

DENIS MITCHELL

"There is about his programmes an astonishing feeling of unity, a strong pervading sense of a single sensibility responding to widely diverse material. The range of subjects is wide, but all the films are really about Mitchell's own pre-occupations – the predicament of the dissenter in a conformist society; the outsider looking angrily or longingly inside; the rebel down on his knees before the community and unable to kick back ... And though his themes are usually 'social' it is the dreamer who catches his imagination, not the administrator. Feeling interests him more than achievement."

Karel Reisz in International Film Annual, 1961

It is a measure of the continuing low esteem in which television is held as an art form that Karel Reisz's article, written only six years after Denis Mitchell had made his first film, remains one of only a handful of considered assessments of Denis as an artist. Had he made his films for the cinema it is a fair bet that the true successor of John Grierson and Humphrey Jennings would, in a career spanning more than thirty years and one hundred programmes, have had numerous books and analytical articles devoted to him.

Denis had started work as a walk-on at the Old Vic before the war, an experience which left its mark not only in the subsequent films about entertainers and the tattier aspects of showbusiness, but in his unparalleled feeling for the poetry and drama of ordinary people's lives.

After the war he joined BBC radio. Portable, but often unreliable tape recorders were just becoming available. Using this equipment, he rapidly became an admired radio documentarist. Whereas colleagues such as Laurence Gilliam and Geoffrey Bridson never really made the transfer to television, Denis was urged to try his hand at the new medium and, helped by Roy Harris, Norman Swallow and others, soon imprinted his own style upon it. His first film, in the BBC's SPECIAL INQUIRY series (1955) was about Britain's teenagers. Instead of the predictable journalist's investigation of 'what's wrong with our teenagers' – it was the height of the Teddy-boy era – Denis's film let the teenagers speak for themselves.

Next he made a pioneering programme about life in Strangeways Prison, Manchester – IN PRISON – and an impressionistic account of the night hours in a great city, NIGHT IN THE CITY. His technique was to take his tape recorder and let people talk into it. He did not interview them in the conventional sense – he was not interested in cut and thrust between interviewer and subject, nor in trapping his talkers into involuntary revelations or exposure. He was interested in the essential inwardness of people, not the public mask. He recognised that to achieve this requires mutual trust and an understanding that the programme-maker does not regard himself as sitting in judgement. His pictures were shot to be an accompaniment, a telling counterpoint to the characters' words or the music and sound effects. Synchronous sound cameras were still very bulky and lighting slow and cumbersome – Denis's early films were made on 35mm. Spontaneous synchronous interviews were dauntingly awkward. However, in MORNING IN THE STREETS (1959), made on 16mm, sync interviews were an integral element. Its elegaic and affectionate tone was unmistakable Denis Mitchell.

"As a technique of film-making, this is enough to make Eisenstein turn in his grave, but for the sort of areas of experience Mitchell is interested in it works," wrote Karel Reisz. "It is just because he tells us so much about those who are on the outside looking in that Mitchell is able to say so much about the values by which our society lives."

Denis now extended his canvas to make films in Africa and America. CHICAGO (1961), made with Studs Terkel, was his longest single film to date and, with MORNING IN THE STREETS, his most completely successful. But he was feeling the need to change both his style and his employers. He left the BBC and in the next five years worked for ATV, Associated Rediffusion, Columbia Pictures and set up his own film company where he was joined by Norman Swallow. He also began his long association with Granada.

People have suggested that by leaving the BBC, and the discipline it imposed, he harmed his career, an assessment which he in part seemed to endorse during an interview towards the end of his life; asked to name the three films of which he was most proud, he chose two from the period when he worked for the BBC.

At Granada with Norman Swallow he pioneered the use of video tape as a medium for documentaries. In *THE ENTERTAINERS* (1965), about Northern club artistes the unwieldy nature of the equipment and limitations of technology for editing were evident; but by the time of *WEDDING ON SATURDAY*, (directed by Swallow with Mitchell on the production team) the possibilities of the new medium had been turned to outstanding effect. As producer with Norman Swallow of Granada's *THIS ENGLAND* (1965-7), he became the inspiration and mentor of a rising generation of programme-makers. His legacy lives on in their work. Some thirty programmes were produced, amongst them early films of Michael Apted, Michael Beckham, Frank Cvitanovich, Michael Grigsby, John Irvin, Peter Jones, Mike Newell and Lawrence Moore.

