

## Thomas Hauerslev MBKS in conversation with the BKSTS Patron at his home in Hampstead.

70mm enthusiast Thomas Hauerslev spent many hours talking with BKSTS Patron Sir Sydney Samuelson to prepare a long and interesting interview for the [www.in70mm.com](http://www.in70mm.com) website. Thomas has been kind enough to provide this much edited version for Cinema Technology magazine, and the full conversation can be read online at [in70mm.com](http://in70mm.com).



# At home with Sir Sydney

Sir Sydney Samuelson (born 7th December 1925) and his three brothers managed Samuelson Film Service in London, a company which supplied technical equipment for film productions. Their customers and industry partners included David Lean, Bob Gottschalk, Stanley Kubrick and Freddie Young among many others. In this [edited] conversation Sydney reveals a little bit about what went on behind the scenes.

### **Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs**

Cinema was always in my family. My parents always talked about films, although we actually hardly ever went to the cinema from when I was about 7 or 8, simply because my parents couldn't afford it. They never went to the cinema, I never went to the cinema, my three brothers didn't go to the cinema – we didn't have the money. We were not an unhappy family; we were lucky, we were a close, loving family – but we'd no money.

Anyway, when 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs' appeared it came to the Odeon in Worthing, because Odeon

released all the Disney product – and although there was a little Odeon cinema already in Lancing, my mother must have said to herself, "I'm not going to have my four being the only children in the school who have not seen 'Snow White'". Because when it came out, the first full-length cartoon, ever – and a very good movie as well – everybody wanted to see it. And so one Wednesday – early closing day in Shoreham-by-Sea, which is where my mother's little shop was – she actually took us on the bus to Worthing to see 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs'.

And I remember every word of the following conversation – she went up to the box office and said to the girl, "One and four halves" (this was at about 2 o'clock in the afternoon – we call it the Matinée performance) and the girl in the box office said, "No half price for 'Snow White'!" And do you know, Thomas, that made the difference between us going to see "Snow White" and not going to see "Snow White"! The best my mother could do – and I still think about it, the humiliation: how could that poor woman have

felt – we were virtually in the cinema – to say, "No, we were not going, let's see what is on at The Plaza". And so we went, and I have remembered this because the disappointment was so momentous.

Years and years after that, when I was the British Film Commissioner, I used to go regularly to Los Angeles because that was my job – to say to people like Spielberg, "I know you're investigating and doing reconnaissances for a new picture...I believe it's called "Saving Private Ryan"...and I know that you're going to be looking for a location in Europe to reproduce the D-Day landings, and we've got the beaches that you can use for Normandy and we've got all the equipment you could ever want by way of cameras and everything else, and we've got the best technicians certainly in Europe, arguably in the world".

And that was really the job of British Film Commissioner – to promote the British film production sector. I met all the top production people from all the studios. I was sitting privately with the then Chief Exec at Disney, who happened to be an Anglophile, and I was able to tell

him about 'Snow White' in Worthing all those years earlier. And I always remember because he said, "No half price for 'Snow White'...My God!" It was for children, that film, but not for me, my mum and my brothers.

### **Bob Gottschalk, Panavision**

Bob loved Freddie Young to bits as a person, and because he'd done a little film called "Lawrence of Arabia" in Panavision and won an Oscar for it. And apparently he had said to Bob, "You know, I think it's ridiculous you have no representation in London or anywhere in Europe, and Freddie said, "Well shall I put you in touch with someone I think would do a good job for you, his name's Sydney Samuelson, and I've known his family as long as I can remember?" And Bob said, "Oh yeah, I know him, he keeps 'phoning me!" So Freddie said, "I think you should see him".

