

Labassa *lives*

Volume 2, Issue 2, 2014



Life through a lens



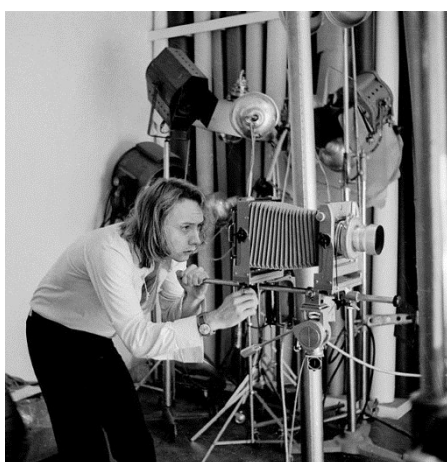
Prior to the National Trust assuming full possession of the house, filmmaking reflected the creative interests of residents. There were sophisticated home movies such as *One Man's Family*, a 9.5mm film with scenes shot at Labassa during the Manton family's residency (1947-56).

Experimental productions involving collaborations among residents were a feature of the 1970s. Before 1980, commercial film companies took considerable liberties with the fabric of the house to meet the needs of a script. A section of the Drawing Room wall was re-painted blue without

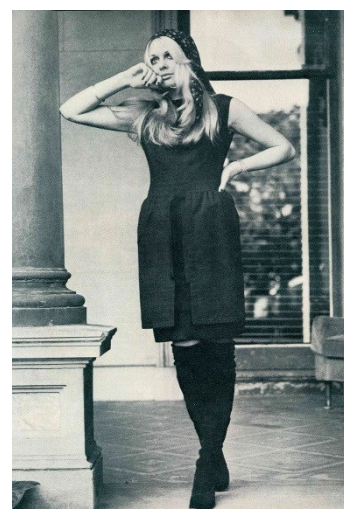
the permission of the owner or tenant. A window in the Music Room was smashed for dramatic effect. In 1977, the occupants of the Drawing Room rented the space to the producers of the Australian horror film *Patrick* for use as the office of Dr Roget (played by Robert Helpmann). *Patrick* had an appreciable impact on the life of the house and there are numerous stories of meeting Helpmann and seeing him dancing on the staircase. The crew even welcomed resident Russell D. Clarke onto the set allowing him to take a series of photos, including the one above left of a crew member.

Inside this issue *Filmmakers at Labassa*

Vale: Phil Speller



Phil Speller (left) who lived in the Drawing Room flat c.1969-70, passed away in December 2013. In his Labassa days, Phil was a photographer working with fashion and graphic art photographer Kurt Veld. He previously worked with celebrated portrait photographer Athol Shmith and commercial photographer John Cato. Phil's photography was featured in major publications such as *Myer Fashion* and *Distinction*.



Above:
Phil Speller used Labassa as a backdrop in several of his professional fashion shoots.

Photos: Karen Wood.

Film pioneer and star Louise Lovely



Left: Louise Lovely (centre) in *Jewelled Nights* (1925).

Labassa's most famous screen actress and film pioneer was Louise Lovely, known to residents as Mrs Nellie Cowen. Between 1915 and 1922 she starred in nearly 50 Hollywood films. On her return to Australia (1924) she made an independent feature with her then husband Wilton Welch called *Jewelled Nights*. As well as playing the lead, Louise produced, designed and contributed to the editing. *Jewelled Nights* is now one of Australia's 'lost films' and appears on the National Film

and Sound Archive (NFSA) 'Most Wanted' list. Louise retired from the screen and married Bert Cowen, who by 1937 was Manager of St Kilda's Victory Theatre (now the National).

The couple moved into the newly completed Willas flats in late 1937 or early 1938. Manor Grove resident Barry Jones, who was befriended by the Cowens, recalls Nellie's "elaborate toilet gear, her furs, and her chocolates and being taken to the cinema".

Mrs Cowen used her enduring celebrity to fundraise for charities although she was not immune to gossip columnist barbs.

Table Talk's William Hazlitt Jnr wrote in 1938: "Louise Lovely ... is now happily busy being nothing else than just Mrs Cowen, with all the glitter of Hollywood turned to a glow in the dusk of memory ... Of late years Louise has become an ardent Christian Scientist — rarely will you meet her where one or two are gathered together without the conversation turning sooner or later to her pet subject."

There are no records of how long the Cowens resided at the Willas flats. They moved to Hobart in 1946, where Bert became Manager of the Prince of Wales Theatre and Mrs Cowen ran the sweets store next door.

Low budgets and high aspirations

Labassa resident John Laurie was at the forefront of a new era of Australian independent film making. He started making films in the 1960s when he was a trainee film editor at the ABC and prior to the establishment of any funding bodies.

