

ANTHONY SIMMONSInterviewed by Rodney Giesler on 25.9.97

Born 16.12.22 in West Ham: memories of Queens Road street market. Parents market traders. Father a Polish Jewish emigré. Went to Upton Cross school then to West Ham grammar. Teacher a left wing poet, Peter Hewitt, who encouraged his writing. Overcame his lack of language. Evacuated to Brentwood. Good rapport with teachers. Won a place at the LSE at Cambridge to study law. Stayed until 1942. Politically active. President of the Union. Organised student work camps getting in harvest. Called up in Army. Sent to Isle of Man. Ran ABCAs. Thence to India in June 1945 running army newspapers. Returned to university. LSE now back in London. Trained as a barrister. Lived in Soho. Became vice president of NUS campaigning for full student grants. In 1946 became part of Student Union delegation to Prague. Paid for the trip with cigarettes. Watched black market in operation. On to Hungary, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. Described journey in "History Goes on Holiday". His political outlook at the time. Called to the bar in 1948. NUS very active. In 1947 decided to repeat European trip as a film. Raised money, joined by director/cameraman (Charles Heath) and Owen Andrews. Reached Prague and decided to do film on a Bulgarian dancer instead. Arrested in Bulgaria. No sign of dancer. Decided to make a film on a Bulgarian village of Plovdiv instead. ("*Balkan Village*") Wrote a script on the spot. Instructed to "tell them what to do in front of the camera", he became a director as well. Arrested again on way back. Got home to find that no one wanted their footage. (44'35")

End of Side 1.

Through Donald Alexander got *DATA* to pay for processing. No one could see a commercial future in it. "*March of Time*" offer turned down. Peter Brinson at Film Centre arranged for film to be finished in Rome. Went there during summer break. Film stuck in Customs. Removed by bribery. Fellini working next door. Also Giuseppe de Santis. Watched the Italians at work. Caught the smell of film. "*Balkan Village*" much admired. Asked to stay as a director. Decided to return home as a barrister. Film was banned in Italy as too left wing. Banned in Bulgaria as too right wing. Film finally turned up in London in mid fifties. Never finished. Always considered himself an outsider. Makes "European" films. Took ACT on to the streets, filming May Day celebrations, etc. Had to leave chambers because he was Jewish. Joined Leon Cloré. Had an idea for a film based on music hall songs. Shot "*Sunday by the Sea*" with Walter Lassally at Southend in five days. Won Grand Prix at Venice. "*Bow Bells*" followed. Still playing as a short. Unemployable as he was considered as being without technical training. Never settled into such a discipline. Not accepted by Free Cinema. Didn't find his commercial feet until "*Four in the Morning*". Three short films in one. Scripts built out of improvisations. Backed by the NFFC. Cannes screening. Origins of "*The Optimists of Nine Elms*". Five years to bring it to the screen. (46'00")

End of Side 2.

Problems of finding a niche. Neither a "BFI" director nor a "commercial" director. Made "*Poisoned Candy*" as BBC/US co-production. Problems of straddling different methods of working, and different cultures. Quotes Mike Radford's experiences. Contrasting Italian neo-realism with today's sub culture. Discourses on the state of British cinema, and the nature of TV commercials. Producers making films for each other, not their audiences. "*Optimists*" a great critical, but not commercial, success. Taken as a tax loss. "*Black Joy*" ran into copyright problems. How it was made. US blacks could not identify with Brixton blacks. Unsuccessful in working for the BBC. Directed some "*The Professionals*" series. Eighty setups in a day. Sent the book "*On Giant's Shoulders*": the story of a thalidomide boy. Made for the BBC. A big hit. "*Day After the Fair*" for TV with Hannah Gordon. Took ten years to get made. Followed by "*Poisoned Candy*". Story about hole in the heart baby "*Whose Turn to Live?*" scrapped because of political worries. Working on "*Inspector Frost*". A different tempo of work. Never a true journeyman director. Problems of ageism. (43'14")

End of Side 3.

A view of Hollywood. A lot of respect for older directors. The story of a Channel Four commission. Follow up on the thalidomide boy. Story taken from him because he was not young enough. (6'18")

End of Side 4.

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