



THE LIFE OF BRIAN

Throughout the GTC's first 50 years, there have been numerous figures who have helped to shape and steer the organisation to where it stands today. Former GTC Chair Brian Rose is a prime example, as his illustrious track record is one of selfless and proactive support over many years, decades even, during which time Brian has donned a number of hats both on Council and quietly behind the scenes too. In July 2021, another former GTC Chair, **Graeme McAlpine**, visited Brian to have a chat with him about his career and how it led to his many years of involvement with the GTC.

From an early age, Brian was mad keen on photography, so his wish was always to become a photographer when he grew up. After leaving school, he went to Harrow Technical College where, in his third year, he specialised in scientific photography and photo-science. When he graduated in 1963, the National Physical Laboratory took Brian on as a scientific photographer, a job he loved and from which he learnt a great deal. It was a very proactive role, often requiring him to think outside of the box, particularly with some of the requests the scientists would make: "I've got this experiment, can you take a look at it and work out how we can obtain a readout of it photographically?" Always up for a challenge, Brian would really think the problem through, often drawing upon the theory he'd learnt at college, until he came up with a solution.

Never give up on your dreams

Although Brian loved the idea of working in film, he sensed a real improbability that it would ever happen for him, because of the highly restrictive 'closed-shop' attitude prevalent in the film business at the time. He referred to this as the industry's 'Catch-22' situation, whereby you could only work on films if you'd earned your union card, but you could only gain your 'card' if you were working in the industry!

However, in the mid 1960s, Brian did get a job as a trainee sound assistant at the Brent Film Laboratory in Cricklewood, London. When he started, his duties were initially fairly menial, such as sweeping the lab floors, but he soon progressed to looking after the company's (vinyl) music library and helping to select music for productions. Whilst this was all valid experience in itself, his work there had the added advantage of meaning Brian was admitted into the ACTT union, whereby he gained the all-important 'card'.



Top: A young Brian, literally cutting his teeth on film; Above: Brian's parents in their family shop

Brent Film Labs were located on the North Circular Road, opposite Vinten's offices where there was a window display featuring a Vinten Everest film camera. Each morning, on his way to work, Brian would stop and gaze longingly at the camera, saying forlornly to himself, "Me, get the chance to ever work with something like that? Forget it!" However, through resolute determination, Brian's dream did begin to be realised when he managed to transfer into the union's camera department.



Brian (second from left), working on Merchant Ivory's *The Europeans*, with DoP Larry Pizer behind the camera

Getting above one's station?

His next step up came when he started as a clapper loader on industrial documentaries – but this wasn't going to be a smooth path. Brian recalls it was in fact fairly disastrous to begin with, due to the severe lack of training in those days, as well as the industry being inherently nepotistic. As an unknown newcomer, Brian would regularly turn up on a job to be faced with a grilling about his 'pedigree': *"Who's your father, then?"* Upon revealing his lack of any family connections, he'd then be subjected to further disparaging bluntness: *"If you haven't got a close relative in the industry, then what are you doing in the camera department?"* A nice twist, with an irony that's never been lost on Brian, was that he would later go on to become the secretary of the union's camera department branch. As he quipped to me: *"It was quite a turnaround from me being rejected, to me becoming one of the people rejecting other people!"*

Working up the ranks

Carrying on undeterred, Brian got his big break in 1976, working for British cinematographer, Larry Pizer. He began as Larry's clapper loader, then worked up to focus puller (a role he enjoyed and to which he felt well suited, due to the thorough technical knowledge he'd gained through his college training), before eventually being made up to camera operator and 2nd unit DoP.

Whilst this was a common path for those working their way up through the camera department, Brian admitted to me it wasn't necessarily that straightforward: *"Each time you moved up, the next role was actually a totally different job. Despite this often being described as a progression, it wasn't; it was more like a transition – and that could be tough. I found that, apart from having a good knowledge of lenses, nothing I'd learnt as a focus puller was really relevant to being an operator. I hadn't realised that 80% of the operator's role was being a diplomat!"*

You see, it was in the days of film, when no one could view pictures live during a take or in playback, as video assist had yet to be invented. As the operator, you were actually

