

The Robin Anderson Film Awards

Robin Anderson - A Tribute

by Robin Hughes (An independent filmmaker and writer)

In 1985 I served on a small panel designed to select, from an impressive field of filmmakers, those who would receive a coveted Documentary Fellowship. This scheme was the brainchild of the late Tom Haydon, an Australian documentary filmmaker who knew from his own experience how difficult it was to fund the development of one's next film adequately. The sheer financial burden of beginning production often means that the time taken to identify the best subject, to undertake proper research and to think imaginatively about alternative approaches, is woefully inadequate. The idea behind the Fellowship was to give filmmakers of proven ability living expenses up-front to allow them to do this. The Fellowship was therefore not to be awarded on the basis of a specific film proposal but on an assessment of the filmmaker's body of work. It was then up to the documentary Fellow to find and develop an idea in whatever way he or she deemed best. It was a good scheme and produced some interesting films. In 1985 our panel awarded a Fellowship to Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson.

Not long after, I bumped into Robin at some industry event. We chatted about their plans and she expressed her appreciation of the award. "Well we're expecting something pretty special from you two" I said, "something different – that's what these awards are for, to advance the form, to give you the chance to take a few risks, to surprise us all". I hadn't meant the comment to carry much weight – it was for me a matter-of-fact description of what I, as a viewer and filmmaker, hoped to get from the work of two accomplished and intelligent colleagues who had been given a better chance to experiment than most of us were used to. But I suddenly realised that Robin took my comment very seriously. She was looking at me with that intent, thoughtful gaze that was so characteristic of her – brows slightly pulled together, a half-smile on her lips, and she said very deliberately: "That's just what we intend to do". It was not until some years later when she and Bob completed their Fellowship film – *Joe Leahy's Neighbours* (1989) – that I realised how thoroughly, how effectively, she and Bob had satisfied that casual demand.

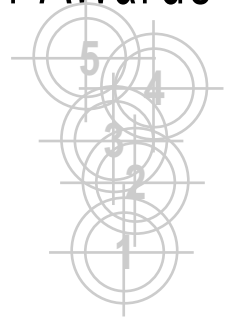
As the award was based on an evaluation of an entire body of work, the selection panel first viewed the films each candidate had then completed before commencing the interview process. In Bob and Robin's case, at that stage, most of the films were Bob's alone, made before he met and married Robin, and mostly made at the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) for the series "A Big Country". I had seen and admired these films when they were first screened, but seeing them one after another like that, it was easy to reach some conclusions about what qualities Bob would bring to his next film. These solo films by Bob displayed an intuitive sensibility, an understanding of the dramatic, and a real cinematic talent. The interesting question was: What would Robin add? What would she bring to the partnership?

I knew something of her background because she had worked very briefly for me as a researcher at Film Australia. She came to see me whilst I was a producer there in the late '70s, before she had started making films with Bob. She was looking for freelance work. I didn't really have much at the time to offer but was so impressed by her intelligence and qualifications that I found a small job for her simply

because I thought she had exactly the kind of mind the film world needed but which seemed in short supply. She had an Honours degree in Economics from the University of Western Australia and a Master's in Sociology from Columbia University in New York where she had studied under Herbert Gans. It was quickly apparent that she had been educated in ways that made her a superb documentary researcher. She was open-minded, unprejudiced and excited by the unexpected. If what she found was the opposite of what she first believed she would find, well that merely whetted her appetite to discover why. She did not need to be warned – as a surprising number of journalistically trained researchers do – not to "contaminate" the sources of information by letting slip her own beliefs or opinions in ways which might influence the positions these people would take in the final filming. She understood well the vital difference between providing an atmosphere in which it was easy for a person to confide in her, and manipulating somebody to provide, perhaps falsely, what they felt she might want. She walked the line between these two with unusual deftness, being at the same time sympathetic and objective, sensitive and curious.

In other words she was a genuine seeker after truth and I would have loved to work with her some more. But by that time Dick Smith, the Australian millionaire entrepreneur and adventurer, had hired Bob and Robin to film a series about Australia which would eventually lead to them working together. Bob, with Robin's encouragement, had left the ABC to try life as an independent. By the time we saw them for the Documentary Fellowship, the one substantial film they had made together was *First Contact* (1983). Robin had done the research for this important film about the first meeting between Australians and the local people in the New Guinea Highlands. In the process she uncovered extraordinary footage shot by the Leahy brothers when they arrived in New Guinea in the 1930s. She subsequently tracked down some of the people who had featured in the films and remembered the first arrival of white men in their village. *First Contact* was structurally conventional, but extremely well-made and its content was truly astonishing. It was festooned with prizes and even nominated for an Academy Award. Outstanding research was its underpinning, and intellectual rigour its hallmark. Robin's mark as well as Bob's was clearly upon it.

As I've said, they got the Fellowship and they certainly saw to it that they did something really special and different with it. *Joe Leahy's Neighbours* was the start of a whole new way of working for Bob and Robin; it provided the approach they would use in all their subsequent films. For a start they had decided that with the two of them it would be possible to be able to form their own crew – a really unusual and risky step in those pre-digital days. They used a bit of the breathing space the Fellowship had provided to go off to the Australian Film Television and Radio School (AFTRS) to learn how to operate camera and sound themselves. They took courses, practised hard and prepared themselves admirably so that they would be able to go to remote locations and complete the job with technical excellence.



During this time they had also been thinking a lot about the observational method of documentary filmmaking. Throughout the '70s and within the limits of the television format that many documentary filmmakers were then constrained by, some of us began to construct our films as much like dramas as possible. We started reducing narration to the point of elimination if possible and to eschew the interview in favour of observing people in action. It was an inevitable outcome of making people-based stories, which attempted to illustrate social or political issues by means of the exemplary case study.

