

NARRATIVE 1945 – 2020

50 YEARS OF MAKING DOCUMENTARY FILMS

Mick Csáky – writer, producer and director of documentary films

Fuelled by the optimism and arrogance of youth, back in 1971, after eight years of further education (five years of art school and three years of film school), I felt very ready to enter the world of work.

The big question in my mind was: “How am I going to earn a living?”

With one or two detours along the way, I eventually decided that my chosen career was to be a writer, producer and director of documentary films for television.

However, nobody warned me that life as a documentary film maker was going to be fraught with financial insecurity, but that was the last thing on my mind.

Nevertheless, in spite of numerous ups and downs during the following half century, I have had a lot of fun making more than 50 documentary films as a director, and a further 600 as a producer. It has not proved to be very enriching financially, but very rewarding in so many different ways.

I have no regrets and would not have had it any other way.

It has given me the chance to tell the stories of an extraordinary range of people in more than 100 countries, and to stick my nose into so many different subject areas of personal interest, in the fields of politics, science, economics, history, religion and the arts.

Truly, I feel very blessed to have had the chance to experience so much of the world during the past 50 years.

Equally, I feel very blessed to have had the generous support of my inspirational wife Jean and our three adorable children Leo, Corinna and Tim (along with their own eight wonderful children), plus our circle of close friends.

BORN IN 1945

I was born in August 1945, just after the end of WW2, along with my twin brother John. My second brother Adrian arrived three years later. Initially, we all grew up on a farm in Shropshire, not far from Ironbridge.

My mother (Mary Baker) was English, the daughter of a tenant farmer near Oxford.

My father (Alexander Csáky) was Hungarian. In the late 20s he was sent to England to receive an English education, initially in London and then at Clayesmore School in Dorset.

My parents met as students at Reading University during the late 1930s. He was studying agriculture. She was studying botany. They married during WW2.

SCHOOL: 1951 - 1963

From the age of 6 to 18 I attended the preparatory and senior schools of Bedales, in Hampshire.

What with Bedales being the UK's very first "progressive co-educational boarding school", girls inevitably played a significant role in my life. However, one of my fondest memories of the fairer sex is being rewarded with a kiss from the Headmaster's very glamorous young wife (Kate Slack) after I won the annual Le Mans cycle race in 1963.

Bedales was founded at the end of the 19th Century, under the influence of the Arts & Crafts movement which put great store by making things by hand.

Learning drawing and painting in The Studio under the guidance of the Art Master Christopher Cash was a valuable experience, as was making things from metal and wood in The Workshop under the stern instruction of "Bif" Barker.

I was able to bring these two strands together when designing and building several stage sets for plays in The Lupton Hall Theatre. Productions included *Tiger At The Gates* and *Pelléas & Mélisande*.

Although I never progressed beyond Grade 5, I enjoyed playing the trumpet in the second school orchestra. However, I would have preferred to have been playing in a jazz band alongside Louis Armstrong.

From my early teens I developed a keen interest in following national and international news by reading the daily newspapers in the Common Room for an hour every morning before lessons. This interest was brought into sharp focus when one of the staff was kind enough to give me a copy of a newly published book called *The Anatomy of Britain* by Anthony Sampson (a journalist and historian who was to play a significant role in my future career as a documentary film maker).

Sampson's subsequent books ignited a life-long interest in modern history, eventually prompting me to make numerous documentary programmes about the historical context surrounding several of the major events that have occurred within my own lifetime.

ART SCHOOL: 1963 - 1971

To this day, I am not absolutely sure why it was assumed that both my twin brother and I would be going to art school immediately after leaving school - perhaps because we showed talent in that area, perhaps because we showed little talent in any other areas, although I greatly enjoyed studying history and biology.

During 1963-65 I attended the foundation course at Farnham School of Art, learning about drawing, painting, photography, pottery and bookbinding. During this time, I made a lot of wooden furniture - so much so that I was advised to become a furniture maker. However, I applied to Saint Martin's School of Art to study Graphic Design.

During my time at Saint Martin's, from 1965 to 1968, I concentrated on print-making and animation, but it was photography that really caught my interest - giving me the chance to capture documentary images of other people's lives, especially in other countries as I became more and more interested in travelling abroad, away from the constraints of middle-class England.

From the mid-60s I ran a commercial light-show business with my twin brother and half-a-dozen friends (including George Hardie, Pete Gray, Chris Keens and Simon Conolly)- providing special effects lighting for pop concerts and films featuring Jimmy Hendrix, James Brown and The Doors, etc.

