SIDE 8, TAPE 4

Al: You were talking about *Eleni*

Billy Williams: Directed by Peter Yates with Kate Nelligan playing the lead. I did a shot in that film, which was quite a challenging one. The script called for an Easter procession, parading through the village and then going into the church for the Easter celebration. And you know how if you're in a Mediterranean country and you're out in brilliant sunlight and you walk past the church and the doors open and you look in and all you see is a little glimmer of candles, it's very dark. And then you walk into the church and as you walk in your eyes become accustomed and after a minute or two you can see everything. Well I wanted to do that on film. And I put the idea to Peter Yates, and he said yes if you think you can do it. So instead of cutting we would be outside with the processing and as our principle character and her son came towards us we'd track with them and we'd go into the church with them and follow them up the aisle, this was all a set, this church. And then go into this church and finish up at the altar with all the icons and candles, and you'd be into candle light after coming from brilliant Mediterranean sunlight. And so we did it. And it worked. And I did it by changing the exposure.

John Taylor: Just on the lens

Billy Williams: Yes. Well I lit the inside as if it was candlelight with warm golden light, but I opened up the lens 5 ½ stops as we went in.

John Taylor: And it worked

Billy Williams: It worked. It was as if you were walking in and your eye was opening up, because the eye does open up as it gets darker doesn't it, automatically. So that was a nice shot to do. And then that unfortunately was not a very commercially successful film, but a couple of years later I did a thriller with Peter called *Suspect*, with Cher and Dennis Quaid and that was partly shot in Washington. And the studio work in Toronto in Canada. And again it was a very nice association.

John Taylor: A lot of the films you seem to have worked on seem to have been good, pleasant and good experiences

Billy Williams: Yes, for the main. There was one which was a very bad experience but I won't tell you about that.

Al: Why not

Billy Williams: Perhaps I should, why not. It was a film called *Stella* with Bette Midler and she is under contract to Disney and in fact is their biggest star draw. And one of the things they're most concerned about is how she's photographed, because she is not a classic beauty, she has a very long chin, big nose, small eyes. And she has got to be taken care of. So there was quite a big thing about being sure that I knew what to look out for. And they even went to the extent of asking the cameraman who photographed her last film to come and see me, he was an Italian. I don't' know why he was doing her next one but he wasn't, to come and see me and brief me on a few of things. That all went ok.

Prior to doing this film called *Stella* I was asked to go to Florida to do a short film with Bette for the Disney studio tour. And Disney World. In Disney World they have a set on the lot which is New York, a New York set. And the story is that Bette plays a music teacher with a student who's tone deaf. And you start off with a studio scene of Bette playing the piano, the scales and this 10 year old girl trying to sing but making a hopeless mess of it. At the same time she has one eye on the television because the lottery numbers is coming up. And she wins the lottery and she has the lottery tickets on her music sheet and she grabs the ticket and goes to the window and says I've won the lottery. And the wind blows and blows the ticket out of her hand.

The ticket is picket up by a pigeon who walks away with it along the parapet and you establish that this parapet is about 30 ft up and she crawls along the parapet to try and recover the ticket. The pigeon flies away, Bette goes to grab it and falls and as she falls she grabs hold of this banner which is across the street advertising the lottery. She hangs on to the banner for a bit, the pigeon drops the ticket, she goes to grab the ticket as it's going through the air, misses it and falls and finishes up in the trolley of a bag lady who is underneath.

And the trolley goes careering down the street, goes into a fruit and vegetable stall, carries on, goes down the subway, hits the turnstile, she gets catapulted out of barrow onto the platform by which time by a stroke of magic the ticket has floated down through the grill in New York, you've got that grill haven't you with the subway, the ticket comes fluttering down and it's on the railway track. So she jumps down onto the railway track, oh it's the lottery ticket. Everybody jumps down onto the railway track. We're now in the studio and the train comes along. She is rescued at the last moment by a policeman, loses her ticket, goes back.

