

AN INTERVIEW WITH DARYL DELLORA

Interviewer (I): Dugald Williamson

This interview is part of the “*Australian Documentary Research Interviews Collection*”. It was conducted by email in November 2001, with Daryl based in Melbourne, and Dugald in Armidale NSW. Minor format and editorial changes have been made to the original email version, with square brackets for information added to the original.

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Postscript 2011

Part 1 Overview of your filmmaking

I: Can you give an overview of your filmmaking career to date?

Daryl: I completed a BA at Monash University in the late 1970s and my major was in Visual Arts and specifically Cinema Studies, which was a new thing then to study at a tertiary level in Australia. There was no practical filmmaking involved but I became intensely interested in the cinema especially in the work of people like Jean-Luc Godard and also the early revolutionary Soviet filmmakers – Dovzhenko, Pudovkin, Eisenstein, of course, and Lev Kuleshov and Dziga Vertov. Two things in particular about the work of these pioneers struck me and stuck with me: their exciting experiments with montage – work that incidentally, I believe, hasn’t been properly developed and in some ways represents a strand of filmmaking that suddenly stops in about 1923 – and the second thing was the work with typology of human character.

At the end of that BA I decided I wanted to make films and I went to Canberra and did a Graduate Diploma in Media Studies and made a short film and then did the Graduate Diploma in Applied Film and Television course at Swinburne in Melbourne (now at the VCA [Victorian College of the Arts]). My student film at Swinburne was nominated for an AFI [Australian Film Institute] award in the Best Experimental category and that was the area in which I was most interested in working. Experimental was often associated, certainly at that time in the mid-1980s, with people like Michael Snow in the US or others acutely interested in the formal qualities of film chemistry and so on. In my case it was all about working with forms of narrative and documentary and blurring the divide.

My student film was *Hollywood Ten, Melbourne One* (1985) and it took as its central character the fictional figure of Ross Franklyn and the real author Frank Hardy appeared commenting on Franklyn’s life. Now you could argue that Ross Franklyn and Frank Hardy are one in the same, but I think that would be the least interesting proposition. What the film allowed for was a kind of cinematic debate about what was real and what was invented in Hardy’s fiction, and in Hardy’s life, and to what extent it mattered. This kind of experimentation in

cinema, unfortunately, degenerated fairly quickly into what became known as “mockumentary”, which it seemed to me had the sole intention of fooling the audience and then, having a laugh at their expense. At its most successful it went straight for the laughs (*Spinal Tap*) but it didn’t have anything to do with what we tried to achieve with *Hollywood Ten*, *Melbourne One*. I’m still enormously fond of that film and it probably is the best film featuring Frank Hardy and about Frank Hardy, who died in 1994, that was made.

In 1987 I worked at Film Australia in Lindfield for a year under a scheme where they took two graduates from Australian film schools in on a kind of scholarship. That was a great time and I learned an enormous amount. It was during a period where Film Australia was on the cusp of changing from huge kind of studio system – the way it had been for over half a century – with their own studios and laboratories and so on, on acres of land, to a cut down version only commissioning projects.

After Film Australia I made a film called *Against the Innocent* (1989) produced by Richard Jones and funded by the Creative Development Branch of the Australia Film Commission and the Creative Initiatives Fund of Film Victoria. It was an experimental feature film with actors Margaret Cameron and Nicos Lathouris. It was entirely acted and included scenes from Chris Barnett’s play *Ulrike Meinhof Sings*. The film also had some documentary sequences including an interview with Don Dunstan and a performance by Nicaraguan singer Salvadore Cardinale. It was theatrically distributed in Australia by the AFI and had a six week run in cinemas like the State Film Theatre in Melbourne and the Chauvel in Sydney and in Adelaide. It did not screen on TV at that time but did do the rounds of international film festivals where it had some success in Ireland and Portugal. Interestingly in the last couple of years it has screened on Australian Community TV all around the country.

It was around this time that the independent film sector became completely divided into two production spheres – feature film production which was, with very, very few exceptions, entirely of the Hollywood classic narrative variety, and documentary production which was entirely reliant on an ABC or SBS TV pre-sale. (I’m excluding the commercial TV networks here but, of course, they have purchased a steady stream of “documentary” work over the years, almost exclusively nature or adventure programs and always made to a commercial formula.) This changed the nature of the independent sector forever and it has increasingly become a situation where we simply work to a brief, not necessarily in subject matter but certainly in terms of formal concerns, devised by a commissioning editor at a TV network.

The independent sector argued for years that the TV stations could not ignore the very high quality production being generated completely outside the framework of the networks. The argument was right that that product should be bought and screened on Australian TV. Unfortunately that product really does not exist any more in the way that it used to. The TV networks have completely colonized the “independent” sector. There has been some recent criticism of Australian filmmakers, perhaps documentary filmmakers, along the lines that some of the

most interesting kinds of work undertaken in the late 1970s or early 1980s is no longer produced. That is very valid criticism but it shouldn't be directed at the filmmakers. It should be pinned fairly and squarely on the funding bodies, commissioning editors and a system that has demanded, aggressively demanded, a particular increasingly restrictive type of product for over a decade now. All of us have projects in our bottom drawers that we have tried to fund at one time or another and with which we have just hit an absolute brick wall.

I've been lucky enough to make a series of films for the ABC over the last decade and they have won awards and been influential, in some cases, really focussing the public's attention in an acute sort of way, generating newspaper editorials or major news stories, really shaking things up a bit. I hope that the ABC continues to be committed to making documentaries like that well into the future, films that have a shelf life and an existence well beyond their 54-minute, 9.30pm Thursday screening slot.

I: How did Film Art Doco form and in general how does it work as an independent company?