In 1968 I secured a place in the Film School of the Royal College of Art. Prior to starting the three-year MA course, I spent three months in the USA where I got a job in Cambridge, Mas, working on an exhibition project called *Signs Lights Boston* which enabled me to make eight impressionistic 8 mm films about the transport and communication systems of Boston. To my delight, on my return to London, the films played at the ICA as the background to a jazz concert staged by the poetry magazine *Ambit*.

Much of my time at the RCA Film School, from the autumn of 1968 to the summer of 1971, was spent working as a cameraman and editor on the films of my fellow students.

However, even more of my time was devoted to outside activities including working for the designer and author Theo Crosby of the design group Pentagram, taking photographs for multi-screen installations in exhibitions, museums and international Expos.

GETTING ESTABLISHED IN FILM MAKING DURING THE 70s

My RCA graduation film was called VOX POP, featuring half-a-dozen friends ruminating about what they expected from life. It was picked to play in a student film festival at the National Film Theatre where it caught the eye of a new television arts magazine programme called *Aquarius*, presented by Humphrey Burton and produced by LWT for broadcast on the ITV network.

Consequently, immediately on leaving the RCA, I was lucky enough to join the production team of *Aquarius* from 1971 to 1973 - firstly as a researcher (working with such luminaries as Alfred Hitchcock and Leonard Bernstein, plus Kenny Everett and Rod Stewart), then as a director making my first one-hour film for UK television about the folk music of Morocco. The film was called *Berber*: I made the film through my first independent film production company *Pictures That Move*, with my future wife Jean Du Pasquier (a former painting student of Saint Martin's and the RCA Film School).

Shortly after making *Berber*, Jean and I got married and went on to have three children - Leo in 1973, followed by twins Corinna and Tim in 1976. Subsequently, the three of them have given us eight adorable grandchildren.

The 70s was a very busy decade while I worked hard to establish how to make a living to support a growing family.

Having acquired numerous skills since leaving school in 1963 I found it quite hard to settle on one specific career path. Consequently, I divided my time between making documentary films

for broadcast television; multi-media installations for exhibitions and museums; and working on several books as a writer, photographer and editor.

I directed numerous documentary films for the BBC (for strands including *Tomorrow's World*, *Man Alive* and *World About Us* before joining the Documentary Department).

I created several mixed-media, multi-screen installations for the Pentagram design group for museums and galleries including the Hayward Gallery (*Kinetics* about kinetic art, and *How to play the Environment Game* about the built environment).

The biggest installation was for the Exhibition of British Genius. It was called *The Future Us Now*, involving 40 slide projectors synchronised to a multi-channel soundtrack composed by Tim Souster (who was to provide the scores for more than 40 films during the following 25 years).

The Arts Council played an important role in my life during the 1970s. First it funded a film based on the exhibition *How to Play the Environment Game*; then it funded a more ambitious film called *How does it feel?* exploring the world of the senses. This second film was conceived with Adrian Munsey, a former fellow film student from the RCA Film School. It featured numerous people talking about the creative role of the senses, including the radical psychiatrist R D Laing, composer Michael Tippett, painter David Hockney, sculptor Joseph Beuys, anthropologist Edmund Leach, and many more. The film played in a new London cinema run by Derek Hill, and on the BBC Arts strand *Omnibus*.

In 1976 I edited a book based on the filmed interviews within *How does it feel?*. Also, I wrote the opening chapter of the book, with the title *Experience is Everything*. The book was commissioned by Thames & Hudson in the UK, and picked up by Harmony Books in the USA, and Forum Books in Scandinavia.

MAJOR INFLUENCES

In the late-70s I was deeply impressed by a couple of inspirational television series that played on the newly created BBC2. Firstly, *The Ascent of Man* presented by the author and scientist Jacob Bronowski. Secondly, *Life on Earth* presented by the naturalist David Attenborough. They provided me with a clear ambition to make both single programmes and long running series about subjects that could be of lasting interest and value to UK and international audiences - programming with a "long shelf-life", not the sort of disposable short-term programming that was filling up so much of the television schedules of the 70s (and today), but programming that followed the somewhat old-fashioned edict of John Reith, founder of the BBC - programming that informs, entertains and above all educates.

This approach, to focus primarily on making "evergreen" non-fiction programming for the UK and international television markets has stood me in good stead during the subsequent 40+ years, with the additional possibility of cinema and video distribution too.