Next scene you cut to is she is back in the same apartment playing scales, the pigeon lands on the window with the ticket in its mouth. So she wins the lottery eventually. Well all of this we shot in a week, 140 set ups including stunts, special effects, blue backing. That film is now part of the studio tour in Disney World. And the producer said do you realise that more people are going to see this film than all the people who have ever seen your movies in the cinema. It runs 365 days a year for years, it's still on.

So that was a little film I did with Bette which was enormous fun because she has a lovely sense of humour, directed by Gary Marshall who directed her in *Beaches*, a lovely character. The film I did with her was called *Stella* directed by John Erman who has no sense of humour and is not very interested in the visuals. Very political and really wants to use the cameraman as a political ploy. And I've never experienced anything like this.

The first time I got any sense of it was when we shot a scene with a car rig, you know when you put a camera on the front of a car and you shoot through the windscreen. And he wanted this particular shot which actually was very boring because it was flat on, and I got the reflection of the sky so I put a polar screen on and a bit of lighting and cut down the reflection as much as possible. But you got a shot looking through the windscreen seeing the people with a little bit of reflection, which is normal, and then you cut inside and of course you're inside the car and you haven't any reflection. And this was all ok, it wasn't brilliantly exciting but there was nothing wrong with it. After the rushes he came up and said I don't like the way you photographed that, that's not going to cut. We'll have to

reshoot it. We talked about it for a bit and I thought well if he wants to reshoot it then we will and we'll find another way of doing it.

A little while later we went back and reshot it, and I said to the script supervisor while we were doing it, anything different about this. She said oh yes, it's a totally different performance. He didn't like the performance so he used me to get a reshoot. And that continued, that kind of behaviour continued right through the film. And I'd never experienced that with a director before. We just had a very bad relationship. But that is the first time I've ever had that kind of disloyalty from a director. So although I had George with me as gaffer on that, it wasn't a very happy film. There were no jokes. Bette used to come on the set and say somebody tell a joke and somebody would try and tell a joke and this director would look at them as if to say this is a serious business, no fun on this set.

John Taylor: Sad story. Does humour play a part

Billy Williams: I think in shooting it does. If you can have some fun on the set and have a laugh even when you're in trouble, if you have got a crew that appreciates a joke, particularly the director. I think if the director is so serious minded he can never let up on the concentration then it's inclined to affect others. Because you have a lot of stress, there is a lot of stress on the set. You're always up against the clock, you're always seeking for that little bit extra, you're all trying to get that little bit more out of things. And if you can have a bit of fun from time to time I think it keeps one going

Al: It also releases the tension

Billy Williams: It eases the tension, yes.

John Taylor: Someone like Michael Caine must be invaluable

Billy Williams: Yes, Michael was wonderful.

John Taylor: I've just read a book about him called *All you'd Want To Know About Michael Caine*, it's quite a standard book of that kind but it's very well done. And he comes out of it as a quite amazing character. But I think somebody with his sense of humour would most likely save you 3 days on a schedule.

Billy Williams: But he's so good Michael, he's so easy, easy to work with, gets it right.

John Taylor: Everyone in the book said, there are lots of quotes, they all said exactly that.

Billy Williams: One of the films I like the most which I haven't mentioned yet is a film called *Dreamchild* a script by Dennis Potter about the little girl Lewis Carroll wrote *Alice In Wonderland* about. She was in fact Alice Liddell, the daughter of the Dean of Christchurch, Oxford and he told her this story when she was 10 on a boating trip and they had a picnic. And there were she and her two sisters and another chap there and he just made up this story. And 2 years later he wrote it. And of course little Alice was in fact, lived with this story all her years, that she was the Alice in Wonderland.