Daryl: I formed Film Art Doco Pty Ltd in 1987 on legal advice that an incorporated company was essential for film production. I'm not sure if the film funding bodies insisted on it, but it was certainly the advice we had. The company, in practice, consists of me as a director fulfilling the functions of researcher, writer and director on film projects and attending to a modicum of company administration, and Sue Maslin as producer of all the Film Art Doco productions to date (except our very first one, *Against The Innocent*, which was produced by Richard Jones). Dr Jenny Hocking is a kind of silent partner in Film Art Doco in that she is a full-time academic, currently the Head of the National Centre for Australian Studies at Monash University, but she has co-written (*Against The Innocent*, *Mr Neal is Entitled to be an Agitator*) or advised on all of Film Art Doco's projects since the company was formed. Co-writer Ian Wansbrough has been an important part of the team for most of the films. [In 2008, Daryl Dellora and Sue Maslin formed the development, distribution and rights management company Film Art Media Pty Ltd (www.filmartmedia.com). Film Art Doco remains the production company, with Film Art Media a complementary development.]

I: In this context, how would you describe your own role as a filmmaker? Has it changed?

Daryl: Over the last decade Sue Maslin and I have formed a very strong partnership and had enormous amount of success in actually getting our films into production. Sometimes it has taken a lot longer than we would have liked, but I don't think that we have ever not been successful, eventually, in getting one of our documentary ideas into production. Once we both agree on a project idea, it might take a long while, but we do get there. Sue has a very keen sense of what will make an interesting film and how to pitch that idea to the funding bodies, and I suppose I have a few film ideas and I try them out on Sue, and if she responds positively then we put it aside as a possible project. Sometimes I don't

come back to it straight away, but Sue might eventually turn our attention to that idea again and if we both like it we push it forward. *Conspiracy* (1995) was like that, we had the idea around for quite a while, then Sue suggested it was the right time to activate it and we went into development mode.

Every film seems to have its own particular trajectory, some taking a long while to develop and perhaps even longer to actually fund and others happening quickly. Our last film, *A Mirror to the People* (2000), for instance, was the rare example of a film that was in production a matter of only a few months after the idea first came to us.

I: Can you tell me about the Film Art Doco web site and interview archive?

Daryl: www.filmartdoco.com has been a great way to showcase our work to Australia and also to the world. By putting that web address on the end of the credits for the film we generate a huge number of hits on the site. In that way people find out how they can get copies of the film they were watching and they can find out about Film Art Doco's back catalogue. With the overseas hits we get, they are mostly generated by people searching for specific material through search engines. For example, architecture academics, students and practitioners all over the world, from Iran to Denmark and the USA, have searched for any material on Jørn Utzon, found our site coming up and then requested copies of the film.

At the moment the site basically has a series of pages which detail the films we have made and give a short synopsis, perhaps provide a video clip, and some graphics and a snippet of media reaction or critical comment. The site also has a brief blurb about each of the key individuals who work regularly for Film Art Doco. In the future we hope to offer access to an archive of interview material that we have compiled over many years. We have both video and transcripts of lengthy interviews with a huge range of different people including Gough Whitlam, Neville Wran, Don Dunstan, Sir William Deane, Sir Gerard Brennan, Michael Kirby, Harry Seidler and of course Jørn Utzon.

Part 2 *The Edge of the Possible*

I: What were your own roles in making this film?

Daryl: I had the idea for the film, then I was researcher, co-writer with Ian Wansbrough, and director of this film.

I: What was the genesis of the project?

Daryl: I'd made two films about mythical or legendary Sydney subjects which had very important national ramifications. The first was *Mr Neal is Entitled to be an Agitator* (1991) about the life and work of the late High Court Judge Lionel Murphy, and the other was *Conspiracy* (1995) about the Hilton hotel bombing of

1978. I knew a very little bit about the Utzon story and the more I found out about it the more I felt it was a fitting third part to a trilogy of documentaries. These were the kinds of stories that had had blanket media coverage in their time and that everyone knew something about and about which everyone had an opinion. We weren't afraid to tackle very controversial subject matter and have a look at it from a slightly different perspective. We were concerned to put an argument and forcefully deliver it and persuasively argue it. But in the end it was up to the viewer to make their own minds up about the argument we put. Perhaps the most important thing, though, and something that often gets overlooked by our critics, is that we always set out with an open mind and did the long hours of research and the fact checking and so on, and came to a conclusion, where possible, about what had actually happened. In the end, if our critics could shoot holes through it then we dared them to do it. Interestingly, no-one ever pointed to one error of fact or omission in any of those films that was of any significance. Several very highly placed commentators have tried to shoot us down and they have failed to find any errors.

The films, you see, are based around the eyewitness testimony of the players in the events. You mightn't like them, you mightn't agree with their views, but in the end they represent a certain truth, and there has never been anything we do as filmmakers to undermine the truth of the contributions of the interviewees in our films. That is our strength. We aren't journalists, and we aren't concerned with some pitiful notion of bias or balance. Those concepts may have some relevance in journalism and news and current affairs in dealing with party political matters, though even there they are used in such a banal way often simply for those on the right of the political spectrum to bash the ABC – after all how often do these same scribes criticize Channel 7, 9 or 10 for political bias? They are not concepts that have any meaning in the documentary films we make. To apply those concepts would mean enforcing the dead hand of political censorship over the established practices of independent documentary making. Truth is very important to us, but you have to accept that any contentious issue will always give rise to a range of different truths.

