

A DIFFERENT WAY OF LOOKING AT THINGS

Mark Shirrefs

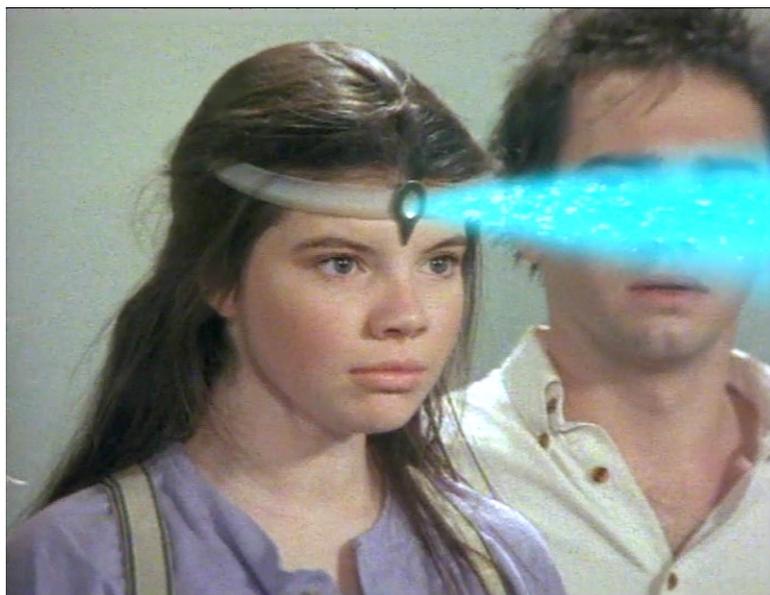
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“So long as you don’t encourage our children to kill their parents, everything will be fine ...”

Editorial feedback from the Head of the Shanghai Film Studio to Mark Shirrefs and John Thomson on their scripts for *Land Of The Dragon Lord*

Mark Shirrefs and John Thomson are two of Australia's most successful creators of children's television. The seven series they've collaborated on so far include: *The Girl From Tomorrow*, *Tomorrow's End*, *Mission: Top Secret*, *Spellbinder*, *Land Of The Dragon Lord*, *Let The Blood Run Free*, and most recently, *Pig's Breakfast*. Both *The Girl From Tomorrow* and *Spellbinder* have also been adapted to novels. In co-production deals with European networks and the Shanghai Film Studio, some of these series have reached audiences measured, potentially, in the hundreds of millions. *Spellbinder* also garnered an AWGIE for its creators, as well as two ATOM Awards and an AFI Award.



Katharine Cullen as *The Girl From Tomorrow* (1991 – 1993)

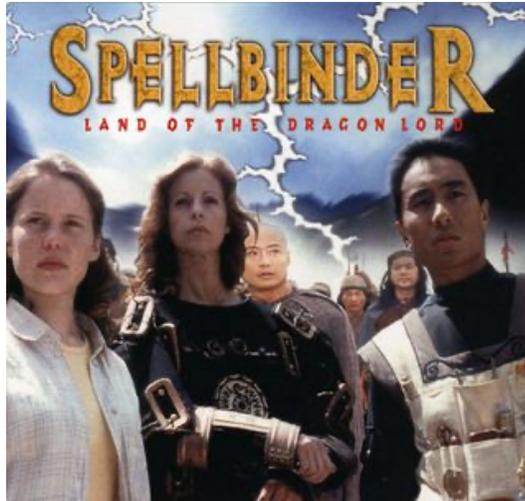
Mark Shirrefs trained as an actor at the Victorian College of the Arts, then co-founded the Flying Fruit Fly Circus and directed plays for the Murray River Performing Group and TheatreWorks (including the long running location theatre piece, *Storming Mont Albert By Tram*). He graduated from the Swinburne School of Film and Television in 1985. In partnership with director Kathy Mueller and executive producer Ron Saunders, Mark and John Thomson created *The Girl From Tomorrow* series for the 9 Network. Currently, Mark, John and Noel Price are developing a new children's series for possible co-production in China. Mark also lectures in creative writing at RMIT (Melbourne).

