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PRODUCING *A TOWN LIKE ALICE* AN INTERVIEW WITH HENRY CRAWFORD © Scott McConnell

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Henry Crawford is an eminent Australian TV producer with more than 600 hours of drama production credits. He produced three of the four most watched dramas broadcast on Australian television in the 20th Century and was one of the first producers of the mini-series format. His mini-series *A Town Like Alice* won an International Emmy for best mini-series and many other awards.

Henry talked with Scott McConnell about his career and *A Town Like Alice*.

CREATING THE PROJECT

S: Please summarize your producing career before *A Town Like Alice* (ATLA) in 1981.

H: I had worked for Crawford Productions, who were the pioneers of Australian television. I was there ten years, and—because I was distant family—they put me through every part of the company: from assistant director to editing, all sorts of things, you name it. That's where I learned the business. I ended up producing over 500 hours for them.

S: What shows did you produce for Crawfords?

H: Early cop shows like *Homicide*, *Matlock Police*. One of the last shows I mounted for them was *The Sullivans*, which was a period piece set in the Second World War, as was *Alice*. We were required to produce five half-hours a week, which was a 6-day working schedule and two crews, lots of interiors, and the lead actors would have to record twenty to thirty scenes in a day. So it was tremendously high-pressure volume. Crawfords wanted to branch off more into more soaps because they were cheaper to make, so I left. But they asked me to come back, and I did a couple more jobs for them. I produced a series about a vet called *Young Ramsay*. I revamped a concept of that and I put that together for them. It was 39 hours.

Then Ian Jones and his lovely late wife, Bronwyn Binns, asked me to produce a mini-series called *Against the Wind* for the Seven Network. Actually this was one of the first mini-series in the world. It was 13 hours made on a princely budget of about \$75,000 per hour, so we had to scrimp and save and do all sorts of clever things to make it work. Ian was exceedingly clever at masterminding how we could achieve some things and wrote to accommodate. It was one of the highest-rated Australian programs of the 20th century. And on that basis, the Seven Network put up their hand when I wanted to produce *Alice*.

S: How did you conceive the idea for the ATLA series based on the Nevil Shute novel?

H: I remembered it really well from when I was a kid. I used to listen to *Alice* on the radio – actually it was a crystal set I made incorporating ex-army earphones. I also read the serialised version in *Women's Weekly*. I always loved the story. But I had never seen the 1956 feature film with Virginia McKenna and Peter Finch because we lived in the bush and didn't have movies. I had a quick look

the film before I made the TV series, just to see what they covered and didn't cover. In fact they only covered about one-third of the story in the novel. The old lawyer, Noel, hardly existed in the feature film.

S: What was it as a kid that you loved about *ATLA*?

H: It was a great yarn and Shute was a master of the story.

S: You could have done a thousand different projects, why *ATLA*?

H: Well you have an idea in the dead of night and your toes curl up, and you try and get a lot of things going. I probably had half a dozen ideas around that time but only one got off the ground. This one.

As a producer, you invest a lot of money and frankly waste a lot of time working on projects that never see the light of day, even though you think they're pretty good at the time. *ATLA* was one of those that got traction.

My impetus to do *Alice* was from my business partner, David Stevens. David, over drinks one night, said, "What about *A Town Like Alice*?" I said, "I always loved that story but I'm sure the rights aren't available." Then I said, "Well, wait a minute. Why don't we just inquire about the rights and see if they are?"

I approached the A P Watt literary agency and they came back and said that no, the rights were not available. That was on the basis of a film having been made in 1956. Not deterred, I went back to them, and I said, "Let's be specific. I'm interested only in the television rights, not in feature film rights." And they came back and said, "Oh, television rights would be available." So we purchased the rights, and it went from there.

So it was really the fact that David triggered something that was in my mind that pushed it onwards.

S: What was your deal with the rights holders of *A Town Like Alice*?

H: To develop a television mini-series. It was limited to that. It was for twenty years. That's the way they protected it.

S: Did you work with the Shute estate? Did they have any control?

H: None whatsoever. Only insofar as purchasing the rights. They had no input whatsoever on the creative side.

S: What did you think of Nevil Shute as a writer?

H: I think Shute was one of the ultimate story-tellers in Australia. He seemed to have the knack, in his period, of his stories capturing the imagination of people. Hollywood did *On the Beach* as a movie.

S: Tell me more about David Stevens.

H: We had worked together for many years at Crawfords, and he was a director at Crawfords, and I actually started his writing career there, when I was a story editor. He was a very, very creative director that actors loved working with because he was one of the few in Australia who had come out of British theatre and so was able to relate very well to performance. So that was a lovely relationship we had. He was also very committed and an important part of the cog of *ATLA*.

S: Let's step back a bit before we get to the actual producing work you did on *ATLA*. What is a producer and what were the many jobs that you had to do as a producer?

