

Profile of ACS SA Branch committee member of Rodney Bolton

For the ACS SA Branch newsletter

Rod what is your favourite film?

I have way too many to mention here. A few of my favourites are: "City of Lost Children", "The Elephant Man" and "Le Grande Bleu", ("The Big Blue") by Luc Besson, as well as "Apocalypse Now" and "One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest". The list is endless!

So how did you get interested in Cinematography?

I initially got into stills photography when given an instamatic camera as a teen. I used and abused it to its bitter end; creating multiple exposures and weird effects in camera, (I was in Holland at the time, which may explain a few things). I soon got into the SLR camera world and had a dark room; developing, printing and pushing the limits even more.

I studied film production (Art & Design course) at a UK Film College, where I wrote, directed, produced, shot and edited three short films on 16mm film; using Arri BL's, Bolex, Éclair and Beaulieu cameras. As well, I shot other student's films. During this time behind the camera, I felt a certain comfortable confidence and really took to the whole filmmaking process. After surviving the cold English summers and the bitter North Yorkshire winters, I finally graduated with a BA Honours Degree.

When did you come to Australia and what happened then?

Trying to get a job in England back then was tricky for a fresh graduate. The film industry Union was a closed shop and very hard to get in to. I wrote to many production companies all over the country and beyond. And it was a positive and kind reply from the South Australian Film Corporation in Adelaide that inspired me to move down to Australia.

I arrived in Oz in 1982 to enjoy the sunshine, the surf and to pursue a film-making career. I initially spent a couple of years at the newly opened National Art Gallery in Canberra as an assistant photographer. It was a great opportunity to be surrounded and inspired by the immense collection of artworks. However, I soon got itchy feet and headed south. Once in Adelaide, I was soon on the set of, "**Robbery Under Arms**" as a film extra; which was shot by our now SA Branch president, Ernie Clark ACS. Here I got to know the local film scene and crew.

Soon I was employed by Great Southern Films as a run about on TVC's. This opportunity opened my eyes to the real film world and the commercial business. I then started getting jobs as an assistant grip with key grip and gaffer, Tom Moody and key grip, Rob Morgan. They taught me an awful lot about on set procedures and work ethic, as well as lighting and all things gripology. They were my very important mentors in the boom time of Australian Cinema, TV series and TVC's in the 80's. Their knowledge and expertise was gratefully appreciated and is still with me to this day.

Having a love of cameras and photography, I jumped into the camera department as soon as an opportunity arose. Long story short, I had an excellent apprenticeship in Adelaide as a clapper loader and focus puller, working with some of the best in the biz, namely Geoff Simpson ACS, Ernie Clark ACS, Andrew Lesnie ACS ASC, Roger Dowling ACS, Paul Dallwitz ACS, David Foreman ACS, Richard Chataway ACS, Tony Clark ACS and Geoff Hall ACS to name but a few (that's a lot of ACS's!). All taught me many technical and creative skills and tips along the way.

I was very busy as a camera assistant on TVC's, TV series and films and must have handled every film camera and film stock in the country. Some highlights were working at Adelaide's F1 Grand Prix with presenter Clive James and working on Scott Hick's productions of "**Call Me, Mr Brown**" and "**Shine**". Also Rolf de Heers', "**Incident At Raven's Gate**" with Andrew Lesnie ACS. And who could forget the bizarrely charming Japanese TV series, "**UltraMan**", shot by none other than our own Paul Dallwitz ACS!



"UltraMan" - filming yet another creature destroying another city.

Soon you became a Director of Photography in your own right, please tell us more.

I kept camera assisting on anything that came up and worked a lot with Max Pepper ACS at Pepper Studios on many TVC's. Between these gigs, I was shooting short films and winning a few ACS Awards along the way, namely for, **"The Domestic"**, (shot on a Bolex 16mm camera) and **"A Good Game"** (shot on Aaton 16mm camera).



"Cat"- short film

This position gave me the opportunity to help guide the younger crew members and directors to create their ideal vision and refine their skills. Plus it let me experiment with a variety of camera techniques and lighting styles. I also began to enjoy and better understand my light meters; playing with readings, grey scales, light levels and ratios.

