Gillian Armstrong belongs to that ‘first generation’ of Australian filmmakers, which also includes Peter Weir, Fred Schepisi, Phillip Noyce and Bruce Beresford. Like them, she has also gone on to a successful international career. She spoke to Brian McFarlane about her most recent film, *Death Defying Acts* (2008), and other aspects of her career.

Tell me about the genesis of *Death Defying Acts*. I’ve read that initially it didn’t involve Houdini at all. When you became interested in the project, was Houdini already part of it?

That’s a writer talking about how he started ten years ago. It’s like Peter Carey saying, ‘I saw a little white church on a hill and I wondered what the story behind it was.’ It’s a writer talking about the very beginning of their [creative] process. One of our writers, Brian Ward, is Scottish and he loved Edinburgh and knew it very well, and he started off writing a story about a Scottish psychic and her daughter. But we’re talking about the very early genesis of an idea, about ten years ago, well before I was on board.

Few cities have looked so wonderful on screen as Edinburgh looks in this film. The first thing I wanted to do when I got involved with the film was to go and see Edinburgh. And it is amazing! I’ve been to other cities where there’s a central area that’s carefully preserved, like Prague, but then you look to the right and there’s a giant high-rise development of Russian housing, and [in] most cities where there is a well-preserved historical area there is also a section that is all modern. But there was none of that in Edinburgh in the areas where we wanted to film. We could do all those wide shots from the top of the hill, with maybe a crane visible in the distance, but really it was a great place for [the writers] to set their period story. It’s a beautiful city and it still has a real Gothic sense which was perfect for the story.

What fascinates you about the idea of a fiction film woven partly around a real-life figure?

I think it’s a clever idea. It was a ‘what-if’ story, though in a lot of ways we were very true to the character of Houdini. A lot of the events are ‘real’: Houdini was obsessed with his mother and with trying to find a psychic who might be able to contact the other side. I thought that was an interesting way to come up with the story idea. But the Edinburgh psychic and her daughter are wholly fictional characters.

I’ve recently read a novel about Howard Hughes [God of Speed by Luke Davies, Allen & Unwin, 2008], and what fascinates me about these stories is how the novelist or filmmaker imagines this real-life figure might behave in other circumstances. Yes, that’s what I mean by the ‘what-if’ element. In the end, you still try to be honest about creating that real character and how he might behave and what his life was like and so on.

Where does your main interest in the film lie? Is it with Houdini [Guy Pearce] as a
world-famous figure, or with his romance with Mary McGarvie [Catherine Zeta-Jones]? What attracted me to the script was that it is about three lives and trickery, and about love and money. I'm interested in the moral dilemma. It is a story of love, and, if you think about it, most of my films have been love stories. There's a whole theory that I'm an extremist feminist filmmaker, and I've decided I want to debunk this myth, and confess that, truly, all I really am is a big soft romantic.

But it's also a film about a strong, determined woman ... Yeah, but the thing I like is that these two characters have in some way built up a protection and a mask around them, but underneath, both are frightened of love and need love from another human being.

There are two lots of parents and children, aren't there? Houdini and his mum; Mary and Benji [Saoirse Ronan]. What would you say to my idea that, in the end, it is neither Houdini nor Mary but Benji who is the centre of the film? You're right, I think Benji is the film's centre, and I think the actors would agree too.

She is given the voice-over: does this give her a specially privileged function in relation to the film as a whole? In some ways the film is seen through her eyes. She's the one who can see both sides and the strange ways these two adults are behaving. She's caught between two worlds. She's an incredibly strong character. We always thought it was a story about four people, including the Tim Spall character [Houdini’s manager, Sugarman] who has become a sort of father figure to Houdini. So that was another element in the story that attracted me; I thought it was a fantastic group of characters: these two people who need love, Houdini and Mary, and both of them have a sort of protector who loves them, but no one's connecting.

A film needs a point of view ... Yeah, and in this film it's Benji's.

I notice you allow only very limited time to show Houdini's exploits: was this deliberate on your part? Yes, there's no story in endlessly watching.
No, we shot a lot of interiors on location, Edinburgh was very cooperative. When we were filming in the old Ealing Studios – and, I think, in Pinewood [Studios] for the [water] tank sequences? I understand the Ealing Studios have been rejuvenated … They have and they haven’t. The offices are all pretty shabby. There’s an incredible sense of history when you’re working in Britain. I shot some of Charlotte Gray [2001] at Twickenham [Film Studios] too. Ealing’s a great place, actually; it’s a nice little village around the studio on the Ealing Green [in West London]. We did a lot of the water stuff at Pinewood, where they have a huge tank. It’s an amazing, sophisticated space.

