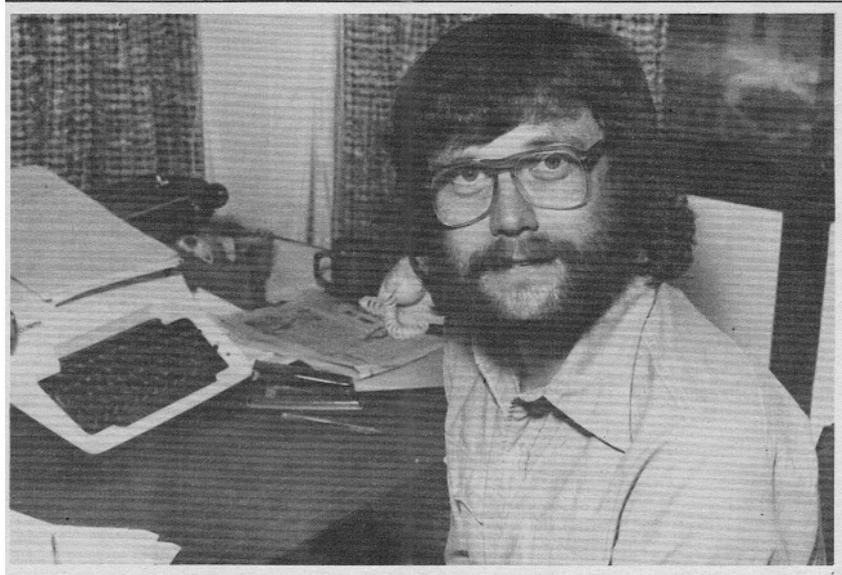


A THREE-DIMENSIONAL IMAGE DANCING IN FRONT OF YOU

Keith Thompson

Cinema Papers # 34 (September-October 1981)



Keith Thompson at the Australian Film and Television School 1981

After the early success of some of his work with the BBC, Keith Thompson came to Australia in the early 1970s to work at Crawford Productions on the last few episodes of the long running *Homicide* series. This included a special 90 minute episode called *Stopover* which won him the AWGIE and SAMMY awards for 1976. Later at the ABC, he originated the *Truckies* series and produced his most highly acclaimed work *Gail*, the story of a young girl's struggle with her family. Since then he has been working on a number of feature scripts and was appointed to the AFTS in mid-1980 a year before this interview took place.

The Australian Film and Television School

As the needs and commitments of writers tend to vary a great deal, the Australian film and Television School in Sydney offers a range of courses in writing for the screen. There is the original one-year course for writers of certain “proven” ability. This involves a six month technical orientation in film production and a six-month residency, working closely with the Full Time Program, supplying material which is then produced on film or tape by student directors. In 1982, it is hoped there will also be a full three-year course, so that script writing will, like camera, sound, editing and production management, be a major course of study within the AFTS.

Operating for the first time this year, and supported by the Literature Board of the Australia Council for the Arts, is a three to four month crash course in scriptwriting designed for established novelists, playwrights, journalists and poets. The cross-fertilization of novel-writing or play-writing with writing for the screen is seen as an exciting one. What the AFTS is looking for here, apart from quality of ideas, is a certain kind of visual consciousness.

According to Keith Thompson, newly appointed head of the Writing Workshop, Australian filmmakers can't, or don't talk about films in a very creative way. He sees the writer as the spearhead through the prevailing low standard of television drama. Until now, writers have copped the flak, but what is more at fault is some sort of general conception of what filmmaking actually is – or can be. Thompson wants to “exploit” the notion of what scriptwriting can deliver – from the writer's point of view and for the industry at large. He sees the AFTS as the place where the debate must begin.

