

## Ken Sallows Intro to IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE

In October 1988 a dinner was held in a Melbourne suburban hotel by James Currie, the sound mixer and Michael Rowan, the manager of Hendon Sound Studios, Adelaide. It was a dinner for film and sound editors, an attempt to drum up some sound mixing work. As the night wore on, and too many drinks were drunk, Philip Reid, an editor to whom I had been assistant to on quite a number of films and television in the 1970's, asked me to make a speech. Not being a person who is inclined to public speaking, but sufficiently imbibed, I announced to my fellow workers that I would like to thank Hendon Studios for getting us together, then remarked that it was a pity that Walter Murch, who was in Sydney at the same moment giving lectures, was not coming to Melbourne.

I was hoping that the others knew who Walter Murch was.....  
Walter Murch had worked on films that seemingly had acknowledged the role of post-production and had been better for it. He was the Sound Designer and a Film Editor on APOCALYPSE NOW, THX-1138 and THE CONVERSATION. Someone who had established himself as a crucial and successful collaborator in the making of a film. Someone who had been able to make ideas better than simply "work". I wondered how he dealt with and solved problems that arose, if he had any special work methods and how he approached each film. Hopefully he was a person whose sense of achievement was realised when the film he was editing started to take a shape during the post-production process, sometimes in a different form to how it was conceived by the writer, director, producer or production crew. That wonderful feeling when the film in front of you begins to have a life that was hoped for, a sense coming from the arrangement of pictures and sound you have been dealing with that an

audience would be moved by it, perhaps even make them want to share in an idea that they had never bothered to consider.

.....they did.

There was much grumbling and disappointment that we would have to rely on second-hand stories from 1000 kilometres away in the north.

Several months later, Jenny Sabine, Head of Swinburne (now VCA) Film and Television School asked me to give a lecture to students about Film Editing.

"It would be in the morning in a lecture theatre, for all the students doing the 3 year and post-graduate courses, and we cannot afford to pay you....."

"Okay, sure."

I was initially quite chuffed at the idea, that I had been asked, thinking that somehow I must be doing something right in my work and that it was being acknowledged, or even seen. Then I began to panic when I had to actually think about what I was going to say.

Perhaps I could give them a brief personal history. How I became interested in working in film at secondary school thanks to an English teacher who preferred to show excerpts from films instead of reading aloud from the prescribed books. Then, after leaving university where I spent far too much time watching films, I went knocking on production companys' doors, lingering in their reception areas, wanting to get a job, any job. Crawfords were the first people to employ me as a trainee. A role that required me to deliver mail, buy choice cuts of steak and cheese out of petty cash for the third floor managers, take watches to be fixed or travel all over city by tram with cumbersome hat boxes with wigs that had to be changed.

I could tell them how I had been an assistant editor for some years, working with editors, all of whom had different working methods and demands. Eventually disregarding financial security, I decided to become an editor and resist any more offers as an assistant....that difficult time when potential employers would ask,

"What have you done?"

"I was an assistant editor on features such as THE CHANT OF JIMMY BLACKSMITH, THE MAN FROM SNOWY RIVER, television such as AGAINST THE WIND, THE LAST OUTLAW, and actually was the film editor for the first 128 episodes of television serial THE SULLIVANS"

"But what features have you cut?"

"None at the moment."

"Sorry, we'll get someone with more experience....."

They may want to hear about the gossip that goes on in the editing room, as a relationship develops between the editor and director, or even the producer. It takes the form of second-guessing, due to the mental concentration and physical confinement of the weeks and months playing with continually changing pictures and sound. Which directors are constantly in the editing room? Which are not? Is that good or bad? Quite often differing points of view collide which result in things being said that in hindsight are laughable, but at the time are painfully personal

I suppose, then they would like to know what I actually do....get up in the morning, have a shower, eat breakfast, travel to the editing room, say hello to my assistant, turn on the Steenbeck, look at yesterday's Mute Rushes (or Dailies).....

It all seems terribly easy, but somehow hollow. They would hear a lot about **what** I have done but eventually they may want to know **why** I did it.

Why did that film work better than the other one? Why is it funny? Why did I make the decision to end that scene before the question asked had been answered? Why leave that wide shot run for 8 seconds instead of 9 seconds? Why cut to that character when they are not talking and someone else is? Why not the other person in the room? Why did you use that optical effect? How long is a piece of string? All of a sudden the potential lecture became self analytical torture. I thought of an Albert Camus novel in which one character..... a writer..... spends the whole book perfecting their opening sentence.