H: Basically everyone works for the producer. The producer employs everybody from the director to the actors to post-production and makes all the decisions. In my case, I'm what's described as a "creative producer." There are other producers who are deal-making producers, and I'm not very good at that, but I'm very good at the creative side, so that's the track that I go down. As the producer, I'm the common denominator, from the original idea to getting the thing on screen. In the case of *Alice*, from the original idea to getting it on the air was about six years of work. It was quite a painful exercise.

The role of the producer is rather comparable with being the conductor of an orchestra. You have to know the playing limitations of each of the instruments, but you don't have to actually play the instrument.

What you have to understand is how the conductor can make that piece of music pleasing to the ear and to the eyes. So in the dramas I've produced, I've always lived by the notion that the audience should leave with a smile on their face and a tear in their eye. That's what we aim for.

S: What was the next step after you purchased the rights to *Alice*?

H: I had made *Against the Wind*, a big historical drama series set during Australia's colonial period, for \$75 thousand per hour and then we did *Alice* for \$200 thousand an hour, so *Alice* was a really huge jump.

What really helped was that the executives at the Seven Network in Melbourne were very on-side and very committed to doing Australian drama. The Melbourne station was run by Ron Casey, the program manager was Gary Fenton. Gary, to my way of thinking, is the great unsung hero as far as Australian television drama is concerned, because he was a tremendous supporter of it. This has never been recognized, and it gives me the shits a bit.

FINANCE

S: What was the next challenge?

H: Our next major hurdle was the funding. Because funding was hard to find in those days, I travelled the world seeking money in addition to what the Seven Network had given us. In America they said, "Well, we'll give you money for it on condition you have David Soul play the Australian Outback character."

At the BBC, the head of television series was quite rude to me: "I'd rue the day that I ever see Australian television on the BBC."

Eventually, it was the overseas division of the BBC, run by Gunnar Rugheimer, who said, “Yes, we’d be interested in acquiring the rights in advance for British television.” This gave them the right to look at the cut first, nothing more than this at that stage. The BBC said they would give substantial money if their directorial choice was appointed. Now David Stevens [who was attached as director] was my business partner on *Alice*. That was part of the reason that we pulled away from the BBC.

So channel Seven ended up owning about 40 percent of the series. And we had some money from Film Victoria and the Australian Film Commission, as it was then. And we had that small pre-sale money from the BBC.

That left us with about three weeks before filming in Malaysia, and we were about \$150,000 short. My then father-in-law, Gordon Darling, said, “I’ll give you the money.” It was his generosity that saved the production. Gordon, incidentally, was founder and patron of the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra. He died recently, in his 90’s.

They were difficult and uncertain times.

S: What was the final budget?

H: We actually made it for \$1.25 million, which then was quite remarkable, since it was a 16 week shoot in three countries. We filmed Scotland in New Zealand. We filmed Alice Springs in Broken Hill (Australia), and we filmed the Asian scenes and the Great Barrier Reef scenes in Malaysia on an island called Langkawi.

S: What was the state of mini-series in Australia at this time?

H: I like to think that I opened doors. *Against the Wind* was really one of the first mini-series in the world and it pretty much launched the format. The stations found Australian audiences watched it. In my experience with *The Sullivans* and *Against the Wind*, Australians were interested in new aspects of their history that they hadn’t seen before. If you can provide an emotionally involving story as the core of one of those history periods, I think it puts you in good commercial shape.

S: What was the landscape of the Australian TV-film industry in 1980-81? I believe *ATLA* was a risky project.

H: Yes, it was. Australian productions had never really broken through overseas. My story about the head of drama at BBC was probably typical of the reaction to Australian drama. “I rue the day, Mr. Crawford, that I ever see Australian television on our screen.”

Alice hit around the same time as movies like *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *Breaker Morant*—the original *Mad Max* was being filmed around the same time that we shot—and there was a happy confluence of Australian drama around that time. I believe that *Alice* was the first Australian TV drama to have a major impact overseas.

S: What would have been the consequence to you if *ATLA* flopped?

H: I was on the crest of a wave from the big success of *Against the Wind*, so this had to work,

otherwise there would be no mini-series after that.

STORY EDITING

S: What other big decisions were there during the early stage of the project?

H: Probably the first big creative decision is how you do the adaptation of the book. The old solicitor, Noel Strachan, had only a modest role in the book, and I made an early decision that the story would work better if it was more of a triumvirate relationship between Noel Strachan, Joe Harman and Jean Paget. So now, Noel, in his way, was vying for Jean's romantic attentions, which really supported effectively the fact that when Joe turned up in his office, Noel didn't then tell Jean that Joe had come to England looking for her. Nor did Noel tell Joe that Jean was pining after him, because Noel had his own degree of interest in Jean. It was now a three-handed love story. That was creative license to make the story stronger. These are the sort of creative decisions you make about making the story more effective.

S: Why did you emphasize this love triangle over the theme of Jean "creating a city" in the outback?

H: We ran with the emotional thread. You must always do this.

S: What message were you aiming for in the script and the production?

