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Interviewee: Sara Erulkar
Interviewer: John Taylor
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The copyright of this recording is vested in the ACTT history project. Sara de Normanville, professionally known as Sara Erulkar, documentary film director. Interviewer John Taylor. Recorded on the twenty-eighth of February 1991, with interjections by her husband, Peter (PdN). Side one.

[00:34]
Who shall we start with? Shall we start with Sara Erulkar?

Well, you realise I'm from India, and I came over here when I was about five, when let's face it, Indians were niggers in London, so it wasn't a sort of terribly happy childhood. But I went to St Paul's, I gather you'll want to know, and then to university during the war.

Did you have trouble with colour at all?

Oh, a lot at school. I mean St Paul's is a very liberal minded school, but it's still, you know, there are still very few Indians in this country and just to jump, I remember some time later when I was wearing a sari – this was after the war and I was in films – and somebody couldn't understand why I was wearing evening dress during the day, you know, we were that rare really, is what I was saying.

Whereabouts were you born, by the way?

In Calcutta. Yes, I'm from Bombay but I was actually born in Calcutta.

When was that?

In 1923, so a long time ago. An antique!

You went to university?

Yes, I really went to university early because I couldn't stand it and we were evacuated to Wycombe Abbey, you know, the sort of real snob place. I begged to be allowed to leave and I went at seventeen and read a sociology honours degree. We were in Cambridge,

which was nice, though it was London University College, it was Bedford College. But at St Paul's I was very much into acting and writing plays and about fourteen I sort of decided that I wanted to make films, and when I was at university I decided I wanted to make documentary films.

Why though, how did you become interested in films?

I don't know, you know, I've tried to work it out, I have no idea. I've got no-one in my family who's filmmakers or…

Were there any films at that time particularly relevant to making you decide?

No. But I used to, I mean I still have my book when I used to write down ideas for films. [laughter] Still got one about, why can't we try a black and white film with one rose just red. Of course that was done in *Matter of Life and Death* later, but you know, and I used to review nearly all the plays, theatre I went to, which strangely, my parents being Indian, but they took us to a lot of, you know, to the Old Vic and places like that and Stratford just before the war. So I got more and more involved in, you know, presentation, I suppose really, rather than acting.

Why documentary?

I suppose that really was a sort of a thing from doing sociology. I didn't work very much at university, I must say, I found very boring the actual course, but it was the only course they would accept me on as a seventeen year old. And I joined, I became president of Mummers, the Cambridge Dramatic Society, but I still don't know why films and I still don't know why documentary.

Did you see documentaries at that time?

No, not many. But, you know, I mean it's the usual thing I suppose, I wanted to do good for the world, I wanted to go back and rescue India from the bloody British, you know, that kind of thing. And I think that was all part and parcel of it, you know. I sort of saw myself on a white horse – a white horse, a dark horse it should be – sort of going into

Delhi. But I mean I don't know, it all gelled in some way and I was just lucky because I went to see Alex Volkov [?], you know, who was at Shell, and he also thought that this was a brilliant idea, actually go back and make documentary in India. But for various reasons I can tell you that didn't work out.

Which year did you see Volkov [ph]?

'44. I'd taken another year at university, so I was twenty-one when I went to see him. I also went to Crown Film Unit, which was, you know, and I got an answer a week later from Shell accepting me. So my life would have been very different if it had come a week earlier. Because I certainly wouldn't have met Peter. Good or for bad, I don't know, but that's the way it was.

Tell us about how you started work.

Actually I had a very strange first year because I started off really doing nothing but learning to join film and I was even sent out to run projectors at schools and colleges and things. And then Geoffrey Bell - do you know he… he was making a couple of films, the second one was on AOSB [Army Officer Selection Board?], the first was the private army – what do I mean?

Popski's?

Non-commissioned people. But the second one was on selection board for officers and I was his assistant and he just handed the whole stuff to me, it had been shot when I arrived, and I just edited it. I mean it was a sort of strange way to start, but it was great, I loved that, I thoroughly enjoyed it. It had synch sound, which I didn't touch again for years after and the documentary was very… I think Crown did it a lot, but certainly Shell was mainly shot silent and then the voiceovers. So I was very lucky.

How did you find the Shell Unit at that time?

Very exciting. It started off, this marvellous thing that colour didn't matter, I mean it suddenly didn't matter and I've been very lucky in that because I really looked upon the

film industry as my background really, my nation, and living there and later in Hampstead and everything, I lived in a kind of little bubble I think, which was very different from my childhood. I loved it at Shell, I had a, the year after, two years later I was twenty-three, I was going back to India to make… leave, you know, I hadn't been back since I was a child, and they asked if I'd make a film there and I made *Lord Siva Danced* with Ram Gopal. Again, totally outflanked, you know, I mean I hadn't directed anything, I'd been an assistant to various people going and shooting apples in orchards and things, [laughter] but this sort of sudden… I didn't know about playbacks, for instance, so we had to shoot, record the same time, I just had no idea. Always a bit different each time, but I mean that was exciting and very lucky. I mean a real break for me.

Those early documentary units were very good for pushing people into doing the work weren't they?

Yes, yes indeed. And this was '45, '46.

The Ram Gopal?

Ram Gopal, yes that's right.

Whereabouts did you make that?

In Bombay.

In Bombay?

Yes.

And was that for Shell?

That was for Shell. Nobody quite understood why, you know, a couple of years later there were sort of questions, why was that Indian dancing? But Geoffrey, Geoffrey Bell produced it and I think he was eccentric enough to sort of… he didn't care what the Shell people said as long as they paid up. So I really had a lot of luck in those few years.

How did you get on with Elton?

I got on well with him before I got married, then he did tell me that I ought to put out Peter's slippers and that was my job in life. He told us this in a taxi, [laughter] we were giving him a lift back to Hampstead. That didn't help, you know. That was my main problem, being a woman, more than being Indian. They liked Indians more than they liked women.

Elton didn't understand women at all did he?

No, I think not.

Well, did you find it difficult being a woman with the rest of the unit?

