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## The movies, mate: Part Three

# Inside Kennedy Miller

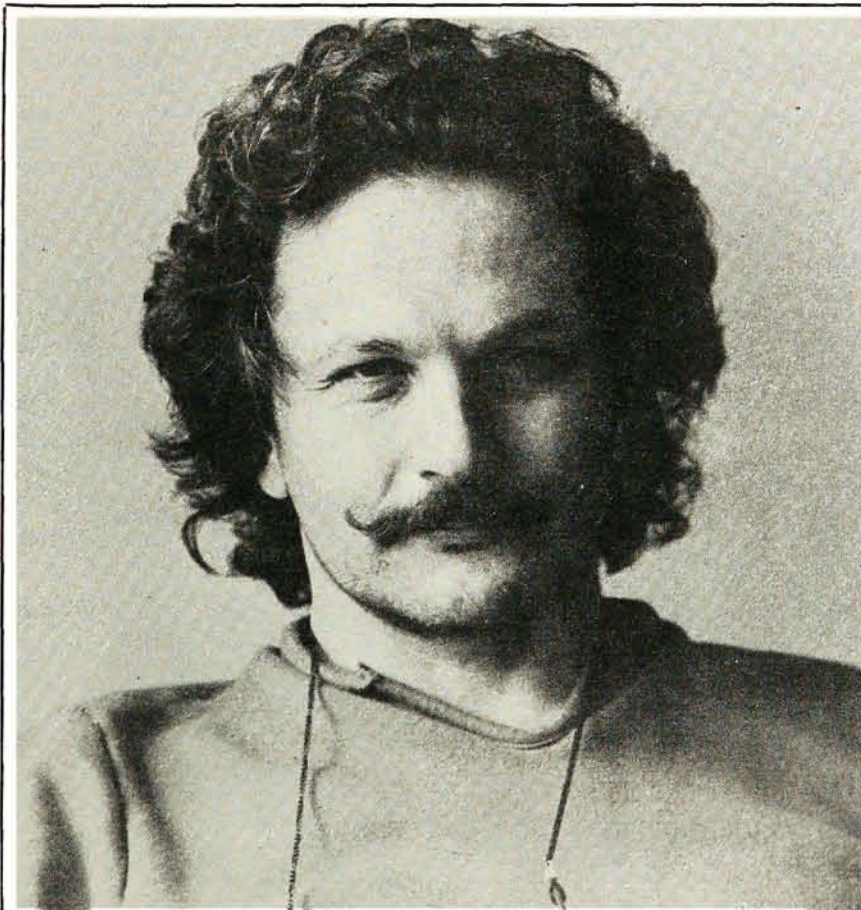
by Barbara Samuels

Sydney - July 11: "The whole setup's a bit like a marriage." Sydneysiders know it as "The Cross," and in strictly technical terms, it doesn't even exist. The place where Darlinghurst, Elizabeth Bay and Potts Point come together provides the setting for the city's red light district, but Times Square this most decidedly is not: the blend of mild-mannered hookers, interesting restaurants and positively posh hotels lends a friendly "PG" rating to the proceedings here. Kings Cross really came into its own in the 1960s, when American GIs on leave from Vietnam stopped in for some "R&R." But locals tell me that things have changed since then, and concrete proof of that lies a literal few steps from the district's main drag.

The Metro Theatre has survived several incarnations in its lifetime; at various moments a cinema, a live theatre and a food market, it has recently shed yet another skin. And is still doing so, from the looks of the exterior: the façade is covered in peeling paint that reads "Food Fair - No Pets." Only a small hand-lettered sign in the doorway brings the visitor up to date.

In purely cosmetic terms, the Metro has probably seen better days. But its current spiritual status would be hard to beat. This is the headquarters of Kennedy Miller Entertainment, a company formed several years ago by a young medical doctor and an aspiring movie producer, and presently the framework for what many have termed the most exciting production setup in the country. The world knows this bunch as the minds behind *Mad Max I and II*, and that fact alone has been enough to turn movie moguls and cinephiles on their respective ears; what is relatively unknown internationally is Kennedy Miller's standing as the premier produ-

The conclusion of an exclusive three-part Cinema Canada special report on the Australian film industry today.



● George Miller has done more for Australian film and TV than anyone or anything

cer of topflight domestic television drama.

That combination is not as strange as it initially seems. When *Mad Max II* (aka *The Road Warrior*) sent international box-office business soaring, the race was on to seduce director George Miller and producer Byron Kennedy into exchanging their Sydney address for one in Los Angeles. But the Australians respectfully declined, opting instead to

purchase the Metro, pursue their own interests, and control the projects from beginning to end. First in line was *The Dismissal*, a six-hour chronicle of the Whitlam Labour government and its startling demise. Produced in 1982, the series was held from broadcast until after the 1983 elections; finally aired in February last year, it created a stir that has not yet entirely subsided. The company had plans for further

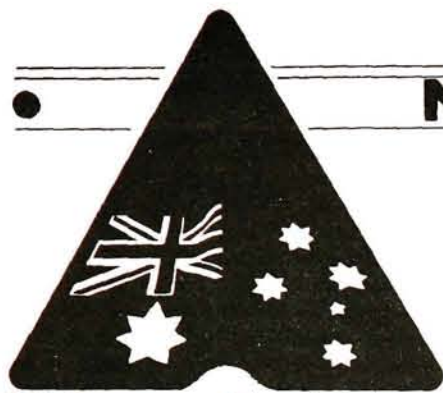
series, but the accidental death of Byron Kennedy in mid-1983 temporarily froze production, and then forced a managerial shuffle. George Miller now shares executive duties with writer producer Terry Hayes and financial manager Doug Mitchell.

As much in tribute to Byron Kennedy as anything else, the company has continued to function in both the television and feature domains. And because of Miller's status as the only first wave "superstar" who's chosen to stay home and keep working, whatever Kennedy Miller turns out is subject to a great deal of scrutiny. The praise has been plentiful. "George Miller," says Australian Film commissioner David Stratton, "has done more for the Australian film and television industry than the Australian Broadcasting Commission has done in all its years of existence." "His contribution in television," says AFC chairman Phillip Adams, "has been magnificent." But the message emanating from the somewhat dilapidated Metro is very clear: this isn't Hollywood, and the cosmetics - either verbal or physical - are not what it's all about.

