who'd both Tony Wilson and - and Geoff were assistants to - had taken - as news cameraman, started taking the camera off the tripod and putting it on their shoulders. And we began to think - oh, this is terribly interesting, and it was only later - much later - when, um, Mike Rubbo came out to film school and brought with him a collection of Wiseman films and Maysles brothers films - we sat there this weekend and, sort of, and among that audience was Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson, who then went on ... So, there was a sort of discovery on our own part, and then a sort of recognition later that we'd been part of something that somehow or other was in the air at that time - let's get intimate with the people who were really part of that.

Robin 02A/50:57 Now the interesting thing about *Chequerboard* for me also - because I would - I started there as Head of Research, and it was really up to me the way we set up - the way we'd - we'd go about doing the research. I later took on a bigger interviewing role, and then became a producer on it, but at that - when it started, I was concerned about the ethics of what we were doing, and very interested in setting up really effectively a protocol for researchers, because remember that this hadn't been done before, and a lot of the people we were going to had no consciousness of what it would mean to be on television, so we took a lot of trouble before they agreed to participate, to be absolutely sure that they were aware that the next day, their kids'd go to school, and they would have been seen. Because it was a

very high rating program, um, and there was a, you know, we felt that it was really important that they give informed consent. So there were a lot of ways in which we had to think about how to deal with some of the issues which still beset documentary filmmakers about how they're going to go about doing their work.

Robin 02A/52:13 I suppose the other thing that I really liked about it was that, you know, the old saying that truth is stranger than fiction, and I guess that one of the reasons why I've stayed working in documentary, largely, although I did put my toe in the water of drama when everybody else was doing that - when the opportunities arose in the '70's, and I thought very long and hard about going more permanently in that direction, but I think that the lovely thing about documentary is perpetual uncertainty - the fact that from the moment that you conceive it, to the last moment of editing, you're really in a discovery mode, you know, that you're writing - that you're - that're you're - anything can happen. And the surprises are often bigger than anything that you could imagine and dream up for drama. And *Chequerboard* was the first introduction to shaping a program in the way you'd shape a novel or a short story.

<Crew chatter.>

Um, so - the collaborations that began there were obviously continued for you. Do you want to talk about those collaborations, any particular people you have worked with, or how you observed their work. Talking about collaborations ... how you worked with them and how you continued to work with them.

Robin 02A/54:48 Yes, well, um, I think I've already mentioned that we were very much a team on *Chequerboard*. Of course, our leader was the iconoclastic Tom Manefield who was older than the rest of us, and, um, gave us the most enormous amount of laxity and leeway to run things, you know ... But he would come in, um, and in really quite outrageous ways, um, suggest amazing things that startled us, and we'd do interesting things together. So it was one of those periods of my life where collaboration really worked so well that I've always looked for finding really good collaborative arrangements, or setting up environments in which people

could have good collaboration, when I've had leadership roles since. And, um, among the people that I worked with then, I've continued to have collaborations with, like Tristram and Aviva and so on, and that continued when I - I was - there was a period where I worked at Film Australia as a producer, and worked with some of those people. But I also met other directors here, and then later, a very interesting time, was when the idea of observational documentary, social issues documentary told through the participants - um, decided to take that to commercial television, and the only way that you could do that, really, was with a star.

Robin 02A/56:30 And as it happened, Mike Willesee, who was working at Channel 7 with his very successful *Current Affair*, which he'd set up having come from the ABC to set it up, had decided to move into doing documentaries, but he was in a difficult situation because he'd signed a contract that he would make 30 hour-long documentaries in 18 months, and it was very clear that he wasn't going to achieve that, and so, I was asked to come in and help make it happen, and we did in fact do, at Channel 7, and then later moved to Channel 9, the Channel 7 we did do 30 hour-long documentaries in 18 months with a team that included Gillian Armstrong, Chris Noonan, Phil Noyce - all working on documentary - Aviva Zeigler, Tristram Miall, and Stephen Wallace. And they were all there together as - as my team. I was Series Producer on that. It absolutely rated the roof off. And when we first went to air, I was very nervous, because the then head of Channel 7, Ted Thomas, decided that he was going to put it on against *60 Minutes*, which at that time was absolutely king - this was the '80's. Absolutely dominant, on ... And I really didn't know whether they could hold their own. Well they out-rated *60 Minutes* - knocked it off the perch. It - they won 3 Logies - they were massively successful. Only a few years later, when I was chair of the council of the AFTRS, the then head of Channel 7 said to me one day, but you've got to realise, Robin, that we can't put documentaries on on commercial television because they don't rate, and they've never rated. So one of the things that documentary is really up against is the old belief that's endemic in television programmers that documentary doesn't rate. The right documentary, made and promoted in the right way, without insulting the intelligence of the audience, but reaching out to the audience in ways to make the work really accessible, can deal with really big subjects, and deal with them very effectively, and - and rate very well. But the belief that they won't has a terribly inhibiting effect on - on what the results are.

Q: Just talking about the effect on filmmakers of, I guess it's, is it attitude, would you say, the attitude of the broadcasters to documentary?

Robin 03A/01:01 Well, over the time that I've worked in documentary, that has been an attitude that's shifted. I mean, you know, from time to time you get somebody, um, who's really in a position to make a decision, as I mentioned with Ted Thomas, who are really very sympathetic to the fact that documentary can be just as entertaining and bring in an audience just as well as other sorts of programming, but sometimes when pressure is on, to lift ratings, say, you know, there's a move to feeling that, um people aren't going to be engaged by subject matter which is a bit challenging, and yet if you make those challenging subjects accessible to a wide range of people, there's nothing connects with an audience as well, in my experience. But it's easy for people to think, no, they'll prefer a quiz show, you know, and so it can be difficult sometimes, to - to get broadcasters to really comprehend that an excellent television slot can build an audience if it's promoted, presented properly and you make sure that the quality of the material in it is kept up to scratch.

Q: Do you think reality television has affected documentary filmmaking, or filmmakers?

Robin 03A/02:32 I think that the arrival of reality television confused a lot of broadcasters about what was documentary and what wasn't. And, you know, in a way, it was stepping into a situation where even calling it reality - I mean, you know, you don't have to watch it for very long to see that the thing that we, as documentary filmmakers strive for, which is to get a natural response from people who've got so used to the camera that they've forgotten it's there, never happens in reality television. The self consciousness of the people, acting how they think they ought to act for the camera, is so evident, and, you know, it's not that that can't be, at times, entertaining, but it's not reality.

Q: I think back to those *Chequerboard* clips, and they were so - there was a realness about those people.

Robin 03A/03:42 Well, certainly always, and I've found this with the interviewing I've done throughout my career, and that includes the big interviewing project, *Australian Biography*, that I've been involved with for the last, you know, almost 2 decades. Um, that - that preparation is the key. That, you know, before - with those *Chequerboard* subjects, before we went in to do something, say, on poverty, before we even selected the people that we were going to use, we did a tremendous amount of theoretical research, you know, to really find out what was the story that we were looking for, so that the people were selected in order to typify situations that we knew from our research were indeed typical. Um, and so then, when you went in to do the interview, you really knew a tremendous amount about what these people were dealing with, and what the big issues were, and so you were able to shape the way in which you questioned, the way in which you filmed, the way in which you edited - to make sure that what you were showing was something that really was a true reflection of the situation in the broadest sense. The case study was never just - who - you know, the unforgettable character. It was always attempting to reveal some broader issue that was there out in the wider world.