Well when she was 80, it was the centenary of the birth of Lewis Carroll and she was invited to New York University, Columbia University, New York to celebrate the occasion. And she went to America on an ocean liner called the Berengaria, this is all true. And when she got to New York she became a celebrity and became a commercial success because people wanted her to sponsor their products, I mean Little Alice is in town, gee that's something isn't it. It's better than Santa Claus and Huck Finn all rolled into one, says one newspaper reporter. So she becomes famous at the age of 80.

Well this is that story fictionalised with Coral Brown playing the old lady and the story alternates between the 1860s when little Alice is 10 in Victorian England to 1932 when the old lady goes on the ship to New York and arrives in New York and experiences the New World. And Lewis Carroll was played by Ian Holm and it was a lovely film with the puppets from the book created by Jim Henson. Because when the old lady gets to New York and the newspaper reporters descend on her, she becomes very confused and goes into fantasy scenes which become nightmares in which she is back with the Mad Hatter and the March Hare at a tea party or on the beach with the Griffin and the Mock Turtle or in the forest with the caterpillar on the mushroom. So we did all these scenes with Jim Henson's puppets you see.

And as I said to you earlier I'd always wanted to do another film in black and white, and when this came up I put it to the producer Kenneth Trodd and the director Gavin Millar that we should shoot the Victorian scenes and the scenes with the puppets in colour and shoot the 1930s scenes for New York in black and white. And intercut the two, you see. And they liked that idea and we went along to Technicolor and saw some tests that had been done and weregetting very keen on the idea until we had a meeting with Dennis Potter, who in addition to being the writer was also the executive producer. And he dismissed the whole thing, absolutely without any consideration. So we didn't do it, we shot it all in colour. And it's a very nice film.

John Taylor: He sounds a bit odd Mr Potter

Al: That's interesting, all television people

Billy Williams: Yes, Gavin Millar, Gavin Millar was a presenter from Arena and Trodd and there was another producer called Rick McCullum who is an American, you might not know, and Dennis Potter, yes. It was a lovely subject, ie was made by EMI and again it came out the reviews were very good but no publicity campaign to do anything with it. They didn't know how to promote it. It went to America and really did quite well. But nothing behind it.

John Taylor: It must be very irritating if you've put a lot of work into a film and you like it and then no one bothers to sell it properly, it must be frustrating.

Billy Williams: Yes. Of course on that I used another version of the Lumar called the Hothead, which is one of those remote cameras where you can put the camera on the end of a long arm and operate it remotely, so you can get the camera into very difficult positions and create some unusual shots which you couldn't do if there was anyone on board.

I've been talking about some of the films I've done, some of the highlights, some of the stories and so on, but I think that having reached a point now where I've photographed about perhaps 40 major movies and a few 100 commercials and a lot of documentaries that really what I see as the cinematographer's role is the visualisation of a story, whether it's a short on or a long one, the putting into pictures, to provide an audience with an interesting,

exciting, original arrangement of scenes which are both pleasing, dramatic, exciting, whatever the script calls for in photographic terms, the arrangement of shadows, the composition. Lighting to create a mood which enhances the story and helps to take the story a stage further than the written word and that that is partly a technical achievement because one needs a certain technical background to be able to do that. One needs assistants and fellow technicians who are able to interpret your requirements, so that it is essential to be able to communicate your ideas and instructions to other people who are working with you. It is also important for the cinematographer to have a good communication and understanding of the director so that they're trying to tell the same story and that the visuals which have been largely placed at the command of the cinematographer should be created in a way that satisfies the vision of the director and also puts the actors in the best light or the most appropriate light for each particular scene. So it is a complex responsibility.

But I think at the core of it is the script and that the whole process evolves from the idea of the writer and the place and the location and the atmosphere in which each scene is set, and I think each scene requires it's own treatment in terms of lighting and composition and camera movement and that a film which has, of course, many scenes in it can have scenes which I'd photograph differently according to their requirements. I don't think it's essential to photograph a film so that from beginning to end the photograph style is the same, because light changes, natural light changes and the light in different situations, different rooms, different environments varies. And I think that it helps to maintain an audience's interest in the story to be able to change the lighting style according to the mood which is appropriate to the scene.