Thompson describes the AFTS as a “crucial resource”, one to be exploited by not just the writers enrolled there, but also by people outside the school. He has developed the notion of the Writing Workshop at 10 Lyonpark Rd, North Ryde, as a drop-in centre. A number of open seminars are being organized - a kind of “mini-writing festival” with papers from people like Everett de Roche (*Patrick*), Howard Griffiths (ABC), Tony Morphett (*The Sullivans*) and British screenwriter Barry Took (*Monty Python*).

The intention is to keep things as free form as possible. At the very least, it is a place where one can find writers at work; at best, and in concert with organisations like the Writers Guild, it is a place where one can get a second opinion on a script; even a place where you can find actors ready to read a script and perhaps put bits of it on tape.

This aspect of the Writing Workshop fits in with the general aspirations of the Open Program of the AFTS, but Thompson and Austin Steele (writing consultant to the Open Program) also see the drop-in centre as recruitment for the major courses. Steele, in conjunction with the South Australian Film Corporation, has been running workshops in Adelaide and it is hoped to extend these activities to Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth.

As a by-product of his teaching function, Thompson is keen to isolate three major film styles or languages and to examine their influence on what might be seen to be an

Australian film style. Firstly there is the British film language: a kind of documentary/realist tradition rooted somewhere in the Puritan work ethic and a style that best accounts for Britain's success with television. The British docu-drama, Thompson feels, is perfectly suited to the sort of naturalistic medium that sits in a corner of one's living room. Secondly, there is the American film style: the traditional three act play structure. And finally, a European style: the first person, singular film.

Of course this is by no means an exhaustive list, but it is felt these are the dominant influences on Australia's tradition. The danger for Thompson is that the influences operate in Australian work rather haphazardly. When one doesn't know where the influences are coming from, the result is a bit of a mess – first person, singular films say, operating in a dramatized documentary.

Paul Davies: Have you come to any early conclusions about a separate Australian tradition actually emerging?

Keith Thompson: There is probably some kind of synthesis of European, American and British traditions. But the odd thing is you can't actually relate Australian literature to Australian films, as you can say, with the British cinema. You just can't relate the bush ballad and that historical experience to the urban landscape; that narrative breaks down in the city. A key component of American films has always been the possibility of movement through a society or through a landscape. These are two movements around which you can build a firm structure. In Australia we have explored landscape in a photographic sense, but not movement *through* a landscape – and we have an ideal country to explore this, with shifts of migration and so on. The problem with the British dramatized documentary is that, because it comes out of the puritan work ethic culture, from Cromwell onwards, you can't allow yourself the freedom to dramatize. It is austere, without decoration, and enormously concerned with reality. It is as if the whole British psyche won't allow that flowering unless it is first rooted in realism. The most advanced British work, if you like, is still expressionist documentary: *Rock Follies* and *The Naked Civil Servant*. *Pennies From Heaven* is another good example because although it is rooted in naturalism it is looking to flower.

Paul Davies: It does have the element of the fantastic about it: the sudden bursting into song in the bank manager's office and so on...

Keith Thompson: Yes. Whereas in Spanish cinema say, even in an ordinary cops and robbers thriller there are overtones of surrealism, which is ritual and Catholic. The British tradition is inherent through their literature. There is a line connecting their television and their literature, which isn't there in Australia – it is broken.

Paul Davies: What about the connection between the playwriting of the early 1970s and the consequent surge in Australian filmmaking?

Keith Thompson: Perhaps, I wasn't here in the early 1970s, so I am not quite sure. It is very difficult to say just where the Australian industry is heading now.

Paul Davies: But here, in the Australian Film and Television school you are in a key position to influence that direction...

Keith Thompson: The School is, as a whole, conscious of this. I would say it has a commitment to exploring the Australian contemporary lifestyle.

Paul Davies: Does that tend to put it in the British mould of documentary realism?

Keith Thompson: I wouldn't like to limit it to that extent. What the School, and certainly the Writing Workshop, should be doing is seeing where the individual interests of the students lie, and working towards those interests. We have to develop skills and push them to the limit – although that probably just reflects my puritan work ethic.

