

LOOKING FOR THE STORY ENGINE

Roger Simpson
METRO #135 (2003)



Paul Davies: Just to get some background, Roger: you trained as a solicitor and came from New Zealand to work at Crawfords?

Roger Simpson: I came from New Zealand to be a writer. Optimistically and naively to tell a series about the mining industry which had just crashed. 'Posidon' and all that. Scandal. And I naively thought because it was newsworthy there would also be good drama. But I was wrong. (laughs) The whole industry laid a very big smell and the last thing anyone wanted to talk about was something that bad.

Paul Davies: There was a film called the Nickel Queen...

Roger Simpson: Yes. And I think that suffered a similar fate. That was at least an attempt at a comedy, mine was a serious drama.

Paul Davies: And a series?

Roger Simpson: Yes.

Paul Davies: So you went straight for television, rather than film?

Roger Simpson: Yes. I'd worked as a barrister and solicitor for three years and I was working part time in TV in New Zealand as a comedy writer, writing gags for a variety show. But New Zealand only did 8 hours of drama a year and they shared that between 8

writers, so you couldn't make a living out of it. Being a writer in New Zealand then was a part time job. So I came to Australia to flog off this series called "The "Investors" -about the mining industry - on my way to England because my dream was to write Z Cars. (laughs) A long time ago. But I never got there because I ran out of money in Sydney...

Paul Davies: So like a lot of New Zealanders you turned to crime...

Roger Simpson: (laughs) I turned to crime. Hector Crawford threw me a liferaft. I'd been in Australia for a year running out of options and was just about to go back over the Tasman to be a barrister for the rest of my life and Hector was running a two week course for new writers, because he was expanding at the time. In 1971 he had *Division 4*, *Homicide*, *Matlock Police* and *Solo One*. Four shows on four networks and he was running short of writers. So he ran a seminar for people interested in writing drama. I wrongly thought I knew how to write drama because I'd written some in New Zealand... But 4 of us survived that seminar and are still around today. Peter Shreck, Vince Moran...

Paul Davies: ... Peter Shreck is currently story producing Young Lions...

Roger Simpson: Yes. And Vince Moran retired a few years ago. And Patrick Edgeworth and me - we were the four survivors out of a course of about 14 people.

Paul Davies: Was Dorothy Crawford involved in that?

Roger Simpson: Yes. And Ian Jones and Terry Stapleton. And Tom Hegarty. They were all our teachers. It was the sort of thing that doesn't happen any more because it was an all in-house writing system - as you know. In those days freelancers didn't exist. There were the odd few who worked for the ABC. But basically the Crawford system was inhouse so you became a staff writer. You were rated like journalists. You started as C and worked up to B, A.

Paul Davies: So there was actually a term - A writer, B writer and so on...

Roger Simpson: Yes. It was to do with money. Rated like journalists.

Paul Davies: In fact a lot of early Crawford writers were ex-journalists - being the only professional writers around?

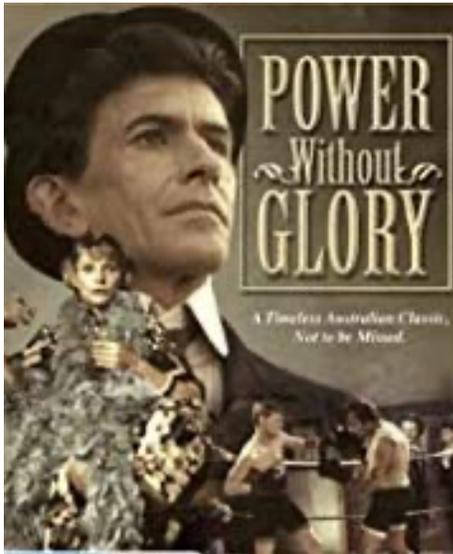
Roger Simpson: Yes. No film schools. Nothing like that. So I started the same week that Roger le Measurier did. He didn't go to the seminar because he wanted to be a script editor. So he got a job as a trainee script editor.

Paul Davies: Did he edit your scripts?

Roger Simpson: He did on *Division four*. But after that Roger went overseas and travelled and we didn't actually get together until 1981, ten years later. He was always more frivolous than I. (laughs). He sensibly toured around the world and had a good time.

Paul Davies: So - two and a half years at Crawfords as a staff writer and then what?

Roger Simpson: I was one of the writers who went out into the big bad world. There were a few freelancers like Tony Morphett and Colin Free, a few established, older writers. But not many of us youngsters. That was another difficult transition because I thought I had *Division 4s* and *Homicides* sorted. But it evaporated quickly because Crawfords wanted people inhouse and didn't want to encourage free lancers. But luckily *Power Without Glory* (based on the novel by Frank Hardy) came along on the ABC so I got a gig there and that was the start of my freelance career really.



Roger Simpson: Then, *I Can Jump Puddles*. A one-off called *The Trial of Ned Kelly* where I did a courtroom 90 minuter. I tried to prove Kelly was guilty of manslaughter not murder. Tried to get him off. It had a narrator who went around interrupting people.

