WALTER LASSALLY

BEHP 0033 T Walter Lassally Transcript

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SIDE 1, TAPE 1

RF: In view of the fact that you've written a book it would be pointless in fact to go over what in fact is contained in that, I think what might be useful is to fill out certain areas which you didn't have the space for or for some reason didn't appear in the book. And maybe go into certain aspects in terms of general individuals as well as movies in terms of the outline of your career.

I apologise for not having read the book. Is the book full of great historical detail or is it more philosphical.

WL: It's hardly philosophical, I would describe it as a collection of annecdotes interspersed with a light sprinkling of technical information which might be useful to budding aspirants, there is a certain amount of historical material but only in a light vein. And certainly could be amplified in many directions.

RF: Why don't we then go through our questionaire.

You were born in Germany

WL: Berlin.

RF: In 1926. That was a very fascinating period, the Weimar Republic, I wonder what memories you have.

WL: Only bad ones, of the later part, my father was in the industry but a very different area from my own, he was a one man film unit and he was working in technical films for education and training. He made a large number of silent documentaries, intended for non theatrical use and two feature films, not feature films, he made two full length documentaries, one about the German textile industry and one about the profession of becoming a motor mechanic. And they were shown in cinemas and had sound. That was the biggest thing he did. And then with the coming of the Nazis in 1933 his work was suddenly cut off totally, because although we weren't Jews, we were non Ayrians, as you know the Nazis went back several generations for their search for Jewishness in the background, so he was not allowed to join the professional association and without being a member of the professional association you couldn't work, this was the Reichfilmkammer, so after 33 he never worked any more. In 33 I was 6 years old and my only experience of seeing him work was we had an animation bench at home and I was allowed to help there occasionally turning the handle of the camera, which was a hand turned camera on top of the animation bench, frame by frame, and I never had the experience of seeing him work at anything other than that but that background must have played some part in leading me in the direction which I subsequently went.

RF: Do you know what brought him into the film industry.

WL: He was a bit of a rebel because all the other members of his family, all his uncle and aunts and so on were in the coffee business in Hamburg, and he left there and went to Berlin and settled in Berlin and studied engineering and he started using film as a tool in engineering and then started his own company called Film Ingineur Lassally and ran that until the coming of the Nazis, the sad part of that is that every bit of his work has disappeared and I have a rather sad sheet of clippings in my processing which is the sum total of the remainder of his work, which is a one 4 ft, 5 ft frame of film from every one of his films, that's all thats left.

RF: You were 6 in 1933 when the Nazis came to power. Do you have any recollection of those through a child's eyes.

WL: A few, mainly later on, 36 or 37 when I was a bit older prior to our emigrating. Of course it all escalated rather fast then, and I have a recollection of climbing a tree to see Hitler going past in a parade, and somebody helped me up the tree and when I wanted to get down he was gone and I couldn't get down. Then it all turned more serious. In late 38 may father was arrested in a sweep of Jews and non Ayrians when he was taken to a concentration camp where he stayed for 4 months whilst my mother made frantic efforts to get him out and the only way to get him out was to have proof we were leaving the country. It was really a money collecting exercise. They knew you couldn't take anything with you so they did it as a regular procedure, they just encouraged people to emigrate leaving their possessions behind.

Eventually she got him out and he came to England, he had a job opportunity in Canada, Regina, Saskatuan, as a works photographer, but the paper work wasn't competed and we couldn't get a visa until the paper work was completed. So my mother bought a forged Peruvian visa, on the basis of which we got an English transit visa, and that's how we arrived in England, just before the outbreak of war.

RF: You say your father had not been allowed to work in the film industry post 33 so what did he do.

WL: He just tried, he made 3 trips to England, he tried to emigrate, to see if he could establish himself anywhere else. But Germany was way ahead of England in that particular field and nobody had ever heard of using film as a tool in engineering at that time and so he found great difficulties in getting a foot hold here. In addition he had problems in that a lot of his money was tied up in a trust fund which only became available to him on the death of his mother which didn't happen until 38, so there was that problem as well, so he did virtually nothing after 38.

RF: So there was no direct example really.

When you say film in engineering, that was a tool in research.

WL: For technical studies, how processes work, slow motion and just macro photography and things like that, to investigate faults in steel which became common place but weren't all that commonplace then.

RF: You arrived in England in 1939.

WL: Two months before the outbreak of war and came to London and took a flat, a room, a flat would be something, we lived for a short time in a hotel in Bloomsbury, then by an extraordinary co-incidence our first base in England was a room in 3 Ladbroke Gardens, we're now sitting in 6 Ladbroke Gardens. Then just before the outbreak of war we moved to Richmond and I lived in Richmond with my father and mother for almost 20 years before we moved elsewhere. My mother actually lived there till she died but I moved out.

RF: Were you considered to be enemy aliens.

WL: I think there was a sort of kinder word and my father was briefly interned in the Isle of Man but he passed the tribunal without any problems and came out after a few months. He was there just long enough to miss the London Blitz.

RF: Did he go back into the film business.

WL: He tried but he never did. He found it very difficult to get a foothold here. He worked on two extremely small industrial film projects, one of which was called Runklelight, some form of plastic I believe, I can'at remember what the other one was. Again he just never got a chance to get a look in again. What he did, for a while during the war he was a fire watcher in a laundry in Hampton Wick, Hampton Court, and he spent quite a time working for the government translating German technical documents after the war, he spent quite a long time doing that. As for film work he never had the chance to do any more, various projects he tried to get off the ground but nothing ever took off.

RF: Did you arrive with any proficiency in the English language.

WL: Just school English. I was taken out of my secondary school in Berlin a year before I left, because again they threw all the non Ayrians out, so I had a year private teaching before I came here.

RF: As an adolescent was on harrassed by one's peers if one didn't conform to the state's requirements.

WL: Not madly, I couldn't complain about that, I was aware that I was being treated in a special manner, but of course you see it with hindsight, it was all relatively mild and we're just grateful we got out with our lives intact, and as a family intact, I'm an only child and the three of us got out which is a lot better than what happened to many other people. And in fact my two aunts died in another concentration camp in Germany.

RF: Did you have any leanings towards cinema.

WL: Not really, it started seriously, I had a normal kind of interest in the cinema, I used to go, but not more than anyone else.

RF: Not a critical one.

WL: No I don't think so. I was too young. My main interest developed in my last year in school in England when i was about 14, 15.

RF: What form did it take.

WL: It formed quite quickly after, before leaving school I was already determined to become a camera man, I concentrated on that side, and it became a sort of obsession.

RF: Had you come to that through an interest in photography or was it specifically motion pictures which attracted you.

WL: Specifically motion pictures and specifically camera work. And I was interested in still photography only as an adjunct to that or a means to that end.

RF: Did you start with any of the small gauges as a child, 8 or 9.5

WL: No that was way beyond us. We were very poor when we arrived. We all lived in one room for many years, during the war, in fact till 1948, we all lived in one small room with a kitchenette attached.

RF: What memories do you have of your schooling.

WL: I liked it, I have good memories of school. I went to a school near Richmond in East Sheen which wasn't called a grammar school, it was a country school but it was upper eschelons, but there was also a lower eschelon which was called a technical school or something like that.

RF: I went to a county school but I don't think we had a technical school attached.

WL: I mean in the same area, there was another school of a somewhat lower character. I have good recollections of my school and I came first in English in my second term at school which surprised everybody, but its not all that surprising, they all took it for granted and I went by the book. I actually came first in English.