[10:00]
Oh, no way. No, I had a wonderful time. And, you know, with Edgar as well and when Geoffrey Bell was producing there were no problems in that. But definitely when Peter and I did decide to get married, you know, one of us had to leave, but they gave no choice, I had to go.

Yet one of you had to leave because they didn't employ married couples?

That's right. But normally I would have thought, you know, I was directing, Peter was an assistant, and I thought that Peter probably, I mean he said he'd go, he'd try and freelance. But we were given no choice, I was chucked out, that was very painful.

I imagine it must have been. But it was absolutely standard at the time, you know, education at the time, they wouldn't employ women teachers and so on if they were married.

Anyway, that was the end of my Shell life.

Which year would that be?

That was… well, we got married in ’50, I was finishing *The History of the Helicopter* then, I was still working on that.

You’d made a number of films by this time?

Yes, quite a number. It seems such an antique business now. I made a film on new detergents, you know, before all these…

Brilliant, they were brilliant. That was the one, the duck sank.

[laughter] That’s right, that’s right, yes. Yes.

You wouldn’t get away with it these days with all the animal rights people. They soaked a duck in detergent, you know.

But the preamble to that was that Peter was living at the time – we were going out, this was before, it was about ’48 wasn’t it, and we were living together in fact – and Peter had a room in a huge communal house near Whipsnade and they had a beautiful white duck called Chalice in their pond, and we went to shoot Chalice being dunked, and she fought back, she fought back and it was horrendous, it really was horrific to see this duck. And I say to Roddy…

Rodwell?

Rodwell.

Stan Rodwell, yes.

I was saying, ‘Cut it, cut it!’ He said, ‘No, no, this is fabulous, wonderful stuff’, you know. [laughter] I said no, because it’s not doing the right thing, and he wouldn’t sort of cut, but anyway. Chalice was taken to Peter’s room and wrapped in a warm towel and brandy was poured down her throat. And she had sort of brandy poured down her throat and she revived and lived to a ripe old age, but I felt very guilty about that. So we did it…

What other films before had you made by that time?

I'd made, I started to do a film on method study, but that came to nothing. What did I do? Ram Gopal, and then I did some small, you know, they're magazine films. I also made one in India for them on country craft, you know, sailing along, the little cargo sailboats which was great fun.

That was with an Indian unit?

Yes. I did the Ram Gopal film too with a totally Indian unit.

What was their reaction to you, the actual unit? Did they accept you just like that?

The documentary cameraman did, but not the features, you know. I mean it was a very… I was very cut off, I mean I just had to get on with it as best I could. But it really was the reason that I didn't go back because they said they didn't want me, you know. I mean there was no two ways about it and it wasn't particularly because I was a woman, but because I'd been brought up in England. I mean it was just before independence and there's a lot of feeling, you know, all the riots were going on, the communal riots were going on, and they just didn't want anybody who'd been brought up and trained in this country. And there was no place for me, so I went back to Shell in London, continued being a director and, you know, I can't remember. I think I just did the new detergents, then I did some of the air shows, you know, it was Radlett then, not at Farnborough, and I did a couple of those. But films took a long time to make at Shell, as you probably know, and it was just…

Peter de Normanville: You did *History of the Helicopter*.

Yes, I started that in '49 didn't I? Yes, so that came after the new detergents. And that, just a few months ago Peter and I were walking down the high street and a young man came roaring up behind us and said, 'Excuse me, excuse me'. And he said, 'Do you have a copy of *History of the Helicopter*?' So I said, 'That was made in 1950'. He said, 'Oh I know, but I still show it to my air cadets. It's a lovely film' he said. And that was great,

you know, that was a lovely feeling. I sort of felt good on that one. But I don't know where he could get a copy, but it was a good film, I enjoyed it, I mean I enjoyed making it, it was a good film to work on. And Edward Williams, it was one of the first films he did the music for, and that really, he did a wonderful score for it. That was a lot of the success of the films, was due to that.

PdN: Funnily enough, in India *Lord Siva* is sort of very much a cult like *Night Mail* would be in this country, and the several times I've worked in India, I've made films there three or four or five times I think, I was always famous as the husband of the director of *Lord Siva*. That was my reputation.

Is it still in circulation?

PdN: Among sort of documentary type people, yes. I don't imagine, the man in the street obviously has not heard of it. But the same kind of people over in this country would talk about *Night Mail*, they'll talk about *Lord Siva* as one of the sort of great classics.

The Indian Music Society here, the man who started that and ran it, he… you know the words I, I wrote kind of verse form, if you like, for the dances, what they meant, I said, 'And Lord Siva danced with great joy'. And he said they were all using these words now, when they had particularly dances and dance displays in schools or in lecture halls they always had the voice saying my words, so that was nice too. I really was very, very lucky on those first few years, were lovely.

It must have been a terrible blow when they told you you couldn't work there because you were getting married.

Oh yes. I couldn't stop crying, it was terrible. Charles Sylvester – do you remember Charles? – I mean he was the one and he was totally… he was such a nice man, you know, and he was embarrassed and upset and there was I sort of weeping away. But anyway, it was a good few years and I really enjoyed it. I did feel…

PdN: Apart from the human side, it was also a family shock because Sara was earning sixteen pounds fifteen absolutely regular at Shell, I was earning eight pounds five, and

obviously it was a nice thing to keep the sixteen fifteen going and not worry about the eight five, but Shell just wouldn't have it.

Why bother to get married?

I don't really know. I think that was really my fault because I felt suddenly that I couldn't just be his Indian mistress, I sort of felt, I just thought this is… it's… I've got to be accepted, I mean his family was anti-colour, anti-Jew – which I am, I'm a Bene Israel – and I just thought that, you know, I wasn't… in fact when Peter told his mother that we were getting married she said, 'I understand the attraction' but she said, 'why can't you marry someone respectable and keep Sara as your mistress?' I mean that was a sort of Edwardian kind of…

It was the way people thought at the time.

PdN: But, to sort of put against that, in later years my mother was enormously fond of you. I think she liked you better than her children.

