

EDITORS ON EDITORS: BOB BLASDALL

He first reached for a splicer sometime in 1968, now he owns, operates and keeps on cutting at THE POST WORKS in sunny Brisbane. Editor, director, producer Bob Blasdall must be the reason they are calling Queensland the smart state these days. It seems many a young director in Brisbane will look to Mr Blasdall for guidance once the shoot is over. In this interview he answers questions put by AFTRS student and ASE committee all-rounder Chris Mill.

When did you decide to become an editor?

I first saw television when it started in Brisbane when I was a young feller. I decided that I wanted somehow to be a part of the exciting story telling I was watching. I had no idea at that stage how to achieve my fantasy, for in the sixties, (and even more so in the large country township of Brisbane) there was limited education or training in most of the arts. In 1961 I joined United Artists film distributors as an office assistant, which apart from working in a cinema was about as close as one could get to Hollywood back then. In 1968 there was a job opportunity at BTQ7 in the film department splicing film commercials into film programs. I was then drafted to the News Dept. to splice the edited film stories into a reel ready for on-air presentation. One thing led to another. I was given a rudimentary lesson in editing news stories and then thrown in at the deep end one day due to staff illnesses and I was on my way in the industry.

Did you have to study or did you start as an assistant?

I learnt the craft cutting news and current affairs and working as a news cinematographer in the late sixties and early 70's. I have had no formal training but have read many books on editing techniques and even back in the 70's we experimented with different styles: jump cuts, line cross edits, white flashes, slomo and fastmo etc. Even on one job I cut we went from black and white to colour and back. So really there is very little being cut today that is entirely new. Fads come and go but great cinematography lives forever. You can't beat cutting great shots or great acting.

Why did you choose doco instead of drama?

Opportunity really. I have cut quite a bit of drama over the years but when I was set up as a business in 1976 there was not much drama occurring in Queensland, so mostly I worked on television commercials and documentaries with an occasional short film or drama thrown in. In fact one short film I cut, "Meatheads", won the Greater Union National Short Film competition... a really big deal back then. I refused many requests to head south for my veins run maroon and I love the Brisbane lifestyle too much to decamp from here... permanently that is. I have worked for up to 6 months at a time in Sydney on a telemovie series and couldn't wait to leave the traffic congestion, smog and grey skies behind.

What was your first "big break"?

I guess it was meeting a very talented individual, Dick Marks, when I worked at Channel 7. Dick was a studio cameraman who joined the Channel 7 news team. I immediately saw that his filming style was streets ahead of the other cameramen

(yours truly included) and Dick would insist that I cut his stories. He then left Channel 7 and started work with a Brisbane production company, Martin Williams Films, and convinced the company principals, Vic Martin and Mike Williams to give me a chance to edit for them. I joined them in 1972 and after cutting literally hundreds of commercials and maybe a dozen documentaries I was astounded when Dick left Martin Williams Films to start his own company. Dick convinced me to set up as a freelance editor, so I purchased a 6 plate 16mm. Steinbeck and rented warehouse space, which I shared with Dick and an animator. Now, after many very funny times, I own and run THEpostWORKS. But really it all goes back to the Channel 7 job of splicing film commercials into film programs just to get a start in TV.

How do you edit (do you e.g. watch rushes, then make an assembly, then rough cut)?

The system I have developed is for one of our assistants to log each tape as it arrives. If I have a script (The Crocodile Hunter docs NEVER have a script...more about that later) I have the assistant place on each shot-name a number relative to that script item. Nowadays with disk space not an issue I have all rushes digitised and sorted into script number. However after digitising I try watch all footage in order of shooting before I start the edit. I then do a very long rough cut/assembly of each segment and then start from the beginning and work thorough to the end tightening and pacing the program as I go.

How do you work with directors (do they sit in on the edit all the time)?

Horses for courses. I have cut various foreign language programs ("Grandfathers and Revolutions" was 90% in Hungarian) and the directors were with me all the time. Mostly though I edit on my own and show the cut at various stages and then get input and discuss shortcomings or if pickups are necessary. With The Crocodile Hunter I receive the footage and a rundown of the segments shot. I either cut the sequences to see if they work or have other editors who work for me perform this task. I then evaluate the way things sit and sometimes even not edit segments that I deem unworthy. The Producer/Director John Stainton then sits with me (sometimes myself and the other editor) and we formulate the final look including graphics and any extra shooting that may be required. I then fine cut the show to time, John has a final run through, occasionally making minor amendments and we lock off. I then checkerboard the audio, manufacture OMF files for the sound edit and manufacture EDLs for online and send the vision to the musos and sound studio.

