



## Ron Michaels

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*Ron Michaels was born in Melbourne in 1915. After leaving school he started work as an office boy with United Artists and began to work his way up the company ladder. After a three year stint in the Air Force during the war he returned to United Artists where he continued his career, becoming Managing Director in 1952. After retiring from United Artists in 1978 he accepted a position on the Board of Channel 10, and was involved with the running of R&R Films. He has three grown up daughters and lives at Kirribilli.*

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I was born in Melbourne on May 8, 1915. I left school in the Depression era. My father had an import and indent business which collapsed during the Depression years. I was at Melbourne Grammar at that time, and after the company collapsed my parents couldn't continue to pay the fees, so I had to go looking for a job. I was looking for a job for about eighteen months. It was a difficult time. People don't realise, I think, unless they went through the Depression, just how severe the problems were. I got in queues everywhere, like everyone else looking for a job. Finally I was lucky enough to get a job as an Office Boy at United Artists. That was my starting point in the industry.

I lived in Melbourne until 1940, when I went to Adelaide with the company I worked for, United Artists, to take over the branch there. I joined the Air Force from there in 1943 - I was away for about three years. After discharge from the Air Force I was brought to Sydney to the company's head office as Assistant to the Managing Director. I went through from being Office Boy, through the Accessories Department, the Dispatch Department, the Booking Department - progressively moving up over those years, until I got into Sales, which meant I was dealing direct with exhibitors. From there I went into the managerial level,

such as when I went to Adelaide to take over there as Branch Manager. And then finally into the Head Office in Sydney, where I had links with New York - which was our international Head Office. The studios are in Hollywood, but the Head Office is in New York. And so I finally became the Managing Director in 1952 and stayed there until I retired in 1978.

I came into the industry in 1931, and at that time there were still a few cinemas in the country areas of Victoria that were on silent film. It's a bit hard to believe today, but they couldn't afford to equip themselves for sound. They were shown in local country halls, not theatres. There were touring circuits. A man would tour around all the small towns for perhaps two weeks. He'd take a print away with him and tour. So I saw the end of the silent era, then I saw sound-on-film, and sound-on-disc. The disc was a short-lived thing. It was a sixteen-inch disc which was synchronised to the film and it had to be played from the centre of the record out. When damage occurred in a print, which it frequently did, you had to splice in some blank footage to keep it all synchronised, otherwise you might finish up with a man's voice coming out of a woman's mouth or something like that. I recall an incident where a country theatre was sent the discs for the wrong film, so they had a film playing on the screen and a dialogue that was for a totally different film. The audience was apparently a bit confused!

These were the sort of problems that occurred in the sound-on-disc era. They were rectified when sound-on-film came in and became the basic technology, which it has been since 1930-31. But there were quite a number of sound-on-disc films made in the early days, and for about two years at one stage most theatres had put in the disc operation, anticipating that it was going to be the ultimate, but things didn't turn out that way.

Things have changed dramatically. There was the 3-D era, where everyone had to wear glasses. That was short-lived too (though recently I read that it might be coming back again. Someone's got a technical development.) The effect of course was quite good. If you were sitting there with the glasses you certainly got into the action. Then for a while they placed additional speakers in the back of the theatres and the like. This was fairly common - and still is today.

My activities were expanded to embrace thirteen countries of the world - right through Asia, up to Japan and so on. I was constantly travelling, which became a bit of a problem. Getting on and off planes and in and out of hotels may sound very glamorous to people that do it perhaps on a holiday, but doing it for business isn't the easiest thing in the world. You've got language problems - I had to learn Japanese because of the business I had to do in Japan. It's one hell of a language to learn but I managed to learn enough to be able to converse in it, and to understand what was being said.

When I retired in 1978 I was invited to join the Board of Channel 10 here in Sydney, which I accepted. I was only on the Board for a period of twelve months when Rupert Murdoch bought the company. The day that Rupert lined us all up to bid us farewell or whatever, I was the only Board Member that survived into his regime. So I stayed there with him while he controlled operations there. I was on the Board for nine years. During that period we formed Associated R&R Films. We only made one film - *Gallipoli* - a very good movie, as it turned out. I was on the board of Associated R&R Films too. Rupert asked me to join that because of my film background.

A couple of years later the Managing Director of R&R got fired (for reasons I'm

not going to go into here) and Rupert asked me would I take over and run the company. But I didn't want to get back in harness again completely, so I told him that provided he could set up the office situation and give me a couple of good staff, and I could operate from home, I'd do it until we went into production again, but after that I'd have to bow out. I didn't want to get back into the all-day grind again. So he agreed with that, but we never did make another film - simply because we couldn't agree on scripts. We had so many discussions on scripts, yet we could never reach agreement. We had three or four properties. We paid \$40,000 for one which I would have liked to have seen produced, but it wasn't (not by us, anyway.) In the finish we gave up. Rupert had started to expand his empires in other areas of the world, so R&R dropped more or less into decline. It was only two years ago that I finally resigned my Directorship and control of it. It was pointless going on because I'd done everything I could do for the company and it had virtually run its course.

In addition to that, I'm a Past President of the Australian Cinema Pioneers. Twenty five years in the business entitles people to become a Pioneer. It's quite big, Australia-wide, the Australian Cinema Pioneers. It has something like 600 members. We get together for annual meetings and dinners and things. It's nice to see old faces again, but as each year goes by there are fewer and fewer of them that I was linked with in my days. It takes in all the people involved in the industry - the theatre people, the distribution people, the production people... it's quite extensive.

During all those years I had the chance to meet with many stars. I entertained stars here in Australia. We produced a number of films here in Australia back in the 'fifties - *On the Beach* in Melbourne, was one. *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, which we produced here in Sydney, was another. *Ned Kelly* was another one.