Well, we got on well anyway in later years, yes absolutely.

What about the Jewish side, did you get any anti-Semitic…

No. You know, I don't think many people knew. I mean when it came out there was no sort of feeling about it, no. I don't think it ever…

No?

No, I think the main thing really was being a woman rather than anything else. I mean even in Birmingham when they were having the strikes because of the Indian labour being brought in, even then I had no… I was working in a factory and there was no sort of ill will on that either, from the workers or the management. I didn't expect it from the management, they knew. Sorry?

What happened when you left Shell?

[19:56]
It was quite a long time before I got another film. And that was with Jimmy Carr and again, a nice easy calm film, *District Nurse*, filmed it down in Kent. And the interview with Jimmy was… I suppose I was, yes, I'd left earning sixteen pounds and I said to Peter, do you think I can ask twenty? And we discussed it, you know, having nearly twenty pounds a week, I mean a thousand pounds a year one always aimed for in those days. And I went to see Jimmy and he asked me what I wanted as my salary and when I said twenty he said, 'Don't be silly' he said, 'We don't pay less than twenty-five'. [laughter] Lovely to go home and say, I'm getting twenty-five pounds a week! It's crazy, lovely.

He was a good producer.

Oh, he was. He was a nice man.

That was World Wide then wasn't it?

Yes. Strangely – just to jump for a moment – I made a lot of, some of my most successful films, with Anthony Gilkison and when I first went to see him he said, 'You were at Shell?' So I said, 'Yes, I was there for sort of four, five years'. And he said, 'Oh well no, I'm sorry' he said, 'you're obviously a blue stocking and we will have no place for blue stockings'. And I thought that was it, but in fact I went back again and did a film on detergents, and a world of difference, for Unilever. And that was one of my most successful films, so from then onwards – again, nothing against my being a woman, nothing against my being an Indian, but because I'd worked at Shell they thought I must be academic only, you know. But…

Strange.

It's a strange reaction, yes, yes.

But he was a commercial producer.

He was definitely a total change from, you know, World Wide or Shell or…

PdN: What was his company then?

Anthony Gilkison Associates, and then I think it became…

PdN: Viscom.

Viscom, that's right, later on. But actually he was a good producer too, strangely.

He was very successful. They got quite a lot of films in the cinemas and so on.

Yes, yes. But his input as a producer was always very productive, I mean it was positive and would sort of help me in quite a bit of my… We got on very well. We had terrible rows, the only producer I ever really had screaming rows with and he never forgave me, even when we got on well, [incomplete] used to say, 'This is a marvellous film, Sara's done a wonderful job, but I can still remember that you walked past me without even saying good morning the day after we'd started shooting', you know, I mean he never really… I suppose he wasn't used to it. Only producer I rowed with I think.

During this time did you keep your social purpose going strongly?

Only to the extent that I was twice asked to make a film for De Beers and both times, particularly the first time because I had been unemployed for some time, I was very tempted and I said, well I'll make a film for De Beers if I can go to South Africa, I'm not going to sit here and make a little cosy film here. But they wouldn't have that, so I said no. I'd love to have made a film on diamonds. [laughter] But apart from that I did a lot of educational films and that, you know, like *Never Go With Strangers*, films for children on… I think I did, come to think of it, one of my first films and one of my most important films I think was a film for the Family Planning Association, a film called *Birthright* and I enjoyed doing those. But I really was always so grateful whenever anyone employed me, you know, I always felt that I must be such an oddity that they have to sell me to the sponsor as well, you know.

Did you always wear a sari?

In the early days. I got quite used to, particularly when I was working with Geoffrey Bell because he used to take a couple of 35ml cans and go roaring ahead of me, sort of the swing doors used to swing back and I'd be standing with about eight cans and a sari, and I used to wear a sari for the early days and occasionally, particularly when long dresses came back into fashion for everyday use and so I went back to wearing saris. Everybody was struggling with long dresses. But it really wasn't a…

Is it true that you're the only woman to have gone down a coalmine in a sari?

No. I wish it were true, but no. No, I did go down a coalmine with Ralph Elton, who again, I thought was one of the nicest men I've ever met.

PdN: Somewhere there's a picture of you in a sari in the middle of… in a field doing your air display film.

Air displays, yes.

PdN: Sort of the sari whipping in the wind in all directions. [laughter] But *Birth Right*, the main title is on the background of human sperm sort of swimming around, and Su, the cameraman, said that he ought to have a credit, our main title background by Suschitzky. He provided them.

[laughter]

Shall we pause for a minute?

[break in recording]

[26:05]
One thing I would like to know, when you went into films, what was your parents' attitude really?

Oh, pleased. Extraordinary. I mean I had a brother and a sister and, you know, the great thing, my father had a lot of faults but the great thing about him was that he was determined his daughters were going to have the same chance as his son. It's very un-Indian, but he also was determined that we were not going to have anything to do with religion, he said, religion being the curse of India. And so because of that we just didn't… we had no kind of religious upbringing at all. That perhaps is one of the reasons why it never sort of really, you know, why my Jewishness has never come out. It's not because I'm ashamed of it or worried about it, but I do find it very unimportant to me, I just never had anything to do with it.

Your father must have been a fairly progressive man?

Indeed, I think he was… until it came to marriage and of course the fact that I was going to marry an Englishman was… my sister married an American and my brother married a Canadian and I think this was a great blow to him. Both sides of our families were against the marriage.

PdN: What did your father actually do when he was in England?

He was… Scindia Steamship Company, he started the office here, he was the managing director over here and of course during the war he had to stay in England. He wanted to send us back to India but we said no, if he's going to stay, we're going to stay. And so he was, you know, he had a pretty bloody awful time. I mean he was a great fighter and he became representative for India Employers with the ILO, you know, the…

International Labour Organisation.

Yes. And often, he said, he used to be the only one [laughter]… he particularly was trying to improve the conditions of the lascars and, you know, it was a dead wall every time but he still fought for it. I think he gained a lot of respect, I think he had a lot of hard times. I mean I remember being turned away from – it wasn't the Café Royal, it was one of those round Piccadilly, you know. I'm talking about pre-war of course, but…

Turned away?

