

John Harrison, Movievision and Southern Lighting



John Harrison

John Harrison, (together with his partner in Southern Lighting, Robin Wilter) who has worked on most anti apartheid films created in and out of South Africa, thought it somewhat unusual when technicians arrived at his office in Auckland Park to repair the telex machine, particularly as the telex machine was not broken. He soon had his first encounter with the government of the day.

The scene took place in the 70s and John was working on a production called Biko, being filmed in Zimbabwe by Richard Attenborough. "As is regulation today, I needed permission to send equipment out of the country," explained John. "It was second nature for us to get the necessary documentation stamped by the bank. When I arrived at the bank on this specific day they said they could not stamp the inspection form as per orders from Cape Town."

It suddenly dawned on John that the government were very aware of what their company were doing in regards to film making.

"General Hendrik van den Berg from the Bureau of State Security accused me of being unpatriotic. It was the first time I had come into contact with the state. To cut a long story square, we had a ding dong fight. Eventually I told him that he owed me a medal for the film being made, as his salary was being supplied by our equipment. Finally the goods were released." A year later John was involved in the State Opening in Parliament and dolly leaked oil onto the red carpet – more confrontation!

John represented Technicolor Laboratories during which time he put more than 1.5 million feet of film through the lab in one year when the SA authorities were clamping down on "anti South African" products.

No doubt John's Irish birthplace have ensured that whilst a gentleman in every way, he certainly lacks no passion or fire. His involvement in the industry for over forty years has proved to be extraordinary.

Arriving in South Africa with his parents at the age of thirteen, John attended Durban High School and King Edward VII, and even played first league rugby as well as for Transvaal under 19 – no mean feat for such a small fellow when taking into account that first league teams also consisted of Springbok rugby players.

"My only dream though during school was to get out of school. It's an institution!" Leaving school at the age of 16, John studied accountancy but became unimpressed with the lifestyle it gave him. Eventually in 1967 he joined a company called General Optical and within six months was the accountant. "The company had a film division and when Roy Walker, who had established the department left, I asked to take over his job and things just grew and grew. Eventually they made me a director and I was told that I was the youngest director in the

history of that public company.” John could not have been more than twenty years old.

Persuading Samuelson Film Services to open in South Africa, John played an influential role in bringing the first Panavision equipment (a world standard) into the country. “One of our first films using this equipment was titled “Seuns van die Wolke” lit by one of SA’s few ASC members, Vincent Cox, he says.

Again, though, John soon became bored. “I was tired of big company life. I’m not a big company person and couldn’t do all those budgets. They told me that the film industry was the same as making mattresses or selling tea. I did not agree. It was different and I wanted to be able to think on my feet.”



John’s two lovely daughters, Kerrie & Kim

In 1978 John, along with Gerry Dannaher, opened Movievision, and as many people know, as the years rolled on, his two daughters, Kerri Dimaond and Kim Reed also became involved in the business. The company initially operated below the Sound Stage in Midrand, on an estate which had just been started by another industry stewart, Felix Myburgh. Gerry pulled out of Movievision in the early days and now the company is run under Kim’s firm hand.

In 1981 he joined Robin Wilter at the then Southern Film Services / On the Spot, and in 1987, the company’s name changed to Southern Lighting. Providing lighting, Southern had the lion’s share when providing gear for the production of new films. “There was no competition,” recalls John. “During this period television commercials came along and stupidly we did nothing about them. When the movie industry dried up, there was a line of companies already working on adverts, so Southern has continually had to re-invent itself. Currently we must have the largest fleete of LED hire equipment in the country”

During this time John also sat on the South African Publications Board (Censor Board) for seven years. “I was angry because they used to take out bits of movies,” he says. Government policy meant that while violence was tolerated, nudity was a definite “no no”. “I’m against anything being disallowed. I just think there should be control.” The irony, of course, is that these days you can turn on the television every night and see either.

Today, both Movievision and Southern Lighting operate from Wynberg and the memories of days gone by have been fantastic.

“In 41 years you are guaranteed to have some fun,” smiles John.

“We did the first three Miss World pageants, and at one of them nearly electrocuted all the contestants. On the one side of the stage there were waterfalls, not created by us but by the set designers. I was sitting by the board

and was suddenly asked if there were any electric cables running below the stage. Of course there were. Apparently there was a leak in the holding tanks of the water falls and there were the contestants, tiptoeing through the water with shoes in one hand, and skirts hiked up to avoid getting wet – the imagination boggles at the thought – water, electricity and fried Miss Worlds.”

Movievision have been proud to supply virtually every large studio in the country with equipment. ZSE television studios were one of the first to take a chance on placing a large order for the new soapie ‘Egoli’ with Movievision who in turn supplied all the necessary lighting, dimmers and control equipment. Since then other studios have included Lonehill for 7de Laan, Urban Brew, CNBC and lately ETV for their new News studios, and even studios in Nigeria and Kenya.

Currently Southern are working on the productions “Doen met ‘n Miljoen” and “Deal or No Deal”. With countless events and movies under his belt, John is the first to acknowledge that he is only as strong as his team. “What few people realize is that at Movievision there is a maximum staff compliment of four, and for Southern Lighting, a maximum of 20. It leads to people knowing the client and vice versa, thus ensuring client satisfaction. For the amount of work done, that’s a paramount thing. It’s not easy to do big jobs with small companies, so I think the people who are working here are incredible.” With an intimate staff, some having stayed with the company for twenty odd years, it really is more like a family concern. “I can’t do everything and I rely on others. It is due to them that we are able to do some of these phenomenal big jobs.”

Married to Joan since 1964, daughters Kerrie and Kim are the light of John’s life. That along with eight grandchildren – interestingly enough Kerri and Kim have two girls and two boys each! “According to the girls I wasn’t involved while they were growing up, but it boils down to the fact that I was supportive from a distance. I gave them total freedom, but if something went wrong, I was always there for them. I didn’t want to run their lives.” That said, he adds, “Kim got gated for umpteen thousand months after coming back with a boy on a motorbike,” says John. The problem was not the motorbike, but that she had not been wearing a crash helmet.



John (far left) learnt how to ski in 2007

With Kerri and Kim attending St Catherine’s convent, John was involved with Drum Majorettes. “It’s a great outdoor sport for girls and took their minds off boys because they had to practise so hard,” he said. “The competition is fierce and it’s the only sport where girls really get involved and also become lifelong friends.” John became the Chairman of the Transvaal Drum Majorette Association and then President of the South African Drum Majorette Association. He received Proteaa colours after managing three South African Drum Majorette Teams who competed at the World Championships in Japan.

At one stage of his life John had time to build and sail boats. He was a past Vice Commodore for the Florida Yacht Club and a founder member and past Commodore of the Vaal Cruising Association at the Vaal Dam.

Nowadays business affairs often consume every day of the week with John looking after the financial affairs of both Movievision and Southern Lighting. Holiday times have made up for a busy schedule and just last year John learnt how to snow ski! With a large family coming in and out of their home on a daily basis, new memories are constantly being made by little children who do not necessarily know their grandpa by his past achievements, but rather by his lovely grin and huge heart.



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