It is a great-looking film: how closely did you work with your production designer and cinematographer? Very closely, I always do, and I also spend a long time choosing them. For this film, I found a fantastic up-and-coming young cinematographer, Haris Zambarloukos, a Cypriot [and] a graduate from the London Film School. I think he’s about to take off as a big name, in the way that Dion Beebe did after shooting Charlotte Gray and Rob Marshall took him on for Chicago [2002]. And Haris, when he finished Death Defying Acts, went on to shoot Mamma Mia! [Phyllida Lloyd, 2008].

There is beautiful use of the Edinburgh locations. Was there any difficulty in doing the location work or was the city cooperative about this? Edinburgh was very cooperative. When we shot in the main part of town, opposite [Edinburgh] Castle, my cinematographer wanted them to turn off those modern orange searchlights trained on it … they did all we asked, and they blocked off all the main park area with the Scott Monument right in the centre of town, so they were really very helpful. Then, we shot all the interiors in London – some of it in the Savoy ballroom, which was very nice!

Did you shoot most interiors at Ealing? No, we shot a lot of interiors on location, like the stuff at the Savoy or in the giant headquarters of the Officer Training Corps in a mansion about forty minutes outside London near the airport. We used this for Houdini’s hotel. We were all over the place and only used Ealing for the last three days for some smaller sets.

Like many films today, this is a co-production. Do you think this is the way for Australian filmmakers to go? I think it’s the way for everyone around the world [to go]. Look at the latest batch of Academy [Awards] nominations: they’ve all got several contributing countries. Producers are doing it all over the world, taking a piece of money here, another piece there.

The studio system is now mainly just for backing the big action, popcorn movies, though even with those now sometimes two studios will share the load.

How difficult is it to set up such deals? It’s terribly tricky. It’s like a pack of cards. At one point, we had a deal set up, then we lost the German money. You know that if the other four or five [parties] contributing to finance aren’t in place by a certain date you may lose your cast. It’s a huge thing, and I think that Marian Macgowan, the Australian producer I brought on board, did an extraordinary job holding it all together.

How about the casting – you have Australian, American and British leads, and an Irish girl playing Benji? Does this make for difficulties? I think casting now is a global enterprise. We weren’t forced to cast from the countries of the investors at all. For instance, I found Saoirse Ronan in England; we have Irish money in the film, but I didn’t have to cast the actress because of the country. And we didn’t cast Guy because of the Australian money; the Australian backers were quite okay with me [as director] and for the post-production work to be done here. We did all the editing, sound and special effects here; the music [by Cezary Skubiszewski] was all composed and recorded here, with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. Guy was cast because he’s an incredible actor. It was the American producers who first mentioned Guy. It was nothing to do with the co-production, it was because they felt he had the reputation for being both very brave and a chameleon. He’s the sort of actor who can take on a character and become that character.

You’ve made a lot of period films. Does this reflect a personal preference?
which we floated up the river. This was a tricky thing to pull off because Peter [Carey, the author of the novel from which it is adapted] had talked about this glass church in the book and Luci had to bring the idea to life in the film in a way that reinforces everyone’s fantasies, and this is something the author doesn’t have to worry about. So we felt we had to pull off something really clever here. Production design can be both showy, like that church was, or it can be subtle, like building two wings of a jail.

While we’re on Oscar and Lucinda, it seemed to me that the central image in the novel – of the glass church floating down a river – almost cried out for filming. How important was this in your decision to film the novel?

Yes, it was definitely an extraordinary visual effect in the novel, but in the end my reaction is mostly a gut one in relation to the original story, as to whether or not I got involved with those characters and went on a journey with them. And certainly I did with Oscar and Lucinda; every film I’ve ever done, I’ve only done because I cared about the characters. It’s the human story that gets me in.

It’s a study of obsession, isn’t it?

Yes, it’s compulsive the way those characters behave. But about the church floating down the river, Luci and I found the right location and I think we did pull it off.

It was filmed in both Australia and England. Did this make problems for you?

