

Dennis Fraser Will you cut it there. Okay.

Martin Spence This is an interview with Denis Fraser in his office Chapman UK. The interview is Martin Spence subjective. His record interview conducted on the 10th of April 2015. So that is what I'd like to do. First of all get some very basic personal information establish and then talk a bit about your family background. You know. How you got interviewed and. Then. Start talking about. Your career. But just for starters Could you introduce yourself say who you are when and where you.

DF

My name is Dennis Fraser. I was born in London North Kensington. Paddington Hospital in 1935 and we lived in London for a number of years. My father actually. Moved us out to Boreham Wood when I was 17 years of age. And that's the time I went into. Into the film industry.

MS

Before we go any further can I just ask what nationality.

DF

I'm English. OK. My English my father was a professional boxer in his day. And my my young brother took up boxing. So all in all we were quite a keep fit Family I am trying to work it out now. Anyway. We moved out we moved out of London. Weny into a council house in Boreham Wood And at that time there were seven studios of the area. And it was an obvious choice to get a job in there. I had no skills. I never had a great. Education. With my schooling

MS What age did you leave school?

DF I left school at 15. And then went in to studios got a job as a painter labourer at the old National studios which was a Douglas Fairbanks studio at the time. I stayed there for a year and got a transfer up to MGM studios which was I think one of the biggest studios in Europe at that time.

MS How old were you what time are we talking here.

DF In 1953. I went into studios into the old National that was in 53. I stayed there a year. Then I went up to MGM. And at that time it was really good because the union sort of had like an agency with a with a. You could apply to the union. They would send you a ticket and you would get a job there it there were vacancies. The union would sort it out for you and get you a job which I did join the union and I went in front of a committee. So I was a union was concerned and they sort of talk to you and you know whether you are a. Good character. And I thought you was going to be okay for the job. And I went through all that. And I got a ticket a union ticket which allowed me to obviously work in the studios

MS And the union we are talking about was NATKE?

DF It was NATKE at that time. Then the chief of MGM at that time the chief steward which looked after the union business. But I stayed there for 18 years. Up until I closed. But in the meantime I always wanted to be a grip soon as I went. Now watch what guys work. But it wasn't like today it was in a gang. You've worked with. You've worked with the carpenters you worked with the riggers you were sort of labouring for them so you called stage hand and so you would lay floors and backings and everything. And when they wanted a grip they would pull one out began to go down as a grip and there would only be one grip on a film. So things changed going forward but what actually happened at MGM after after a few years I became a grip and um work forward and started to work on some big films at that time. And what we actually did there was a few grips there people like Jimmy Dawes?. Myself. We approach. The. Management. And asked them whether we could. Do gripping full time because what was because were were stage hands MS occasionally do some gripping work when it.

DF Yeah. It's a part time grips where you would go on a film and then go back in the gang and all that. We couldn't concentrate. And basically what it did it affected us because we wanted to put equipment together we wanted to look after the equipment that we were using at the time and that. So it never happened because she was pushed back into the gang. So you've lost all that. We lost all that momentum about being a good grip and eventually.

like I said before Jimmy Dawes? so we approached management and asked if we could if we could do gripping full time as a full time job An important job and we got a nice letter. I'd done done a TV. Series with Patrick Mcgoohan Prisoner series and Patrick Mcgoohan wrote a really nice letter to the management how

important it was that the grips. Could make or break a shot and you know we should consider him a bit more and give them the most statuses and in the workplace. And eventually we got there so that we became Grip's full time at MGM.

MS Were you the first in NATKE The first. was the same thing going on elsewhere.

DF No we were the first in the studio and it didn't happen. It didn't happen in other studios. But what actually happened what actually happened going forward years forward. I've worked on a film Kelly's Heroes which was quite a big big war film. Yugoslavia and when we came back the studio closed and I and I eventually done their last film out of MGM "No Blades of Grass". And when I came back the studio closed down and I was a bit concerned because there wasn't that much freelance work about in those days

MS What year are we talking about? we thought and this scene in 98.