With the Utzon film what we tried to do, and what no-one had ever done before, was to talk directly with Utzon and the people he worked with, his international team of architects, and ask them exactly what they were trying to do when they developed the scheme for the Sydney Opera House. Everything else then just followed from their commentary on what they were trying to achieve. Of course journalists had spoken to Utzon some thirty years before (he refused to speak to the Australian media from about 1973 to the day we arrived in 1998) about what he was doing, but no-one had searched out Mogens Prip-Buus, Yuzo Mikami, Jon Lundberg. It had all been about celebrity in the past. When we came, Utzon saw a team of filmmakers genuinely interested in what he had been trying to create.

- I: What possibilities did you originally see the project having in Australia or internationally (eg, in terms of anticipated form, content, liaison with subjects, or markets)?

Daryl: We always saw the project as having a great potential in the international market, but we were concerned about a couple of things that flowed from that. We didn't want to have to tailor the film in any way to get an international sale. It is the uniquely Australian stories that we are interested in telling and telling them in our own way. It has been very clear for a long time that any Australian films that try to present themselves as something else can't succeed, because the rest of the world are interested in us as Australians not as poor copies of American or British filmmakers or films. So the successful films are the uniquely Australian films, but that doesn't stop overseas broadcasters putting constraints on Australian producers, so we were fearful of that happening. The other concern was that we would get locked into a non-Accord category and our film would not get made unless we could get the overseas interest. ['Non-Accord' was a film funding category formalised by the Australian Film Finance Corporation (FFC) in 1993-94, geared towards the international market. The FFC had already established a category of 'Accord' films that it funded under a documentary investment agreement with the Australian television networks.]

We knew that Jørn Utzon hadn't spoken to the Australian media since about 1973 and that he rarely spoke to any media. He had just appeared in a Danish film at the time we were writing the script; even then it turns out that he really didn't want to do that film at all, but the Danish filmmaker arrived unannounced on his doorstep in Majorca and burst into tears. We weren't going to do that, so we really didn't want the film to be predicated on the involvement of Utzon. We hoped that somewhere along the way we could get him involved, but we really felt that the film could very easily survive without him. The course we set for ourselves was to aim to finally get Utzon but to never make the film contingent on his appearance.

I: In a Film Art Doco submission to the Australian Broadcasting Authority Review into Pay TV Regulation, you say that for "three years this project lay on the desk of an ABC executive while we scoured the world for international pre-sales". Can you explain this, in terms of the ABC/FFC Accord context of production?

Daryl: We started work on developing the film in 1995. The film was finally pre-sold as an Accord documentary to ABC-TV in the beginning of 1998. We approached the ABC and got a letter of interest from them in 1995 and on the basis of that got script development funding from both the New South Wales Film and Television Office and Film Victoria. The ABC, though, encouraged us to get an international pre-sale and suggested that the best way to go with the film was as a non-Accord project. We initially just wanted the Accord pre-sale, but they really wouldn't budge on their view that it was a non-Accord film so we had to go down that path. For the best part of the next three years we tried every possible way to get the overseas sale, but it was impossible. Young documentary makers are probably daunted by the thought of just how difficult it is to get an Australian pre-sale, and it is; an international pre-sale is one hundred times more difficult. Mike Rubbo, then Head of Documentaries at the ABC added another caveat – we also had to have Utzon in the film – without his written agreement to participate we couldn't have a pre-sale.

All this is immensely ironic. Utzon would never agree to be in a film with Australians whom he didn't know and probably wouldn't like, and no international broadcaster would give a pre-sale to a couple of Australians with a film about some High Court Judge under their arm but no track record in overseas sales or films on architecture. It looked impossible, but we plugged away. I wrote the script with co-writer Ian Wansbrough, we built up a relationship with Utzon's lieutenants Mogens Prip-Buus and Bill Wheatland and with architect and Utzon aficionado Elias Duek-Cohen, and we kept working. We met with or spoke to every architect we could contact who worked closely with Utzon on the Opera House. Mogens told us Utzon knew what we were doing and seemed pleased we were doing it, but he would not agree to an interview now, perhaps in the future. No agreement came, we finished the script, Rubbo read it and made his decision to demand Utzon's involvement, and the script was put on the back burner until one day in December 1997.

On that day we got a phone call from the ABC. They had decided to make a film about the Sydney Opera House because the twenty-fifth anniversary of the opening was coming up. Did we know when the anniversary was and could we make a film by that date? The answer was yes and yes. It so happened the anniversary was in October 1998. If it had been in January then presumably the film would never have been made. Even more frighteningly, they had apparently already gone down the path of developing their own documentary project on the Opera House. That is, repeating all the work we had already done. Fortunately before they got too far down that track someone in there, with an institutional memory that went back more than a few months, remembered that our script existed so they dug it out and contacted us. I know of many cases (it has also happened to us) where a broadcaster has developed and produced (with a different team either internally or through a commission) the very project that you pitched to them some time earlier.

I: In the "Art of Narrative" panel at the Australian International Documentary Conference in Perth (2001), you talked about the intensive research and scripting of your projects, before shooting. Can you relate this to *The Edge of the Possible* and the research path that brought the story to the screen? When did you work out the story structure – and how would you describe it?

Daryl: Research began in 1994-95 and scripting in 1996. This project posed an enormous task for a researcher. There were many books written on the events between 1956 and the opening in 1973, thousands of newspaper clippings, and there were several archives of documents. The NSW government had opened all its archives on the Opera House development to the public and there was a whole building full of files. The NSW State Library has a whole archive of thousands of Utzon's drawings, and the National Library in Canberra housed a manuscript collection of the papers of competition judge and Opera House proponent and design committee member, Prof H I Ashworth. All of this was examined. Many hours of discussions between myself and co-writer Ian Wansbrough resulted in plans for the structure of the script. We decided that the film would only cover the period that Utzon worked on the Opera House, from 1956 to 1966, and then jump to the present day. The focus then would very

much be on the immediate problems of the design as it took place, with a coda at the end which provided a present day, retrospective commentary.