It is incredibly tiring to film in two countries because basically everything doubles up: you’ve got one team prepping things in Australia and another team doing the same in England, and the director, the cinematographer and the first AD [assistant director] are flying back and forth, and it’s not a short flight. It was really very wearing. I’d go to England to look for locations, then come back and look for them here, then go back and see what’s happening in England. At one point we shot non-stop for ten days in England, then all had to jump on a plane and fly back to Australia. The logistics of filming in two countries as far away from each other as England and Australia are very complicated. You begin to wish there were two directors: you know, I’ll direct the Australian bit and send me the rushes of the English bit.

Do you think of My Brilliant Career [1979] as a turning point in your own career?

No, I’d say One Hundred A Day [1973] was my breakthrough, one of my graduation films from the Australian Film and Television School. It’s only ten minutes long and it was accepted in the Sydney Film Festival and won a number of awards. It was the film that put me on the map in Australia, and that’s when the offers came for the bigger films. My Brilliant Career obviously put me on the map internationally, but looking back I think it was One Hundred A Day that made people take notice of me.

It’s one of two early films adapted from stories by Alan Marshall: One Hundred A Day and The Singer and the Dancer [1977]. What drew you to them?

I met Alan, and felt very privileged to be involved with him. He saw my final screenplay and I later screened the film for him.

You also wrote and produced them: was this a matter of choice or necessity?

The one year that we all packed in at film school, on that post-grad course I did, they had approached a number of Australian writers. We didn’t have six months to work on the script; we had to find something to start shooting in a few weeks time. So they’d sort a number of short stories and asked the writers if they’d be willing to have their stories filmed. There was a chapter from Alan’s book, How Beautiful Are Thy Feet, which he wrote about the time when he was working in a shoe factory, and when I read it, I loved it, so that’s how I came to do it. Then later, because of my friendship with Alan, I asked him about another story, which I adapted into The Singer and the Dancer.

How did you come to get Ruth Cracknell for the latter at this very early stage of your career?

She actually came and auditioned. I was very fortunate to have someone as wonderful as Ruth. She hadn’t done very much film at that point, and she was always very proud of the film. She was wonderful to work with. We had no money and we were all staying at a cheap hotel outside Sydney, and she just threw herself into the whole thing.

Smokes and Lollies [1975] was a significant documentary about [three] fourteen-year-old girls and you returned to the girls again in 1980 and 1996. Were you influenced in this project by Michael Apter’s Seven Up series?

No, I was in fact making it at the same time as Michael. It was a Gill Armstrong inspiration; I had no idea about what Michael was doing. I’d just finished at the film school and I’d been commissioned to do one short doc-umentary about what it was like to be fourteen. At this time, Seven Up! [Paul Almond, 1964 – Michael Apted directed 7 Plus Seven or ‘Fourteen Up’ (1970) and the later films] hadn’t been shown in Australia, and no one had then done this particular thing – going back to see what had become of the young people in the original film.

What specifically were you exploring in your series?

It was originally a matter of the girls talking about their hopes and dreams and their futures. When I said, ‘What’s your ideal age to be?’, they said, ‘Eighteen.’ So, I thought it would be interesting to see what happened to them, to see them again as eighteen year olds, and I went back to do the follow-up. I managed to raise the money and Film Australia came in (the South Australian Film Corporation had done the first one), and when I caught the girls again at eighteen I realized it was completely unique to have caught them growing up. There was a fantastic reaction to it; it was run on the ABC and it was called Fourteen’s Good, Eighteen’s Better [1980], and as soon as I did that everyone said, ‘You’ve got to go back again, so that’s how it all started.

Have you kept in touch with the women involved?

I haven’t seen them for quite a while because I’ve been away with my last couple of films, but I’ve been wondering how they all are and what’s happened to them. When I did the fourth film with them, we ended with two of them having fourteen-year-old daughters and one of them a sixteen year old, so there was a sense of the full circle. Now, of course, I’m curious to know what’s happened to the women but also to their daughters.

Your feature film career is regularly punctuated by documentary work. I don’t think there are all that many directors of whom one would say this. This series of films… became a personal thing. I’d caught three people who were very honest on camera and who’d had pretty incredible lives. It was just a fluke that I did the Florence Broadhurst film [Unfolding Florence: The Many Lives of Florence Broadhurst (2006)]; that was the first proper documentary on another subject I’d done for years. It was a matter of timing: the producer approached me when I was waiting for all the finance to come together for Death Defying Acts, and I felt I wanted to make something, so I said to the producers of Florence Broadhurst, ‘If you can get the
money quickly I can fit it in.’ And they did.