One evening, when I got home, there was a message on my answering machine. It was the Office Manager – "I'm phoning up for Mr. Robert Gottschalk – he wants to speak to you". And it was gone midnight. So I phoned Robert Gottschalk and he did speak to me – he said, "There's a picture called "Thunderball" being made – they've taken equipment from us, they've just started shooting and they say the stuff doesn't fit together - they must be idiots! Now you've told me on the phone before about your Chief Engineer, who came from the Rank Organisation – Bill Vicker is it?" And I said, "Yes". He said, "Well, tell him to get his ass down to Wye-mouth – wherever that is – right away!" I said, "Bob, it's 1am...I'll try to get him, but he'll need to go on the train – he'll be on the first train tomorrow, with his tool-kit". So he said, "Right". I said, "Now while we're on the phone – we've never met, I've asked you whether we might talk about representing Panavision. I've asked if I can come and see you, but we have no deal. Believe me, Bill Vicker will be there, not later than 9 o'clock in the morning". And he said, "Oh well, you can come here if you want to". And so I did!

I had previously knocked on his door for a visit, and I was shown around Panavision in their relatively small place in Pontius Avenue in West Los Angeles. Nothing about UK representation was talked about, but I did meet him in the end, in passing, as it were. He wasn't in the mood to say,



"Well what do you think of it all", "Tell me about yourself", or "Come and have a coffee" – and so I went, but that's how we began to get a deal.

We were the best, the closest of friends – he was the most loyal person, business colleague, I could ever have – did ever have. If someone complained to him, along the lines of, "I don't know why you have Samuelson's representing your product, they're very difficult to deal with, you know". He would say, "Why, was there anything wrong?" "You can't negotiate with Sydney at all". And he'd say, "Well are you talking about discounts?" "Well not necessarily, but it's...not easy to do a deal". And Bob would always say the same thing – "Have you spoken to Sydney about it?" "Well no, I haven't spoken about it, I was coming to Los Angeles so I thought I'd speak to you – I thought I'd come to the top". And Bob would always say, "If you haven't spoken to Sydney, I don't know why you're speaking to me!" And that was very important to me; I think I can say, without sounding too pompous, that if anyone was complaining about my company it was because we didn't discount. In the end, we had to discount just like everybody else in order to stay in business! Later on, Panavision also had to discount.

### **Stanley Kubrick and 2001**

With Panavision came a lot of huge business benefits. It introduced us to the biggest filmmakers in the world. Now of

course Stanley Kubrick came on our scene and that's how we came to do "2001". It became an iconic film. Many people have said, who are not necessarily technicians, "Oh, what a boring film". But of course the music was also so important to that film, for which Stanley paid nothing, when you come to think of it! But he was such a clever man...

We were quite good friends, in a detached kind of way – not good friends like I was with say – dropping a big name out of the sky – I was truly close with David Lean – and I've got a still upstairs of David and I, and David has his arm through mine – Stanley Kubrick might shake hands with me, but he wouldn't go any further than that – and that wasn't just me, he was very detached. I would say he was a bit weird – I don't think he had really close friends – I think he and his wife had an affectionate family. As far as his relationships with technicians, he respected knowledgeable people. Anyway, I can't say Stanley was an important customer to me – he was clearly an important person – he used my company, and our activities, but hardly as a customer – in so much as he was always very friendly. He would phone me up, and say, "I want to be able to hand-hold a camera and shoot sync sound...I hear that Arriflex have just brought out a blimp". He said, "Can you hand-hold it? I understand it's small, only 400 feet, when a Mitchell is 1000 feet". I said, "You can't really hand-hold" – he would say, "Well can I come and see it?" And I'd say, "Of course you can" – and he would probably always say, "Will you be there yourself?" – "Of course I will, let's fix a time". He didn't ever come during daytime; he would come at 10 o'clock at night – really strange. And I would go back to the office, and whatever it was he wanted to see, or he'd heard about, I would show him, and I'd have one of my technical people if it needed detailed explanation of any kind, especially when complicated electronics came into our industry – but he would never say, "Well for the next picture I'd like to rent that for 10 weeks". If he wanted that item, he would find out where it came from, and buy one for himself. He must have been quite wealthy – he'd had some very successful films, hadn't he?

