three or four weeks into shooting you might compromise on a scene, just to get home. And it's nice to have a small voice saying, don't you remember six months ago when you told me about this scene, you told me you were going to do that and don't you think it would be good to... So it's almost like a conscience, and that's something I find quite valuable.

Do you work from a storyboard when you're shooting?

No, I can't draw, so it really boils down to a relationship with the cameraman which is established in the weeks before the shoot. Usually I've just one rule of thumb, which is to try to make the camera serve the action, not the actors per se, but the action. I just try to use the camera to reveal the action and to serve it, rather than be emphatic in any way. I think that because of over-emphatic acting style and overemphatic camera style the audience's options become limited, and they have been asked to do less and less work. I would hate to be accused of trying to manipulate an audience into one or other emotion at any one time.

The nicest thing anyone could say to me about Local Hero is, I saw your movie last week and I'm still thinking about it and I might even go and see it again, because there were one or two things I was thinking about that I want to check out. That means the audience are really working hard and I think that's wonderful. They are the film in that sense. And when I've seen it with a large audience, say about a thousand people, then I can sense that happening: one or two people kind of giggle at something and no one else will and then someone at the back will start laughing at nothing in particular, which means that they're all sitting there churning it over themselves. I think that's wonderful, I really do. Makes me feel good when that happens.

Producing the goods

Verity Lambert's rise from being a £7-a-week secretary at Granada Television (from which she was fired) to Head of Production at Thorn-EMI reads almost like a Hollywood script. Recruited by Sydney Newman, she became, at 27, the BBC's youngest producer. During her time with the Corporation, she produced Dr Who, a series of Somerset Maugham stories, The Newcomers and Adam Adamant. Moving to London Weekend Television, she was responsible for, among others, Budgie and Between the Wars, before returning to the BBC to produce Shoulder to Shoulder.

In 1974, she was appointed Head of Drama at Thames Television, where she initiated many of the most influential television series of the last decade. Between her Thames role and her later role as Chief Executive of Euston Films (a wholly owned subsidiary of Thames Television), she initiated Rock Follies, Bill Brand, Edward and Mrs Simpson, Danger UXB, Out, Fox, Minder, Widows and the much acclaimed Naked Civil Servant. The current projects with which she is involved include, as well as some one-off films, Reilly, a Troy Kennedy Martin series, directed by Jim Goddard and Martin Campbell; The Nation's Health, directed by Les Blair; and a fourth series of Minder.

In October 1982, she was appointed Head of Production at Thorn-EMI, retaining her Euston job but relinquishing that at Thames. At Thorn-EMI, she has creative responsibility for all EMI film production and has indicated a desire to increase the number of indigenous films produced by the company. The two years preceding Verity Lambert's appointment had not been profitable for EMI. Barry Spikings, then Chairman and Chief Executive of EMI Films, gambled on mega-budgeted films geared towards the American market. In May 1980, he had announced a $110m production programme, of which $40m was to be spent
on two films, Can't Stop the Music and Honky Tonk Freeway. Both were commercial failures and Spikings left Thorn-EMI in December 1982. Verity Lambert has the ticklish task of proving to the company that a more balanced programme of low to medium-budgeted films can be successful. Given her dynamism and her extraordinary television record, her appointment is a propitious augury for the future of the British film industry.

LYNDA MYLES: Your early career in television drama was during a particularly exciting period under Sydney Newman.

VERITY LAMBERT: Sydney really did change the face of British television drama. Before there had been those rather nice stage plays which had been reworked for television. Sydney came straight in with social realism and overnight changed the way people looked at and accepted television drama. I worked mostly for Ted Kotcheff, who taught me a great deal, an excellent director of actors with a very good visual sense.

You’ve never been afraid of controversy. Does that stem from this period? Possibly. But I also believe that the essence of good drama is conflict of one kind or another. I never thought of The Naked Civil Servant, for example, as controversial. The subject was controversial, but I felt that the screenplay was extremely enlightening about homosexuality. Given the people who were to be involved, such as the director Jack Gold, I felt it would be done in such a way that it wouldn’t be controversial. In fact we had very few letters of complaint, probably fewer than the News or Crossroads.

At Euston Films, you were in charge of both film and television drama.

I had a curious progression. First, I was in charge of television drama, which was mainly tape with film inserts. Then I did both. Then I went to Euston and did only film drama. That really involved drama series, although we did make The Sailor's Return, Charlie Muffin, The Knowledge and Quatermass, a four-part series later edited into a single film.

How distinct did you find film and television? In terms of the writer's role, it's very different. I think that the writer's role in film is important, but in television or the theatre the writer's words can be sacrosanct. In film, the tendency is to get a screenplay and then to alter it. That tendency arises since film is a visual medium and film directors very often have very little respect for the text. The attitude towards the soundman in film is very interesting. All the emphasis is on the cameraman and the soundman is almost like an afterthought.

At the moment you are both Head of London Weekend Television's Budgie (1971): Joe Gladwin, Adam Faith.

Production at Thorn-EMI and Chief Executive of Euston Films. Do you intend to continue to do both? I shall stay at Euston until the end of this year, and hope to continue in association with the company thereafter. It's early days to tell if I can do both.

Is it still your intention, as you announced earlier, to make six films a year at Thorn-EMI? Well, that's what I would like. But I think it's going to be difficult, not because the money isn't there, but because it takes so much time to get an idea into production. We are in fact shooting one film now that was in development when I arrived and which we progressed [Slagyard, scripted by Trevor Preston, directed by Terry Bedford, starring Peter Coyote]. But in terms of the projects we're going to develop ourselves, they're just not going to be ready to shoot this year. We have been inundated with scripts and packages, but I'm determined not to make anything I don't feel strongly about. I'll take a leaf out of David Puttnam's book, because I think he has had a great deal of commitment to every film he's made.