*On the Beach* was a very big project - and a very expensive one. We had an amusing incident associated with making it. You know the story - an atom bomb has exploded and the effects are moving south, and Melbourne is about the last place left that you can survive in. Ava Gardner and Gregory Peck were the principals. There was a need for a street scene in Melbourne - one of utter devastation - car bodies, garbage everywhere - you know, to give the effect of a dying city. We got Council approval to do this to a part of Lonsdale Street. We had to do it from midnight, and have it cleared by seven o'clock the next morning. We were going to shoot it about half past five - six o'clock. It was only a short scene, but we had to take it. So all the arrangements were made and we came to the point where all that had to be done was to set up the cameras the next morning.

Well, it so happened that the Town Clerk, who'd been away on holidays and knew nothing about this arrangement, drove home late that night and saw all this bloody litter in Lonsdale Street... so he immediately sent out an emergency squad to clean it all up! We got there to shoot the next morning and we had to start all over again!

That film, by the way, was the first film where a 360 degree shot was achieved. A pan right around a complete circle. It's a very difficult thing to do inasmuch as you've got cables, you've got lighting, you've got a hundred and one things that have to be kept out of the shot. Stanley Kramer, who directed the film, had thirteen takes on this, from memory, and something went wrong every time - someone tripped over a cable, or the lighting wasn't right. But finally he did

achieve it. I think since then there have been technical developments which have made it easier, but in those days you had to keep people out of the line of camera vision, and still keep clearing the decks.

It took a lot of time, and we ran over budget. We had to guarantee Ava Gardner's fee without tax. That required having her out of Australia within, I think, ninety days. That was the Tax Act at that time. Provided they were in and out within ninety days they would not be taxed. We were running awfully, awfully close to not getting it done in time, because Stanley Kramer was running behind with some of these things. We finally got the last scene done and she was out with only a day to spare. I breathed a sigh of relief, because I was thinking what we'd be up for in tax if we hadn't. But these are the sort of problems that occur when you're in production. While Stanley Kramer had to assume responsibility for it, we were paying the bills, and it was our money.

It could get a bit stressful at times, if you allowed it, but temperament sometimes is the problem with stars. For example: *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. There was a shot on the railway station here at Central of the cane cutters leaving to go up north. John Mills and Ernie Borgnine were two of the people in question. They were being farewelled on the station (I even had my three daughters there as extras). The camera had been set up, and Borgnine and Mills had to move to their marks - chalk marks on the ground that had been worked out so that the angles were right, and the focus was right etc. They took up their marks. I was just standing in the background, because I had no direct involvement with the production, when suddenly Ernie Borgnine, in a fit of rage, comes up to me and says to me that John Mills had cribbed his mark and was getting a better angle than him. It's hard to think that temperament like that can be found in a star like him. He was adamant! John just stood there - he didn't say a word. However, we had to satisfy Ernie that the marks were being observed and that the angles were right. It was a ridiculous situation, but it's the sort of thing that happens regularly.

There are scenes I've been on in Hollywood - I can recall one from a film called *Sergeants Three*, which had the Rat Pack in it - Sammy Davis Jnr, Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra and Peter Lawford. One morning I was there during the shoot of a bar-room scene, where the bar gets wrecked - it's a very funny scene. Sammy Davis' wife had just given birth and they were all celebrating. They were blind drunk at seven o'clock in the morning. This was in reality. This wasn't intended at all to be part and parcel of the film, but it turned out to be, because of the celebrations. They were ad-libbing. They all had their lines, but that didn't mean too much, and they were all in the mood to do everything different. There was a line where there's a big buffalo hunter who's blocking their way on some issue, you know, and they're having a big fight. He stood about seven feet tall and three and a half feet wide - that sort of character. Dean Martin was supposed to have said to Frank Sinatra: "Who's going to stop him?", and Sinatra was to have said: "I am." The day the scene was shot, Dean Martin fed Frank Sinatra the line, to which he replied: "I'm not. You are!" This is the sort of thing that went on. John Sturgess, who was directing the film, threw up his hands, but he let it go, and he let it go all the way through. They ad-libbed all the way through the thing after that, and ignored the lines. It turned out to be one of the funniest scenes in the film - it's still in the final version. The Rat Pack mightn't have been quite as bad as some of their publicity portrayed, but they were pretty solid on the grog. They were good drinkers. But I found them delightful on most occasions.

United Artists was executive producer of all these films we made, therefore I had to represent them, but I didn't become *directly* involved in production. We

financed the production, and we appointed a producer and a director to do all the work, so I was only on the fringes - nothing directly linked to the production itself. That's a highly specialised area.

Sometimes you'd get problems with the titles of films, where you find a title that is perhaps appropriate in America but inappropriate in other parts of the world. I'm hard put to think of an example now, but we did change titles in Australia on a number of occasions. Yes - here's an example: *Saturday's Children* was the American title of one film that we changed - to *The Loudest Whisper*. It was a story that suggested a lesbian relationship between two of the women at a school. Any decisions like that I had to refer to New York, and get approval, because sometimes they had to go back to the Producer for the OK because we didn't have the right to arbitrarily change a title. We could put forward the reasons why it should be changed, but it wouldn't necessarily follow that they'd agree.

I was completely dominated by what New York said in this area. I didn't have much real independence or autonomy. I had certain areas where I could go without reference, but if I stepped over those I had to get approval from them before I did something. They controlled us very tightly - understandably, too, I think, because you've got copyright problems and things. You've got to be so careful - even if you change the billings on a poster you've got to be so careful that you stay within whatever size type and order of appearance that the names are in.