Those suspicions are reinforced inside the building, where the faded lobby serves as a makeshift reception area, and the whole place exudes a sense of barely contained chaos. The back of the lobby is dominated by a garish, oversized staircase that once led to the mezzanine; now it feeds into an oblivion of corridors crammed with lumber and old furniture, up toward a smaller staircase and across to the only area that the new owners have chosen to renovate. But the executive offices still don't look like L.A.: no carpets on the walls, no inlaid jacuzzis, no hint that revenues have gone anywhere but straight back into production.

The erstwhile doctor is in, and quite possibly more exhausted than he'd be had he stuck to medicine. The company's new 10-hour miniseries *Bodyline* - on which Miller is executive producer - will go to air in a few days, and shooting on a third series is underway downstairs. Over and around all this is the mania of pre-production on *Mad Max*

Cinema Canada contributor Barbara Samuels recently toured Australia at the invitation of the Australian Film Commission.



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*III*, set to roll at the beginning of September. Miller has co-written the script, and will *co-direct* the picture, a fair indication of the brashly unorthodox methodology that his company is now famous for. *Mad Max III* will extend to feature production a formula that's paid off brilliantly in television – an “ensemble” approach to filmmaking in which a group of writer/directors and actors first workshop a project (sometimes without a script) and then produce it *collectively*. This concept originated with *The Dismissal*, when Hayes and Miller decided to guarantee a high standard of performance by hiring theatre and opera director George Ogilvie – until then a man with no television or film experience and now Miller's co-director on *Max* – to take the actors period of preparation. *The Dismissal*'s “lockup” (named after the two week pre-shoot confinement of the actors and writer/directors in a large house) paved the way for what's come to be known as the “Kennedy Miller Method,” and they've applied it to every project they've tackled since. But Miller is uncomfortable with labels; what matters to him is that the system works. It also explains what he's still doing in Sydney when they're offering him the moon and the stars to work in L.A.

“I'm staying with Kennedy Miller – for the time being because as individuals – and collectively as a group – we're all learning much more than we would anywhere else. We can approach the work much more organically. If I was working in the States, I'd tend to be doing one thing: directing. Here it all blurs together – the producing, the writing, the directing. And because we're able to use what we do as a kind of laboratory – particularly the television – it's amazing how much we're all learning from one another.”

He regards the chronology of their television product as a slow “widening out” to the world: “In television, our first market is Australia, but we're broadening that now. *The Dismissal* was obviously domestic, but *Bodyline* is closer to *Chariots of Fire* in its appeal. It's about cricket (specifically an infamous British/Australian series in the 1930s that sparked a new surge of Australian nationalism), but it doesn't really have that much cricket in it. It's much more about people. The 10-hour series starts with the Raj in India at the turn of the century and finishes at World War II, so it follows a lot of lives through a very long period. It's not until Episode Eight that we finally get to the main incident of the title, and it's almost over by then.

“And *Cowra* (the series now in production) will be even more accessible, because you're dealing with World War II and the attempted breakout of Japanese soldiers from a POW camp in New South Wales. It's a symmetrical conflict between Japanese and Australians, and the issue is more apparent, more accessible. So we're moving toward a wider audience.”

Kennedy Miller was directly affected by the change in the 10BA legislation last year – “It was a little disruptive, because we were at the very point of financing *Bodyline* through 10BA” – but he is positive about the long-term effect. “I think it's great. It's tended to make films harder to get off the ground. It's been said a million times, but there were people making films who were skilled at financing, and completely unskilled at assessing a project. I think that perhaps there's half a dozen people in the world who consistently have a feel for what sort of things should be made; there's hardly that many in Australia. So this has hopefully stabilized the industry by stopping the ‘deal’ pictures.”

And as the third chapter of the *Max* saga looms large, Miller senses the ‘let's-see-what-he-can-do-to-top-the-last-one’ sentiment that's snaking through the industry. He chooses to ignore it.

“I hope this is lucky,” he says, “but we've never been motivated to say: ‘OK – What can we do to surpass what we did before?’ It always came from the story. It didn't occur to us to do a *Mad Max II* until the story came along. In fact, quite the opposite: the more people said ‘do one,’ the greater my aversion to the whole idea. We were thinking of another picture altogether when the story popped up. And if you've got a strong story, you've got to tell it. I don't know how *Mad Max III* will compare with the other picture, but I believe it'll be better; I don't think we'd be doing it if we thought we were just repeating ourselves. It's going to be a lot better, in fact, a lot more powerful. But it's going to be different.”

And when *Max* is wrapped and Miller is free again?

“It's basically time to take a break,” he says. “We've got quite a few things brewing, but I haven't stopped since *Mad Max II*. So I'm trying not to think too far ahead.” He closes his eyes in mock-meditation, and then grins suddenly. “There is no life after *Mad Max III*.”

The boss has offered a tour of the premises, and as we approach the former site of the actual theatre, he warns me that “there isn't much to see. We're not really a studio – there's no soundstage down there.” He indicates the *Cowra* set below, now crammed with a full-scale replica of a POW barracks. “It's really just an old movie theatre. And one of the things we've always said is that if the machine starts dictating what we do... if we have to produce product just to keep it going... then we'll close it down. The whole setup's a bit like a marriage, I guess. It's only worthwhile when you can walk away from it at any time.”

This provides food for thought as we reach the top of those incredible stairs again. He gestures around him. “So that's basically it. Offices, that shooting area, and the screening setup here.”

I glance around in confusion. He points to a glassed-in projection booth behind the main landing, and then down at the lobby. “This is where we watch rushes,” he says. “The screen is set up in front down there, and we sit on the stairs.”

The mental image is immediate, terrific. I find myself hoping that this mar-

riage lasts a very long time.