Paul Davies: Like *Consider Your Verdict*?

Roger Simpson: It was a bit more adventurous than that. I wouldn't call it a big success for the ABC. It was a wee bit ambitious for itself. But it's all experience.

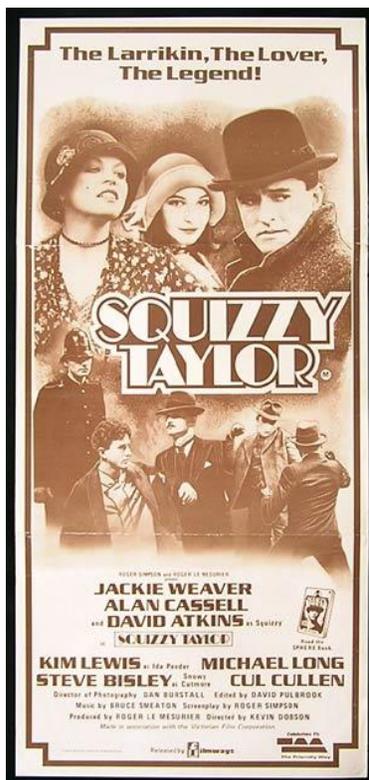
Paul Davies: Is *Squizzy Taylor* the first big project you do with Roger?

Roger Simpson: Yes. But before that I had a period of going back to New Zealand - still living in Australia. But New Zealand got a new head of drama called John McRae. He reckoned the way New Zealand could get ahead in the world was not to compete with adult drama because the English and Americans did it too well. But to be able to find a niche in children's drama and he put all his budget into really well resourced kids' series. And I did four of those over the next six years. And when they had trouble getting a producer for the second one, Le Measurier had come back from overseas, and I said it's time, Roger, for you to be a producer. (laughs). He said I don't know anything about

being a producer I've just learnt script editing. So I said there's not a lot of difference (laughs). Just a bit of casting and a bit of budgetary control, you can do it. The New Zealanders are desperate. So Roger went over and he produced two of them. I was still living here. This was just a job.

Paul Davies: So this is the late 70s now ?

Roger Simpson: Yes, and then towards the end of the 70s we started talking about setting up this movie. But it took 2 years. So it was 1981 before *Squizzy Taylor* happened. That's where it started and Simpson Le Measurier have just had our 21st year.



Squizzy Taylor (1982)

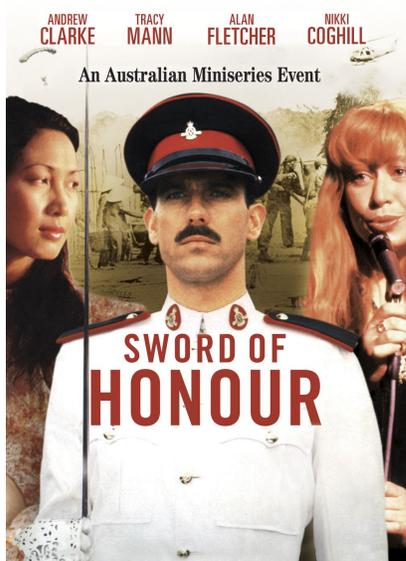
Paul Davies: After *Squizzy Taylor*?

Roger Simpson: Nothing for three years.

Paul Davies: A deafening silence. The phone stopped ringing...

Roger Simpson: Again its the naivety of the young writer. Thinking all he had to do was make a film and then your career looks after itself. It's a smash hit. You're asked to go to Hollywood. But of course the reality is: it ran for 8 weeks. Made a box office smash in Australia. It's still in video shops. But we weren't ready for it. We hadn't even written another script. I don't know what we thought was going to happen. So Roger went back to work as a free lance script editor and I went back writing television. But we kept the

partnership. And we spent three years of pitching in all directions- films TV series, kids' shows. Everything. And we finally got a gig where we made *Sword of Honour* which was a mini series about the Vietnam War.



Sword of Honour 1986

Paul Davies: Which was very highly regarded, still...

Roger Simpson: I think we got our first logie with that. And that did make a difference. *Squizzy Taylor* we didn't get noticed. Though it opened the Sydney film festival. But that's about all it did. At least it didn't close it.

Paul Davies: Was it a 10BA film?

Roger Simpson: Yes 10BA was invented about the time we were trying to get it up. *Sword of Honour* was a 10BA project too. As was our next mini series *Nancy Wake*. So we had a 10BA phase.

Paul Davies: Is *Skirts* the next cab off the rank ?

Roger Simpson: Before *Skirts* was *Darlings of the Gods*, a co-production with Thames Television. Mini series started to sell. The era of the Mini Series. Funded by 10BA. It was fantastic. They were big budget, the poms liked the production values. And were buying them. Australian Television got a very high profile very quickly. And this project with Thames was at the height of that boom.

Paul Davies: This is the early 80s now.