All this sort of thing I had to pick up as I went along. It all came from experience rather than books. There was no such thing as a course you could go to learn it all. Matter of fact, I used to discuss this with Norman Rydge (Sir Norman, as he became later). He used to run the Greater Union circuit here. Norman always said to me: "You know, I have a great respect for the School of Hard Knocks. You learn it there and it stays put." It's true, too, I think. It would have been nice to have had some tutorial areas preceding that, but you finally have to get into it and learn it yourself as you go.

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When I was looking for a job after I left school I queued up for all sorts of jobs - a newspaper reporter was one I remember going for. But I think I was lucky that I got a job where I did - in the film industry. It's a fascinating business in so many areas. Having gone through all the departments that were in existence in the company, I had a fairly good basic background of the business. Then from my experience of watching production activities overseas I learned more on that side, too, which was helpful. Then when television became a significant part of our revenue I got involved with television stations and the marketing of our films. We sold films to television, and it's still a sizeable area of income today for the motion picture business. I don't know what the percentage is today, but it's substantial. Then there are videos - that's become a very lucrative area too.

And now Pay TV is about to begin. That's an interesting one, in many respects. I think that the people who invest in that one are going to be on a long-term basis before they see any return on their capital. I don't see it as an area for investment where you could expect a return in under five or six years. There's a huge capital outlay involved. Even the process of considering bringing cable to this building for Pay TV - it's an enormous business, and there are legal complications involved with it.

As a hobby, I write film scripts. I've written a number of them which I'm now looking to get into production at the local level. Some I've written specifically for use on Pay TV, but some I haven't. Most of them have a link to the Australian scene.

We handled all the James Bond movies in my days at United Artists, and I still think there's a possibility for the return of James Bond. Of course all the novels have been used up, and they ran out of properties for James Bond, so I've written one that brings in part of Australia and part of New Zealand, and finishes up with the finale in a Pacific island. It's just one of those typical Bond films. Escapist stuff purely and simply, but very lucrative if you come up with the right sort of thing. I think at the present time I've completed about six scripts - now I need to get someone to read them and see what comes of it. The scripts are something that I've been concentrating on for the past year or so, so I'll see how we go. I'm still working on one of them, and I'll probably pick up on another one.

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I suppose you could say that strictly I didn't retire until quite recently. The move onto the Board of Channel 10 came along after I retired from United Artists, and that took up a lot of my time. Then the R&R development also filled a gap, so I really didn't retire perhaps in the sense I'd intended. But having resigned from the R&R commitment I've had no activities for the past two years or so.

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The other thing that has changed a lot over the years is censorship. In the early days of my involvement with the business, censorship was very, very tight. I can remember we had a film back in 1953 called *The Moon is Blue* - a David Niven movie. I went to London to see that film, and after I'd seen it I said to our people that they were going to have problems with the censor, because in it there were words like "seduce" and "pregnant" that were taboo in Australia at the time - absolutely. I didn't usually go to Censor screenings - normally we'd send our Publicity Director down to represent the Company, but I thought I'd better go down to that one because it was such an important film.

When I appeared down at the Censorship Board, Jack Alexander, who was the Censor at the time *The Moon is Blue* came out, looked at me and said: "Uh oh, we've got bloody problems if you're here, Michaels!" I said: "I don't think so, Jack, but let's get the film running and we'll discuss it afterwards." The Censor room usually had around half a dozen censors sitting around in it. Each one has a little desk, and a light, and a pad, and as the films are screened they sit in there and watch it going through. If they see anything that worries them, the light goes on while they make a note about it. Well, with *The Moon is Blue* screening it was like Luna Park in there! When it was over, Jack turned to me and said: "Well, what do you expect me to do with that?" "Pass it." I said. Jack said to me, "You know the rules," and I said: "Jack. Aren't we ever going to grow up? This is 1953. Is there really anything that objectionable in this? It's a delightful comedy..." and so on. To cut a long story short I finally talked him into giving it a go, to see if we could get a breakthrough in censorship. He said: "I'm going to get thousands of letters complaining, the day this hits the theatre." I said: "I'll bet you don't" and I pulled out a ten pound note. "I'll bet you ten quid you don't." "You're on," said Jack. Well, he never did get those complaints, and I didn't ever bother to collect the tenner, I

must tell you! But it was interesting, inasmuch as that episode changed the thinking of the era we were living in as opposed to the Draconian conditions imposed by previous generations of censors.

When Jack finally retired I had Emile Mercier - a cartoonist from one of the newspapers whose name probably rings a bell for you - I had him do a drawing of myself and a couple of others standing outside the Bio box in the Censor's office and you can see *The Moon is Blue* on the screen, and you can see a silhouette of Jack Alexander sitting in the Censors' Room. Before the film goes into the projector there's a bucket of ice, and I'm running the film through the bucket of ice to cool it down! (*Laughs*). I presented it to Jack on his retirement and he said: "That's a delight. I remember that only too well."

But with censorship now, there doesn't seem to be any. Personally, I'm much opposed to this ridiculous gratuitous violence that seems to be popping up in every second film. Maybe we've gone too far. I don't know. In the early days, the Hayes Office in Hollywood used to restrict what you could and couldn't do or say before you went into production. You couldn't even have a double bed - you had to always have twin beds, and you certainly couldn't have a man and a woman in the one bed. A kiss could only last three seconds. No open mouths. It's a totally different ball game today. I don't think there are any controls at all in production levels now - not to my knowledge anyway. It's a matter for local censorship. In the early days in Australia we used to have state censorship too, where you could still have a state censor ban something that might have been passed by the Commonwealth censor. There were all sorts of problems. If those things happened we had to make cuts.

