



You are here: | [Home](#) | Culture

## On the cutting edge

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*Video:*

One of just seven students to complete Australia's first ever film course in the 1960s, Jill Bilcock is an internationally acclaimed editor who is also responsible for some of the most iconic moments in Australian films, including "Muriel's Wedding" and "Strictly Ballroom".

### Tags

[Creative](#)

[International](#)

[Art and Culture](#)

[Subject](#)

[Culture](#)

[Academy Awards](#)

[Art](#)

[Australia](#)

[Film](#)

[Inspiring Australian Women](#)





“You’re terrible, Muriel” is one of the most famous lines in Australian film. But according to film editor Jill Bilcock, Muriel, the main character in the 1994 film *Muriel’s Wedding*, was almost too terrible.

During post-production, Bilcock and director PJ Hogan decided the character was unlikable, so Bilcock hunted down additional footage – a giggle here, a funny line there – that softened and fleshed out the character.

The work of a film editor is vital in establishing the tone, style and rhythm of a film, but it often goes unnoticed by the audience, with the direction and cinematography spotlighted instead. Internationally renowned editor Jill Bilcock, however, has had no problem in making a name for herself in the industry.

One of the world’s most sought-after film editors, she has worked on a string of major movies, and has been nominated for an Academy Award (*Moulin Rouge!*) and four BAFTAs – three of which were for Baz Luhrmann films: *Strictly Ballroom* (1992), William Shakespeare’s *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) and Shekhar Kapur’s *Elizabeth* (1998). More recent projects include *Red Dog* (2011) and *The Dressmaker* (2015).

Bilcock was responsible for the famous 'clap' finale of *Strictly Ballroom*, when the music gets cut and the main characters dance to the audience's clapping crescendo. She spent long nights chopping up tape to add more claps, alter the tempo and stretch out a sequence that was originally much shorter than it needed to be.

The editor is known for her versatility and willingness to be bold. She has been described as the 'Bruce Lee of editing' for her work on *Moulin Rouge!* (think of those frenetic, rapid-fire shots that built so much tension in the tango scene) while her work on *Road to Perdition* (2002) by Sam Mendes was lauded as 'stately'.

## A cut above

It's a decidedly distinguished career for someone who never really decided on it at all.

Encouraged by her creative mother – a single parent, Shakespeare enthusiast and first female principal of an Australian co-ed school – Bilcock studied art at Melbourne's Swinburne Technical College in the 1960s. She was one of seven students to complete Australia's first film course, and in her final year she was selected by director Fred Schepisi to work in his studio, The Film House.

"[He] said why don't you just start in production and move your way around – you can do anything you like," says Bilcock. "I only got from production into editing and accidentally got stuck there."

The film editor's job is to patiently craft, from hours and hours of footage, a compelling story with which audiences emotionally connect. There are inordinate amounts of time spent in a windowless editing suite long after the cast and crew have gone but Bilcock has no complaints.

"What I love is that somebody's giving me stimulus to do something creative, as opposed to, say, if I'd stayed as a painter or an artist of some sort I'd just have a blank page," says Bilcock.

## Inspired by travel

Throughout her career and her life, travel has been a constant theme and a source of creative incentive. As a young woman, she immersed herself in vivid worlds, travelling extensively through South America, the Middle East and India (the latter becoming a year-long stopover on her way to a job in England that was long gone by the time she arrived).

It has she admits, influenced the way she tells stories. "Travelling and meeting so many people and being overwhelmed by so much colour, smells, activity, different lifestyles, you just absorb it and it becomes part of your life," she says.

It's a life that traces the lines of Australian film history, captured in the recently released award-winning documentary *Jill Bilcock: Dancing the Invisible* directed by Axel Grigor.

"It's important to me that people get a chance to tell their stories," she says.

In 2018, Bilcock's enormous contribution to Australia's film industry was recognised with a prestigious Companion (AC) of the Order of Australia award.

Most recently she spent a year in London on Craig Pearce's series *Will*, about a young William Shakespeare. Now back home in Melbourne, Bilcock is working in a supervisory capacity on two projects: Richard Lowenstein's *Mystify: Michael Hutchence* and Rachel Griffith's directorial debut *Ride Like a Girl*, which tells

the story of the first female jockey to win the Melbourne Cup.

## Closing credits

After five decades in the business, Bilcock suggests the time may soon come to hand over the reins. Her advice to aspiring and emerging editors is to “just keep cutting”.

“You can [edit] on your computer, your phone,” she says. “You can create a story out of anything. And you can put stuff out there easily. If it’s good, and you’re good, you will somehow rise to the top.”

The film industry veteran also encourages young filmmakers to “be wild and creative”, and fearlessly authentic.

“I want [Australian filmmakers] to express the Australian identity more, as opposed to just trying to chase the dollar,” she says. “Because we do have something special. And Australian cinema is just wonderful.

“I think Australian films have an extraordinary amount of truthfulness. I think to show this country the way we see it is unique in itself. And also, to tell our stories is terribly important.”