However, looking back, I now realise that while making this sort of "blue chip" programming was a great privilege from a programme-maker's point-of-view, it was not a very commercial decision as a producer, often requiring months, and sometimes years to raise adequate budgets to fund the productions. Nevertheless, I would not have had it any other way.

It has been nothing short of thrilling to be able to create productions about geo-political events that have occurred during my own lifetime, events that still have resonance today - including the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima, China's Cultural Revolution, the Cold War including the Cuban Missile Crisis, the US hostage crisis in Iran, the massacre of Srebrenica, the unstoppable rise of unregulated capitalism, the history of the oil industry, and the history of Africa from an African point-of-view.

In addition to these historical projects, I have greatly enjoyed making biographies of stars from the arts, including: Rudolf Nureyev, Placido Domingo, Bob Marley, Benny Goodman, Josephine Baker and Sister Rosetta Tharpe.

A third strand of programme making has been the creation of special event films built around musical performance - films like *Mozart in Turkey* featuring Mozart's *Abduction from the Seraglio* performed in the Topkapi Palace, Istanbul; and *Africa Live: The Roll Back Malaria Concert* showcasing some 150 of Africa's finest musicians performing in Senegal (a project that went on to trigger the release of more than US\$50 billion to combat the spread of malaria in Africa).

Apart from a couple of long-running weekly arts magazine programmes (*Brunch* with Mariella Frostrup for Channel 5 and *The Pier* for ITV's Meridian), I have not ventured into making much fast-turn-around programming, preferring to stick with more timeless programming with the longer shelf-life.

CONTENT IS EVERYTHING

The only criteria that I have ever considered when committing myself to a new production has been whether the content has editorial merit - whether it meets the Reithian criteria of providing information, entertainment and above all education to the widest possible audience.

Equally, I have always tried to make each production as profitable as possible - not least in order to have enough money left over to make another production or two.

The creation of Channel Four in the late 70s, was a very big event in my career as it was set up as a publisher/broadcaster to commission independent film makers like myself to provide more adventurous forms of programming than either the BBC or ITV were commissioning at that time.

THE 80s

I was lucky enough to secure a contract from Channel Four to develop a series of eight x 1-hour films with the title *Africa: The History of a Continent*. It was written and presented by the historian Basil Davidson and enabled Africans to tell the history of the African continent from an African point-of-view, not from the more familiar European point-of-view.

I was the executive producer of the series, while also directing one episode called *Caravans of Gold*. The series played on television worldwide and was nominated for an International Emmy, while winning numerous other awards. It has been very satisfying to see the series being used in schools and universities throughout Europe and especially in the USA for the past 30 years.

The success of the *Africa* series secured me another eight-part series for Channel Four, as series director. It was called *Oil* and based on the book *The Severn Sisters* by the historian and journalist Anthony Sampson. The series explored the history of the oil industry from both a social and a political point of view. During the making of this series I had the pleasure of getting to know Anthony Sampson well.

A few years later, I came up with the idea to making a six x 1-hour series about the machinations of the global economic system for BBC2. I asked Anthony to write and present the series. He came up with the excellent title *The Midas Touch*. I produced the series, and directed it along with my former Film School colleague Mick Gold.

But first I had to raise a substantial production budget to enable us to film in some 25 countries around the world. This involved pre-selling the series to coproduction partners which included BBC2 and the Japanese broadcaster TV Asahi.

It should be stressed that all three of these major series (*Africa*, *Oil* and *The Midas Touch*) were very expensive - involving lengthy research and shooting trips in many countries. Consequently, it was always necessary to bring in co-production partners in the form of broadcasters and distributors from across Europe, the USA, Japan and Australia, etc. As a result of creating these co-productions, I was able to build up a robust address book of very loyal co-production partners who have proved invaluable over the years.

In between making these ambitious series, I also made several single one-off films - the first being a biography for Channel Four called *Josephine Baker: Chasing a Rainbow* (directed by Christopher Ralling) which won an International Emmy in 1986. This was followed by one of my favourite films *Killing the Dragon* for ITV's *First Tuesday* strand about a radical cure for heroin addiction being administered by Buddhist monks in Thailand.

In 1988 I was invited to join the distinguished independent production company Antelope Films as an Executive Director. Two years later I was appointed CEO and Creative Director of Antelope - a role that I have held to this day, for more than 30 years.

THE 90s

Throughout the 90s I worked hard to ensure that Antelope greatly increased its output - from two to three major productions per year (including the International Emmy winning series *The Heart of the Dragon*) to more than 100 productions per year by the end of the decade.

