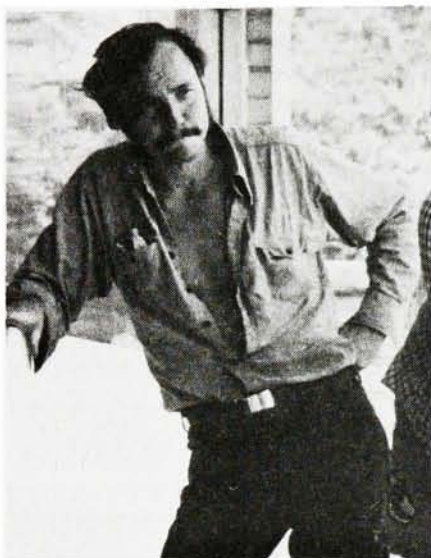


SPOTLIGHT...

on jock brandis

Jock Brandis has managed to immerse the conventional wisdom of the film business into a totally enigmatic lifestyle and still remain well ahead of the game. He lives on a tugboat in Toronto Harbour, restores and rides antique motorcycles, has his wardrobe fitted by the finest in Army Surplus and is able to tap dance into a frenzy without the slightest effort.

As Jock Brandis, he is fully equipped lighting man with an armload of features to his credit. As Brandstead Industries, he is an innovative design and manufacturing company, constructing lighting, grip and special effects equipment. His name is an anglicized version of the Dutch name "Joost" – and his adventures tell it all.



Jock Brandis

Cinema Canada: *In the years I've known you, you have established yourself as a living, breathing legend in the film business. Where did it all begin?*

Jock Brandis: I was born in Holland and raised around, in various places, took on a military career which I didn't like, then a high school teaching career which turned me into a Marxist-Leninist. I decided early on that the trick behind Marxist-Leninism was making great revolutionary films. So, I rushed out and bought myself an Eclair and stepped eagerly into the wonderful game of making films so that I could in fact fan the flames of discontent. Unfortunately, by the time I had gotten the knack of the film business, my politics had waned to a near guttering light in the bottom of the barrel...

While on this threshold of discontent, let's just backtrack. To be a bit more specific, you mention a military career...

Well, although the Royal Canadian Navy Reserve put me through university they were disappointed because I changed my major half way through.

Although they thought they'd end up with a bio-chemist, they ended up with an anthropologist. They felt cheated, but none the less they threw me into the system and I became a navigation officer. We parted company on friendly terms and I went into being an eager social worker for Oxfam. I did a variety of activities... Biafra air-lift operation, various other bits of public relations, hospital organization, signing receipts and sending out Christmas cards... and other nice things that Oxfam people do. Then I got into teaching.

Was this regular Ontario high school?

No, this was the CUSO. They sent me down, four happy years in Jamaica, teaching high school. I'd gone with the intention of teaching auto-mechanics. Unfortunately, the head-master and I were the only teachers who were university graduates. All the other 30 teachers were high school grads and they thought it would be an affront to the other people to have me teaching technical subjects. So, in order to save face I taught biology, chemistry and West Indian geography.

Was it in Jamaica that you got your first taste of filmmaking?

Basically, yes. I matched socially with Perry Hensel, who later went on to do *The Harder They Come*. He did a fair amount of commercial work, stuff with the local TV broadcasting system. So on weekends I would wander out on film locations with him. That got me mildly interested in filmmaking. My political discontent was another story.

So now you were back to the point where you ideals – after a certain amount of film experience – were more or less re-arranged. Where did you go from there?

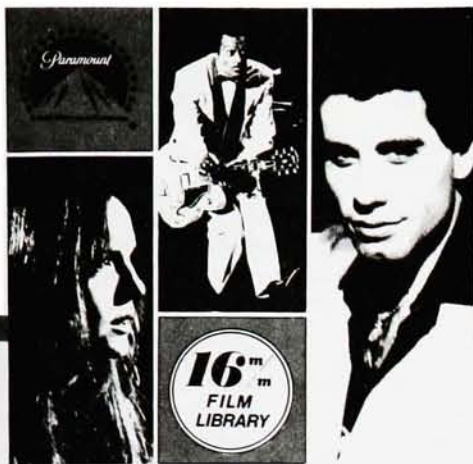
I was at this point back in Toronto, NABET was sending me out to do Ford Motor commercials with Advertel which was fine with me because Advertel was right behind that little Marxist bookshop and everybody else would go out for a wet lunch and I would go browsing and come back with some bargain basement copies of Lenin's work that had been thrown into the bathtub by the Western Guard the night before. On the surface I was never in the film business, the same as most people; I just did whatever I could.