Yes, because they didn't allow coloured people in.

Really?

It is extraordinary, you know. I find it extraordinary when I look back on it. I mean when I tell you that when I became pregnant Peter's parents' great worry was whether the children were going to be striped or spotted or patched or… I mean it was, the ignorance is phenomenal, I mean it's extraordinary. So we just, we had a lot of trouble, you know, as a couple, for a while, but particularly in the sort of Ealing – not Ealing – in the Elstree kind of area where Peter's parents lived and it was always a very strained business.

People disapproved of a white man and a brown woman?

And particularly were appalled that Vi and Edgar's son should have let them down, and all that. It was, could I eat with a fork and knife? I mean it was just crazy wasn't it?

[30:10]
PdN: I think an example of my father's attitude, which is almost unbelievable, is that before the war he wouldn't dine, I think it was at the Café Royal, because coffee was served by a black man in a turban.

The fez, he used to have a fez.

PdN: That's right, yes. And my father wouldn't go there.

It's quite amazing isn't it? And I know that we all know the problems of colour in America until very recently and you didn't realise that there was so much of it here.

Yes. My brother, who as I say is in Philadelphia, he said he preferred the overt anti-colour situation in America to the, you know, where you get whispers and sidling away, that kind of situation here. He of course had a worse time at school than I did so he's more bitter than I am about the past. The other side of it of course, quite a funny situation, was that I told you Peter lived in a sort of commune, a huge house, which was shared by ten families,

all fairly progressive obviously, they'd all sort of answered advertisements in *The New Scientist*, people like Ken Allsop was there. And the first time I went, the first weekend I went to have a bath, and none of the bathrooms locked and I was lent a bath by one of the people there. And suddenly the door banged open and in walked three small girls, about seven they were then, and they sort of stood there and looked at me and I looked back and they said, 'Oh well, goodbye' and they roared out again and I could hear them scream, 'She's brown all over!'. I thought that was fine. That I found sort of pleasing in a way, that was good. But it was the kind of situation when you realise you're apart from the rest of the world in a funny way and that's why perhaps I was so happy in the film industry, I was a film technician, I wasn't black, blue, anything, I was just a film technician.

How did you get on when you were working with the people you were directing and so on, did it rear its ugly head then at all?

No, but there was obviously the initial, if it was somebody I didn't know – a cameraman – there was the initial kind of growing together process which was always tough, but it didn't last too long. I made a film in Pinewood, one of the last films I made, and there again, you know, it was very tricky. I mean people called me 'Ma'am' and, oh God, you know. But by the end of our three weeks there we were all quite relaxed, the sparks were quite happy, but that took time.

What film was that then?

It was a film for the Electricity Board, not an important, not a very good film to be quite honest, but just on… it was a film for schools on cooking and enjoying it.

But in Pinewood?

In Pinewood, yes. It was a time when the, well it was a time when the film industry was very low and they were happy to let their small studios – they were in between James Bond films, so to speak – so they were happy to let these. I was also incredibly lucky that almost all my films are made with either Su as a cameraman or Arthur…

Suschitzky?

Suschitzky, yes. Or Arthur Wooster, or with Dougie Ransom for Rayant, you know. And I was very fond of them and certainly with Arthur Wooster, we did a lot of new ideas which were then new ideas, like Doug sort of doing a sort of spinning camera and things like that, and enjoyed working it all out. He was a very innovative cameraman and really…

Wonderful man, yes.

Absolutely. And such a nice man. My last film I made, directed, was a film on leprosy in India, and I shouldn't really say this [laughter], but the four of us went, was Arthur as cameraman and he took along as his second – and I took Peter along as mine – and we, you know, it was, well a nice way to end, I ended in India as I started too, which was quite…

PdN: The budget was so extremely tight on the film, and it really was tight, that the only way we could afford it is if the cameraman and assistant and the director and assistant both shared bedrooms. But we had another sort of funny… when Sara and I were both invited separately, independently if you know what I mean, to go to Leipzig and caused utter scandal there to the very strait-laced East Germans, when it was said that Mr de Normanville and Miss Erulkar would like to share a room. They couldn't get over it.

You were lucky in your cameramen because not all of them were as progressive as those three were they?

Absolutely. Yes, as I say, I do feel I've been living in a nice colourful bubble really, as far as that was concerned. I've had some bad times, I mean like my location, seven weeks in Korea were absolute murder. I mean they were… that is where…

Which year was that, roughly?

That was about twenty-five years ago I think, yes.

After the war or not?

Oh yes, yes. It was really just quite a few years after the war and there was a lot of military, American military still there. A lot of nastiness still, I mean the police would sort of set about with sticks on a kid who had a little radio he was holding to his ear, you know, insisting that he was listening in to their messages. And I went with Dougie Ransom and Douglas Williams, Dougie Williams, and had a Korean assistant there, but…

What was the film about?

It was really to put – it was sponsored by Caltex – and it was to put Korea back on the map really, because it was just the beginning of the Vietnam War and people were confusing the two. It was a very strange juxtaposition, you know, Vietnam and Korea became sort of one in a lot of people's minds and the Korean people were anxious to make the film because they wanted to set it up as a holiday resort again. But they weren't very helpful, that was the trouble. We arrived, and I arrived in Seoul and I was the only person who was setting up this thing. They wouldn't let us shoot in any of the palaces unless we paid them fifty pounds each time we put the tripod down. I mean it was… that's not the kind of help you need.

Was it bribery?

No, that was actually the Ministry of Culture, or Culture and History or something, they had a long name. Nobody would help us on it and Caltex really couldn't have cared less, I don't know why, but their local people I think were fighting quite a lot of problems anyway, so they didn't help. And I really did, I think they were the longest weeks I have ever spent in my film life, they were terrible. My cameramen were charming and good, but they were… the stood back from any kind of problems. So it wasn't an easy film and I didn't enjoy it.