Roger Simpson: Yes. Then it all went bang. It imploded on itself and politicians said there's too much tax avoidance money going into film and television. And like all booms

there came a crunch. That's when we did *Skirts*. Which was our first television drama series not funded or subsidised by 10BA.



Kate Gillick and Antoinette Byron in *Skirts*

Paul Davies: This was for channel 7?

Roger Simpson: The famous story about that is that they required a gritty 8.30 police drama about a community policing squad. But after we'd made the first half of the first series they decided to put it on at 7.30 on Sunday night after Disneyland, with the instruction to hang on to the same audience. We said how do we do that with a gritty police show? Well - start changing the scripts. So the first 11 went to air as gritty police drama then the programmers panicked and put it to a 9.30 show just as the soft scripts came through. (laughs). They'd been advertising this hard edged show....

Paul Davies: This is reminiscent of the *Something In the Air* story. Do you despair sometimes at the way programmers treat what you give them?

Roger Simpson: It's very hard. They sort of, on one hand, understand the process and that it takes time. Scripts are written a long way ahead and it takes time and it is what it is. And it's very hard to change quickly. You can change it from series to series but it's very hard to change it on the way through. But even with that knowledge they get stuck with their schedule. And if it isn't working in the schedule they panic. They shift their cards around.

Paul Davies: Is it a failure of nerve on their part? Not to trust what you give them? Or are they bound by ratings so much...

Roger Simpson: They're under so much pressure to succeed in ratings and they've got advertisers screaming at them too of course..

Paul Davies: You'd think that it would be different with the ABC...

RS Yes you would. It was our blackest time. The Jonathan Shier years were the worst. We've been through some rough times. But nothing like that. To see a national broadcaster enfeebled in that way... it's just appalling.

Paul Davies: *Halifax* was another SLM success story. Twenty one telemovies in all...



Rebecca Gibney, Hugo Weaving *Halifax FP* (1994 – 2002)

Roger Simpson: Yes. Roger and I have kept ourselves adaptable. Because the rules change. 10BA is there one minute then its gone the next. Video tape drama becomes the thing to do then suddenly there's a swing against that. *Halifax* became a creature of FFC subsidised drama. We made *Snowy* as a thirteen part mini-series before we made *Halifax*. But then, when too many 13 part mini-series came along, the FFC started running out of dough, so they had to change the rules. And they favoured telemovies. So there was *Feds*, *Cody*, *Singapore Sling*, and *Halifax*. And *Halifax* was the survivor.

Paul Davies: When you say “*Snowy*”, that’s “*Snowy -the shovel*” (not *The Man From Snowy River*)

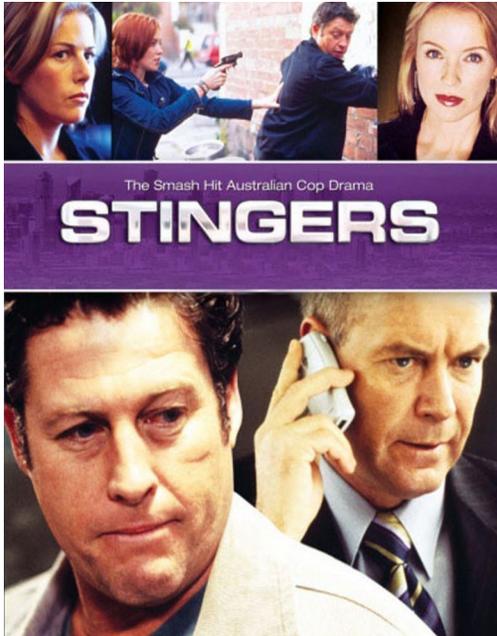
Roger Simpson: Yes. We had big plans for “*Snowy -the shovel*”, it was going to be a series of 13-part series. Series one was the immigrants arriving, Australia after the war, and the beginning of the Snowy (River Scheme). And Series two was going to be about the tunnel and Series 3 was going to the consummation of the scheme, twenty, thirty years on. But they changed the rules.

Paul Davies: So only the first series got in the can?

Roger Simpson: Also the ratings were spectacular when it went out. But every week it went down a bit. Because it was a serial. And Channel 9 panicked because they said it

was a great idea, but people tend to feel they've missed a few episodes. There's no point in joining it late - which wasn't true. But that was the perception. They were ratings you'd die for now. High 30s. Only the Bronlow medal count and the Eurovision song contest gets higher these days. (laughs)

Paul Davies: That remains an issue though now with something like *Stingers*, were you are getting large narrative arcs spread over sometimes 5 or more episodes. So the story department problem becomes how to give each episode enough self containment to be viewable alone and still connect to the stories on either side.



Peter Phelps, Gary Sweet *Stingers* (1998 – 2004)

Roger Simpson: It's an ongoing issue. And the networks are always turning the tap on and off as far as the serial aspects of a series are concerned. The story department on *Stingers* at the moment is enjoying the serial strand, but that sort of thing - if the network didn't like it they'd cut it. But because *Stingers* is about to go into its 7th season it's got it's loyal audience, so you can be much more flexible with the rules once a show is established. You could never get away with that in the first or second year. We did a five parter at the end of the first series which rated very well and it didn't make the network nervous. But the foreign audience doesn't like it. Because they sometime split the series in half.