### **David Lean and Ryan's Daughter**

The crew had done extensive tests – and



they'd gone away to Ireland with this huge load of gear – very happy – everybody was happy. We were happy, because of what we knew. I think the original schedule was about 20 weeks – of course it went much more than that – you know. After the first 3 days of shooting in Dingle, I got a phone call from there, from the Production Manager – one of the biggest – big-time Production Managers – John Palmer – and he said, "Sydney, we've got terrible trouble here, we've had our rushes back and there's a problem with the focus". I said, "What kind of problem?" He said, "Well, David has just stormed out...we've had our first day's rushes and David has stormed out and said, 'That's absolutely useless, the lot of it'". And John said, "We've remonstrated with him –". "We've argued with him that it seems alright, and his camera crew felt that it was probably OK". My first question was, "You've got three cameras out there at the moment – have you been shooting on all three?" "Yes, we have". And I said, "Are you saying that all three have gone out of focus?" "Yes – everything – David says everything is soft". I said, "Impossible! Nobody, including me, could be as unlucky as to have three cameras that have each been tested, with their own lenses, no way would all three cameras, simultaneously, on one day, go out of focus. There must be something else". I said, "What we'll have to do is shoot some tests – shoot the same thing, on all three cameras and get it off to the lab. And then

let's look at what we've got". I said, "I'm going out on a limb and saying, 'It cannot be a fault of three cameras and three lenses, that have been tested at the same time; there has to be something else'". I had really no idea what it might be, but labs have also been known to have problems with their own printers.

Anyway, the production manager said, "Mr. Lean wants you to come to Dublin and he will bring the rushes with him. You've got to go to Dublin because there's no 65mm projection in Ireland nearer than Dublin". And I said, "Right, I'll get on an early plane tomorrow". This was in the evening – they'd just seen their rushes after shooting for their second day. And he said, "No, Mr. Lean wants you to be on a plane tonight". So I said, "Well I don't know if I can get a seat on a plane tonight". The Production Manager said, "We have already booked you a ticket...and we will send a car for you at Dublin Airport". And certainly, when it's David Lean, and it's the biggest picture of the year, without any doubt – I think it was the only 65mm picture probably shooting anywhere in the Western World because of the cost-cutting that was going on...Russia may have been shooting 70mm – anyway, of course I was on the plane that night – you don't say, "Well, tell Mr. Lean he'll have to wait for me until tomorrow". And when I got to Dublin, there wasn't a taxi waiting for me, it was a unit limousine – like a Mercedes – it took me to the big hotel in Dublin – The

Shelbourne. Anyway, in those days it was like the big traditional hotel in Dublin. There were four or five who'd come from Dingle: David Lean; the Associate Producer – who I think was Anthony Havelock-Allan; Freddie Young; and the Operator, Ernie Day. Ernie had become a Cameraman but went back to operating, I think to do 65mm for David Lean and Freddie Young – I think that's what happened. So there were four of them – but when the taxi pulled up, at the pavement outside the hotel, there was David Lean, on his own, pacing up and down. And so I got out, the car drove off, and I said, "Hello David, what are you doing out here all on your own?" He said, "I wanted to be the first to talk to you, Sydney". And he said, "I think the old boy has lost it". Something one could say about anyone, if they did something you didn't like.

I was in awe of Freddie Young's entire career as a Cameraman – and as a person, as it happens – and when someone says that, even if he's got his arm through my arm, I found it really difficult to accept. And I suppose I just said, "Well David, let's look at the first rushes". So we went off to the theatre and they projected it of course, in 65mm. It was a standard commercial cinema and I had no way of knowing whether the quality of their lenses, even the quality of the movement of their projectors – I'd no idea what the technical quality of that commercial cinema's 70mm projection equipment was – how accurately maintained it was. I was 45...I know by then I was wearing glasses – what I'm getting at is, I'm not sure my eyesight was not good enough to be able to absolutely critically analyse the sharpness on the screen. Of course if something was soft I would see it was soft – but if it was not 100% perfectly sharp, it was a very fine degree of opinion. And while I couldn't honestly say, "It looks perfect to me", equally, it didn't look as though it was optimum sharp. It may not have been optimum sharp. It's an example of how personal jealousy – or whatever you like to call it – how the great, wonderful, brilliant, David Lean, right inside, how he felt about Freddie Young, I mean.