Do you find different satisfactions in documentary work?
It’s a very different art from feature filmmaking, and it’s much more difficult, I think, to direct documentaries. You’re dealing with real people’s lives, with real people on camera being encouraged to reveal things they may not want to, whereas in fiction everyone knows they’re playing a character.

To backtrack, your most undervalued film, in my view, is Starstruck. What do you feel about it? It was quite daring to make a musical in Australia in 1982.
Oh, it was. We were probably a bit ahead of our time trying to do a rock musical here in the early eighties. In the States at that time, the idea of a rock musical set in Australia was about as remote as having one set in Botswana, though that’s probably quite hip now. The international audience for Australian films was the sort of people who went to French or Italian movies, a middle-class audience who thought Australian cinema was a matter of ‘beautiful’ films like My Brilliant Career and Picnic at Hanging Rock [Peter Weir, 1975], not a rock musical. A year later, Australian bands became huge, and the film might have had a much bigger success then, but it’s always about timing.

Did you have in mind those old American musicals about kids putting on a show?
Yes, that was the screenwriter’s intention – like Judy and Mickey saying, ‘Let’s put on a show.’ It ultimately did good business in Australia with eleven year olds who went back to see it many times and knew all the dance moves. It also caught on in San Francisco and New York and became a cult film, like Rocky Horror [The Rocky Horror Picture Show [Jim Sharman, 1975]]. The reviews at the time didn’t accept it for what it was. It was often along the lines of ‘If she’s going to do something about young people, why doesn’t she focus on youth unemployment?’ I ran into David Stratton [critic and presenter of At the Movies on ABC] about ten years later and he said that he thought he was really wrong about it. Adults didn’t understand that it was a camp in-joke thing.

To go back to My Brilliant Career, what attracted you to Miles Franklin’s novel?
There were quite a few period films, with coming-of-age themes, in the latter 1970s: did you consciously want to work in this genre? Or did you have other reasons for wanting to film this book?
No, it was Margaret Fink, the producer who knew the novel and was passionate about it. She’d had the rights for a number of years and had been trying to get it together. She brought it to me. I’d never heard of it, I’m ashamed to say, but when I read it I thought it was a fantastic story. One of the reasons it took so long raising the money – we were actually turned down by the AFC [Australian Film Commission] – was that it was felt there had been too many of these period coming-of-age stories. But my point was that it’s never the era the film is set in that matters, but whether or not it’s got a good story and whether it’s got something new to say.

Did you feel you could make it relevant to the feminist issues that were being articulated then?
When [My Brilliant Career] came out, it was considered radical because the heroine turned down the man. The film was successful all round the world because it had something brave and radical to say. This whole thing about whether people are in period clothes or not is a furphy; what mattered was that it had something contemporary to say to people in the seventies, and I was shocked as well. I’ve talked to women journalists and authors over the years who’ve told me that they became writers because they saw My Brilliant Career.

Did you work with Eleanor Witcombe on the screenplay?
Yes, I worked with Eleanor for two years.

Well, it’s a lovely tender film …
Some people who saw it recently said that they thought it stood the test of time. Of course, having Judy Davis as your lead meant you were off to a good start. She was a star from the very beginning. And don’t forget Sam Neill. We found these two young people no one had ever seen, and both went on to become international stars.

Many of your films are focused on women of exceptional energies or talents: think of Mrs. Soffel, High Tide … Has this been a matter of deliberate intent on your part?
I’m interested in the human condition and in character. There has been a bit of branding, though. Because My Brilliant Career was my first big film, I think a lot of people felt I was that character – and I think they felt Judy was that character. And yes, I’m a feminist, but I’m not only interested in women and women achieving. People forget that in Mrs. Soffel, Mel Gibson had one of his best roles and gave one of his best performances ever, and in Oscar and Lucinda, Oscar is the lead. Journalists go to the movies and think I’m bloody Miles Franklin. I mean, who goes to Phillip Noyce’s films and writes about how his films show an interest in men? I keep wanting to say [that] there’s another side to me: I’m not just a redhead who says, ‘I want to go out into the world and achieve.’ I also love rock music, I love kitsch, I love to laugh as well.