So that was basically as a lighting man?

I don't know exactly how I ended up being a lighting man in the union. I just did. When I went to university and high school I had done all the amateur lighting for operettas and all that sort of amateur drama stuff and I just somehow managed to talk myself into being the lighting man.

So later, did you talk yourself into being a cameraman?

I bought a camera and talked everyone else into the fact that I was a cameraman. The assumption is that if you have an expensive camera you know how to use it. Fortunately the first few films that I started off doing were sort of simple industrial educational films and I sort of learned on the job fairly quickly. I had never been an assistant cameraman so I didn't know any of the rituals. But it's all tech-



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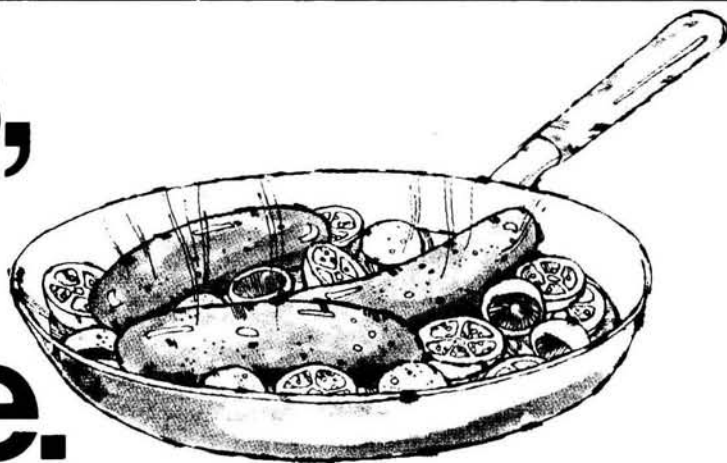
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nology, it's all fairly logical; it will rarely leave you with problems on your hands. I worked for Moreland Latchford and for Halliwani Films, and a whole variety of small independent filmmakers.

So graduating from industrials and documentaries, your first feature was of a less educational nature?

My first feature was shot down in Detroit. I, in fact, did the lighting on that but it was my first big taste of special effects because, as it turned out, it was an incredibly complicated special effects movie about a bed that ate people. The day before we were actually going to start shooting, I had done a pre-light for the whole studio and the director came over to me and said, by the way, if I had a bit of spare time, they still hadn't figured out how to get the bed to actually munch the people. It was written in the script that the bed actually swallowed people but no one had figured it out and they didn't have anyone hired to do special effects. So at the last minute I was to try and figure it out.

Was this a comedy or...?

This was a real horror show. A true G-grade horror film for the summer drive-ins out here. I started doing the special effects on it and by the time we were three days in, I spent maybe ten minutes a day lighting and the rest of the eighteen hours doing special effects.

What was your first shoot as a Director of Photography?

My first shoot as a DOP was with Ed Hunt. That was a 35mm epic called **Diary of a Sinner** and we did it in 14 days as I recall. Non stop. One week was shooting with an Arri 11C and no sound. The next week was with a Panavision and sync sound.

That, in fact, was the last film that I also operated as a DOP on, being my first and last venture into 35mm features as a cameraman. I've been involved in many Ed Hunt features. In fact, I think I've been involved in every feature that Ed Hunt has done in this country. However the film that I started to shoot for Ed after we had done **Diary of a Sinner**.. well, Ed and I parted company half way through.

It was a general non meeting of the minds.

So the laying to rest of the...