RF: What were your favourite subjects as a young man.

WL: I was science orientated, my favourite subject was chemistry, and an interest in the arts was rather lacking, in my youth and developed rather late. So I entered the industry with a rather science orientated vent but realised quite quickly that was less than 50% of it, I look at it now as being more of an art than a science.

RF: I think arts were rather perfunctorily dealt with by the educational system at the time. I remember at my school trying to draw a few daffodils.

WL: Probably, and I was so bad I couldn't draw for toffy, I was very bad for it, and I took the alternative, I took the easy way

out, there was an alternative of art, woodwork or a third language, so I took German as my third language, because French was taught as the first foreign language, it was obligatory, but the second foreign language was an alternative to art or woodwork and I was terrible at both. In the examinations at the end, the matric, I took German of course.

RF: Very sensible. Did you get 100%.

WL: I don't know about 100% but I got 9 passes or distinctions, I did quite well in the matric.

RF: We're about 3 months apart in our age so we were obviously doing the same thing. And then went on to A levels now and then higher school.

WL: I didn't go on to higher school but went on to an intermediate BSc course in evening classes. But the war was still on and I did that a bit reluctantly. I really wanted to become a clapper boy right away but my father was convinced a degree would help me in this career which he was totally wrong about, but he pushed me this this direction and to please him I went to evening classes, London University evening classes to try and get a B Sc, and in fact I did scrape through the intermediate school exam but only because it took place at the height of the flying bomb season and they added 10% to everybody's marks to compensate for the disturbance and I passed barely, but I used to fall asleep in the classes because I was working during the day and I was just too tired and the work thing was that after may letters and months and months of trying to get into the industry I finally got an interview, I think it was Riverside, it was Butchers Film Service, I think they were based at Riverside, but they wouldn't have me because I had these evening classes and they weren't interested in somebody who might have to go to evening class.
RF: Your first job Walter was what.

WL: My first job was at a process printers, a block makers, in Covent Garden, which was still during the war, I left school in July 43, so my first job was right in the middle of the war and the whole place was on a war footing, it was run by an old bloke and two apprentices and that lasted exactly 6 weeks, I didn't fancy that at all.

RF: Was it just gratuitous, was it just a job you heard about.

WL: It was the nearest thing to photography related thing at the time that I could get.

RF: So there was an element of calculation in it.

WL: A little bit. I don't remember how I ended up there. But it didn't last very long, I didn't like that at all. Further more I had to get permission, every time I changed my job I had to go to the police station and register, register in alien's certificate booklet.

RF: Would they have kept you out of sensitive industries as they saw them.

WL: I don't know, probably, I was technically stateless at that point, because I only had a German's child passport, and until I was 16 I would have been automatically been naturalised British when my parents applied for naturalisation, but it was granted to them just after I passed 16, and I applied much later, but that's a separate story.

RF: Any joy at the block makers.

WL: No they just used to play a lot of pranks on each other. And put ink on the handles and poor amonia under the lavatory door and things like that. It was a bit like being in some sort of college. It was quite interesting work but it wasn't close enough to what I wanted to do to encourage me to stay there. So I kept trying to get something closer and did succeed in a very short time I succeeded in getting a job ian a photographer's studio which was very good and lasted 2 years, also in Soho, a man called Gene Straker who many years later ran an establishment almost directly opposite the ACTT offices in Soho Sq, the Visual Arts Club, which was a place people could come and draw nude ladies or photograph nude ladies, but he was a very interesting man, and I had a good time with him, and he was very generous, at that time he was doing photo journalism, but in his own building in Berwick St he had two other photographers working with him, one of which was a very good industrial photographer called Leslie Collier, the other was a very good portrayist, called, he was a Hungarian called Denesh, and I worked in the dark room there and assisted in the studio, so I got a very good insight into different aspects of stills photography.

RF: All these technical aspects were a great interest to you.

WL: Yes. Absolutely. Also I could borrow a Lika every weekend and as much film as I wanted and that's how I made my first lighting experiments.

RF: And you did your own processing.

WL: Yes. My main job there was processing and printing. i was the dogsbody, there wasn't anyone else. There was just these photographers and one other assistant besides me.

RF: Was it commercial photography.

WL: There were 3 different fields, Straker himself was a photojournalist, he was a bit of a maid of all work, he dashed about a great deal, did all sorts of things, mainly photo journalism, then Leslie Collier did commercial inudstrial photography and Denish did portraits. So I got into all different aspects. And I stayed there two years until just about the end of the war.

RF: So you were what, 18, 19.

WL: I left there in December 45 when I was just 19. And finally, all the time I was working there I was still trying to get into the movies proper.

RF: Did you get any interviews at all.

WL: Oh yes. I got, I wrote at regular intervals to all the studios and I certainly remember having an interview with Bert Easy at Pinewood, and certain others as well. But mainly letters saying very sorry but at the moment there were no openings, etc. Particularly at the end of the war there were a lot of servicemen coming back who had to be given their old jobs back and then of course there were people on the inside and that always helps as it does now. So I didn't make it until late 46, a year later, because in 45 what I did get when I left that photo-stills place, I got a job in a place called Kinocraft which I think until very recently still existed, they had an office opposite Gloucester Rd Tube station, and they were then run by a stills photographer called Hugh Davy and another gentleman called Cookson. They operated one of 2, to my knowledge, one of 2 industrial filmmaking outfits in London which worked on 16mm. The other one was Gateway. And I worked for them for one year still writing my letters to the studios. They were all steps on the way to where I wanted to get to. But it was very useful experience because there I had a hand in all sides, starting off with painting their premises and installing their darkroom and working on electrical information on all that, and then being carted off to the provinces in a small motor car crammed to the roof with equipment to make fascinating films which I described in my book Illustration of Life Boat Launching by the 6 by 6 Scammell Tractor which was filmed in Skegness February.

RF: They're still making them. Not far removed from what your father did.

WL: That was the closest I came to the kind of work my father did. Because they were mostly, they were all non theatrical and they were all basic technical films of one sort or another. There were medical films, Hugh Davy, I've a feeling he was a doctor, some connection with medicine because they made a number of medical films. And I remember working on the editing of one called Complete Larygectamy and it was very bloody and in Kodachrome, extremely gory to look at. We did one in the Peacock Locomotive Works in Bolton, being deafened in the boiler shop, and the tractor thing in Skegness, another tractor film in Bidiford, Devon, we got around a good bit, it was good experience.

RF: Were you developing contacts in the mainstream feature film.

WL: There were two things happening in that, one was that I was still writing these letters and the other thing which happened was that I was starting to make films myself, we formed this little group, I met a friend called Derek York and we formed a semi amateur, semi professional film unit called Film Designers and we made a film called Sniff Our Friend about the squatters in 46. For a while Derek also worked for Kinocraft, and then in 48 we started a much bigger, a much more ambitious project, to make a film called Saturday Night on 35mm, originally intended to be a 25 minute story film, alter expanded to 35mm to get it into a quota featurette, but it was never finished, that's a long story which is in the book.

RF: The fact you were at Kinocraft, was that of use in getting you equipment.

WL: Yes, we could borrow equipment and stuff there. And it was very difficult in those days. The most difficult thing was sound. 16mm was fairly easy to do. But to record sound.

RF: Were you shooting sync sound.

WL: We were in the second film, we would have liked to but it was impossible, so we were shooting dialogue scenes without any sound recording at all, just with notes, and the idea was to post sync everything from the notes.