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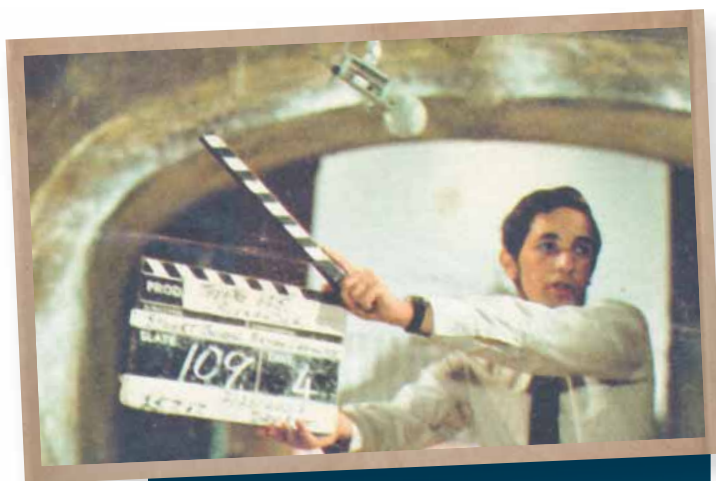
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the only person who could tell if the shot was any good or not, and so you were responsible for giving the director a yay or nay on each take. You were also involved in looking after the cast, which a focus puller would never do. The actors would ask the operator about their performance and how they'd done, so you'd reassure them or give them feedback about what you'd seen through the lens. You had to have confidence in yourself, but you couldn't be arrogant; only a director or producer could get way with that!

Making the grade means no way back

"Back in those days, it was not the done thing to move backwards and forwards between roles. So, if you'd been made up to camera operator, then that was that; there could be no cold feet and going back to focus pulling if operating didn't work out, so it was very hard.

*On one occasion, I got a call asking me to work on a very small film, called *The Shining*, directed by Stanley Kubrick, but I turned it down, because the offer was as clapper loader and I was already working as a focus puller. But that was expected; once you'd moved up, you'd moved up, because it was the director of photography who had promoted you. All the same, I came to realise that my turning that gig down was a very bad career move!"*



Brian on clapper loader duties on a BBC drama at Ealing Studios

The right stuff

Since he has enjoyed such a varied career, I wondered what Brian considers the most important qualities for a DoP to be: *"There are two: one is the ability to interpret the director's 'vision', and the other is that they have to be a good leader."* He also mentioned the need to communicate clearly and decisively as self-confidence is reassuring, but he added: *"I think a good DoP is going to be chosen based on his or her own vision that they will bring to their work as well; it's not necessarily just about whether they can work well with the director or not."*

So, out of all the DoPs he worked for, who did he rate? *"Larry (Pizer) was my favourite DoP. We just knew each other so well; we'd worked with each other so much that we didn't need to talk about anything technical. I'd stand behind him, listening as he talked to the director, so that I could have mounted the correct lens on the camera ready for him without asking. He didn't need to say much, I'd know what he meant; we had that... simpatico."*

Invaluable lessons

Of course, the dynamic between DoP and his/her crew often depends on personalities and temperaments. Brian cited one particular occasion when, as a rookie clapper loader, his naivety could easily have incited the wrath of a DoP who was known for his harsh manner, but instead he received some invaluable tuition on lighting.

"I was on a feature with DoP Paul Beeson. Now, he was known as 'Basher' Beeson, and I don't think it was necessarily because of the lamps he used; he could be a real bully. I was his clapper loader and, one night in the bar, I jokingly said to the sparks that I was going to save up to buy a Spectra light meter and some tracing cloth as I wanted to be a DoP – I was a very inexperienced clapper boy! The next day, Beeson beckoned me: 'Come over here, BOY. Stand next to me, BOY. I understand from my gaffer that you want to be a DoP!' So I answered: 'I want to be a proper one, like you.' (The popular way at the time was very flat lighting; no matter what was being filmed, everything was done with flat lighting – it had no character, it didn't tell a story.) Beeson replied: 'Right, I'm going to teach you.' And he started setting up, and with every light he put in, he'd say sharply: 'No, look through the camera, boy!' Now, this was really something for a clapper loader, as back then, you'd never dare look through the

viewfinder or do anything like that, but the amount of stuff he taught me was amazing! For example, he said, 'Now, look at the leading lady, see that I've lit her a stop hot, do you know why? Because the audience hasn't come to see Paul Beeson, but to see Trish Van Devere. You always light your leading lady so that the viewers' eyes go to her.

It was all these little things he taught me. He was a great, very underrated DoP, and yet, like I say, he could be a real bully. That particular encounter was partly as a show to 'put this boy in his place', and yet he spent all that time teaching me about lighting. At the end of it, Beeson turned to me: 'Well, now you know what it is to actually be a DoP!'"