The script was divided into three Acts. It really was a dramatic tragedy. It even had a direct link to Shakespeare. Utzon had spent his childhood not far from Elsinore and would often play in the shadow of the great castle on the promontory there, Kroneborg Castle – the setting for Hamlet. Utzon was the fair prince – doomed by a legacy left by the father of the Opera House, the great but flawed Maestro Eugene Goossens.

We knew Utzon's involvement was problematic, so nothing in the script required him to be involved. We had a whole range of contemporary commentary from architects and others close to the story. We had a huge amount of archival film, much of it direct interviews with Utzon between 1956 and 1966, and in 1973 and 1995 (in Danish). He wasn't essential and the film was too important to live or die simply on one person's involvement. Nevertheless, we kept following up the possibility of him becoming involved.

We conducted a number of research interviews, recorded them on audio tape, transcribed the recordings and used this material in the film script.

When the ABC finally agreed to buy the film we did not have Utzon's agreement to be in it. We arranged to conduct filming in Denmark, various buildings Utzon had built, and we notified his son's architectural practice that we were in Copenhagen and would like to meet with his father if possible. The second day we were there Jørn Utzon rang us at our hotel and the next day we went to meet him, still not knowing if he would be open to an interview. Well, he met us and said yes on the spot.

Generally with a film like this one we are able to maintain a relatively low shooting ratio. Everything is highly scripted and therefore we only shoot exactly what we need. The actual amount of tape stock isn't such a big issue when you are shooting on video, but even so our ratios would be on the low side. The main cost saving is that we shoot over a pre-defined, limited period. With a number of the interviewees we shot them back to back in a studio, again saving time and allowing for a certain controlled stylistic approach.

I: Can you summarise how the project was funded?

Daryl: One of the most important things for the successful development of a film like this one is to have adequate support in script development. We were lucky enough to have both the New South Wales Film and Television Office and Film Victoria assist with that stage.

Production was funded under a normal ABC-FFC Accord process, with an argument that the initial ABC pre-sale figure, which determines the total budget for production under the ABC-FFC Accord, should be towards the higher end of their normal range because some international travel was essential to the project. Because the pre-sale money from the ABC is included in the total production

budget (many people have the false idea that it is an actual return on top of investment) you have to have some kind of cash flow facility so that you can make the film and then get the final payment towards the production budget, which is in the form of the pre-sale money. Film Victoria provided an interest-free cash flow facility for this purpose.

I: Can you describe your aims in terms of the style of the film?

Daryl: The story we had to tell was a very dramatic one; it was a tragic story, a sad story, but also a poetic story. Especially poetic in terms of the building itself and the imagery of the building and the words and imagery associated with the architect. There was also a kind of spiritualism or philosophical approach to Utzon's work that we wanted to offer the audience a glimpse of. These aims dictated to a certain extent how the film would look. All the interviews, for instance, were shot against a blue screen. Then, in post-production, carefully chosen architectural sketches were put up behind each interviewee. The only person who wasn't filmed in this way was Utzon himself, purely because he happened to be at his home in Hellebaek and had, there, huge black and white prints of the Opera House shells under construction. It was convenient and appropriate to simply conduct the interview in front of one of these giant prints.

The music was especially important in maintaining the stylistic flow of the film and helping the story to unfold. David Bridie and John Phillips composed the music and I like it a great deal and once again am indebted to them for their beautiful work.

I: Did the executive producer/commissioning editor influence the shape of the work? Were there any other key institutional or personal interchanges that influenced the shape of the project?

Daryl: Dasha Ross was the Executive Producer for the ABC and the commissioning editor and we consulted with her closely right from the very beginning of the project. She of course viewed the rough cut and made suggestions and then viewed the fine cut and approved the film. There is always discussion about aspects that she might like to be changed in some way, perhaps to make the story clearer or flow better and this project was no exception.

I: How did you choose your crew?

Daryl: Sue Maslin and I sat down and discussed who might be a possible choice for each crew member. It is a fairly straight forward process. We know what the roles are that have to be filled and then we look at the people we know of who either we have worked with before or we have wanted to work with but for some reason couldn't. We then make up a short list and start contacting to see who is available for the dates of the shoot. Often the people we would like to work with just aren't available due to other commitments.

I: How was the shooting of the project organised? (Crew, equipment used)

Daryl: For the most part, especially overseas, the crew was a very compact unit of myself, director; Sue Maslin, producer and acting as production manager; Mark Tarpey, sound recordist; and John Whitteron, director of photography. We shot on a panasonic DVPro video camera and Mark recorded backup DAT tapes. In Sydney we needed a bigger crew, we had grips and gaffers and a steadycam operator and even did a helicopter shot. Charlotte Seymour was production manager. A very small percentage of material was shot on 16mm film for a time-lapse effect of Sydney Harbour at night.

I: Where was the editing done and how was it organised?

Daryl: Editing was done by Mark Atkin and we rented time at Tim Lewis's The Joinery in Albert Park and the edit was done on Lightworks.

I: Any input of broadcasters or funding bodies into the cut; any screenings of work to documentary subjects or other people?

Daryl: The film was screened to the broadcaster, in the person of commissioning editor Dasha Ross, as I mentioned above. We never show our work to interviewees before the film is finished and no-one other than immediate editing crew looked at it in the rough cut stage.

I: What were the greatest challenges of the editing phase?

