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A life in celluloid

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A new memoir shines a spotlight on a quiet hero of Australian cinema. Philippa Hawker talks to Anthony Buckley.

AS A filmmaker, says Anthony Buckley, he's used to promoting his films, hoping people will go to see them. But there's something disconcerting to him, he says, about becoming an author. He has to get used to the idea that not only has he written a book, but that people are actually reading it. "It makes me feel quite exposed."

Beyond a Velvet Light Trap, subtitled "A Filmmaker's Journey from Cinesound to Cannes", is a handsomely produced, copiously illustrated book, full of anecdote and detail, an account of more than half a century in Australian cinema.

In 1953, at the age of 15, Buckley started work in a Sydney film laboratory, learning how to splice and clean film. He worked on newsreels at Cinesound; since then, he has been involved, as an editor then a producer, on features such as *Wake in Fright*, *Caddie* and *Oyster Farmer*, and TV series such as *A Harp in the South*, *Celluloid Heroes* and *The Potato Factory*. It was *Bliss*, the controversial and much-acclaimed adaptation of Peter Carey's novel, which he produced in 1985, that was invited into competition at Cannes.

One of the things that struck him, he says with a chuckle, is what he had to leave out of the book. He mentions two chapters in particular. In 1981, he produced *The Killing of Angel Street*, a fictionalised version of the 1975 disappearance of Juanita Nielsen, who waged a campaign against corruption and development in inner Sydney. The chapter on this details all sorts of obstacles that were placed in the way of the production, including an explicit threat from a leading figure in state parliament. For virtually every draft, during the six years he worked on the manuscript, this person was named; but six months ago, the publishers decided against including it.

Another chapter had to be "emasculated by the lawyers", Buckley says, which meant, to his regret, that his tale of "a huge rort" could not be properly told.

The book is not an autobiography - because "as one publisher said, 'Who on earth is Tony Buckley, we've never heard of him?' But I wanted to put down some kind of record of the industry during the 56 years that I have been in it."

Beyond a Velvet Light Trap is not just about Buckley's experiences in the film industry over 50 years; it's also about the filmmaking of the preceding years, and how important that was to him.

Encounters with the cinema of the past loom large from the very beginning. There is a constant sense of discovery, beginning with a box of old 9.5 mm films - "a treasure trove" - that he came across in the family laundry. In his first job at the film laboratory, he noticed "a pile of rusty cans that was sitting there for three months before I asked about it". This turned out to be Raymond Longford's silent classic, *The Sentimental Bloke*. Buckley worked on the cleaning and restoring of the print; he also wrote to Longford, a seminal figure of Australian silent cinema who had been largely forgotten.

A young Buckley was invited to tea. "We expected an old codger," Longford told him. He visited several more times, eager to hear stories of the thriving Australian industry of the past. "I hadn't realised at the time that having known Raymond Longford [who died in 1959] would make me one of a rare breed."

Then there was what Buckley calls "an Aladdin's cave of film treasure", a cache of Australian film history, of features and newsreels, that lay unappreciated at Cinesound, in a vault behind a projection booth. As a young employee, he got permission to rewind and clean the negatives in his spare time.

He left Cinesound, then returned in 1962. He realised that the Aladdin's cave was deteriorating. He also feared that it would be destroyed. Twice before, large collections had been thrown out, and he was determined that it wouldn't happen again. Almost 1000 cans were loaded, covertly, on a delivery truck and dispatched to Canberra, where they were to form part of what was to become the National Film and Sound Archive.

Years later, Buckley was on another mission of retrieval for *Wake in Fright*, on which he worked as editor in 1971. When plans were set in train in 1996 to re-release the film, the original materials were missing. It was his detective work over a period of years that tracked them down. Forty years on, it has been screened in cinemas once more and is, he says, a film that still confronts contemporary audiences.

Although so much has been lost or destroyed, there is always the hope that missing titles can be found. "We shouldn't stop looking for films," he says. "They get found in the strangest places. I appeal to libraries, if there is anything suspicious looking in a square box, always open it, because film used to be kept in square boxes, not round cans."

Several mentors and influential figures appear in *Behind a Velvet Light Trap*, among them Longford, Ken G. Hall and the legendary English director Michael Powell. There is also a chapter about Buckley's encounters with Rudolf Nureyev during the making of the film of *Don Quixote*. Buckley says, with a chuckle, that this is bound to be the "most well-thumbed one".

There will be a screening of *Bliss* and a discussion about *Beyond a Velvet Light Trap* at the Cinema Nova, Carlton, tonight at 6.30pm

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