

Adventures in Movies

*An Intimate Chronicle of 25 Years Working in
the Film Industry from Roger Rabbit to
Harry Potter*

Paul Bernard

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Prologue

The prolific Hollywood Producer Robert Evans who headed up Paramount Studios in a period that saw the release of some of cinema's great mainstream films such as; *The Godfather*, *Chinatown* and *Marathon Man*, prefaced his own account of life in movies with the following quote:

There are three sides to every story,
yours...mine... and the truth. No one is lying.
Memories shared serve each differently. Be it
day or decade, recall still remains the one ace
I've been dealt from life's deck. In the spirit
that the least spared in these pages by myself,
I make no apology to those chronicled. At
least you have been remembered.

Well, everything you read here is my side of the story, my best recall, a glorious quarter century watching some great, and not so great movies, being made while working on the promotional documentaries (behind the scenes) commissioned by the various film studios involved. If you feature in these pages and disagree with my view of events, if I have written any inaccurate material facts, then please let me know, it will of course be reviewed and revised appropriately. Looking back I sometimes wonder if all this really did happen but you could not make this stuff up, I hope you enjoy sharing these memories.

Quote from:

'The Kid Stays in the Picture' by Robert Evans - Faber & Faber

Opening Scene

Having now worked on over 40 movies in the preceding 25 years, walking onto the location based set of Guy Ritchie's, 'Sherlock Holmes' in 2008, was a well worn path, traversed this time in a mild state of apathetic autopilot. I knew it would probably be a relatively easy movie to work on as Guy was always calm and accessible while I was filming on, 'Rock'n'Rolla'; and I had previously worked on movies with both lead actors in this one.

Robert Downey, Jr., or RDJ as he was referred to, was playing Sherlock, and I first met him early in his Hollywood career on, 'Air America'. His Watson was Jude Law who as a 19 year old drama graduate I had met on his first feature, 'Shopping', where he also met his former wife, Sadie Frost. 'Shopping' is a little known British film funded by FilmFour and directed by a baby faced 28 year old, Paul W.S. Anderson from his own script about ram-raiding joyriders. I had been hired by FilmFour to make the promotional video press kit (EPK) and remember turning to the crew when we had completed our last day on-set, saying: "Well we'll never see that Jude Law again!". How wrong could I be. Paul Anderson also went on to be a successful director in Hollywood.

Little did I know Sherlock was to be the mysterious final chapter of my quarter century affair with an industry I had craved to join as a movie loving kid but ultimately betrayed that passionate loyalty.

BACKSTORY

From the age of six I was a movie convert, a trip to the local cinema with Mum and my older brother in 1968 introduced me to Julie Andrews as she whirled over London supported by her

umbrella, carpet bag in hand. Mary Poppins was magical for a six year old and I was smitten, perhaps in much the same way Harry Potter has captured the imagination of a new generation. These cinema trips were quite frequent as we only had a black and white television and broadcasting was not the 24 hour ferris wheel it is now, the BBC only sparking up at midday for 'Watch With Mother' then closing down again until Blue Peter on BBC1 or the more trendy 'Magpie' on ITV.

A Chinon Super 8mm camera bought from the proceeds of a paper round provided some amateur movie making, including producing a teenage version of the British TV cop show 'The Sweeney'. I was also developing and printing my own B/W 35mm stills in a makeshift darkroom built at the back of our garage with the help of my older brother, Mike. I did work experience aged fifteen at Yorkshire Television in the Calendar newsroom and while I did not want to be a journalist it was nevertheless interesting seeing a daily news show put together. They were very kind allowing me to sit in on the morning editorial meeting, researching a small piece on a cricketer who had died and sitting in the gallery as the evening news went out. I took some pictures to record the experience including one of journalist and presenter Richard Whiteley who fronted the news.



Richard Whiteley in the Yorkshire TV newsroom

When the BBC sci-fi series 'Blake's 7' came to Yorkshire for some location filming, I went with my stills camera to record the day. I begged the producers to allow me to come down to London and see the studio recording of this episode and they kindly agreed. Mum drove me down from Leeds and we spent the day at television centre watching how the location shoot integrated with the now notorious low-fi interiors.



'ticket' allowing you to work in the industry. This was at a time when closed shops existed so unless you were in the union you were not allowed to work. The Iron Lady, Margaret Thatcher crushed the unions in the 80's and closed shops were outlawed.

The first film I worked on having secured a union card was with the Children's Film Foundation, a unit set up to make the sort of Saturday morning cinema popular in the fifties. Made on threadbare budgets with short shooting schedules and paying union minimum rates, these films were often a way in for new directors and actors. 'Haunters of the Deep' was set in a Cornish fishing port and shot on location during the summer of 1982. One of the sequences involved a village football match and even the crew, including myself, was roped into make up the numbers on the pitch. So I would mark the head of the shot with the clapperboard then run on the field and give

it my best Beckham impersonation (I was always the last to be picked for any team at school as I admit I was rubbish) The film was shot by Ronnie Maasz who had been the second unit director of photography on the great British Classic, 'The Italian Job'.

While no financial avalanche for me it did allow me to meet crew members who worked on feature films and the focus-puller David Watkins put me forward for a subsequent job on an American TV movie being shot in London. This led to second unit work on 'Highlander' and again through the diary service I was a member of (GAS) another job on a Disney film being shot at Elstree Film Studios, north of London, and that film was, 'Who Framed Roger Rabbit'. At this point, the course of total chance became the arbitrary “written in the stars” moment that catapulted my career and life immeasurably.