RF: Did you ever get round to the track.

WL: We did record Bryan Forbes', he was the star,

RF: There is an reference in an article the BFI gave us to that. And a photograph of you at that time. What happened to all that footage, does it survive.

WL: God knows, the last I heard of it it was in some vault in Shepperton. But at least 50% of it was on nitrate stock.

RF: How near to completion did you get.

WL: It was virtually complete as far as picture was concerned.

RF: Cutting copy form.

WL: No we hadn't cut negative. I can't remember how much editing was done. Some of it was edited, some of it was just in rushes. Because it was waiting for the sound to be done, that was the big hindrance, we couldn't do the sound. We had a good relationship with a chap, his name was Smith, he was in that building in Soho Sq where National screen is, in the basement, he had a recording studio there, and he was very helpful and he used to let us record stuff there. He had one of these big EMI tape machines.

RF: It was on tape, you weren't on optical tracks.

WL: Tape had just started then. But our big problem was that there was no portable tape equipment for sync sound. But another thing which he helped us do which I've still got, we were great John Ford fans, and we used to go down there every time when we could get a print of a John Ford fan and we recorded onto tape and then onto disk, some of the dialogue and some of the music, just extracts from the soundtrack, we took them of the prints, and we made a small personal library of John Ford soundtracks, which I've still got.

RF: Do you ever have any desire to dig out that footage from Shepperton and complete it.

WL: No. It's too late. I doubt if it's still there. Almost certainly decomposed.

RF: It's the sort of film which could be sent to the National Film Archive.

WL: The other film, Sniff our Friend, it still exists. And was used by the BBC, I sold them an extract a year or two ago for their immediate post war series, they actually used an extract from it and the film itself was shown in Bristol and Four Corners, a workshop, I've had one or two requests to show the film, which was a silent film take at 16 frames.

RF: What are your recollections of the British film industry at this time. Here you are a bright and an extremely enthusiastic person on the border line. Had you yet been able to get into the union.

WL: I got into the union when I was at Kinocraft, that was my great reason for accepting that job which was very badly paid, I seem to remember I went down 10 sh. My salary at, salary, wages at the photographic studio, I started at £2/10sh a week and had climbed to £3 a week by the time I left 2 years later. And I dropped 10 sh, one sixth of my wages to get this other job at Kinocraft because I knew by working there I could get into the union and that was one of my objectives.

RF: That was a union wage scale at the time.

WL: I don't think they were that well organised. I can't imagine there was an agreement for those sort of industrial filmmakers at that time. I certainly wasn't aware of it but I was aware they couldn't keep me out because I was within their jurisdiction, I was working for a film company making films and therefore they had to let me in.

RF: What are your memories of ACT at the time, an immensely self protective organisation.

WL: I couldn't help but be aware of that vicious circle situation which still pertains today to some extent, you can't get a job without a ticket and you can't get a ticket without a job. It struck me as faintly ludicrous.

RF: But we've all gone through that.

WL: Later I realised some of the reasons for it but I never thought they were very good reasons.

At first my overwhelming need was to get in, to be allowed in. And once I was in I started taking very serious interest in the union and in union affairs, for a short time I was on the executive committee later on.

RF: Have you retained that interest.

WL: No, I'm afraid I've gone in rather opposite directions as far as that's concerned.

RF: Your political awareness had developed in that time. I was very red in my youth but rather like many people have gone rather bluer as the years have gone on.

RF: How long at Kinocraft.

WL: One year.

RF: Which brings us up to 49

WL: It was rather less than a year, 10 months, from December 45 to October 46. And in October 46 who hadn't been able to help me very much because he didn't have any contacts in the industry, but he did make, one of those two jobs which he managed to work on he made contact with Terry Turtle, who was head of the camera department at Riverside. And Terry was quite fascinated by my father's experience and was determined to give me a chance and he took me on as clapper boy in October of 46 at Riverside Studios.

RF: Who owned Riverside.

WL: Riverside was owned by Shipman & King who ran the Essoldo Cinema Circuit, it was part of a 3 studio group, it had just been sold prior, originally I'd applied once before to Riverside but Butchers was in there, but after 46, somewhere around that time it must have changed hand and Shipman and King bought it and it was called Alliance Studio Ltd., and they owned Twickenham, Riverside and a studio at Southall which no longer exists. And I was working mainly at Southall, starting at Riverside just briefly, i worked briefly at Riverside on a film which Otto Heller did, They Made me a Fugitive, and then the first complete film I worked on was made at Southall and Twickenham and was called Dancing with Crime and it was Richard Attenboroughs first staring role.

RF: These were renting studios, independent producers brought their pictures in did they.

WL: No, they were produced by Alliance Film Studios, but there were various tied ups, but they weren't just rental studios, and they had crews, it wasn't a four wall, they had crews, and I was permanently employed by Alliance Film Studios and they were the producers of those films I'm pretty sure. Or at least the co-producers. I've got an advertisement for Kine Weekly at home which I can look up but I'm sure they were the producers.

RF: What was the lot of a clapper boy at that stage.

WL: I was too keen, for many people I was too keen, and they used to tell me, don't you worry your head about any of those things, you just bang those two pieces of wood together and make sure you're first in the tea queue.

RF: What were those things.

WL: I wanted to become a cameraman. I was interested in the lighting, the camera, the whole thing. In a much more serious way than anyone there at the time. There were no film buffs. The big difference with today and then, the thing which struck me most forcibly, when I finally got into the studios after all that trying was that it was a factory and the people that worked in it with a few exceptions were there because it was glamorous, it was well paid, they had friends on the inside, but they weren't film buffs, they weren't people who had a larger interest in films, and as I said in my book, the names of Eisenstein or Rossellini or Busby Berkeley for that matter would mean nothing to them, their outlook was extremely parochial, so I stuck out very much

as a figure outside of all that and they tried to keep me in my place. And the exception to that was the director of Dancing with Crime who was John Paddy Carstairs, who was very good to me, who encouraged me, but he was virtually the only one who did that.

RF: Who was the first director of photography that you worked with.

WL: Reg Wyer. Well Otto Heller really on They Made me a Fugitive, I did a few days on that.

RF: Otto and Reg Wyer were they also unencouraging.

WL: Otto was always very nice. Reggie was indifferent, he wasn't encouraging or discouraging. He was a jovial man, hale fellow and well met.

RF: Were they equally guilty of this is a factory process attitude.

WL: I can't speak of their philosophy, I can't speak of individuals within that area, I can only say the atmosphere of the thing was a factory atmosphere, a glamorous factory if you like, but certainly not orientated to film culture in a national or international sense.

RF: Was an element of that a resentment that a young person was trying to learn, a potential threat.

WL: First of all I was a foreigner, I wasn't one of them, I was outside both the London, a lot of them were Cockney, London working class. I wasn't working class.

RF: The camera crew was.

WL: Yes, entirely. But again I can't speak for the key technicians, there was a mixture of people, but the atmosphere among the assistants was very much a working class atmosphere.

RF: I've found in interviewing people there was to a very large exent a great middle class influence among the higher levels of technicians, but lower levels were recruited locally, they were there because they happened to be in the neighbourhood when a job came up.

WL: Or their uncle was the carpenter, you know. I suppose there was a sort of division, the NATKE jobs were entirely working class and the lower ACT jobs were working class and only one or two in the higher grades might have been middle class, I think it was very much a working class atmosphere on the floor of the studio

RF: Maybe the reason they did advance was that they were a) better educated and b) had a greater interest in what they were doing.