It sounds horrible.

It was. I really came back sort of loathing the urban Koreans. The rural ones were, as always, you know, marvellous. But I mean the problems of being a woman on location like that, you know, I'd want to go to the loo and we'd stop the car and immediately a

hundred Koreans [laughter] would arrive from nowhere, you know, from behind the few bushes and things there were. So I used to have to go into the villages and use two boards over a sort of centuries old pit, you know. So my two cameramen, one used to hand me a lit cigarette and the other used to hand me a pair of dark glasses [laughter] every time I went. But that's where women, you know, really do suffer, it was not easy.

I mean I imagine also they weren't very keen on having a woman director.

No, I think that was a mistake that John Durst made, he was producing. He had been there to arrange the whole thing and thought this was paradise. I mean he was sort of treated with enormous sort of respect, none of which I got, you know. And I think they were more hoping John would come back and I think he should have. I think he hadn't realised the difference between setting something up and everybody saying they'd help and they'd lay on cars and things, then actually arriving and finding nothing, nothing.

This wasn't Shell, no?

No, Rayant, it was Rayant, yes.

Yes, John Durst, I remember John Durst, yes. I'm stumped for the moment – shall we turn it off for a minute?

[break in recording]

[40:20]
The film that I did in Korea which was such a problem was called *Korean Spring* and whether it achieved its object, I don't know, but it was, as far as I was concerned, the sooner it was finished the happier I was.

Was it shown in England at all do you know?

I think mainly in America, I think mainly in America and in Japan it was shown, again, you know, to try and encourage Japanese which that certainly, they certainly took that one up. I think probably the three most successful films I've made were *Never Go With*

Strangers, the police from our police station used to come round and borrow my copy. It also I feel justified my existence, you know, I got letters from people who actually their children had seen it and did what they were told to do, I mean writing down numbers and refusing to go with people. I felt really great about that, I felt, you know, that's me, I'm on my way to the pearly gates, that one film. But the other two were very…

Stay with that one for a minute.

Yes.

Which company was it and who produced it?

That was Balfour Films, Anne Balfour-Fraser produced it. Do you know her? A strange, small company – I made *Birthright* for them as well – they started off by being called Samaritan, which they gave up quite soon, and…

And the woman was the producer there was she?

She was the producer and she had a backing from her brother-in-law who was a whiskey man.

PdN: Sir William Younger.

William Younger, he was the sort of backer, if you like. And they tended to make art films and then sort of social films, if you like, and made several small films. They were all quite small, but they were all quite important, you know, on cross-infection in hospitals and sort of fairly… depression, mental depression. They were all quite minor films, mainly through the COI, but they were good films to work on.

What was the date of that, Never Go With Strangers*?*

Dear oh dear, it must be twenty years.

Have you seen it since?

No, no. No, they made a follow-up about five years ago called… no, mine was called *Say No to Strangers*, I'm sorry, and they made *Never Go With Strangers* after that.

PdN: One of the letters we had, or Sara had, was from a Chief Constable, I can't remember, something like Staffordshire, saying that it was the most important individual piece of sort of object to advance his work that he'd ever had in his career.

People underestimate the importance of these films, you know, quite a lot of them, you know. A very good example of, you know, and you've got the feedback on it as well, you know. But the effect that some of these films had, I mean the people who are making them I don't think were conscious of it, but I mean the effect was enormous on some of these films, on people's lives, which is not understood really.

PdN: Sara had enormous trauma making that one, because it was then known, everyone knows that in fact most of the people who rape or abuse children are in fact their parents or relatives and at that time, twenty years ago, it was impossible to even hint at that, so in a way the film was deficient. Nowadays, making the same film again, you'd be able to be quite open about it, but that's the difference in sort of attitudes in twenty years.

[44:25 - end of side]

[46:04]
Sara Erulkar, side two, with interjections by Peter de Normanville, Sara's husband.

Sara, side two. Tell us more about making of the film.

I used to, in those days, was I'd take on a little drama school run by Anna Scher, it's been used since, you know, Pauline Quirke and people like that came from her school. She had this… it was not meant to be professional, the children all around the area, from Essex Road, used to pay half a crown and they'd come in. And they were brilliant. They were so different from the professional drama schools, it was such a pleasure, you know, these. And I went to audition the children there and we played out the little scenes, I'd play the villain and see how the children reacted. Then they took over, they were far better villains

than I was, they'd do it to each other, far more seductive and convincing. They were really thinking children and it was, you know, they weren't just concerned with how they looked or anything like that, they really did act marvellously. They'd even add dialogue, you know, and I did tend to do it all off the cuff rather than having dialogue scripted too rigidly. And Arthur was, Arthur Wooster was cameraman and it was a total sort of, very satisfying production.

Start at the beginning, did you have a subject expert on it when you were writing the script?

Well only the Home Office people and the police, it was a joint sponsorship: Scotland Yard and the Home Office, and obviously I talked to people who went round schools and lectured children about it, because they would be showing this film anyway. And very… the point Peter made did come up time and time again, that it was too often a neighbour or an uncle who was the villain, but they didn't dare touch on that.

And you would have written a full script for it would you?

Yes, but not the… as I say, the dialogue I said I was going to keep flexible, I gave the guidelines in the script. Elizabeth Lutyens, you know, Liz Lutyens, she was related to Anne Balfour-Fraser, but she wanted to do the music for that and it all sort of gelled. The children, we had one child, the one who was picked up, and that was where I was worried. I thought this isn't going to work, you know, to have a child terrified, but she was incredibly good. Very underplayed but it was there, you know, all the tension was there and it really was… I was very happy because I had hoped to work with children and I did go on from there to make several films with Jack Holmes, on smoking films, smoking machine, and then later on I made three films about alcohol and eight films that would trigger off dialogue in the classroom for the Scottish Health Education. You know, things on parents' points of view.

[50:24]
A lot of your work was socially orientated.

It did end up that way. I'd forgotten myself, you know, it did, yes it did work out that way.

A lot of work for a documentary director has been, you know, you have to do what's going at the moment, you've got to guess.