**July 12: “George and I are just making a film together.”**

The man who brought the concept of “workshop” to Kennedy Miller is a soft-spoken 50-year-old who responded to Miller and Hayes' request for a meeting back in 1982 by asking “What on earth do the *Mad Max* people want with me?” Several years later, one is hard-pressed to think what they would do *without* him. George Ogilvie has played a crucial role in every production undertaken by the company since *The Dismissal*, and *Cowra* represents the first project he will not actually take a hand in directing, although he completed an intensive workshop with the cast and creative team several weeks ago. At first glance, Ogilvie's is a phenomenal mid-life turn-around; his directorial work on *The Dismissal* marked the first time he had ever stepped behind a camera, and a few weeks from now, he'll be co-piloting *Mad Max III* with Miller. But his own view of the craft and the situation turns that perception around.

“Before I went into my first television directing experience,” he recalls, “I was terrified. I thought the whole idea was very foolhardy on the part of George and Terry. And then I met (director of photography) Dean Semler, and I thought: ‘I'm not doing this alone – I've got a partner.’ Then I met the rest of the crew, and said ‘It's more than a partnership; it's a company. It's wonderful.’ And during the workshop, I learned more and more from the other directors involved (Miller, Phillip Noyce, Carl Schultz and John Powers) and found I didn't have to know everything. That being a director is just part of the package. No one person makes a film.”

That element of “company” is the hallmark of Ogilvie's approach to the workshop, and he's found – much to his surprise – that the medium of film has brought him closer to the possibility of true collaboration than he'd ever experienced in theatre.

“All my life I'd been searching for an ensemble,” he says. “The ideal in theatre was to have an ensemble group of actors who really worked *together*, with whom you could do anything. I never dreamt that it was easier to do that in film, because one's brought up to believe that film's got to do with stars and all the rest of it. But I found that the possibility of creating an ensemble lay not just with the performers, but with everyone else working on the project as well. It was exciting; I realized that if you made it all interesting enough, every crew member became a willing participant. Most of the workshops thus far included writers, directors and actors, but it's opening up. For *Cowra*, the DOP and various members of the crew turned up.”

Asked to define the process of workshoping, he is very straightforward.

“You're creating a world together. I discovered that a director can actually leave an actor alone with their role – as long as you develop a world in which that actor can live. Then the actor will do the rest of the work for you. I'm reacting against that one-to-one thing, where in fact the director is often making the actor do what he wants him or her to do, rather than bringing out what the actor knows is inside. Instead of just admiring an actor's performance, I want to be absorbed into the world they inhabit. Too often, I find I'm just watching performances, and they stand out because



● Kennedy Miller Entertainment headquarters: “Food fair – no pets”



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the world in which they live is inadequate."

Ogilvie recognizes that the "aura" surrounding the Kennedy Miller approach is potentially damaging, and he's keen to discourage it.

"Workshop can develop into some kind of mystique, when in fact it's the simplest thing in the world. All you're trying to do is free yourself. How else can you get into a situation where we can let our ideas flow? The only way to do that is to empty yourself, to cut out all the bullshit, all the defences... so that any idea becomes a good idea."

The *Mad Max* collaboration has spawned some pointed questions in the press: who's going to do *what*, for instance? And how will Miller's flash-frame visual technique be affected by Ogilvie's approach to performance?

"As far as the nature of the collaboration is concerned," he says, "George and I refuse to define it. We don't want to put ourselves in pockets. People keep saying: 'Yes, but...' There's no 'yes, but...' I feel that the same way *Mad Max I* and *II* had George Miller's stamp on them, so *Mad Max III* will have it as well. And mine too, whatever that may be... I've no idea. I distrust definition intensely. I do not 'direct' a film - not when I'm standing next to a DOP like Dean Semler. And the whole *auteur* theory is such a load of nonsense because it never existed: the best movies are made by everyone. So George and I are just making a film together."

And his sentiments about Kennedy Miller are equally clear.

"It's a unique organization in this country, because they're obsessed with the idea of quality, and they'll do anything to achieve it. The thing about them is their vulnerability. All these theories can be torn apart in moments; the workshop, for example. Somebody comes in, spends 10 seconds knocking it, and you'd have 50 people cringing in a corner. But that's how it should be. You've got to have that vulnerability, that willingness to try things. I suppose that people who don't work here think it's some kind of club. But a lot of people have passed through this building in the last two-and-a-half years, and most of them have found something interesting going on; they've given of themselves, and they've taken things away. It's that feeling established by George, Terry and Byron, like those conversations we used to have: a group of people in this business, and what you sit around and talk about is the meaning of life. It's fairly original."

When you think of *Mad Max II*, it's those mind-blowing vistas that haunt you, the way the desert light plays across the frame. So it's inspiring to learn that when Chapter III is ready to roll, Dean Semler will be back behind the camera.

He's the undisputed portrait painter of the Australian outback; in both *Max* and *Razorback*, it emerges as a palpable screen presence. But Semler won't trip you up with mystic ruminations on the art of the landscape photographer.

"Only problem in shooting that kind of expanse with anamorphic lenses is keeping the catering truck out of the shot," he says. "You can't really control the light at all. You're dealing with lots of it, and endless horizon lines... that area up around Broken Hill is perfect anamorphic landscape. I've shot television commercials here, and it was as though you had one eye gouged out. The

land opens up to a perfect anamorphic frame. And given that in *Mad Max II*, the cars and trucks are all anamorphic shapes, there wasn't any problem. But you've got no control over light, except up and down exposure and filtering. I only filtered a bit on *Max*; most of it is absolutely straight. *Razorback's* got a lot more... it's a little more stylized than *Max*."

The visuals of *Razorback* are the picture's spine, but Semler is quick to accord a great deal of credit for the film's look to director Russell Mulcahy.

"I learned an awful lot from him on that picture. I hadn't worked with anyone like that before. The rock clip experience he's had has obviously left him with a totally open mind as far as

the colour of light or anything like that is concerned. Which is pretty opposed to conventional drama, where you've got all the rules and you try to make things logical: there's a window, so the light can come through there. Well, who gives a monkey where the light comes from? If it looks better coming from a beaker, let's do it. And that's Russell. I learned a lot from him about boldness. Towards the end of the picture, we were gelling a lot... Russell wanted backlight, so I'd put in arcs for the job, and if we had lasers, we'd use them too. Didn't matter where they came from. He was really a delight to work with."