Daryl: Editing is always a long and gruelling period. It is where you really find out if the film you have shot actually stacks up against the script that everyone has been working to. It can be a very scary moment of truth for a director, especially one who is also the scriptwriter. In this case Mark Atkin was an absolute pleasure to work with. Some directors, I'm sure, like to hover over the editor at all times putting in their two bob's worth. I certainly don't hang around if the editor makes it plain that s/he wants to have some time to do something by themselves. Mark basically assembled the film as close as he possibly could to the script and then got me in and said "Hey what are we going to do about these big holes?"

The holes weren't actually that big, but they are always there. You never shoot the film and find absolutely every scene is completely covered exactly the way it was mapped out in the script. One big difference between the script and what we actually came back with "in the can" was, of course, the interview with Jørn Utzon. We had to decide right from the outset of the editing process how we were going to handle this material that does not exist anywhere in the script. Mark and I agreed that he should assemble the film according to the script first and separately edit the Utzon interview. Then I would look at the assembly and the separate Utzon grabs and decide how we could merge the two. It was quite a challenge because some of the best material from him was about things like Australia voting on the Republic issue, something the script never ever envisaged.

I: What were the main issues in constructing the soundtrack, including narration and music?

Daryl: Basically Mark Atkin and I constructed the bare bones of the soundtrack in the edit and then handed it over to Livia Ruzic, the sound editor, who fleshed the whole thing out – at times constructing quite an elaborate and sophisticated soundscape.

Sue and I decided to approach Robyn Nevin to do the narration. Robyn had a long history of association with the Sydney Opera House as a theatre performer and we thought that that was important. She also has a beautiful timbre to her voice. She agreed to do it, and I think really adds something to the film which nobody else could have achieved. In fact, she wrote to us after the film was completed and thanked us for inviting her to be a part of it. We thought it was us who should have been thanking her, but it was one of those wonderful sorts of letters that you get occasionally and that really make the whole thing worthwhile.

I: In what ways did questions of addressing the “audience” figure as you made the film?

Daryl: Well you always think about your audience. I suppose in a general way you are trying to have at the forefront of your mind, all the time, whether or not the whole thing is going to make sense to anybody else. We wrote *Edge of the Possible* with the strong view that it would sell overseas, and we were right about that. With that in our minds all the time I think we made sure that there weren't any bits of the story that were taken for granted, and in an interesting way I think that made us re-examine things about Australian society, say in the 1950s or 1960s that perhaps we wouldn't have looked at otherwise. One unexpected comment we found from Utzon was that he believed that nowhere else in the world, at that time, say 1957, would have embarked on a project like his design for the Opera House. Now that set up a real dichotomy between the Australia that he had identified as being in the avant-garde of modern, some might like to argue post-modern architecture; and the Australia of just a few years later that had him removed, or indeed the Australia that was constantly sniping at the project, through the tabloid media, as it took shape.

On the other hand, I think that a well told story will always overcome any small areas of audience ignorance. Any story that comes out of a particular milieu will always have intriguing elements that the uninitiated won't understand, but if the whole project is handled well those things give added interest rather than confuse or repel the audience. Two interesting examples from *The Edge of the Possible*: at one point in the film, a very poignant moment, Utzon tries to convey how exasperated he had become, towards the end, with the bitter, grinding recalcitrance he had to deal with, coming from the NSW government. He throws up his hands and says “basta” – which means “enough” in Italian and Spanish. Now to the Australian audience this sounded like “bastard”. So what? Some actually suggested we put a sub-title explaining the meaning – an execrable thing to do.

The second example was that Utzon, at the end of the film, referred to “the decision you are going to make to become a republic”. He was directly addressing his Australian audience. This stayed in the film for all the overseas sales. In fact, of course, the film that sold overseas is exactly the same film that was seen here, and it doesn’t matter: people understand that these kinds of things are taken differently depending on the audience that watches. The substance of the film transcends these little quirks. What is important is the focus the writer-and-director has on the story s/he is trying to tell, or, more fundamentally the argument s/he is trying to make. I think this is the thing that disappoints me most about many documentaries I see – there is no argument being put. It’s not that I don’t agree with the views expressed in many documentaries; it’s that there just isn’t a defining central proposition.

I: How long did it take to make the film overall?

Daryl: This is not as easy a question to answer as might be imagined. It depends what phase you are talking about. The development phase, from having the initial idea for the film through to finishing the final draft of the script was a long time – years. I had the idea in 1995 and finished the first draft perhaps two years later, but then kept working on the script until production began in 1998. I think we started production in May 1998 and handed over the final cut in September.

I: Overall, do you think the form of the film is affected by your negotiation of the production and broadcasting context in significant ways?

Daryl: Absolutely. Many of the predilections of commissioning editors, for example, are made abundantly clear at different times in industry forums of various kinds. For nearly twenty years now I’ve been going to conferences and “meet and greet” sessions with funding body representatives, and they sit down and expound on the types of films they want to see, the types of documentaries they want to fund. Sometimes utterly glib edicts are put out. Recently there was the “we’re not interested in history films” line. I think that has faded away a bit now, but it was out there and from a very major industry figure. Have a look at all the documentaries commissioned in Australia in the last six or seven years and make your own mind up as to whether that edict could have been put into practice. With international commissioning editors it is notorious that Australians pitch ideas and the response is “great idea, but I think we might do that ourselves” – that is, for example, as a BBC film shot in the UK, exactly the same idea but with their locations and their people not Australians. So when you ask is the form affected, well you have two choices as a filmmaker: conform to the edicts that are issued and hope they fund you, or you keep plugging away with your ideas, maybe pitch them in a way that is more palatable to the funding body than it once might have been – and hope they fund you.

I: Can you outline the television and other distribution/exhibition the film has had?