Paul Davies: And even show eps out of order.

Roger Simpson: Eps out of order. They drop eps that they don't like. For some markets there's too much violence or language that's inappropriate. So they just drop eps. And if they happen to be in the middle of a serial strand its a disaster. Distributors also don't like serials. The Network decided the serial element in *Snowy* was wrong but that was a wonderful era at 9. When David Leckie had just taken over and Bruce Gyngyll was there

as well. A golden era. David Leckie was fantastic for Australian Drama. Very bold. Pretty unafraid of making big plays and riding with it to see if they came off. After *Snowy* we went into Channel 9 to the network meetings - this doesn't happen any more - to deal with the managers. Now it's all corporatised. But in those days you actually went to the Network meeting to pitch the second series of *Snowy* and they virtually said: we don't want to go with *Snowy* again but we like you guys and what you do, have you got anything else for us? And we virtually said on the spot. "What about Rebecca Gibney as a forensic psychiatrist?" They said, "fantastic we'll have six."

Paul Davies: Is that something you had in the bottom drawer?

Roger Simpson: It was something Roger and I sketched together out in the waiting area when we sensed that the mood of the Network meeting wasn't going to go in our direction. We decided we better have something up our sleeve. Rebecca was in *Snowy* and we thought there was potential to do something with her. So we had this idea. But there was nothing on paper. That was David Leckie. A very gutsy sort of call. Others were struggling to do one, or a maximum of three, telemovies and usually they would do one and see how it went. Whereas he just said 'Six' let's go for it.

Paul Davies: Simpson Le Measurier have always built their series around people like Rebecca Gibney, Marcus Graham (*Good Guys Bad Guys*) Magda Szbanski (*DogWoman*), Peter Phelps in *Stingers*...

Roger Simpson: The older and wiler you get you try to make every post a winner. When you're young and naive and idealistic and all you want to do is a series about the Vietnam War - even when the market didn't want it - it was the first series about the War-years before Kennedy Miller made *Vietnam*. We weren't even allowed to use the word 'Vietnam' in the title. Which is why we called it *Sword of Honour*. It was too raw and recent and Australian Television wasn't ready for it. So we had a love story set in South East Asia with the vague background of the war. And the peace movement - that was one thing, but the subject matter was unacceptable. We were driven in those days by the stories we wanted to tell, and to hell with boring detail like casting. Now its the other way round because we realise you develop a lot of things that never get made and you want to minimise the wastage and so my advice to young writers is think strategically from the beginning and by all means follow their hearts and passions but if you can make the package look more attractive by having some talent attached well, why not ?

Paul Davies: When you look at the slate of programmes that you've produced, police drama is very central to it. You have a background as a barrister and even your headquarters is the old police station in North Melbourne... what is it about crime on television that is so enduring as a genre?

Roger Simpson: It has the perfect dramatic form, the crime or problem or commission of the crime is the beginning, the middle is the investigation and the ending is the conclusion - guilty or not guilty. It just has the perfect dramatic form. We've been struggling at times, we've sort of given up now, but there was a time where we wanted to

get free of the label of crime television. *Good Guys* was at one level, an attempt to get away from cop shows or legal shows but it was really a crime show. Just happened to be a crime fighting dry cleaner. As opposed to a policeman. I guess it's a bit in the blood. Some people write hospital drama, some people write family drama, our bag is crime. That's what we do. Over the years you pick up an awful lot about how the police force works. How the legal system works. You have all this knowledge and the tendency is to use it. Ever since I've been in television in Australia - 30 years now - they always say there's too many cop shows. As when Hector was making them in the early 70s. The critics still say it. But it's what people watch. The Americans keep making them and the English keep making them. *The Bill*, *CSI* etc.

Paul Davies: You mentioned the structural principle of the crime which coincides with the dramatic structure. Is there an element also of reassurance for the audience that there's somebody out there looking after them. That the good guys always win. Justice is seen to be done. We can all sleep a little safer in our beds tonight...

Roger Simpson: That's been the tradition and that's why in the past, shows about corrupt cops - except for short run things like *Blue Murder* (which is acceptable as four one hours). But in the past there's always been that conventional wisdom that the audience want reassurance. They don't like crooked cops. But in American now there's *The Sopranos*. And a new cop show called *The Shield* which has a bad cop in it. So there is a change happening but the bad cop needs a moral rationalisation.

Paul Davies: *Stingers* are playing with that idea at the moment, the Harris character appears to be corrupt for about six eps. But we find out in the end, of course, that he is on the side of the angels. But you play with this idea and lead the audience on. And from a writing point of view its a terrific dynamic because you can go against the convention and play on those irrational fears people all have - that if the guardians are corrupt then we're in trouble...

