



Bruce gives Rita some last minute instructions. Bobby Maza gets his makeup checked. Kylie Belling wouldn't mind some attention from the director.

An early cut of *The Fringe Dwellers* was viewed by Pierre Rissient, the scout for the Cannes Film Festival. He recommended that we send a print of the finished film to Paris for consideration for selections for the official Competition. At the end of March we received a telex from the President of the Festival, Gilles Jacob, confirming that the film had been selected. This resulted in a flurry of activity, a marketing plan, a translation of the dialogue into French for subtitling, and a budget to send actors and me to Cannes for the festival. Bruce by now was filming *Crimes of the Heart* in the US, so could not attend. This was a drawback, as Cannes is a directors' festival and films are not quite so well loved by the jury if the director is not there to present them. Nevertheless, he could not be in two places at once, so the rest of us did our best. Bruce's now ex-wife, Rhoisin, who had done some work on the screenplay adaptation and was credited as co-writer, agreed to attend. This was helpful because she spoke fluent French.

Having attended the Cannes Festival with films which were not in Official Competition but battling with hundreds of others to find buyers in the marketplace, I now discovered that being

Selective Memory: A life in film

in Competition was definitely the way to go. We were accommodated at the best hotel in Cannes, the Gray d'Albion, and our every minute was taken up with functions, drinks, dinners and press. One night at dinner I sat next to Tony Curtis, a fabulous old charmer who had everyone laughing. Justine and Kristina were flown over for the screening. Justine was working in the TV series *Prisoner*, but the producers kindly rescheduled to give her two days off, just long enough to fly in, do some press, attend the screening and the official dinner, party all night then fly home. Both girls had a great time and looked absolutely ravishing in their formal dresses on the red carpet at the Palais.



Justine Saunders, me, Rhoisin Beresford and Kristina Nehm on the steps of the Palais. Executive Producer Damien Nolan and his wife behind us.

The week after I returned from France, my brother Robert's first book was published. *No Conceivable Injury*, a report on the Royal Commission into the British atomic weapon tests at Maralinga in the 1950s, is regarded as the definitive account of these tests and their effect on the environment and the local Indigenous people.

Su Armstrong was kept busy through her second year with Film Finances. She was overseeing thirty features in production, a record, along with many still in post-production.

Among them was *Time Guardian*, a kind of futuristic horror movie. In spite of its \$8 million budget, it managed to go over budget, and a comment on the film's IMDb website pretty well sums it up: "John Baxter (the scriptwriter) is an absolutely brilliant short story writer and apparently a life-long student of films, so I was very interested to see what his only screenplay was like. I simply could not believe that he came up with such a piece of total crap."

A bigger nightmare was *Melba*, a television mini-series about the diva, produced by Pom Oliver and Errol Sullivan, and directed by the theatre director Rodney Fisher. When given a movie camera, Fisher joined the ranks of Igor Auzins and Graeme Clifford, kicked over the traces and drove everyone nuts with his obstinacy. In addition, the film was caught in a disastrous currency situation as it had extended sequences filmed in Europe, at exactly the wrong time for the Australian dollar.

Bruce Beresford and I got along well during the making of *The Fringe Dwellers*. I first and foremost admired his filmmaking skill, but I also delighted in his sense of humour and his intellect, which challenged everyone to an extra level to keep up with him. Creatively he always knew what he wanted, but he would listen to other ideas. When what he wanted was in conflict with the funds available, he would either find a way to get the same result for less money, or alternatively find a way to save money elsewhere to compensate. Crews and actors adored him. Everyone wants to work with Bruce.

One of Bruce's closest friends, perhaps his closest, is Barry Humphries. In their peripatetic lives they meet whenever they

can. During post-production of *Fringe Dwellers*, hilariously they arranged to meet at a Chinese restaurant in Chatswood for lunch but inadvertently each attended a different restaurant. Chris Gordon in my office was the recipient of several increasingly irate phone calls demanding to know where the other one was, and why they had not arrived.

Around this time I had a call from Barry. He and his wife, the artist Diane Milstead, were making a film about Sir Les Patterson. Would I be interested in producing it? Bruce had obviously said nice things about me. "Don't do it," Bruce said, when I told him. "I love Barry, but the script is *terrible*." Barry had asked him to direct it, but he declined.