Semler is a bit confused by the "stylized" tag that dogs him internationally - "I don't quite understand it," he says,

"because *Mad Max* and *Razorback* are only two pictures. Eighteen months out of my five years' freelance work. What about all the other stuff?"

And the other "stuff" is quite remarkable. Starting his career in South Australian television, he went from news foot-

## Australian independents More love than money

The output of Australia's commercial film industry in recent years has been more than impressive, considering the country's population and financial base. Equally impressive, and just now attracting attention in the United Kingdom and North America, is the product from the independent side of the film community. Recent films like *On Guard* and *For Love or Money*, both of which come out of the independent-feminist sector, will be appearing or have already appeared in Canadian festivals this year.

The way independent filmmakers see it, there is a radical split between the commercial side, or what they call the "industry," and the independent side, unaligned filmmakers who produce low-budget subjects on social and political subjects. Most of the women filmmakers have allied themselves with the latter.

Australian independent filmmaking is, in fact, older than its commercial counterpart and has already seen a lot of changes. In the late '60s, some five years before the founding of the Australia Film and TV School and the creation of the Australian Film Development Corporation, a handful of experimental film artists banded together to form Ubu Films, a screening and distribution outlet for their own work. With the intent of taking a stand against foreign domination and government control over content and subject matter, they dedicated their organization to free expression in the cinema and development of an indigenous film culture. The product at that time was for the most part short experimental films and a few ethnographic documentaries. In 1971 Ubu Films acquired a constitution and a new name - the Sydney Filmmakers Co-op - and it geared its energies to exhibition and distribution of the films produced by its members. In the early '70s the independents abandoned formal abstraction and started to work on political themes, addressing issues such as nuclear disarmament, Aboriginal culture, the status of women and youth unemployment. Women filmmakers form an important component and at one time the Co-op itself was predominantly feminist in political outlook.

Today Co-op membership includes workers from all aspects of film production and it has become the nerve centre of the independent commu-

nity. Serving first and foremost as a distribution outlet for its members' works and, owing to its historical role as community centre, it is now the largest single distributor of non-commercial films in the country.

Alternative films may not be big money-makers but they are consistently in demand. Domestic outlets have been non-theatrical and non-commercial, through schools, universities, community groups and the Co-op's own outreach program. During the educational boom in the '70s, sales to colleges and universities made for financial expansion of the Co-op and the independent sector generally. However, both private and public television have remained indifferent, and although rentals are still going strong, recent cuts in funding for education have resulted in a reduction in sales to that sector. Lately the Co-op has had to face the prospect of cutting its staff and simultaneously finding new avenues; in collaboration with the AFC officers in Los Angeles and London, it has also moved into overseas sales.

Though the AFC is in theory committed to the production of low-budget independent films, since its direction has been turned over to big-money managers from the private sector, independent filmmakers find themselves increasingly marginalized. According to Megan McMurchy, co-producer and co-director of *For Love Or Money*, the fight to maintain a consistent level of funding has become an annual battle. "Every year the AFC directors have to be reminded of the importance of independent, non-commercial productions," she said recently in Montreal for the Festival du nouveau cinema.

McMurchy is herself in the vanguard of what promises to be a new phase for Australian independents. In the past two years, the women independents have altered the traditional pattern and set a precedent for non-industry production. The classic way to proceed has been to make short documentary subjects on money from AFC Creative Development or the Women's Film Fund and then to distribute them through the Co-op to non-theatrical domestic outlets. But the makers of *On Guard* and *For Love Or Money* have broken with that pattern and threaten to close the commercial gap.

*On Guard* makes a notable incursion into the world of film fiction; it

is described by its authors as a "feminist heist film" and uses a thriller format. Perhaps because it runs counter to the documentary tradition, the film was rejected by the Sydney Filmmakers Co-op and picked up instead by one of the small independent distribution companies. Its unusual beginnings led to unusual ends: although only 50 minutes in length, it opened first-run in a small commercial cinema in Sydney and was later picked up by Women Make Movies in the U.S.

Its unprecedented success gave a leg up to *For Love Or Money*, then still in preparation, as McMurchy has it, "*On Guard* raised the profile of feminist film production in Australia." The original plans put *For Love Or Money* at 50 minutes' running time - the film documents the labour history of women in Australia using contemporary archival materials, film clips, stills and quotes - but the film grew to feature length when it attracted funding from the AFC Project Development Fund, usually the preserve of the commercial industry. Its producers also received \$50,000 from the Marketing Branch for worldwide promotion.

*For Love Or Money's* publicity campaign also represents a departure. Its producers were courted for the domestic rights by both the Co-op and an independent distributor with a sideline in publicity. Instead of going with one or the other, they struck a compromise that gave the indie distributor a contract to do commercial publicity. The specially-designed campaign resulted in a first-run opening in non-mainstream houses across the country.

The success story of *On Guard* and *For Love Or Money* provides an interesting parallel to the career of Australia's industry films in recent years, demonstrating that "alternative" does not have to mean "low-interest." The two films have gone on to attract the attention of distributors in the United Kingdom and North America and have already been shown through festival and non-theatrical outlets in both regions, with a growing reputation among women's groups. Incidentally, both films are slated to show at *Through Her Eyes*, a women's festival to be held in late November at Toronto's Harbourfront.



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age to documentaries. During his nine years at Film Australia, he went on to run the production gamut: features, telefilms, documentaries, cinema shorts and ethnographic films, "which I think I loved the best. It's beautiful just doing raw film like that with a small crew. And you don't do that kind of work anywhere else but at Film Australia." He also shot the exquisite documentary *Stepping Out*, and acted as director/cameraman on a lyrical little film called *Saturday*. His other feature credits include *Under Cover* and *Kitty and the Bagman*. In his own words, he has "pretty much done the whole circle," but in a rather non-traditional fashion.

