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Edited LCVA interview
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Exploring community video: It's all about focus!

Portrait of Edward David (ED) Berman
Born 1941 in Lewiston, Maine (USA)
Lives and works in London
Founder and CEO of the Inter-Action group of charities

I grew up in the state of Maine, a town called Lewiston, which is really a French-Canadian mill town. I was born in 1941 and I had a usual small town upbringing: I played sports, I was successful in school and in the debating society. I was brought into Harvard in an early programme, and that wasn't very successful with me, I got thrown out within a year, I went back again. In my year out of Harvard I did my own little civil rights march before the civil rights movement really started, and I went through the United States, going West via the South. And that was an interesting experience because I got beaten up by the police in several states. There was no discrimination about the state I was in. They all got me because – and there's a reason for it, it wasn't totally their fault – I had a black beard and I wore a military jacket and I looked like Fidel Castro, whom I greatly admired at the time and this was not a wise idea! In fact, once I hitchhiked home from Harvard to Maine, usually it would take 3 hours – it took me 9 hours, and I told my father this and he said 'Of course you silly fool, you look like Fidel Castro, no one's going to pick you up, he's a Commie!' And I said, 'Well, what's wrong with that?' I was lucky to escape a beating, I think. Anyway, my father was born in Maine and he was a real Yankee, very strict values, very taciturn,

Well I was pretty revolting I must say! But at the time I had gone to Harvard Stadium to hear the first speech by Castro when Castro was a hero. People forget this, but he was a great hero in America for about 6 months until he left America, went back to Cuba, and then said he was a Communist.

I was very inspired by Castro but not by Communism, although I was very interested in co-operative-ism. And I had studied a course at Harvard on nineteenth-century British history and therefore came into contact with the ideas of the co-operative movement and so on. But nothing sunk in very deeply. I was a very rebellious student.

President of a national youth organisation giving speeches around the country

When I was in New York where the Headquarters was I was pretty impoverished, because there was no pay. So there was a little delicatessen around the corner, and I used to go in. And on the sideboard there was bread, and relishes, and tomato ketchup and so on. And I would go in and I would take that instead of going to the aisle to get food. I would gobble this food down and run out again. They paid for a little room, I remember it was in Queens, a borough of New York, with this little Russian lady who couldn't speak English. She didn't feed me, but she gave me a cup of tea. She gave me one tea-bag a week - she would dry it out and give it back to me the next day... But when I went on the road for this organization I was treated royally, because I was the National President. Yes it was an

interesting year. And this organization was a Zionist youth organization, and within a year I'd become an anti-Zionist. Or at least neutral on the question of Palestinians. But if you can cast your mind back to the '50s, which this was, the late '50s. Israel was very popular in the world, so I went along with it, but within a year I became very disillusioned, because I don't take anything for granted. I look at it, I study it, I ask questions. What about the Palestinians? At the time you could have said, why didn't the Arab States around absorb them? It became clear that they didn't absorb them, because they had a cause, which is still a cause today. So I had sympathy for the state of Israel, sympathy for the Palestinians. And I stopped being a Zionist at the age of 17 or so.

Back in Harvard: learning about Ghandi and late night talking

When I went back to Harvard, I was a year older but my class-mates were one year ahead of me, so there was really no connection with very many people. So I thought, where can I find people who are more worldly wise, who will sort of be nice to me? And I went to the International Student Club, where I met two Indians, one of whom was the President of the Madras Christian College, and he had come to Harvard to do his PhD before he took up his office at this prestigious Indian college. And I became very friendly with him, and I, he asked me if I would edit his dissertation, which was later published as a book on Gandhi in South Africa. So here I was, from backwards of Maine, or you know very small mill town in Maine, and had been around the United States getting banged up a few times, and having lived in these curious circumstances which I've talked about. And I was learning about Gandhi and his time in South Africa. Well that is such a broadening experience for somebody from my background, which was, you know, pretty narrow American high-school background. So that was part of my social life, another was a graduate student living in my house at Harvard. And he was a Junior Fellow, which was very prestigious, in Chinese Studies. Although his father had been a missionary in China. And he was very bright, and we would go out for Chinese meals, and he would order in Chinese, and we'd go out late at night and we'd never pay, because they were so amazed that these white guys would order in Chinese! Of course I didn't, but he did all the talking! So this was my social life really. Very late night talking to this Junior Fellow, or working on this dissertation written by this Indian fellow. And so on. It was quite unusual.