What sort of budgets are you likely to have? I never like to say five or six projects on budgets of $8m, which was what I first said, as these statements tend to come back to you on a tablet of stone. I would like to be flexible, and any budget will be considered up to about $10m. We could finance that ourselves, but anything over that would require co-production money. I favour making medium-budget films, around $6m or $7m, or even some costing a great deal less. I don't think something has to cost a great deal of money to be good.

How committed are you to the idea of a British cinema? I want somehow to redress the balance between Britain and America. Although two of the projects I'm keen on making are American, we do have another English subject in development. It's called Illegal Aliens, is written by Griff Rhys Jones and Mel Smith, and will be produced by Barrie Hanson. I hope that we'll start shooting this year. I'd like to think that we'll find another two British subjects, which would mean that the two American subjects would be balanced by four British, rather than the other way round, as it has been previously.

Given that Britain represents only four per cent of the world market, how far must you gear your projects to the American audience? I think you must find a subject which may be British, but has some quality of universality about it; it should have the ability to stretch out in the way that, say, Chariots of Fire and Gandhi do, although they are both patently British films. If you are going to make films which cost $6m or $7m, you are going to have to find subject matter which transcends the barriers—and there's no reason why that shouldn't happen. I've discovered over the last six months, however, that it would be easier for me to find three or four good screenplays in America than to find them here. I think that's because over the years the British film industry has been so crippled that writers and directors have got out of the habit of
thinking in terms of the big screen. They think very well for the small screen or for the small movie. But I believe it's going to take a little longer to get subjects from Britain into development. The energy is going to have to come from us; we will have to be activators rather than receivers.

In terms of the future of the British film industry, how much reality do you think there is behind the rhetoric surrounding the Oscar successes?

As an optimist, I can only look at it positively. Thorn-EMI, for example, are putting up money to make films. If I can prove to them that the film industry is viable and profit-making rather than loss-making, then they will continue to support it. I think this is quite marvellous and remarkable, given the huge losses they sustained over the last two years.

That's a very good thing, but that's only one area. This kind of support has to be carried out in the independent sector and into the City. The only way you can do that is to say, 'Look, British films can make money and they can be accepted abroad. We have excellent people here who are recognised outside this country.' A film like the Oscar-winning short A Shocking Accident [directed by James Scott, produced by Christine Oestreicher], which was partly financed by the National Film Finance Corporation, should be used as a flagship to persuade the Government that they must support the film industry in the grant-aided sector. I think that the NFPC's feature-making programme should be supported also. If support is withdrawn from that, it's an absolute crime. The BFI Production Board must also be supported, because it's from those two areas that a lot of our young directors will emerge.

You recently resigned from the Chairmanship of the BFI Production Board. How did you feel initially about joining the Board? I felt I was going to learn a lot. I spoke to David Puttnam about it, and he suggested that I ought to join for that reason. I knew that I was going to come into contact with people who had much more academic knowledge of film than me, since I came from a straightforward teach-yourself commercial area. I thought it was going to be rather interesting, but I was a bit nervous as well. Sometimes you think things are rubbish as a way of protecting yourself, so I tried very hard to submerge that part of my personality and to view things without a jaundiced eye.

Do you support the Directors' Guild argument for a new fund for British filmmaking?

In principle I do. But I don't think that they are going to raise enough money from that kind of levy. I'm much more in favour of the Association of Independent Producers' view, which is that there ought to be some kind of levy on tape, because I think that will produce the much larger revenue which is required.

Do you believe that much can be done to halt the collapse of cinema audiences in Britain?

First, we could publicise films much more effectively. At the moment, it's often very hard to find out what's showing and how long it lasts. In America, every single local paper runs a comprehensive guide to cinemas, and the times of performances. We don't really encourage people to go to the cinema here. We don't let them book seats in advance, for example. There seems to be a brand of people who want to work on front-of-house who quite enjoy seeing others queuing in the rain and who then get a big kick out of telling them that the house is full.

The cinemas themselves often leave a lot to be desired in terms of cleanliness and the way they've been maintained. You sometimes feel that you take your life in your hands when you go into the cinema, and money has to be spent on decorating cinemas and making them more attractive. Most cinemas were built forty or fifty years ago and should be replaced. There should be pressure on councils to ensure that, when they approve a shopping mall, for example, this should include a prominent, multiscreen cinema, as is the case in America. I grew up when there were three cinema chains, and I went three times a week to the cinema. Admittedly, there wasn't any television then, but I loved the cinema. Unfortunately, I don't think that most people who run cinemas have woken up to the fact that television exists—it's as if they're living in some kind of time warp.

When you were at Euston Films, you initiated several interesting genre series, like the gangster series Out. Is this an area you particularly liked?

Yes, I did enjoy them. What drew me to Out was the writing and the relationship between the two obsessive characters who were in conflict. I didn't really think of it as a gangster movie as such, but rather as a compelling piece of writing by Trevor Preston. I have very catholic tastes, in that I love all films when I love them. For example, I thought Raging Bull was wonderful, extraordinarily well made and acted, and terribly shocking in its kind, though normally I would have said that I didn't particularly like films about boxing. It's very hard for me to say that I like any particular kind of film. Perhaps that's a good thing as it means that I have an open mind about what comes to me.

Do you have a strong sense of what audiences want at this moment?

In a very general way, I think people want romance, optimism, comedy, entertainment. If you look at the success of films like An Officer and a Gentleman, E.T. or Gandhi, it shows that. There is a world recession, and people are going through hard times. If they can afford to go to the cinema, they don't want to be told about other people's hard times. They want to be allowed to forget and be transported for 90 minutes into something which gives them hope, like Rocky III. That's a bit simplistic, but it's the overall feeling I have.