Notable productions included the opera film *Mozart in Turkey* filmed within the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul; *Srebrenica: A Cry from the Grave*, *Hiroshima: The decision to drop the bomb*, *The Cuban Missile Crisis* (winner of the News & Documentary Emmy award in 1992); *444 Days: The US Hostage Crisis in Iran*, along with an Oscar nominated movie called *Himalaya: L'Enfance d'un Chef*, plus numerous biographies including Chairman Mao Zedong, Bob Marley, Rudolf Nureyev, Benny Goodman, Buddy Holly and Plácido Domingo.

As an independent producer and director, working outside the cosy club of television broadcast companies, I greatly appreciated being made a Fellow of the Royal Television Society in 1998, with the citation: *In recognition of an outstanding contribution to the furtherance of television.*

INDUSTRY BODIES

While I think of myself as a film maker and not really as a businessman, I have had to learn certain skills in order to be able to make the films I want to make. One of those skills concerns the running of profitable independent production companies.

From the earliest days of being an independent producer and director, back in the 70s, I recognised the need to be part of the industry bodies that could strengthen one's hand when negotiating with broadcasters.

Over the years I joined the councils of AIP (Association of Independent Producers), IPPA (Independent Programme Producers Association) and PACT (Producers Alliance for Cinema and Television).

As a consequence of these effective trade bodies, the independent sector has grown and consolidated significantly during the past 40+ years.

Equally, I have joined both BAFTA (British Academy for Film and Television Arts) and the RTS (Royal Television Society).

SINCE THE TURN OF THE MILLENNIUM

The turn of the new millennium provided me with time for a rethink.

I had been working flat out as an independent producer/director for 30 years. The pressure of running Antelope was becoming quite a strain what with producing up to 100 productions a year with a turnover approaching £10 million. My children were all educated. The mortgage was paid off.

Boosted by the success of the opera film *Mozart in Turkey*, I decided to slow down a bit, move out of London to West Sussex and return to what I enjoyed most: taking a hands-on role in making my own films as a writer, producer and director, and sometimes cameraman too.

The first thing I did was to buy a small and modestly priced video camera in order to be able to shoot my own broadcast quality documentaries.

In 2003 I took the camera to Iran to shoot a couple of programmes for BBC4. The first was called *Hotspot Iran*, a one-hour film about the ongoing antagonism between Iran and the West. The second was called *Shirin Ebadi: Divided by the Prize* - a half-hour programme about the human rights lawyer and political activist Shirin Ebadi receiving the Nobel Peace prize. It felt very liberating to be shooting my own films on my own camera, in Iran - a country that I have always greatly enjoyed visiting in spite of the theocratic regime.

Subsequently, I shot a half-hour programme for BBC4 about political cartoonists in Israel and Gaza City – a very grim and dispiriting production.

The most ambitious production since the turn of the millennium was *Africa Live: The Roll Back Malaria Concert*. I conceived it with the brilliant Senegalese musician Yousou N'Dour as a

concert and concert movie project to raise global awareness of the deadly impact of malaria throughout the African continent.

The plan was to stage and film a two-day concert, resulting in a two-hour concert movie for worldwide distribution via cinema, television and video, featuring 150 of Africa's finest musicians performing in front of an audience of 50,000 in Senegal, West Africa.

After two years of fundraising, the concert took place in 2005 with the backing of the BBC, Arté France, the CNC and, most importantly, the United Nations Foundation (set up by Ted Turner).

By the end of 2005 the edited film was completed for television and video distribution. We premiered it at the United Nations headquarters in New York in 2006. It went on to play on television worldwide. Most importantly, the film helped trigger the release of US\$20 billion from The World Bank, World Health Organisation, UNICEF and the Gates Foundation to combat the spread of malaria in Africa – resulting in a significant drop in the malaria mortality rate throughout the continent.

On a more modest scale, my two favourite one-off documentary films during the past 10 years have been my biography *Sister Rosetta Tharpe: The Godmother of Rock & Roll*, and *The Jazz Ambassadors* (directed by Hugo Berkeley) set during the Cold War. It proved very satisfying to see these two one-off films have such a significant impact – especially in the USA.

TEACHING & LECTURING

During the past 40 years I have participated in numerous film and television festival discussions, while also giving lectures (at festivals including Sheffield in the UK and Banff in Canada).

Equally, I have lectured at several film and television schools (including the National Film & Television School and Westminster University).