"I envy the guys who trained under lighting cameramen, whether good or bad; they learned all the basic tricks. Ways to do things, how to cut light. I never did that. There are several 'non-trained' cameramen like me in Australia, and I guess the difference shows when you go into a new situation - there are no rules. You do what you like, and there's probably a lack of fear because you don't know the rules. You learn as you go along: how to get rid of a boom shadow, how to make someone look 20 years younger. The last picture I did - *The Coca Cola Kid* - well, I was learning every day on that. Stocks are changing, lenses and lights are changing all the time. You've got to stay flexible."

Semler's work has made waves in Hollywood, and some offers have come his way - all to be turned back by the American union. Having made the trip over to take a look, he's not entirely sure that's a bad thing.

"It's got to be different from working in Australia," he says. "There's a fair amount of tension over there that doesn't exist here, and I think there'd be a lot more pressure on the DOP: a lot more asked, a lot more responsibility. I'd never say no if the work was offered and it was interesting, and there was a way to work it out. But I spoke to some producers, and they said 'Yup, well over here we place the DP right at the top, and the director and producer come underneath.' I thought: 'Shit, what do they want in return for that?'"

He won't have to sweat the question out for a while; *Max* rolls Sept. 10 and goes right through until Christmas.

### July 13: "Everyone knows they're talking about the same thing."

"Kennedy Miller," says Carl Schultz, "is the hottest show in town."

We are several districts removed from the Cross, at a place called Film Business where Schultz is preparing a commercial. But his thoughts wander back to the Metro Theatre, where he directed two episodes of *The Dismissal* and a full half of the 10-hour *Bodyline*.

"What happened over there," he says, "marks the first time that filmmakers got together to make a series. We worked

together from conception to completion, and the result is a combined effort. Generally in film, you're working out on a limb; here you've got the strength of people around you. There's no room for egos; people who worked with us and tried to extend their egos fell by the wayside. By involving everyone in the project you only gain, and you finish with a more consistent performance from the actors. There's still lots of room for individuality, but everyone knows they're all talking about the same thing."

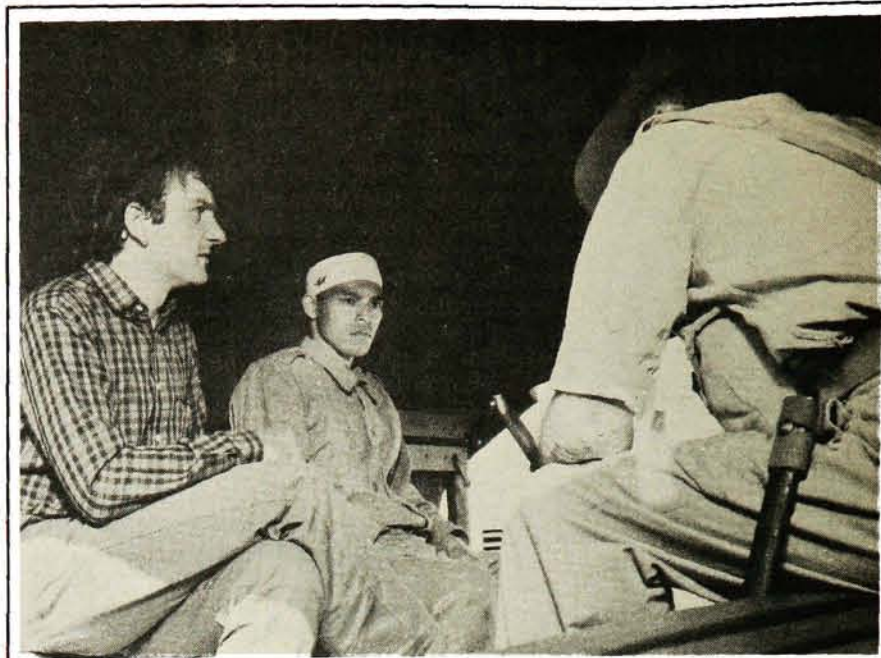
Schultz is enthusiastic about the new series. "I'm very happy with what I've seen of it. The initial subject didn't interest me in the least; to me, cricket is a little insect that makes a lot of noise. So it wasn't love of the sport that caught me up. It's a human story, dealing with the political stance of Australia and England, a very human drama."

In this country of cricket maniacs, Schultz's disdain for the national pastime is a dead giveaway. Born in Hungary, he emigrated to Australia after the 1956 revolution, and arrived with dreams of studying electronic engineering. Quite by accident, he fell into television production, and soon garnered a solid reputation at the Australian Broadcasting Commission as a dramatic director. His two first theatrical features (*Blue Fin* and *Goodbye Paradise*) went largely unnoticed outside Australia; his third most assuredly has not.

"A friend of mine was writing the screenplay for *Careful, He Might Hear You*, and I found out that Jill Robb had the rights. She asked me to direct it, I made certain suggestions, and the picture came to me about nine months before it actually got made."

The visual sweep and tone of the movie is absolutely overwhelming, and Schultz acknowledges that this approach to the imagery was very much part of the game plan. "We decided that the film had to be made from the child's perspective: everything over-emphasized. Sharper, clearer... to bring out that feeling you have when you're a kid, that a summer afternoon lasts forever. We wanted to have that literal sense of the world being beautiful and threatening at the same time, to emphasize the physical relation of things. That was part of the reason we decided to go anamorphic."

*Careful, He Might Hear You* is pivoted on the performance of seven-year-old Nicholas Gledhill, who radiates an eerily



● Co-director Chris Noonan discussing a vital scene during filming of *Cowra* series

beautiful screen presence. Schultz says that the child is, in fact, as remarkable as he seems.

"He's frighteningly intelligent. So you tend to speak to him as though he was a professor of languages, or something. You find yourself using words you don't know the meaning of. He made you forget he was just seven. Intellectually, he was very sharp, very observant, but he had the physical limitations of a child: a short attention span, and a tendency to get emotionally distraught if he thought things weren't going absolutely right. He's a perfectionist."

Schultz knows he's been tagged as a "European filmmaker," and he shrugs it off. "I'm not aligned to Europe in any way other than the fact of my having been born there. That background's made me richer. But I'm an Australian filmmaker; all my working life's been spent in this country, and I consider myself very much a part of its society. What my past may have given me is a slightly sharper view of this place than someone who's always lived here might have, and that's fine. But I'm not struggling to hold on to more of my 'Europeanness' than what's already there."