Paul Davies: How did the acting and theatre work translate into a job writing for television?

Mark Shirrefs: John Thomson, Ian Mortimer and Boris Connolly created a clown show which John, Ian and myself turned into a screenplay called *The Magic Telescope*. This project actually got quite a substantial amount of development funding from the Children's Television Foundation and the NSW FTO. The money came not only to write a script, but also to do a full budget and build scale models for the set. It was a children's fantasy adventure story. It was very expensive and nobody wanted to take it on (we're still hoping), but with the script at least, we finally had an example of our work to show to people. While trying to attract a producer for the project, we met up with Kathy Mueller, who had been a student with John and I at the VCA and was by then living in Sydney. She had been offered a gig by Film Australia to direct a series called *The Girl From Tomorrow*. This hadn't been written yet, but she convinced Ron Saunders that John and I could do it. So he commissioned us to write a pilot episode, which he used to raise the budget. John, Kathy and I developed a bible for the show and by the time we'd got the money, we'd been funded for three scripts, which were all eventually produced. *The Girl From Tomorrow* was successful enough to lead to a second series called *Tomorrow's End*, which was produced and directed by the line producer from the first series, Noel Price. Noel then began working for Grundy's on a children's series called *Mission: Top Secret*, which involved about half a dozen European countries. John and I wrote four half hour episodes for that (subtitled *The Polish Pony Puzzle*). So we got the proverbial phone call from overseas, but it wasn't from Hollywood, it was from Poland.

Paul Davies: A lot of the work you and John have produced has been in co-production with either European or Asian companies. How does the co-production deal affect the writing of a project?

Mark Shirrefs: The most difficult aspect is that you have a whole lot more people looking at your work. The hardest example was *Land Of The Dragon Lord*, which required both Chinese and Polish elements.



Land of the Dragon Lord (1997)

Paul Davies: How do you mix Polish and Chinese threads in a single narrative?

Mark Shirrefs: The best way is to go to these countries first. *Spellbinder* wouldn't have worked unless we'd actually gone to Poland. You see stuff. We saw a guy in China riding a bicycle with a fridge tied to the side and that gave us an idea for a scene. We had network involvement in both China and Poland. We thought we might have trouble in China, but they were very easygoing. We were at a dinner with the Shanghai Film Studio people once and we'd had no feedback about the scripts at all so we asked them what they thought. And after a moments consultation with his partner, the head of the Shanghai Film Studio turned back to John and me and said: 'We have heard that you are very good television writers. As long as you do not encourage our children to kill their parents, we're sure it will be fine'. [laughs] That was the extent of the feedback from China. The Polish connection was very different. We worked with a Polish dramaturge. He looked like Nosferatu: dressed in black, a thin long face, widow's peak, and he spoke in the most convoluted way about structure and so on. Lecek's favourite phrase was 'The dramaticological construction requires that...' He prefaced everything with it. Then, after first drafts were in, the Polish people decided they wanted more of their Polish myths and legends in it.

Paul Davies: Which you knew a lot about of course ...

Mark Shirrefs: [laughs] Yes. So we asked them if they could give us some examples of their 'myths and legends' to work on. And there's silence. Then after conferring they said: 'We'll send you some'. So John and I go back to Australia and we're waiting and waiting, and nothing comes, so we go to the state library and find some Polish myths and legends and started incorporating them into the story. Then

some weeks later a package arrives from Poland and it's a book of Polish myths and legends—in Polish—and a letter saying, 'We're sure you'll have no trouble having these translated'. As it happened, the woman at John's local laundromat was Polish, and she was able to explain them. But they were legends we had found anyway. So juggling those sorts of issues is the most difficult part of it.

Paul Davies: Aside from Lecek's concerns, how important is structure in any script? Are there rules to be followed?

Mark Shirrefs: The problem with Australian television is probably mostly in the storytelling aspect. I discovered this working as a script producer on *Pig's Breakfast*.