This era also saw me in the role of Director of Photography on my first feature film, **"Maslin Beach"**. Shot on the iconic South Australian nudist beach with the then latest Super 16mm Aaton Production camera.



"Maslin Beach" - feature film

This was a great opportunity to work consistently in daylight and all weather conditions, and whatever it may throw at us, whilst still keeping lighting continuity and the story line flowing. We had minimum crew and equipment but we still managed to survive the summer of '96 on a chilly beach and produce some good pictures.

Finding a dead body in the cliffs on the last day of filming and its retrieval by the Police and Council was in itself a real black comedy sequel! **"Maslin Beach"** has been aired a number of times on TV, to mixed praise and raised eyebrows.

To further my career and knowledge, I soon found myself moving to Melbourne to work on TV series, **"Good Guys, Bad Guys"** as 1st AC for DP Craig Barden ACS. We had great scripts, strong performances from the cast and a wonderfully efficient crew, (which included Adelaide Gaffer, Richard Rees Jones). One slight drawback was focus pulling at 'T2' 90% of the time over 6 months. This sure makes your hair go grey! The show was shot on an

Arri SR III with Super 16mm film stock. We also used a variety of shutter speeds and frame rates to give the show a certain look at times.

Without even a moment to reach for a box of “Just for Men” hair dye, I found myself on TV series, “**Ocean Girl 4**”, again with Craig Barden and similar crew. We shot for 6 months, shooting at ‘T2’ again, and again more grey hairs! Focus pulling, I believe, is one of the most difficult & stressful jobs on set. If you get it right, no one notices or cares. But one ‘soft’ shot and everyone is on your back! Happily, this rarely happened to me!

“Ocean Girl” had a long stint in the studio and I was relieved to be put into the underwater unit, (being a certified scuba diver), where we filmed the “ocean” scenes in a dive pool. This was an extraordinary experience where we spent incredibly long hours underwater for two weeks. Believe me, working underwater certainly takes ages to set up shots, to light, rehearse and to shoot.

Watching Richard, the gaffer, walk across the bottom of the pool with a lit Hydro-par to light the next scene is a most unusual and bizarre sight. But we had a blast! We used AGA full-face dive masks which have coms switches on them, so we could speak to each other underwater. Absolutely a necessity in this environment. The camera assistant’s role is exactly the same but just do it all underwater. In prep, I did have to re-calibrate the focus markings on all the lenses to ensure sharp focus whilst underwater. Ahhh, “physics at work”.

The shooting schedule then found us at last very happily filming up at Port Douglas, Queensland. The dive team then spent ten glorious days way off shore living on a huge Dive Expedition boat. We had two dive units and a huge safety support team. We finished off the six month shoot doing ‘real’ dive scenes with the lovely ‘Ocean Girl’. It is at times like this that I truly love my job! Working non-stop for 12 months with Craig Barden ACS was a huge delight and I learned a hell of a lot from him.



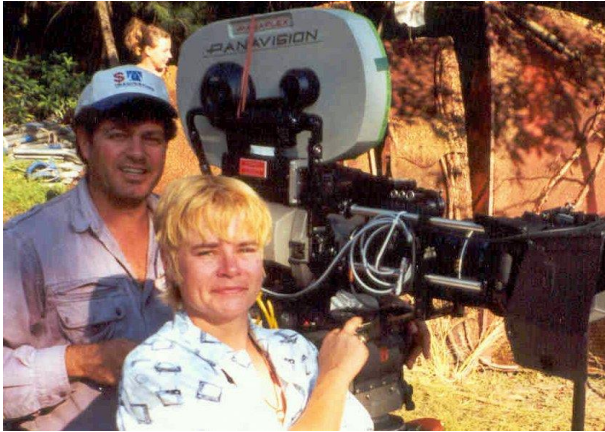
You’d need a rest after that. What did you go onto next?

After a brief period settling back in Adelaide, I was off to Sydney. And thanks to Roger Dowling ACS, I was to take over the 2nd Unit DP role on the TV series, “**Murder Call**” season 2, where Roger was main unit DP. We shot on Super 16mm film using Aaton Production Kits which had 800’ foot mags to cope with the lengthy takes and incredulous shooting schedule. Although it was a very dark, shadowy show, I felt very confident in pushing the envelope meter wise, as I trusted the film stock and the processing procedures we had in place. As with most TV series, we get to work with a variety of Directors, who have a variety of ways of working and this is always a delight and challenge at the same time. We all come out more knowledgeable and better off from the experience.