WL: It's possible. But in those days I was already interested in the British Film Institute, I was interested in the Film Societies, I ran a film society in Richmond for several years,

and there was no interest in that at all.

RF: And because you had an interest you were somewhat suspect.

WL: I was an outsider in every way. and interestingly enough, other people in the same year and same month I started at Riverside, Michael Reed and Gerry Fisher started there also. When I was clapper boy one of those two were loaders. Clapper boy and loader were still separate jobs.

RF: Central

WL: No, they had central loaders at Pinewood and places like that but at Riverside each film had a clapper boy and a loader and it was combined in 48 or 49. I was a clapper boy on Dancing with Crime and I was a clapper boy on the next film and then I was a loader, I was promotted.

RF: Loader was more important.

WL: Oh yes. Lower than focus puller. Definitely.

RF:What else did you do other than load magazines.

WL: As clapper boy your main job was tea boy. Putting the clapper board in was incidental, the most important thing was to be first in the tea crew when the trolley came round. Being loader was a bit higher up the step because you could absent yourself and say I've got to go and load the magazines, so you could have a little time on your own.

RF: So as well as being structured from a professional point of view it was very hierarchical, the camera department.

WL: As it still is.

RF: I think there's more communication between the various levels. The jobs are compartmentalised.

SIDE 2, TAPE 1

Well I think I see it more as different individuals had different attitudes. I remember working for John Wimbole, he was the focus puller on one of those films and he was rather dictatorial and rather nasty to me, and then I worked with Gerry Turpin who was quite different, quite nice, and later the roles were reversed when I leapfrogged over him and became a cameraman while he was still operating, I've never been an operator, I leapfrogged over that because I went in through the documentary side on I think This was a Woman, and Gerry Turpin was focus puller. And when I did my first feature film I took him as my operator. It was dependent on inidividuals rather than having any sort of definite structure.

RF: Was the DP Reg or Mr Wyer.

WL: He was Reg.

RF: I raised that with Freddie Young who was still Mr. Young.

WL: He was known to run a tight ship as it were.

RF: He now swears it was Herbert Wilcox's fault. That Wilcox insisted.

WL: Reg was a very jolly man, he was not the sort of man who would have insisted on being called Mr Wyer.

RF: I wondered if it was a convention.

WL: I don't think so.

RF: Because today again still today he's still known as the governor, partly in jest but also with affection very often.

WL: I don't think Reg would have done that. Then I worked with Gunther Krampf, and he was German of course, but we never had an y connection on it. He knew I was German but he never spoke about it. He was rather aloof, an aloof gentleman, very interior.

RF: In a teutonic fashion.

WL: No, not at all in a sort of absent minded professorial fashion.

RF: Because at this stage there were so many people who had come over from Germany.

WL: He had been here for some time. He wasn't one of the late refugees if he was a refugee at all, I don't know. There were a lot of German cameramen working in England at that time. There was Mutz Grunbaum and Curt Courant

RF: Otto Heller.

WL: Otto's Czech.

RF: But had begun in Austria. He once told me once when we were working together, he told me he got into this quite quixotically, because he was assigned as a private in the Austrian army, he was assigned to photograph the funeral of Franz Joseph, told to stand there and turn the handle. That's his story, how true it is I don't know. But there were a great many marvellous technicians in England.

WL: The only thing I remember about, I remember a number of things about Gunther Krampf and his technique, I remember he had this little diffusion glass which he kept in his pocket, his wastecoat I think, in the morning he used to go up to the focus puller rather secretly and slip it to him and he would put it in the camera. Nobody else saw what it was. And in the evening, as soon as cut had been called on the last shot of the day he was standing there with his hand out saying my glass please.

RF: What were the films being made at the time. You must have had an awareness.

WL: I was very interested in all that. The thing which needs to be said most strongly is that the period was very short. My joy

at getting in was very short lived because in, I got in December, I said October but that was wrong I got in December 46, and in October 47 the entire studio group went bankrupt, the Alliance Studios closed down all 3 of them. And one of the reasons was restrictive practices and generally the way of making films had become so inefficient, it had to collapse. I remember particularly there were two films in production there during that period. One was called Daughter of Darkness and for them that was quite a major film, but being a small studio anyway the major thing for them would have been rather minor elsewhere, say Pinewood or Denham, so that was one of their major productions starring Siobhan McKenna and the other was No Orchids for Miss Blandish which caused a furore on censorship grounds, was the first sort of dicey sex film made in England.

RF: Sex and violence.

WL: And both those films, I have it in my head that they took 26 weeks and 24 weeks respectively and they were not much more than B features. So something had to happen. I was aware of the restrictive practices. I'll just give you an example. There was an electrician whose job it was to sit next to, there was a sort of pedestal with 3 switches on it, red-green, green light and the bell, this was mounted on a pedestal and he sat next to this pedestal and when the director called for a red light or a green light, then he did this and he did nothing else all day. One day I was talking to him, I was chatting to him and I was leaning on the pedestal and my hadn was actually touching the switch and the director said green light and I actually flicked the switch and oh my god, don't you ever do that again. I realised that this was his job, and he depended on it and someone might become aware that

RF: What was the manifestation in producing the picture, very little screen time each day or a great time out in dispute.

WL: No disputes, there was the odd sort of thing, it wasn't disputes but it was acknowledged an known that if somebody had to climb a ladder to the top of th set and the ladder was standing there it had to be the right ladder. if the carpenter had to get up there but the electrician's ladder was standing there he had to get the electrician to get the electrician's ladder away and bring the carpenters ladder, that sort of thing.

RF: Was it feather bedding or just a very slow rate of production.

WL: It was a very slow rate of production, feather bedding in th sense that these people had these jobs and that was the tradition, but it just escalated, they grow. I think 8 set ups a day was the maximum, we never did more than 8 set ups a day, that was 4 in the morning and 4 in the afternoon, and that was pretty good going.

RF: And this was a B picture.

WL: They were not major pictures. So they took that kind of time to make. I think Daughters of Darkness and No Orchids for Miss Blandish took especially long, I don't think anything else I worked on had that length of schedule. But other problems

developed, location in Ireland and weather. But our pictures were mainly studio pictures. There were additional problems which made them that long but still they were 12 to 18 weeks.

RF: What was the equipment like.

WL: It was a change over period. Just when I got there they had just changed from Debrie's to Mitchells, C Mitchells in blimps, I don't know what the make of the blimps were but huge things. All I remember is that Hal Bricus, the camera operator on this smoked like a chimney and he used to have a fag hanging from the end of his mouth, and he'd look through the viewfinder which was on the inside of the blimp of course but his mouth with the cigarette which was also inside the blimp and he used to sit their saying move it up, move it up, move it to the left blowing ashes into the blimp all the time which I had to clean out. But I remember just before that people like Bert Mason, a camera man, he came to grief on No Orchids for Miss Blandish, his first job as a cameraman, he was faced with an all white set and it almost floored him, but he still operated in Debries, he trained on Debries and he used to operate on Debries and it was an old Debrie, Super Parvo, where a look through was on film, it was not a mirror shutter or rack over so he used to look through, you used to have a black cloth thrown over your head and you put your eye to the eyepiece and waited for the image to appear.

RF: And some of the operators then wore black patches did they not.

WL: Yes, it certainly didn't do any good to his eyesight.

RF: But so when they went back on camera they could see through.

WL: Yes you literally had to wait for the image to appear, because you're looking through film.