So I think that makes the work very interesting and exciting and varied. You are constantly striving to bring in something new, something new, something which may not have been written actually, may not actually be written in the script that this is the kind of light that should be used. Sometimes there is a germ of the idea in the script. Certainly with *Lawrence* there is a very full description of the time of day and how the light is playing. But not all writers do that. So I think one works from the script and

then with the director and the designer to create the visual image.

Now having done that to the best of one's ability, the film then goes to the film laboratory where it's processed and you have your rushes, the film is edited. And then at a later stage when the editing and soundtrack are completed, the cinematographer comes back to do the grading or the timings as the Americans do it, which is a very important part of the process, it is the finishing touch to the work.

Al: The answer print.

Billy Williams: The answer print. So one comes back and spends some time in the laboratory viewing different prints until you have something that is as good as you can make it. You're getting the best out of the original photography. And the film then of course goes to inter positive inter negative and release prints are made. The film goes out to thousands of cinemas throughout the world.

And that is where I'm afraid the technical perfection that one has been striving for breaks down. Because unfortunately one has to say, and there are quite a few cameramen who will tell you similar stories, that when a film goes out it is rather pot luck whether it is going to be shown in the way that it should be shown, with a certain brightness on the screen, because one views a print on a screen with a certain level of brightness which is laid down by the British standards or the American standards according to which country it's being shown in.

And all cinemas are supposed to be equipped to present the film at that screen brightness, so that your print which you saw at the lab yesterday, if you saw it at the local Odeon will look the same in terms of brightness and sharpness and colour, that the screen will be white, it will have a certain intensity of light. But of course that's not the case. And the standards are not adhered to. And enormous money has been spent recently refurbishing cinemas, multiplexes, Dolby sound, stereo sound, but nothing has been done to control the picture brightness. And some years ago when I was on the board of the BSC and we were having meetings with various equipment manufacturers like Rank, who make projectors, I came up with this suggestion that the movie projector should have a magic eye built in just like your automatic cameras do

today or your home video has. And that prior to the running of a print, it needn't be done every day, but from time to time, the projectionist could run the open gate projector at the white screen and this little magic eye would measure the brightness.

John Taylor: What a good idea.

Billy Williams: And that brightness would then be fed to the mechanism, the light source in the projector, so that you had 12 or 13 ft **lamberts** coming back from that screen. And then you'd show the print. And at 12 or 13 ft lamberts, British Standards that would be the brightness. In America it's 15 to 16. So all you need is a little device that is going to measure the white light, feed it back to the light source and there's your brightness. But no, that couldn't be done, hasn't been done.

So what happens now is that some cinemas will be 12 to 13, some will be 8, some will be 20. So that the print that you've made to be shown at 13 is either going to look much to dark or much to light. And that applies even to trade theatres in Wardour St, as you know. So there is no standard. So that's something that I deeply regret at presentation level.

But nowadays of course our work all finishes up on video tape. Now as a result of doing various film lighting workshops, particularly those in America, I've come into contact with people who are more aware and more knowledgeable about video and about the transfer of film to tape. Because I'd been under the mistaken belief that having graded my print and got an answer print suitable for the cinema, that when the time came for that movie to be transferred to video tape, that all the information was available. But that's not the case. You know this

John Taylor: From bitter experience.

Billy Williams: And in fact you have to start all over again and that to do the job properly you should go back to the original negative and grade the print with the mixer, the vision mixer at the house who are making the master tape. And you should sit with him and go through the whole thing as if you're doing it at the film laboratory, only this time you're working with an electronic medium. Now since I discovered this, I've had in my contract a clause

to the effect that not only when the film is finished should I be transported to the film laboratory to complete the timing and that I will make myself available for this, provided I'm not shooting another film, in addition to that clause there is a clause in my contract which says when this film is going to be transferred to video tape that my services will be sought in order that I can perform a similar function and provide them with my opinion about the grading. Well that has never once been acted upon. It has never happened once. And the only time I've ever done this is when I've done this with some commercials and I've seen what can be done at that transfer stage onto tape, where they have enormous control.