Of, the famous laying to rest of the lightmeter... The evening of the day that Ed and I decided that the cameraman-director relationship could end, I wandered down to the harbour in such a state of artistic frustration that I sailed my Spectra lightmeter a considerable distance into the harbour and it splashed and sank from view. Where it rests to this day.

Tell us about Pleasure Palace.

This was another Ed Hunt feature. I think it was his first 35mm feature in this country. It was a fast and tacky skinflick. Bennet Fode produced it for Phoneix Films. I did the lighting on it; Lance Carlson was the cameraman. It wasn't a notable film in any sense; in fact it was a remarkably un-notable film in almost all senses.

My big break there was to appear as an extra as I've appeared in most of the films that I've lit. I've been a naked hippy swimming in a pond. I've been a stretcher bearer. In **Pleasure Palace** I was a polaroid swinging customer in a nude photo-palace body-rub establishment on Yonge Street.

The only problem was that being slightly too tall and having set the lights in slightly the wrong positions; I had to stoop my way following this well endowed lady in order to end up in the frame in my big shots. The initial two shots were me fully dressed pursuing naked ladies with a camera in my hand. And the final shot was me naked being followed by the same lady fully dressed with a Polaroid camera in her hands... this was one of those wonderful sight gags that didn't work.

Fortunately, due to Canadian censorship laws, you can't show the naughty bits of a goffer and rather than matte in some boxer shorts they threw the shot out.

How about Race Home To Die?

Well that was an interesting situation. That was basically an English crew that came over and they decided to have a token Canadian on the crew. We had a Canadian director — Peter Thompson

— and I was brought on as the gaffer. I'd spent the whole summer doing *Polka Dot Door*, *Alphabet Soup* and *Professor Magic* up at OECA so by that time, I was skipping around singing songs about elephants and learning how to cut out paper dolls and not damage my mother's scissors.

Going from that onto a rather grisly motorcycle gang feature was a bit of cultural shock. They didn't want to cut out paper dolls in the motorcycle club... But for me it was my first truly big budget epic and, of course, it was never released. But it involved a lot of (to me) very new lighting techniques that were brought over here by the Canadian cameraman John Crawford. Being most patient, he took the time to explain to me how things were going over in England. He described the wonders of spun glass on mini-brutes and bounce-off styrofoam.

It was, in fact, on that epic that I decided to invent the Lightbeam because they made all the temporary grid arrangements out of two-by-fours. And that may have been all right twenty years ago but in the year 1975 it was hard to get a good 16 foot two-by-four that wouldn't twist and warp as soon as you put a light on it and left it up for a day.

A Lightbeam is a simple idea: to have a portable grid if you're not going to be filming in a studio and you want to keep your lights off the floor. It's an arrangement that can be set up in almost any room to hang lights and microphones and what-not. It's a sophisticated and sturdy polecat system that's slightly more expandable. I started to manufacture them and they appeared to be instantly popular, though not in this country because obviously it was a Canadian invention and therefore it would never be popular in Canada. Had it been an American invention every one would have bought it up by the dozens. The National Film Board wasn't interested and the CBC wasn't interested either. I had a feeling had it been made by Mole Richardson of Hollywood they would have bought a million of them, but...

It was recommended that I go see Lee Electric in England and I went and arranged a deal to sell these Lightbeams. They were very enthusiastic about them and told me they could