H: Jean Paget was the fulcrum. Her character arc (her change and growth) was that she was nothing more than a typist in Kuala Lumpur, and she became the leader of the people on the trek and their spokesperson. The story was about her growth and what happened to her after the war. Jean emerges a very different person at the end of the story. When she goes to the Outback town, she thinks there should be something for the women there and starts the shoe factory and ice cream parlour. Jean emerged from nothing and went through this great character arc, and in the course of that, she encountered one love interest and one aspiring love interest, creating a triangle. But the message was really about her character journey.

S: What is a producer's influence on a script?

H: Crawford Productions was started by Hector Crawford and Dorothy Crawford, his sister. Dorothy Crawford was a great creative and a very good script editor. She was my mentor, and I did my training under her. She taught me two key things: One is to insist that the writer explain the story in one sentence. For instance: "Old woman lives in bus, she has five sons, four are in gaol, and this is about her fight to keep her last son out of gaol." Once you establish what the simple line of the story is, then you're able to question the relevance of a scene or the relevance of some discursion in the story.

The other thing Dorothy Crawford used to ask writers was: "Who do you feel sorry for? Who do you have a sympathy with?" I see a lot of *CSI* type shows, and a lot of it is plot driven stuff, where the plot's probably interesting, with twists and turns, but at the end of the day, often the drama is not very satisfying because you don't feel sorry for anyone. Those are the two great things that Dorothy Crawford taught me.

S: Can you apply Dorothy Crawford's two principles to *Alice*? First, how would you summarize *Alice* in one sentence?

H: A young girl's story of heroism, love, and ability to make a great difference in people's lives.

S: What about her second principle?

H: Who do you feel sorry for? As I said before, it's a three-handed love story. It's got the backdrop of war, and that gives it the texture and drives the story along, but you care about the protagonists. You care about Noel Strachan, the old solicitor; you care about his position. You care about Joe Harman, who meets this girl while a prisoner of war. You feel sorry for Jean Paget. You care about her trying to find Joe again. So there's a basket of great stuff to grab you emotionally.

S: What other work did you do regarding the script development and script writing?

H: After acquiring the book, it was to decide who's going to write the adaptation. And then decide how many episodes the series is going to be. It could've been four, but we thought six was appropriate to do the story justice and to play out the love triangle.

And then to work with the individual writers to make sure that their approach is seamless between episodes. Rosemary Ann Sisson, who's a British writer, wrote a couple of the episodes, but the real driver was an Australian writer called Tom Hegarty. He did four episodes, and to be frank, he did rewrites of the English writer, but she was there for us to try to raise money in the UK, and she had a very good reputation.

I would work with the writer to establish, first of all that there were six episodes, then what is in each episode, what is its beginning, middle, and end. And if we divide each episode into three acts, what happens at the end of act one, what happens at the end of act two, and so on. And then typically we would develop that to a scene breakdown, and I would work with the writer for maybe a half-day, going through the scene breakdown and making sure the scenes are as we want them. And then they'd go away and write the dialog. And then typically I would spend two days at the desk with the writer, going through every line of dialog—"This line is not quite in character" or "This line could be improved."

I liken a script editor to a tennis coach: He's a reasonable player himself, but he guides his tennis players, works with them. They send a shot down, he'll send it back. It's about lobbing ideas to each other and working as a tennis match.

Being a writer is a lonely job and it helps if you've got an editor who can shoot ideas back at you. I've actually script-edited most of the dramas that I've made. That got me into the thick of it, but it certainly makes you understand all the elements of the story and makes sure that the writer's intention is followed through when you get to the director.

S: What was the biggest difficulty in adapting the novel to a script?

H: It was a big story. We were always cognizant of how we were going to raise the money to make it, so we had to script it so that it was affordable. That's why we did Scotland in New Zealand, Alice Springs in Broken Hill, London in Sydney, and the Barrier Reef in Malaysia.

S: What was the opportunity in adapting *ATLA* for the screen?

H: You have a loyal readership. People who have read the novel and want to see the film.

S: People not in the industry don't understand how much a producer can be involved with the story, and not just the content of the story but also its sensibility.

H: Yes, that's right. I guess there aren't many producers with the creative experience I have, that can bring that sort of attention to it. The only rider to that is that there are producers who perform an important 'deal' function but don't have much creative idea at all. They're very simply deal makers. Often they don't care much about the story as long as they get the deal across the line. "Put David Soul in it, people."

REALISM

S: *ATLA* could easily have been written, shot, and acted like a soap opera, but it wasn't.

H: I always approached it as a six-hour feature film. I used a feature film crew to make it, because I really didn't want to do soaps. The story itself had enough color in it and integrity not to have to vamp or talk fest. There was enough good material to drive the story for six hours. We didn't have to create soap opera-type scenes and cliffhangers to try and keep it interesting.

S: In soap operas, people over-act and there is very explicit dialog, but *ATLA* has nothing like that.

H: Most soap opera is rooted in melodrama. There's nothing wrong with that, but I tried to base *Alice* more on reality rather than melodrama, and I tried to give it dimension. For instance, in the book, the Japanese character Sgt. Mifune (Gunzo) who guarded the women was pretty much a one-dimensional character, so we tried to flesh him out into a well-rounded person with a family and a history. When Gunzo knew he was dying, Jean wanted him to have one last look at the photo of his family.

