

## THE FILM MAKER`S TALE

### Dusty Rhodes

*Dusty`s tale is one of the extremes of fortune. Coming to Milton Keynes gave him the opportunity to realise a “burning ambition” to work freelance in film and video. He`s taken several gambles along the way, usually for all-or-nothing stakes. At one point he lost everything he possessed.*

I used to visit Bletchley – when I was in the Territorial Army of all things – in about 1969. It seems ages ago, I doubt if they`d even accept me now. There was a lot of talk about the new city so I decided to move here. At the same time I decided to train as a teacher because I couldn`t think of anything else to do. I got on quite well with the kids and was helping out at Derwent Drive youth club. Years ago, Derwent Drive was the one and only place to go and see bands. Status Quo, AC/DC – I could reel off a whole list of people who played there when they were nothing. Anyway, that was why I came really and I decided to take a teacher training course and a Youth and Community work course here. While all this was happening I was making 8mm films. I`ve always been absolutely mad about films. I got my first camera when I was about fifteen. I used it so much that it wore out.

I went to Canada in 1973. I decided with a friend to do the trip all young men must do and we hitch hiked from one end of the country to the other. When I came back I started to get stuck into video. I was working at Derwent drive again and I was shown some half inch video gear they`d got at the Media Centre. The equipment was a community source but there were only a couple of groups using it then so I decided to have a go. Unfortunately, one of my failings is that I never like doing anything in a small way so I embarked on this massive documentary drama based on a book called `The Gates` - the kids chose it – which is all about school phobia. It was a bit of a mish-mash but it was partly about a load of people getting together and making something to put on video. I remember spending hours and hours editing the thing with a stopwatch and a chinagraph pencil. Ten years on the equipment is unbelievable compared with what we used then. If we got it right we were lucky. It was shown mainly to other groups but its premier was at the teachers training college. It was a terrific fascination at the time, everybody wanted to be in it.

### A Real Riot

I was still at teachers` training college and had settled down to the idea that I was going to be a Drama or English teacher but because of all the video and film projects I was involved with I met this chap called Michael Barrett. He had been given a brief from the Home Office and Development Corporation to set up a community cable television station. It would be in programme form dealing with local issues and happenings.

He had a look at the things I'd been doing and about six months later turned up at my house one evening and asked if I'd like a job. I said "Yes!" I jumped at the chance because for me it was the kind of thing that only dreams are made of. I had to take the decision of coming off this teacher training course and take up a two year contract with Channel 40.

Channel 40 was a breakthrough for local broadcasting in this country, although it had been happening in America for a long time. We were one of several projects but the first to be government funded. We did all kinds of things, election specials where we'd courier video tapes about on motorbikes so we could go out almost live. We did a rock show once from a youth club which was a real riot. I spent nearly three years at Channel 40 but at that point there were a few rows. It's a bit vague in my mind now, but I decided to quit along with other people. Eventually the television station closed down and the whole thing turned into a radio station. The greatest thing Channel 40 gave me was an ACTT broadcast ticket.

When I left I spent all the money I had buying a film camera and the ancillary equipment to go with it. It was the standard equipment used for doing documentary or T.V. news work. I bought it without having any work and phoned up BBC news. They gave us some film to make a little report to see if we were any good and we took it to a carnival where a local stuntman was going to drive a car over all these other cars. It was quite a good stunt so we shot the film and interviewed the guy and then took the stuff down to the BBC dubbing theatre in London. The guy who gave us the film watched what we'd done, scratched his chin and said: "Fine, great, a few problems with the exposure . . ." But he thought it was good and he said he'd call us and to our surprise he did, three days later. We had to go and sit outside this judge's house and wait for him to come out. He never appeared but we got paid £75 so I didn't mind. The second call was when Lady Spencer died and donated her eyes to somebody or other and we had to go and see the surgeon. That was the first of ours that was ever transmitted.

Unfortunately, although the money started coming in we weren't getting enough work to sustain us. The car kept breaking down and all sorts of things started going wrong. The last major job I was called out for was for CBS in London. CBS told me to go to Marwell Park Zoo and cover a giraffe called Victor who was on its last legs. I can't remember quite why it was so newsworthy now. Anyway, we arrived late. Just as we got to this bloody zoo the giraffe died and we had to deal with this very irate American female reporter. We got in terrible trouble and I knew that I needed a decent car and decent camera which I couldn't afford so there wasn't much point going on. I sold my equipment and got out altogether. In fact I set up a furniture business.

It took three years to get the furniture business going, dealing in antiques and stripped pine furniture and that was really hard work. We started off in a kitchen and ended up with God knows how many square feet of warehouse, two shops – one in Central Milton Keynes and one in Olney – a workshop, a London supplier and a French shipper. We went bust in the end. It's easy to forget but at that time, in 1978-79, this country moved into the grip of real depression. For me, in a business like

that, the recession was really heavy. People stopped spending money altogether. Luxury goods plummeted and the firm had to liquidate. Running that company was just plain hard work for absolutely no real returns so I'm bloody glad it went the way it did, otherwise I'd still be working thirteen hours a day and earning less than the till girls in Woolworths.

I dropped out for a couple of years after the firm went bust. I was mentally exhausted and had a little bit of a nervous breakdown. I didn't know where I was going. I just used to sit at home. It's hard to explain, but when you've had liquidation followed by bankruptcy and the people have come and taken all your bloody furniture and every scrap of money. . . .All my possessions went. I sat there on my floorboards and wondered what the hell I was bothering for. I've always described myself as a doer but this time it got me into trouble and I had to accept the responsibility for having got that company off the ground and providing nine people's wage packets. After that experience I got ill. Slowly I started reading film books again. I watched T.V. and got interested in watching movies. I got a burning ambition. If somebody had come to see me and said: "If I take those two fingers off your hand, you can direct 'Battle of the Falklands' for MGM," I would have said: "Cut 'em off now." Because that's what I wanted to do. I started operating cameras again and got back into video. I did a couple of promos for local bands and slowly began getting my contracts together. I invited myself to see people at Sony and had a look at the new cameras they'd got. Then I met somebody from Volkswagen/Audi. They'd started using freelance people so I filmed cars and things for them and at the same time got my own projects together again – shooting little dramas because the equipment was available to me. Latterly I've got involved with Videovision Associates. We do music promos for broadcast television and things for pretty big companies, adverts, all sorts of stuff.

It might seem more obvious for me to move to London now things are going well. I can stay with my brother in Hampstead if I need to but there's something about Milton Keynes. . . . I travel about the country and Milton Keynes is the only place I know that has this electric atmosphere of let's BUILD, let's DO. And while there's a lot of apathy – quite understandably from unemployed people, I know what it's like after the collapse of my business – it's in sharp contrast to the other people you meet in Milton Keynes who are generating a hell of a lot of enthusiasm. Very often it comes from creative people who love what they do – fashion designers, artists, people who plug along on their own. Milton Keynes is a tremendous backdrop because of the building and construction and the newness which I think goes hand in hand with creativity. I'm lucky to live where I do. I've got a nice house with the City Centre right outside my window. I was a country boy and I've had the sheep and the cows and the farm and what I love now is right outside – a huge expanse of glass.