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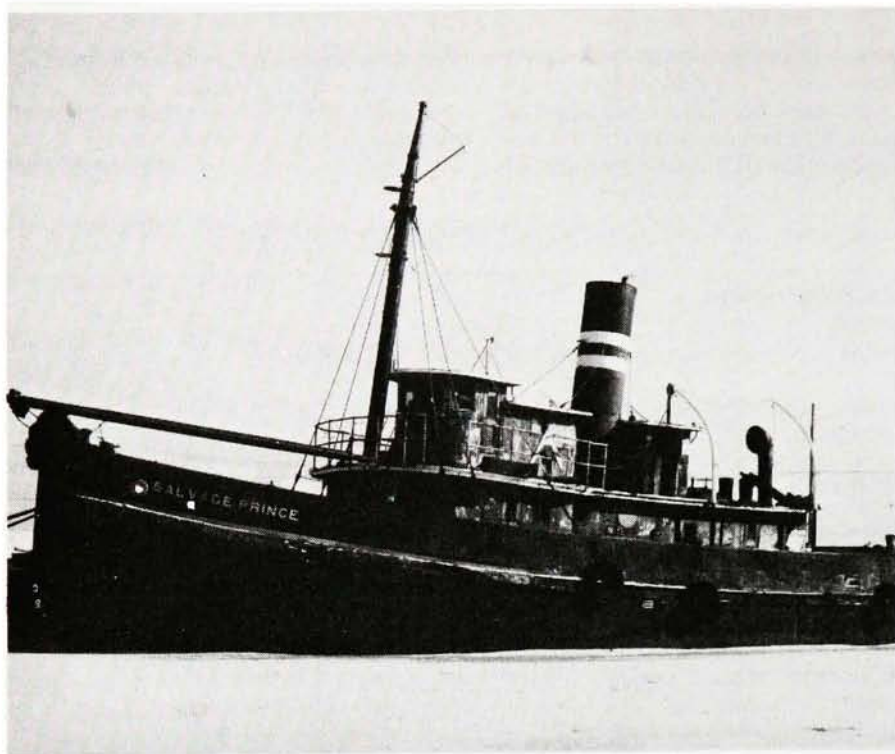
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A man's home is his...castle?

sell as fast as I could make them. So I geared up. I was entirely into a manufacturing operation and they were on the phone every day urging me on to greater production levels, shipping them to Israel and France, Italy and everywhere. Then all of a sudden the orders ceased. I found out later it was because the folks at Lee Electric had decided to manufacture and sell them for themselves. Unfortunately, at the same time my American agents (with whom I had made a similar deal through Lee Electric) also ceased their orders from New York because of course Lee Electric had supplied them with their version of my product.

Such is life in the fast lane.

So you put together a machine shop but it was basically metalworking in aluminum. What else have you constructed?

Well, I've built the better part of a copy of an Oxberry Animation for Nelvana here in Toronto. They complain about it but they do run it 18 hours a day with hardly any problems. They didn't pay me very much money for it so that strikes me as being a good reason why I should ignore their complaints. They use it and it works and they complain and I ignore

them. It seems to be a fairly satisfactory relationship. I also built... guess you'd call it a Vertical Animation Stand... for live action filming for the famous *Starship Invasions*. It proved to be successful for what it was supposed to do, but it ended up being used in kind of a chaotic fashion.

To go slightly into detail what did this glass arrangement achieve?

The idea was that the cameraman sits in a rather large blacked out housing and in front of him is a large picture window, a large piece of glass with a tiny model of a flying saucer. This saucer model is lit in the same fashion as the background and the lighting is bright enough that the whole filming operation can take place at F22 which gives it an infinite depth of field for a wide angle lens. And providing that the live action people in the background are reacting in the correct way, the small model – in this case a flying saucer – (which is in fact close to the lens) appears to be very far away. It moves around and people react to it and that is the essence of the device. The major problem with that was after the thing was designed to be used for three shots, always about two miles

from my workshop, it was decided that it should be trucked up and put in small boxes and shipped to Paris, Rome, Hong Kong and Cairo. So after it was chopped up it had all the reliability and complexity of the Canadian postal system. Although it might be resurrected from the ashes, to see it now, it looks like a telephone exchange.

I know that you have redesigned a number of lights; minibrutes and softlights, and built them out of aluminum instead of steel as the famous Mole Richardson does. What was your reason in doing that?

Well, I spend most of my day carrying lights in and out of trucks, up and down stairs, putting them on and off stands, raising them up and down and spinning them around, and as soon as you make a light out of welded steel – or in some cases even cast steel – then you're hauling an awful lot of hardware around. Aluminum is nice material to work with. It's lightweight. With careful design it can be made as strong as steel, and it dissipates the heat much more rapidly, so in a lot of situations your bulb life is longer because your bulbs are in a cold state. The other reason I built them out of aluminum is that aluminum is a much easier metal to work with. If you have a pair of tin snips and a pop riveter you can make a softlight. I have softlights now – 4K softlights that weigh 22 pounds – that have been on the regular rental basis for 3 years which don't have any dents and work quite nicely.