We made a film of D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*, where there was a wrestling scene in the nude between two of the men. There was the occasional flash of pubic hair, and in the first place the scenes in question were rejected outright. Don Chipp was the Minister in charge of censorship at the time, and I had the right of appeal to Canberra under the Act, so I rang him up and told him that I'd like him to see this film. He said that he'd ring me back, and he rang Jack Alexander, the Censor, and he explained the reasons why it had been rejected. Chipp rang me back and said: "Look. Bring it down and I'll have a look at it with you". So I went down to Canberra with the film and he brought in a number of his staff to see it. It wasn't a bad film, actually. It was quite well done and dramatically performed, and the scene in question was only brief. You could hardly object to it, really, but technically, apparently, the Censors Board still felt that they couldn't pass it. After the screening was over Chipp signalled to me and we walked out into the passageway and he said: "Look. I agree with you. I think we can pass that. I'll have a talk to Jack Alexander about it. You'll hear from him about it, not from me." So it finally was passed.

That was the only time I had to appeal to the Minister. You do have a right under the Act to do that, but it's not done very often. Usually, if a film is rejected, the reasons are sufficiently valid that it would be a waste of time to appeal, and most times I think the distributors felt that there was little point in going on with an Appeal. There were one or two instances where it was done, but that was the only time I had to do it. I was pleased to be able get the result, and the film was quite successful at the box office - it turned out to be quite a good film from the point of view of the critics, too. It made quite a bit of money, so it was worth the effort. But if you lose a film like that completely, the loss of income in your country is substantial. A good film today in terms of box office can probably come out at about twelve or thirteen million dollars in film rental in this country - maybe even a

bit more. So you don't throw that away without trying to fight for the right to collect that sort of money.

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You ask me if it was a nine-to-five sort of job. Well, theoretically it was, in the sense that the staff who were in the office observed those hours, but in my case my work life blended over into my personal life constantly. We had social commitments which were linked to business which you just simply had to fulfil.

My wife was involved in a lot of work-related social occasions, and she travelled with me quite a bit as well. Most of the times that I went to the States on business I took her with me - the company approved that. I was travelling through the East a lot and up to Japan - three to four times a year I used to cover that and be away for about five weeks at a time. She used to come with me about every third trip. In my later activities with the company I was away for a tremendous amount of time because of these commitments, because you can't operate thirteen countries around the world sitting on your backside here in Sydney - you've got to go.

When my children were small I wasn't travelling so much, and they were with us all the time. My main activities then were just New Zealand, which I controlled with Australia, and the occasional trip to New York. I didn't have the East to worry about then - that came later. We had branches in every capital city, and offices spread right around Australia which I used to visit.

The travel sounds glamorous, but it gets boring. I used to shudder every time I had to take off, because every country has a problem - especially, as I said earlier, language difficulties... in places like Hong Kong they talk Cantonese, but if you go to Taiwan they talk Mandarin. (I couldn't speak either, so it didn't make much difference to me, but I always had to be sure that there was someone who was able to interpret if we got into something that was a little bit difficult to deal with in English.)

The drafting of contracts - particularly in Japan, for example - it was very, very difficult converting the intentions in English into the actual phraseology in Japanese. You know, you suddenly find that your understanding of what had been agreed upon, when it's put into the language - that they didn't see things quite the same way.

Once I got involved with business in the East I had to learn Japanese. I had a Japanese manager there who spoke good English, but I found that once we got into discussions they spoke their own language. In those days there weren't too many executives around my age who spoke a foreign language. The younger people over there today are learning English at school, so probably today it may not be necessary. But in my era it was because the people with whom you had to negotiate couldn't speak English.

But even speaking Japanese to some extent, when we got down to the fine print I still had to call upon more experienced people. I wouldn't have dared to try to deal with that sort of thing on my own. I learned Japanese in a university course here. My wife learned it with me. Once I began to use it it became easier for me.

When my wife used to accompany me on trips she would talk to the Japanese women in the office in their own language, and they used to start to laugh. She

asked them why, and they told her that she “talked men’s language”. Apparently in Japanese the women have certain words they say that the men would never say, and vice versa. So in effect there is a Japanese women’s language and a Japanese men’s language. We had no idea of this, and what we’d been taught in the university course was the broad men’s language.

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I suppose being involved with the production side of things was the most interesting for me because it involves so many elements. I must admit that if I had a leaning towards anything I probably would have liked to become further involved in production activities because I was quite fascinated by what all that involved. As it was, I knew very little of the technical aspects of the production area. I left that to the specialists, and my background was purely as a production executive rather than Production Manager. If they wanted decisions on something that I could provide - I could say Yes or No to something that related to the company’s policies and that sort of thing, but I never got directly involved in the detail of production.

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I had a lot of experiences. An interesting one was, following the premiere of *Around the World in Eighty Days* down in Melbourne - Mike Todd’s production - I knew Mike was in Honolulu when we had the usual party following the premiere at the Menzies Hotel, and I got him on the phone to tell him that the premiere had been a huge success. I was talking with him, and the press were all around taking the conversation down, when Mike said to me: “I’ll be with you on Saturday” (this was Thursday). Out of the blue, he and Liz Taylor were coming through to Sydney without any warning! I’m down in Melbourne, and it was Spring Carnival time in Sydney. I’d gone down to Melbourne by car, of all things - took the family down for the premiere. I had to tear back to Sydney to organise everything. In that era, the only hotel, virtually, that you might call a class hotel that we had in Sydney was The Australia. In those days the others just didn’t exist. Despite our contacts and our influence there, there wasn’t a suite available, because of the Spring Racing Carnival. The officers scouted out everything else there was, and there was one hotel - I think it was the Hampton Court - anyway, it was an old hotel at the Cross. They agreed to refurbish a suite, starting almost immediately. (This was on a Friday and they’re arriving on the Saturday, bear in mind!) I said OK, so it was on. Recarpet, re-wallpaper, repaint - the whole bloody works. They worked through, and Saturday came.