Roger Simpson: Yes.

Paul Davies: So there's a quirkiness, a playful larrikin aspect to a lot of Simpson Le Measurier shows. Going against the grain. Is that something that comes from you and Roger personally?

Roger Simpson: I think it's about embracing the Australian character because in our trips overseas we see that what makes our drama marketable is our difference. There was a period in the 80s when Australian drama was trying to be English or American drama. But going to the markets - what they like about us is the difference. That larrikin personality which is essentially Australian. Roger and I both have a cheeky outlook on life, so it suits our personalities to go that way, but it's smart too. And the quirkiness is sometimes a survival mechanism. It's a tough game and its always battling with survival. It's knife edge. It might look secure on the outside. But it's a precarious business as you know, Paul. It can blow up in your face and a show can be cancelled without warning. So part of the survival mechanism is to make the job as enjoyable as possible. Because you

dare not worry about the future. So there's a larrikin attitude in our day to day working lives. Because if you were sensible you wouldn't be in the game at all. (laughs).

Paul Davies: I think it was Brecht who said if you're not having fun doing it, nobody's going to have fun watching it.

Roger Simpson: That's so true.

Paul Davies: There's also the question of logic in police drama. A lot of what the plot comes down to is - is this logical? The threading of the narrative is to do with logical coherence and rationality. A lot of the script editing is to do with fixing up the illogical in the story. Is this something that a barrister's eye gives you.

Roger Simpson: Are you talking dramatic logic or the authenticity of the police work?

Paul Davies: Both.

Roger Simpson: I had to unlearn a lot. The trouble with being a barrister is that it's all to do with precision. A legal document is meant to have no loopholes in it. I think when I became a writer I had to learn that precision doesn't make good drama. And the unexpected is probably what it's all about. But contradictory to that, it has to be within a logical world because you can't just sort of pull rabbits out of the hat unless you've thought it through and people can see that it's plausible. So there's these two dynamics in opposition to one another. One is authenticity, plausibility - the real world. But then drama hinges on surprise and the unexpected because you don't want people to work out where you're headed. Because if they can guess the ending they're going to be bored rigid.

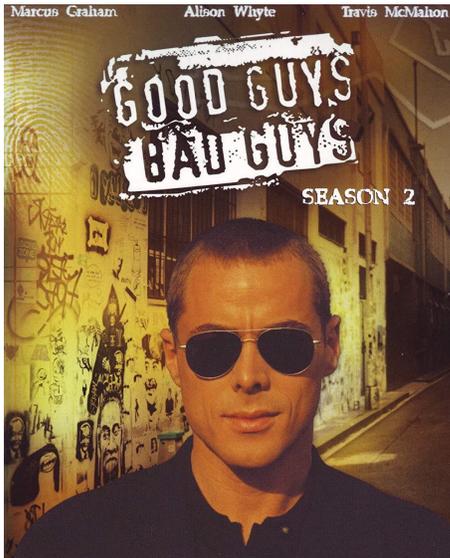
Paul Davies: In a lot of *Halifax* too, there's that element of surprise, you could never accuse a *Halifax* script of being ahead of the audience. As much as the quirky larrikin element, there's that sense of the concealed mystery - which makes those stories stand out. In *Stingers* also to a certain extent.

Roger Simpson: The murder mystery was a lot of fun. There won't be any more *Halifax's* but we want to make more murder mysteries. It's as durable as the cop show. It's another form of TV drama that's been around since *Colombo*, *Murder She Wrote*, *McMillan and Wife* and the poms did it too. It's a pretty good form.

Paul Davies: When you're putting together a concept for a series are you looking for characters that are going to endure across 26, 52 hours or drama? Is it the setting, the characters, what grabs you first?

Roger Simpson: It's definitely character because if you don't get those right you're going to be very bored with writing them. But setting is part of character because the character dictates its setting. Sometimes you change the setting to suit the character- if that helps the character. There's a lawyer or a cop or a dry cleaner...but basically it (*Good*

Guys) started off as a crime fighter on the wrong side of the law, a former cop. It's my favourite show.



Marcus Graham *Good Guys Bad Guys*

Paul Davies: So why don't we see more of *Good Guys*?

Roger Simpson: The network had a lot of trouble with it. It had a loyal audience that loved it. The Network felt it wasn't broad enough.

Paul Davies: Was it a young audience?

Roger Simpson: It was a young audience. Now - because the rules keep changing - now Channel 9 would be delighted to have a *Good Guys* because these days it's acceptable to target a particular demographic as opposed to a broad one. But in those days it was the broad demographic or nothing. So, because we were very niche focused in the audience, it never went beyond its second series. We had financial problems too. It was a very expensive show. Shot in seven and a half days with a lot of locations, a lot of stunts, it was pretty splashy television and it sold well in some markets. The French for example loved it. Apart from *Halifax* it was the only thing we ever sold to France. But it didn't finally get the sales to justify the big budget.