Paul Davies: But it's also economic isn't it? It is easier to make a contemporary film set in the streets than an historical epic...

Keith Thompson: I have a perception of the Australian industry – of which I am a part; I am not saying that as a migrant – as being distanced from the emotional content. It holds emotional content at arms length. In fact it holds most issues at arms length. That's partly reflected in the emphasis on historical features. I also wonder about the odd predilection of most Australian male writers, myself included, to write about women. That is a way of not writing about themselves directly. It is a device men have of getting women to carry their emotional content. To that extent it is a cop-out.

Paul Davies: But I would have thought *Gail* was an example of the reverse. You used an inversion of personalities – yours into hers – to come up with a particularly credible character.

Keith Thompson: It is interesting because it got below people's belts and that's what I think plays should do. I showed it to school teachers – psyche and guidance people – and they wouldn't talk about the play, they would talk about "I". They'd see themselves in it. That emotional response is what I am looking for, and I don't know how much that just reflects what I am. I don't like the distance writers and directors put between themselves and their material. One of the advantages of a place like the AFTS is that you can explore on two levels: you can explore the "out there", the contemporary lifestyle, and you can bring the material home and explore it within yourself. That's why it is an AFTS priority to get out into the real world, research and look at the contemporary Australian life, and bring student consciousness to bear on that. The two things have to mould, somehow. It is also part of the general "seeing if there is an Australian film language – the "critical" function of the School.

It is interesting being British and being brought up in that documentary realist tradition. I was 18 when *Cathy Come Home* went on television. I'd seen some of the Ken Loach things that preceded it. I realized I used the standard drama that the British incorporate into their films – shots of people walking in the streets, so that you think you are in a realistic setting. I had done that unconsciously for years, because that's where I come from. But when I came here, I don't know what tradition to put myself into; I didn't feel like I was on any kind of river. In Australia you have to start from

scratch; you have to discover the Australian style for yourself. Maybe, as writers, we are just too close to the Australian industry to see if it has a voice.

Paul Davies: Is this the fault of the critics? Perhaps the Australian media hasn't provided a sufficient analysis of its own work?

Keith Thompson: I feel quite strongly that there is no critical establishment – certainly in television. There are some exceptions, though, like the stuff 3RRR puts out – John Flaus and so on.

Paul Davies: So the best analysis comes from the academics and not the media...

Keith Thompson: Yes, with one or two exceptions like Brian Curtis (*The Age*). There isn't, as a rule, any debate about television – not by anyone who understands television. But, generally, the criticism that is around just isn't working to the benefit of the film or television program maker. It is working on an academic level, within the colleges; that's why it is vital that we incorporate it as an aspect of the AFTS. But it isn't working on a craft/criticism level, or even a gut level, which the best overseas criticism does.

Paul Davies: Does the School have the chance to develop new formal possibilities with film and television, or is there a counter-pressure to merely provide a training facility for the industry?

Keith Thompson: There is certainly that pressure at the moment, with the tax incentives (10 BA), but again it is a matter of responding to people who come into the School. There are those who come to acquire craft skills and don't avail themselves of the chance to do direction. They are just here to polish skills. In that sense, the School is very successful. For example, there is a 100 per cent employment rate out of the sound workshop.

Paul Davies: Is that a consequence of the present economic climate?

Keith Thompson: I think it has always been like that.

Paul Davies: How about Camera and Writing?

Keith Thompson: There has been about a dozen people through the Writing Workshop, and as far as I know, they are all working in the industry. Steve Wallace did the one year course; Rifka Hartman and Patricia Johnston were in the same year. And the three people from last year are all writing features.

Paul Davies: How many people apply for the courses? It must be hard settling for only three or four for each (three-month, one year, three year) course...

Keith Thompson: There is about a one in 30 or 40 chance of getting in. But, like creative development submissions the good ones leap out at you.