RF: What did they pay you.

WL: Magnificent, I made a leap. At Kinocraft I was paid £2/10sh whcih rose to £3/10sh over the year I was there. When I got a job as clapper boy at Riverside it leapt to the magnificent sum of £10 and I bought my first watch.

RF: £10 was not at all bad.

WL: £10 was a fortune to me.

RF: Any overtime.

WL: I can't remember whether overtime was paid or not. We didn't do much. We did a certain amount of overtime. Once I remember coming in on Sunday which was very unusual. And there was a terrible row which I describe in my book where all these foreigners were screaming at each other, an Hungarian producer and German cameraman. Tim Whelan, Marcel Hellman and Gunther Krampf. So my salary was a tremendous leap forward.

RF: and that was 5 and a half days.

WL: Yes. We used to work Saturday morning.

RF: So the disenchantment set in rather early at Riverside.

WL: Of course I loved working there, but it was very very short and then I was out on my ear in the street again, having thought I'd just got in I wasn't in at all. I was out again.

RF: Did you learn.

WL: Oh yes, I learnt a lot there. Particularly from Gunther Krampf and Otto Heller, I watched their lighting very closely. I remember being horrified by Reg Wyer because he had a habit, he lit the set and he lit the thing, and I thought he was doing quite well, and when he finished and I thought it looked quite nice to my eye, he always put 2 cans, 2 5 kw cans next to the camera, one left an done right and flattened everything out. Oh god why did he do that.

RF: Why do you think he did that.

WL: I don't know. But he made his name on the Seventh Veil, and each studio had a great film which had been made there, which was the last successful film and at Riverside the last film was The Seventh Veil and if you criticised anything about the studio, people or anything, it was said do you know The Seventh Veil was made here. That exhonorated them from any criticism.

RF: I don't think The Seventh Veil has survived particularly, but it's interesting.

WL: But what is interesting, quite recently I saw a copy of They made me a Fugitive at the National Film Theatre, and what strikes one immediately is the brilliance of the black and white which just isn't there any more, you can't do it any more, because the chemistry's changed.

RF: It's a lost art.

WL: Yes the chemistry's all changed.

RF: Where did they send their, there wasn't a studio lab was there.

WL: No, Humphrey's I think. I can't remember, there wasn't a lab there.

RF: To the cameraman was there a favoured lab then.

WL: I don't think so, there were so many. I wouldn't know. When I became a cameraman I worked a lot with Studio Film Labs because I found you could get a lot more personal intention there, it was a smaller lab. And with documentaries, once the high speed film came out, the Ilford HPS, they processed it in a way which showed much less grain, they had a slow buffered borax bath which was only available there. I tried them to do my first feature, A Taste of Honey and so on because we used the film there and through various contractual reasons I couldn't do it, but I made a test once sending half the film to Studio Film Labs and half to Den Labs, and the difference was like night and day.

RF: This was when SFL was at Royalty House.

WL: Yes.

RF: Do you remember the lab technician you dealt with.

WL: Alf Dossett who now lives not far from us in Suffolk, he's retired near us.

RF: Out on the street, what next.

WL: I promoted myself to focus puller and started looking for work in documentary which I found off and on.

RF: Was that huzpah on your part.

WL: Not really because in documentaries you don't have clapper boys. You have camera assistants. I just sought work as a camera assistant in documentaries. And we're now in late 47 and that was about the time I started to, I'd just made the squatters film with Derek York and we formed this other film unit and started working on Saturday Night which we started to shoot late 48, the development went parallel. From that point onwards I was freelance, I never had a job after that time which lasted for more than one film.

RF: Do you deal with Saturday Night in the book.

WL: Yes that's all dealt with there.

RF: This was still a very active time in British documentary, was it easy to work.

WL: There was a lot going on. I worked quite a bit for Richard Massingham, nice things there. Then in 1948 I did a lot of pieces for odd companies but quite a bit for Massingham. Then later on I met Leon Clore at Basic, who had just taken over Basic Films and I started to work for them, as they gave me chance to be a cameraman. But in 49 I did a lot of second unit work on features as well as focus puller, but I've never been a focus puller on a whole feature and I've never been an operator.

RF: Do you regret that.

WL: It would have been quite usehful. But I don't think I was good enough and I could never master the handles. I still haven't.

RF: Did you have any gods at this stage, people you worshipped.

WL: Oh yes, certainly among the cameramen. In England Robert Krasker, Guy Green, the Frenchman Georges Perinal, with whom I had an interesting experience once, he came in and reshot something I'd made a mess of on a film called Beat Girl or the Night, one of those films I made at MGM Studios. Anyway, of a league table of people I admired in England those three would have been at the top. Also Douglas Slocombe at Ealing who to my mind was infinitely better than the other two who were working there. Douggie was definitely the tops out of the Ealing lot.

American, I started to go to films which the BFI put on before the National Film Theatre was opened, so I had my heroes abroad, Greg Toland in America, Franz Planer, another German who emigrated to America

RF: It's interesting that the Germans have given us so many great cameramen.

WL: From the UFA days, that's very true. I think each country has a height, it comes to a peak, and German cinema certainly peaked in the late 20s and early 30s. Then there was a minor peak after the war, in certain new wave areas, and then the Czechs and had their turn and the Poles and the French, and I don't know when the English history will show a peak, one needs a bit more distance to evaluate it, but probably the best of Ealing.

RF: Well technically we haven't done badly.

WL: Technically always very good, overall aesthetically and technically.

RF: I think the aesthetic problem has been the common language with America, we've always been a captive market. Therefore as an industry highly controlled.

To what extent should we go into this period of documentary, any outstanding memories.

WL: Only the great charm of Richard Masingham. It was always felt he was miles apart from the run of the mill film technician or producer. I've always had a great soft spot for him.

RF: Were you working on those comedy shorts he produced.

WL: I worked on one.

RF: I wasn't in this country at that point but I gather they were very popular.

WL: He made some before the war, And So to Bed and Tell Me if it Hurts. I didn't work on those. I worked on what for a long time was the only government sponsored British comedy called What A Life, and it was a Ministry of Information film. It was cheer up, the message to the British public was cheer up, things could be worse, or things are looking up.

RF: This was in times of austerity.

WL: Yes 48.

RF: Tell me about the young Leon Clore.

WL: He had just taken over Basic Films. I don't know how I got in touch with him but he saw some of the rushes of Saturday Night and he was sufficiently impressed to give me the chance to light a trailer, a short governmental information film, so I made in 1950 a fire preventing trailer for him shot partly at Carlton Hill trailer. I get a bit confused because immediately after the trailer we made a 10 minute fire prevention film called Every

Five Minutes, directed by Max Anderson. Then I just worked for Basic for more or less a permanent basis although I wasn't on the payroll all the time, but most of the time I was there doing something or other for the next 3 or 4 years. Until I got my first feature job. Even beyond that actually. I was there from 50 into 55, I think the last film I made for Basic was early 55 when I started to concentrate more seriously on features.

RF: How steady was work in those day, was it precarious.