I am always amazed how this career gets you into all sorts of unusual situations and locations. I shot all of the opening murder scenes, (using the main unit crew, whilst Roger prepped the next episode), in a variety of macabre settings. I was also the 2nd Unit Director on eleven of the episodes which gave me creative license to create the shots and coverage, which was a terrific experience. I was ably assisted by Adelaide camera assistant, Jules Wurm, who worked with me on, “The Domestic”. There are 101 odd ways to die and we filmed at least a dozen of them.

Once I washed the splattered blood from my face and the series was over, I again settled back to a quieter life in Adelaide. **BUT NOT FOR LONG!!**

My old D.P. buddy, Craig Barden, called me up and asked if I would shot 2nd Unit on the 1st season of “**Farscape**” at Sydney’s new Fox Studios. I accepted straight away and was on set within a week or so. OK, safe to say it was intimidating initially. It was a Henson Studio (Muppets) Production and one million US dollars was spent on each episode. We were shooting on three Panavision 35mm cameras (3 perf), in four massive studios and I had a twenty member 2nd Unit crew - I was living the dream!



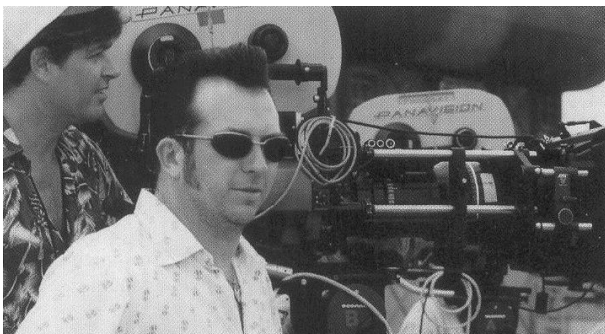
"Farscape" - a rare exterior scene with Jules

As 2nd Unit we got to create 'stand alone' scenes to light and construct in any way we wanted. Then, on occasions, I would have to match Craig's lighting style for some other scenes. The challenge to do this was most satisfying in that it is all part of the magic of cinema, tricking the audience into a new reality. Matching other cinematographer's lighting styles and techniques is a great way to learn more skills.

We had our own huge studio to film in, as well as shooting, "Pilot", at her flight deck, operated by no less than eight puppeteers at a time. It was a combination of art meets craft - meets robotics - meets puppets - meets sci fi. I spent most of the time on a Fisher Dolly 'operating the camera like a Harley Davidson' with two tripod heads mounted 90 degrees on top of each other creating a six way axis 'float' to all the scenes on the spaceship.

There was a lot of green screen work and other special effects which kept us on our toes and always excited. We never knew what was going to come through the studio door, another plasma dribbling monster or a gorgeous alien from Andromeda. We always hoped for more coffee & doughnuts!!

Most of the lighting was worked into the beautifully designed sets as practicals and we just used Kino Flo units and other harder mobile sources to enhance the actors within each set. This made for a very efficient, cool and comfortable working environment. After all, most of the actors were buried under masses of prosthetics and thick costumes.



"Farscape" - Craig Barden ACS

The massive schedule soon saw us a bit behind and soon I was DP'ing main unit as Craig prepped the following episodes with the new director. Again it was a lesson in stepping up to the plate and getting the job done, on time and under budget. As we shot mainly on Vision 500T Kodak stock over a few months, I got very aware of its characteristics in all lighting situations and was confident to set the aperture accordingly. This is where I trust the stock, my meters and my interpretation of such.

I understand you then came back to Adelaide again!

Yes, back in Adelaide again and I found myself on the children's series, "**Chuck Finn**", (seasons 3 & 4). I was the main unit camera operator with Roger Dowling ACS as DP. This was a very fast and furious production, shooting on Aaton 16mm film cameras. We usually did 50 set ups a day, with "shoot the rehearsal" the norm! The kids were brilliant and the crew most efficient throughout this most hectic schedule. Focus puller, John Foster and key grip, Mike Smith kept us on track and well focussed.