Paul Davies: But an almost guaranteed job at the end of it?

Keith Thompson: I suppose you could say guaranteed job if not funding...

Paul Davies: Surely it is also the chance to make a film here that is so attractive?

Keith Thompson: I have tried to re-emphasize what the Writing Unit should be about. It used to be a three week technical orientation with an 11 month residency. I have tried to balance that out, so that it is half and half. I think it is unrealistic to expect to take writers out of their prime working circumstances, established over a number of years, bring them into those four offices down the corridor and expect them, no matter what creative input they are getting from the rest of the School, to suddenly come up with the major work of their lives. It is more important that they come here, absorb everything around the place, do some writing – it is important that they write something – and then go away and let this place react on them over the next eight or ten years. – whatever.

Paul Davies: That seems the main advantage over the apprenticeship system at the big production houses, or the ABC, where one is narrowed to a specific job of writing without having the chance to explore the technical and formal aspects of the crafts...

Keith Thompson: Yes, and even less so now than when we were working for them. In those days, I think there really was something to be learnt from a *Homicide* episode.



The final fab four of the *Homicide* squad (1975)
L-R Dennis Grosvenor, Gary Day, Don Barker, Charles Tingwell

Keith Thompson: Structurally you could play with the rules and get something out of it. But “soap opera” is so much a committee process that there is less of a learning experience than on series dramas like the all-film *Homicides*. What we are getting now is a whole generation of writers growing up never having written “The End”. In the old series, you created characters for your episode and it had an ending. Sure you couldn’t experiment to a great extent, but at least at Crawfords you were able to slip something in every now and then, which is what Everett de Roche says.

SEGMENT/	ONE	TWO	THREE	FOUR	FIVE	SIX		
<u>DRAMA LEVEL</u>								
<u>SCENES</u>	4	9	10	10	9	8	TOTAL 50	
<u>TIME</u>	3 MINS	8 MINS	9 MINS	9 MINS	8 MINS	6 MINS	45.30 MIN	
<u>FORMAT</u>	MURDER OR DISCOVERY OF BODY **	FIRST COMMERCIAL *** BEGIN WITH POLICE AT SCENE * INTRODUCE CENTRAL NON POLICE CHARACTERS HAVING INTERESTED AUDIENCE, GET THE STORY GOING HEAVY POLICE INVOLVEMENT	SECOND COMMERCIAL REAL CHARACTER AND STORY	THIRD COMMERCIAL REAL CHARACTER EXPLORATION AND DEVELOPMENT	FOURTH COMMERCIAL POLICE APPROACH THE POINT OF SOLVING THE CASE	FIFTH COMMERCIAL SOLUTION AND EVENTUAL APPREHENSION OF KILLER Narration	SIXTH COMMERCIAL	

100% copy = editing / running?

30 sec for 2 mins

No. B. * "Homicide" super over opening shot.
** Stock cutting into commercial.
*** Title and writer's credit. 12 seconds

The basic *Homicide* script template

Six segments rising in dramatic tension from ad break to ad break

Paul Davies: What happens when people come through the School and end up in the "Committee System".

Keith Thompson: One of last year's graduates is doing that already, at Grundy's. It's hard to say, but I think the process is valuable, for a year or so, if only for what seems to happen to the people who do it. The people who were there when we were are, now, six years later, commissioners of the AFC (Australian Film Commission) or producing a lot of film and television. It gives you a few names and that's of value, if nothing else. There is also the value of having your stuff played. You write a lot of material and see it on the screen very quickly. It's sort of like Kleenex Tissues – out once and thrown away. But you must learn something from that.

Paul Davies: Can we expect a challenge coming out of the School?

Keith Thompson: That is School policy. But, being realistic, the only way you can break the pattern of commercial television is to do so politically, through legislation.

Paul Davies: Is there no way of challenging the System in a qualitative sense?