John Taylor: That machine, it's a girl's name, Betsy or something.

Billy Williams: There is a machine called Harry or Paintbox

John Taylor: The one I worked on was a grading machine which they put into a computer. They were doing *Gone With The Wind* on it. Betsy, Mary, something like that. And Rank were the only people who had it at the time. A 30 minute documentary that I made, the first lot of videos we had, a man sat with a thing like a joyce stick and just moved it backwards and forwards. The control was nothing. And he was always 10 frames behind because by the time he saw it, moved the stick and so on. Then we took it to this place and they regraded the film onto tape and that worked perfectly and it is quite a simple operation as well isn't it.

Billy Williams: Well you see to do it properly you should go back to the negative, the original negative, if you can't get the original negative you should go to the inter positive, if not the inter negative. The worst possible result is to go to the print.

John Taylor: And use the negative for regrading.

Billy Williams: Yes, put the negative into the telecine, or if you don't want to use the original, then use the inter-positive, but not the print. The answer print is four stages along, isn't it, so that the information on the answer print is that much diminished.

Well a few years ago I thought maybe I should have a few copies of some of the films I've done and so I went out and bought about 8 films in one afternoon and came back and started to play them and they were nearly all dreadful. They were nearly all of them, 6 out of the 8, were so bad I thought oh well, I can't show this to anyone, it's dreadful, it's flat, it's no contrast.

One of the films which I haven't mentioned yet was a film I shot in New York called *Going In Style* with George Burns, Art Carney and Lee Strasberg about 3 old men on social security who become very bored with life, looking for a bit of excitement, and George Burns is the liveliest of the 3 and they decide to rob a bank. And they get away with it. And I got a copy of that, and when I saw it I knew that they'd taken the video from the answer print because the answer prints had been hard mastered at 1.85 and I knew from the composition with the headroom as tight as it was that they must have used the 1.85 print because if they'd gone back to the original negative, it would have had a 1.33 headroom. So I was quite disappointed in that, but I don't know what else one does. I remember at the BSC and we have a newsletter and there have been a lot of people writing in recently to say the same thing, that one's films are transferred when they go onto tape and it's going to be pot luck whether they're going to be any good. And sometimes you get a result which is really pleasing and close to the original and other times it is a disaster.

John Taylor: A complete disaster, especially these smaller companies that do it. And do it on manual control from a print. It is so awful you can't believe it. We threw away 100 of that last film they did. They were made by someone in Wardour St, Studio Film Labs. Studio Film Labs have a video department and it was impossible and the quality of it, even bending, trying to say well there is bound to be a bit of a drop in quality, you just couldn't use them. It was 10 years ago of course that, but the Rank thing seemed at least give you a result that you could look at anyway.

Billy Williams: I shot some commercials recently and went along to the transfer house and was amazed what they can do there. They have much more control than they have in the film laboratory. Because in addition to all the things that are available to you with density and colour, they can also alter the contrast, or they can darken an area as if you were making a print. Or they can pick out a colour and

change that colour. It is extraordinary what can be done now electronically.

John Taylor: This also applies to stuff going out on television. I didn't know anything about it but Paddy Carey, he makes films, he doesn't deal in commentary, just visual films, and they're usually about the outdoors. And 2 or 3 he's made in conjunction with BBC and Telefis Eirann, when it's transmitted here, he goes to the BBC and grades it with the people who are doing the transmission, the week beforehand which I didn't know you could do. But I don't supposed this happens on many films.