#### **I always like to make it light-hearted if I can**

At the Tribute Lunch [2011], I decided I wasn't going to bore everybody by making

a formal speech. I played it by ear, I just had a card with what I call "bullet points" – just to remind me. And I always like to make it light-hearted, if I can. And here I was, in front of this wonderful audience, who had all paid money, if you please, to come have lunch in tribute to Sydney Samuelson. We had – I don't know if you know of a personality called Stephen Fry – well he stood up to talk about me and why, in his opinion, all the 451 people were there, and he can be very funny. And I then had to respond.

And I hadn't given it much thought, but I had my bullet points, and I finished on a little story, whereby I say, "In this crazy industry, that most of us sitting here have been involved in, for so many years, one of the best things about it all is that although you may have noticed that a lot of people in our business have egos – you notice that? Sometimes, you find someone with an ego? Only occasionally?" That got a laugh, because there are a lot of people who've got very big egos, in our industry. I said, "Well, the good thing is, our industry has a wonderful habit of making those egos crash to the ground!" And I said, "I think I've got as much of an ego as anybody I know – but thank goodness for you all, there have been plenty of people, who if they thought I've got too big for my boots" – do you know that expression? – "they do something about curbing my ego".

"And I'll tell you two examples, and then we should all go home, or go back to our jobs". As I said that, I thought in my mind, "By the way, who has been looking after the whole of the British film and television industry while we're all in here, having lunch?" That got a laugh. And then I said, "Now, back to the ego-crashers". I said, "When I was first made the British Film Commissioner, I was amazed; I came out of BAFTA, and on the other side of Piccadilly there was a man selling The Evening Standard. And he has a poster below his pile of newspapers, and it looks like it's been done in longhand. "Britain Gets a Film Boss" – that was the headline. And, having just been appointed, when I saw this poster, I sort of knew it was probably reporting that the government – the Thatcher government – had appointed, for the first time, a British Film Commissioner. So I walked over there, and getting money out of my pocket, I said to the chap, wearing his cloth cap, who I bought

Every December issue of Cinema Technology magazine provides the opportunity for us to remember BKSTS Patron Sir Sydney's birthday on 7th, before seeing him once again present the projection team of the year awards at the Christmas Party, which this year takes place on Monday 16th December at Dolby House in Soho Square.

Happy  
Birthday  
Sir Sydney...  
88 not out!



papers from for years – I said, "Hello". He said, "Hello, guv'nor". I said, "What's all this about? – 'Britain Gets a Film Boss'?" He said, "Oh, it's just some bloke". I said, "Oh, I see". I said, "I hope it's on the front page". He said, "Nah" (Cockney slang for "Certainly NOT") – "I'll show it to you". And he opens the newspaper, and on page 3 is the same headline – "Britain Gets a Film Boss", and the picture. The article was about half a page – and there was the picture: a head and shoulders of me. And then he said, "Here he is, guv'nor, look". And I said, "Well who is he then?" And he said, "Well, I'll have to read it, won't I... 'Sydney... Samuelson' – that's what it says". And he looked me in the eye, and said, "I've never heard of the bugger, have you?"

#### How lucky can you be?

I'm lucky, because I keep reading about people who are asked if they would be interviewed, and who say, "No, I don't do interviews". I actually enjoy being interviewed, and I think it's much because I love history, in general – and I love, even more than history in general, the history, the nostalgia of our industry. And being lucky enough to be part of our family, in this business for five generations – 1910 my Dad had his cinema – his little temporary cinema, in Southport, Lancashire, with

his immigrant mother helping him.

I am lucky enough to be part of a large and close family, that kind of tradition. And I suppose, having experienced so many wonderful events, happenings, almost adventures, and having met so many people – good and not so good! – my watchwords are, "How lucky can you be". And to find somebody interviewing me, from Denmark, who speaks perfect English – who knows more about Cinema and movies than I know (which is saying something, I suppose), even if that sounds a bit pretentious for me to be saying, but I know about the history of Cinema, because I've been in it for more than 70 years, and – I read a lot, and I'm interested in people – whatever the success I may have had in running a major worldwide business concern, I've just been the man in the top office, and I've been lucky enough in so many ways, including that I seem to have been able to pick out really good people to work with me.

**So that's my philosophy, and I've no complaints about what my life has brought me, none at all.**

*Thomas would like to thank Brian Guckian for his help with the mammoth task of transcribing the long interview with Sir Sydney.*