When I asked Brian about the attitude of superiority that was reputedly rife in the industry back then, he replied: *"Was the industry elitist? Yes! But, at that time, the [British] film industry was relying on investment from the Americans, so we needed to be elitist; we needed to be the best crews in the world."*



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Beware of being pigeonholed

Brian's advice around not limiting your options remains as valid now as it did then: *"There is a huge danger in this industry of being typecast, which is something we have all suffered from."* Again he shares a personal experience to illustrate the point. Many years ago, Brian bumped into a colleague in the bar at Shepperton, who told him: *"I was going to give you a ring about a job, but you only do aeriels now, don't you."* The initial compliment aside, the real lesson was delivered in one, seemingly innocuous, four-letter word: 'only', which in this instance, demonstrated to Brian both the risk and cost of being pigeonholed. He had indeed been undertaking aerial work, including shoots for renowned aerial camera specialist Peter Allwork, founder-to-be of GTC sponsor ACS. One particularly memorable job was assisting Peter in shooting the 'plates' for the 1978 *Superman* feature, using the Astrovision Periscope System from a Learjet above Switzerland. However, although Brian greatly enjoyed shooting aeriels, it certainly didn't define him. Yes, he *could* do aeriels, but he didn't *only* do them.

The Samuelson brothers

One of the industry's legends back then was Michael Samuelson. Having forged an outstanding career for himself in camera, lighting and as a DoP, Michael was also President of the Variety Club, as well as being involved with various



Another string to his bow: Brian (foreground right) producing a film on location for The Variety Club

other charities alongside his brothers David and Sydney (also big figures in the film industry). Brian told me how, through his involvement with the Guild of British Camera Technicians (GBCT), he would often receive a phone call from Michael's secretary, in which she'd tell him about whichever charity job they had coming up next and needed covering, to which she'd add: *"And you're doing it!"* Brian recalled two particularly noteworthy occasions, the first being when he was informed that he was going to film the Duke of Edinburgh. The second was when he received a brief message that simply stated: *"Mr Michael would like to see you next Tuesday evening at eight o'clock."* At that meeting, Brian discovered he was going to produce a film for the Variety Club, that would feature a major fundraising event. In Brian's own words, *"This was really dropping me in at the deep end, but it was a real highlight of my career."*

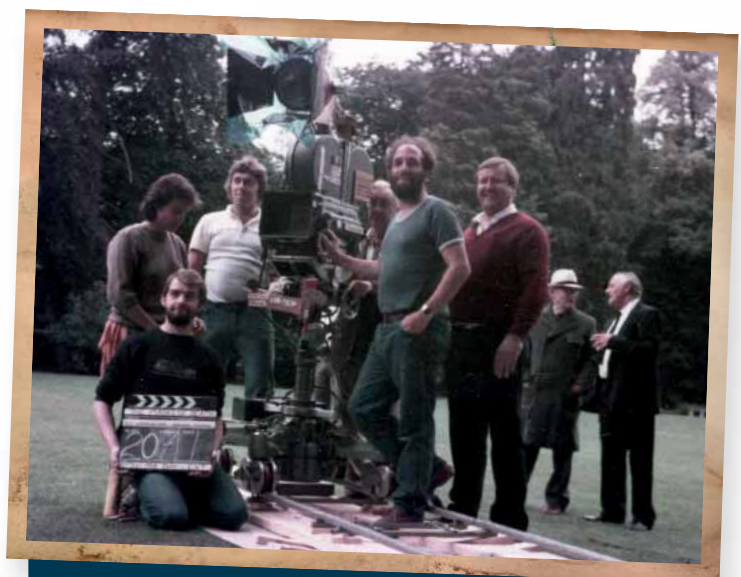
Although he never worked for the Samuelsons directly, Brian was honoured to be involved with them on three amazing collaborations. The first was when he supported David Samuelson's work on his front projection and depth of field test systems. The second was through working with Michael Samuelson for the Variety Club. The third came about after a phone call from 'Mr Sydney', in which he asked Brian to take the Samuelson museum collection of vintage cameras to a film festival in Rio de Janeiro – it was a huge honour to represent the Samuelsons internationally.

The most down-to-earth star

I next asked Brian, out of all the actors he'd worked with, who did he admire most? *"Rod Steiger, not just because of his acting skills, but because he was one of the most marvellous human beings I've ever met,"* he replied, before

sharing an anecdote to illustrate why he thought the famous actor was undeserving of his reputation for being extremely difficult to work with.

Rod was in *Cattle Annie and Little Britches*, one of Brian's first feature films as a focus puller (with DoP Larry Pizer). Shot in Mexico, the schedule was relentless and the harsh, sandy conditions made life particularly difficult for the camera crew, as they struggled to keep the camera maintained and working. Late one evening, Brian had just got back to the hotel after a particularly long, gruelling shoot in the desert. Rod walked up to him and asked: *"Have you eaten...?"*



Brian (middle foreground) as focus puller on location for *The Masks of Death* with Peter Cushing and Sir John Mills. It was probably one of the last films to be shot on the venerable Mitchell BNCR camera



Remaining cool whilst under fire on set – literally and verbally – and focus pulling for Stanley Kubrick on *Full Metal Jacket*

No? Come on, I'll take you to dinner," so Brian gratefully complied. "Well, you can't really turn down Rod Steiger!", he reminisced to me with a chuckle.