Daryl: *The Edge of the Possible* has screened several times on ABC-TV. We licensed the film to them for three screenings over five years. During that time it can’t be

sold to any other domestic free-to-air television network. But it can be sold non-theatrically and we have an agreement with Ronin Films who distribute the film to the non-theatrical market. [*The Edge of the Possible* is now distributed through www.filmartmedia.com.] That means to schools, universities, institutions and to the general public. We have sold it to Qantas for their in-flight channel and we sell it at the Opera House shop. The first screening had a fair amount of publicity and that was handled by the ABC's publicity department. We prepared a pretty extensive publicity kit with stills and so on and they distributed them to the media.

ABC International have served as our international distributor for the film. They have been great and we have sold to TV networks all over Europe, but not the United Kingdom; and to Canada, China and even the Middle East, but not the USA. We do have a non-theatrical distributor in the USA and they are www.films.com [since 2008 a Spanish language version, packaged with a colour booklet and essay in Spanish is handled by <http://www.arquia.es/documentales/>] and have made some great sales for us there.

I: What have been the modes of reception of the film (eg, reviews, press articles, interviews, festival discussions, etc)?

Daryl: The film got quite a lot of press coverage on its release on ABC-TV. All the major daily newspapers covered it and the TV sections reviewed it and some had major feature stories on the film. The launch of the film by Harry Seidler, with Utzon's daughter Lin Utzon present, and held of course at the Opera House, made news in *The Sydney Morning Herald* and in *The Australian*.

It has also screened overseas at a number of special venues, exhibitions and festivals including notably the Viennese Architecture Centre (AZW) which screened it and invited me as a guest to talk about the film; and the Florence Festival of Architecture and Video which also invited the film. It was also awarded a Gold Plaque at the Chicago International Television Competition for best Arts Documentary.

I: How have audiences reacted to the documentary, to your knowledge?

Daryl: Other than ratings figures, it is hard to know how television audiences might have reacted. Ratings are highly dubious when applied to the ABC because they are a system established for the commercial networks, and have certain inbuilt biases because of that. But having said that, we rated quite respectably. The important gauge is how you do over each 15-minute period; that is how the ratings are calculated. We held or increased our audience over each successive 15-minutes of the hour, which gives you some indication the audiences at home were captivated by the film.

The screenings that I have attended personally, with an audience, have generated a fantastic response, and that is a palpable thing that you can feel through the air as people watch the film. They laugh at the right places, or even at places you didn't expect, they gasp and they clap. A simple thing is whether people fidget a

lot or they get up and walk out, and that may sound basic but I've been to plenty of film screenings where a fair proportion of the audience has left in the first ten minutes of the film. No-one walked out on us so that's a pretty good sign, too.

I: Any reactions from protagonists in the Opera House story?

Daryl: Well, I've never heard directly from Jørn Utzon and I don't expect to. But his daughter Lin certainly liked the film a great deal and I did hear a report back that the whole Utzon family sat down and watched it either on video or when it was screened on Danish television, which it has been twice now, and they had a very emotional response to it, a good response, but an emotional one, and it is a very moving film and a tragic story especially for the Utzons.

Mogens Prip-Buus, Utzon's lieutenant and friend, the man responsible for the technical drawings of the "spherical solution", one of the Danish architects who worked on the Opera House, liked the film very much, and in fact we have become great friends out of the process. I visited him in France just this year and he was a very great help to us right from the beginning.

Sir Davis Hughes, (the NSW Country Party Minister for Public Works who forced Utzon out) rang me; in fact I had several phone calls from him. They were quite amicable, but I think he made it clear that he didn't at all agree with the argument the film put. But even he has this extraordinarily positive view of the building; he sees it as his greatest achievement.

The engineers of the Sydney Opera House, Ove Arup and Partners had some, I think fairly minor criticisms, of the film and they wrote a letter voicing them. All in all, I think we succeeded in producing a film on a very contentious and quite complicated and drawn out matter that took a fairly strong line on it and yet didn't ruffle too many feathers. After all, a key representative of Arup, John Nutt, appeared in the film. I think their commentaries on the events stand on their own to a certain extent.

I: Any other comment on the degree of public, political, academic etc interest the film has excited?

Daryl: One of the great things has been the high level of interest in the film from the architectural profession. We had a special screening of the film in Melbourne for the Bates Smart team who have been building Federation Square, and others; they filled most of the Treasury Theatre here. And there have been reviews in architectural journals and interest from architects all over the world. After the screening in Vienna at AZW, it just seemed to have a life of its own in Europe, showing to architectural audiences and film audiences in Italy, Germany, Spain, Slovenia and most recently Sweden.

I: What forms of remuneration have you had from the work (eg, up-front fees, deferrals, Screenrights payments, distributor payments, satisfaction from producing a particular kind of work)?

Daryl: The remuneration that I personally had from the film included a writer's fee, and a director's fee. Those fees would not have covered the actual amount of time I devoted to the project. I own the production company, Film Art Doco, but the company itself did not receive any returns for the production, and in the production budget there may have been a few hundred dollars for a company overhead, but that certainly wouldn't have covered those costs expended by the company on that particular project, so the company is constantly in the business of subsidising its own work in various complicated ways. [Since 2008, Daryl and Sue's new distribution company www.filmartmedia.com has begun generating significant returns from new releases and the Film Art Doco back catalogue including a Special Edition re-release of *The Edge of The Possible*.]

All the returns that come back to the film, and there have been quite substantial sales, overseas and in Australia, are simply held in a trust account by Film Art Doco and then 100% of them are forwarded onto the funding body or bodies, in this case the Australian Film Finance Corporation (FFC). The ABC-TV pre-sale, of course, as I mentioned earlier, forms a part of the production budget and is completely spent on production. The FFC does send a small amount back to the filmmakers in the form of an advance on profits. I think something like 10% of returns after the film has returned 20% of the investment. We haven't seen any money under this provision yet (the film was finished in 1998), but we understand that we are eligible for a small amount, again maybe a few hundred dollars.