Keith Thompson: You would hope so. You would hope the mini-series have started to do that. That is the ambition you have to believe in – if you didn't you would go crazy.

Paul Davies: What scripts are being developed at the School?

Keith Thompson: Of the three full-time students Cory Taylor has just finished *Fertility Rite*, a 50 minute television play which I think is one of the best I've read anywhere. The second year students used it as the basis of an actor/director workshop, two weeks' rehearsal and a week of putting it down on tape. I still think it's good enough to be done outside. In fact, it has already picked up some interest from actors

who have workshopped it. I bring in actors and we just sit around and do script readings. It is important that each student gets the chance of having a 50 minute, personal statement-type play done.

Paul Davies: How does it work here in practice? Does a full time student director tell the writers “I want a film about so and so. Can you do it?”, or does it go the other way, with a writer trying to sell his/her idea to the filmmaker?

Keith Thompson: I am trying to keep this as loose as possible. It certainly happens a lot, and directors say, “I want to do a film about this, but I can’t write it.” You then try to make a marriage with your writing students. I also feed it back the other way, and go to a student director and say “Have a look at this.” The significance for the writer, again, is that you go right through the production process with it.

Paul Davies: Is the writer usually involved in a film’s post-production?

Keith Thompson: As much as they can be. I want them also to direct their own material and see how that feels. Most of the writers in the full year will make a short video – whatever. We can’t afford much, but they get to make something. This way, the whole process is demystified for them. When the technology is later thrown up as an obstacle, they know how to handle it. This applies more to television than film, because video development is racing ahead so much.

Paul Davies: Yet commercial television seems surprisingly slow to take advantage of it...

Keith Thompson: It gets back to visual consciousness. Scriptwriting is essentially about image against image, and not necessarily words (dialogue). How to get a visual vocabulary is something I am exploring here. My feeling, on one level, is that the writing students should spend half their time as say, film editors, because that’s the beginning and the end of the process.

Paul Davies: Editing as a form of writing...

Keith Thompson: Yes. I have learnt a lot from going to double-heads (combined sound and picture editing sessions) and listening to soundtracks – not just the dialogue but the rest of the sound. As soon as you learn to use a sophisticated sound or visual track, you are saving on dialogue, on words. It is a basic structure that is the sort of area into which I am interested in pushing writers. It is difficult if you come out of a literary tradition, but then that’s what scriptwriting is; it doesn’t matter how the script actually reads. I have been making conscious efforts to get more emotion into the dialogue and change my style. That was one reason I came here. I started writing when I was at film school (Ravensbourne College, Kent) and stopped last year. That’s 12 or 13 years of solid writing – the last six of seven professionally, and it all seemed part of the one process. It was one trip.

Paul Davies: So you wanted to make some sort of break?

Keith Thompson: That is what’s happening now. I supposed I had idealized what the break might be, and I had fantasies about being charged up by heady students, from

nine to five, then going home and doing a masterpiece or two in the evening. But that hasn't happened. I am exhausted by the "nine to five" and just want to go home to bed. But I did want the break, because I wanted to look at language, at style.

Paul Davies: Can you relate that to anything you are working on now?

Keith Thompson: It's hard to put into words, but I think the reason I stopped writing was because I had realized I had turned some corner. Maybe it scared me a bit. I realized the writing I could do from now on could actually come from inside me and I didn't need the prop of a particular series format or whatever that had sustained me through the years. I also believe there is a certain cumulative exhaustion that builds up over a certain time when you have had to write a lot of television. So I am just letting the projects that hang around my neck for years fade into the distance...I'll pick it up in a year or so, when I really want to start writing.

Paul Davies: How do you get an idea – and this relates to the students as well – where does it generate from?