That came from us trying to give the character a bit more breadth than just a black-and-white character. We approached all the characters to give them a proper character arc – a beginning, middle and an end. I think that's the main difference between *Alice* and a soap, which I generally refer to as 'chewing gum for the eyes'!

S: Why doesn't Noel tell Joe that Jean is looking for him and where she is?

H: Because he's being very guarded about wanting to keep her for himself. Even though there's a big age difference, there's a part of Noel that wants to live the fantasy that he could be the husband or lover. That's part of that triumvirate. We wanted the audience to say, "You bastard. You haven't told her?" How frustrating. It was to develop the right sort of audience reaction.

S: But there's also the other reaction: The audience empathizing with Noel's situation.

H: Yes. It's just about making things real, isn't it? If it hadn't been real or just came out of the blue or was a fake plot point to drive toward a commercial break, the audience would have recognized that. It was drilled into me from an early age to always make things realistic. Cop shows had to be based on an actual case. Performances have to be realistic. I don't know if that has an influence or not, but that's my philosophy.

S: There was a conflict in the series that wasn't in the novel, and that was the conflict between Joe and Jean over the reaction of the people in Willstown, especially the bank manager, to Jean. What was the purpose of that?

H: It was really picking up on the fact that she's a woman and those country communities are very closed, they're very insular, they're very wary of outsiders. Joe, being a local, was very cognizant of that fact. He'd be wanting Jean to be accepted. I came from the country myself. I know how in these small communities people can be concerned about what the local mayor or bank manager thinks. The barmaid was also negative towards Jean because she was an outsider.

And, of course, it's not only the writing and the adaptation but the direction of the actors that's really important. We got a really good cast of what were film-based actors rather than TV-based actors. I don't think I cast anybody in *Alice* who was from my soap opera background or my long TV series background. I just went for a cast that in those days you'd go for in a feature film. These days, because there's some really good television being made, a lot of feature film people are going back to television in America. But in those days it was a different story.

CASTING

S: Let's move then to the casting.

H: The Seven network had ideas. The Americans wanted someone they could bank, like David Soul, who played a motorcycle cop on television.

S: Tell me about casting Helen Morse and why you chose her to play Jean Paget.

H: The character had to be English and Helen fitted the bill beautifully. Helen was and is a renowned technical actress. Of course we didn't have to worry about Gordon Jackson; he was such a professional. We didn't have to audition Gordon for it, because he was well-known from *Upstairs, Downstairs* and the police show *The Professionals*. We were lucky to get him.

On the face of it the biggest risk for us was putting Bryan Brown and Helen together, because they had to have a chemistry that worked. Helen was a Melbourne doctor's daughter, from the opposite end of the tracks from Bryan, who was brought up in Panania in Sydney. We didn't know how the opposite sides of the track were going to work together and relate to each other. Bryan, as wonderful as he is, has limited acting technique. Helen was full of it. It turned out to be a situation where real opposites attracted. They had a magic relationship, became very good friends, very close during the series. That was important because that chemistry shows on the screen.

The biggest problem was getting the network to approve Bryan. No one argued much about the rest of the casting, but Bryan had done very little at that stage; he'd done a cameo role for me in *Against the Wind*. So David Stevens, the director, worked with Bryan on that scene where under the tree he describes the Outback. It was only a short scene, but David had to work with Bryan for a day to get the performance right to show the network and get their approval. I can understand their caution.

S: How did you convince the network to accept Bryan Brown?

H: Just kept saying, "No, you're wrong." We played the screen test of Bryan under the tree, of

course. That finally convinced them. It was very good, but bear in mind that this was the beginning of Bryan Brown's screen career; he didn't have the experience or profile that he has now.

S: And the casting of the actors who played the Japanese soldiers?

H: The Japanese actors all came out of Hollywood. I went over there and did some screen tests. Yuki Shimoda played Sgt. Mifune. After the filming, he went to Japan. It was the first time he'd ever been to Japan, and he loved it because he was no longer a minority - he was a majority. He'd been interned in America during the war. Going to Japan was a sort of final pilgrimage for him because he found out when he got there that he had cancer and died shortly after. He was a lovely man.

The baby in *Alice* is my daughter, Melissa. The series is a great home movie for her. But no other parent would want to put their kids through that. We were lucky we had her to put in the show, because it was very hot filming in Malaysia, and being in all those scenes was quite difficult. Every time she cried, the director said, "Give her a banana." To this day, she can't eat bananas.

S: What about the Malay villagers like Mat Amin? They seemed so real and natural. Were they professional actors?

H: They were local village people with no acting experience. Generally we revoiced them.

PRE-PRODUCTION

S: Any other pre-production challenges you had to meet?