Pigs Breakfast (1999 – 2000)

Mark Shirrefs: A lot of commercial television writers have a real problem with story. My theory is that series and serial television provides writers with such worked out storylines that all they have to do is basically paint by numbers. And they don't get the sense of what it really means to tell a story. It's the Scene Breakdown stage where you discover things haven't been worked out from the Storyline.

Paul Davies: That's where the structural problems emerge?

Mark Shirrefs: Yes. And you expect the writers to work out those things for themselves. Or at least ring up and talk about it. But we found they just weren't dealing with this problem. Either they thought it was just kid's TV and it didn't matter—which is an appalling attitude—or it's a much bigger issue about telling a story.

Paul Davies: Is the spoon feeding itself part of the problem, the fact that writers aren't given due importance, that the basic principles of writing are being lost?

Mark Shirrefs: It's a complex question. But I often find the narrative drive is missing, the things that actually keep an audience glued to the screen. The stakes in a story often aren't high enough. I would like to see writers given the opportunity to create stories which can embrace those things and aren't interfered with by story departments. But John and I have devised all our own material so we've had a lot of freedom. Nobody else edits our work. We get feedback from producers and directors, of course. But when you've got good quality control over your scripts, then the product will speak for itself. Certainly I think long running television shows are a bad idea. You just get more of the same. Even on shorter series there's a burn out factor. The trouble is the opportunities on Australian TV are really limited and when those opportunities are taken up by long running shows, that means we really lack a lot of variety. The diversity of expression just doesn't happen.

Paul Davies: Does that indicate a kind of 'If it ain't broke don't fix it' approach from the Networks?

Mark Shirrefs: It's certainly much easier not to take risks. The ratings are all-important. But there is also evidence that Australians like to see Australians on television. Which is why a lot of those shows that you've worked on—*Homicide* and *Stingers* and so on—have all been so successful. But at the same time we get cops and hospital shows from the UK and America with more resources. The trick with long running series is to make them fresh. I believe we have a unique vision of the world in Australia and it's one of the reasons why our children's TV works so well overseas.

Paul Davies: It's really the unsung success story, isn't it, the success of Australian kids TV against a lot of odds?

Mark Shirrefs: Absolutely. The Oriental Pearl television tower in Shanghai is the third tallest man made structure in the world. It has an audience footprint of 200 million people. Whenever Heather Mitchell [the villain in the two *Spellbinder* series] went overseas she was mobbed by kids. Likewise the Polish actor who played the wise old *Spellbinder*. Children's television is the best returning investment the FFC have made by far.



Spellbinder (1995)

A prank gone wrong sends 15 year old Paul Reynolds into an alternate dimension

Paul Davies: Is there a different obligation when you're writing for kids? Special parameters?

Mark Shirrefs: Kids TV is regulated by the ABA (Australian Broadcasting Authority). There are guidelines that you have to adhere to. But the interesting thing about the guidelines is that they are very positive and do all the things that point you in the direction of making a really good story. Positive role models, not about violence ...

Paul Davies: Something adult drama could learn from?

Mark Shirrefs: What children's television does is encourage really good values in people—the use of imagination, working together rather than in opposition—not to the exclusion of conflict and drama of course. But the other thing is, it's actually there to stimulate kids' imaginations and adult television almost seems to do the opposite. The things I remember watching as a kid were *The Outer Limits*, *The Twilight Zone*, those programmes about places I'd never been ... and that's what lead me to the fantasy stuff. Fantasy doesn't have to be aliens and monsters. Look at the UK series, *Cold Feet*, for example. All of a sudden you're out of the ordinary and you see things in a different way. And as programme creators, we have that

responsibility to our viewers to reflect back not just what they know anyway, but something else—a different way of looking at things.

Paul Davies: How does the collaboration with John Thomson work in practice?