Keith Thompson: For me the idea has always sprung out of character; it has always been based on an interchange between one character and another. That has been the first sparking point for me. What I believe now is that there are more ideas around than there are people who can transpose them. I am particularly interested in structure, because structure is how you state the idea. This is something that is apparent from the amount of scripts that I have to read for recruitment here, and also because I have been on Creative Development panels for the AFC. I suppose I read about 400 scripts last year, a staggering amount. And you could say there would hardly be a bad idea among them. The concepts are there in the first page synopsis, but it is the realization of the idea that is at fault. And realization is structure.

Paul Davies: Is that what the school is teaching?

Keith Thompson: Sure. I don't want to suggest that I am under-valuing ideas; I just want to explore the different ways of conceptualizing ideas into structure. I don't think an idea for me is ever dissociated from its emotional content. But this dissociation is evident in a lot of work in this country. It strikes me as a major problem. We are being "nine to five" about a lot of writing here. One has to find the metaphor, to find the lens that is going to take one's perception and invert it – as I did with *Gail*. I didn't want to write about a guy, so writing about a girl was like looking through the lens that inverts the image, that turns it upside down.

Paul Davies: And that gives you the distance, the objectivity to write?

Keith Thompson: It's not distance, I don't want distance, because it is important to be able to pour all the light through the lens. But it gives you the objectivity to look back into yourself somehow; the lens is the research period. Through the research period - which is vital - you find the structure of your lens, you find the quality of the lens that you are going to put your perception through so that it comes out differently.

Paul Davies: Is the lens your perspective of a technique?

Keith Thompson: It is technique, research. It is the filter through which you work. Somehow, maybe it changes from first person to third person.

Paul Davies: It is like when you start using “he” or “she” instead of “I”. Until then, it is autobiography or diary writing...

Keith Thompson: Mike Jenkins was out last Friday, doing a seminar, and he made the terrific point about how, when you are actually at the typewriter “writing”, it is not inside, but a sort of three-dimensional image dancing in front of you. It needs to be that much outside of you, but not distanced. It has to have that emotional quality because films are emotion.

Paul Davies: A feature these days seems to be about a three year project, especially if an individual is going to be involved right through. It is a huge commitment...

Keith Thompson: God knows why films take that long. I feel relatively confident with a 50 minute television single shot. I like that form and I know I can write it in a couple of months. But why do films take so long – and you are kidding yourself if you think it is anything less than a year. How writers sustain themselves through three year projects is really unexplored. I have been working the past couple of years on feature ideas and I am into them for a year at least, sometimes two, just on the script. I find it really debilitating when I am going further and further out on a limb, with no guarantee that when I have finished, it is going to get made. For a scriptwriter, just having the work here, watchable, reinforces a hell of a lot of conceptions about just what you think of yourself as a person, as a writer, and you buy into the feature number and you are away from that for two years. I haven't had anything made this decade.

Paul Davies: So how do you know when to stop, to give a particular project away?

Keith Thompson: It gets competitive with me: it is “it” or me, if it ever comes to a choice. I wish I knew the answer to that. There are projects where it would have been better for me to say “enough is enough”. Another major problem with a lot of professional writers is that, if they have some sense of their own advancement, once they have done something, they want to move onto something else. And over five or so years, you close certain doors; you narrow your possibilities; you have to feel as a writer that you are getting better. That is the only thing that keeps you sane. But getting better with narrower possibilities – that is a hassle.

Paul Davies: Perhaps then, one function of the Open Program could be some sort of consultancy service, where a number of people could look at a work...

Keith Thompson: That's exactly what we should be doing. If something can be done here on a portapak (small video camera) within the corridors of this building one Saturday, then people could look at it and see it. It might give them the strength, whatever, to go back and write it.

Paul Davies: It also gives you something to show somebody.

Keith Thompson: Yes it is a realization of your work.

Paul Davies: Despite the technical competence of a lot of film school films, some people seem uncertain about what they are trying to say. The tendency is to see them as just technical exercises with no great ideas bursting through....