H: As you know, most film crews are freelance, and I assembled a lot of feature film people, like Russell Boyd as the director of photography, and his lighting crew, and everybody else who worked on it. When I had to get permits for them to work in Malaysia, they were spread to the four winds. From the Malaysian embassy in Canberra I got all the forms that needed to be completed and sent them all over Australia and got the crew to complete them with their passports and everything. I then flew to Malaysia and stood in a line for six hours at the immigration office, with a big folder of application forms. The woman took one look at it and said, "Ah, but they are on the wrong form." So I had to come back to Australia and start the process again, even though these forms had come from the Malaysian embassy.

The next problem we had was that you couldn't have weapons or anything seeming to be a weapon, even if they were inoperative, in Malaysia at that time, so we had to make the 303 rifles out of plywood. The Ministry of Culture also had to review the scripts. They initially demanded that the [water] well building element be removed because it reflected badly on the Malays that they could not build their own well. We had to fight tooth and nail to retain this as it was a crucial plot point. Working in Malaysia at that time had its challenges.

PRODUCTION

S: You're now ready to go into the field to shoot *ATLA*.

H: We tried to make it an A-list film production, but you didn't get much for \$1.25M, even then. We tried for high production values; that's why I went for a feature film crew, so it would look filmic rather than like a cheap video tape production. We weren't long out of the era when everyone did

their interiors on videotape and their exteriors on film, integrating the two. The series was shot on 16 mm film, which gave it a slightly better result. I wish we had today's technology to be able to do it.

S: Tell me about the shoots, first Malaysia.

H: Langkawi now has an international airport and many very fancy hotels, but in those days there was one government guest house, and there was a grass airstrip, and we had to get our equipment to the island like the boat people. The people who ran the boat people boat refused to unload our equipment unless we paid a ransom to them. I had no choice but to tell them where to go, and the production designer, Larry Eastwood, and I unloaded all the equipment and got it into trucks. It was a very difficult exercise.

We had chosen Langkawi because of the beautiful rice paddies we'd seen during the survey. When we got there, there'd been an unusual drought, which meant that every rice paddy was as dry as you could make it. We had to sit in circles and consult their god gurus to be able to upset the balance of nature and had to pump water into the rice paddies to be able to do the rice paddy scenes.

The irony is that the Outback scenes were in Broken Hill and designed to be central Australian desert but when we arrived it was like a bowling green. There had been a great rain. We had to grade the grass off the paddocks to make them look dry, and we had to use dirt from the shearing sheds to create dust storms with fans. To make the rain, we had to use the local fire engine. The irony was that we had to drag the fire engine across this muddy, muddy paddock with a bulldozer to get it into the old homestead set. So we had our challenges. It wasn't an easy production. Nothing was what it seemed, or often what we planned.

S: Things often goes awry during production.

H: Yeah, and you gotta fix it. In order to make the dollars go further, I had to work on the crew in Asia, which was mostly in the catering area, where I could lend a hand, and also in the rigging department. I was a sort of general hand, I suppose.

S: What lessons did you learn during the shoot?

H: Normally I don't spend much time on location. I just look at the footage in the office and make assessments of that. I learned a big lesson from being on the shoot, because being there sometimes the wonder for me was that we actually got a scene done, and that actually skewed my normal objective perception of the product. There was scene we did that was a major one because it involved clearing out a village and putting in a lot of extras. The film had to be flown back to Australia for processing. A week later we got the report that the film had been fogged, so we had to film the scene again, and a week later we got the message that the film had been fogged again, so we did it a third time—all at great expense. In the end, we dropped that scene on the cutting room floor.

For me, the wonder was that we had this great big village scene with lots of extras and we got it done. That was the achievement for me, but had I been sitting in an office somewhere and not been exposed to that lack of objectivity, I might have decided that we didn't need to go down that track. We just could have dropped that scene and not reshot it twice. It was a very interesting lesson in

production objectivity.

S: Where exactly did you shoot Willstown and its Australia pub?

H: That's about 20 km outside of Broken Hill at Silverton. It's a well-known film location now. I think we were one of the first to shoot there, because we graded the street, put up some facades and added verandas on that pub and made it look really vintage. And they pretty much kept that as we made it. The verandas on the pub remain to this day. Inside the pub there are cuttings from all the series and films that have been made there. Some of the *Mad Max* stuff was done there.

S: How were you able to get the production values so high? The vehicles and the planes, for example.

H: Beg, borrow and steal. It was very hard; it involved me working on the crew, doing shortcuts to do certain things. I'm pleased that it still looks okay.

The plane was from Melbourne, so they had to fly it from Melbourne up to Broken Hill. One of the reasons we chose Broken Hill to do those scenes was that it's pretty equidistant from Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide, and it was Outbacky enough to get away with it. But mostly with these things, you're looking at easy access for travel and transport. A whole lot of film trucks have to go out there. You've got to get equipment, generators, and period cars and that sort of thing.

The London scenes were in Sydney, that London bus was in Sydney. We did have trouble matching cars between Malaysia and some of what we shot in Sydney. We couldn't get army trucks in Malaysia, so it gets a bit tricky where you see an army vehicle with prisoners pull up and the truck is filmed near Sydney, and then you see people get out of it and those people would walk into frame in a scene shot in Malaysia. Those two shots have got to match and the continuity has to be right. You have to make sure they're in the same clothes, walking in the same order and that sort of thing. Continuity issues!