He went on to work for *WORLD IN ACTION*. His style was not naturally that of the hard-hitting investigative journalists who still typify *World in Action*. Denis's programmes were often portraits. But if as a result of his technique a politician was given enough rope to hang himself, that was probably sufficient justification for his employers. One of the portraits of this period was *Quentin Crisp* (1970) made some years before Philip Mackie and Jack Gold's "The Naked Civil Servant."

During the 1970s and 1980s he also embarked on series using writers as reporters: *EUROPEAN JOURNEYS* (1971 & 1972) – with Rene Cutforth – exploring first the countries of Western Europe and then of Eastern Europe; *MARYPORT* (1979) and *THIS ENGLAND – THE PENNINES* (1980) with Ray Gosling. But being Denis Mitchell, the reporter was used less as an investigative journalist, more as a companion and someone who could ruminate enlighteningly about their own experience or ideas inspired by the place being visited.

In 1975-6 he made, with his wife Linda, arguably his most ambitious film, *NEVER AND ALWAYS*. A picture of Norfolk and the village in which he lived – Great Massingham – it was not simply an impressionistic view of the area and the lives and dreams of the ordinary people living within it, as *MORNING IN THE STREETS* and *CHICAGO* had been. It counterpointed the lives of people in rural Norfolk against the climactic political events of 1976 – the year of the IMF's intervention in the British economy, the rise of Mrs Thatcher, the premiership of James Callaghan, and a rising tide of popular discontent. It attempted to catch and portray the mood of a nation at a moment which Denis seemed to sense was a crucial turning point.

At a time when television is in danger of being given over more totally to the journalistic imperative, glossy entertainment and attention-grabbing sensationalism, we stand in urgent need of a return to the values embodied in the work of Denis Mitchell.

He knew the value of allowing a programme to take its own time, yet knew better than anyone how to select and weigh the exact and most economic phrase or story. He was supreme at inducing ordinary people to talk fluently, expressively and truthfully. In all his work the breadth and generosity of his human sympathies shines through. He was above all a great editor and the poet of documentary television. It is as a poet that he will be remembered.

"A vision of the world that is as personal and intense as the creation of the most serious poet or painter, novelist or dramatist."

Norman Swallow quoted in Halliwell & Purser's Television Companion, 1986

PROGRAMME

Introduction by **Sir Denis Forman**

NIGHT IN THE CITY (1957) Extract – One of Denis's earliest films, first shown in 1957. The technique is still developing from his work in radio but already he is transforming and growing away from its limitations. Despite the occasional contrivances, necessitated by the inflexibility of the equipment, the essential poetic voice is already evident.

Extract from an interview with Denis Mitchell from the series "Television"

Appreciation by **Studs Terkel**

CHICAGO (1961) Extract – One of the last films Denis made while working exclusively for the BBC and one of the most accomplished. Made in 1960, the year Kennedy was elected to the White House, Mayor Daley was at the height of his power and America was the richest country in the world.

Appreciation by **Richard Hoggart**

Extract from an interview with Denis Mitchell from the series "Television"

PRIVATE LIVES (1974) Extracts – Two clips from the **PRIVATE LIVES** series which show Denis's remarkable talent as an interviewer:

GWYN THOMAS – Novelist, playwright and teacher. Once started by Denis, Thomas talked with such fluency and humour that the whole film crew were unable to suppress their laughter.

GLADYS COOPER – This portrait of a primitive painter is a typical example of Denis's short portrait style.

NEVER AND ALWAYS (1976) Extracts – Two extracts from the ambitious film about Denis's home county of Norfolk in a year of turbulent political and social change, 1976. The first extract is taken from the start of the film and the second shows one of the characters whose personal stories punctuate the chronicle of passing seasons.

Appreciation by **Norman Swallow**

MORNING IN THE STREETS (1959) – The whole of the film. It is still regarded by many as Denis's masterpiece.

Notes on the selection of extracts for this programme

Rather than select a mass of short clips, I decided on longer extracts from fewer programmes. This is because I believe that any film-maker's work should be seen in context and a programme can only be properly appreciated as a whole. This is particularly true of Denis Mitchell. I have also been swayed by Denis's own assessment of his best work. He himself named **MORNING IN THE STREETS**, **CHICAGO** and **NEVER AND ALWAYS** as his most interesting films. There can be little argument about the first two, but **NEVER AND ALWAYS** provoked a very mixed response when it first appeared. I believe that even though not every effect comes off, looking at it again from the perspective of the 1990s the film can now be seen as a remarkably prescient and sensitive impression of a decisive moment in post-war history ranking with his finest work.

Michael Darlow

10 December 1991

The organisers would like to thank the British Film Institute, the National Film Theatre, BBC Television, Granada Television, Channel 4 Television, Primetime Television.