So with all this arrangement of lights and so on, what features have you lit?

Well, the unreleased feature is as Canadian as the War Measures Act. I took great pride in doing lighting for Henry Fiks on a wonderful feature called *125 Rooms of Comfort* which means absolutely nothing to anyone who didn't work on it. It was one of those Canadian Film Development Corp. \$125,000 features which was a fine artistic success but which never saw the light of day. It sits on someone's shelf. I guess I'd better go in a backwards fashion because my life is always like a receding horizon.

In 1977, I did the lighting on the Markowitz feature about the Demeter



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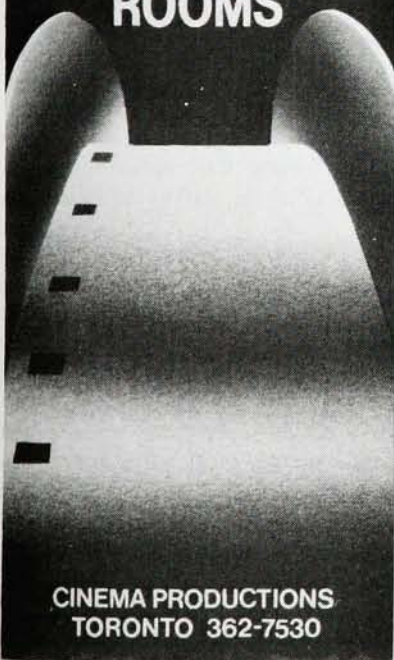
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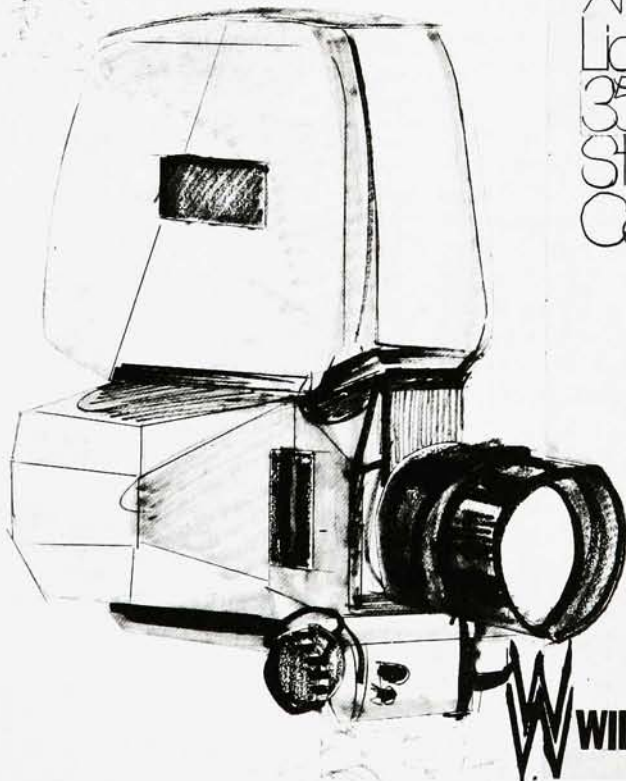
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murder case called **Hugs and Kisses** and, before that, I did lighting on Peter O'Brien's **Blood and Guts**. It's interesting to note that **Hugs and Kisses** had more blood and guts than **Blood and Guts** which had more hugs and kisses in it. If you'd swap the titles, it's be much more representative. Previous to that, I had spent about nine months doing special effects lighting for the Hal Roach **Starship Invasion**, ... I even did a few minutes of underwater photography for them in the Florida Keys which never appeared on the screen despite the fact that I almost drowned on several occasions.

That was an interesting gig because it's always wonderful to fantasize about lighting up the Universe so that it looks like the Universe. I would light up the moon so that it looks like the moon... but how do you light a rocketship travelling through dark space so that it doesn't look like a runaway hubcap?