S: Tell me about Gordon Jackson on location.

H: I knew Gordon was a great actor and he was really easy to work with. I'd go and pick him up at the motel in Broken Hill at six in the morning and he would wax lyrical all the way to Silverton about the beautiful country and the sun coming up and how great it was to be alive. He was a wonderful man. We fell on our feet with his casting.

S: And working with Helen Morse on the set?

H: She too was just wonderful. She got the accent right, and just everything, didn't she? It personally disappointed me that she didn't go on to do much film work after that. She retreated into doing stage work. As a result of *Alice*, she was offered a role in *Yanks*, a movie made by John Schlesinger, but she turned that down for some reason. I don't know why she didn't warm to the film experience that much. But she's a star performer, a very clever girl.

S: Was all the series shot on location or did you do some soundstage filming?

H: The old solicitor's office and his flat were sets, There were a few others like the Japanese

Commander's office.

S: As the producer, tell me about the work you and director David Stevens did together.

H: David and I had a long history together. I was involved in employing him after recruiting in New Zealand, where he won drama awards. He was an excellent director who we gave all the 'acting' episodes to. He went on to be a writer of some note and ghost wrote Alex Hailey's novel after *Roots*.

S: Re the acting: Lester, Noel's business partner, never verbally challenges Noel about Jean. It's all done with looks and reactions.

H: That's trying to flesh out characters and situations. The acting would be a combination of both the director and the actors. But the director would probably explain to them the situation, the relevance of it. But mostly that's a directorial decision. That's where David Stevens was very good, because he was a great director of actors.

S: The writing, directing and acting were subtle. The audience had to watch carefully, had to work.

H: I think you couldn't get away with anything else in Australia because the audience was a bit more perceptive. Later I did a 39-hour series called *Five Mile Creek* for the Disney Channel in America, and because it was a Western there were goodies and baddies. The Americans were always saying, "Where's the baddie?" and I'd say, "It's implicit in the dialog." If you're making shows in America, black has to be black, and white has to be white. No in between, no subtlety. That's one of the things I loved about doing the stuff that I did; You could put a bit of subtlety into it, and the audiences would get it and understand it. You don't need the hero to be dressed all in white and the villain to be dressed in black with a twirly moustache.

S: Do you have favorite scenes in the series?

H: I like the one where Joe sits under the tree and talks to Jean about the Outback and the colors of the Outback, describing where he comes from and what The Alice is. I think that's one of the best scenes. It was used in promos. It was done well. That's a favorite. The appeal may be because I come from the bush.

POST PRODUCTION

S: Tell me about post-production.

H: I would've had the final cut, and there wasn't a lot to fix in it, editing-wise. The series had a very good editor, Tim Wellburn.

S: The music?

H: Bruce Smeeton was a feature film composer. A wonderful composer. Bruce did all the Fred Schepisi movies: *Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*, *Devil's Playground*. You often hear some of the *Alice* themes played on aeroplanes. I enjoyed working with Bruce a lot.

S: What was the style, the feel of the music that you wanted?

H: It had to be romantic without being syrupy. But it also had to cover a range of emotions.

As producer you have to decide where the music's going to go, what sort of music you want, whether you want the music to play against the scene or with the scene, or decide that less is more and not have music. I would run through the film with Bruce and tell him where the music starts and where it finishes and leave the rest to him. I could trust him. It was great to go into a recording studio and hear the orchestra playing the music for the first time.

There were a couple of scenes that were, in my opinion, a bit slow as they were directed. So I could say to Bruce, "Give me some fast music because we need to get a bit of energy into those two scenes because the images were a bit slow. That's a producer's decision.

S: Do you remember for which scenes you wanted the music faster?

H: Cross country riding in the floods did not have a sense of urgency that I wanted.

S: Tell me about showing a cut to the BBC, as per your deal with them.

H: The BBC International department had right of first refusal. In production after a while you don't have much objectivity. I sent off the first half of it to the BBC, to the department run by Rugheimer, and his 2IC (second in command) came back to me and said, by telegram, "We've viewed *ATLA* and we have to tell you that it's well below our expectation." The bottom fell out of my world.

I didn't hear anything from them for some time, and then I had a call from the BBC business manager and he said, "I'm in Sydney, and I'd like to catch up with you." I met him for a drink, and said, "You don't like the production and I'm devastated about it, and it destroyed my confidence." He said, "No, no, we actually quite like it, but we want to re-edit it."

I replied, "Well, that's okay; if you're gonna take it, I've got no choice. You can do your re-edit." They cut their own version of it, basically removing the filmic exterior scenes and making it more of a talky interior show. They cut out the lengthy colorful Outback sequences, which was crazy. But that's what you deal with.

Even with a bad edit, sixteen million viewers watched it on the BBC.

