

Who's Who in the Shroud World

David Rolfe

Mention the words "Silent Witness" and anybody with even the remotest interest in the Shroud will know exactly what you are talking about. The documentary by David Rolfe was the first introduction to the subject for many people in the late 1970's, myself included, when we were taken from school to see the film at a local cinema in Leeds. The story of how the documentary came to be is fascinating, and was told to me by David in the venue office this summer at the Edinburgh Festival. But first, a quick look at his background.

Rolfe received his honours diploma in Film Technique from The London International Film School. He went on to become a freelance director/producer, with credits including "Panorama", BBC1; "Gorbachov's 5th Anniversary Event" for Newsnight; "Fight Again" for BBC2; many programmes for blue chip companies and TV commercials for Seiko Watches amongst others.

Whilst with Screenpro films, he was consultant to BBC Worldwide setting up Drama Co-productions in Australia; BAFTA winner for Best Documentary "Silent Witness – An Investigation into the Shroud of Turin" BBC1 & 2; Producer of the main title sequences, cinema trailers, and TV commercials for Paramount Pictures London including: "The Great Gatsby", "A Dolls House", "That Funny Touch", "The Last Tycoon", "Triple Echo", "Sutjeska", "Rachel's Man" and "Butterfly Ball". He also set up Middle-East film service for a consortium of contractors.

As senior partner of the Performance Group, he established, produced and directed Performance Coaching programmes for The Woolwich, Barclays, NatWest, Motorola, Zeneca and others; He was series producer of "Wild Islands" 26 for STV, H4C and RTE; produced "Postcards from the Country" for BBC Natural History Unit; and took the feature CLONE to The Cannes Film Festival.

As senior producer/director for LWT/ITV, his credits include: "Weekend World", "Credo", "20th Century Box", "The London Programme", "The Walden Interviews", "Jesus - The Evidence", "6 O'clock show", "Thatcher Years", "ITV Telethon" and many others. In 2000 he temporarily left the world of television to develop another project – a fold-away sailing boat called the clamboat. It quite literally folds up into a small box and can then be towed by car. Details are available at www.clamboat.com. He is currently producer for Impulse TV Ltd where he is responsible for developing theatrical and TV projects.

Now back to the Silent Witness. Looking for a project to really get his teeth into, David had set up a company whose aim was to gather together scripts for documentaries and then sell the best ones to producers. This was of course a much slower and more laborious undertaking in pre-Internet days than it would be with today's communication technologies. A budding young journalist from Bristol, Ian Wilson, sent in a script about a subject he had been looking into. One day, while David was picking up a pile of envelopes, some papers fell onto the floor. One of them was a picture which from his experience as a professional photographer, he immediately recognised as a positive / negative image. The image was, of course, the face of the Man on the Shroud.

In spite of a professed atheism and definite anti-religious sentiments, Ian's script turned out to be the best of all of them and convinced Davis that it was a good idea for a film. He was, in his own words, eking out a living making title sequences for feature films like *The Great Gatsby*, and decided to try his hand at doing something different. He only had Ian's notes to go on, but set out to make the film himself.

One of David's other activities at the time was running film expeditions to the Persian Gulf for civil engineering companies. Stuck for eight hours in an airport in Saudi Arabia, he ended up talking to an American called Forrest and explained his project about the Shroud film. Some three months later, Forrest sent him a newspaper clipping from the *Houston Post*, the only paper that ran the story about Max Frei's pollen studies on the Shroud. This was another lead for the documentary.

Rolfe arranged a meeting with Frei in Zurich and an exclusivity agreement was signed. The project was underway. David also met John Jackson and Eric Jumper, and Fr. Rinaldi at the Holy Shroud Guild. He had started out with the idea of finding out how the Shroud had been forged, although bit by bit, Jackson's three dimensional work and the late Robert Bucklin's medical studies began to convince him that this something more than a forgery.

Now every film producer needs funds. Fr. Rinaldi managed to find half a million dollars from a private sponsor, thus converting the project into the most expensive documentary ever filmed to date (1973). The *Sunday Times* showed an interest and decided to make the Shroud their colour supplement cover story for Easter week in 1977 – it seemed that fate was smiling on the project. However, the anonymous sponsor withheld the last payment when he found out that the body on the Shroud was naked and would be portrayed as such the BBC and ITV both turned the documentary down, and suddenly David was faced with an unfinished film, little interest from the media, and no money.

It was time for a make or break decision. Personal bank loans helped finish the film and rent a room at the Picadilly Hotel in London, where the finished work would be shown to the public in a kind of makeshift cinema. After all, the story would be appearing in the Sunday Times on Easter Sunday and the first showing was set for the following day. What else could go wrong?

The answer came in one word – STRIKE. Fleet Street towards the end of the 1970's was dogged by one strike after another, and there were no newspapers at all on Easter Sunday 1977. Despondent, David went out for a walk. Imagine his surprise when at the first newspaper stand he came across, the only thing he could see was the Shroud face staring out from the Sunday Times colour supplement – it turned out that the magazine was in fact printed three weeks before the date it accompanies the newspaper, and as there was in fact no newspaper, the supplement was free! It must have been the most widely read colour supplement in history, because apart from its intrinsic interest, it was all there was available and to top it all, free.

The next day there were long queues at the Picadilly Hotel, and as they say, the rest is history. The Silent Witness even managed to outgross Saturday Night Fever for a time in London. "As a documentary filmmaker it can be a bit unnerving to realise at the age of 26 that you've just made the best film you're ever going to make. But that's what happened to me". Soon after he picked up the coveted BAFTA for best documentary in 1978 Rolfe started to try and repeat the exercise he had just completed so successfully. The money flowing in from sales of The Silent Witness meant he was able to travel the world freely looking for follow-up subjects.

Rolfe then spent two years searching for a follow up subject - another "mystery" that would benefit from his particular storytelling skills. "Everything I touched crumbled to dust in my hands", he said. "The Bermuda Triangle, Weeping Madonnas, UFO's, various apparitions of the Virgin, Bigfoot. All of these came nowhere near the levels of the genuine mystery presented by the Shroud." They entailed the filmmaker spending as much time concocting the mystery as trying to unravel it.

As an independent producer, Rolfe knew that in order to repeat his success, he had to come up with something as strong. The trouble was, there was nothing else that came close. Eventually, the money flowing in slowed down and he had to give up the search. He settled down in the comfort and security of working for LWT until he returned to the now established independent sector with his company Performance Films. The BBC had asked him to make a film about the carbon dating that had finally been sanctioned for the Shroud. Rolfe went out to Turin and began negotiations with the authorities for another "exclusive." Everything was being

prepared meticulously. The excitement and interest in the Shroud created by his film had produced an unstoppable momentum for the C14 test to be carried out.

To Rolfe's amazement, halfway through his negotiations, all the meticulous preparations for the test were set aside. "It was almost as if they didn't care any more", says Rolfe. "They just abandoned all the protocols that had been agreed with the international team of scientists, cut one sample from the corner (instead of seven from different areas), and sent it off to three arbitrarily selected laboratories (instead of blind and controlled tests to the world's leading seven laboratories). At the time, the scientists didn't protest too much as they were afraid that the Vatican – who had taken so long to agree - would cancel the test if a fuss was made.

"I returned to London with no real basis on which to make a new film. The test and results were rushed out. To the sceptical press the results were no surprise and the headlines that flew around the globe branded the Shroud as a medieval fake. And to all intents and purposes, that's how the public perception has remained."