He fully understands the need of Australian filmmakers to plumb indigenous subject matter like *The Dismissal* and *Bodyline*; what's more, he thinks it's healthy.

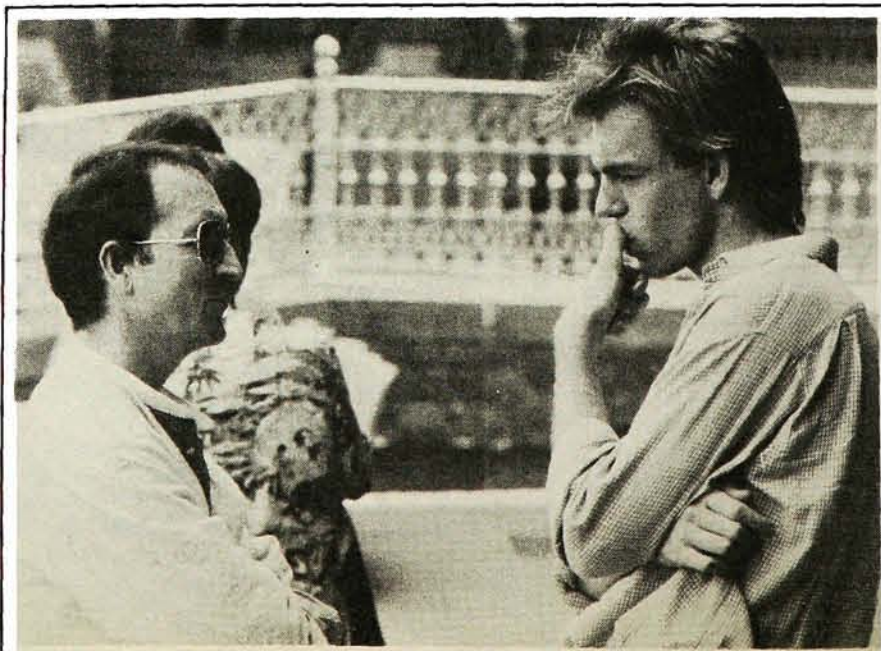
"You have to explore those subjects before you go on to anything else, even if they're not readily marketable internationally. If you're an Australian and live with the country's relatively short history, you have to examine it before you go on. There's been this desperate need in Australian filmmakers to find the true Australian character. Not to say you will, but the need to explore the possibilities is strong and real, and it's got to be filled."

### July 14: "I really don't mind where I work."

The lobby at Kennedy Miller is somewhat transformed this day; the *Cowra* shoot is in full swing, and in these definitely non-soundproofed surroundings, a warning bell rings intermittently to demand absolute silence during takes. The area is crammed with Japanese extras in POW uniforms, and they sip coffee wordlessly until another ring of the bell frees up abbreviated conversations. The *Cowra* production offices lie at the back end of the Metro, and it's a navigational nightmare through a combination of bodies and lumber to find them. But the *sound* finally pinpoints the location: the blend of Japanese and English reaches my ears before I round the bend to Phil Noyce's office.

He is one of two writer/directors on the series: the 10 hours have been evenly divided between Noyce and Chris Noonan. Of the two men, Noyce is probably the better-known. An important figure in the Australian first wave, his feature *Newsfront* is widely regarded as one of the definitive Australian films of the 1970s. He is also a graduate of that stellar first year at the Australian Film & Television School (AFTS), and his feature credits (*Backroads*, *Newsfront* and *Heatwave*) testify to his extraordinary range. The fact that the funding for *Umbrella Woman* (a feature he was supposed to shoot last year starring Judy Davis) fell through is strong proof that filmic track records didn't account for much here in 1983.

But the feature world's loss was Kennedy Miller's gain. The cancellation of *Umbrella Woman* brought Noyce to *Cowra*, and back to the setup he had so enjoyed during *The Dismissal*. And neither was that series his first encounter with Kennedy and Miller.



● Carl Schultz with actor Hugo Weaving on the set of *Bodyline*



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● Mel Gibson as Mad Max in George Miller's world-wide hit *The Road Warrior*

"I first met them during a one-month workshop I helped give in Melbourne," he recalls. "In my group of eight or 10 students was George Miller, a trainee doctor from the University of New South Wales, and he'd won a prize for the best 30-second student film. The prize was the trip to this workshop. Byron Kennedy was also there; he'd won a prize for one of the best amateur 8mm films in the country. I taught them how to load a camera, and they had to go out and shoot a film. George and Byron came back with this *completed* film; all you had to do was cut out the flash frame at the head of each shot, and the whole film was right there."

Years later, the group came together again for *The Dismissal*, and the project's collaborative aspect had a profound impact on Noyce's view of the whole filmmaking process. "I thought we were in for a giant ego struggle," he says. "But, to my surprise, the whole thing turned out to be very harmonious. It was the first time any of us had really had a chance to watch someone *direct*, and we all learned from it."

Production of *Cowra* is proceeding in the same harmonious atmosphere, and Noyce is excited about the way the project has evolved.

"When I started on it - in April of 1983 - it was just an idea. Since then, we've been to Japan twice, researched the whole thing and written 10 scripts. Now we're finally shooting. I'm splitting the episodes with Chris: he's odd and I'm even. It's basically a development of the theory that George and Byron had - that film is an organic process, and that it shouldn't be split up into boxes holding a writer, or producer or director. All you have is *filmmakers*. As directors, we direct on set, but along with Margaret Kelly, we've conceived the whole thing, and written extensively. Margaret is Creative Producer now, responsible for the day-to-day running of the thing."

The Australian television boom makes perfect sense to Noyce, who isn't interested in holding out for a widescreen epic.

"One of the things I remember Byron saying was that the Australian film industry should essentially be a television industry. I think he was right. We only have 15 million people, and with the decreasing backup for theatrical films, there's not enough to support a large theatrical industry. On the other hand, there are three commercial networks, and the key to their ratings is Australian

product. The network that doesn't have Australian drama comes third in the ratings.