I had the last laugh on this, because eventually when we went to the Emmys, it was the unedited version which won the International Emmy award. For the Emmy we were up against *Brideshead Revisited*, which I thought was a terrific series. The win was great. It particularly vindicated our position with regard to the editing and the BBC. Our non-edited version also won a British Broadcasting Press Guild Award for that year. We won lots of awards with it.

And there was another advantage: after the BBC had their plays, we were able to sell our original version to Channel Four in England. So our complete version played on Channel Four and I think they had as many viewers as the BBC.

RELEASE & DISTRIBUTION

S: And the release in Australia and America?

H: The Seven Network had the rights in Australia. It was picked up by Paramount Pictures, who had world rights, except Australia and Great Britain, and they distributed it around the world. It was sold to 70 countries.

S: Did you have to give away some of your rights to Paramount?

H: Yes, first of all, we had to give away a lot of the rights to an Australian network to get the money to produce it. We also had to give quite a bit away to Paramount.

In the States, the un-edited version was broadcast on Masterpiece Theater on PBS, which is where all the big mini-series played. It was one of their most successful ever. It had pretty wide dissemination through Masterpiece Theater. Masterpiece has a big audience.

S: Did *Alice* win other awards in Australia or America?

H: It won five Logie awards, the annual Australian television industry awards. It was a BANFF Television Festival winner in Canada. The National Board of Review, which is a religious organization in America, gave it their best drama award.

S: What were the ratings in Australia?

H: The ratings were high. I produced three of the four most-watched dramas on Australian Television in the 20th century. One was *Against the Wind*, one was *ATLA*, and the other was some episodes of *The Sullivans*. *ATLA* got 49 points, which was 70 per cent of the audience watching television at that time. It performed well for the network.

S: Did *Alice* make a profit?

H: Yes, it's one of the few shows that made a profit. It returned a reasonable amount to the investors, so it cost the Seven Network very little at the end of the day. They got most of the money back that they'd spent on the advance that they gave us. The film commissions got their money back, my private investor got his money back. None of us earned much out of it. I made about \$60,000, but bear in mind that was six years of work, so...

S: Were there any firsts in the success of *ATLA*?

H: I'd have to say that it was the first widely successful Australian mini-series, or drama for that matter, overseas. There was nothing that came before it. It was certainly the biggest rated Australian drama. It would've also been the biggest budget of its time. When I went to the network and said what it would cost, they nearly fainted in their suits.

S: What was the consequence of the success of *Alice* to the Australian TV-film industry?

H: It was the first TV show where people took Australian drama seriously. I've already told you about

the attitude of the head of television at the BBC, that he'd rue the day that he'd ever see our content on English screens. In the UK, *Alice* had 16 million viewers, so it was well-watched there. That would be a much wider audience than a feature film going out.

S: What's your reaction when you watch the series?

H: I haven't seen it for some time, mainly because I don't have a playable copy. When I see scenes, I remember trying to make that scene: how we made the dust, for example. I tended to only see the problems of making it until enough people saw it to give me confidence in what we'd actually produced. Certainly the initial BBC reaction pulled the rug out from under me, as I thought after that, "This is terrible."

S: I read that your reaction to watching the series was that you cried. What induced that?

H: Tears would well up in some of the emotional scenes because I'd be connected to the characters and the performances that were going on. I'd be as emotional as an audience. That's the way it should be.

I went on to the tourism business and built a resort in Fiji, which is not as silly as it sounds coming from film, because of the similarity between them: You have an idea, you find the location, you build the sets, you put a bunch of characters in it. The thing I always said to my TV staff was: "You send the audience away with a smile on their face and a tear in their eye." There has to be an emotional connection for the story to be successful. That followed me right through into tourism, and it worked very well in my favor. We became one of the top ten barefoot resorts in the world. I always talked to the staff as I talked to film people about the effect of the emotional connection. There has to be an emotional connection. It goes back to Dorothy Crawford saying, "Who do you feel sorry for?" "Who do you relate to?" "Who do you have a sympathy with?" "Who are you cheering for?" Some people probably even barracked for the old solicitor, Noel. Some people barracked for him ahead of the guy from the Outback, Joe Harman.

S: You've mentioned "confidence" a few times. How important is confidence to a producer?

H: You would not spend six years on a project if you had doubts!

S: Why did *ATLA* turn out so well?

H: Love. Good people working on it. Good film people and a very good director. Very good performances. There are lots of things that go into the recipe for the fruitcake. There are lots of nice plums in there, particularly the three-handed relationship. And the production values at the time were good. We basically cared about what we were doing. It was made for the right reasons.

S: Could any of that happen without the man at the top, the producer?

H: Well, unusual. The top guy has got to have passion and the vision for it. Most of it is vision. You've got to see it from beginning to end. You've got to maintain the vision. Harder to do these days. I see American shows and if you add up the producers and executive producers, it's about twenty people. In this case, before all this nonsense, I was lucky; because it was me. I had the vision, I did script editing, I did casting, I employed all the people. I didn't have to answer to twenty people or twenty

opinions. It's not a committee-made job. It's one man's vision.

S: Summarize your vision for me.