Who Framed Roger Rabbit

Elstree Studios – 1987

By now I was a member of the GBCT (Guild of British Camera Technicians) an organisation you could only join by invitation from other members. It had its own diary service GAS (Guild Answering Service) and those on the books were seen as the cream of crew so jobs would come in from companies who did not know me but credibility was imbued by membership so they kept me busy. I was able to put down a deposit on my first house based on this workload, a mid-terrace Victorian house in Hanwell, West London.

And so it was through the Guild I was invited to work on Roger Rabbit at Elstree Film Studios north of London. Borehamwood was previously known as Mini Hollywood because of the cluster of studios that thrived in the 60's including ABC Borehamwood now owned by the BBC and home to 'Eastenders' and MGM Borehamwood where Stanley Kubrick made, 2001, A Space Odyssey.

I had not worked at Elstree before but did make an uninvited visit after leaving college on the way home back to Leeds for the summer. I knew they were filming, 'Indiana Jones & The Temple of Doom' and just wanted to see cinematographer Douglas Slocombe at work. I admired Douggie because he was one of the last of the old school who used direct lighting rather than soft bounce light popularised in the 70's. You may know his work from the Ealing Comedies; Man in the White Suit, Lavender Hill Mob and movies such as Rollerball, The Great Gatsby and the British classic, The Italian Job. I jumped over the fence at the back of the studio which

entailed going through the garden of houses bordering the studio and traversing a small brook. Once on the lot no one seemed to bother who I was; so I asked the first person I met which stage the main unit were shooting on: “try stage 2”, was the fleeting response.

The door to stage 2 had a large notice stating in graphic clarity, 'CLOSED SET NO ADMISSION WITHOUT PERMISSION' – so of course I went in. Lining the wall next to the door were directors' chairs with names of key crew and cast, George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, Harrison Ford, and on set Spielberg was talking to Harrison while Douggie, with his trademark croupiers cap (worn to shade overhead lights shining directly in his eyes) was finishing lighting the scene (Well of Souls). A large man with a distinctive booming voice approached me within moments of taking in the sights, this was legendary Assistant Director David Tomblin, and he asked what was I doing on the stage. I replied honestly that I was a film student who just wanted to see Douggie working; he suggested I go to the production office and ask permission from Pat Carr who was the Production Manager. So I dutifully complied and on hearing my unannounced request proceeded to pop all main fuses, yelled for security and had me thrown out of the studio. Spielberg himself tells a similar story of sneaking on to the set of an Alfred Hitchcock film to see the master at work and being ejected on discovery so it couldn't really be held against me?

Several years later I needed no permission, I was working on Roger Rabbit as a clapper/loader, but talk about a small industry, the Production Manager was the one and only PAT CARR and she clearly had an elephantine memory because already she had me down as trouble. The movie was being directed by Robert Zemeckis and produced by Steven Spielberg. Filming had not yet started just camera and lighting test days for the American Cinematographer

Dean Cundey who had previously worked with Robert Zemeckis on, 'Back To The Future'. I only needed to load two film magazines all day but when it came to unloading the film I could feel it was all concertina like squished into one lump, clearly not properly connected to the take-up spool. I immediately admitted the state of the stock and was told to just wind it all back up by hand and send it off to the lab anyway with a covering note. The following day we sat in the preview theatre to watch the lighting tests. I sat next to Dean and visibly sank into the seat as great big white flashes rolled up the screen as each concertina crease jumped through the projector.

I thought that was the end of my film career when called into the office that afternoon, but to my surprise no comment was made about the camera test instead I was asked if I would like to be the camera assistant on a documentary about the making of the film for an America Director. This could not have come at a better time after four years as clapper boy and I happily accepted, the shortest, and as it transpired, wisest decision I was ever to make as the next 25 years proved.

A TURNING POINT

The guy making the 'behind the scenes' on Roger was Les Mayfield a fresh faced bespectacled Californian (think Clarke Kent) a couple of years older than me and a graduate of film studies at USC (University of Southern California). It seems he was a trusted person in Spielberg's inner circle as his Producer Frank Marshall was also a USC graduate and supported fellow alumni. Who could have envisioned at this point meeting Les was to prove one of life's unexpected chance events that would drive almost all my future career?

Roger Rabbit was the first time an entire film would involve the interaction of animated cartoon characters with live action actors. There had been short sequences in previous films doing this such as Mary Poppins and Song of the South but nothing on the scale of Roger. The live action lead was Bob Hoskins, a no nonsense cockney who would drive himself to the studio in his old light blue Mk 1 Ford Escort and eat his lunch off paper plates sat outside on the floor with crew. It was so claustrophobic on set everyone was keen to see the sun for an hour! I quickly realised that these behind the scenes documentaries meant you visited all departments covering every aspect of film production, something that was virtually impossible when welded to the camera crew as clapper-boy. Naturally I was enthusiastic and Les Mayfield pleased to have a Brit on board, as I was able to oil my way round the crew to get good access for him.

The animation element of Roger was the responsibility of Canadian born Animator Richard Williams who supervised a small army of traditional cell animators. Each frame was to be hand drawn and painted with the same techniques and skills used by Disney for over 50 years. We got to visit his studio and record this process taking place and interview Williams about how the two elements would eventually combine so Bob Hoskins could interact with the animated Roger.

While filming on Roger I was aware that Steven Spielberg was also in the studio preparing his next film, an adaptation of J.G. Ballard's semi autobiographical novel, 'Empire of the Sun'. Naturally I was harboring a passionate desire to get on that one, Steven was just about the most famous and financially successful director on the planet at that point. When I heard that the first three weeks of the shoot would be in China I brazenly went up to Producer Frank

Marshall and said I would work for nothing if he took me on the shoot! Well, apparently Frank did see if a visa could be secured in time but unfortunately it was too short notice. However he did tell Les Mayfield about my enthusiasm who was suitably impressed and hired me to work with him on the rest of Empire.

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