At what stage are you involved in the doco (do you have input with the D.O.P. and director)?

On some docos the director and DOP have had meetings prior to shoot. I have personally directed 20 odd docos and work as a Producer on a lifestyle show on the Nine network (Escape With ET) so I have a pretty good idea of what happens on location, which is sometimes useful to inexperienced directors.

Do you pick the story out of the doco, does it pick you?

Bit of both really. I quite often have a different take out on the way the lead up stuff works and generally the story will flow from there. Frames lead to seconds,

which lead to minutes, which lead to a full final cut. The frames are the most important item though. Sometimes a frame here and a frame there can have monumental influence way beyond a twentyfifth of a second.

Do you have an assistant (what do they do)?

I've pretty much described my assistant's task earlier. I expect my assistants to know where every tape is and to have a handle on the general visuals. We have at any given time in our tape storage area up to 750 hours of material so it is a daunting task keeping track of all that. E.G. Currently we are working on 14 X 1 hour individual docos, a 13 episode 1 hour doco series, 1 German telemovie, 6 short films and a 2 hour rock concert.

What kind of system do you use?

I use and recommend. No I'll be serious. THEpostWORKS is exclusively Lightworks. I have a Lightworks turbo, a Heavyworks and a Lightworks Touch.. I went Lightworks over AVID in 1993 mainly because the console is very similar to a Steenbeck flatbed editor and I got the hang of it really quickly. I had to learn computer speak real quick so now I am relatively computer literate or at least I now know that ram isn't woolly and that a byte is worse than a bark. I firmly believe though, that even in this technological age, its the nut behind the wheel and not necessarily the hardware that is the most important feature.

Do you have a certain style (or do you have things you always do in a doco e.g. use narration, use title boards etc)?

My style varies although I am a believer that with The Crocodile Hunter the quicker you can keep events happening the more interesting Steve is. Having stated that the last doco I cut has one shot that runs for almost 90 seconds. A lot happens in it though. It's the old business of frames etc, etc.

How did you get involved with Steve Irwin?

I worked with Director/Producer John Stainton at Martin Williams in the 1970s. When John discovered Steve he phoned me and explained the talent of the guy and asked if I would cut a 5-minute marketing video from material they had just shot in Nth. Qld. I had a look at the material: was blown away by Steve's camera presence and cut the video free of charge. On the strength of the material in the video the Channel 10 network picked up on the shows and after much hard selling by Steve and John overseas the rest, as they say, is history.

Did you know the Croc Hunter would be successful?

Absolutely! From the first time I watched that material, we used in the marketing promo, my gut feeling was that The Crocodile Hunter would make it in America.

Has the success of the show made you more conscious of your editing (i.e. because so many people are watching the show)?

It's funny. You are the third person to ask that question in the last 3 weeks. No I don't think of how many people watch the show. I am proud though, that through the show many people have changed their attitude to wildlife and the world around us. One thing that I hammer people with is that the show is centered on Steve but

the major players are the animal he mucks around with.

Do you keep moving between mediums (i.e. tvcs, tv, etc)?

It's funny how life changes. 10 years ago I was so much a part of the advertising scene in Brisbane that I was inducted into the Brisbane Advertising Industry Hall of Fame in 1995. I've hardly worked on a commercial since. As I stated previously I wear a producer's hat on "Escape with ET" and I cut the occasional TV drama. The last one was a couple of episodes of "Misery Guts" a children's drama. But generally docos are my passion. Not only wildlife docos but all genres of doco production.

What do you think of the opportunities for editors in Australia (is it getting better)?

Yeah it is getting better. The education facilities in Australia are first rate and there is a hell of a lot more production happening in Australia. It disappoints me though that a lot of post is taken overseas but that is gradually changing thanks to shows like "The Matrix" and "Moulin Rouge". However my tip is to work on anything and try to network and keep selling your skills and work ethic.

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