Nearing the end of this shoot, **Anifex** called and asked me to shoot a couple of **“Mortein, Louie the Fly”** TVC’s. Roger kindly allowed me to bail from “Chuck Finn” and so I got to work with the Anifex team utilising their Gazelle Motion Control rig and stoic Mitchell 35mm camera. As I had worked a great deal with Richard Chataway ACS and Michael Cusack over the years, they trusted me with this most important client and iconic character. With in-depth technical help from Jo Rossiter ACS and Joanne Bouzianis-Selleck and lighting from Graeme Shelton, we spent a week very carefully animating the camera moves and focus with the claymation characters. This was a huge change from 50 set ups a day!!



Then out of the dust in the west came the very successful TV series **“McLeod’s Daughters”**. Again with Roger Dowling ACS at the helm, we finally enjoyed shooting proper 16 x 9 framed scenes, giving the production a very high quality wide screen look. We shot on Arri SR III Super 16mm cameras on Panther dollies with a variety of film stocks for all occasions.



As the 2nd Unit DP and part time main unit operator, we would be shooting all sorts of scenes with the actors and animals. On occasion, we did aerial shots from helicopters and light aircraft and some air to air scenes to match Roger’s footage in the studio with the main actors. There was also ‘day for night’ scenes and a lot of night shoots, so the camera and lighting teams were always kept very busy, changing filters, film stock, lighting gels and fixtures, flags, etc, etc.

The country location was a real working farm with cattle, bulls, sheep, alpacas, wild pigs and dogs which were at times, featured in the episodes. The weather was relentless during the extremely hot summers and freezing cold winters. Still, the crew survived the many hardships thrown at us and McLeod’s became a worldwide success.

FYI, my notes (of many) from the shoot regarding 'Daylight Interiors' are: 200T Kodak Stock, gel HMI lights with CTO ¼ / ½, + 85 filter =125 ASA. I always carry a notebook to jot down set ups and what the main unit DP is doing with the lights, film stock, filters, lens sizes, etc. so when it comes to matching shots, I have the basic info to help create the same look.

Of all the many highlights of working on this show, I have to say filming a horse giving birth certainly was one of the most remarkable.

After a few casual years on McLeod's, I decided to head north once again to Sydney to pursue more film work. Upon landing I was roped into shooting a little doco about this chap called, **Chopper Read**. He was having his first exhibition of his paintings in the heart of Sydney. This fearful living legend, with no ears, was wearing a pale blue silk suit surrounded by his X-rated artworks. Safe to say all went well and the artworks were collecting red sold dots. In celebration, we all went up to Kings Cross to have a lovely Italian meal surrounded by *his* 'people' in more suits. "Welcome to Sydney, Mr Bolton."

My second feature film came along in 2005. Entitled, "**Ra Choi**", I saw the script two nights before shooting and the digital Panasonic DVX 100 camera, (with anamorphic lens adapter), arrived the next day. Nothing like jumping blind into my first digital film! The director, Michael Frank had researched the film over two years, studying the drug trade, the local Asian gangs and the social unrest in Cabramatta, west of Sydney. He financed the film himself and wrote the screenplay. Some of the scenes we shot, one would believe to be made up, but sadly, they were all true. As a low budget feature, we had minimum crew and equipment and it was a tough, arduous and sometimes dangerous production. But that is another story all together!



"Ra Choi" – actress, Nammi Le Benson

With a strong script, dedicated actors and a committed crew, we survived and produced a great film. I was awarded a Silver ACS feature film award from the NSW branch of the ACS. And Michael won best original screenplay from the Australian Writers Guild (AWGIE Awards). "Ra Choi" screened at the Sydney Film Festival to great applause.

The digital age had initially thrown a few spanners in the works and made many 'old school' cinematographers nervous, trying to negate light meters and other traditional filming techniques. But once aware of how to handle the whole digital process and digital cameras, one can arrive at some spectacular images.