WL: Very unsteady, it was terrible. In that respect I think the film industry has never changed, when they talk about yet another crisis in the film industry I think to myself what's new. The only thing is for film industry read television industry, because the role of the big studios then, Pinewood, Shepperton, Elstree, is now London weekend, Granada, they have the studios, they have the permanent employees, they have the bulk of the employees, the largest number of people, the only people, permanently employed in production are employed by television, it's the television industry nowadays. Economically they're always these ups and downs, we have these terrible slumps, then periods of boom followed by periods of slumps, that's certainly nothing new. But in 1948, 49, 50, after this initial fillip of my salary leaping from £3/10sh a week to £10, I was rudely disillusioned back on the labour market, signing on, being freelance, I've always looked at freelance as being a euphemism for being unemployed. ACT had the unemployed section and they decided to call it the freelance section, it sounds a lot better. But in 49 and 50 there were long periods when I did very poorly paid work on the fringes of the industry, I was a projectionist, I did printing walking picture postcards, the sorts of things you take at the seaside, I worked a in film library repairing film, all extremely badly paid.

RF: And that was typical.

WL: Yes.

RF: What would one have averaged then per year. It was almost a survival level was it.

WL: It was pretty poor. My outgoings weren't very high but I couldn't contribute a great deal to my parents, I lived with my parents all through those years. And my father wasn't earning any money either. By that time he was getting a small reparation pension from the German state and my mother taught languages which brought in a modest income. But I couldn't contribute a great deal. I've got it written down somewhere but I haven't got it here. The pay as projectionist I was right back down to the £3/10sh a week level.

RF: What were the problems you experienced at this stage. Was it the beginning of television as a very widespread medium in this country, or was it the mismanagement of the industry.

WL: It was too early for television to have much of an effect. I know Riverside closed in October 47 and didn't open until sometime in 1950 with The Small Voice and then things started climbing up again. I just think it was a general shakeout, the thing was just much too inefficient and there had to be some kind

of restructuring.

RF: This was the time of the collapse of the Rank Organisation.

WL: Yes. But I was concentrating during the period 48 to 52 on Saturday Night, getting the film finished. It was in production over 4 years and never finished. But all my efforts were put into that other than the efforts of just keeping alive, it was precarious.

RF: What was the next development in your career.

WL: The next step was being given a job as a cameraman by Leon Clore, that was a step up. And then I worked steadily but with gaps as a documentary cameraman.

RF: You felt ready for that jump.

WL: Oh yes. I'd done the thing on Saturday Night which showed I could do feature type lighting, and then I gained experience through the documentary side, which were half a dozen or so, or more, and then I concentrated in trying to get a feature to light which I finally got in 1954. Although it wasn't, initially I thought, I'd also done some commercials which had just started then

RF: Commercials for television.

WL: In 1954 Joe Losey was going to direct Time without Pity for Leon Clore, he did direct it with Ann Todd, and I thought I stood a chance because I'd done a commercial with Losey and I knew Leon Clore, but Ann Todd didn't like the idea of having a young inexperienced cameraman, which I can understand at that stage of her career. So that didn't come to anything. But very shortly after I did get a chance to do a totally independent film directed by Gavin Lambert, who was then editor of Sight and Sound, who made a bit of a mess of it, but at least I got a chance, although the film never saw the light of day much. After that came my connection with Cacoyannis and my career just took off.

RF: Was you ancestry Greek.

WL: No connection with Greece at all before that.

RF: Do you go into the Cacoyannis connection in your book.

WL: Yes.

RF: Then we'll go on unless there's anything further you want to put on the record.

WL: It's just of interest that I was active in certain political ways and I worked with Tony Simmons on the film of the Bucharest world youth festival and went to the Berlin World Youth Festival in 51 to get back to Berlin, and that was quite an adventure because the Americans were trying to stop people getting to Berlin, all the young people, I went on a roundabout route from the port of London to a polish ship to Gdenya (Poland) and then by train to Berlin and arrived half way through the second week

of the festival. Then I brought back a film record of that in my luggage and the Americans and West Germans searched the train and confiscated silly things like hats with the worlds world youth festival, and this most potent propaganda medium, this film record of the film festival they said they had no instruction about so they just let it through, and they confiscated a silly hat.

RF: What was the attitude of the British authorities.

WL: There was a whole thing, I was investigated. Because of being on this ship, there was a party of 10 or 12 Englishmen who were going to Poland. I thought no more about it. I knew they were communists. And then some months after coming back from Poland I discovered I was being investigated by Special Branch. And the way I found out my employers and friends, they didn't come to me, they were asking questions about me around. Finally I said what's going on and they said we want to talk to you and it turned out these 12 people on this ship were the central committee of the British Communist Party and the only person on that ship on whom they had no file, no record was this Walter Lassally, who was this man.

RF: So you're on the Curzon St computer.

WL: Then there was a parallel to that. Earlier I'd applied for naturalisation and I was interviewed by an extremely aged policeman who took every thing down longhand which he kept licking from time to time and foolishly enough one of the things I told him was I read the Daily Worker, I must have been crazy, and I was refused naturalisation. Then I got a German passport because I was stateless, I had a stateless document for a while and I reapplied for a German passport because to travel on location with a stateless document was impossible. I had a German passport for quite a time and eventually I reapplied for naturalisation and was granted, by that time the pink had faded a bit and they thought I was OK.

RF: The early 50s was also the period of the great fear, an extension of McCarthyism in the states.

WL: I did quite a bit of political filming at the time, the Peace Movement mainly.

RF: Was this for Leon Clore.

WL: Sometimes, but it was mostly with Tony Simmons. I went to Bucharest with Tony and we also did a film called We Were Young, there was a youth festival in Sheffield in 1952 and we did a film on that. Both our credits were pseudenyms,

RF: For political reasons.

WL: Yes, I called myself John Walters.

RF: I saw that in an article, I wondered if that was the reason. Who was subsidising the films, the Party.

WL: It was the Committee, the Soviet Friendship Committee, it wasn't the Party direct.

RF: But it was Moscow controlled.

WL: Definitely Moscow dough there.

RF: Looking back it was a frightening period and it seems to be happening all over again. I watched a programme on Channel 4,

WL: I watched a bit of it too, ridiculous. I used to love attending rallys, not rallys, but Speakers Corner and listening to the Socialist Party of Great Britain, they always had a speaker there, and his watch word was Socialism will come when the majority of people understand it and desire it, and I used to say under my breath that's never.

RF: I'm increasingly convinced that we get the governments we deserve.

WL: But they had some very lively speakers there. And during that period I was quite actively politically and in film and in that field. But at the same time I was already painfully aware that the unions including the ACTT had too much power for their own good, they were abrogating rights to themselves that they had no right to have, like the whole business of the preemptory closed shop and keeping people simply those are in have the right just by virtue of being in of keeping anybody else, saying we will decide who will come in and who will not come in I've never found acceptable, I think there should be a spirit of competition that people who show they have talent have a way in, regulated, unregulated, not this vicious circle which goes on.

RF: It's much less now.

WL: It's much less marked now but it still goes on.

RF: There are little pockets within the union of great resistance.

WL: The camera department was one of the worse for a long time.

RF: That kind of attitude now centres with the television people now, the paid staff.

WL: I think this whole battle of the permanent employees against the freelancers is disgusting. Beneath contempt.

RF: On the other hand there is still an historical movement at work, common sense in the end prevails.

Anything else on that political activity.

WL: I remember my time on the executive committee being very instructive. We all had little scratch pads to make notes on and I remember one session in particular where some poor blighter was guilty of moonlighting and he was up before them, and they were people very hard, and I looked down at my pad, and I'd written over and over again judge ye not.

RF: You were representing the camera section.