Paul Davies: Would you have done a slimed down version?

Roger Simpson: I don't think so. You can take *Stingers* into a studio, but *Good Guys* was much more action based, round the streets.

Paul Davies: I remember you saying once they were very hard to write, tricky...

Roger Simpson: Tricky, yes. Although we were getting team of writers towards the end who really latched on to it. But all new shows are hard to write.



Anne Phelan as “Mon” *Something In the Air* (2000-2002)

Roger Simpson: *Something In The Air* was hard to write at the beginning. And then it finds itself and the teams of writers all play their part as well. Somebody writes a script and you say, yeah, that’s what we’re trying to do. It’s all teamwork. It doesn’t matter how long you spend in preparation, everything has a shakedown period. Theory is one thing, you can write and rewrite scripts as much as you like but until you’re actually making it; and until the directors and actors place their interpretation on the characters you’ve created... in the old days I tried to control those characters as I saw them. Once again, something you learn when you get a bit grey in the head- (laughs) you’re better off letting the actors and directors play their role and add their dimension and not be so proprietorial about it.

Paul Davies: So you write the pilot scripts, you create the characters, you spend a certain amount of time in the story department and then you stand back?

Roger Simpson: You get the best results when you empower the people who are making the show. In the old days Roger and I were probably control freaks who wanted to be all over it. But all you’re doing is undermining the people - everybody else who’ve got a huge contribution to make. With each series of *Stingers* I’ve done less and less. And with each series of anything there’s a process of setting it up, then empowering the other people to play their part and that’s when it’s really exciting. Also my brief is to prepare for the next disaster (laughs). Errol Sullivan once said to me, there’s only one thing certain in television: when a show is commissioned one day it will be axed. You don’t know whether it will be the first series or the second series. But the axe is going to fall. So I’ve never forgotten that and I’ve always had two or three things. There were years where we didn’t work and I had nothing ready. Now I’m working at three or four things at once. Because *Stingers* won’t go on forever. *Halifax* went for Seven years. *Something In The Air* finished after two.

Paul Davies: Is there something more personal in the bottom drawer though - apart from the bread and butter stuff. Is there something where it didn’t matter what the network wanted... or the demographic.

Roger Simpson: That will be known as the era of my bad novels. (laughs) The thing about TV is that it's a business. The good old days of the one-off play on the ABC are long gone. I've got a couple of plays I'm writing but you have a company to run and so you've always got to feed the monster.

Paul Davies: You've always had that loyal group of people around Simpson Le Measurier who have gone across a number of shows with you. Something reminiscent of the Crawford era. The engenderer of talent and the creators of teams of people...

Roger Simpson: Yeah. And I like that. I like the process. Roger and I always said to each other - and this is ridiculous after 30 years - it was a young man's game. Because you work long hours and it's relentless. Every day brings a new problem. And you get to a stage where you think the next generation can do this. Then I'll probably go to some shack in the bush and finish these plays. And they'll be personal and made by a regional theatre company...

Paul Davies: Plays rather than features or novels?

Roger Simpson: I think I'm a dramatist rather than a novelist. I'm more comfortable with dialogue and performance. Dramatic structure rather than the structure of a novel. I don't even know the rules for a novel. I don't mean I'd write bad plays. Just not mainstream. Not made for the big audience. We are unashamedly main stream television makers.

Paul Davies: Well there's no other form is there?

Roger Simpson: No. I think even the ABC unfortunately still wants to rate. So you can't. There's not much opportunity for a personal statement. I think there are other outlets for that. You are just wasting your time in television. A movie would be better. For a very personal statement.

Paul Davies: But there is that idea of the personal in the *Good Guys* style of television.

Roger Simpson: Oh yes.

Paul Davies: You couldn't confuse it with a *Blue Heelers* for example.

Roger Simpson: No. Absolutely not. When you're a writer. The personal. It's there in a *Stingers* script too.

Paul Davies: It's in the dialogue...

Roger Simpson: It's in the story, the guest characters. The situation. And there's tons of opportunity to say what you want to say about the big world around you.

Paul Davies: Then a script editor comes along and changes it all. (laughs)

Roger Simpson: Oh yeah. I like the editing process. Although I've never been an editor. Roger has been my editor. And he still is. So in the first instance, when you're writing a pilot. It's Roger who critic it. And he's very efficient. He only makes six or seven points. But they always go right to the heart. They tear it to bits. And then you've just got a pile of words sitting on the floor... He's not a line by line, he's a big picture editor. And he's extremely good at it. He always has been. I think his major talent as a producer is his nose for a script. And he's never wanted to write interestingly enough.

Paul Davies: So that's the perfect marriage isn't it. The writer and the editor.

Roger Simpson: I think so. The writer and producer. But it was a very lucky accident. We weren't close friends and we weren't... we never had plans... it was opportunistic rather than anything else. Le Measurier went across to New Zealand to be a producer, and we worked together a bit, writer-producer. Then he came back to Australia to do shows on a freelance basis. And then we tried this movie. (*Squizzy Taylor*).