So during this period of X number of features and movies and inventions you managed to move from dry land to a somewhat more nautical home. Where exactly do you live now?

I live on an old steel tugboat in Toronto harbour. I think I bought it on a whim. It happened very fast. So fast that in retrospect I'm not exactly sure what had gotten in my mind to force me to buy this boat. I think it was having battles with the landlords that did it. Australian landlords to be specific. Now I only have to deal with the Toronto Harbour Commission which is another ball of wax.

I decided to move on a boat because it was a cheap house. You can't buy a house for \$10,000 in Toronto but you can buy a big boat for \$10,000. And, ergo, being El Cheapster that I am, I decided I would try it out. It has been made the subject of a media event which is to say the National Film Board is doing a film about the restoration of the tug boat. The film is costing more than the actual restoration of the boat which I think is the true definition of a media event. Often you'll see two people working on the boat and four people filming the two people working.

At the same time that you were inventing things, shooting and lighting fea-

tures, living and restoring on a tug boat you have been also writing scripts.

I've been writing scripts for many years. They tend to run on social themes. For example, I was a general gaffer/grip and cynic on an Imperial Oil tour of the Arctic: an exposé on muskeg, I think it was. It was an interesting endeavour and I fantasized slightly on the politics I saw around me and came up with a wonderful bit of whimsy called **Kung Fu Eskimos**, the general line of which is a group of revolutionary eskimos, disguising themselves as a native ballet troupe, tour the south wreaking havoc on government institutions as they go, finally setting all of the long lists of injustices done on the native peoples of the north. As you see, definitely a social theme with political overtones and an awful lot of useless sex and violence and a good chase scene which must take up three quarters of the entire film.

I understand that there is now a new feature screenplay which you have just completed and which could be safely called a caper film. What unique experience caused this feature to be written?

The unique experience behind this script was that I was sitting in the empty boiler room on my tugboat fantasizing about boilers and how much work it would be to buy a boiler and install it and how much easier it would be to write a script which would require boilers to be in this very boiler room. My experience has been in the past that if people need things for films they snap their fingers and they appear. So I thought if I could sell a script that requires major installations on a tug boat that if they bought the script they would have to obviously use my tug boat because the scripting was so carefully done that no other tug boat in the entire world would fit the careful plot contrivances. Therefore if they bought the script they'd have to use my tug boat and fix it up, or I'd sell the script for a vast fortune. It doesn't matter, I get them coming or going.

It's a very complicated plot involving a tug boat, a perfect Brinks truck robbery and general malaise in the police department of our fair city. I've always been a great critic of Canadian film scripts. I believe that Cana-

dian films are like watching a person paint a picket fence: you always know what's going to happen next. So, when I write scripts I always make sure that no one has the slightest idea what is going to happen next and even when people actually read the script, they're not sure what has just happened...

And this has helped you through life no doubt?

It has. No one knows what's going to happen next to me except for my bank manager; and he's not talking.

What of the future? Assuming your tug boat does get fitted with a boiler?

Well, I don't know. I've changed a lot of professions over the years and I probably will change through a lot more and make and break my fortune a couple of times but I'm slightly hooked on the film business. It drives me crazy twelve months a year but I like the thought that there's something else I could do so that I could putter around in an ocean going tug boat and light the odd feature. That would strike me right now as being as close to Paradise as I can aspire.

Rumour had it that with all your machine shop equipment and talents the ideal occupation would be to sail to the Carribean and serve as a floating workshop to save shipwrecked Americans whose boats were at the mercy of hurricanes or crazed Bahamian mechanics.

Millionaires. I've always liked American millionaires in sinking ships especially when I can save them. That is right now the official scenario. But I have a feeling that many things will happen along the way to that goal...

Well, as you're aware, most of those in the film business in Toronto would shed many a tear were the Salvage Prince to sail out the east gap and leave us for ever. On the other hand, were it to end up just off the coast of Jamaica where we could come and rest all winter at your mercy, those many tears would soon dry up and planes south-bound would be packed so we'll get you coming or going Jock. You're never safe.

Well, wherever I go, I always keep a sungun in my back pocket and my rates are...

Mark Irwin