I: What interest do you have in the intellectual property of the film?

Daryl: Film Art Doco and the FFC jointly own the copyright in the film, but Film Art Doco is responsible for making sure no breaches of the joint copyright occur. So it tends to be an added job for the company with little incentive provided, since all returns still go back to the FFC, as outlined above. My personal intellectual property clearly resides in the script as researcher and co-writer and in the finished work as director. I certainly assert my moral rights over all my works.

I: What were your greatest challenges in producing this work?

Daryl: The greatest challenge, as always, was to get the production funded.

I: What are your greatest satisfactions in producing this work?

Daryl: The greatest satisfaction was not that Jørn Utzon agreed to speak to us and meet with us and be in the film. That was certainly the high point of a long process. The greatest satisfaction was that we held to our course. We set out to make a film about that incredible building and the people that created it, with or without Utzon; we never veered off that course and we still got the film funded and produced. That he respected what we were trying to do and agreed to assist us, for me, just confirmed that we had taken the right course.

I: How do you see *The Edge of the Possible* in your overall body of work?

Daryl: I see it as the third in a trilogy of films about Sydney stories of national importance. Of mythic stories, of legendary stories where our intervention has somehow helped to offer an alternative view.

I: In the submission to the Australian Broadcasting Authority Pay TV review mentioned above, you identify “Australian social history documentary” as a particular Film Art Doco interest. Can you expand on this, why it matters, what’s happening to it?

Daryl: What I mean by that is documentary films that tackle almost any subject matter but try to put it into some kind of context. Films that analyse. Films that don’t hide behind the lie that they just “observe”. Films that intervene – as all films do – but aren’t ashamed of it, or offering some kind of pretence that the film is just revealing what went on in front of the camera. I’m bored by those kinds of films, but I also think they are fundamentally duplicitous. You can sell a lot of soap powder by making up all sorts of fictions for television, whether they are game shows or so-called “reality TV” or combinations of both, but they aren’t documentaries, and I don’t want to make them.

I: Are there particular documentary traditions or influences that are important to you as a filmmaker?

Daryl: They are all important to me and inform my work in certain ways, but I suppose I draw my greatest strength from the tradition of essay-style filmmaking that probably reached a peak in the 1970s. I’m an eclectic filmmaker and I really feel that you draw on the whole palette to make your films and don’t simply fence off some areas because they aren’t traditionally associated with documentary filmmaking. In that sense I feel much freer as a filmmaker than a lot of people who work in specific genres, TV drama, feature films etc, etc, where the dictates of what you can and can’t do can be much more de-limiting.

I: Do you think there have been changes in the context and nature of independent filmmaking practice while you’ve been working?

Daryl: There have been many changes over the years. I suppose the on-going and most obvious one is the constantly evolving technologies. When I first started, and even into the early 1990s, 16mm film was still a common format to be working on. Nowadays, of course, literally only one or two people have the kudos to demand to continue working on film. I’d love to, but it is just not feasible.

I think the changing technologies have been over-hyped often to create a sense that just because you are working with them you are somehow offering something fresh and new, which invariably isn’t the case. The classic example in that regard is the multi-media revolution. While I think there are really possibilities for multi-media applications to documentary work, at the same time much of what I have seen produced has been very expensive “re-inventing of the wheel”-type projects.

The non-linear editing systems have been extraordinary developments, and I don't know anyone who now works in any other way. At the same time I think certain old ways of working were inevitably lost and the craft suffered as a result. Sometimes it was an improvement, or at least allowed for that, but overall I think the general level of creative thought that goes into a project seems to have declined. The pressure of finishing quickly and the ability to do that seems to have pushed out other considerations.

Part 3 Current documentary context and issues

I: Has broadcast television been a constraining medium or a medium of opportunity, or both, for your work in documentary?

Daryl: It has clearly been both of those things for me. It has offered me possibilities that perhaps wouldn't have been there before, and in particular it has taken my work to enormous numbers of people. For example *Mr Neal is Entitled to be an Agitator* was seen by between 1.5 and 2 million Australians. Prior to that I had had audiences of between 1 and 2 thousand people! We really felt the palpable change in people's attitudes after that film screened. It went into the cultural subconscious in a way that really surprised me. I remember seeing a headline in *The Age* in 1992 after the *Mabo* case was decided: "Mr Mabo is entitled to be an agitator". Of course, our Mr Neal was an Aboriginal man from North Queensland as well – the cultural resonances were wide and deep.

As with all developments of this kind I suppose they start out as one thing and then change over time. I think the view of what is "acceptable" television, or "what will work for us", has ineluctably narrowed until now I despair a bit at what kinds of opportunities there are out there. You need always to remember that in the early days – early 1980s that is – the independent sector was making great documentaries, funded by the Australian Film Commission or Film Victoria, or paid for by the filmmaker, or a combination of all of these things. The TV networks refused to buy them or screen them. I remember Peter Tammer telling me that the ABC rang him up once and said "we want to show your film *Journey to the End of Night*", about an amazing WWII survivor. They wanted to screen it on Anzac Day. Peter was over-joyed, and then the let down, "Oh, we can't pay you anything, do you mind?"!

Anyway the Accord system and the FFC were established in order to get these great films onto television, and it has worked. There has been an incredible body of work since then. But nowadays it has gone full circle. These films that once existed as the product of a vibrant independent sector now increasingly reflect only a commissioning editor's brief.

I: How have the broadcast slots and schedules suited you? Have you ever wanted to make a documentary series?