Getting into community work: A game method for co-operation and creativity

I started doing community work with Black young people in South Boston. And I went there thinking I could do something – I had nothing in common with these young people. I was one year older than they were probably. I thought OK, what are you interested in? They said music. I said OK, rhythm then - I'll clap a rhythm then, and raise my finger, and when I raise my finger you've got to repeat the rhythm, if I don't raise my finger and you do it, then you're out. Well this was fun – it was fun for them, and fun for me. And I learned then that you could take a children's game out of its cultural context, and make it into something that an adult could use to stimulate co-operation and creativity. So that's where I started it, and I said, 'Well why don't we carry on with music – do you have a record player?' They said 'Sure – wait a while'. And they came back a half-hour later with a record player – I noticed it still had a price tag on it, so I know where they got it. The owner of the shop is probably still looking for it. I said, 'Well do we have any records?' They said 'Yeah, just wait a minute, we'll get some records'. They came back in half an hour with some records. Anyway, from that very modest beginning, I created this whole creativity and co-operative method, called the Inter-Active Creative Game Method, much later, back here in England.

And it seemed to be useful to a lot of people.

Move to England and studies at Oxford

I shifted fields from Arabic and Turkish Studies, and then into education. Again, I was interested in how the education systems of different countries, or Empires, like the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, the British Empire, and the post-imperial period - the textbooks in the colonies, as opposed to the motherland, were totally different. And that accounts for a lot of the racism and misunderstanding on the part of what are called native British people. Those incomers were mostly from colonies, and they had a right to be here, and they were taught in their school texts that the motherland would welcome them – they were part of this, but the mother land wasn't taught in their texts that they should welcome the colonials! So this was an eye opener to me

You had signs saying 'No Coloureds...no Irish', there was even signs like this in various establishments. And I was very puzzled by this, because that wasn't what I understood, having for a time specialized in British history. I couldn't understand why that happened until I read a lot more, and began to understand, at that time, current British politics, and what was involved. And, of course, my intellectual experience of Gandhi being in South Africa was also part of this, because you understood Apartheid, you understood different communities – black, brown, white, and mixed race. Which I had never really understood in America – I understood black and white, but the various nuances were very different when you started to think about India and Gandhi.

From university to community theatre Starting up Inter-Action

Theatre in this country especially is about recapitulating what has been done in the past. Another Hamlet...and I was interested only in new plays that explored things – space, the environment, media; the relationship to the audience. I wasn't interested in doing old plays, I was interested in exploring new relationships in all senses of that word. And in addition to that, I didn't think theatre per se was very important unless you could involve people from the community themselves creating plays. At the time I was using the Game Method with young people, kids really, from Beauchamp Lodge Settlement House in Paddington, which was quite near where I was living in Notting Dale. And I got this group together, and they did Beowulf. They had never heard of it. Beowulf and the Dragon on a narrow boat that was owned by Beauchamp Lodge. And a friend of mine, who was working for Rediffusion Television at the time, came with a crew, and interviewed these guys. And it seemed to me at the time, that if I could get a camera like that at the time – this was '67 – that this was a perfect way to do things, to record things. But they had a whole crew, and I didn't see how we could afford it at the time.

In 1968 the people who were at the Mercury Theatre, the International Theatre Club left with me, and my co-director at the time, who was a brilliant director, by the name of Naftali Yavine, who died unfortunately a couple of years later. To become the thing that I wanted to build, which was Interaction. Which was professional arts – largely theatre and film, and, as it happened, video and community work, a balance of the two. And people were trained – both the actors and the community workers – in this Inter-Active Creative Game Method that by this time I had developed quite a bit, as I explained earlier.

We then moved from Notting Hill in late '68, to this shop-front, which had a warehouse in the back. It was all joined together. And there we attracted a lot of local kids, it's all working-class around there. And these kids decided that they wanted to set up a film club. I said 'Great! Good idea.' And the kids made these films, these short films, and they

showed them in the Chalk Farm work place, and so on. And it was about that time that we discovered that you could actually buy video – it was expensive at the time.

In '70 that we set up a video project in Chalk Farm, and by this time we were moving into the back of Chalk Farm, which is West Kentish Town, which is really, that's where we set up eventually, Talacre, and built a centre there.

Exploring community video

It's all about focus!

And I remember that I really wanted to explore the use of video, and I was doing sessions with this Game Method in a residential place, run by Mind, it was for people who had various disabilities. And I took a video set-up with me, and we began to video them and let them video themselves, and I noticed that people who were previously almost silent, almost catatonic, they would just sit there like this. Suddenly, because there was some filter between themselves, like now, and the subject, that, they were able not to feel that they were focussed on. It's an amazing irony, because it's all about focus, but when they got behind the camera, or in front of the camera, they were freed up from the various afflictions that they had, and I postulated that one of them could hold a microphone – they had a hand like this - and one of them could talk fairly clearly, and one of them could press buttons, and see through a camera, and one of them could walk. So they had 4 different afflictions, but together they made up a team that could make videos.

