

This Melbourne movie buff's book is a love letter to film culture

By Tom Ryan

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CINEMA

Melbourne and the Movies: Confessions of a Certified Cinephile

Ross Campbell

MM Publishers, \$39.95

Anyone who's attended the Melbourne International Film Festival during the past 50 years, or a screening at the Erwin Rado Theatre in Johnston Street, or viewed any of the films made by the state Education Department's AVEC Unit will be familiar with Ross Campbell's work. They mightn't recognise him on sight or even know his name, but he's been a significant behind-the-scenes player in local film culture for what seems like forever.

My abiding memory of him is of an always courteous and gentle man unobtrusively mingling with the audience in the foyer following a screening. He's emerged from the bio box, the engine room for the event from where the films are projected, the focus is sharpened, the sound levels are adjusted, and the lighting is controlled. And with the show over, he's checking to ensure that nothing went amiss. Probably the only way to distinguish him from the crowd is the amiable, mission-accomplished smile he wears when everything's gone to plan; or the agonised frown when he knows that something – even the tiniest blemish – has marred the presentation. For it's far more than a job to him. It's a loving embrace of the medium of the movies, the art form that has been his life-long obsession.

Now he's written a beautiful book about it, stepping out of the shadows and into the spotlight, placing us alongside him as he pursues his passion, from a childhood spent frequenting the Camden Theatre in Caulfield and other cinemas in the Brighton-Elwood area, to an adulthood that sees him chasing the flickering magic around the world.

Superbly presented and abundantly illustrated, *Melbourne and the Movies* is partially a glossy memoir about Campbell's life as "a certified cinephile". But it's also an unofficial history of Melbourne's film culture from the filming of the Melbourne Cup in 1896 to the present day. It remembers the way we were, watching movies at single-screen cinemas in the city and the suburbs, and reflects on what's been lost, and gained, along the way. It features a cast of hundreds, including local and international filmmakers he's admired over the years and a heady roll call of Melburnians who have played important roles in establishing the city as – in the words of film and theatre historian Frank Van Straten's foreword – "Australia's motion picture capital".

Campbell, who originally trained as a teacher, looks back on his numerous adventures making films for AVEC, a previously unwritten history that begins in 1970 with *All My Own Work*. Imagine my astonishment when I turned the page to discover two stills of my retired-headmaster-father playing the role of an authoritarian art teacher for Ross's camera. Ross knew nothing of the connection; I only vaguely remember Dad wryly holding forth about finally hitting the big screen. And, like me, anybody involved in Melbourne's film culture will find numerous points of intersection with the people who populate Campbell's story and the places with whom their names have become inseparable.

There's Hungarian expatriate Erwin Rado, who brought an elegant effervescence to his role as director of the Melbourne Film Festival (as it was originally known); Ed Schefferle, the tireless acquisitions officer at the State Film Centre which distributed Campbell's films; George Florence, who made the art deco Astor a picture palace to remember; *The Age*'s Colin Bennett, *The Sun*'s and Channel 7's Ivan Hutchinson and *The Herald*'s Keith Connolly who brought an engagingly distinctive wisdom and wit to their commentaries about film; *The Age*'s Jake Wilson, who's impressively followed in their footsteps; John C. Murray, the trailblazing lecturer in film appreciation at Coburg Teachers' College who inspired a generation of students (including me); Richard Franklin, fellow cinephile, filmmaker (*Roadgames*, *Hotel Sorrento*, *Psycho II*, etc.) and drummer for The Pink Finks; Paul Harris and John Flaus, inimitable both, on 3RRR's *Film Buffs' Forecast* and many more.

With the ardour of a true cinephile, Campbell also recounts his pilgrimages: to Cannes; to Jean Cocteau's home on the Côte d'Azur; to the screening of Abel Gance's restored *Napoleon* (1927), featuring a score written and conducted by Carl Davis, at the Royal Opera House in London in 2000; to the first Nitrate Film Festival at George Eastman House in Rochester in upstate New York in 2016.

Perhaps best of all are his infectiously exciting accounts of his own work putting together scores for the screenings of restored silent classics such as Carl Theodor Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1927), for which he drew on several Bruckner symphonies. Campbell, ever modest, doesn't say it, but this aspect of his work, drawing on pre-existing compositions, places him in the honourable tradition of the screen's great composers who would source others' music for their own scores.

As Van Straten observes in his foreword, Campbell is both an astute observer of and a respected contributor to Melbourne's film culture. More than that, though, what he has to say takes us inside the ways in which cinemas everywhere and the films shown inside them serve the possibilities of community (locally and globally) in ways never dreamt of in town halls or council offices.

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