Q: With that, did you have an ongoing connection with those people after that, because there's a lot of work that goes into it, um, and ... revisited when you actually went back - any later feedback from people about how you'd represented them.

Robin 03A/05:33 You know, it's - it was very interesting, um, because that was an enormous learning experience for me. I remember as a young person working in this area - you do form close connections with the people during the time that you're filming, and I had a sense that I had to keep that up. And after you've acquired a number of people who you've had this relationship of closeness with, you realise you just can't maintain it, and I think the great relief for me was to learn that they didn't really expect you to. Um, but it was always lovely to bump into them, you know, years later, although very recently, I bumped into someone that I interviewed for one of those programs when I think I was 26 or something, and, um, and I hardly recognised them, but they recognised me. And then they said, oh, but you look so much older. And I thought, no wonder. When was that? That was the only negative ... And they were very ... And so, provided you treat people well and - for me, the

big issue always, is that you have to try and be very very true to how the person is, and even if you haven't agreed with them, and you haven't really even particularly liked them, if you actually represent them very accurately, you know, it makes a huge amount of diff ... For example, I mean, I do remember one case where I was terribly worried what they'd think when they saw it off air, because now I always try and organise that I show people the programs before they go to air. With *Chequerboard*, we couldn't because of the time scale of how we did them, and so you'd be terribly nervous that the thing had gone out, and sometimes, with a portrait that you had felt was a little unflattering, you know, to the person - but always, if you were true to them, I remember the next day, waiting for a call, and getting a call and finding that the person had been absolutely thrilled with something that I thought had cast them in a bad light, but we'd been very true to them, and so they were very happy. So I think that that's really the struggle you always have, and the ethical - I suppose - discipline that you have to exercise to not misrepresent the person.

Robin 03A/08:16 It sort of, you know, goes right through to editing - it's even - leaving in that little qualification when you're dying - you're looking for the - you know, because we're always contracting, aren't we - we're always trying to get the thing down to the time. So there's a minute that you'd love to take out, but it's a qualification that you know is really important to them, and if you lop it off, you're really misrepresenting them, so you have to really try and find something else to cut that won't do that. You know, and that - that's what you try to do, and I learnt all of that in *Chequerboard* really. And then sort of moving on, and developing in other ways, and one of the things that I got more and more interested in when I came here to Film Australia and I was working on, you know, the interesting thing here was that quite a lot of the things that gave me the opportunity to develop these ideas of observational documentary ... to develop these ideas of observational documentary, some of the opportunities I got here, were with the commissioned program that was here then. At Film Australia, there was, um, a program where Government departments would commission films on certain subjects so, um, while I was here, I worked on a little series which included an observational film about a man with a really serious drinking problem. It was directed by Graham Chase, and it was called *Thirst*. It was a 20 minuter, and for many years afterwards, people up on drink driving charges were condemned to watch this film, which had a whole lot of, um,

information in - buried in an observational film with no didactic commentary - nothing. Just observing a person with a drinking problem. It was terribly powerful for making people think about their own drinking behaviour.

Robin 03A/10:31 I also won a whole lot of awards for a film that was, again, commissioned which was called *Please Don't Leave Me*, which was about children in hospital, and at that time, parents weren't allowed to visit children in hospital except in visiting hours. And there was an organisation trying to change that, and they commissioned this film, which was tremendously successful. All they wanted, really, was a whole lot of didactic points. We made it as an observational documentary, without any commentary at all, and it became a huge success and was used, again, for years afterwards, for hospital training, to show the importance. And it was very instrumental in bringing about a situation where children weren't left without their parents in hospital. But, you know, quite apart from that social purpose, it was a film that, as a film, as an observational documentary, won a lot of international awards. So it was, um, an interesting time for trying to move even further away from interviewing into observation. And then the other idea that I'd had was a sort of fusion where you would - because I got frustrated in making a lot of these films, but with the Willesee specials, with the films that I made here at Film Australia, and with the *Chequerboard* experience, where you had situations like, for example, issues of family breakup where you had ethical problems about access to actual stories. So I devised this method which, when I became Chief Executive here at Film Australia I was able at last to implement, which was that we made a series of films - the first one was called *Custody*, where we got actors to role play, being a family, with a divorce happening, and an issue of custody of the children. But we used a real court, the Family Court. We used real counsellors. We used real lawyers, and the whole thing was conducted, and not even the film crew knew, what the judgement would end up being. And so there was this fusion of drama and documentary which, in the days before reality television, I called reality drama. Um, and we did - we did a series of those, which were shown on Channel 9, and were extremely successful and high rating.

Robin 03A/13:26 And they came as so many ideas do, simply out of the frustration that you felt that you couldn't use a real family with real children, and - but

you wanted to show the real situation. And I was always a bit surprised that that template wasn't taken up a bit more, because I thought it worked very well.

Q: Who was the director on that?

Robin 03A/13:48 There were a series of different directors. Tris Miall was here as an Executive Producer then, and he presided over all the first ones. Um, Bill Bennett came on board and did some of the later ones. Um, *Custody* was directed by a young director called Ian Munroe, who I'd worked with on - on - he'd been one of the ones who'd come from the Film School, and worked at - on the Willesee specials.

Q: ... John Hargreaves ... Dean Semler shot it ... the crews were, when you look at the people who were working there ...

Robin 03A/14:51 Well, when I first came here too, I worked a lot on some of those earlier - those earlier efforts with Dean Semler, who was at that stage at Film Australia, as a documentary cameraman. Well, you know, we had drama then as well. He worked in both, and he went on later to glory in Hollywood.

Q: But based on - how much would he have done here ...

Robin 03A/15:19 Huge amounts. Huge amounts. And one of the things that I think was a great pity was that one of the things that happened after the Film School came, was that a lot of that sort of experience-based learning that took place in the ABC and here at Film Australia, stopped, and when I came here as CEO, I introduced a program which I call Professional Development, which was to bring some people in who'd gone through Film School, and could come in here and actually consolidate with a lot of experience, you know, because one of the - problems now is that people come out of Film School, takes them ages often to get their first film up, and then they - and then a lot - even longer to their second. So that intense experience that we used to get at the beginning, which was really very valuable, um, you know, they don't get any more. Yeah.

Q: I want to go back to the beginning and where you first felt you were interested in this industry and when you first started - was it high school? was it ...

Robin 03A/16:32 Um, well I guess, you know, we all loved film, but didn't particularly think about working in it, and my first ...

<plane overhead>

Q: I wanted to go to the point at which you got an interest and you were saying, we all loved film ...