DF

You. Know 89 it was in 89. I beg your pardon. Can we cut that cut that one. Yeah it was six. Six was 16 on a big turn in violence. Tony Rolands? .

And it was 69 70. And then I ended up. I ended up out of work and I was a bit concerned. And I got a phone call to do a film in Yugoslavia Fiddler On The Roof. And it was a Pinewood based studio. Picture. And. Anyway when I went out and done this film and. We've done all the location we have to go back in the studio but they wouldn't let me back in the studio because their grips at Pinewood

MS That was your fellow union members members wouldn't allow you DF And they wouldn't allow me in the studio because I was a freelance grip anyway. The director insisted on it. Then I went and finished. So he spoke to a studio got me in the studio. And I think that. Was where. We opened up as freelance grips. And the four wallers? started at Pinewood with all the grips ended up going out freelance and I think that was the beginning. Of grips going out freelance but at that time. There was only one grip on a field whereas now things have changed. And I did that I did and still went out freelance. I've done quite a lot of films. I think I'd done something like hundred films at that time up to. Up till about 82. And decided to pack up and went into a rental company. We started our own rental company with five other grips.

MS Where you in a sense tired of gripping or were you thought of opportunities?

DF Well I was always away at that at that time. At that time when you when you went to another country they didn't have the crews like they did today. So you always went away. I was almost away eight months a year. So I got to the stage where I didn't really want to go away anymore. And. I thought I'd try something different and I got involved with five other grips and we started a grip company. And because there wasn't that much equipment around in those days. We designed and started designing new equipment. And I think at that time we we actually opened up. A new era for grips.

MS What was the name of the company?

DF Grip house. So I started building all the different tongues and cranes and different different different pieces of it which was never around because you can never go to. You could never go to a rental company and hire something you had to build it on a day when you're on those films. So that's what I did. When I opened it up. So a grip. If they want a car go in a car and all they could come and rent some specific piece of equipment to do that specific shot. So. This revolved and I ended up at that time I ended up the biggest grip company in the world that I had equipment all over Canada South Africa different places.

MS Where did Your support come from within but mainly from directors. Or was it from the cinematographers and camera operators that they love. What would make it possible for them. What was the response from the wider industry?

DF I thought it's great cause there's nothing around. There's nothing around that time before I started that. And it was a new it's a new era for grips. It was like it was like a new shopping centre to come And I was getting calls from people coming in from America and saying you know you got to go to a Group House because you know. You'll be amazed at the equipment that they're building. Different different rigs different stuff for different shots so they could. achieve And people coming in with. I'd like to be able to do this and build something for it. And no one done that before. So there's a whole new phase and I think it opened it up for Grip's generally. And. Another. I think

what was going on the unions started to fade out a little bit. At that time. And it was Grip House through Grip Hoous I think. So I think at the time that we started a new branch we had all our meetings at Grip House and people like Tony Rolands there was Jimmy Dawers? was. our Secretary there Terry Kelly who used Look after all the money bits. And we started a new branch where we started off with about six or seven guys you know talking about that and we built it up. And I think it is amazing now.today The respect and everything they've got hr grips.Now then I was approached. Once once we got the branch moving on. I was approached by a Skill Set About qualifications. Which. I was approached about and there was a guy at the BBC put a qualification together it was a BBC cameraman. And. I didn't think at that time. It was good enough and also thought the grips deserved a better qualification. And they asked me if I would get involved. So. I said the skill set which was Kate O'Connor ?? the time that. I'd like to rewrite it get it rewritten and make it worthy of a good qualification for grips. And that's what we did. But when we started I got everybody saying to me Oh you never get the grips you never get the grips of do. A qualification. And the older grip you know they've been doing it a long time. But what I what I decided to do and I thought If I get older grips the good top classs grips to do this qualification then everybody would follow. And that's what I do. And I think today the grips qualification is second to none I don't think there is anything like it in the business.

And. That grips have got more respect now. Instead of having one grip on a film you've got of six or seven. The whole system is changed. The equipment's more sophisticated now it's it's. More complicated more up to date. It's. There's so much of it now on a film.