In trying to explain to a class at the AFTRS the difference between what we were attempting and the then dominant form of documentary, I was driven to draw on the literary tradition and to compare the classic "essay" form and the "short story" form – terms that then had some currency in documentary circles in Australia but which I knew even as I coined them not to be quite adequate. In this atmosphere of the early '80s, the AFTRS brought Mike Rubbo, an Australian who had been working in Canada, back from North America to conduct a weekend of screenings and discussion on the history of the documentary. What a revelation this was to all of us. He brought with him many fascinating films most particularly those of Frederick Wiseman, the Maysles, Pennebaker and Richard Leacock. We couldn't believe our eyes. Here flourishing since the early '60s in North America, unbeknown to us, was the tradition we'd been groping for. It was a kind of first contact for many of us. And it had a huge impact on Bob and Robin.

In the years since, we've had a chance almost to grow tired of this format but at its best it is hard to beat in providing gripping dramatic and intellectually satisfying screen experiences. It's worth asking among all the subsequent practitioners of this form: why do Bob and Robin's films stand head and shoulders above the rest, not just here in Australia but worldwide? The answer was there, in *Joe Leahy's Neighbours*, where the pattern was set that they improved on, but never abandoned. Whereas some thought it sufficient to point a camera at an interesting person in an interesting situation and edit it together as dramatically as possible, keeping the most sensational of the material, Bob and Robin undertook in-depth research into the issues that their subjects represented, they studied the context in which they acted before they even began. Their decisions about what to film and what to include were informed as much by the fundamental ideas that inspired the film as by the excitement of the material in a purely dramatic sense. In other words they avoided voyeurism in favour of highly intelligent use of real human stories to draw attention to much wider social and political issues.

Joe Leahy's Neighbours was a sequel to *First Contact* in subject matter; it also emulated its success in the cargo of glittering prizes it subsequently won all over the world. But it was a stylistic departure. Joe was the mixed race son of one of the Leahy brothers, and the story of his struggle to maintain relations with his fellow highlanders while at the same time operating as a successful coffee plantation owner is exotic and exciting enough in itself. But the film's true power lay in its depiction of the attitudes toward wealth and the effect this has on social relationships. *Joe Leahy's Neighbours* was released in 1989 two years after Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* (1987), and as an indictment of the "greed is good" philosophy (and coincidentally as a sheer piece of drama) the documentary beat the Hollywood feature by a country mile.

When they set out in 1990 to live once more among the Ulga Ganiga to make *Black Harvest* (1992), the third of the trilogy, this time with a two-year-old Katherine in tow, I marvelled at their bravery and envied their commitment and close partnership that made it possible. The development of their approach, their maturity as filmmakers, was visible on the screen when we finally saw their beautifully crafted film. How could anybody who saw *Black Harvest* fail to recognise artistic achievement at its best in documentary

form? After the early screenings, the buzz was about their bravery in filming the battle scenes with arrows whizzing around their ears. Bob told funny stories (against himself) about Robin's fearlessness in the face of the fighting. But again it was the fearlessness in sticking to the real story that truly impressed. I quizzed them at the time about their methods. Every night, they told me, they would review together what they had done that day. Robin's role was to keep them on track. She was the keeper of the concept – the one that reminded them of the necessity to stay true to the underlying reality, the deeper meaning in what they were filming. She was a person with a profoundly disciplined mind. If they disagreed they slugged it out (metaphorically speaking of course) until they found the answer. And whether the problem was creative, practical or ethical, Robin insisted on the same way to finding a solution, keep thinking until the underlying truth was identified.

It was hard to imagine what they would do after *Black Harvest*. It had become fashionable to argue that white filmmakers had no business filming other cultures. In any case Joanna had arrived by then and with two children even Robin was daunted by the prospect of another eighteen months away from home. When they told their friends that they had found their next story in Leichhardt Council we all wondered how a bunch of suburban Australians involved in local government could compare to the inhabitants of the New Guinea Highlands. But humans are humans and what an archetypal story of the effects of power they had found! Around the corner from their own home they found multiple ways to challenge themselves. For a start, meeting rooms are just about the most impossible places to film in. And meetings themselves are a huge challenge to select and edit. As well as that, they were by their choice of subject in an ethical minefield. And they had to go on living as ratepayers alongside their subjects.

Rats in the Ranks was released into Australian cinemas in 1996 and ran for five months. At the time Helen Garner wrote, "a writer would have given her right arm to have made it up but it springs from a realm of reality which is beyond the power of ordinary invention." (press kit) Again Bob and Robin experienced huge success and now came the task of finding their next film – a task which they always undertook as meticulously as their subsequent research and editing. In the Music Department of Sydney University they found a wonderful way to illustrate the problems created by the ideology which cannot see value in anything but commerce. *Facing the Music* (2001), their last film together, was released to the usual acclaim at last year's Sydney Film Festival only days after they had found out that Robin had cancer. In the months that followed it became clear that the rare and deadly form of cancer that had been diagnosed would give her very little time to ready herself for death. Her response was characteristic.

As her children grew, I noticed that whenever I met her, Robin would be more inclined to discuss children than films and we agreed that for both of us the children (I also have two daughters) seemed much more important than anything else. I could see that she brought to motherhood the same strength, intelligence and integrity she brought to her films and to her life in general. When she knew she would not be around to see the girls reach adulthood she committed herself to her last piece of serious disciplined work. Using labour supplied by willing friends and family, she selected out photos and stories from her little family's life so far, thought about the sort of things her daughters would like to know from their mother as they grew and pulled this all together into books for them. When the work, precise, meticulous and beautiful as usual was completed, she called the two girls into her room and handed over her legacy. A few hours later she died.