Robin 03A/17:11 Yes, yes, well, I - I guess, you know, I'd - I suppose broadly speaking, when I was at University, I majored in Psychology, but I was really just as interested in English Literature, and therefore, sort of, the broader media world was of interest to me. And so after I graduated, I worked for a couple of years as a psychologist, and then I did the big trip overseas, and, um, and I spent a year in Norway, and came back to London and applied for a job as a producer at the BBC. I was in my very early 20's, and it was an unspeakably cheeky and ill-informed thing to do, but to my astonishment, I got the job. It was to be trained on the job. And so, I worked there for a couple of years, and was trained on the job. And, um, then came back to Australia because by then I'd met my husband, David Throsby, and he had a, um, bond. He'd done a PhD over there, and he had a bond - of an amount of money we could never have thought of paying to come back to Australia. So after having started at the BBC, I came back to Australia and had that classic experience of going along as a woman, with very good references from the BBC, thinking I'd get a job at the ABC, and I remember going in and being interviewed there, and saying, oh, these are lovely references - we'd love to employ you, but there are no vacancies on Woman's Hour at the moment. And I said, I don't even know that I'd know how to do Woman's Hour, because I'd been - at the BBC, I'd been doing, um, an Arts program, and a number of features, um, on, you know, economics, philosophical, political themes, so I didn't quite know - and that was really how - how it was. But very soon after that, they were starting up the ABC's Science Unit, and I got a call asking would I like to come in and ... So not really having a background in science, I

went in to the ABC Science Unit, and then moved - and then they were starting up *Chequerboard*, and so I went and worked on *Chequerboard*, and there it followed on that path.

Robin 03A/19:43 But I suppose, really, it was curiously enough, I think one of the things that has fed into the way in which I approach film, is my love of literature. And often, in structural things, I find that the things that I sort of know from always loving books, sort of translate and transfer to the way you shape a story, to what is dramatic, to what is a good way to keep people interested.

Q: Shaping a story is something people do relate to - to drama, but in documentary?

Robin 03A/20:32 Very much so. And I think, you know, it's interesting because at one stage, trying to explain this to a film school group, I sort of coined a term that I later sort of slightly regretted because I thought it got a bit used out of context - to say there's a short story sort of documentary, which is shaped like you shape a drama, and there's the essay documentary, that is shaped like you'd shape an essay, again using the literature, sort of, analogy because I couldn't think of how else to explain it. Because if you're doing an essay type documentary, you're usually starting off with a proposition, and - or you - or request to undercover something, or, you know, the way you would if you were exploring an idea through an essay. And - but I've worked myself mostly in the sort that you shape like a drama.

Q: In terms of your culture shift from the BBC to the ABC, after that experience, were there other things to be brought from your experience over there?

Robin 03A/21:30 I tell you one of the major things that really hit me in those days when we came back, and I think we've improved a bit, but not that much. Um, we had - an arrangement at the BBC which was a Thursday meeting - I mean I can remember, because remember I was very young and I'd got this job, and I'd gone and almost every day, I'd think today will be the day they find out they've made a terrible mistake because I sort of really felt somehow slightly like a fraud in the job,

because it was so demanding and - and I felt I was young and inexperienced, um, and so I really did work hard to make sure that, you know, I - I was OK, and I learnt very very fast, as you do in those sort of circumstances. But we had Thursday meeting which was - you were obliged, as part of your professional duty, to criticise the work of your colleagues, and so, the group of us that worked in Art, Science and Documentary, would move - would get together and we would have been expected to look at anything that had gone to air that week, and we would have - we were expected to criticise each other. And it wasn't personal. It was professional obligation. And it was this critical climate, and when I came back to Australia, I assumed that you'd be doing your colleague a favour if you pointed out what was wrong with their program, and I very quickly learnt that that sort of approach to - this is all about improving our game, wasn't endemic in the culture here. And I think we probably all could do still - even though I think it has improved over the years since, you know, I've been around, I think it's something that we really do need to do, is to separate out feeling personally affronted and feeling that it's actually generous thing to offer someone - I mean, you don't have to take - you know, they could be wrong, you know, if I offered criticism of your staff, Ray, I could well be wrong, but I think that you can then evaluate whether or not you agree with it. Don't you think?

Q: It's been said that you're a very good manager of people, a creative manager of people throughout the years. I'm thinking of how you've managed that - if you, obviously, you've got creative people - directors, filmmakers, but also with the bureaucracies, and again, BBC bureaucracy, ABC, Film Australia, Government bureaucracies - the culture that was there and what you brought in - how you came into that ... or how you approached that?

Robin 03A/24:51 You know the terrific thing about these sorts of organisations is the fact that you can be very prolific within them if you're given the right context. You know, when you're working outside with the wild ones, you know, as I am now, the amount that you can actually organise to do is much more limited, because of all the paraphernalia that has to go around it. The wonderful thing about a large institution is that if you can really get going, you can be very prolific, and I can remember after a stint here as a producer at the end of the year, I had 15 projects that had happened in that year, and I remember going to a weekend where I had to talk

with somebody who had, you know, one short film, um, and really struck me that in a context like this, you've got that huge advantage. And you should use it. But you also have the disadvantage that the whole context means that it can oppress you - it can prevent you from doing what you want, it can have all sorts of negatives, and when I was asked to come in to run Film Australia, I was conscious of those two things, so everything that I tried to do here was to try and make a space in which filmmakers could actually work effectively, unbothered by all the crap that goes on that you have to sort of do to make an organisation accountable, financially viable, you know, all those other things. And I'd got in to that situation in a sort of odd way, because I started out and my whole ambition was to be a writer/director. I mean, I was entirely directed onto the creative side. I wasn't really interested in producing - I worked as a producer in television, but a producer in television in those days was actually the equivalent in documentary of a director - you did both. And because the organisation took care of a lot of the nuts and bolts things that you have to take care of as a producer.

Robin 03A/27:15 And so, but I just made - it was the children that changed that. When I left Film Australia to have my first child, I continued and did a number of projects as a director, and, you know, on contract from outside, and I found it incredibly difficult because I'd be away from my little child and she didn't care, but I'd get quite distressed about having to leave her to go. And I got a call, in fact from Tom Manefield, who'd - who'd moved to Film Australia, where they were looking for a producer, and I said I don't want to be a producer, and I remember very clearly, he said, you - as a producer, Robin, you make your own appointments. And he had to say it a couple of times before I got it, that he was telling me - it will work for babysitters, and it will work for everything because you'll know when you'll get home. And I discovered when I came and worked as a producer that instead of having to get up at 4am to go out and shoot the sunrise, you could come in and watch rushes at 9 o'clock and tell them why didn't you get up earlier, you know. So that there was a sort of, it worked with the kids. And that's how I moved from writing and directing into producing, and then from that position, I was sort of brought into series producing, where, you know, you had the team under you - quite a large team of people working. And then somehow or other, that segued into being asked when they were considering shutting Film Australia down in 1985, and I was asked would I

come in and motivate it to do that by having it privately disclosed to me that this was the last chance to keep an organisation that I thought was needed running. And so that's why I got - so having got into it like that, I thought, now, how is this going to survive - how can this be a really viable organisation? And I believed, as I believe that it's true of the ABC, and SBS, and even the commercial televisions - they survive by being creatively vibrant.