WL: I think it was before there was sections, it was early on. I don't know why I was on there, but I was just an individually elected member. Again in the union, without wishing to tread on any toes in particular, my recollections of the union are that the favourite, my favourite period was when it was a much smaller organisation, when there were individual votes, you didn't have the block vote, this delegate vote thing, and we had the meetings in Beaver Hall which were never less than interesting and amusing and George Elvin was a secretary of quite exceptional qualities which have never been repeated. And I thought the union then was a nice organisation, because it was to scale. Once things get too big places lose something. Like the BFI, I walk into the BFI now and in the old days, I've just been in their new building, in the old days it was run by two men and a dog in a back room in Great Russell St and when I walk in there now there are thousands of people and all this machinery and I think is that really progress, or is it a bit over the top. You get the feeling there's an awful lot of parasytical activity these days, it's not, if you look at the bookshops, I think of the 70s and 80s as a time when they didn't make many films but they wrote a lot of books about them, there's a lot of people studying film and they're not actually doing anything. It doesn't lead to a productive activity.

RF: Then again in the states who see people making films who are rooted in film schools and film going, Spielberg, Lucas.

WL: That's a good development.

RF: Not always, because in Spielberg's case I get the impression I'm seeing a movie that is essentially the interpretation of a child watching a film. It's the worm it eats is tail. Where in the old days a film had a different purpose, it was set out in some fashion to relate to life, now they relate to movies.

Going back to ACTT, I think again possibly it all seems a better time there was greater unity and contact. Now there is a division of interest between freelance, television.

WL: Also the other thing which bothers me is that unionisation is only appropriate for the industrial aspect. And as our industry is only half an industry, the other half is an art, one musn't swamp the artistic aspect, also the opportunities for employment must also bear that in mind, if you for instance, the idea that cameramen musn't work in different countries, the director can't say I want to work with this cameraman, he's not English so he can't, which is ridiculous because the whole industry depends on fruitful collaboration between different areas, and I find it regrettable even in the 1980s that you can't chose your collaborators regardless of domicile law and nationality.

W LASSL2 : 007

SIDE 3, TAPE 2

I twice prevented from working in France even after the Accord had been signed in the Common Market, it's too difficult, the unions were too difficult and that's regrettable.

RF: Are you a liguist.

WL: Yes, inherited from my mother who spoke 5. I speak four. Greek as well as english French and German.

RF: It was the Greek connection I was thinking about, the problems of working in another language. Did you work in Greek.

WL: I worked in English, when I worked with Cacoyannis initially the first 5 films I made in Greece were all Cacoyannis and then I got to know the people there and the studio there more and more and eventually other people asked me to work with them as well and that's when I really started learning Greek, when I worked for a Greek director who didn't speak english and we communicated in French and more and more in Greek and after 2 or 3 years came the point where I could communicate adequately in Greek and read a script in Greek and so on. But there is a common film language. so there is no difficulty, you get on each other's wave length quite quickly without speaking the language.

RF: The first film in Greece was what,

WL: The Girl in Black.

RF: With a Greek crew other than yourself.

WL: Entirely, a small one too.

RF: What was the state of filmmaking. This must have pleased you.

WL: Yes, I liked the atmosphere a lot because they were all highly dedicated people, all very enthusiastic, all very badly paid, the average wage of a film technician in Greece in 1955 was £6 a week. And I was paid the princely sum of £40 and once I was paid in gold because English sovereigns were circulating in the country, mainly for property deals which were all done because they didn't have much confidence with the Grek currency, so it was done with sovereigns. I thought just as a laugh I said can I be paid in sovereigns, yes certainly, I've still got them.

RF: Do you go into the Greek film industry at this stage.

WL: Yes two chapters.

RF: Any stories not included.

WL: No it's pretty thoroughly covered.

RF: Really what we want to do is take an overview of your career as a lighting camera man.

WL: Well my last chapter in the book is called Plus ca Change because the more it changes the more it remains the same as the proverb goes. That's why I find when they talk about another crisis, I look through my press cuttings and these crises have erupted perenially. I think now the thing which occupies me most is the film versus tape thing, the structure, television versus cinema debate, and an awful lot of rubbish is talked constantly about it because the similarities far outway the differences. I'm not one of those who regrets the passing of television and the coming of television other than in a few specialised cases. I think good stories and initimate stories can be seen at home on the small screen, you don't have to go out to the cinema. But certain things, like this year The Last Emperor, is lost on the small screen, you have to have a big screen to see that. There's room for both and I don't think the cinema as such will disappear, and on the other hand I'm quite happy to work for a lot of my time for screening on television.

RF: On film or tape.

WL: I haven't worked on tape because I think it's regretable there isn't more interplay between film and tape people, the two never meet. At the BBC they're in separate buildings and they hardly speak to each other.

RF: That's in the process of change.

WL: I once attended a session of the BCS with the Society of Television Lighting Directors and it was very tentative and people threw their weight about on the film side which was not desirable. But I would like to have more experience of working on tape which has been very limited so far. Because ideally when you look at it from a theoretical point of view, the best way of recording images is by a light medium and not through the imposition of a chemical medium, but before that can really be true, improvements still have to be made in the tape medium before it reaches the standard which film has reached.

RF: I presume eventually, probably after our lifetime, this will all be digital information. High definition television is on the horizon.

WL: The whole interesting thing about the whole video thing is that by the time a video camera comes on the market it is already obsolete. I'm watching with great interest the development of on board cassette video cameras which are getting smaller and smaller and better and better. And I think very soon they will reach the point where they will be equivalent to film in quality and ease of operation.

RF: At this stage what is your ideal working configuration both in terms of equipment and crew.

WL: Well I like working on 16mm, particularly if it's for television, because I like the idea of lightweight equipment, it makes hand holding much easier and you don't need to have dollies nearly so much, if you're working for television it's perfectly adequate. I often think it's a waste of time and money shooting 35 for television, other than that I'm an Ariflex fan, I like working with the Ariflex,

RF: 35

WL: 35 or 16, but talking about 35 I favour a compact package, I'm not one to cover myself with extra equipment, over the top, I ususally find myself using every light I've ordered and every bit of camera equipment I've ordered and I hate it to see it escalating into 105 cases, always trying to keep the thing more compact and more mobile.

RF: What do you feel about the zoom lens.

WL: I think it's a thing you should have a licence system and it should only be licensed to certain people, I use it very sparingly indeed.

RF: As the equivalent to a prime lens.

WL: You could say that now. Anyway I destroy the quality by always shooting through diffusion filters, I never shoot straight or almost never. Because I think the last thing you want to see when you're shooting drama is a super hyper-sharp images which is appropriate to industrial processes, if you're making technical films that might be appropriate, but it isn't appropriate to the human face, you don't want to see every paw of the skin, so I put a softening agent in the way, and I find it ironic the way the film manufacturers and the lens manufacturers are making every more colourful ever sharper film and lenses and I'm, not only me but all the cameramen are putting more and more silk stockings over the lens because those two people never speak to each other so they're really moving in opposite directions.

RF: Have you ever relied on the labs to provide effects for you.

WL: Not really, except effects which can only be done in the lab. No, I try to get the image on film in the first instance, the closest to what I'd like it to be and all I want from the lab is consistency, it's the same every day, because I've a lot of experience of working with labs in foreign countries, in India particularly, they were apt to make a test, they look at the negative and think it's a bit thin so they stoke up the fires, so I had great trouble in stopping them doing that in my first experience in the Indian sub continent which was in Pakistan on my 3rd feature film which was in 1957.

RF: Which film was that.

WL: It was called The Day Shall Dawn.