Yes.

But if you've got that social purpose behind it, I mean that is what you're really trying to do. That's when you get the pleasure out of making.

No, that's right. I'd forgotten I'd made so many that actually had some value, you know, in those terms. And I'm glad you reminded me.

You're saying there were three films that you really…

Well, they're the three that were successful. The other two were totally different. One was the film on design of stamps, called *Picture to Post*, which I got the BAFTA for, and again, Arthur was my cameraman – no, he wasn't – sorry, it was Douglas Ransom. And that was, again, a glossy film but it was good, you know. I sort of…

For the Post Office that was?

For the Post Office, yes.

Directly for the Post Office or to a company?

No, no, directly for the Post Office. And it had Arnold Machin and David Gentleman and Jeffery Matthews were the three designers I used.

And you scripted it?

I scripted it and directed it.

What company was that?

That was Rayant.

That was again Rayant?

Yes, yes.

Was that in colour?

Yes, yes. That was ’68.

[both speaking together]

I remember it won the award. I remember watching on television.

Ah. [laughter] No, I don’t think… it was cut out.

I’ve never been so cross in my life because they rushed you on during the commercial break.

That’s right, yes. [laughter]

They put it at the end, I mean they couldn’t care less about… get them out the way quickly while we can run the commercials. I jumped up and down, furious when I saw that.

The strange thing, just to divert you a moment on that, was that I got the award for the best documentary and Peter got the award for the best specialist film, so we were both up there in the end, you know, which was nice.

Did they rush you on and off in the commercial break?

Yes.

PdN: Yes, always.

[laughter] Always!

It really is disgraceful, you know, the way that the BAFTA, well it's not BAFTA, but television have kind of completely buried anything but Sean Connery and…

Well, we're really the poor relations now aren't we?

PdN: What was very nice was at the pre-awards drink, we were the only two representatives of what you might call documentary or shorts, everyone else was sort of top international stars and we were just very much in our little corner, you know, having a drink, so that was okay. I think it was Vanessa Redgrave came over…

That's right.

PdN: …she said, what are you doing here, who are you, was absolutely charming and sort of loving. I mean she was one of the big types and looked after us really, which was very nice.

Amazing woman, great.

The other film that really I suppose, you know, I suppose was my sort of kick-off film, you know, sort of… I don't know, words, whatever you like, was *Something Nice to Eat*, which Su was the cameraman.

Who was that for?

That was for Gilkison. But it was… Su got…

How did you… you started scripting it and…?

Yes, I had Margaret Costa as my adviser on it and she was very… she's a good girl, you know, she's really lively and again, she's very inventive in her ideas and so we worked

together very well and I wrote the script and she went over it with me. But it was a strange film. Su in fact said it was from that film that he got all his commercials, that was the first time. It was, I don't know, we went over the top I think on our ideas, but it was just the beginning I suppose of things happening, it was early sixties. And we had a presenter, which was unusual, but we had this huge soufflé sort of rising up behind him, and it was a fun film and it was meant to be, it was meant to just encourage English women to look at food and look at spices and look at oils and, you know, sixties was a pretty dire time for the food industry here. I mean in terms of, you know, over-cooked vegetables and things. I think this just somehow was to try and lift people out of that and we used a lot of trick work, a lot of it we worked out ourselves again, Su and I. But it was the first time too we had the 9.8, I remember, that was one of the first documentaries to use the wide angle, you know, and the fisheye, but it was mainly the 9.8 which I fell in love with, you know, and shot through aquariums and things in restaurants with the chef. It was just great fun and a lot of loving people. I mean people who cook I think really are loving people in their own way, they're all sort of nice and fat and floppy, you know. I just… we were just given a free hand with that film. It was the Gas Council who sponsored it and we were just allowed to do anything and we did anything, you know, we saw would be right for the film. So that was really the other side, the other extreme from the *Never Go With Strangers* and the alcohol films and things.

Did you get any other follow-up on Never Go With Strangers, *other than the one from the Chief…*

Just the Scottish Health Education Film Unit, because of that film, asked me to make these films about children, discussion points for children on love and communication, you know, not teaching films, but they were very open-ended, they were just fifteen minute films, open-ended.

In synch this was?

In synch, yes. And again, I had a group, a basic group of teenagers whom I used as my sort of main characters, a group of four and then peripheral. And again, had a very good relationship with them. In fact one of them sort of adopted me as her surrogate mother, turned up pregnant, you know, [laughter] the usual thing. But it was again a nice

relationship and they were very good sponsors, I mean they were tough but they were very…

Glaswegians were they?

No, the actual… I made it in Glasgow but my committee was in Edinburgh, that was the… mainly schoolteachers and educationalists of various sorts.

But the kids, where were the kids from?

Glasgow, yes, they were Glasgow. Yes, yes. Natural actors I think. I don't know why, I sort of always think about Glasgow and Calcutta as being sort of similar, you know, sort of very, in many ways low on the sort of economic and living scale of, you know, the enjoyment of life, but they enjoy life in their own way, both Bengalis and…

PdN: We had an incredible sort of crossover in Glasgow actually, because Sara was making her anti-alcohol film, one you made on anti-alcohol didn't you? I was at the same time shooting a film sort of for public relations for White Horse whisky, and the two units crossed in Glasgow just for one night. So Sara and I had a night together.

And all got drunk I expect. [laughter] Tell us about the anti-alcohol films.

They were painful to make and painful to research. I hadn't realised…

Who were they for?
Again, the Scottish Health Education people.

What, through the COI or…

No, directly. They had a very, at the time, a fairly large budget, they did, they did sponsor quite a number of not educational, but films for schools. And the alcohol film…

They were made for schoolchildren?

They were made for schoolchildren. But they were, you know, we decided right from the start that we weren't going to use actors, so it meant that to show what was happening in the streets of everywhere – we didn't stick to Glasgow in that.

Which year was this, sorry? Roughly.

This must have been about '70.

PdN: I was going to say about '70.