Robin 03A/29:38 So we started here on a whole program of expansion, and at that time at Film Australia, when I came in, it was the production division of the Film Commission, so there's been a back to the future recently, with the return to Screen Australia, but it was a production division of the Film Commission, and it was, as a result of the review that was announced immediately after I took up the role, which I knew was going to be announced, to see whether it should exist - that it was decided to turn it into a company, and move it out to be stand alone, and I had realised that what we had to do was to open it up to the world, so we started this big effort to sell internationally, which really hadn't happened before, and that was enormously successful. I mean, in the period that I was here, which was 4 years, the whole sales division of this organisation increased threefold because we put a lot of effort into that. And that, in turn, was money that could go back and into production. And so, we did in fact manage to expand the organisation at the same time as we were forced by cabinet decree to cut staff, but because the world had changed, and now out there, there were a lot of freelancers, who were really looking for work, whereas inside the organisation, there weren't - there was a list that I was shown, of 18 people that were on a list called Inactive. I said what does this mean? They were 18 people on staff who didn't work. So there was the need to have a reform, and that happened. And that was really quite a hard time in my life, but the effort was all to try and create a place that would be sustainable, and it was for a while. Like everything else, you can never really expect anything to last.

Q: What do you do when you're not involved in film and television?

Robin 03A/32:17 Well, there is my secret vice, which I tend not to tell anybody. But so long as it doesn't go outside this room ... Um, I write poetry. I love

to read, and that includes reading poetry and I do write poetry. That's my secret vice. I, um, I love the beach. I just can't believe how lucky we are in Australia with our fabulous coastline, and I love the beach. Um, and I - I suppose for very long periods of my life, it's been work and family. Um, I'm also, um - my husband's very involved in a lot of cultural activities, and so whenever I can, I go to conferences and other things that he's associated with, with broader cultural sort of issues. I, um, I chair a fairly innovative, cutting edge little theatrical company. I'm on the council of the ANU - the Australian National University, which takes up quite a lot of my time. I fairly recently finished, um, being on the board of the Bangarra Dance Company, which I got involved with because I felt a great need to be - to do something as useful as possible for the whole sort of reconciliation movement, and that was something I was asked to do. Um, so I sort of keep busy with various things ...

Q: ... a particular personality trait that you had - a strong personality trait, something that's been very - relative to your work, that's made you very good at what you do. Is there something you could ...

Robin 03A/34:29 Well, I don't know about very good at what I do. I think that I've - I have a very low tolerance for boredom. And so I get, um, a huge need for the fresh. I need to refresh myself. Now that has meant that I've tended not to stay in particular jobs for huge amounts of time, but wanted to sort of move on to the next thing, um, that - that was interesting. And it's been odd in a way that I've been involved with something like the *Australian Biography* series for so long, because although I did it at times with my left hand while I was doing other big things, it is a fairly conventional interview format, and therefore, it's always sort of surprised me that I've kept on with it, you know, because I sort of tend to get to the end of something, and it's the longest I've ever been connected with anything. And I think it's because each person that we film in the *Australian Biography* series is so startlingly different from the person that we've filmed before, that the actual content as opposed to the style, you know, whereas I've usually been looking for innovative style - I've been trying to push the form forward, trying to find new ways of showing things, I - with this, it's a sort of static formula that they won't let me move from, but the content is so different, and there is something amazing about a whole life story that I find, you know, keeps me fascinated with doing that. So I think, to answer your

question, mostly, it's to do with the love of what's fresh, and that is a great motivator to make you sort of move on to the next thing.

Q: Good, good. I'm wanting to sort of go up to the ... the next thing is - let's call it digital ... new media. I'm just interested in how you see yourself adapting to, and this could be audiences as well, just - particularly on the documentary form ...

Robin 03A/37:01 I just think that this is very difficult to call right now, because so much is in flux. And it's always interesting to be in those times where you're not quite sure what the possibilities are, but you have to keep open to them, and one of the things that really, I mean, it's been for a while now, or in fact when I think about it, in the early '90's, I was chairing the Council of the Film School, and agitating for us to move into a digital concept. And I can remember one very eminent person who was on the council, who shall be nameless, was saying, oh, digital, smidigital, you know, what's ... really, oh, this is nothing, oh this is, you know ... Whereas I could already begin to see, as many people could, that there were going to be interesting possibilities emerge with all of this new media. Um, I think that, you know, I've really enjoyed being associated with putting - you know, I've always called the *Australian Biography* a project rather than a series, because, you know, there's been a book, and there's been a ... and the - and now it's online, and the way in which you can handle material once you've got the online outlet, just give you a completely, you know, it opens up a whole new possibility with it which is really terrific. And one of the things that always sort of slightly broke my heart was that although everything was kept in archival, it wasn't able to be seen by others unless they were accessing it for part of their own film, so now, it's on - online. That makes a huge amount of difference.

Q: How about a couple of specific things like the closeup - in documentary, and again, I'm thinking back to the earlier work ... it's very clear ... how do you think that's evolved or changed? Maybe there's an editing style there.

Robin 03A/39:11 Yes, um, you know, one of the things that was interesting for me because I started in radio, remember, and moved into television, and when we first went into - when that move - shift first occurred, we were all terribly concerned that we shouldn't make radio with pictures. You know, we - we really wanted to use the fact that things moved, and you could do them on a grand scale, and the talking head was something to be avoided, and so on. There was that sort of idea around. But, again, working on *Chequerboard* - one of the things that I noticed was that within particularly the television frame, there's what, you know, I came to call the landscape of the human face - that a face can tell you so much more than words can, and sometimes when you've got a talking head, and they'll even have finished talking, I've got a classic with Nugget Coombs, the great Australian economist, head of the Reserve Bank, leader of the whole of the Public Service and the setting up of the post war reconstruction program - an amazing person. And he, in responding to questions about regret, he spoke absolutely movingly about his great distress that we'd never really managed to get proper reconciliation with Aborigines. And he finished his statement, and finished it, and his eyes had filled with tears - just thinking about that great failure in his life - and he waited, and then, about many seconds later, he just nodded at the camera. And it was so much more eloquent, even, that what he'd said - the look on his face. Um, and I just sort of thought, that is the reason why we need screen based history, not just auditory, or written history. You actually have to have that face to really get the message. And so, I've learnt to - and in order to do that, one of the things that I really think is interesting with a sensitive cinematographer, and I like cinematographers who shoot with their ears, um, because, you know, you - in documentary you really need to listen, and one of the things that I always say to crews when we go into very complex, um, observational situations, I'll say to the camera follow the sound. The sound loves it. The camera's not used to it sometimes, and doesn't like it very much, but you really do want the sound in - you know, if there's a party, or an argument, or something going on, you really actually have to have the sound and the camera has to just do the best they can, and, you know, follow that.

Robin 03A/42:36 And, so, um, the - and then in the framing of a face, I think, actually capturing a head, I've found, is sort of more difficult than you'd think, and to actually listen and work out sensitively, when to change frame, when to move

in close, when to pull out again, when somebody's showing emotion, when you need to go in, when the sensitive thing to do is not to be so close, when the sensitive thing to do is to be really in close. Of course, there've been fads with all of this. Do you remember, um, what was the name of the guy who came out here and shot *Sylvania Waters*, from England? Um, but the - and he - he had a series of things that he did - one about masculinity, where he shot, you know, eyes, and you had these long periods with lips moving that were sort of disembodied, and sometimes one eye, you know, and that was ... well, yes, you'd sort of, you took notice, but after a while, it looked a bit wanky, you know. And so you sort of, um ... So I just think - and then, of course, the other thing is that the full body, you know, also, can be very eloquent. Um, but there is something about the face in the small screen, that - that you know you can see if someone's telling the truth, I think, you know, you can see where they're being evasive, and, you know, it's quite revealing, I think. So, I guess that's how I feel about the face.

