

Reflections of a life in the movies

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Tony Buckley has devoted his life to the realisation of Australian stories on screen, and has witnessed first hand, the film industry's peaks and troughs. He speaks to Peter Galvin about committing his memories to the public record in his new book, *Behind a Velvet Light Trap: A Filmmaker's Journey From Cinesound to Cannes*.



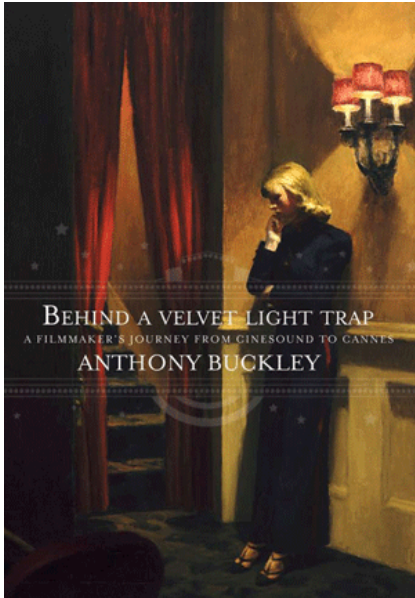
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Tony Buckley has spent a lifetime making movies. It was part of his family legend that in some way this career choice was destiny. Buckley's father said he could remember, as a boy, the picture show behind the back fence of the family home on Sydney's north shore but by the time Tony was born in 1937, all signs of a 'palace of dreams' had disappeared. For his 10th birthday, the young Buckley asked his parents for a magic lantern (a slide projector). At school he began making films and was the designated projectionist. At 15 he got a job in a film lab. Unlike many of his peers, Buckley has never known a professional life outside of the picture business.

Touch down at any point in Australian film history since the mid-50s and Buckley seems to have been there. Newsreels, commercials, the coming of TV, the Australian feature film revival of the 70s, the mini-series boom of the 80s, the bureaucratic shake-ups of the 90s, and the recent struggles of local filmmakers to gain commercial acceptance in a dwindling market place, Buckley has seen it all up close and holds a deeply felt view about it all, too. An amateur historian since a teenager, the one-time editor and veteran producer told friends and colleagues some years ago that he was edging toward retirement. It was about this time he started to write a book.

The result is 'Behind a Velvet Light Trap'. Hand-written over six years, the 400-page book is a detailed, frank and very funny narrative that has an intimacy in its prose that is more diary-like than "tell-all" in style. Essentially, it is an insider's view of the follies and fortunes in Australia's film and TV business since 1953 with a supporting cast of characters that includes Mel Gibson, James Mason, and Rudolph Nureyev.

For film fans there are generous and startling portraits of Australian filmmakers such as Ray Longford and Ken Hall but also the great British director Michael Powell (Buckley's mentor). He says it is not quite a memoir and it is certainly not a biography. "For starters no one has heard of Tony Buckley!" he told SBS with a laugh. "This is what three publishers, who turned the book down, told me."



Composed without an advance or publisher of any kind, Buckley's original 198,000 word text has been edited down to 156,000 by Hardie Grant. Like his films, the book has all the care and grace of a work that seems hand tooled; even the illustrations are a highlight. Instead of routine press shots, many of them are rare snapshots from private archives that offer a candid and personal glimpse into a recent past.

To the greater public Buckley is not quite a brand name but to the film industry he's a Godfather (well, perhaps a highly thought of Great Uncle). For a time in the 60s he was the country's leading film editor. He won plaudits in the industry for his sublime work as picture editor on Michael Powell's *Age of Consent* (1969) and Ted Kotcheff's *Wake in Fright* (1971). In 1967 Buckley was amongst the first to be charged with sparking government support for a feature film industry. This was because he had spent years making a low budget documentary called *Forgotten Cinema*; an account of Australia's feature film pioneers. His first public success arrived in the mid-70s when he produced the feature *Caddie* (1976). Buckley's career as a film producer has been spiked by successes like *Bliss* (1985), experiments like *The Night*, *The Prowler* (1978), flops like *The Killing of Angel Street* (1981) and recent highlights like *Oyster Farmer* (2005).

In the 80s he turned to TV and produced hit mini-series like *The Harp in the South* and its sequel *Poor Man's Orange*, *The Heroes I & II* and recently two hugely successful Bryce Courtenay adaptations, *The Potato Factory* and *Jessica*.

Like the man himself, the book is well mannered, warm, candid and somewhat reserved: "I hope people won't be too frustrated that there's no salacious scandal," he says. For the movie fan, the book offers a raft of anecdotes and minutiae concerned with the taxing task of wrenching a movie or TV show out of technology and science, ego and business...often a budget that would not cover the catering bill on the last Bond flick.

Buckley's book puts paid to the myth that the film business is full of hard-boiled operators, if not egomaniacs. This portrait of an industry (or industries if you count television) is complex and diverse, and generous. The book, Buckley argues, breaks from the tradition of many first-person showbusiness memoirs by paying close attention to the job – in this case producing – itself. "I have a library full of books by filmmakers, and they talk at length about themselves but not about what they do and I wanted the reader to come away with knowledge of what a producer actually does."

Indeed, professionalism, what it means, and what it takes, is a major theme in the book. And Buckley can be quietly scathing on this issue. He describes one government filmmaking institution as a "sheltered workshop" and his portrait of one of the most successful independent TV producers of recent years is a devastating picture of indulgence, decadence and professional irresponsibility. But the tone remains a step away from rancorous: "I don't think score settling achieves anything," he says. Persons in the public eye are notoriously litigious and consequently Buckley says, and "legal-ing" the book became a trial. "I was advised that I could not write the truth," he explains. "Some of the experiences that have been touched on in the book have been heavily censored by the lawyers." Buckley says that even if one understands something as "fact" it cannot be stated as such; it must be presented as an opinion: "And you have to express that opinion carefully." He says he hopes it doesn't come off as anodyne or sanitised and "if it doesn't, that's a credit to the publishers and the editors."

Buckley is honest about his failures and catastrophes too. In 'Light Trap' he relates in hilarious detail, the mortifying moment at the Cannes film festival when *Bliss*, the first feature from Ray Lawrence (*Lantana*) screened to a gob-smacked audience. "There's no denying that 600 people walked out." Rather than retreat into denial, Buckley says the Bliss team turned the situation on its head: "We turned it around and told people to go and make up their own mind." It paid off; *Bliss* became a hit at home (at one point its screen average out grossed *Rambo*), and walked off with Best Picture at the AFls that year.

Perhaps the best thing about the book is that it is a firsthand social history, recording the mores and manners of an Australia that is long gone.

Unlike other industry veterans of a similar age and experience Buckley remains up to the minute in his opinions and active (though officially 'retired' he is preparing another feature and is making an independent documentary about one of his favourite subjects, trains). He remains dogged – his heroic efforts to restore *Wake in Fright*, the book reveals, is only the latest in a long line of "rescue jobs" advocating film as an art and craft, though Buckley is loathe to take any personal credit.

He admits to some pessimism in that the film bureaucracy seems to have "lost its way" and that the audience for theatrical features is clearly on the decline.

Still he says: "I'm optimistic always and as corny as it sounds there's nothing wrong with the film industry that a good film can't cure."