"I also think that the only thing keeping the television industry from 'respectability' is the ego of filmmakers, along with the mystique that's associated with cinema. Worldwide, television reaches more people, so you could really say it's more important. Standards of production haven't been as high, but if you take the audience's point of view, it's really the more important medium. Once there's a genuine body of criticism written about television product, filmmakers will probably change their minds and start taking it seriously. As far as I'm concerned, I really don't mind where I work."

Round the corner on the *Cowra* set, Chris Noonan is blocking a major scene in the barracks. The Japanese POWs have apparently decided to alleviate the boredom of incarceration by staging a show; they've set up a platform and a wooden backdrop painted with delicate cherry blossoms. A few of the prisoners assemble into a small orchestra. Director of Photography Jeff Burton stands by as Noonan explains what he wants to the production's translator; he in turn transmits the directions to the perfor-

mers. But amazingly few words are required here. This rehearsal scene intensifies the impression I've had all day; George Ogilvie's touch lingers in the air, because everyone here actually seems to be on the same *wavelength*. Language is practically inconsequential.

The *Cowra* set is unique, in both mood and intensity. There have been a few scenes today featuring moments of emotional fireworks; characters explode at one another in angry Japanese, and you find you can follow the story *despite* the particulars of the dialogue. That's very much the case right now. As the AD calls for a run-through, people materialize from all over the building; secretaries, carpenters, electricians, producers. Word of this scene has travelled fast, and the perimeter of the set is soon crowded with onlookers.

When Noonan signals action, one of the actors leaps up onto the stage and addresses the assembly of prisoners. The men's laughter and impatience reaches a crescendo as an exquisite geisha appears from behind the cherry-blossomed panel, her face hidden behind an enamelled fan. The men howl, stamp their feet in glee - the man on stage signals the band, and the girl moves to the music with delicate, mincing steps. One of the prisoners bounces from the audience and onto the stage, where he makes lewd advances toward the dancer. She seems unflustered, finishes her performance, and dances off as the men clap in hysterical appreciation.

The sound is suddenly replicated all around the set as the crowd of spectators breaks into applause. The actors turn to acknowledge the response, and I'm still trying to figure out what the hell a Japanese woman is doing in an Australian POW camp when the geisha appears again and crosses directly in front of me.

Under the makeup, I see a slender young man.

Chris Noonan is elated. The fears he harboured before the shoot - and he freely admits they were numerous - have evaporated.

"One of my greatest worries was that we wouldn't be able to judge performance, and we still can't judge whether people are delivering their lines right. But we're working with a fabulous linguist, the interpreter, and he's just bril-



● John Meillon as Australian governor-general Sir John Kerr in *The Dismissal*

liant. He's also a great judge of performance. But both Phil and I have found that you can gauge the emotional intensity of a performance despite the language; you just hook into it at a non-verbal level. And you really *can* tell."

What is immediately apparent to an outside observer is the naturalness of performance here, diametrically opposed to the stylized *tours de force* one has traditionally seen in Japanese theatre and film. Noonan traces it back to the workshop.

"We talked to the Japanese actors for a long time about the kind of naturalism we were aiming for, which is an unusual approach in Japan. But we've had two weeks of workshopping with them, trying to define just what that naturalistic approach is, and I think the performances reflect it. The test will come when the series is screened for a Japanese audience. But these people are extraordinarily dedicated as actors, and it may have something to do with the fact that they're in a foreign country, and they don't have other lives to go home to at night. When you're using local actors, they've got their normal day-to-day concerns, but these guys will stay up until three in the morning discussing scripts. It's phenomenal."

What about the beautiful geisha, I want to know. Did the boy under the makeup train extensively in kabuki theatre?

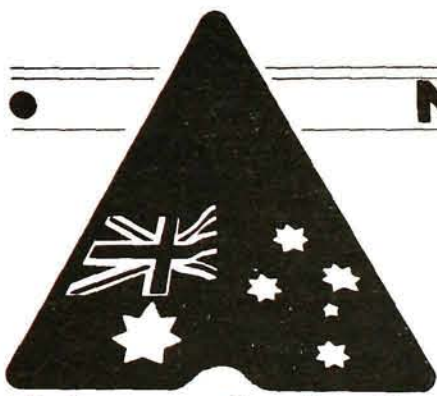
Noonan bursts out laughing.

"That kid lives in Sydney," he says. "Never done anything like this in his life. One of the other Japanese actors in the cast is a professional dancer, though, and he spent two weeks training our guy. Got him to walk with a phone book between his knees. It's absolutely extraordinary how well he picked the movements up."

*Cowra* is Noonan's first large-scale dramatic project, and it couldn't have happened to a nicer guy. A gentle, soft-spoken young man, he is best known internationally as a documentarian; his superb, evocative *Stepping Out* has won emotional plaudits right around the world. He's another product of the AFTS Year One, and his graduation piece there was a 35mm anamorphic short called *Bulls*. It was on the basis of that film that George Miller proposed him for *Cowra*. Noonan also spent several years at Film Australia, and left the organization to make *Stepping Out*; now he'd like to concentrate on drama.

"It's ironic," he says. "Right now, a lot of big-name directors are looking for a television break in order to make something of quality. And I end up landing the television job first as a step toward a career in dramatic film. Shows you how things turn around."

He's watching *Cowra* take form in the cutting room, and what he's seen reinforces his initial feelings: "The whole thing looks like it's very much on track. Now you can see great slabs of the series coming together - it's like watching a jigsaw puzzle begin to make sense. I hope this doesn't make us overly sure of



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ourselves, but I'm awfully happy with what's happening."

He suggests I return for rushes tomorrow.

You betcha.

### July 15: "Nationalists can't produce anything."

The critical previews of *Bodyline* are spilling out into the papers.

"Ten Hours of Crash Hot TV," says *The Australian*. *The Sunday Telegraph* addresses the network itself: "Well played, Ten! Cricket Series Will Bowl Over Viewers." And the weekly *Bulletin* headlines with: "*Bodyline*: It's Not Just Cricket." *The Sydney Morning Herald* devotes the front page of their weekly entertainment guide to the series, and so it goes. On and on... and on.

Message received.

The harbour view offered by the 25th floor of Sydney's Regent Hotel is a stunner, and Dusan Makavejev is impressed.