Billy Williams: But you see this is the week link in the chain because I think when you consider all that's gone into the preparation and the production and the post production of a film, costing millions and millions, it is that final stage, the presentation to the public which is the weakest link. And nobody seems to have control of it. Nobody seems willing to make it effectively controlled.

John Taylor: One point arises from this, what allowance do you make when you're shooting a film for the thought that one day it's going to be one television, do you make any allowance for that

Billy Williams: Do you mean in composition or in lighting

John Taylor: In any way.

Billy Williams: If I can go back a little bit to when I first started shooting commercials, and they were black and white, we had a directive that you had to avoid peak white and dead black. And I was at that time doing commercials for Persil and the thing was that Persil washes whiter, and you had to have a white and a not so white. Well because we had this directive not to use peak white, the Persil white was in fact an off white and the non Persil white was a pale grey. And of course the films we did at that time were so flat because we all seemed to be obsessed with this directive about contrast. But in fact if you took any of the great black and white movies from the past and put them on, they all transmitted reasonably well although the monitors themselves were not of very good quality. But I think now that the quality of reception is so much better.

And when I'm photographing a film you asked if I made any consideration or concessions to the fact that the film would eventually be shown on television, I think in a slightly subconscious way I do. But then at the same time when one is lighting, I think you're trying to put information onto the screen in an arrangement of light and shadow and that even in the very low key scenes which are the dangerous ones, one tries not just to have a tiny bit of light in the picture and nothing else because one knows that is not going to work on television, to have a very large area of black. So that I try to work and not have huge areas of black with nothing in them, in that the best way to get contrast of course is to have a highlight, because if you put a highlight the black will look better than if there was no highlight. So I try to put highlights in the black so the contrasts is held and that works in the cinema but it also helps when transmitting on to the home receiver because there is nothing worse than a screen with no information on it. So one is kind of aware of that all the time.

Composition is much more of a problem because it's so much of a compromise. And in recent years movies that I've shot have been for 1.85 presentation, I've been able to persuade the producers to go with the 1.66 hard mask so that by doing that the projectionist can't show the film too much out of rack and when it's shown on television the headroom is not going to be terribly loose. A little bit is going to be lost on the sides unless if it's shown on Channel 4 they will show the masked top and bottom, so you've got a full 1.66 composition. If it's any other Channel, they insist on having the full frame so it means it's enlarged a little bit and you lose a little bit on the sides. So that filming for the cinema and for television is a compromise.

But whenever we get HD, high definition, television, the ratio is going to be about 1.75, so that we will be able to adopt a standard with the exception of anamorphic which is 2.35 to 1, and anamorphic is the one that is going to be the one that is going to be difficult to contain. Well there is a fairly recent process called Super 35 which is the process I used for *Shadow Of The Wolf* where you expose the full 1.33 frame, you expose that whole area and that is the area that would be shown on television. For the cinema you compose at 2.35 to 1 in the middle of the screen and then in the post production process you take that centre area at 2.35 to 1 and you squeeze it onto an anamorphic

print, so that when you present it in the theatre it can be de anamorphasized to show at 2.35 to 1 widescreen process. So you're getting 2 for the price of one. But it is still a compromising position, because you can't compose for 2.35 to 1 and 1.33 and get a perfectly good result for both compositions, one has got to suffer. So I'm inclined to let television suffer because I regard the cinema as a more important medium. The cinema presentation I feel is the one that matters the most.

The other thing I think that I've enjoyed is the various workshops that I've done with various students and people who are interested in cinematography, who come for a week or two and we'll experiment and we'll try out various exercises with light and filters and film stocks. And I enjoy that at an educational level and a means of finding out what other people feel about things and to experiment.

John Taylor: Do you haven an operator with you when

Billy Williams: No, not usually, I have an assistant and a gaffer, very often the participants will operate.

Al: There I think we'll say thank you very much.

Billy Williams: Yes, well thank you. It has been enjoyable to relive some of my experiences. I've had a very full and enjoyable life in the cinema.