

Gillian Armstrong

Gillian Armstrong came to prominence in the 1970s as an outstanding young Australian film director, who has gone on to achieve sustained international success. Alongside filmmakers like Bruce Beresford, John Duigan, Phil Noyce, Fred Schepisi and Peter Weir, her early work was supported by a new national film industry, giving expression to an individual creative vision and an Australian content.

Gillian Armstrong's father was an amateur photographer, and as she grew up, she had her own camera and interest in photography. She studied a Diploma of Art (Film and Television) at Swinburne Technical College, graduating in 1971. Originally enrolled in costume design, she started attending the film course and became entranced with the medium and with the work the students were doing ... turning more and more to still photography and then to film' (Stratton 1980, p.213). It was the first course in film and television in Australia, initially offered by Swinburne Art School within the Department of Graphic Design. Armstrong 'experienced great stimulus from the art side of the course — for her the philosophy of film as a means of expression and vision came from the first two years of the course in art and graphic design' (Paterson 1996, p.46). She graduated with the experimental film *The Roof Needs Mowing*, 1970.

Brian Robinson, first head of the Swinburne Film School, was significant in the development and operation of this innovative course, and the creative learning experience of the small student intake. Regarding them as artists being trained in the technical skills of filmmaking, he thought they should all 'aim at being producers and directors' (Paterson 1996, p. 64). Promoting an Australian film industry, he emphasised that 'Contemporary film and television afford the artist a flexible new voice for expression ... in which all the arts, it would seem, seek to speak with one voice. It is the dominant voice of the twentieth century' (Paterson 1996, p10). Following Robinson's death in 1991, at age 57, Armstrong acknowledged: 'I wouldn't be a filmmaker today without your vision and passion setting up the first filmmaking course in this country , thank you for inspiring me and countless other students over the years to think of him as an art term, (Paterson 1996, p 164).

After graduating, Armstrong extended her experience in editing, art direction and design. In 1973, she completed a further qualification at the new, highly funded Australian Film, Television and Radio School (AFTRS) in Sydney, as part of an elite Interim program. 'It was a fantastic year and it came at just the right time for me We had professional crews and professional actors, and I'd

never had the chance to work with people like that before. It was very stimulating ...' (Stratton 1980, p.214). This enabled her to direct three short films, including *One Hundred a Day*, based on an Alan Marshall story, and described by Cinema Papers as 'perhaps one of the most powerful and moving films made in Australia' (Stratton 1980, p. 215). Obtaining a grant from the Experimental Film Fund, a 1970 government initiative, she next made *The Singer and the Dancer*, 1976, further establishing her filmmaking ability and entrance into the industry.

Armstrong's first feature film *My Brilliant Career*, 1979, was made with funding from the New South Wales Film Corporation and private investors. With producer Margaret Fink, she explored feminist themes in an adaptation of a Miles Franklin novel, making the first film by an Australian female director since the 1930s. An official entry for the 1979 Cannes Film Festival, it won critical acclaim internationally, gaining six Australian Film Awards and wide box office success.

This outstanding early career achievement was both a catalyst and constraint, as it was difficult to move forward and not be typecast as a director of period dramas Australian Film, Television and Radio School, 1982). Her next feature *Starstruck*, 1982, exploited a new direction, focused on contemporary youth culture and set in inner city Sydney.

From this established position as an independent filmmaker, Armstrong has gone on to direct a number of feature films in Australia and abroad that have attained international acclaim and box office success. They include: *Mrs Soffel*, 1984, *High Tide*, 1987, *Fires Within!* 1991, *The Last Days of Chez Nous*, 1992, *Little Women*, 1994, *Oscar and Lucinda*, 1998, *Charlotte Gray*, 2001, *Unfolding Florence: the Many lives of Florence Broadhurst*, 2006, and *Death Defying Acts*, 2008. Armstrong has repeatedly found inspiration for her film choices in the 'art' of literature, explaining that 'novels are deeper, richer and more layered because writers have more time. ...They can be braver and take more risks than screenwriters, who have to think about commercial pressures' (Barrowclough 2008). She has a firm reputation for recognising and choosing unknown talent, as with Judy Davis, Sam Neill, Claudia Karvan, Cate Blanchett and Ralph Fiennes,

Parallel to her feature films, Armstrong has consistently created documentary work. Most significant is the series focusing on the lives of three young working-class women, beginning with *Smokes and Lollies*, 1976, a single commission by the South Australian Film Corporation. Following this exploration of social issues and experiences at age 14, Armstrong returned to make three more films of the women at 18, 26 and 33, working independently as writer, co-producer and director. Each incorporates earlier footage, pursuing consistent themes through time, Armstrong's reflections are insightful: '... few people understand that the art of documentary making is as powerful as filmmaking ... You always go out never knowing what you are

really going to get ... trying to push towards some sort of honesty I think often in features you get far away from what's really happening in ordinary lives' (Australian Film, Television and Radio School, 1982).

Armstrong only agreed to work in America, when she felt an affinity with a film. Initially directing *Mrs Sot/el*, 1984, she was later persuaded to make the iconic *little Women*, 1994, extending her international standing. More recent films have been made in the UK and Europe, but Armstrong has remained based in Sydney, alternating her filmmaking between Australia and overseas, as well as moving between period and contemporary themes, 'Armstrong's place in the cinema has been influenced by an unusual combination of factors: her creative collaboration with women writers, producers and actors; her versatility with a range of genres, styles and budgets; her sustained loyalty to the Australian industry and to her regular crew; and her proven ability to deliver the goods in Hollywood (Collins 1999). Appreciating early assistance from the then newly established and well-funded film industry, Armstrong is concerned about the future of Australian filmmaking and the arts. 'I think there is an incredible appetite for our own stories. We just need the support to tell them' (Kent 2008).

The creative voice of Gillian Armstrong has steadily evolved, maintaining integrity of artistic vision and focus on carefully chosen projects both in Australia and abroad. She has achieved a different telling of Australian and other stories, a deeper response to literature, and to women's lives, while persistently exploring new directions and her own sense of filmmaking as an art form.

Elizabeth Ninnis