Mike and Liz came in and I explained the problem and showed them how it had been all refurbished and everything. It was a prestige thing for the hotel to be able to say Mike Todd and Elizabeth Taylor had stayed there. Mike was satisfied with the suite when he saw it, but he called me aside and said: “Christ! I want a double bed, not twin beds.” As I said, this was Saturday. I told the Manager that we needed a double bed and he said they didn’t have any in the motel. They were all twin beds. I said that he’d better get one, and he said: “Where am I going to get one?” Fortunately I knew one of the Directors of Anthony Hordern’s (as it was then), and I prevailed upon him to send someone in to open up the Anthony Hordern’s store on the Saturday afternoon and get a double bed! So a double bed was transported to the Hampton Court about four or five o’clock that afternoon. They’re the sort of complications that do arise occasionally.

And yes, there were huge amounts of money wasted on occasions. I’m afraid

that the average person on the production side has very little perspective in terms of monetary expenditures. Money means nothing to them. They don't even think of what it costs, whereas the average businessman who has to run an operation has to think about the expenditures and equate it to just what it produces. In the production side that just doesn't happen. And frequently there'd be ridiculous things that someone would insist on having in at the last minute that cost hundreds and thousands of dollars. It's absolutely outrageous at times, what can happen. Like today, *Waterworld* cost over three hundred million dollars. Unbelievable. They'll never get the money back. It's just down the drain. The average production budget these days is about forty, forty five million dollars, plus the ridiculously higher ones that keep bobbing up on occasions. It takes a lot of recovery, and it's unnecessary - most of it.

It is a function of gigantic egos. Very much so. Possibly more than in other businesses. Getting back to whose name comes first when you run the credits, or what size they've got to be, or what colour, even. It's a constant battle. You get a couple of star names in a film and each will insist that their name comes first. The average public mightn't be conscious of this, but in general production terms the name that comes first is supposed to be the No 1, so with them it's very much an ego issue who comes first. And as to whether they were *all* like this, I don't believe I met one who wasn't! (*Laughs*) I can't bring one to mind!

But it was different to most other industries, and will always have its fascination. Most of the people, when you got down to the nitty gritty, were quite down-to-earth people behind that facade that used to be built up around them - and much of it *was* a facade. Their agents used to develop it for them more than anyone else, I suppose, and insist that they stuck with it. For instance, Ernie Borgnine, despite that business with John Mills that I mentioned, used to come home to our place, have dinner, and play gin rummy with my girls. He was very much a down-to-earth character in real life when you got down to it - but the temperament was still there when they got on the film set.

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Distribution of films has changed dramatically since I retired, but in the era that I was involved with there were the two circuits - Hoyts and Greater Union, and certain distributors went with one and the others went with the other. Village Roadshow emerged later on and came up as a third. They were only small to start off with, but they developed subsequently and probably today they're the most important of all. But in my time they were just beginning to get their footing in the business, and it was a case of you either released with Hoyts or you released with Greater Union. We released through Hoyts - that was our outlet - but I ran into trouble over certain films that Hoyts didn't want, or we couldn't agree on terms. I think that has changed today. I think you can jump around from anywhere now that the entry of Village has opened up the door.

In the early period Hoyts was virtually controlled by Twentieth Century Fox. They had a big holding and they dominated what took place on the Hoyts circuit. Greater Union, conversely, was controlled to a considerable extent by Rank - it was set up more from the English side of activities, then broadened its sphere quite a bit.

You suggest that with so much money involved it's likely that there were some scams around. I suppose there were, but I'm not aware of any specifically, quite frankly, but there probably were.

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The United Artists management in the US changed dramatically from when I started. United Artists was formed by Mary Pickford, Charles Chaplin and D.W. Griffith and one or two others. Pickford and Chaplin hung on for quite a number of years, controlling the company, but neither were producing. The objective of United Artists was to encourage independent producers to bring their product to the company for release, but not to have a studio production activity - that was its basic philosophy. With each person having the ability to create something themselves, they should not be told by the studio how to do it. The idea was, that giving them complete independence of direction and production was going to result in a better product than something that is churned out of the studio mould - and I think they were right - I think there's no question about that.

But there came the point in time where neither Pickford nor Chaplin were producing any more and we were starving for product. This is when there was a change of ownership. Finally a group that was well-experienced in the industry bought them out after a lot of haggling and arguing. That was in the early fifties, probably about '52 I think. They maintained the same philosophy, and we encouraged independent producers to come in - the Stanley Kramers etc. came in as part of our production activities. Now, of course, United Artists has merged with Metro, so God knows what's going on now - I couldn't tell you. But in the era in which I was involved we were independent in that sense of releasing the productions of independent producers. It proved to be very successful, and we handled some of the best movies of the era. The independents could see the advantages of producing for themselves without the constraints of a studio, with all their rules and regulations. In a studio someone could slash your script around and do this, or cut costs and do that, whereas we gave them a fairly free rein - within reason, of course - they couldn't go mad with the budgets. They had complete autonomy, and that was the key to the whole business.

Some of the other film companies have gone over to a similar sort of thing. In my time in the business there were eight major film companies, but now many of those have amalgamated, independents have sprung up, and it's a changed position today. I'm not absolutely conversant with what's happening now, but I think there's more independent production activity today than there is studio production.

Some of the recent developments in film-making technology have probably reduced some of the costs as well - particularly the stuff that can be done on computers - the special effects and all that. Stuff that once would have had to be done by stuntmen can now be done by computer. And computers have speeded up the animation process, too. United Artists didn't handle all that much animation, though we had things like the Pink Panther cartoons. They were the main animation area that we got involved with, and they were very successful. And the Mancini music that went with them. But computers weren't in my era at all - they all came later.