In 1964-65 John was living in Flat 6 (Upstairs Balcony) and working on his first production — a 30 minute black and white 16mm film called *Choice of an Evening Face* which was an adaptation of a tale in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. According to John, it was heavily influenced by Alain Resnais' *Last*

Year at Marienbad and made "with no money". The performers included Rosemary Gerrett, Anthony Everingham and Richard Beck with music by David Evans and sound by John Morrison.

After leaving Labassa, John headed for London with a print of the film intending to leverage off it into a film career in England "but was sidetracked by the delights of 'Swinging London' and foreign travel". John Laurie went on to take a lead acting role in the controversial and once banned *Pure S* (1975). He directed a number of shorts and the innovative feature



Stroker (1987) which was shot without a written script. The plot of *Stroker* evolved from what occurred in front of the camera. The actors spoke numbers and the dialogue was constructed from body language and lip movements after editing. Performers included John Flaus and Ross Macleod.

Copies of *Choice of an Evening Face*, *Pure S* and *Stroker* are held by the National Film and Sound Archive.

Exploring the Surreal



Far left: Daryl Lindquist late 1970s with cans of the film.

Photo: Daryl Lindquist.

Left: A page from the *Inkspots* comic book which was based on the film made at Labassa.

Image: Daryl Lindquist and Andrew Strathie.

The resurgence of the Australian film industry in the 1970s was largely realised through government funding bodies. Innovative short films had their own fund — the Experimental Film and Television Fund (1970-78) — and “any-one school-age to bald-age” was encouraged to apply.

A group of friends with Labassa connections did just that. Graphic artist Daryl Lindquist, who has been guardian of the resulting film for 40 years, recently donated the original 16mm footage to Labassa.

“The film was our first attempt at anything like this,” Daryl says. “We applied for a grant. We submitted a script, written by Labassa resident Andrew Strathie, and got an interview. It must have been pretty clear we knew zero about making movies, but they gave us a grant anyway (a couple of thousand dollars from memory, enough to hire a camera for a couple of weeks).

“We shot the movie circa 1973/74 over a couple of months, in short chunks. Since we had no idea what we were doing, it wasn't very good. Our cameraman was Robert Pickford who had never used a movie camera but was familiar with still cameras (which was more than the rest of us). Our lead actor was Russell Hellyer, who had never acted. Labassa resident Stephen Hall was also involved, along with Brian Hellyer (Russell's brother), Elaine Baker and others who drifted in and out, and whose names escape me.

“I was introduced to Labassa by Stephen Hall. It was such a great location. There were a couple of scenes set in the house including a shot of a canoe being carried up the main staircase. At the time we were all into Surrealism and exploring the subconscious and psyche.”

Stephen Hall remembers the boat on the staircase shoot very well.

“It included Russell Hellyer and me playing chess with dead scorpions. Much of the film was inspired by the early films of Luis Buñuel and Alejandro Jodorowsky.” Stephen believes the plan was to call the film *Belladonna* after the poisonous plant also known as Deadly Nightshade. Labassa's grounds were overgrown with Morning Glory, a member of the Nightshade family.

According to Daryl Lindquist, the film didn't reach a final cut stage. A year or two after filming he converted the script into a graphic short story, which was published in the first issue of *Inkspots*, an Australian comic magazine. The above page from *Inkspots* provides some insights into the film's intended visual impact. Note in particular the man in the boat, the chessboard pattern and scorpions, all of which were featured in the filming at Labassa.

Apostasy



Left: Juliet Bacsikai as 'The Woman' and Rod McNicol as 'The Man'.

Photo: Peter Friedrich.

Right: Rod McNicol's photos of artist and resident John Money. The first was taken in his room at Labassa with his art works in the background.

According to resident Miriam Gregory, the feature film *Apostasy* was shot in the Music Room (Flat 2) over a three month period in 1977. Several residents were involved in the production and the credits acknowledge Miriam Gregory, Leonie Gregory and Ann Moir amongst others.

A photograph of artist John Money, who lived in the Smoking Room and shared the Flat with the Gregory sisters, was incorporated in the script.

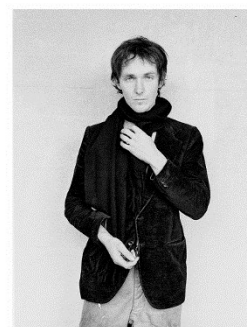
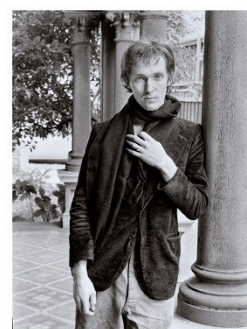
Apostasy's lead actor, Rod McNicol, went on to become an internationally successful photographer, winning the 2012 National Photographic Portrait Prize for his photo of Jack Charles. Only one of Rod McNicol's photos of John Money was used in *Apostasy*. Nevertheless they are important examples of his signature style — 'the stare back'. Rod also offers some context: "As you can see from the hand gesture in all of them, these photographs were taken to give us an image of John that would illustrate a quote from a Jerzy Skolimowski's film *Bariera* that is delivered by my character."

