behind a velvet light trap: from cinesound to cannes – a filmmaker’s journey

anthony buckley

hardie grant books, 2009

any dedicated film buff can tell you what roles the grip and the gaffer play in the making of a film, not to speak of the ‘foley artists’, but there still seems to be a good deal of uncertainty about what the producer does. there are books about hollywood moguls such as sam goldwyn and his less flamboyant british counterparts such as michael balcon and sydney box, but even so the producer remains both a crucial and somewhat mysterious figure. perhaps this is because of the diversity of images producers have acquired: the cigar-chomping boss who has the power of career life and death; the suited and faceless money man out of sight of the action; and the creative types, like balcon and box, who did exert a serious influence over the kinds of films that bore their imprimatur.

anthony buckley falls into this last category. if he is not a household name – and in some households he no doubt is – this may be because of a sort of innate modesty in his approach. it would be hard in the 400 pages of this memoir to disguise all urge to dominance. what does emerge is a producer who was involved creatively in all the stages of filmmaking. yes, he had to initiate and monitor a great many intricate financial deals with ‘gentlemen’ and others, but he gives the impression that this was just the necessary hurdle to be cleared before he could immerse himself in the more rewarding aspects of production. his background includes a child’s passion for the movies; a young man’s getting himself employed in some lowly positions in the industry; and stints as editor and, ultimately, producer.

his father owned a projector and bought films for private screening and his mother took him regularly to ‘the pictures’. to some of us, this sounds like an immensely privileged background from which to spring into the hurly-burly of film production. he met raymond longford and talked with him about lottie lyell and the sentimental bloke (raymond longford, 1919); he got involved in restoring film, and then editing, at cinesound, where his path crossed with that of another veteran of the australian film industry, ken hall. he got into features via work with lee robinson’s production company, and like so many of his vintage felt the urge to travel overseas in search of opportunities to further his budding career. i was especially interested to read of buckley’s work in canada with british editor fergus mcdonell, who had directed three more-than-moderately interesting features in britain. according to people i’d spoken
to about McDonell (Valerie Hobson, Anthony Havelock-Allan), he was of too nervous a disposition for directing, whereas he was an expert editor, as Buckley discovered.

After spending time at the BBC in London, Buckley was back in Australia with Cinesound again. He secured a coup with Australia with Cinesound again. In London, Buckley was back in disfavor. Buckley was an expert editor, as Buckley transitioned for directing, whereas he

son, Anthony Havelock-Allan), to about McDonell (Valerie Hobson, Anthony Havelock-Allan). and (Donald Crombie, 1978) Irishman (Ray Lawrence, 1985). The turning point of Buckley career is proving more fallible than usual. One of the great strengths of the book is in the insight it gives into the producer’s function – or, rather, into the ways in which this particular producer functions. Buckley is frantically busy organising distribution and exhibition; securing locations, often in inconveniently remote places; dealing with casting problems; soothing irritations; and, in the case of On Our Selection (1995, George Whaley), getting Joan Sutherland on board, as engaging and unlikely a piece of casting as is to be found in Australian cinema.

If perhaps none of the films Buckley produced ranks among the top handful of the Australian output of the last three decades or so, they are an eclectic bunch that suggest a producer not concerned with merely playing safe. Apart from the titles mentioned, his roll-call also includes The Night the Prowler (Jim Sharman, 1978), which is the occasion for some pithy recollections of Patrick White; Kitty and the Bagman (Crombie again, 1982); Tracey Moffatt’s innovative beDevil (1993) and the engaging Oyster Farmer (for the prickly director Anna Reeves, 2004). There are as well several popular miniseries, which Buckley gamely presents as being as challenging and exciting as feature films, though somehow it doesn’t ring quite true.

Of particular interest is the chapter that deals with three projects that seemed full of promise but ultimately never got off the ground: Morrison of Peking, the abandonment of which led to acrimonious correspondence from its would-be director Cecil Holmes; John Heyer’s aborted dealings with Xavier Herbert’s novel Capricornia; and, in most revealing detail, Voss, with its star-studded credentials (Patrick White, David Mercer, Joseph Losey, etc.). The producer’s lot is not always a happy one and Buckley is unsparing about the frustrations that were interspersed with the successes.

He makes clear that this is not to be one of those show-business books in which the sex lives of the participants are so exhaustively chronicled as to leave little space for the kinds of activity that made us want to read about them in the first place. However, apart from acknowledging the roles of his mother and father in accounting for his passion for cinema, Buckley scarcely refers to any other relationship except the occasional mention of “my friend” so-and-so. I’m not chiding him for eschewing salacious detail, but in what amounts to an autobiography rather than a memoir the total absence of any sort of relationship seems like a surprising lacuna, and one that leaves a hollow at the book’s centre. An oblique reference to “difficult years emotionally” just seems evasive.

The publishers have produced a handsome, lavishly illustrated volume, and the photos are full of idiosyncratic interest. It is a pity that the same attention could not have been available for proofreading. There are far too many exclamation marks, as if we might miss the significance of a point without them; an irritating use of a kind of proleptic past tense (“we were never to meet again”, for instance; what’s wrong with “we never met again?”); a bizarre invoking of the word ‘ubiquitous’ on several occasions (“The ubiquitous tea room at Film Australia”); and, some ungrammatical usages of pronouns (“It used to amuse we juniors”, etc.).

In a less amiably written book one would hesitate to mention these, but they should be corrected in any reprints. I don’t want to finish on a negative note, though. The years Buckley has spent on the book have been well worth it for the wide-ranging information about, and ongoing assessment of, phases in Australian film history, as well as a vivid evocation of one man’s part in this.

Reviewed by Brian McFarlane.

Metro Magazine 163 • 157