Mark Shirrefs: We have a number of ways of working. We get together in the first instance and do the concepts, work out the bible together. We spend a lot of time developing the stories. Most of the work is in the transition from concept to storyline to scene breakdown, especially in terms of getting the structure right, the hooks and so on. And then we can go off and write drafts individually. Sometimes, if it's difficult, each of us will write the same thing and see what we end up with. And sometimes one of us will have a nice slant on the scene or the other person will have written some good dialogue... or in the worst situation, both of us have written something we each really like and we have to decide which one to go with.

Paul Davies: Do you call in a referee?

Mark Shirrefs: [laughs] We haven't had to yet. It's a good process.

Paul Davies: What are you looking for as an editor when you edit John's scripts and he edits yours?

Mark Shirrefs: A good editor needs to know what makes a good story, particularly about structure. As script producer on *Pig's Breakfast*, my job was to commission the writers, talk them through the storylines, edit the first drafts and then take their second drafts, give them a bit of feedback, let them do a polish and then do the final [shooting] draft myself. Assuming things go well, it's just cosmetic changes at that stage and throwing in the odd joke here and there. But in the worst cases—more often than I would have liked—I had to rewrite scripts completely, which is a sobering experience. But as far as editing goes, you need to sit above it, which is hard sometimes. This is where a knowledge of the craft elements of scriptwriting are important. There are a number of good books—Syd Field, Robert McKee, Linda Aronson... And you need to absorb all that stuff, even if you don't do it formally through a screenwriting course. The series we're doing at the moment [another co-production with Chinese Television] is a thirteen parter and what's good about that is you don't have to stretch the story so far. Thirteen half hours allows you to tell a story with really good character interaction. It's closer to doing a feature film, like a mini-series almost. It allows you to think about telling stories with images.

Paul Davies: Is that a piece of advice you give your students? Emphasise the visual?

Mark Shirrefs: There was a programme about the human body on TV recently which dealt with the mind, and there's this thing called the 'Mental Olympics'. One of the tests is to remember the sequence of a pack of cards. The guy who's won three years in a row does it by assigning each card a quality or a character. So the card 7 equals '007', for example, and then he makes up a story about them. That's how he remembers the sequence. People had vision before they had language and I think we're still primarily a visually oriented culture. Obviously words are incredibly important. But the things that stick with you after seeing a film aren't necessarily the exchanges of dialogue, but the images that convey the information. In my teaching I use images from *Apocalypse Now*—some of the most extraordinary on celluloid—as an example of imagery in storytelling.

Paul Davies: Are camera directions important in the script?

Mark Shirrefs: Most directors tend to ignore them. When I write a script, I want it to be a good read. And if you write camera directions it takes readers out of the story. If you write it cleverly enough, the director almost has no choice but to shoot it in the way you've intended. So you can insinuate camera directions without actually spelling it out. That's an acting technique too, of course. One of things you're taught as an actor is to examine the image behind the line. So an acting approach is to take each line apart and give it an image, and analyse how that makes you feel emotionally. It's the same with a writer. A writer has to know at every point in the script what is actually on the screen. The scenes I can see the easiest are very easy to write. I'm just translating. The difficult ones are the ones where I can't see what's happening, and they require several attempts to get it right. Often, you look back at something on the page and realise you can cut away all this dross and just get to the essence of it and make that clearer. And whether you're aware of it or not, your subconscious writer has put what you really want in the scene, but it just isn't clear enough. It's like sculpting. You cut away all the pieces that aren't the sculpture. A first draft is like being in the coal mine. You work really hard to dig it out. You're dealing for the first time with what people say to each other and how they say it. You start to find the comedy. The second draft is much easier and you can have more fun.

Paul Davies: Film or TV: is there a difference for the scriptwriter?

Mark Shirrefs: Writing for television is much harder than film because there's less money to do more. And if you want an audience to watch it, it has to be really good,

because they can just get up and leave the room. People have paid money in the cinema and are less likely to walk. There are also more options on the box. A big movie could be on the other channel or the tennis—things that go for hours. It's much harder. So you have to be more creative. And in fact the only way to have a career in Australia is to write television. You can actually make a living.