Q: How about the jump cut?

Robin 03A/44:24 Ah, we used jump - yes, we - we used jump cuts in *Chequerboard*. Um, that was Tom Manfield. He had this theory that you had to be honest about where you'd cut. Um, I suppose because I think of myself often as a storyteller, and I know that when you're writing fiction, you shape and smooth, I think that the - bit of smoothing, to make a story cohesive, you know, so long as you're being honest about the story, um, you know, so I abandoned the jump cut - I never used it myself, in my stuff. Never really wanted - to use it. I have been interested in exploring the different styles of documentary, and trying to bring them together. After I left Film Australia and - and went back and set up my own company again, I did a 4 part series called *The Opposite Sex*, which was about gender. When I used to tell people that I was doing this 4 part international series on gender, someone once said to me "4 parts - on gender. Shouldn't that be a channel?" But - but at that time what I was trying to do there was to interweave the observational, the sort of what I call the attitudinal, which was having straight talking heads, using a mirror box we used in those days to talk straight to camera, um, expressing opinions about - about it, and a science bit in which we actually observed some science taking place. And so those sorts of elements of what you might call, you know, the essay style

science documentary, mixed up with, and that really was quite an editing challenge - to try to interweave those and keep shape, and it was - you know, pretty ambitious - probably too ambitious. But I've always been interested in trying to use form a little bit differently.

Q: And how much have you found in the editing room, though, if you like that storytelling takes place, you know, are there any particular people or moments you recall where you've, I guess, had this happen - that realisation of what you've created?

Robin 03A/46:58 Well, you know, the thing I love about editors, is that they do things for you sometimes that you just can't believe they've been ... I remember, when we were doing the Willesee specials, we did one about the Melbourne Cup - we did a few, sort of, fluffy ones among the 30. And we did one about the Melbourne Cup, and I - you know, because it really didn't have a lot of substance, you know, I got really frustrated with how it was looking and what - where we were going with it. And, um, and we'd had a screening and I wasn't happy, and we - we - I went home, and John Scott was the editor, and he stayed back that night, and the next morning we came it, and he'd cut this most hilarious collage, out of - out of the material, that just, sort of, gave it all the lift and the start that you want. Editors can be wonderful that way, the way they suddenly do that. I'm not saying that just because you - you started life as an editor, but I just think, you know, you can get wonderful results from them. The other thing, though, that I have also found, especially with some more conventional minded editors, who want to do things the way they've always done them, is that, it's nice to push them and, you know ... I really believe it's terribly important for a director to have enough knowledge of each of the processes to be able to know when somebody's saying something can't be done, that - and you know that it can. It - you know, because you do get that a bit with people saying - something that's going to be hard, or a bit of trouble, and they'll say, no, and if you know they can do it, it helps because you can persuade them to have a go.

Q: You've already talked about that move into - that Willesee program that moved into commercial television. Was there - was there anything

specific about the people you managed to bring into that world, and the - the - I guess, what ... I'm thinking of a name ... Jo Kennedy ... one of those shows I think,

Robin 04A/49:20 Ah yes, yes. How did you remember that? Yes, yes.

Q: I think a Phil Noyce one?

Robin 03A/49:27 Could have been. Yes, yes it was, it was. It - that was the one where they - Diane Cilento and - yes. Well, I mean, I think ... why did I go commercial? Yes, yes. Well, I think I felt I'd always wanted outreach. You know, a feeling - see, I - you know, I come from a working class family. Um, I've got a large extended family - there were 6 kids in my family of origin, and they've got kids, and, you know, there's - and I often would think of them. I'd feel, you know, I want to do something - they're all very intelligent, but not necessarily part of the media ghetto in which I lived. And, um, and so that always brought me into thinking - outreach. And commercial television was reaching a hell of a lot more households than - than public broad ... And on a lot of the big issues, you know, one felt one wanted to have that - that outreach. And so, I was keen to go to commercial television, and when I got the opportunity, I did. And then because we set up a good work environment, and Mike - we had to, um - he had in his contract that he had to host on location and narrate. And we kept him absolutely minimal, so that he had not very much to do, and he could go off and take care of his racehorse interests, and so on. And our group - but he was very good. I mean, he's very smart, and whenever he was there to do his narration and so on, he was one take, and, you know, really good. But we'd - we'd use him very little, and we made, you know, strong documentaries - human interest documentaries, that were - that stood up well.

Q: Do you think that influenced those filmmakers involved in that?

Robin 03A/51:38 Well it is interesting that Gillian Armstrong has always kept a little foot in the documentary camp. And I don't know about Phil. I've sort of lost contact a bit with Phil. Um, but, you know, Chris Noonan of course, started at

Film Australia, so he had a documentary history behind him, and - but I think they enjoyed and learned from their experience there, yes. I never got any indication to the contrary, and of course, it was, um, people like Aviva Zeigler, really grew in that atmosphere. You know, got a lot of experience, and - and she directed the program called *Quentin* that broke all records for documentary - I think probably still hold the records for the biggest - the biggest viewed documentary in - in history - in Australia.

Q: So that - that's really relevant, or I'm thinking of the audience - how you felt about who you were making films for.

Robin 03A/52:42 Yes, we were wanting to make films that did not compromise on meaning, substance, content - that were as true as we could possibly make them, documenting Australian life, and that were entertaining and accessible to a very broad audience. And I think we managed that.

Q: And your feedback from people - from audiences?

Robin 03A/53:09 Was terribly positive. I mean, they kept tuning in, which is the best compliment you can get. And of course, those series won 3 Logies, altogether. And there was just that first one on - which we did so fast - on - on Channel 7, and then the whole shebang moved to 9, and we made some at 9. And, um, and there were some interesting experiences with that - like, um, the one - the one that we made with James McCartney Anderson, who'd been involved with Abe Saffron, and came - um, I can still remember sitting in a little cottage down at Channel 9, and he arrived, and came in and started telling - that he was ready to really deliver the whole story of the Sydney underworld, and the role of his now enemy, Abe Saffron, in the whole thing. And he was about to reveal everything to the media, and he'd chosen us, and the whole time, he kept getting up, and having a look through the venetian blinds of the little cottage at Channel 9, saying ... And I said "What are you doing?", and he said "I'm looking. Abe's boys are after me." And I'm sitting there thinking, "Oh, should I be worried." And he said, "Don't worry." And he patted the case he had with him, and he said, I've brought protection. And then he tried to open it, to show me, and he'd forgotten the combination of the lock. So it wasn't very - wasn't very comforting. But, we made that film, and it was never

shown because, um, in fact, um, Kerry Packer intervened personally to see that it wasn't shown, and it's never been shown.

Q: Where is it now? Not archivally saved somewhere?