Paul Davies: And you never looked back...

Roger Simpson: Well, it sounds good from this distance but the first ten years were pretty hairy.

Paul Davies: Were there moments when you thought this is not going to gel here?

Roger Simpson: No, we were realistic about it. You can take more risks when you're young and stupid too. Naivety is a wonderful thing. If we'd known what we know now we mightn't have stuck it through. But you always thought tomorrow was going to be a brand new day and the phone would ring and somebody would give us the money...

Paul Davies: So you've got to be optimistic.

Roger Simpson: Inane optimism.

Paul Davies: And then have fun doing it.

Roger Simpson: Yeah. Well we went to lunch a lot. It cheers you up. Your days start at 7 o'clock something. You can't write all day long. You can't produce all day long. It's a tough job. Then you're still doing meetings, correspondence, viewings and all that other stuff in the afternoon. But I've always marked the middle of the day with a bit of a reward (laughs).

Paul Davies: So do you have a typical working day? An ideal writing structure? Do you start at a certain time? Or wait for the muse...

Roger Simpson: I write every day. But I've got to be careful to have weekends. Because I'd go mad if I didn't. But there was a time when I didn't stop. A workaholic unfortunately - from a writing point of view. I'm happiest in my room tapping away and I'll do it at night, early in the morning. All day.

Paul Davies: There's deadlines too of course...

Roger Simpson: But a lot of the work I do its speculative so the deadlines are self imposed. It's just a bit manic and a bit compulsive. And the danger I've got is I've got to be careful to have a life.

Paul Davies: So it's not a matter of finding the switch so much as switching off?

Roger Simpson: My family protests. I make this Sydney-Melbourne thing work for me. Because at home with the family (in Sydney) I have a saner working life. Weekends and time with my children and catch up with friends. When I'm in Melbourne I just lock myself away and work day and night. And I love that too because its so self indulgent. Though it's not a way to keep friendships or marriages. Or relationships with children. So I confine my writing time in Melbourne and do it day and night. Unless I've got a script. Which I tend to write quickly.

Paul Davies: So a TV hour would take a week to write?

Roger Simpson: A week for the draft. Three to five days. And three to five for the treatment.

Paul Davies: The treatment is just as important. The Scene Breakdown stage?

Roger Simpson: More important. That's when you establish your characters, the ending, the dramatic structure. All the rules. And so when I sit down to write the draft I know every scene. How long, who's going to be in them and I very very seldom stray from the scene breakdown. Whereas I know other writers hate them. It may be my legal training. I just like to know what it feels like before I leave home. And I hate rewriting, I absolutely loathe rewriting. And so I make damn sure I've solved the problems before I start.

Paul Davies: The structural problems...?

Roger Simpson: Yeah, and I think through the scenes in my head - as I'm doing the Scene Breakdown. So I sort of have an ability to dramatise it in my imagination. So by the time I start page one, I know what I'm writing. I can just about see it. I see the settings, I know the characters. The surprise is in the dialogue. Once characters start talking to one another I think shit, I didn't think they were going to say that!

Paul Davies: It surprises you. The way it comes out?

Roger Simpson: Because I write so fast, you release the characters, they're out of their cages and running like a dog race and you don't know which one is going to win necessarily and I change the dynamic within a scene, but I very seldom change a Scene Breakdown.

Paul Davies: And once you've committed that dialogue into the computer is that it?

Roger Simpson: Unless everybody's unhappy with it. Then I'm into rewrite hell, like every writer is. But I would try really hard to get people to lock off on the story. So I can say, but hang on, you liked that story, don't change the rules on me now. I know writers who loathe Scene Breakdowns and think it inhibits the creative process. For me I'm a structuralist from way back. In terms of creating TV series it's structure structure structure. It's characters, setting, what is the story engine...

Paul Davies: This was the Crawfords style wasn't it? I remember on the first day as a trainee script editor you were give a graph of the emotional structure they wanted for a Homicide episode. With a wiggly line showing the waves of emotional intensity from segment to segment.

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

Handwritten notes:
 - On the left: "DEVELOPING" (vertical)
 - On the right: "30 mins p 2 mins"
 - At the bottom: "N.B. *'Homicide' super over opening shot. **stock counting into commercial. ***title and writer's credit in minutes"

The *Homicide* script template

Roger Simpson: It probably came from Dorothy (Crawford) who was a big influence. She and Ian Jones. But I love writing bibles. Even the bibles that never see the light of day. I love analysing what the story engine is going to be and putting your finger on it. And it's always a process of refining it down to this essential truth of what makes a series tick. You start with 50 pages, but the Writers' Bible is going to be a few paragraphs that nail it. You start with this big searching, outpouring on the computer which roams all over the place when you're looking for what makes the thing tick.

Paul Davies: The story engine.

Roger Simpson: And then you refine that 50 pages down to 30 then down to 10.

Paul Davies: So the first page has to nail it?