Paul Davies: Are agents important for getting work?

Mark Shirrefs: We got an agent after we won an AWGIE for *The Girl From Tomorrow*. It was good, because it made us feel somebody wanted us. They negotiated a couple of contracts for us, which was fine, but they didn't help much finding work because basically John and I create our own. We decided eventually that we could employ a lawyer to do the contracts, so we parted ways amicably with the agents. And in fact they said, 'We're surprised you stayed with us so long'. Now we do the negotiating ourselves.

Paul Davies: Do you have an average working day?

Mark Shirrefs: I have an office I go to every day. I did write the second series of *Girl From Tomorrow* in the second bedroom in my flat, which meant I could work till 2am without having to go home. And my partner Diana was very impressed that I'd put on an ironed shirt and go into the bedroom to work. But it became a trap because I could never get away from it. If I have a problem—I don't call it a block—I'll do the accounts, or go see a movie or go to the gym, which is really good because it's like meditation, it clears your mind. I'll sit on the exercise bike and a solution will pop up. You need to have a number of different strategies of attacking your work. It gets easier with experience. Plus the mind is like a flywheel. It takes a lot of effort to get it moving, but once it's up and running—like on *Pig's Breakfast*—it's like a juggernaut and anything that gets in its way is crushed beneath it. [laughs]

Paul Davies: What advice would you give to writers starting out now?

Mark Shirrefs: Write what you know. It means that you have a starting point. If you can see some situation in your own life that makes you feel something ... It's what I find so difficult to convey to my students sometimes, that the only time a story is truly vivid is when it has a strong emotional spine. People like the story of how the boy gets from being dumped in the forest to back home. What they're really interested in there is the emotional logic of survival. What does it mean for this boy to be put through all this?

Paul Davies: So there's a mechanical structure ...

Mark Shirrefs: Yes, the craft element, the Syd Field aspect.

Paul Davies: Then there's an emotional structure that's separate and different from that?

Mark Shirrefs: Yes, and the 'how to' books don't often deal with it. This is where 'the stakes' come in. What are the stakes in any given story? Mostly it's life and death stakes. Is the character going to physically survive this experience? But equally important is the character's emotional journey—how will they survive emotionally and psychologically?

Paul Davies: Is Reality TV a threat to the role of the writer?

Mark Shirrefs: I don't think so at all. We'll get bored with it pretty soon. It's like *Gilligan's Island* without the jokes. There's a novelty element to it. But stories have a vital role to play in our society. We live in a time of such rapid change that the things that once held a society together become more tenuous. And we consume so many stories. People are reading more books than ever, for example.

Paul Davies: Plus the average number of movies one would see in a lifetime ...

Mark Shirrefs: Yes, huge. But stories always occur in everything. We're always looking for them because it's a way that we learn. Stories convey information to people about how to cope with different situations. The Reality TV stuff doesn't seem to provide any level of insight.

Paul Davies: It's also based on some pretty negative impulses—like greed, eviction, ganging up.

Mark Shirrefs: Yes, we'll get bored with it quickly and we'll go back to the things that have always sustained human society, which is people getting together and telling stories. Humans are also fascinated by patterns. When somebody dies, we want to know why that happened. We're looking for a pattern to give us a sense of security. And that comes from when we were hunters—us versus the natural world. We're looking at a patch of jungle. And it's green, green, yellow, green. And its—oops, yellow is the colour of lion fur! So we look at the pattern and we look at the disruption in the pattern and that disruption is a piece of information that is extremely useful to us. I think a story is a pattern with a disruption in it. And what

we're interested in seeing is whether that disruption destroys the pattern of the story so that it never quite gets back together again. And by the end of the story, there's always another pattern created out of what's just happened. But above all, stories give us coping skills, like the narrative cure that some psychologists use. What it does is help people make sense of something—their trauma, grief and so on. It gives them a pattern they can understand. So by writing a story, you confront the issues of who you are or who the character is. It's a powerful tool.

Interview held at the Dogs Bar, Acland Street St. Kilda.

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