Robin 03A/55:15 Don't know. Don't know. Never knew. Never was able to find out what had happened to it.

Q: I just wanted to touch on the Women's Film Unit, and your involvement in that.

Robin 03A/55:34 Oh, well, when I arrived at Film Australia, when it was still part of the AFC, and I arrived to take over, um, the organisation, it had a Women's Unit in it. And, I've always been opposed to Women's Units. Um, in fact, it was interesting that I'd actually been approached to head the Women's Unit, um, by Tom Haydon when he was here, uh, when it was being set up, and he asked me would I head it. And I said is it going to have 51% of the budget, and he laughed, as if that was completely ridiculous. And I said, well, why doesn't it have 51% ... I mean, it's always struck me that as soon as you isolate, um, you know, something like that, it might be positive for a little while, to give people some experience, but unless it very quickly comes into the mainstream, it means that everybody thinks that everything that's of interest to that group can be taken care of there, and all the employment decisions are - you know, if you're a woman, you're going to go there. And I remember being told there are no vacancies on the Woman's Hour. So I was concerned to bring it into the mainstream. And the interesting thing was that at that stage, the only women employed on films here were employed in the Women's Unit. Couple of them in other areas, but not many, not many. Suzanne Baker was here as a producer, and - there were one or two others.

Robin 03A/57:19 But - so when I came in, um, you know, we just had a policy that we'd employ the best people, and so gradually we built up a presence of women among the filmmakers. And they were making things for mainstream television, not for community women's groups, and women's issues were being

covered. And we had problems with the broadcaster over that. I can remember there was a terrific film proposal, um, that was there to make a thing about the then emerging big movement to get women - women priests. And, um, the team of filmmakers - Jilly Coote and Pamela Williams - had this terrific proposal, um, and they were calling it the *Fully Ordained Meat Pie*, because the Arch Bishop of Brisbane had said to ordain a woman would be like ordaining a meat pie, and, um, and so they called it the *Fully Ordained Meat Pie*. And the ABC - all middle aged, middle class male, media moguls would-bes, sitting in at the ABC, and in all the other stations - had said they weren't interested in a thing about women wanting to be priests. And I can remember I had introduced a rule here that everything that was made had to have a market. We could - you couldn't just make it to show to your mates, you had to have a thing. But, I remember meeting this crestfallen group in the corridor telling me that they couldn't get a presale. And I said, oh, blow it, let's make it anyway. And we could do that then, in those days. You couldn't do it now. And I went ahead - we went ahead and made it, and of course, when they saw it, it was such a terrific program, they loved it. And it was - we sold it, and it was made. But, you know, it was difficult to get those things into the mainstream then, which is hard to believe now, but it was. And so I didn't - yes, so I - I caused a huge outcry among women that I, a woman, had closed the Women's Unit.

Q: Could you explain where we are at the moment?

Robin 04A/01:16 Well, we're standing in the conference room of what's now Screen Australia Studios - used to be Film Australia. This table here, was brought from the War Cabinet, um, of the Curtin Chifley Government, I've always been told, and it became the sort of big board table for Film Australia. When I came here as the, um, initially as the General Manager of the Production Division of the AFC, and then later as the CEO of the newly formed Film Australia independent, um, I used to sit at this table, and discuss with the editorial group what we were going to do each week. Um, David Gonski, who went on to do lots of other things, was our first chairman, and so we used to have the board meetings around this table. So it was, um, part of my life for that, you know, four and a half years - a pretty central part of my life, um, while I was here at Film Australia, when it was a very different place from the place that it is now. When I was running it here, it was very much a

production house that had all its own facilities. There were lots of editing rooms, and there was a great deal of activity happening here all the time.

Q: Do you want to take us through some of the people that have been here, and of course, it's got a history that goes way back.

Robin 04A/02:45 Way, way, way back. Well, of course, after the Second World War, what had been just a little film unit in the Commonwealth, was turned into the Commonwealth Film Unit, um, which was - which was a large unit. And that moved here, I think, I think it moved here in the '50's. Um, and then it worked as the official Government filmmaking body, at a time when this was the only place where a lot of films were being made in Australia, that were other than the struggling, strictly commercial films that were being made just by a few - by a few brave filmmakers, and so it was a terribly important learning environment for people. Then in the early '70's, this was before my time, but in the early '70's, it became Film Australia, under the Whitlam Government, and um, was given a sort of new lease of life, as the Commonwealth Film Unit and Film Australia, it nurtured people ranging from, you know, Peter Weir, um, through, on the cinematography side, Dean Semler is one of the great names that come from that period, um, Chris Noonan, um, once the Film School started, um, Phil Noyce came here for some of the time. Um, there were a lot of the names that we now associate with a lot of success in Australia who got a tremendous amount of training and experience here in this - in this place. Now sadly looking rather empty.

Robin 04A/04:32 We - we can - if we walk - if you want to go round the loop, I can, um, feel a bit weird doing this actually, because it's so, sort of, empty. See, when I first came here, all the accountants were grouped in one area around here. One of the things that I liked to do was to get people working in groups together, so the accountants were all dispersed into the production units, and - that freaked out some of the corporate people who wanted to keep central control of that, but it really worked very well. We're a bit too dark, aren't we?

Robin 04A/05:12 Now, you know, this - this was one of the production unit areas. No, there's such an elegiac thing you're getting me to do, um, because this

used to be a very busy production unit - a sort of hub of activity, where the, you know, production manager and production secretary and production - or, assistants, all sort of congregated, and now here we are with it almost empty. But here's somebody - an actual filmmaker, has hired a room, and is working here, because that's what happens now. And then, if we come through this corridor, also dark, dark corridors ... I don't know whether this - ah, this is going to work, um, this was my old office - there I am on the wall. They've put up the old ... When I arrived, things were bad here because my predecessor had been sacked, and there had been nobody running the place - I mean, there'd been an acting person, but a lot of uncertainty for a period, and a lot of talk about closing it. And so it was quite difficult to come in and try and get everybody back on keel because there'd been such a period of uncertainty and, of course, very unusual in bureaucracy in those days, to have anybody sacked. So, um - here we go, into what used to be my old office. See, I can't even find the lights - look, abandoned. That's where I used to - try and run the place from. And - does feel weird doing this. I'm not sure about it, Ray.

Robin 04A/07:27 And then, if we go downstairs, we'll come to where the editing rooms used to be.

Robin 04A/07:52 Well, I sort of - I suppose there's been a sort of long period where things have changed, and you sort of get used to it. Um, you kind of adjust to it. I mean, it does feel strange when I remember how busy it all used to be, and what good things were made here, I mean, really small ... I mean, that's really where my focus always, on trying to make good things. Ray, you would have worked in some of these editing rooms along here. Um, they're probably all locked now, and they're certainly no longer editing rooms. But they used to - the old steenbecks used to be in here, and in one of these along here, I remember Tom Foley who was edit - Head of Editing, um, the late Tom Foley, working down here with Bruce Petty - I was producing - I used to have to bring them down a bottle of Drambuie to keep them going. They were always at loggerheads, because Bruce always wanted the impossible, and we used to always try to give it to him, you know, he's that sort of person that you - you'd want that. And of course, he'd made the film *Leisure* here, a commissioned film. He'd made the film *Leisure* here, which was a commissioned film, which - which won an Academy Award, um, so ... there used to be a Reception

here. The Reception's obviously gone. Um, remember Gerry the switch? Gerry, the switch who used to work on Reception here for years and years and years. This is, at the moment, that takes us through to the Roxy Theatre - a purpose built cinema - a lovely little cinema, which is now hired out for all sorts of functions, rather than being used for film.