Apostasy also represents an important phase in Australian film history. According to director Zbigniew Peter Friedrich, *Apostasy* was part of a movement to make non-mainstream Australian feature films and help revive the Australian film industry.

With a tiny budget of around \$13,000, Peter Friedrich relied on cameramen from production houses such as Crawfords to contribute the raw film left over at the end of their own shoots known as 'short ends'.

The complex structure of the film defies a simplistic summary. Set during the 1975 election campaign, which saw the defeat of the Whitlam Government, it focuses on the interactions of two characters — 'The Man' (played by Rod McNicol) and 'The Woman' (by Juliet Bacsikai).

Apostasy may be viewed by making a booking through ACMI or NFSA.



What Russell saw

During his residency (Flat 3, 1977-86), Russell D. Clarke produced four Super 8 films and one video. Although he was not a trained filmmaker, Russell's photography studies at RMIT had given him a passion for the visual arts. In 1977 he was given access to the *Patrick* film set to take his own photos. In the same year, he worked as Director of Photography and First Camera for Howard Watkinson's film *La Vie Ignoble*.

Russell's own films not only reflect the experimental style of the 1970s and 1980s, they offer lucid and sometimes intimate insights into the life of Labassa.

The Bay Window, Super 8 film, c.1977



The Bay Window is shot in the front room of Flat 3 and features residents Stephen Hall and Leonie Gregory. We see a large variety of Stephen's art and some of Leonie's. Says Russell: "Stephen was a cheerful, funny guy and this was a spontaneous production. He was a great fan of avant garde and Surrealist art and musician Captain Beefheart.

The film was shot in one afternoon with Stephen and Leonie contributing many ideas. I edited 'in camera'."

L'Escalier (The Staircase) Super 8 film, c.1978/79



Resident Ann Weir (Drawing Room flat) came up with the idea to make a film about a piano player being swept down a staircase by a wind and out the front door. She also acted as director throughout the production. The opening titles showing black and white keys of a keyboard were painted by Ann using gouache on board.

To get the effect of moving down the hallway, Russell used 'stop motion' photography. The film starred Konrad Dorn (the piano player) who lived in Flat 3 with Russell.

Other members of the crew were residents Howard Watkinson, Trevor Stevens and Stephen Hall.



What Did Ruth See? Super 8 film, c.1980/81



John Harland and Russell shared Flat 3 for about four years. *What Did Ruth See?* depicts a father (John) and daughter (Ruth) having breakfast together.

As Ruth looks out the kitchen window she sees residents fighting a small fire on a side fence. The 'firefighters' include Jeff Watkinson and Trevor Stevens with Sue Furze and Esther Gregory among the bemused onlookers. The next door neighbours are shown frantically hurrying about with ladders and hoses. The fire is eventually brought under control.

What Did Ruth See? was shot in two parts at different times of the year and joined together to make a story.



What Russell saw (continued)

Ruins, Super 8 film, c.1985



A student, played by Russell's flatmate Mark Klos (1982-86), discovers Labassa while delivering pamphlets. He explores Labassa's hallway, spiral staircase and the Flat 3 kitchen.

Eventually he discovers the tower but due to its disrepair he falls over.

The whole building is falling down and Mark is always in slight danger due to the poor condition of the house. Shot on Kodak Extrachrome Super 8 film, this production has 'bluer' cooler tones.

In Her Dreams, video, 1985



Oakleigh Technical School student Sally Freeman (above) plays a young woman who is sad over a recent breakup with her boyfriend.

According to Russell, the title was chosen to suggest that the film may not be portraying reality.

The girl's thought processes and emotions waver between reality and fantasy. The scenes in her bedroom (Flat 3) may be real but her disastrous attempts at cooking in the kitchen may be a bad dream.



Left:

Russell D. Clarke editing in his Labassa flat, c.1980.

Photo:

John Harland.

The Quick Brown Fox



Above: Gary Day and Gerda Nicholson in *The Quick Brown Fox*, 1979.

The Quick Brown Fox is a National Film and Television School graduate short, which was filmed at Labassa in 1979. The cast and crew offer a Who's Who of Australian screen including actors Gary Day (*Homicide*), Gerda Nicholson (*Bellbird*), Pat Bishop (*Prisoner*) and Alan Hopgood (actor and script-writer). The production crew comprised director Malcolm Robertson and producer Natalie Miller.