H: I wanted to capture the essence of what turned me on as a kid about the drama of it. And then having a passion for that. And I think, and I say humbly, I was known as a producer with attention to detail. I like to think a lot of the details were pretty good.

Except for a scene where Noel is getting examined by the doctor. I was criticized because the period stethoscope we used was not invented until five years later. Somebody wrote me a letter about that, about how it had destroyed the whole series for him. There's an expert on everything. Attention to creative details is really important. Where the music starts and where it stops, what the music's like and what the editing's like, for example.

S: After the success of *Alice*, did you want to produce another Shute story?

H: Obviously, after *Alice*, I looked at all the other Shute projects, and I didn't think any of them measured up to *Alice* in terms of a real story potential, including *On the Beach*. I didn't think they had the quality of *ATLA*. For me that was the best of his books. After the success of *Alice* everybody came out of the woodwork trying to acquire Nevil Shute properties. But the others didn't see the light of the day.

S: Do you remember what you thought of *Trustee from the Toolroom*? That's many peoples' second favorite Shute novel to *Alice* and the one that many people would love to see filmed.

H: I defer to your superior knowledge. I have not read it.

S: Could such a production of *Alice* be done today?

H: It'd be difficult unless you had a big budget. We made *Alice* in three countries, six hours of television for \$1.25 million, and my production secretary returned as a free-lancer to work on a Pepsi Cola commercial shot in Queensland for \$1.5 million. They did two thirty-second and one sixty-second commercial for a budget in excess of what we had to spend on *ATLA*. I hate to think what *ATLA* would cost now; I think it might be \$20 million or something like that.

I went on to do other productions, but I eventually, reluctantly, got out of the business because it was just too hard to raise money to make things of the quality that I wanted to do. And you couldn't have production by committee. It's got to be a person's vision.

S: Would you consider this period (the 1980s and part of the 90s) when the Australian industry was much financed under the 10BA tax concession scheme, the golden period of Australian film and television?

H: Yes, because things got made. You can argue that a lot of people got fees that shouldn't have got fees, and a lot of scripts got made that should never have been made, but on the other hand there were a lot of fantastic productions that got the industry going and provided a little bit of insurance and longevity for the industry. 10BA certainly helped the industry get going. It gave people a lot of experience.

The 10BA tax concessions created opportunities for all of us to try stuff. It was like someone had opened a door and all this pent-up emotion came flowing out the door. And it exhibited itself in films. The original *Mad Max* was at that time. There were some interesting filmmakers around, too. There were clever creatives with passion in that era. There are passionate people now, but they don't seem to be as thick on the ground.

It all goes back to story. You've got to find a good story to start with, particularly with the budget limitations in Australia with features. Maybe the good stories aren't there. The upper limit for an Australian budget these days seems to be about ten million dollars. Anyone dealing in something between ten million and fifty million may as well kiss goodbye to their money. One of the recent great success stories of Australian film is *The Last Cab to Darwin*, which I think is a terrific film. They made it for about ten million dollars. It's doing pretty well. Australian films have got to compete in the cinemas with American blockbusters that cost \$100 - \$200 million. That's very hard.

S: The vast majority of Australian films today lose money.

H: I think that's often because of: "Who do you care for?" In the productions that lose money, you don't care for the people. "I want to make a film about a mad axe murderer"—who cares?

S: What are you doing today?

H: I've just come back to Australia and I'm keen to get back into film, but there's not much opportunity when you get older. No matter what your experience or track record, alas. I'm pulling some ideas together. You've got to invest quite a lot in ideas to have one that pays off.

There are starting to be a few more outlets for drama in Australia. What's interesting is that Foxtel seems to be doing here what some of the American networks have been commissioning and doing well at. The real economic problem in television is that the dreaded soap opera and reality television became so cheap to produce by comparison that it's very hard to get big-budget shows going.

I think that film costs have changed a lot in a positive way. We don't have to process film any more. We have digital technology. That makes the editing easier. Anybody can go out and shoot something on a pretty cheap little camera these days and get a pretty good result out of it.

The only reason we've ever survived in Australian drama is that they are popular. People want to watch them. The problem is that we speak the American language, whereas if you're in France, you have a French-speaking film industry that's strong; if you're in Germany, you have a German-speaking film industry that's strong. Americans provide no direct competition to these foreign language films. We've always had to fight the dumping of American product here for not much money. It's only through popularity with audiences that we've managed to stay in business but it's always been pretty tenuous.

S: What's the future of ATLA?

H: I understand the novel was picked up by Sony, who spent about \$2 million developing it and now no one wants to know about it or talk about it. It's just languishing somewhere.

S: I presume that because your option on the novel was for only 20 years this means that you have no rights to reproduce the mini-series.

H: I recently received some legal advice that we own the copyright of the mini-series and we can release it. But I'm waiting to get some paperwork examined forensically to know whether that's the story or not. I own the masters of the series. They're in good condition. In fact, I've been talking to a distributor, who's very keen to release it. There's a lot of people who want to see it. It would be a popular series.

Scott McConnell is a producer/writer/interviewer in Los Angeles and Melbourne.