Keith Thompson: There has to be a greater emphasis on the idea and on the translation of that idea into film. The idea needs to be transposed in a strong way. The actual idea's quality, I suppose is something that has been faulty. It is part of the Writing Workshop's function to initiate that, and it hasn't been operating as such in the past couple of years. I don't know the answer, but I think my function here is to encourage people to work to the limits. It is not good enough for people to say, "Oh look, I can do this type of film." The incentive should always be to work to the limits, to find out what you didn't know you knew – that discovery of what all writing's about.

Within the industry at large, there has always been that tendency to make films about what you knew when you started; so, there is no discovery. Gutsiness of ideas, a sophisticated world view is always linked to exploration and experimentation, and maybe its absence is a manifestation of keeping things at arm's length and all those other things I have mentioned.

I'd like to make a more cogent statement out of it, but I can't. All I can say is, this is the place where we must begin to examine these issues. The Film School is the place where the debate must start.

Thus far the effort to make the Writing Workshop more accessible seems to be having distinct practical benefits. Other projects underway early this year include a three week workshop with NIDA (National Institute for Dramatic Arts) students. The effect of associating actors with writers/filmmakers has made the various groups involved particularly aware of each other's respective needs and difficulties.

For the actors the ability to be involved in the development of a script was a novel one. Normally, they felt themselves merely the "interpreters" of something that is fixed. For writing student Ian David, the experience gave him the chance to determine just precisely how much information he can hand to an actor:

"When a writer gives a script to a person, and it goes wrong – in dialogue or some other sense – perhaps it is simply because he didn't give enough information, or because it was impossible for him to give that information. It is also important for the writer to know when to shut-up, because one can write something that sounds a bit flat, but in another person's hands suddenly it is vibrant and it works."

For their part the NIDA students felt film and television technicians rarely understood their particular difficulties as performers. The AFTS experience is seen as a first step towards overcoming this difficulty later on. They saw themselves as moving out into the industry in concert with the film students there are working with now. Despite

management commitment to the formulas, they felt they could be the process of making the industrial, working situation a more “human” one.

Another film being shot at the moment, by third year director Di Priest, is based on a script by Nick Delaland, who has a background in theatre. Delaland sees the production of his script as a personal breakthrough. *Sam, Johnno, and...You* deals with the plight of a young man seeking work at an abattoir. It is a carefully observed and beautifully economic work with a great deal of emotional involvement that Keith Thompson says he is looking for.

Sam, Johnno, and...You has the potential to reverse the trend in film school films. Its characters come across as fully-realized people, and it doesn't hold issues at arm's length, because it has the validity of a certain “lived” experience. It therefore remains to be seen what next year's class of established novelists and playwrights, with the assistance of Keith Thompson, Austin Steele and the Literature Board, will actually come up with.



Since this interview in 1981 Keith Thompson's later career has continued to flourish with scripts for the feature *Clubland*, starring Brenda Blethyn, which premiered at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival. It was sold to Warner Independent Pictures in one of the festival's biggest distribution deals.



Clubland (2007)

Emma Booth, Khan Chittenden, Brenda Blethyn

Clubland won the 2007 AWGIE (Australian Writer's Guild Award for Best Original Feature Film, the overall AWGIE for Outstanding Australian Script of the Year and was nominated for an AFI (Australian Film Institute) Award for Best Original Screenplay.

Keith also co-adapted Tony Brigg's stage play, *The Sapphires* which premiered at the 2012 Cannes Film Festival in a Special Midnight Screening.



The Sapphires tells the story of a group of young Aboriginal singers recruited to perform in Vietnam in the late 1960s. It won two AWGIE Awards for Keith Thompson in 2012: Best Feature Film Adaptation and the overall AWGIE for Outstanding Australian Script of the Year. *The Sapphires* took home 11 AACTA awards in 2013, including Best Adapted Screenplay. Keith had previously won the overall AWGIE for Outstanding Australian Script of the Year in 1991 for an episode of the medical series GP.

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