"This city is truly breathtaking," he remarks. "Just look at that. The Opera House, the Harbour Bridge. With a little courage, it could be one of the most beautiful places on earth."

One does sense some reservation there. Makavejev has been in Australia for some time now, one of the few foreign directors in years to make a film in this country. The circumstances, he says, have not been the happiest; *The Coca Cola Kid* (his first feature since *Montenegro*) is an Australian-financed movie, but there has been some negative reaction within the community to his presence here. Makavejev is both puzzled and angered by the sentiment.

"I think the attitude of excluding foreign directors is stupid. Legally, they can claim some legitimacy for that stand; the tax deductible money is supposed to stimulate national production. But the Australians don't seem to realize that the world is all one big thing, not a collection of separate places."

The new picture - detailing the efforts of a brash American salesman to bring Coca Cola to the Australian outback - stars Eric Roberts, and is, according to Makavejev, "inherently Australian. And its international aspect gives it a very special flavour. There's no such thing as 'national' art anywhere; nationalists can't produce anything. Foreign talent makes for a cross-fertilization of ideas, like what happened in France. That country's great strength is that it's a wonderful cultural manipulator. All the Spanish filmmakers, the Brazilians, the painters, the writers... the place is open to everyone. And French culture is blooming. Paris is full of good art, and you get government support for all of it. So everybody benefits, especially French culture and the French economy."

Despite his reservations, he is enthu-

siastic about the Australian film community and its potential. "Look," he says, "I couldn't resist coming here. And I had a wonderful Australian cast... first-class actors. The crew was super - they worked from the heart. And I'd like to think that what they've got going here will be able to flourish. That kind of assurance only comes with open borders. Once you close them, the people inside start dying. And that," he intones, "would be a goddammed shame."

Back in the *Cowra* offices, Margaret Kelley reflects on the work ahead of her.

"I've still got four episodes to rewrite," she says, "and we're well into the shooting. I've been writing for a year now, and I'm getting really tired. I asked at the beginning: 'How many writers are you going to have?' and they said 'Four or five.' I said fine. We started shooting, and now I'm the only writer left because Chris is directing. It's a nightmare, because I want to spend more time as Creative Producer." She sighs, and then shakes her head. "But then you sit there at rushes, and you just get a thrill down your spine. They are so good."

Kelly came to *Cowra* at Phil Noyce's invitation; an award-winning writer, she'd been working in television drama for some 20 years, and moved into producing with *Puberty Blues*. When *Umbrella Woman* fell through on her

last year and Kennedy Miller offered the *Cowra* job, she accepted because "I was absolutely intrigued by the subject. It was so challenging; everyone wanted to make an anti-war statement. I feel a small twinge of guilt, because if I'd been out there this year, I might have gotten my film off the ground. I hate to go on record saying this, but I will: I think this is a much more important subject, and will reach a lot more people than the film I was trying to make."

As one of the few 'female presences' in the Kennedy Miller hierarchy, Kelly has been asked on more than one occasion as to whether the company's tradition of "boy's own" stories disturbs her. She is quick to respond.

"I honestly believe that the guys here are inherently not sexist. They are boys, and they're interested in boys' subjects. I get on really well with them, and they obviously like what I do because they made me Creative Producer on this project. And when I find a little sexism here, I point it out - they listen, they laugh, but they do take notice. They're very aware that this criticism has been levelled at them, and they did look seriously at a project that involved only women. They threw it up to me, in fact. I think if I'd really loved it, we would have had a go at it. I'm a very strong feminist, but in my work, I'm interested in making the best project possible. And if it happens to only have men in it, then I'm sorry. *Cowra*'s a war story, and women

weren't involved in war at this level. I can't bring myself to make a project that I think is inferior just because it features women. And I'll probably have a lot of criticism fired at me for that."

Her overall response to the organization?

"More power to them. They've managed to work through a very difficult time; they survived the death of Byron, and they've kept producing." She stops, and then cracks a little smile. "At the moment, I think they're God."

The bells are ringing again, this time to summon all and sundry to the rushes. That staircase is soon full of people; cast and crew, Kennedy Miller support staff, interested visitors. The lights go down and the screening begins, footage from yesterday's shoot.

The 16mm images are suffused with Jeff Burton's cold, edgy daylight, and in closeup, the Japanese actors are electrifying; their performances are rivetting and incredibly subtle. An apparently amusing line read sends the Japanese half of the audience off into helpless laughter, and the Australians look at each other with bemused grins on their faces. An Aussie actor's goof a moment later reverses the response. The whole occasion is one of those rare moments when potential onset is transformed into real fire on screen, and it's a genuine pleasure to see it happen here.

From the evidence on view at the foot of that remarkable staircase, *Cowra* should be one spectacular series. From the evidence at hand, *Cowra* will be one very special series.

### July 16: Goodbye to all that.

I haven't spent much time in local drinking establishments since my arrival, and it's been suggested that I've bypassed the most significant expression of Australian culture in existence. So I do manage one last visit to a Sydney pub, and find the place strangely quiet for a Monday night. It seems the watering holes and even the streets are virtually empty by 7 p.m.; if drinks were had this evening, they were tossed back early enough to get patrons home for the premiere episode of *Bodyline*. "All roads should lead to the box tonight," says the *Sydney Morning Herald*. All but the route followed by Qantas Flight 3 en route to San Francisco. As the saga of cricket and national pride bows with a three-hour opener, Sydney disappears below me in a swirl of winter rain clouds.

So what does one come away with? The feeling that when it's all said and done they're going to be just fine. The impetus for making movies in this country didn't begin or end with a tax incentive, nor will it, I suspect, in the days, months and years to come. Deals, politics and diatribes aside, there are still people making magic down there.

Good on ya, Oz.

My thanks to all who made the Australian story possible, and in particular to Kay Matthews and Ian Klava of the AFC, Helen Sweeny of the Queensland Film Corporation, Rea Francis, Jan Batten and, most of all, to Mike Lynskey. A very special debt of gratitude to Mike Harris.



● Wendy Hughes, Nicholas Gledhill and Robyn Nevin in *Careful He Might Hear You*