Robin 04A/09:37 So, I feel it's sad that it's gone, but a bit inevitable because it gradually moved away from being a production house. The sound mixing theatre that used to be down there, that we called the Crystal Palace, which was brilliant mixing theatre, was sold. The - um, the editing rooms gradually reduced. Um, so it ceased to be a production house, and moved much more into just funding films, which were often made elsewhere, so a lot of the reason for keeping it began to diminish. I mean, the big soundstage over there started being hired out for other people's films, not necessarily Film Australia's films, and I think that's still what's - happens to it from time to time. But, um, you know, in the old days when you were here, and when I was here, it was a functioning production house - a really good place for young people to get a lot of experience. And, also, for older people to come and do, perhaps, more experimental, more difficult things - things that would, in fact, have some long-lasting, cultural value, and the notion of cultural value has become a more difficult one in some ways to defend. You know, in some ways, we've understood it better, but when it comes to putting it into practice, um, finding the mechanisms for doing it become more difficult, I think, in the last couple of decades. And, um, so in the present funding arrangements, there really is no place for doing things that you could do in the old National Interest Program, which was simply to make something because it was in the national interest. The National Documentary Program that has taken its place isn't quite the same because it's very dependent on broadcaster interest. So if the broadcaster isn't interested, even no matter how important the film is to the country, it can't be made, which I think is a pity.

Q: Should we go down to where George is? ... Bruce Petty, what was he ... he came back and did ...?

Robin 04A/12:07 Ah, he stayed - he did some more films after *Leisure*. Um, he did one that starred Max Gillies - was the first one that I did with him, which

was called *Megalomedia*, and it was about the media. And the thing I remember about that from my point of view was that Bruce became obsessed, because it was back in the '70's or early '80's, and, um, Bruce very much wanted to open it with a clip from *Star Wars*, and I tried to get this for him, and they wanted a fortune - more than our whole budget - for the clip that he wanted. And so, I went through their local distributors, I went through their lawyers, couldn't get anywhere. So one night, I sat down, and these were the days of telexes, and I typed out a thing that said who we were, what we wanted, and I sent it to George Lucas himself, with no thought that he'd actually get it, but I just was so desperate, and I signed it "May the Force be with us", and sent it off, and the next morning, I came in, and there was a reply - I've still got it at home, that said you can have it gratis, and signed George. Good luck. So, it was a lesson in how you should - always try for what you want.

Q: And it worked. Ah, wait on ...

Robin 04A/13:50 Same thing - 8777. No - oh, it worked. I thought it was star. Right. There we go. Hash works too.

Q: What was down here - all the negative cutters, I remember them.

Robin 04A/14:11 Neg cutters were down here. Neg cutters. Does anything get neg cut now. Just all gets digitised and done that way, even if it's shot on film. I don't know where - where it is. He'll have gone, won't he? Ah, right. Oh, this is atmospheric. Ah, here's George here. ...

George: Don't shoot me. I don't belong in front of the camera - I belong behind it.

Robin 04A/14:48 I have to tell you George is one of the few people who's been here through all the vicissitudes, haven't you George. He's a stayer. ...

George: Since the old days, when we used to do film.

Robin 04A/15:03 And the place used to buzz sometimes, didn't it, in those days.

George: In those days, it used to - buzz a lot.

Q: OK, so are we going to the - have a look at some of this technology that you were involved in. I think - I'm interested in the technology as well as what was made with it.

Robin 04A/15:22 Well, I suppose - um, really, my interest in what happened later, you know, when we started talking up there about the whole sort of digital revolution - that had really - I mean, I - I remember when I first came to Film Australia as a producer, having to - to - presiding over something called a Video Dialogue Unit with this new thing called video about which everybody was highly suspicious, and, um, I remember the then Head of Cinematography - wonderful Bruce - Bruce - help me, George - no the Head of Cinematography - Bruce Hillyard. Remember Bruce Hillyard? And he was not at all sure how he felt about video - you know, that this new fangled thing ... And I can remember at the time visiting the Film Board of Canada, and the Film Board of Canada guy saying, look, I think that this video's a flash in the pan, and it won't last.

George: Like computers.

Robin 04A/16:36 That's right. And so, you know, I was a sort of a bit of an advocate for video because, you know, I was interested - still wasn't very good, but what was interesting to me and which I think is a great lesson for all the new media was that - at the beginning, video did shocking stuff, and they were right to criticise it, because it was in the hands of the techy heads. It was only the people who were really sort of the technical people and engineers who were sort of calling the shots. When film editors learned how to do video editing - when cinematographers learned to pick up a video camera and do with it as closely as they could what they'd learned to do on film, video took off. And it demonstrated to me once and for all that films are made with minds, not with technology. That it is the creative person using the technology that makes the technology sing. So if you're just relying on the fact that

we've got new technology, this is exciting stuff, we'll go with this, you're going to get nowhere. Whereas if you get people who really are creative, who really know how to make stories work, who really know how to make an image grab you, who know how to record sound properly, you get a quality there that you're not going to get just with the technology. And it worries me a little bit about the whole sort of de-professionalization that's occurred, that - I watch stuff that's been shot, effectively, by amateurs, all the time on television, and this is a way of cost cutting and keeping things down, and you don't get that expertise, and you can see it on the screen.

Q: Now with the - what have we got here?

Robin 04A/18:30 I'm not sure what we've got here, George. George'll have to tell you what we've got here. George is the - George is the techy head.

George 04A/18:49: You'll recognise this program because it's one of yours.

Robin 04A/19:01 Ah, right, this is - this is *Please Don't Leave Me*. Emotional title for an emotional film. Yes, there was a - we ended up with no commentary at all.

Q: And that was because ...

Robin 04A/19:23 We wanted the audience to make up its own mind, and we had some trouble with the sponsor who wanted actually to present it herself. Um, and it was really only, I think, finally - when we finally got invited to Government House, to Yarralumla, to be congratulated on this wonderful work, and she came with it, that she was reconciled to the fact that we had - um, an observational film. But by just observing what happened to this kid in, you know, to the children, and seeing the interaction between them and their parents, it was a very affective, moving film. And it worked.

Q: It's what some people might call corporate documentary, but you'd actually ... maybe shot with a purpose, or commissioned film ...

Robin 04A/20:12 Look, one of the things we used to do with those corporates or commissioned, or what was called the Departmental Program, where we got, you know, a Government with a partic ... - funding - this was funded by the Health Department - with a particular purpose, you know, and they had an agenda. They were often - their own background was print journalism, so they had very limited ideas about what film could do for them, and we really took it as an opportunity, often, to be able to make a film that you'd wanted - have wanted to make anyway - out of this issue, or around this area, in a way that was really exciting, and communicated. And again and again, at the beginning you'd find that they were a bit sceptical, those who were funding, because they wanted it very didactic. But when they saw the power of film to persuade without didacticism, you know, film can have such a powerful affect if you're just asking a person to enter into the situation of this mother, this child, and what's about to happen to them, and it's a dramatic thing that's about to happen to them. And, you take the per... - the people with you. And you, as a filmmaker, when we were travelling through here, did not know what was going to happen. And I think that's the really exciting thing about documentary. You know, you don't know. You haven't written the script, you know.