Your films do still speak eloquently about women …
I’m a woman and I hope my films speak of women in a complicated way, but of course I’d want all my characters to be complicated and real. Because I’m a woman, I’d want to make sure I didn’t have thin, cardboard female characters.

Speaking of films about women’s relationships, two significant ones in your filmography are High Tide and Little Women [1994]. One is Australian, the other American; one is contemporary, one is period.
Do you know that I turned Little Women down, because I said I’m so sick of being sent these scripts about women achievers – you know, women mountain-climbers, first women to fly etc., as though that’s all I care about. So they dragged me into doing Little Women, but in the end I did decide to do it because, if you think about it, Little Women was the beginning of all these stories, and probably the sort of story that influenced little Miles Franklin out there in the bush. I think it’s so timeless because Louisa [May] Alcott wrote so honestly about her own life. Most children’s literature before then tended to be very idealized, and she wrote it warts-and-all, with fights and screaming fits, one sister pinching the other sister’s things. She wrote great, real characters, and that’s what I related to. To me, it wasn’t just a book about women’s need to be recognized in society, but Louisa’s tribute to her mother and her sisters.

And because it’s set in the past, as we said before, doesn’t mean it is any less significant to us than a contemporary-set film like High Tide.
No, and you don’t have to do it in a way that is pompous and romantic about the past. We’re still human beings whether our skirts are longer or shorter.

You’ve worked with some major stars – Diane Keaton and Mel Gibson in Mrs. Soffel, Susan Sarandon in Little Women, Cate Blanchett, Ralph Fiennes, Catherine Zeta-Jones and others. Have you had good
experiences of this aspect of filmmaking? I’ve been very lucky in having had a lovely group of major movie stars. I know they’re not all easy to get along with, so I’ve been really fortunate that they’ve all been down-to-earth people and they’ve all taken on projects and me [as their director] because they cared about the film. There aren’t any horror stories [regarding] the stars I’ve worked with.

Mrs. Soffel was your first American film. How did it come about? What was your experience of working there? I know much of the film was made on locations in Canada and Wisconsin: was it hard work?

When I started Little Women and saw that it had snow scenes, I said, ‘This time we’re going to make it!’ After the snowy location work on Mrs. Soffel, I said, ‘Never again’.

There were Russell Boyd and I, two Australians who loved the beach, standing all day in [the] freezing cold – it’s not a matter of being on skis, but just standing in it, and then it started melting. If you do a retake you’ve got to blot the footprints, it’s a nightmare! And it was an eye-opener for me coming from independent low-budget Australian films to doing a big studio picture. However, I learnt a lot about how the politics of filmmaking [in the US] are very different, and I was lucky to have very experienced producers in Edgar Scherick and Scott Rudin, but it was a lot more difficult dealing with that whole committee approach. It was a whole different ball-game from raising the money and shooting an independent film in Australia.

There’s quite a strong line of continuity of personnel associated with your films. Does this increase the efficiency or enjoyment of filmmaking for you?

Oh, yes. I’ve often fought very hard to do this, and have nearly always brought an Australian cinematographer with me: I’ve done a number of films with Russell Boyd and with Geoff Simpson. On Death Defying Acts, I had to have an English crew because it was a co-production, but you develop a short-hand of understanding with people you’ve worked with before. It is efficient, and also you’ve become friends with them and there’s a great sense of support. I’ve taken Mark Turnbull, my first assistant [director], round the world with me, and in the editing room Nick Beuman has cut nearly all my films. They’re also very gifted at their jobs, and I know they make me look better, so I really respect their judgements. Sometimes you’ll have crew people who won’t speak up, but these others will tell me if they’re unsure whether something’s working. I appreciate the fact that I’ve got a team who are honest with me; I respect their taste, and I say to young filmmakers, ‘Always take the best idea in the room; it’s not a matter of your ego but of making great films.’

A last, hideous question: I was thinking the other day as a parent how strange it is that you don’t have favourites among your children, and I wondered if you as a filmmaker have a favourite among your films?

No. I think that’s a good analogy. I think they are like your children and you’d never single one out. When I see my films, I find there are parts of them I love and parts of them [that] make me think ‘Why did I do that?’ So, they’re a bit painful for me to see, but I couldn’t single any one out.

Endnote

1 For the curious, I asked Gillian how this name is pronounced and she said, ‘Sersha.’ So now you know.