Daryl: The slots seem to have suited us quite well. Recently there has been a move to put first run documentaries on at 9.30 pm. That I think is a huge mistake.

Nobody stays up that late to watch them and it devalues their important contribution. The 8.30 slots worked really well. I'd love to do a series. I put one up some years ago and Film Australia invited me to be part of a series they were doing, but neither project got off the ground, so it's just a matter of the right project and the right time I think.

I: Could you identify advantages or any problems of the FFC Accord system?

Daryl: From my stand point I think it's the non-Accord system that seems to generate more parochial films and films with a kind of bland, mushy heart. There seems to be the mistaken belief that the non-Accord system somehow responds to the needs of globalisation and therefore results in the best of the best. The reality is, I think, that the most dominant player in the multi-country mix, say for argument's sake the BBC, simply stamps its brand on the product, and the artistic freedom that the producer may have once held onto, and the cultural subtleties and peculiarities, which make a film truly great, gradually dissipate through a series of contractual requirements placed on the production by all parties but funnelled through the dominant player.

I really support the Accord system and believe it must be strengthened and expanded. The dwindling budgets are a real problem and I think the lower they go the more the viewers will turn to something else and that would be a great shame, a tragedy.

I: Have you worked on any FFC non-Accords – how do you see the difference between the FFC Accord and non-Accord systems playing out?

Daryl: I haven't worked on a non-Accord film yet, but we are getting pretty close to getting one up I think. We did, though, treat *The Edge of the Possible* as a non-Accord project for a long time while we tried to raise some pre-sales. So the experience with that film certainly gave me an insight into the non-Accord system. The ridiculous thing was that no overseas network would give us a pre-sale and we ended up making it as an Accord film, but, and this is the crazy part, we have now sold it all over the world. We came that close to not being able to make that film because the ABC insisted for so long that it had to be a non-Accord project. Of course, the greatest irony is that the money returned to the project from outright sales is real income whereas pre-sales, although higher in value, would have only gone towards the production budget. But the salient point I suppose is that British TV hasn't bought the film and they are the first port of call in raising non-Accord money. But they have had a look at it, and one of the networks over there recently did their own version in twenty minutes. I had to take a double look at that, but it was a pretty low budget, almost a travelogue kind of thing, so there you are.

I: Do you have a view on how documentary is faring overall now that its main medium is the "mass" medium of television, and where do you see the future of documentary?

Daryl: You still occasionally see a documentary at the cinema and I think that is fantastic. I think that is also a kind of cyclical thing. I can envisage a time again when documentaries screen at the local movie theatre, but I'm not sure that they will be much like most of the stuff that is on TV at the moment. There is a big emphasis on TV at the moment on low, low budget and the kinds of projects that deliver low budget entertainment. Again, TV audiences will pretty quickly get tired of that fare and things will move on. I guess public broadcasting is the big central issue in all of this. Strong independent public broadcasting is essential and let's hope it keeps on going and once again starts to get the support it deserves.

I: How do you see the role of documentaries you have made outside of television and the scope for such work?

Daryl: I made a number of films for government or educational sectors over the years, projects like *Koories and Cops* or *Cleanskin*, and I've always really enjoyed doing those projects. They aren't what you would call bread and butter jobs because they have come along pretty infrequently for me, but they always have their own foibles.

Cleanskin was a film for prisoners in the Central Remand Jail, then at Pentridge, in Melbourne, and *Koories and Cops* was a film about Police and Aboriginal relations in Victoria and it was produced for the Victoria Police.

End transcript

POSTSCRIPT June 2011

This interview was originally conducted as part of a research project on Australian documentary by Trish FitzSimons, Pat Laughren and Dugald Williamson, from which a main outcome has been the book *Australian Documentary: History, Practices and Genres* (Cambridge University Press, 2011). It is one of a range of interviews quoted (but not reproduced) in that book.

Sue Maslin and Daryl Dellora formed the development, distribution and rights management company Film Art Media Pty Ltd in 2008 and its first release was the feature length documentary *Celebrity: Dominick Dunne* (which they executive produced) and its second release *The Edge of the Possible Special Edition* DVD. In 2010 it released a one-hour biographical documentary of the former High Court Justice *Michael Kirby: Don't Forget the Justice Bit*. Film Art Doco remains the production company with Film Art Media a complementary development.

Work by Daryl Dellora since this interview was recorded includes the following.

In 2010 Daryl was contracted to Penguin and he is currently writing a book due for publication in 2012.

Michael Kirby: Don't Forget the Justice Bit (2010) DVD Dir/Writer

The Edge of the Possible: Special Edition (re-release with new material) (2009)
DVD Dir/Writer

Dominick Dunne – After the Party COLLECTOR'S EDITION (USA) (2009)
DVD Exec Prod

Celebrity – Dominick Dunne (2008) DVD Exec Prod

Jørn Utzon El limite de lo posible, (Rafael Moneo, colaborador en el libreto)
(2008) DVD

Hunt Angels (2006) Co-Producer, ABC-TV

The Life, Times and Travels of the Extraordinary Vice-Admiral William Bligh
www.abc.net.au/bligh (2005) Interactive graphic novel Dir/Writer

See also:

Film Art Doco web site <http://www.filmartdoco.com>

Film Art Media web site <http://www.filmartmedia.com>

Australian Screen Online http://aso.gov.au/people/Daryl_Dellora/

Video interview with Sue Maslin by Ray Argall, and transcript, 10 June 2009
http://aso.gov.au/people/Sue_Maslin/interview/

Complete transcript of video interview with Sue Maslin by Ray Argall, 10 June 2009
http://aso.gov.au/people/Sue_Maslin/extras/