Robin 04A/21:43 And so, with drama, exciting part for me was always the development stage. And then, once it was settled, it becomes a how to issue, which is interesting in itself, but here, the what is going to happen, continues all the way through. And you just have to be flexible enough and interested enough, engaged enough, to follow it.

Q: I just want to get a shot - reverse shot ...

Robin 04A/22:19 So, just watching this little boy - sweet little fellow, that we were following. He's giving - giving the next little kid his toy. Um, as he stays in hospital without his Mum, and slowly - slowly falls apart, and it's heartbreaking, really, as it dawns on him that his mother's not there, and we just watched it happen, and an audience doing that becomes completely engaged with this little chap, and watches his face fall, and so on. It's much more telling than anything that you could ever have said in a commentary.

Q: ... I'm just interested in the technology ... maybe if I follow you ... see what's actually through there. This was shot on film, obviously. How was this - what was used to capture ...

Robin 04A/23:27 Film. Film. These were the days of film. This was done - this would have been done, again, in the late '70's, early '80's. This was my days when I was here as a producer, um, before I came back as a - as a - as ...

Q: Now, when you say producer, you mean director?

Robin 04A/23:45 I mean, I was a producer here. And so the director on this one was Stephen Ramsay, yeah.

Robin 04A/24:06 We were producers. So when I worked at the ABC as a producer, you know, in the early days, I was writing and directing, really, is what we'd call it. And that's why I was a bit reluctant to move over here, where I was going to be 'a producer'. But what was good about it was that I was able to really, um, um, make a lot of things happen, that I'd wanted to have happen, and that, you know, like, as a director you can only do so much in a year, and you'd think - this is a good idea, would you like to run with it. So one of the things that I - wasn't my idea, was, um, a program that had a big effect, uh, and in fact got banned from overseas distribution by the then Government, which Oliver Howes, who was a director here, brought to me as a producer, um, and it ended up being called *On Sacred Ground*, and it was because nobody had filmed the Northern Territory Land Council development. So we were making a film about the rise of the Kimberley Land Council, and how it worked, and we had almost finished editing when Noonkanbah happened. Do you remember Noonkanbah? And how the West Australian Government moved in on an - very successful Aboriginal cattle station, and forced them to have mining where they didn't want to have mining. And so, we had to sort of recut the whole film, and cobble it together. We'd spent our budget. It was quite dramatic, and then, once it was finished, um, we were told it couldn't be distributed overseas because the Western Australian Government didn't look very good in the film, I hate to tell you. I hate to tell you. And, so, it was interesting because it was recently revived, and - and

reshown all these years later, um, so there were some films as a producer, that were really very much my initiative. That was one where Ollie came to me, and said can I - can we make this film?

Q: Do you want to take us through ...

Robin 04A/26:18 I don't know what's here. I need George to tell me what's here. Here are some old film cans, you see. Lots of old film cans. Goodness me. It's lovely to see them again. I haven't seen film cans for a long time. It's great. Oh, a Steenbeck still. There's still an old Steenbeck here. Now, Ray, you remember these. You remember these better than I do. This is where you first learnt, isn't it? On a Steenbeck.

Q: Yeah, that's right. There used to be things called Moviolas.

Robin 04A/26:52 Oh, they were before Steenbecks, weren't they? Wow, yes, well ...

Q: They were the traditional technology. But everyone loved Moviolas and the old school editors said Steenbecks were terrible - couldn't use them, and they really didn't like us new generation using Steenbecks.

Robin 04A/27:12 But there are no Steenbecks left, and that - I can date that because we, um, we cut *The Opposite Sex*, which was 1994, was one of the last things that was done on a Steenbeck. You know, like, most people had moved off the Steenbeck by then, but we - we shot that on film, and we cut it on a Steenbeck, and I remember, um, you know, we were saying that this'll be the last time anything'll be cut on a Steenbeck. And I think that's probably about - by mid-'90's, they'd gone.

Q: But the process, was there something about cutting on the film?

Robin 04A/28:05 Do you know what was the big thing that shifted to make video work in the editing room, was really digital, because I used to - you

know, when - when I first started working in video, remember it was, you know, like, terrible editing because you had to go back to the beginning if you wanted to alter anything. I kept saying, we want the equivalent of an electronic bin, you know, because a bin was so good - you could just pull off the bit and put it in. And, in fact, the new technology eventually brought us what I tended to think of as the electronic bin, where you could find your bit that you wanted to muck around with. But one thing - you know how you were saying, do you have abilities that have been useful to you in film, and I said, oh, well, they're literary I suppose, you know, um, but, I have actually found that in editing, one of the things that's a great help, and probably - I assumed everybody had it, but then I discovered from talking to some other filmmakers that not everybody does - I have got a very good visual memory, so that if I've watched, um, rushes, and we've got a problem in editing, I can often say - can't you deal with that by taking that bit, you know, remember where she walks down the stairs and when she gets to the bottom, she's saying this, and then she turns - you know, there's a bit there. That'll cover that. And they'll say what, what what? You know, which bit. And I sort of can - so I think a visual memory is very useful, for a filmmaker. I think if you've got one, you'll find it a bit easier in the editing room. You've got the same, haven't you. You can remember - once you've watched - you know, well, it's interesting - some filmmakers say they - you know, they need to look again. They don't remember their rushes.

Q: You must have been ahead of your time, with the digital bin -

Robin 04A/30:03 The electronic bin. (Laughs.) Well, I mean, but, you know, as soon as that arrived, as soon as we could do that ...

Q: If you were young, when you started, when you went overseas and started that work at the BBC, and then the ABC - if you were that age now, what would you do?

Robin 04A/31:36 Go about it? Well, of course, you know, nowadays, you can't learn on the job like I did. You need to go to Film School, and so what I - well, I can tell you what I recommended to my own daughter. The first piece of advice I gave her was don't, because, you know, if you want a life of penury, you - you go into the film business these days. I mean, when I started, we were treated as professionals.

We were paid as professionals. And there was this sort of sense that you had continuity of work. Nowadays, really, in - for a large part of the industry, um, we're really living more like artists, which in financial terms, isn't a good move, you know, to move from being a professional to being an artist doesn't really do a lot for the bank balance. And I think that - so, but if you're determined to do it, that means that you do it because you love it. Then I would recommend getting a very good broad education. Um, you know, really doing a general degree probably, rather than a communications degree, um, to begin with, to be you know, really broad based education. And then go on to doing, you know, Film School post graduate. I think that would be the way to go nowadays, in my view. And, then, the most important thing of all is that because you're doing it because you love it, make sure that you only go for those things that you think are really really valuable and worth doing. I mean, don't compromise on that. That'd be my advice.

END TRANSCRIPT