Bruce was right about the script, but when I met with Diane she brushed all my concerns aside. It was an early draft, Barry knew there was work to be done and he would do the rewrites. The opportunity to work with the funniest man in Australia, a comic genius whom I had admired since I first saw Edna on stage, was irresistible. So, ignoring Bruce's advice, I agreed to produce *Les Patterson Saves the World*. Paul Morgan & Co, the Brisbane stockbroking firm which had underwritten and financed *Crocodile Dundee* to the great joy of its investors, was keen to do the same for Barry and Sir Les.

Barry and Diane hired George Miller to direct – *The Man from Snowy River* George, not the *Mad Max* Dr George. *Snowy River* had been a huge success, and George had done a great job of bringing in a logistically difficult film on time and on budget. Prior to *Snowy River* he had a successful career directing television drama in Melbourne. He was clever, a bit unpredictable, with a sharp, off-beat sense of humour. He seemed like the right person and I was happy with the choice.

There continued to be a problem, though, with the script. The rewrites failed to appear. I constantly asked Diane when the new work would be done, and the responses changed from "Barry will do it" to "I will do the rewrites tonight, you'll have them in the

morning.” But still nothing showed up. Having got the film off the ground by persuading Paul Morgan to underwrite it and raise the money, Barry handed over the preparation to Diane. Diane’s experience of making films was around zero, which was okay, except that she turned out to be an expert on everything.

George just barrelled on, in love with Barry and thrilled to be working on a film about Sir Les and Dame Edna, all of which blinded him to the fact that the script was a tasteless exercise in which the vulgar comedy of Barry’s characters, so successful and insightful on stage, would fail to translate to the big screen.

There is a parallel with Roy Rene “Mo” who, like Barry, was a megastar of his day and whose racist, vulgar comedy was side-splitting on stage, but whose films failed to entertain.

George and I were not the only ones attracted to the film because it meant an opportunity to work with Barry. Pamela Stephenson, Tim Finn, Graham Kennedy and Joan Rivers all were happy to make appearances. Unfortunately, George proved to have little flair for directing comedy, and although nothing could have saved the film, without some of the heavier-handed moments it might have been funnier.

What we began slowly to realise during production was that the Humphries marriage was in trouble. Too late, we figured that the film was a way for Barry to keep Diane happy – and probably, out of his hair. As shooting loomed and the rewrites to the script continued to fail to appear, I became more and more worried. But how do you tell the funniest man in Australia that he’s not funny? At the last minute, in a response to my nagging, Barry made a few changes. But by now it was too late, the train had left the station and we were on board for the ride.

To make matters worse, Diane and I quickly grew to loathe each other. At the same time, Barry couldn’t have been nicer. Unfailingly polite, he was usually punctual and helpful. “Barry is always the same,” Bruce had said, and this was pretty much true. And reassuring. It was rare to see the cocktail of characters he lived

with pop out of the urbane Humphries persona. It did happen a couple of times. We arrived at his Point Piper house one morning for a meeting. Barry was out on the verandah overlooking the sun-speckled harbour, elegantly dressed as usual in a tailored suit with handkerchief in breast pocket and perfectly complementing shirt and tie. As we walked out to join him, he turned to us and told three really quite filthy jokes, roared a Sir Les laugh, and then switched to polite, courteous Barry.

Another morning I was at home getting ready to go to work, after a couple of bad days with Diane. The phone rang. Dame Edna was on the other end, screaming at me about something Diane had told him I'd done. Later when I saw him on set, Barry said, "Sorry about this morning."

Before production started, Barry wanted to shoot a still shot for the cover of the prospectus, a legal requirement for raising money from the public. It was decided to shoot Sir Les riding a camel. On a sunny afternoon, Evanne delivered a very laid-back camel called Adam to the sandhills at Kurnell, and in due course the stills photographer pulled up in his Porsche, followed by a Honda Accord driven by Sir Les Patterson in full costume and makeup. A vision occurred to me of what would have happened if they had had a traffic accident on the way: "Agitated member of the public gets out of his dented Camry ready to punch the other driver, Sir Les climbs out of the dented Honda ...". Luckily this did not happen, and Barry was very brave, perching and leering on a camel which was trying to maintain its balance on a steep sandhill as directed by the stills man.