Filmmaker Richard Lowenstein and singer Deborah Conway also participated. The film concerns an author who writes about his attempted seductions and ends up in gaol only to become a best-selling author. *The Quick Brown Fox* was shown at the Melbourne International Festival and released in the UK (1980).

A 19 minute edited version can be viewed online at www.aftrs.edu.au/showcase/student-films/video/0_w7ogw97q

La Vie Ignoble



La Vie Ignoble was produced in 1977 by resident Howard Watkinson who also wrote, cast, directed and completed the final edit. He even composed and performed the music for one scene “with a little help from Mr Adolf Hitler” — achieved by creating a sound loop from one of his speeches. Although mainly set at Labassa, with a resident crew and cast, some scenes were also shot in Gippsland and in St Kilda, Caulfield and Prahran.

“The film is about me wanting to apologise to everyone I may have hurt in the past, thus bad things happen to me,” says Howard. Among those “bad things” are being run down by a car he is also driving. His on-screen persona’s vices seem to include the use of copious quantities of every kind of drug. The main interior shot was filmed in Howard’s flat (Drawing Room) which was being used at the time as a set for the Australian feature film *Patrick*. Enhancing the set décor of ‘Dr Roget’s office’ are some vigorously healthy marijuana plants.

According to Howard, some risks and liberties were taken during production. One scene involved him driving a car blind with Director of Photography Russell D. Clarke filming while sitting on the bonnet.

The filming of a scene with Howard being hit by a car and lying in Orrong Road was not well received by a woman passing by who screamed, “Thanks for upsetting my kids.”

While the film has serious intent there are elements of humour and the audience is warned in the opening credits that this film “may contain traces of nut”.

Aside from the narrative, *La Vie Ignoble* has many shots of Labassa and its environs including elderly resident Mr Fred Halford with his legendary 1951 Triumph Renown.

Production members

Cast: Jeffrey Watkinson and Miriam Gregory

Director of Photography: Russell D. Clarke

Still Photographer: Russell D. Clarke

Lighting: Russell D. Clarke

Post Editing: Russell D. Clarke

1st Camera: Russell D. Clarke

2nd Camera: Jeffrey Watkinson

Assistant Director: Jeffrey Watkinson

Dolly: Ron Nichols and John Harland



Left: Howard Watkinson and cast member Miriam Gregory (resident Flat 2).



Left: Exterior shot of Labassa showing the backyard of the house that once stood in the mansion’s front garden, which was purchased by the National Trust and demolished in 1988.



Left: Howard Watkinson in the rear yard of Labassa. The garages in the background have since been demolished.

Volume 2, Issue 2, 2014

Please send contributions, corrections, information, comments and articles, indicating whether or not they are for publication, to the following:

vickijshuttleworth@yahoo.com.au or
PO Box 363, Chadstone Shopping Centre,
Chadstone, Vic. 3148

Forthcoming events

Open days (3rd Sunday of the month, 10.30am—4.30pm)

August 17 Regular Open Day

September 21 Regular Open Day

October 19 Regular Open Day

November 16 Regular Open Day

December CLOSED

Next issue

- ◇ Post War II transitions
- ◇ 1950s migration boom
- ◇ Owners:
Wolf and Hinda Kazer

The music video

Labassa is a favourite with production houses for its variety of elaborate yet adaptable interiors and availability for longer shoots.

The house also has the benefit of its own visual language. The Drawing Room translates into a lavish Parisian apartment while the Music Room has a sense of interiority suitable for intimate dramas.

Music video and avant garde directors have often played against these conventional meanings to create more surreal images.

Hi Ho — One Man Too Late (1986) is an example of how Labassa has been used both as a conventional stage and to create a more abstract aesthetic. Performed by Rozzi Bazzani with young dancers from the Australian Ballet, it can be viewed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=dIED-5KVofc

Also of interest is Coco Rosie's video for *Lemonade* which maximises Labassa's potential for the surreal. This video may be viewed at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=tu3EcAHdHIE&feature=kp



Above: Scenes from the music video
Hi Ho — One Man Too Late.

Looking for . . .

The establishment of the ABC television studios at Ripponlea in 1956, Monash University in 1961 as well as the growth in arts courses at the Prahran and Caulfield institutes of technology in the 1970s, drew a lot of artists to Labassa as both visitors and residents.

We are looking for any photos or films they may have made at Labassa during this era.

Our most wanted list includes:

- ◇ A film made in the Music Room by Neo Opera featuring a belly dancer
- ◇ An experimental film made with musician Ron Rude.

If you can help us with any information about these or any other relevant visual media please contact vickijshuttleworth@yahoo.com.au or 03-95446859.