"Hi, I'm Ken Sallows and I work as a film editor, and I'm a film editor because I don't like speaking in public, which I suppose is what a director does.... that is, speak in public, and they are a lot better at it than I am....."

I remember sitting by the telephone at home and staring at it. Wanting to ring Jenny Sabine to tell her that I could not give the lecture as I....um....it was important that I mow the lawn at home on that day.....any excuse.

Hilary Furlong had been harbouring an idea for quite a number of years to bring to Australia experienced film writers and practioners to conduct classes with aspiring Australian writers. The Australian Film Commission supported Hilary's resulting Industry Development Support Scheme, and in October 1988, 40 selected people attended lectures and workshops held by the Americans Gil Dennis, Frank Pierson and Walter Murch. On a night away from these duties, Walter gave a lecture to post-production people at Sydneys' Spectrum Films.

Lynda House, then a production manager with whom I had worked on MALCOLM, RIKKY AND PETE and CELIA, has since become the producer of PROOF. However back then she had been Hilary's assistant for IDSS. I cannot remember how, but I found out that Lynda had sound cassette tapes of Walter's Spectrum lecture. Lynda lent me a copy of the tapes.

I listened to them and realised my Swinburne lecture problem was solved. All I had to do was arrive at Swinburne for the lecture with a portable sound cassette player, put the tapes in, be announced and say, "There is a lot for me to talk about, but Walter Murch on these tapes does it better, so listen."

Eventually, the lecture day arrived. There is something very odd that happens to a person when they are in front of eager eyes and ears, or for that matter, in front of a camera. A case of sink or swim.

I think started like this.....

"My introduction to film was based around the 'director as auteur' theory, which has resulted in a ever increasing library of analysis. Jean Renoir, the French director, is accredited as having said that a director continually makes the same film over and over again, Jean Luc Godard apparently said a film must have a beginning, a middle and an end, but not necessarily in that order..... something like that. And as films are primarily visual, the work of cinematographers and production designers is immediately recognisable. Most kids want to be directors. Even when I first started working in this business in 1973, I wanted to be an editor. Editors are this odd group of people whose work is often regarded as good even when it is not seen. So why would anyone want to work in a part of an industry that seems to desire recognition as an unseen person? Is there a sort of masochism involved? Perhaps there is, but I

see that the editor has the ability to alter meanings and emotions of a film at a stage when most others have gone home. I can become a story teller and not have to write the words. And being able to work on different directors' projects, I can tell different stories from different points of view. You don't have to work on features alone, there is television drama either serious or soap, which require you to be more obvious, documentaries on which editors sometimes tell the entire story, music videos on which you can play with styles, commercials on which you can play with technology and there are short films which you will all be doing soon which unfortunately are far too often regarded as exercises.

The idea that editors are better if they cut more is incorrect. It is often harder to cut less. Some prospective employers have asked me to send them a show reel and perversely I have thought that I should send them a videotape with a 5 minute shot with no cuts of which I am prouder having left run than, say, a music video with 15 images overlapping at once. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. You've got to work out which suits each situation best."

After 2 hours a siren rang. In my school days sirens usually indicated that the period of time of the class was over, you closed your books and left, the teacher closed their books and awaited the next class. But these students were leaving very quickly....far too quickly.....was I that boring?

No..... it was a fire drill.

Several students came up to me as I was leaving the building and asked questions. Whatever I said in the lecture theatre was of interest, which was a relief. They would like to know more.

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There are several books available about film editing, such as Karel Reisz and Gavin Millar's 'The Technique of Film Editing' and Ralph Rosenbloom's 'When The Shooting Stops The Cutting Begins'. There is a book called 'The Editing Room Handbook' which was told from an assistant editors point of view. I have bought many copies of it and given them all away to my assistants. It is now unavailable. And there was Walter's lecture on sound cassette.

In the 4 years from Walter's lecture at Spectrum to the version you are about to read, I have to admit I've never met the man. There was a chance in 1990 when I was working in Paris. Walter was working on GHOST at Paramount in Los Angeles, we were conversing by FAX, and I thought that I may be able to come back to Australia via Los Angeles to meet him, have a coffee, une double s'il vous plait, and we could say, "Hey, how are you going," and ruminate about our success and failure on the lecture circuit. But I finished up fine-cutting my film in France, and Walter went globe trotting on Francis Coppola's THE GODFATHER PART III. I missed out. Anyway, the day my transcription of his lecture arrived on his doorstep must have been suprising. I thank him for believing that it was worth publishing, then patiently setting aside the time to rework it, as well as the never-ending FAXES between us, which have now resulted in the Australian Film, Television and Radio School publishing

IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE.

At least it has got me off the hook in having to lecture again for a while.