The main location for the film *Les Patterson Saves the World* was a disused tannery at Botany, quite close to Sydney airport. It had lots of large, empty, dilapidated old buildings, some palm trees and a lot of open space. Designer Grace Walker created elaborate interiors and exteriors for Abu Niveah, the fictional country in the film. (Barry had an unexplained fixation for the cosmetic product, Nivea Creme. We had to get permission from the company to use



Pamela Stephenson takes a ride with Sir Les.

the name. “Oh, Barry is always on about this, no idea why,” the man said.)

Whenever the Sydney airport flight path was east-west you couldn't hear yourself think and the place stank, a powerfully putrid smell of blood and bone. We should have taken this as an omen.

The final sequence filmed in Sydney was a revolving restaurant in New York where Dame Edna is dining with the Possums for Peace. The bad guys arrive, there is a chase, Colin the koala gets into the control room and pulls the lever which speeds up the revolve, and chaos, naturally, ensues. We built the set in a warehouse in Homebush – an amazing piece of work. The restaurant was full size, and many times bigger than that intimate room at Tony's Bon Gout. Outside the windows there was a cyclorama of the New York night sky, and the restaurant revolved at varying speeds up to thirty kilometres per hour. I stood on it when they were testing it and there was no way you could keep your balance at full speed. Gradually your feet loosened from the floor and you spun out towards the walls, ending up stuck like a fly to the carpet.

The union decided to give us a hard time on *Les*. Or rather,



Two of the greatest talents Australian show business has ever produced:
Graham Kennedy and Barry Humphries

a newly appointed Acting Federal Officer (Poo-Bah), based in Melbourne, decided. I continued to be of the view that, unless the production had done something wrong, the relationship should be between the union and its members, not between the union and the production. Having worked on crews I understood their needs; I tried to be a good employer and a fair one. No one ever had cause to go to the union to get a problem resolved on my films. I refused to be intimidated by bullying and I enjoyed a fight, unless it wasted time which should have been spent on more productive matters.

This jumped-up megalomaniac started ringing me with ludicrous demands and threats. After several unpleasant conversations, I told the office not to put him through to me for a while. I said they should always be polite and say I was out, or in a meeting, or ... anything they could think up, and that I would call him back. He rang every day, sometimes twice, for a couple of weeks. I was never available and I never, ever, returned his calls. This drove him crazy, which was very satisfying. Finally, when I decided to speak to him and get it over with, he threatened to take us to court and

to prevent the film ever being screened in Australia. He thought the film was going to be a high-profile hit and could be held up as an example of the power of the union and, no doubt, himself. The irony was that the audience took care of his threat – no one went to see the film. Even the union eventually realised what a fool it had employed, and moved him off to lick stamps in some corner somewhere.

There were two overseas locations, the first some sequences in the US with scenes of the President in the Oval Office, and exteriors of New York. These were all filmed in Los Angeles, and we had a pleasant week driving around in rented limousines, filming downtown as New York, and in a small studio in Culver City which owned an Oval Office set – one of about twenty in Hollywood. Joan Rivers had fun playing the President of the United States and in return invited Dame Edna onto her weekly show after filming was finished. Back then, Americans just didn't get heterosexual men in drag and Dame Edna was a flop. It looked as if Barry's attempts to establish himself in the USA would be unsuccessful. But



Joan Rivers as the President of the United States

he persisted and eventually became nearly as big a star in America as he is in the UK and Australia – a truly phenomenal talent.

On the evening of the last day of filming, I booked a table at Spago on Sunset Boulevard, then Hollywood's trendiest restaurant, to take the Australians who had come with us for the US shoot to dinner. As I was reaching for the bill at the end of the meal (the production would pay as a way of saying thank you) Barry leaned over and said, with emphasis, so that everyone at the table could hear, "I'll take it, Sue." As it came to around \$1,000, everyone was impressed by his generosity and thanked him profusely. I smelled a rat. Sure enough, the bill turned up in the film's accounts department a few weeks later. Barry had paid on his credit card. I figured that if we neglected to reimburse him, he wouldn't have the nerve to ask for the money. This proved to be the case. So he earned the crew's thanks, after all.

The final shooting was for second unit location exteriors in Morocco. This was a challenge, as none of us had ever been to Morocco. We eventually located a film company in Marrakesh to set up the shoot for George and the camera crew. This company insisted on full prepayment of all costs prior to commencement,



With Evanne on the set of *Les Patterson Saves the World*