On the journey into town, they spotted a young lad crying in the street and Rod got the driver to stop so he could find out what was wrong. On hearing that the kid had been picked on by bullies who'd stolen his ice cream, Rod took him to the local ice cream parlour, where he asked the staff to create the most sumptuous ice cream dessert they could for the lad, who accepted it with wide-eyed amazement and appreciation. Rod turned to Brian and asked: "Do you feel good?" and, to Brian's "I feel great," Rod replied with: "Lesson number one, if you can't make just one person happy, then you haven't lived the day." Then he went on to ask Brian what he actually did on the picture, as he hadn't really noticed him on set. Perhaps a little surprised to hear this, Brian explained that he was the focus puller, but he was more than reassured by Rod's reply: "Take that as a compliment, it means you never get in my way!"

As they chatted during their meal, Rod spoke frankly about his personal life, openly sharing his vulnerabilities with rare honesty. At one point, as he looked around the restaurant, he remarked: "What I love about this town is that no-one knows who I am. To them, I'm just some guy from out of town." Having this big movie star candidly reveal such humility and humanity left a lasting impression on Brian.

The harsh under-bully of genius

To follow on from that, I asked Brian to name his most memorable feature film, and his answer was *Full Metal Jacket*, directed by Stanley Kubrick, with Brian as focus puller. Although, he added, "It wasn't easy at all, it was hell!", before explaining that, whilst the renowned director was a genius, Brian had actually been more scared of Kubrick than of the drill sergeant-major in the film – "He was a bully to me because I didn't stand up to him." Brian acknowledged there is a fine line between being a perfectionist and a bully, pointing out how Kubrick got through numerous focus pullers during the film.

Despite Kubrick's bombastic nature, Brian did commend the director for his authentic portrayal of war in *Full Metal Jacket*, the action set pieces for which were shot at Beckton Gas Works in East London. He told Kubrick how realistic he'd found being on set filming the battle scenes, as it had really reminded him of his own time spent as a press photographer in Israel, two years after the Six Day War, which had been a pretty terrifying experience.

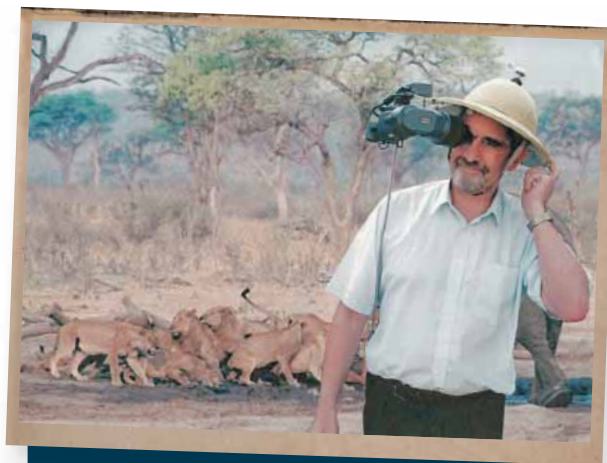
A new direction

A career change came in 1988 when Brian, who had already been writing articles for trade journals in his spare time, was approached to become the editor of *Video Action!*, one of the first video magazines aimed at the consumer market. He remained at the helm until the periodical folded shortly after a year, due to poor advertising revenue, but, as he'd also been working as a producer, he decided to set up his own production company. However, these were challenging times and unfortunately his new venture failed, so he started to look for a new career. Brian had two job offers to consider, either as producer on a new BBC strand, or to join a broadcast rental company. Being a Buddhist, Brian came to a decision through chanting, and the 'wisdom' was to take the job at OpTex Rental, where before too long he became the Technical Manager. It was through his work at OpTex that Brian first became a member of the GTC.

Being at the forefront of technology

This was an exciting time in the television industry, especially when, as Brian recalls, Sony introduced its new Digital Betacam camera in 1993, which he still considers to be the most influential television camera ever. "It allowed you to get into the menu and, if you knew what you were doing, you could make pictures that were absolutely cracking and didn't look like they came from a video camera." Brian believes that this was the beginning of the 'digital cinematography' age. Having accrued all the necessary accessories, OpTex realised it could supply customers with a complete 'Electronic Film Camera' package and part of Brian's role was to help DoPs understand and fully embrace this new format, because he could speak their 'language'.

Being such a proactive supporter of camera craft meant Brian was soon co-opted onto the GTC Council, where he served as the Manufacturing Liaison and Standards Officer.



Brian modelling a rig that he helped devise for *Lions – Spy in the Den*, so that cameraman Mike Richards could shoot with the OpTex Excellence periscope lens whilst relaying his pictures back to producer/director John Downer