RF: Presumably the Ivory Merchant connection is covered in your book, what's happened to Ismael Merchant, he's under arrest.

WL: No he was never arrested, that's not true, I worked on that film, that's nonsense. We were harried by the local mafia because we refused to employ them, that's what that amounted to.

RF: So the film has been completed.

WL: Yes it's being edited now. He's alive and well and they're about to embark on another film in the states very shortly.

RF: With you.

WL: Maybe, I don't know yet. I don't always get asked. It depends.

RF: The ideal crew for you, on a Merchant Ivory scale of production.

WL: I like to operate myself.

RF: You have become an operator.

WL: Well of the 61 features I've lit, I've operated on about 60% of them. I've never been an operator but I like operating. I never use the handles, but I think the division between lighting camera man and operator was a technical one, it was made for economic reasons back in Hollywood, as you know before the war there were very few operators as such, the cameramen tended to operate themselves, but this division between cameramen and operator tended only to happen in Hollywood. In Europe they were all doing it themself.

RF; Was that true here.

WL: I don't know it it was true in England but it was certainly true in France, Germany, Italy and elsewhere.

RF: I'm inclined to think in this country it followed the American fashion because you find people like Ronnie Neame started as operators, Ossie Morris.

WL: But I've always found that to be an unnatural division unless you can have a for life operator, if you can have a relationship with someone over a large number of films, but for me the film is always personal to me if I operate myself. And I haven't been able to do it lately , partly because the schedules too short, for the film is too big, like the last one, but my ideal crew would be for me to light and operate and have one or two assistants according to the size of the film.

RF: Do you have your favourite people.

WL: Yes. I have more or less permanent assistants both here and in the States, unfortunately he died re cently, but here I work a lot with Tony Garrett and a chap in Germany and India.

RF: How do they see themselves, are they a process of development or are they content to

WL: That depends on the individual.

RF: Generally what do you find.

WL: It varies. Some are on the way up and others are content to be what they are.

RF: It used to be true in the States, an operator was lifelong.

WL: Yes. I don't think that's true any more. That really

belonged to the good old studio days. But I do prefer a small crew. But the important thing is that the size of the crew generally must be taylored to the size of the story. If you make Tom Jones it's a different thing to a smaller film. But there again, it's very interesting, if you compare Tom Jones and Zorba the Greek which were made two years apart, on of which was made with a crew of 110, 130 if you count drivers and everybody else, and the other with a crew of 35 or 40 and a crew of equal size and scale and on one I had an operator and on the other I didn't operate, both took 15 weeks to make and the cost was roughly equivalent, I think Zorba cost 1 million dollars and Tom Jones so even there you can make quite big films with relatively small crews. But its not the size it's the structure. Once the thing takes on a certain size and once the budget is large, the aesthetic aspect is liable to be swamped by the industrial aspect, so once a film has to be organised like a campaign in a war, the industrial aspect is liable to swamp the artistic side. So I think it's quite important even when a film has quite a large scope, it's important that the director is firmly in control and the production manager doesn't take over, the organisation serves the director and not the other way round and the thing remains firmly under the control of key people.

RF: Do you enjoy improvisation on the part of the director.

WL: Yes.

Rf: And you enjoy coping with emerging occasions.

WL: I think you can't have it all cut and dried. I think a good script is essential but only as a framework, you must be free to improvise within the framework of that and improvise within the confines of that and incorporate ideas from actors and other people. And lucky accidents are very nice. You can't do without a certain degree of luck, a certain degree of luck is essential to the work. You cannot run a film unit like a sausage factory.

RF: There's magic moments to look back on too.

WL: That is also mentioned in the book. There's a shot in The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner where he runs across the parkland and where the moon and the sun, the rising moon and setting sun are in the same shot, and you pan across and one critic said what consulting of astrological tables there must have been, how many fingers must have been blown upon before that shot was in the can, and I thought he doesn't realise how the conditions of filmmaking you're lucky to get the chance to do some real dawn shooting, because of the overtime and whatever else is involved, so we set out to shoot a sunrise, and the fact that the moon is also in the shot is pure luck.

RF: Did you ever work with 3 strip Technicolor.

WL: I once got close to it but it never happened. So may first experience of colour is on Agfa film on one of these peace films, and then Eastmancolor came out. But Agfacolor as a 3 strip process predates Eastmancolor by 20 years.

RF: 3 strip or 3 layers.

WL: 3 layers. Afgacolor predates Eastmancolor by almost 20years.

RF: Oh yes, in Germany during the war there was some extraordinary colour film.

WL: I've just seen it, I've just been to the Berlin Film Festival Retrospective of colour films and they had all known systems represented.

RF: It's very interesting to see of the 30s material from Germany.

Looking ahead what's left for you.

WL: A quiet life. No, I'll just carry on as before, hoping some good scripts will arrive at my door, interesting people to collaborate.

RF: As you perceive it are there fewer opportunities these days.

WL: I think good directors are as rare as ever. And in the last 10 years I've had more good offers, good scripts for television than for films. And one of the reason is that there is this tremendous gap, particularly in America, between the most expensive television project and the cheapest film project. And if you have decent subject and you make your budget and it falls somewhere in that hole your film just can't be made. Television won't pay more than 2 and a half million dollars and films aren't really interested below 8, that's a great pitty I think. It's down to the scripts. I watch with great interest the knew talents who are coming up in England. There are a number of people I'd be very interested to work with like Neil Jordan and Mike Radford. Also good new cameramen are coming along. The same is true of abroad, there are interesting movements all the time.

RF: Which country intrigues you most.

WL: At the moment I'm very interest in India. I'm very interested in working in India, and it looks to me as if India is becoming like Greece was in the 50s and 60s, a home from home almost. I like working there because it's very alive. Things in the West are a bit dead, they're too set, they fall into patterns.

RF: Have you worked on an Indian picture as such.

WL: Technically some of them were Indian pictures, but not really.

RF: Not Bombay mainstream productions.

WL: I'm not interested in that particularly, but I would be interested in the new Indian cinema, Shyam Benegal, Mrinel Sen, all those people.

RF: Channel 4 at some nonsensical hour, 9.25 has been doing a long running series on Indian cinema, revelatory because it gives one insights into personalities and technical prowess

WL: Although I 'm interested in the technical developments of tape and so on I think the real interest lies in ideas, not in technical advances, good ideas, good scripts, one always hopes something would come ones way.

RF: There's a great confusion at the moment because we're going through transitional periods both with equipment and methods of distribution as well as production, and that sometimes muddies the waters, and the fact that there is that vast machine out there which just needs to be fed.

WL: But you can't have it both ways, at one time we were afraid about the shrinking of the cinemas, the number of screens falling, now the screens are rising again, if you take the television screens and the television channels into account then the number of people who watch that, then the audience is a million times bigger and the danger is quite the opposite, that there are two many channels and the good stuff there is thinner. More thinned down, more diluted, because you just can't fill, if you get 70 channels instead of 2 channels you tend to get 70 channels of rubbish.

If they're financially dominated, commercially dominated, then the threat to public service broadcast is very serious, both here and in America, nearly all the good things done in America are for PBS, very occasionally for the other networks but mostly for PBS. So I think vigilance is required and perseverance.

The first 20 years are the worse and I'm over those.

RF: Anything more, or are you getting a bit bored.

WL: I think we've come to the end, but we can always amplify it if anyone wants to go into anything more particularly.

RF: My thanks.

WL: And my pleasure.