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You ask me what it was like working for Rupert Murdoch. I have the highest respect for Rupert - he's a gentleman in my eyes. I know the press don't always treat him that way! I had quite a bit to do with him in my activities with television and with R&R, and I have nothing but praise for him as a man, and as a man with

vision - which he has, undoubtedly. And he's prepared to take a gamble - huge gambles, sometimes. Other people I won't mention by name who are prominent in the press these days treat their staff just like dirt, but Rupert never did.

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Now that I'm retired I miss the social element a bit that my work brought to my life, though as I said earlier, most of my contemporaries have moved on now. Time has caught up and there aren't very many of us left. Of the people that I was associated with at the top levels, I suppose the only one that's still around is Keith Moremon, who succeeded Norman Rydge at Greater Union - though of course he's retired now, even though he's still involved in doing a few things personally.

When you've worked in the business for as long as I did, I think there comes a time when you're ready to take things a bit easy. There was a certain relief in not having all those things to worry about all the time. For example, when I went away on holidays with the family I was constantly on the phone - every day. I was getting wires... I couldn't go away and disappear for any length of time because decisions had to be made. Even though I used to give my executive staff a certain amount of authority, they didn't feel at times that they could make a decision on this or that, and had to refer it to me. Sometimes on holiday I'd be on the phone to New York from street phone boxes - feeding coins in or calling reverse charge. It's a business where you can't be out of contact. The big problem associated with working for a company in New York were the constant phone calls at two or three o'clock in the morning - in their working hours and our sleeping hours. That used to be a bugbear for me.

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When Al Daff was the Branch Manager in the Melbourne office of Universal Films, I was the Booker in the Melbourne office of United Artists. One night I was getting dressed to go to a ball - in those days we used to dress up in white tie and tails, you know. I got a phone call from Ringwood, an outer Melbourne suburb, to say that they hadn't received a print of our film that was playing there that night. In that era the film exchanges, (or the distributors, to use a term that we've been using) used to have a ring around to see who had the second feature (it was always a double feature combination back in that era) and whoever had the most number of reels used to accept the print from the other company and put it in a big trunk which took a double feature program. Then it would go by rail.

On this occasion, our film had been sent to Universal for enclosure with their print, and somehow the United Artists feature didn't get there. So this phone call from Ringwood was a desperation job. I had to go into the office to check that it had been sent to Universal for enclosure. When I found that it had I rang Al, and he was at home, ill in bed, but he agreed to meet me at the Universal offices. So there was I in my tie and tails, and Al in his pyjamas and dressing gown, in at the Universal offices about eight o'clock at night trying to find out what had happened to the bloody film. We went through the vaults and we found it. They'd forgotten to move it out of the vault. Because Al was sick, I grabbed the print and put it into my car. Al went back to bed and I went to pick up the girl I was taking to the ball. So I arrived at Ringwood in tails, with a girl on my arm - to deliver them their film! It was a ridiculous situation. (Al went on to become a top executive with Universal in New York.

He died only last year, as a matter of fact.)

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As I was working my way up through the company, I realised that if I was ever going to get anywhere I had to become proficient in Sales. I needed to have a relationship with the exhibitors directly. So in that early period when I was still a Booker I got the company's permission to go out at weekends and visit country theatres and the like, selling. I couldn't do it during the week days because I simply didn't have enough time away from the booking responsibilities. So it was frequently my situation on Saturdays to take off in the car and drive to country towns and make deals. Fortunately I was successful in doing so, and that got me started on the ladder upwards because I'd achieved some ability as a sales rep. I didn't get any extra salary for the extra work - I did it with a view to trying to further my future.

In 1939 we had a film from England, *The Lion has Wings*. It was a propaganda-type film demonstrating that we had the air power to fight the enemy etc. The important thing was to get this into every theatre in Australia as fast as we could - this was the request from the boys in New York and in London. That was my first assignment. I went to Tasmania to sell this program and covered all the theatres in Tasmania in one round trip, and I managed to sell it to every one of them. I came back with a bag full of contracts. That was the only propaganda-type film that we handled, though of course there were many others made during the war.

As I said, I was in the Air Force during the war. I applied with one of my best friends in Melbourne in late 1939. He was accepted, but I wasn't because I had admitted to being a sleep walker, (which I was. At night it was nothing for me to go wandering out onto the streets. I had quite a track record as sleep walker. I used to wander around to a dairy two or three blocks away and call out to my mate who lived there. His father would get me back home, and I wouldn't have known anything about it only the mate's father used to tell my mother the next morning.) I didn't think being a sleep walker was very important, but it meant that they wouldn't accept me into the Air Force. My friend went on to be a navigator and spent most of his time in Europe. When I reapplied later from Adelaide I didn't make any mention of the sleep walking - in those days there weren't computers, and I didn't think they'd have the records of my previous application available. And anyway things were getting a bit grim with the war at this stage so they probably weren't as strict as they were earlier. So I was accepted.

I went through, and spent some time in New Guinea at Milne Bay and around there, then I was brought back to do an officer's course. I became Air Transport Officer in Darwin, and I used to regularly communicate with my friend the navigator. (In wartime you just wrote to a number, and they used to send it on. You had no idea where the person was - and you weren't supposed to know where they were.)

I used to fly down from Darwin to Adelaide frequently, and we used to overnight at Alice Springs. One night I was staying over at Alice Springs and I went down to have a drink in the mess with some of the boys. Some of us got talking about what we did before the war and when I said I was in the film business one of the chaps there said: "That's a coincidence. Our navigator used to be in the film business." I asked his name, and he said it was Frank Dick. "Holy God," I said, "that's my best friend! Is he still in Europe?" "No. He's here in Alice Springs!" I could hardly believe this. I found out where he was and I dug him out (this is about two o'clock in the morning). He was on his way to Darwin. His squadron

was being moved up to Gove in the Northern territory - by rail, of all things. So I stuck him on our plane the next morning and took him up to Darwin and he had about three or four days' leave with me until the others arrived by train from Alice Springs. It was an incredible thing - out of the blue. I still see him regularly when I drive up to the Gold Coast. He lives in Mullumbimby now. He's in his eighties, and still hale and hearty for his age.