Soon after this I found myself back in TV series land as 'B' camera operator on three tele-features; "**Blackjack 2005**", starring Colin Friels and the now famous Marta Dusseldorp. Henry Pierce ACS was the DP and we basically shot two camera setups 100% of the time, both on tracks, or both on the same dolly tracking back and forth. It was an exciting shoot and really fast and the grips (lead by Key Grip - Adam 'Skull' Kuiper), were incredible making these intricate shots possible in no time at all. And we shot entirely on location! We shot on Arri SR III cameras and Henry lensed Marta, whilst I had Colin all the time. I learnt very quickly that he rarely does two takes, so I had to get it right first time, every time. This is a great discipline for all crew, as it brings up your expertise to a new level. And Henry did an outstanding job in lighting, (in one shot), for the female support, an established lead actor and two cameras, often set up opposite each other.



Prior to the main shoot, I was lucky enough to do some aerals filming from a Long Ranger helicopter right over Sydney CBD. We had a Continental Nose Mount housing an Arri SR III camera. Again, it is at times like this that I love my job and it is such a privilege to be part of an industry that allows us to 'play' like this. Whilst in Sydney, I also helped out Geoff Hall ACS, (who was living there at the time before moving to Adelaide), on a few commercials as 'B' camera op. They certainly bring the circus to town on ads in Sydney, as it appears the budgets, trucks and crews are much, much bigger! It was a great pleasure to work with him again, back in Adelaide on feature, "**Red Dog**" and later, the "**Wolf Creek TV series: seasons 1 & 2**".

Having had enough of the 'big smoke', I was back in Adelaide producing corporate videos for a few clients, namely for the incredible "Unusualist" magician Raymond Crowe. Then a call from **Kakadu National Park**, Northern Territory, saw me again on the road and fulfilling a multi-media consultant position at this federal government office way out in the wild.



Here I produced a few videos for the various research and educational departments, whilst teaching and mentoring the young indigenous rangers in all things 'multi-media'. Yes, they had all the equipment they needed but no one knew how to use it properly. These stints up north have been on-going sporadically for years. We produced a variety of videos for the historical, cultural, educational and tourism departments. I really enjoyed my time up there in the most incredible wilderness and learning all about the indigenous ways of life. But that again, is another story.

On the mention of mentoring, I always try to pass on my knowledge and skills to up and coming cinematographers, because I can proudly say, I was taught correctly by a skilled and demanding bunch years ago which set me on my way. Too often poor instruction creates inferior technicians and techniques, which in turn degrades the whole production and the team.

Not that long ago I had the opportunity to work with film graduate students on an 'in house' feature film produced by Flinders University. This was a great experience for the students to be totally involved with a real production. Happily, some 'survived' and are working in the industry today. Our film / TV industry is intense, stressful and not as glamorous as most think. But I know many, like myself, who enjoy this pressure and thrive on getting the job done creatively, efficiently and economically.

All I can say to the younger generation coming up is to learn your craft well; understand grey scales, colour charts, Circle of Confusion, lenses, lighting ratios, light meters, and digital technologies. And go to as many lighting and media master classes as you can and ask questions. It is far better to get the shot right on the day, than spend extra time, (& money) to fix it in post!

Update as of January 2019;

Lately I have been doing more camera operating and 2nd Unit DP'ing, on such productions as Wolf Creek TV series: seasons 1 & 2 and a few feature films. As well as being D.P. on short films and music clips. Most recently I found myself way out in the northern Flinders Ranges near Farina working on a Japanese TV commercial for body deodorant. It was 47C in the shade, (and there was no shade!) and I was operating a drone camera, (not the pilot). We were filming desert back plates to scenes shot on a sound stage in Tokyo of tennis champion, Naomi Osaka. Apparently, she does not perspire when playing tennis in an extremely hot desert !!?!.

I just love film-making and the art of cinematography! For more information, please check out my website www.boltonfilms.com and I look forward to elaborating more on my wild and crazy times in the film biz, over a few beers, of course.

You became a SA Branch committee member a few years ago. What inspired you to join?

I had been a committee member of the SA Branch many years ago and enjoyed it, but my constant travelling put a halt to all that. Happily, I am back on the committee to help ensure that SA has a voice in the national ACS scene and to shape the new generation into keeping the wonders of cinematography alive and kicking down here in Adelaide and beyond.

Thanks Rod, it's great to hear your story. It was such a great read that we couldn't edit it down!