Roger Simpson: The first page, the one page after the 50 pages. It's the essence. It's the instant coffee but it comes from the plantation. It comes from the beans and drying it. Tons and tons of paper. I just pour every idea in my head into the computer. Then I print it out and stick it round the walls, then I circle bits and I'm trying to analyse and refine it down to the simple truth that makes that series unique.

Paul Davies: And that's the story engine?

Roger Simpson: That's the trick. In *Good Guys Bad Guys* it was a former cop from a criminal family. That's what it came down to. A crime-fighting dry-cleaner. It comes down to something as simple as that. It starts as a huge outpouring about god knows what - tourette's syndrome - as all these occupations come pouring out and I tried him as a dry cleaner - which was a very late development. But you're looking for something that has got the right quirk. So he actually hates dirt. It was a business he thought was going to be a bludge. It is a bludge because he hires someone to run it for him. But you don't start with that, you end up with that.

Paul Davies: So it's a journey.

Roger Simpson: A journey to that essence. From random jottings down to something which the writers, when they read them - my bibles aren't long - but they start off as great tomes. Also its the network too. Anyone who's going to be involved in it, directors, actors, everybody needs it in a nutshell.

Paul Davies: And as the series progresses, I remember at the end of *Something In The Air*, someone did a map of all the places and people and characters that were depicted in the show and it blows out again, there's this world you've created that has creeks and parks and mountains, other towns. And you think, this is a totally imaginary place, but it all comes from that one original story engine.

Roger Simpson: The tendency is for more and more information to be added as the series goes along. We refine that story engine on every series. Every series on *Stingers*, or *Halifax* or *Something In The Air* - we're trying to make that story engine more and more profound and perfect. It doesn't stop. Every series, its not quite that sentence - it's that sentence.

Paul Davies: So the engine will change?

Roger Simpson: You refine the bible all the time.

Paul Davies: *Stingers* has gone more internal, psychological, especially with the studio component to it now.

Roger Simpson: Because Roger and I have become less control freaks. *Stingers* has now become the personality of the people who work on it. As the story teams have changed the flavour of the show has changed. I guess your job as a producer is, if you can see them heading in the wrong direction, you stop it. But if it's going in the right direction... as long as its positive you go with that. But it's constantly refined and re-defined. It's a search for what makes the show tick.

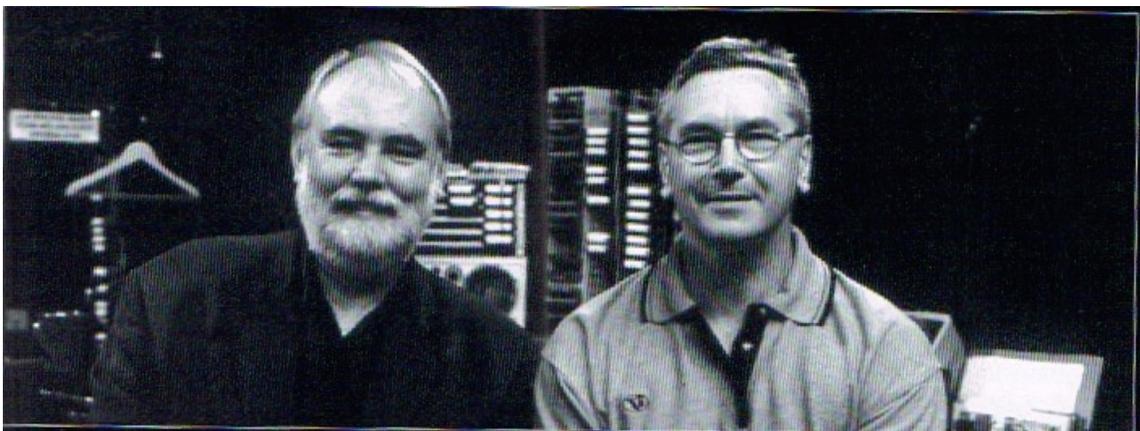
Paul Davies: Can you talk about what the future holds for you now?

Roger Simpson: We're developing some telemovie possibilities.

Paul Davies: With a continuing character base?

Roger Simpson: Yes, generic telemovies- like *Halifax*. Last year we put a lot of energy into developing *Halifax* as a one hour series. A co-production with Linda La Plant. Unfortunately, that bit the dust when David Leckie left. Even though that series hasn't happened there's still a relationship with Linda La Plant so we're still keen on a co-produced crime show with her. Made in Australia with English elements. Co-conceived with Linda La Plant and me. We're also developing a new series for Channel 10. I've got three or four ideas fighting with each other in my head at the moment. And if they don't like the first one they'll get the second. But which ever one sells - that's the one I'll bond with. (laughs). But as Hemingway said: "A story told is never written" so I don't like to say too much until it's down on paper. Then I'll start showing it to people.

(Interview held at The Gypsy Café, Smith Street Collingwood. 26/9/2002)



The "Two Rogers" Le Mesurier and Simpson

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