MS Can I ask a question which I know has been controversial. Film grips. And TV grips and about their respective respective challenges. Been a group of those different involved. So it does come up from time. How do you I mean career is making the film. He's in the film industry world. How do you see that distinction. Is it a looming thing???

DF Now. My my view on on different parts of the industry.Is I've always said the. Commercials. Is more of an amateur side. People come up there learn and learn in their business. You get good directors coming out of doing commercials and they evolve to being a good film directors television. I don't think they put that down. I don't think they put. The amount of. Quality into into like they do with films. They don't use the equipment and I don't know whether it's because the directors are not up to it. Whether the haven't got the foresight to do these big shots or whether it's the money they can't afford. But they don't use the amount of equipment that film grips. So television grips don't get that experience they'll have a dolly and a piece of track and that's what they'll cope with. Occasionally they'll get a crane on a film. But with a film grip on what he has to do on film it is. Quite amazing. I mean it's got to be an engineer it's got to be. A carpenter some sort of scientist. And I look forward to create shots at the directors demand and the cameraman demand so he has to come up. With these ideas how we can achieve big shots. You don't get that in television so I don't think the television grips get the experience. I'm not saying that they couldn't do it if they were up against it where they got the opportunity. I don't think they get the opportunity to do.

MS And do you think the qualification. that one grip qualification is that helping the Skills of the whole community so far.?

DF Oh no I think since since I'm really proud of what I've achieved and the qualifications.And you know I've been working on it for almost thirty years now getting these qualifications in to place. You get a lot of producers you know who are not happy with it because they're worried about you know they might have to pay a bit more money. But I don't think that's the case.

But training these people the young grips now they get they get more training. It nver happened that. When when the studio system was running it. You got trained properly. You worked with riggers you worked with carpenters you knew your rope you knew your pulleys you had all this array of experience within the studio which you learn from when the studios closed that never happened. And if a grip isn't very good and he had a young guy with him he wouldn't get that experience working with a guy that's not that. Good. So it starts to dwindle. And when I started Grip House I started to notice when grips were coming in for equipment. I Felt that they weren't up to it I had experience on cranes. I was

renting out cranes to people that. Wasn't that experienced. So that's the reason that I got into these qualifications. All these guys had to be qualified to use this equipment and they got trained to use it. So eventually now, with a you're commercials with your dramas television. Films all these guys have to be qualified now. So I believe that someone on television because of all the training that he has to care and to pass qualification can go on a major film and get through whether very good bad or indifferent is up to them. But. He's got the qualification to be able to do it. So I think we've achieved a lot over the years.

MS Has the work you've done given you wider recognition of him in the industry. I mean awards?

DF I mean let's say were with my awards on. I'm very lucky. I've done some amazing films. I've been lucky enough to work with some of the best directors cameramen in the world I think I've got. More awards than I don't know. Now think up there they're the top people with we've all got an MBE for what I've done in the industry. I've been recognized by every association. In the industry. So I've very lucky really long term achievement award. I've got several. I'm a lucky boy really. Considering that I came out with no education. There's something that I love doing and I'm still doing it. I think it's it's just an amazing industry that you like to work. And I still love doing I work five six days a week and. And I can't say when I'm going to finish.

MS You've retired once are you going to retire again?

DF I can't see it at the moment can't say when I'm going to retire I coming up to 80. Hopefully I can carry on our. I've still got a lot of input. I still get involved with their qualifications although I'd step back a bit now and. I've got a good guy following me up. Tony Rolands? which is. Nice. He's doing a good job and are just hope the grips. Keep it going. You know it's. Got a lot of respect in the industry now. As opposed to they didn't years ago. Now you were just you know just the body you know. Now you're skilled. You know. You're important So it's good.

MS I've covered the ground I wanted to cover.

In. Is there anything else that you want to say.

DF No. It's fine. And then maybe if we go down and go it up some of the stuff you know and go and look at the equipment and say why it's. different and what we're doing different.

END OF INTERVIEW SCENES FOLLOWING ON VIDEO ARE DENNIS FRASER DEMONSTRATING EQUIPMENT CIRCA 2015