Teaching at ESoDoc (the European Social Documentary School) since the turn of the millennium, while Hugh Purcell was Head of Studies, has been very rewarding. I have always found working with bright and passionate young film makers very invigorating.

In 2017 I was granted a retrospective at the Chichester Film Festival, with the screening of 10 past films and a 90-minute lecture with the title *Telling True Stories*.

During the past 20 years a small number of my past films have been screened in universities and art house cinemas in Europe and the USA. I have always enjoyed being asked to introduce the films and provide Q & A sessions after the screenings. I have always enjoyed getting feedback from audiences - favourable or un-favourable. Productions have included *Mozart in Turkey*, *Africa: The history of a continent*, *Africa Live: The Roll Back Malaria Concert* and *Sister Rosetta Tharpe: The Godmother of Rock & Roll*.

KEEPING ACTIVE

Much as I would like to, I am not overly confident about making much of a contribution within the film and television industry after 2021.

However, in 2018, for the second time, I bought a wonderful new digital still and video camera, enabling me to shoot 5K video for television and cinema, along with very high resolution still images. This has kept me in a position to shoot pilots and even complete documentary films of broadcast quality, plus stills for books, etc.

In the spring of 2019, the new camera proved very effective in Moldova where I shot a 10-minute pilot with the violinist Meg-Rosaleen Hamilton for a documentary series about the many traditional forms of music in Eastern Europe.

One of my current projects includes an interactive video production about the environment of Chichester Harbour, targeting school children.

WHAT I WILL MISS MOST

In addition to the mental stimulation and excitement of getting stuck into the researching and writing of new projects, the thing I will miss most about documentary film making is the sense of camaraderie amongst the crews.

During the past 50 years, I have greatly enjoyed working with the cameramen Robert Alazraki, Mike Shrimpton and Michael Miles – often in quite challenging locations in Africa, the Middle East and the Far East but always a pleasure.

MY FAVOURITE PRODUCTIONS

From the 600 productions that I have been responsible for (more than 50 as a director and more than 500 as a producer or executive producer), the ones that I am most proud of are listed below. I produced or executive produced them all, and directed all with the exception of the ones indicated:

Major series for TV (political):

“AFRICA: The history of a continent” with Basil Davidson for Channel Four. I executive produced this International Emmy nominated 8 x 1-hour series and directed one episode called “CARAVANS OF GOLD”.

OIL with Anthony Sampson for Channel Four.
I directed all of this 8 x 1-hour series.

THE MIDAS TOUCH with Anthony Sampson for BBC2.
I produced this 6 x 1-hour series and directed 4 episodes, with Mick Gold directing two episodes.

Historical specials for TV:

HIROSHIMA: The Decision to Drop the Bomb for BBC2.
Directed by Jeremy Bennett

CHAIRMAN MAO: The Last Emperor for BBC2
Directed by Jeremy Bennett

THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS for BBC2
Directed by Jeremy Bennett. 1992 Emmy Award for best News & Documentary.

444 DAYS for BBC2
Directed by Leslie Woodhead

THE JAZZ AMBASSADORS for BBC4
Directed by Hugo Berkeley. 2019 Peabody Award.

Music specials for TV and video:

AFRICA LIVE: The Roll Back Malaria Concert for BBC4

MOZART IN TURKEY for BBC2

Human stories for TV:

RETURN TO HONG KONG narrated by James Cameron for BBC2's strand *World About Us*.

KILLING THE DRAGON for ITV's *First Tuesday*

GEIKO GIRL for BBC2's *Under the Sun*

Biographies for TV and DVD:

JOSEPHINE BAKER: Chasing A Rainbow for Channel Four
Directed by Christopher Ralling. 1986 International Emmy Award.

RUDOLF NUREYEV: The Story of a Dancer for ITV's The South Bank Show
Directed by Paddy Foy

ERNEST SATOW: A Diplomat in Japan for BBC2
Directed by Christopher Ralling.

BOB MARLEY: Rebel Music for Channel Four
Directed by Jeremy Marre

PLACIDO DOMINGO: A Musical Life for ITV

BENNY GOODMAN: The King of Swing for ITV
Directed by Ken Corden

SHIRIN EBADI: Divided by the Prize for BBC4

SISTER ROSETTA THARPE: The Godmother of Rock 'n Roll for BBC4

Arts magazine series for TV:

THE PIER for ITV (Meridian)

BRUNCH with Mariella Frostrup for Channel Five

Films for the cinema, TV and video:

HIMALAYA - L'Enfance d'un Chef directed by Eric Vallé
Co-producer with Galatée Films