Bert Eeles

Cutting room guerrilla possessed of great vision and a disarming sense of humour

Appreciation

■ **Bert Eeles, film editor. Born: 30 August, 1943, in Elsenham, Essex. Died: 25 April, 2011, in New Cumnock, Ayrshire, aged 67.**

BERT called me in Slovenia, and my daughter, who was two years old, picked up the phone: 'Ha-loh!' "Hallo … it's Bert o' Lucci!" Tana groped for the few words she knew in English.

"What …" Pause. "… What are you?"

Bert never ceased to be amused by this – What am I? How on Earth am I supposed to answer that? He had a tremendous, full-bodied laugh that came bursting out, and with customary gusto he adopted those words as the greeting of preference whenever we spoke.

What are you?

Bert was a human being, and that was the great quality he brought to film editing.

We met at Napier University in 1993, in the midst of that short-lived experiment in education that aimed to nurture new voices, the Scottish Film School. Born and educated in England, Bert had moved to Scotland and by that time he seemed to have worked with everyone. He taught me to lace up a Steenbeck, to sharpen a chinagraph, to keep a log, to organise a trimbin, and then we settled down to watch our disastrous first exercise amid great hilarity. Bert was the best thing that happened to me at film school. It was the first moment of pleasure for me, and from that moment onwards a constant was established: the best part of the process has always been the editing, and editing has always meant sharing the film with Bert.

For Bert o, a cutting room was a kind of home. It should be there on indefinite lease. It should be clean, organised, and civilised. It needed a window and the space to pace around. And an ashtray, because smoking and contemplating film are such close cousins. I liked to share his habits, right down to knowing where your cigarettes were so that you could prise one out without taking your mind off the shot or your eyes from the screen.



He was unrepentantly old-fashioned, and I liked to share his prejudices. From the start came the infectious feeling that film-editing was cool. And not just any kind of cool, but specifically as cool as Jean-Paul Belmondo, and the jump-cuts in *Pierrot le Fou*. While Bert claimed never, consciously, to have taught anyone anything, from the very start he sought to imbue me with a certain cast of mind. This was the magic of working with Bert: in the course of the process I became him, adopting his patience and craftsmanship, and in turn he became me. He was brilliant at handling the delicate and exciting relationship between editor/provocateur and director/dreamer.

He developed a whole lexicon of attitude to maintain an open mind and a creative process. I knew if some outrageous new proposal was good because when I told Berto he would pause, and then say " … you interest me, strangely …", before bursting into laughter. He was never possessive of his skills or less than generous with his time, and over the decades Bert cultivated a generation of new film-makers in Scotland. In turn we, the directors, could imagine new films, films cooked up as prolonged editing schemes to share with Berto.

Inevitably these were defiantly independent low-budget films with prolonged post-production that would take place in improvised surroundings.

Despite the lack of money he allowed himself to be dedicated to these projects, and in the independent scene he was a mainstay. He took the work as a great chance to experience life, and he did it with enormous sympathy. He used to tell me, apropos of films he had made about Alan Wells and David Jenkins, that success was always much less interesting than failure.

And he often told me that cutting drama was "a piece of p*ss" compared to documentary, because it was for documentary projects that we sought out his special qualities as a colleague: his delight in it, his loyalty and his discipline. A cut is there to advance the story. A good shot, and a whole film is a process of allowing something to be revealed. These were the rigorous strictures that he brought to very open-ended projects to negotiate with his feeling for character, rhythm and sense. We worked together for nine years on my documentary, *The Ring*; it would have been impossible without Bert, and we were both immensely proud of it.

He lived for most of his life in Glasgow and had a real admiration for the city and its people, a kind of closeness to pain and joy, pride and desperation. It was the real jazz of a proper city, and the film he completed before he died, Peter Mackie Burns' *Come Closer*, is to my mind the best portrait of that city and its soul that has ever been made. It is a *tour de force*, and a testament to the great maturity he achieved as an editor. I hope that we will have the opportunity to show *Come Closer* and *The Ring* in homage to a great friend, teacher, colleague and artist.

He leaves Zoe, his daughter, and Sheila, his partner.

ANGUS REID

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