Yes, about '70. It went on for quite a long time because there were, in the end there were eleven films altogether, the three…

Were there really?

…three alcohol and then the…

I'm sorry, I interrupted. You were saying the streets.

Well, we'd decided we couldn't use actors, it just wouldn't gel. And so we did a lot of sort of chasing around the streets after drunk people and it was unpleasant, you know. I mean there but for the grace of God, let's face it, you know, go me and several people.

[1:00:13]
Young people who were drinking?

No, these were the older people, it was really to show the… they also did the young people, but it was mainly the people just, ordinary people just lurching around in the streets and falling and collapsing.

And you shot actual drunks then?

Mm, mm. Horrible thing to do.

PdN: That was my one night in Glasgow, in fact I went out as second unit for Sara and her second cameraman and the technique was to drive in a sliding sided van, you'd get out with your cameraman and someone with two hand battery lights and if you decided it was interesting, you'd say 'Okay' and the camera would start straightaway and the lights would come on straightaway and as the mob sort of swore at you or the drunk started lurching towards you, you'd leap into the van and away.

Not very nice! [laughter]

PdN: And occasionally we did this little group with a man lying on the street and I was just about to say, 'Alright, go', when in fact I saw that he had a large knife sticking out of his back, was dead. I thought he was dead drunk.

Glasgow was pretty rough wasn't it?

PdN: It sort of the only dead I've seen out of wartime things.

I mean did you have any trouble clearing the copyright on the… or the permissions, or did you just…

No, we just, I mean that was up to the… they said just go ahead, the Scottish health people. But it made the point, you know, I mean sort of grandmothers, people who looked like grandmothers, sort of losing everything, their dignity and everything. And it wasn't pleasant, it wasn't pleasant.

But important.

But important, yes. I don't think it's… in fact one of the terrible things we were told when I was doing the recce, in fact Peter drove me around, he'd often do this when I was on a recce, Wales or Scotland, Peter would just drive me round and come with me, but we went to see a man who had spent a long time in the Strathclyde area trying to get the pubs to accept women, instead of having it as a tiny little parlour in which all the women were shoved, and giving up the sort of sawdust and spit image and trying to get them to take man and wife and let them come and drink together, because they thought that way there'd

be a kind of break. In fact the results were appalling, in fact the women were drinking as much as the men. When they did a kind of analysis they found that the drunk drinking incidents had just gone and doubled, and that was very painful for this poor man who'd been struggling so long, and at last got it through and then found he'd made the situation worse. I'm sure a few years and then it would have eased off, but I don't know if he was given a chance for those few years.

That couldn't have been a more difficult film to make than films about drunks in Glasgow.

No, I think that was, certainly one felt very guilty. We had Martin… I can't remember his name. The first one I did had Englishmen with me, a whole English crew, but the other two I had Eddie McConnell, you know, up in Glasgow, and that was much better because he talked to people in their own voices and tongue. But it was unpleasant. I couldn't believe it though. One of the pubs allowed us in with our cameras and they opened at five at that time, and we sort of had all the lights set up and everything, the cameraman and I had worked out our various signals. And he said that the barman said he must have all those cables cleared before five o'clock. We thought, you know, well there'll be a trickle, and so we sort of did it because he asked us to do it, we didn't think we had that much rush on it, but five o'clock and the place was packed! They just came whooshing through the doors, there was a sort of queue outside, you know, waiting for the doors to open. I found a lot of it very strange, you know, the children and talking about crawling home on their hands and knees after they'd been given sherries by Auntie this, that and the other at Hogmanay. We had to disguise, you know, just use silhouettes for a lot of them, who talked about their drink problems. It was frightening, frightening.

It sounds like it. Most difficult things to make, I should have thought. Well, did you get any feedback from them on their showing?

Not a lot, no, I didn't. When I went up for the other eight films, which was a couple of years later, they were still showing them, but I don't know what they thought.

They were showing them in schools?

In schools, yes. And I gather at parents-teachers' meetings too, which was quite an interesting…

The other eight films?

They were just on discussion points, they were the open-ended ones.

On drink?

No, they were totally… they were on love, communication, parents' points of view. I can't remember the other four, but they were that kind of…

What kind of length were they?

Fifteen minutes, ten to fifteen, and they were for the teacher to trigger discussion, the teacher would pick up points. And, you know, the points of view, one of the classic things which… I did a lot of interviewing, I interviewed about 500 children, just to get their ideas on it, you know, not to…

What, on film or on…

No, on tape and then had terrible transcripts which the poor… some of the accents were so strong, I couldn't understand half of what the Glaswegian boys were saying, you know, I used to have to sort of try and make up my mind what the next question was. But they spoke very well, very honestly, just on tape. Obviously once the cameras come in they tend to be a little bit more inhibited. But the kind of thing, as one girl said, which always stuck in my mind, was my parents always nag, nag, nag me about coming home late and coming home late, but she said, you know, I'd be very worried if they stopped. She said at least I know somebody's caring, you know. And I thought that kind of thing is a good trigger for discussion in a group. So, you know, I enjoyed my time in Glasgow.

Did you ever go and see them in the classroom when the films were finished?

No, they would show them only with the children. I would like to have, but... it was just impossible, you know, I just went straight off on to another project and…

This was one of the problems, wasn't it, you know, people didn't follow up and see what happened.

They were. I saw long ago in *Always Say No to Strangers* - awkward title but there'd already been an American one called *Never Go with Strangers*, I saw that in the classroom - I was extremely ashamed of myself because I had in this child, the sequence of the child who had accepted a lift, I had her in some dark room, you know, and a shadow which, to be menacing and get it over to small children rapidly, sort of grew enormous, and at the end of it a little boy, about seven, said, 'But I thought shadows grew smaller'. They're right, you know, it was a cheat and I felt so annoyed with myself. A kiddie of seven sitting there, and I said to him, 'You're absolutely right, and I'm sorry, but I was trying to make a point quickly', you know. Very nifty child, he'll go far. The last few films I've made in my career, you know, apart from the leprosy one, were not really terribly interesting. I mean, you know, when I retired I retired partly because of my arthritis, but also because I sort of knew that [clock chiming] I'd lost something and you don't want to go on feeling that you're not giving, you're not doing what you…

When did you finally give up then?