After the war I went back with United Artists. (It was the law, incidentally, that if you joined the services you had to be given your old employment back.) But at that stage they thought that with the background I had I'd be of more use in Head Office, so I didn't go back to the Adelaide branch - I came straight to Sydney. It was quite a promotion. That was in 1946.

There were fewer productions made during the war for obvious reasons, but after the war the film industry picked up again, as did most things in the postwar boom years.

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When we made *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* we had, as I said, Ernie Borgnine and John Mills playing the cancutters. They were having difficulty getting the Aussie accent, and I was a bit concerned because they weren't making too much headway on this. So one day I decided that I would send them out on the Hawkesbury for the day with a bunch of typical Aussie reporters and just let them listen. I put them on a Halvorsen and they went up around Pittwater. Well unfortunately it rained - all day, and they finished up in the Brooklyn pub. They would have heard a lot of the Aussie accent, but I'm not sure how capable they were of remembering much of what they'd heard!

That night I was hosting a dinner party at which the Lord Mayor happened to be one of the guests at the Caprice Restaurant (as it used to be) at Rose Bay. And Ernie and John, of course, were the guests of honour for that night. By the time they arrived at the restaurant they were well and truly up to here with grog - they'd been on it all day. I'd had a couple of cane knives - actual canecutter's knives - silver plated and inscribed to each of them as a memento of the occasion. I presented them at the restaurant at dinner. Ernie, who was well away by this, got up and said, "Well, I'd like to say a few thousand words..." and he's got the canecutter's knife in his hand, and using it for emphasis as he spoke - and cutting hell out of the table in the process! Jimmy Bendoit, who ran the restaurant, looked over and saw this, and didn't bat an eyelid. Finally Ernie put the knife down for a moment, and Beryl, my wife, who was sitting next to him, grabbed it and sat on it! When Jimmy Bendoit finally gave me the bill he said, "I'm sorry, but I had to charge you for a new table."

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Another incident was back in the early 1970s, when the government was planning to introduce a number of what I considered to be Draconian measures directed against people in television distribution in this country. When I received data on what they had in mind I shuddered, knowing it would have a tremendous impact on every distributor, and in particular on small Australian distributors. I wrote to Jim McClelland, who was the Minister at that time, pointing out that if they went ahead as planned they were almost certainly going to put a lot of distributors out of business. McClelland's reply to me, after acknowledging receipt of my letter, finished up by saying that "he had no doubt that dinosaurs also

resisted their extinction". That was his response! I think he thought that distributors had too much control, and he wanted to force them to put money into Australian productions, as well as imposing extra duties and tariffs. However, they didn't bring the changes in. They decided to have a Tariff Board Inquiry on the industry instead - and as a result, nothing further happened about the changes because the tariff Board were against them.

But it did have another outcome. When I realised the intentions, I gathered all the distributors together and convinced them to form an association. I felt that we really needed a voice which represented distribution in Australia. So we formed what was then the Television Programme Distributors' Association, of which I was the Foundation President. It had eighteen members to start with - I think today it's something like 64 members.

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You ask me if I preferred working in films or in television. I don't think I had a preference - I think possibly, if I had a choice I would have stayed more on the theatrical rather than the television side of things, but my company was deeply involved in both and it didn't matter all that much to me which way it went. And although I spent some time as an observer of the production process, I can't honestly say that I've ever wanted to be really involved, like being a director or anything like that.

There were some films that we did over the years that quite appealed to me personally, and were highlights for the company - films like *High Noon*, with Gary Cooper, which in its day to me was a very fine production in every way. I always think very highly of *Around the World in 80 Days* because of all that went with that here - the parties and the premieres and the involvements that were there - that always has happy memories.

We had the premiere for *Around the World in 80 Days* at the Paris Cinema. I was going to have Don Lane, who was a TV star here at that period, arrive at the theatre on an elephant. Sir Edward Hallstrom, who had his private zoo across in the Northbridge area, learned of this, and very generously rang me and said: "Look. Under no circumstances take the chance. If that elephant should panic you could have a major worry on your hands. Especially with the sort of surroundings you'll have, with bands, and crowds, and..." It frightened the daylights out of me and I cancelled the elephants straightaway. It hadn't occurred to me. Even though we were going to use a well-trained circus elephant it was a risk I couldn't afford to take.

Those sort of events attract a lot of attention - press and television coverage, and it all adds up to selling the movie, which after all is what our objective is. But it's not something that I miss now that I'm retired, because I had so much of it. I think I had my fill. Certainly I enjoyed the big premieres and the parties with the people who were out here - hosting this and hosting that, it was all great at the time, but to be quite honest I don't miss it at all. In fact it was a bit of a relief not to have those responsibilities.

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Surprising as it may seem, most stars are anxious to avoid publicity - they get so much of it. We used to go to extreme measures to get them out back doors of hotels and things like that, simply because they didn't want to be at the mercy of

anyone that wanted to stop and talk to them and ask questions. Even in restaurants people would come up to them at the table, and this sort of thing I was never very happy about. It's intruding on privacy in my opinion. There was a private party when Mike Todd and Liz Taylor were out here, and one person (who's still quite well-know today) was over-insistent that the press should be allowed greater access to them. Mike Todd had to go up and tell him off in no uncertain terms before he would accept that it was a private gathering.

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Sometimes the responsibilities were quite considerable, and if I made a mistake it could be bad for the company. So I had to be careful that I didn't make too many mistakes. Sometimes things would cause me a degree of stress, but I never let it get me down.