Audrey Bronstein carried on with that project there, and I started working with autistic children, with what I had learned about this phenomenon of the lens freeing up the mind that had previously been unwilling to communicate.

This was in 1970, and we did the early use of video, and at a similar time, in Kentish Town we were working on this derelict site. Local people were angry at the council because the council had torn down all the buildings on the site, and there was only one building left, which we eventually occupied, and we worked out a plan to develop the whole site. It took me five years to raise the money, but we were working there constantly, and a film was produced by our film company, called 'The Amazing Story of Talacre', and this was in '71. Well we were using video in that community, with local people, and we took over up to 50 houses.

Working as a cooperative and starting the first city farm in the UK

The people in Inter-Action at the time, like the squatter's movement, which was a huge movement, the largest in the UK, attracted a lot of people from outside of Kentish Town, but some local people were drawn into the squatter's movement. Interaction had a number of local people, who lived locally, who joined us. One was a bus driver who was also a graphics expert who had gone to London Printing School. Another was a sportsman, who worked on our sports-based programme. We had fairly strict rules. There was no political credo, but everything was co-operativized. All money was pooled. We had laundry machines that were central, centrally used, 'cos when you have 40 or 50 people, you don't need 40 or 50 washers or dryers do you, but that's what happens in an atomized society. But we could use one big industrial machine for everybody, we just had to make sure it was used efficiently.

You didn't have to be left-wing or right-wing or whatever – we didn't care, as long as you didn't try to proselytise, and make us into a belief system. Basically we were environmentalists, which was why, perhaps, we started the first city farm. I started the first city farm, there are now 80 of them in the country, throughout the UK. That was a big movement that we started just up the road from our centre, in Talacre.

Pioneering community arts and community media Break through at the Arts Council

We got a grant in, I think it was in 1972, and because they gave us a grant for what was called Community Arts, which included community video, community theatre, community art etc., they couldn't, because of the principle of fairness, deny anyone else. And there were a lot of groups who were practising these various community arts things, so they all were able to pile into the Arts Council, who set up a separate panel for community arts. So once we broke through, Inter-Action broke through, then that meant that everyone could pile in, because, you know...all I wanted to do was to see people able to do what they wanted to do, like the city farms.

My interest was not to manage things, or to be the administrator of a large group of things. I just wanted to create new things, break through, beat the system, whatever you want to call it, and move on to new things. So by 1973, we had taken our use of video, which started in 1970, into a thing called the Community Media Van. The Community Media Van was a large Mercedes vehicle – you could do theatre on the roof, and you could do back-projection films through the back, you could do video out the side, and we have portable video equipment to roam around. And we had a radio telephone, which was one of the first in the country. So we would go into places, and we'd invite people by doing a song and a dance and so on, with this van, similar to the bus, which we started up, the Fun Arts Bus, in 1972. The Media Van was a much more compact and more cost-effective way of going into communities, getting them to use video, to see things that they hadn't seen before perhaps, and to...that started, I think a lot of groups who were on the edges of trying to do community video and so on, were now able to get some grants under community arts, and were able to pursue their own approach to this stuff.

From Publishing to the Instant Business Enterprise System (IBES)

By the late 1970s we had built a centre, by the late '70s our publishing unit, called Inter-Action InPrint had started to publish things like Tony Dowmunt's book, which I think I edited, on video and young people, for example. And there were other publications that we did, on city farms, city farming, for example. And I edited a lot of these, or I published them, one or the other, because we began to explore community print. We did a booklet on community print. We did lots of little booklets on battered women and the law, charitable status, how to set up your own charity...and now we're working on the instant business enterprise system. And this can train theatre people who want to set up their own theatre company because they can't get a grant, but they can set up their own company, but they don't know how. They don't think that way, and they're not trained that way in drama schools. But we're offering to do that now, as well as to help anybody, especially the lower half of society.

Looking back:

Why Inter-Action changed from a cooperative to a social enterprise

It's very hard to run a co-operative in the city, and if you look through the history of these types of co-operatives, they're largely set in the countryside. There's a good reason for that – because if you set them up in the city, there's so many distractions in the city, you meet so many outside influences and people. So if you meet somebody and you fall in love with them, you're going to want to carry on a life with them. Whereas if you're in the countryside you're not likely to meet anyone outside your group. So we were an urban phenomenon, in a way. We were very successful for a short period of time. We influenced

a lot of other groups – in fact it got to a point where we could say ‘We’re going to go into Birmingham’. And people in Birmingham would say ‘Oh no you’re not - we can do it’. And so we didn’t have to do it in Birmingham, they would do it themselves.