The last film was the leprosy one, I shot it in '84 and after that had been completed, that was it. I had a phone call only about six months ago to ask if I'd make a film on racial harassment. I thought, oh God. I said, look, I can't direct any more, really my knees are crippled and I just couldn't do it. And he said, well would you consider writing a treatment. So I said well yes, I'd do that, I'd like to do that, and I had a weekend to do it in, but it was again, he sent me, the government sent me people to talk to and I got it to him. But that was pleasing, that's the kind of thing I'd love to do, I enjoy the writing anyway so that was a great pleasure. But it didn't come to anything. We both agreed, the producer and I, that we must put something in about the fact that coloured people tend to think the police are 'agin' them, and it was for all Indian communities and, you know, West Indian communities, the film. So perhaps that was the reason it was dropped.

[1:10:18]
Going back, how did you get on, did you break off to have children?

I was back working after about six months after my first one and, you know, we had au pairs and people, but mostly at that time it was writing, you know, I was doing…

PdN: And editing.

And editing. No, no, that was after the second one I became an editor, I went to the Coal Board and that's where I obviously met Ralph Elton, and he produced, Rodney Giesler directed and I edited, we made a sort of team which was… and again, thoroughly enjoyed. It was a good, it was a good team, I was very fond of Rodney and Ralph and we did well together and it was rather sad, but I decided I wanted to go back, and Karel Reisz in fact suggested me for the *Birthright* film with the Family Planning Association. He'd been asked if he'd do it and he said no, but I suggest Sara Erulkar, so that was my comeback into directing again.

Tell us about that one.

[laughter] Apart from the sperm title background, it's very difficult to know where to start on that one.

It was family planning was it?

It was family planning and we were, it was based on sort of three or four women who - I mean real women, not actors, again, we didn't use actors - and their problems, you know, based on children. We had, we made a set-up, we knew a family living near here. Kay Wright, do you know? Kay Wright?

Yes, gosh yes.

Well, her basement she turned into a slum and her children were very, very small, obviously Martin was about fifteen then I suppose, and we threw in my youngest daughter, who was then eighteen months and we wanted her to be crying, you know, so we ripped

her ballerina petticoat off her just as the cameras turned and she did a load of yelling that we needed and again, her children were very good. We used that, but that was the only set-up we actually did. Apart from that everybody we filmed were in their real homes and their real situations and it…

PdN: My chief recollection of that film for me is someone squashing out a cigarette butt in a…

A fried egg.

PdN: A fried egg. Eugh!

That was Kay Wright, that was Kay Wright.

Why did they squash out a…

PdN: Heaven knows.

Well, it was, funnily enough, her own idea. She was sort of doing this cooking, you know how she could, with all her hair all over the place, and she just suddenly turned round and did this, got into the part, sort of thing and it was… it's a long time ago you see, my daughter who was then eighteen months is now thirty-five, so it's an awfully long time ago. But it was shown all over the Middle East, which was surprising, and in India. I kept on getting… that's where I got a lot of comebacks, you know, from people in India that I met who had seen it. Apart from that I, you know, does that one really… It was just a very straightforward film.

PdN: Kay Wright stopped me in the street the other day and said, 'You don't know who I am'. I said, 'Yes I do'. And she said, 'How's Pierrette?' I said, 'She's a mother of twins and another one'. I recognised her perfectly well, you know. How long ago was it? Twenty-five years or something?

No, no.

Ooh, must be, must be.

Thirty years. I mean Pierrette's thirty-five, as I was saying, yeah. But, you know, this thing about having children, it's very difficult. When I first had Siri I was, I thought I'd give up, you know. I did, I mean it's all I wanted to do, was to make films and it was very hard, but Peter was the one who came right down and said no way, he said that I married a film director and you're going to stay a film director. [laughter] No…

PdN: The thing that we're very proud of in our marriage is that we both had very kind of, if you like, friendly production people, mine were quite a lot the same as Sara's, some different, but we managed until the kids were fifteen never to, not one or other of us be home to put them to bed. We would swap, split editing and actual shooting so that there'd always be one or other of us home.

But let's be honest, my elder daughter who's thirty-eight, she's not sure whether it was the right thing, and that's painful, you know, because in a sense we were sort of… I mean everybody disapproved of me, I mean Sally Mason [ph], Ilona [ph] Suschitzky, you know, they thought I was terrible and it was quite a struggle. Peter had to take on a lot more than, in those days, the usual father role, he had to be mother as well. But it was, I'm not sure, you know. When Siri said this, and sort of felt that perhaps it would have been better for the children if I had…

Might have been worse.

It might have been worse with all the frustration, yes. [laughter]

Especially with mothers and daughters.

And the thing is, there's no doubt that you come back sometimes, you know, you really do want to swing the cat and beat up a few kids, you know. [laughter] I don't think I actually did, but I think a lot of that kind of, when you've had a bad day shooting or whatever, or a meeting and you come back and you really, they must have felt it and they couldn't have not felt it. So I'm not sort of very sure, I'm very disturbed by it now, after so many years.

Don't we all have our doubts about whether we did the right thing or not?

Yes, but when the children start to say them [laughter], you know you…

I think that's the children's privilege isn't it?

Yes, yes.

PdN: It may be a good thing that the children are able to say that thing.

Yes. No, I think so, yes. My children say much worse things about me than that, so… [laughter]

I think it is a strain though, having two people, not so much on the working side, but we were successful in our jobs, you know, and I think it does that, that is very difficult, you know, really. I mean you must have found that too.

Yes.

That there is a kind of pressure on them to sort of compete.

PdN: Well, it's, if you like, it's the two roles competing isn't it? You know, it's the mother instinct and if you like, the professional instinct competing.

Yes. And which one wins.

PdN: Yes, that's right. Yes, yes.

Shall we have a pause?

PdN: Yes.

[1:17:49 recording ends]