I was Managing Director of the company for seventeen years, then I was made a Director of the parent company in New York - Vice-President - and Chairman of the Board of the local company. When I toured on my activities in the East I was always touring as the Vice President of the company, rather than the Managing Director of the local company because it was more appropriate to have a direct link to New York. I was with the company for 47 years, which is quite a long time. From time to time it has been played up in the press and so on that I went from Office Boy to MD, and since you ask me, I have to say that I probably did feel a certain sense of satisfaction with my career. I always aspired to do a bit more and to climb the ladder from Day One. I was quite happy to get to the top and try, by my performance, to justify getting there. Anyway, you either had to succeed, or you weren't there very long! I think the main thing was to apply a bit of common sense, most of the time, to the situation you had in hand.

Do I think I have an approach to my job that made me successful? I don't think so. I played it mostly by ear, according to the circumstances. Every decision was different, and I think it was a case of adjusting to the particular task in front of you... you couldn't just go to a cabinet and take out a form that told you the procedure to follow. Different personalities require different treatment. The fact that every day was always different was one of the best things about the job - no question about that. Flexibility had to be an absolute number one. In any area where you weren't you'd be out of step very quickly.

I don't know if some parts of the job offered more satisfactions than another. The release of every film was a highlight. If you made a success of it - if you felt you'd handled all the publicity right, all the approaches right - and the film failed at the box office, you ask yourself what we did wrong. Quite often its a matter of public taste. But you can certainly steer people towards seeing your film with the right advertising approach. This was always our concern. For every film that arrived here for release we had to sit down and figure what was the right approach for the launch campaign. We were dictated to by New York on the size of the stars' names on the posters and all that, as I've said earlier - that was absolutely tied down by law - but how you sold it at the local level was left to the discretion of the local office, so we might approach it differently to how they did it in the States, or in Europe - because Australian conditions differ. I suppose, after all, they paid me to guide them on what was right or wrong for the local conditions.

It was a pretty cut-throat business in Hollywood - Australia was definitely not in the same league. Anything goes over there, and I think still does. I had no aspirations to live and work in America - I saw all I wanted to see of it. A lot of

what I saw there I didn't appreciate too much. It was a way of life that was out of step with that which I thought was a desirable one. It wouldn't have suited my temperament. The attitudes of most of the top people in the film business there - well... ethics just didn't exist in most places. It's not the way we live our lives in this country - or at least it wasn't in my day. Ethics here were important... well, they were important to me. I just couldn't have lived in that environment and been happy about it.

They were ruthless, there's no doubt about that. I could do a deal here with a handshake, but that wasn't the pattern over there. (Mind you, some of the people still in the business tell me that things have changed a lot here too, and that I would not like being back in the business today.) In fact I had quite a battle with my New York office over a deal I did with Sir Robert Kerridge in New Zealand. (Kerridge in New Zealand was a circuit like Hoyts or Greater Union here). He and I had developed quite a good relationship over the years. On this occasion we were unable, in the negotiations, to define all the points that would have been necessary to put it all down in contract form, so Bob said to me: "Why don't we go on a gentlemen's agreement? We know each other. We agree on Points A,B,C, and D, and so on, and we'll take the others as they come along." I said that was fine with me, but my New York office were horrified when I presented to them the way it was going to operate. I told them that with this man we didn't have to have a written contract because I knew that his word was his bond, and with him a handshake was as good as a written contract, and I guaranteed that the contract would be honoured in the spirit which I talked about. So in the finish I prevailed upon them to let it ride, though they were horrified all the way. It went through, and everything was done as I said it would be done. I couldn't do that everywhere, of course, but I was able to do it with that particular person. It involved some 65 theatres for a whole year, so it was quite an important thing. It was the main source of our revenue in New Zealand and it could've all gone down the drain if I'd been wrong.

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I'm reminded of another incident to do with the filming of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. There was a binge on in the script, where Mills and Borgnine were downing schooners of beer. When they started out they weren't actually drinking beer, they were drinking some concoction, but the colour wasn't coming out right. Finally, Leslie Norman, who was directing, said: "Look. Get some beer. We can't run the risk of this not looking right." Well, they had about nine or ten takes of this scene around the bar, and by the time they'd finished they're both blind drunk! It turned out to be OK in the end, because it was one of the few times you could get away with being drunk!

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The time that Mike Todd and Liz Taylor came out here unexpectedly and I had to refurbish the room at the Hampton Court for them, one of the things Mike said he'd need was a secretary. I asked my secretary Ray to do it for him while he was here because she was familiar with the industry terminology, and I knew she was efficient. She was a bit intimidated at the prospect, because Mike Todd had a reputation for never finishing a sentence, but I reassured her that I had booked into the same hotel and that I'd be on hand if anything arose that was a problem. When I introduced Ray to Mike, the first thing he said was: "Right. Get me the King of Siam."! For openers! Ray just looked at me! I've never forgotten her expression! (What had happened was that during the shooting of *Around the*

*World in 80 Days* he'd had the King's barge - one of the things featured in the story - and the King wanted to see him again and had invited Mike and Liz to stay at the palace.)

We used to try to bring a top star out for the release of new films - even if it was only for a brief appearance. If it was feasible we'd get one who had appeared in the film, but that wasn't always possible because they'd often be tied with productions elsewhere round the world.

It was always a great satisfaction to see the Box Office careering along - particularly if it was sustained. I used to always look for the second week's figures to tell me the story - I knew how long a run we were likely to have from the drop in takings from week one to week two. I used to watch those things through a magnifying glass!

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As well as the things I've talked about here, of course, there are other personal issues, and there are things that I can't reveal from a company point of view - I wouldn't want to get into that territory. But I think I've given you a broad outline.

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*(Recorded October 26 and November 1, 1995.)*