EDITORIAL
Rebecca Coyle, Forever Heard

Mark Evans

I first worked with Rebecca Coyle in 1997. She was a lecturer in the Media department at Macquarie University and I was a first time tutor. I was appointed to work for her in a course called ‘Media in the Asia-Pacific Region’. Who would have thought that within a decade Rebecca would be the world-leading authority in one aspect of that regional media studies we were teaching, notably Australian screen sound, and the founder of the journal we now read.

As a first-time tutor working for Rebecca, two things stood out: her generosity and her tools of critique. I believe these two aspects became markers of her entire academic career. To begin with the former, Rebecca was always remarkably generous in all aspects of life. For me professionally that was evident back in 1997. As a new tutor one expected then (and probably still today) to be thrown into the deep end and left to fend, as best you could, for yourself. I doubt such a possibility ever crossed Rebecca’s mind. She produced more materials for me than for the students, and would meet with me every week to go through the course materials (that she had meticulously prepared) I was to deliver that week. She was always busy—every great academic always is—but I was never made to feel an imposition. Every meeting felt like it was the most important thing she had on that week (and imagine how far from the truth that was!) That semester in 1997 remains the most formative moment in my own learning and teaching history. Years later I had the pleasure of working with Rebecca on the course ‘Screen Sound’ and was delighted to see nothing had changed in her approach and generous collegial spirit.

Rebecca’s generous spirit flowed into her research and is evident through much of her corpus of work. For instance, she sought out industry and pursued the voice of the practitioner at a time when the professional/academic divide was worse than it is now. From her earliest forays into screen sound studies she involved herself (actively) in groups such as the Australian Guild of Screen Composers, was a regular at industry forums, and formed genuine relationships with soundtrack personnel. Rebecca knew these voices were important. One of the phrases I remember hearing the most from Rebecca as we discussed research ideas and projects together was, ‘Have you spoken to xyz yet? Let me get you their number’. She treated those voices from outside the academy generously, ensured they were heard, and ensured they fed into critical discourse within the academy. This refrain runs throughout her work, from her PhD dissertation to her scholarship on topics as diverse as the films of Yahoo Serious, and individual features such as Lantana to The Lion King. It is a feature of all her edited volumes, and a strong determinant in the construction of this journal. The structure of Screen Sound Journal itself allowed for different voices to be heard, different forms of academic presentation to occur, as noted on the homepage:
The journal has three sections:

i. Double blind referee section with articles of 4,000–8,000 words.
ii. Single referee edited section with industry reports, edited interview transcripts, feature reviews up to 5,000 words.
iii. Edited, non-refereed section of reviews, reports, responses and reprints of seminal reports, debate items, up to 3,000 words.

http://www.screensoundjournal.org

Such a structure in an era of ERA (Excellence in Research Australia), journal rankings, and a focus on (rather traditional) impact factors shows both courage and integrity. In the very first issue of this journal Rebecca was keen to ensure all audiences were catered for: “This debut issue of an online, open access journal addresses both the global network and the specific interest group of ‘soundies’ situated in a variety of disciplines and locations” (Coyle, 2010: 7).

The other voice Rebecca always generously lauded was that of the early career researcher. Rebecca took a chance on a wide-eyed naïve scholar and helped me publish my first book chapter in 1998. The assistant editors of this journal are a glowing reference for Rebecca’s tutorage and support, as are the many early career academics who have published in Screen Sound in its first few issues.

Rebecca was very rightly proud of Screen Sound, its mission and the success it enjoyed from its first issues. What is perhaps less well-known is that the impetus for the journal flowed directly from Rebecca’s successful ARC Discovery Project grant, DP0770026 ‘Music production and technology in Australian film: enabling Australian film to embrace innovation’ (2007–2010), awarded to Rebecca Coyle, Michael Hannan and Philip Hayward. That such a nationally prestigious research grant should be awarded in the area of film music is also testimony to the dedicated ground work that Rebecca and the rest of the team had put in for years prior. I particularly note Philip Hayward here, Rebecca’s partner and long-term collaborator in so many areas. It is no surprise we find Phil’s partner article to the Red Curtain Trilogy in this issue. Here he is again, bouncing his work off Rebecca’s, blending and melding ideas together, and working in partnership to produce a thoroughly enlightening article. What is surprising is that he could produce such work at such a time as this. Then again, what a fitting tribute to such a glorious partnership.

Standing alongside this generosity of spirit was Rebecca’s determination to be critically engaged in her subject. For her this questioning was comprehensive, considering soundtracks from multiple entry points, with the objective clarity to succinctly point out deficiencies and issues. We see this from Screen Scores, with her piece on the popular Yahoo Serious films (‘Sonic Semaphore’). Unclouded by Serious’s charismatic, comedic ramblings, or the insights from esteemed composer Martin Armiger, Rebecca was able to synthesise many voices, many projections of nationalism and ultimately arrive at the rather jarring conclusion that, “Despite their apparent ‘unaffectedness’, Australian music soundtracks are neither ‘young’ nor ‘reckless’ but increasingly the product of hard-edged industrial determinants—however mediated by authorial vision” (Coyle, 1998: 160).

Rebecca’s critical contextualisation of subjects meant that numerous outcomes were always possible. Whether that be a detailed musicological analysis of a
cartoon which revealed that “cultural ‘grey-out’ and/or blandness do not necessarily result from international collaborations enabled by Hollywood, particularly if... careful attention is paid to the blending and synergy of the distinctive production practices of the collaborating creative agencies” (Coyle and Morris, 2010: 204), or considered ethnographic research that pointed out the “lack of auteurial closure in terms of Lantana’s sound track” (Coyle, 2005: 173); the richness of critique never failed to produce engaging, and sometimes startling, conclusions. How fitting then, that this issue contains Rebecca’s magnificent article on Baz Luhrmann’s Red Curtain Trilogy. Here we read the breadth of Rebecca’s critical contextualisation and her ability to synthesise multiple readings of multiple films into one compelling argument.

It was incredibly, incredibly sad to lose Rebecca when we did. No doubt many of us will struggle with that for a long time. There is some solace, however, in her legacy of generosity and critique. There is the impetus to continue our various research projects with that same generosity to our subjects and our subject matter that Rebecca would have held. There is the imperative to uphold the discourse of critique that made Rebecca’s work so valuable and pioneering. As we saw with Screen Scores, risks need to be taken to advance the academy, but unless they are grounded in deep, considered, contextual critique they will advance nothing.

We honour the work of Rebecca with this issue of her own journal, Screen Sound Journal. We celebrate the future that her work has created. We acknowledge the many careers that have been formed and guided because of her.

And finally, I want to reiterate what a privilege it has been to call Rebecca a colleague, mentor and friend. Vale Rebecca Coyle, 11 November 2012.

Mark Evans, Macquarie University

References


