

by ANDREW TRACY

“You have to understand something: sound editors spend their whole day listening, so when they get the opportunity to talk, they run with it,” says Fred Brennan. By this point, the conversation has veered from Yeats and Longfellow to the overlap of British theatre and cinematic traditions to fond memories of *The Littlest Hobo* and Brennan’s newfound fascination with heavy metal, all apropos of his deceptively specialized profession. In a nearly 30-year career, Brennan has built a reputation as one of Canada’s preeminent dialogue editors, working on major international co-productions such as *Sunshine*, *Being Julia* and *Max*, pseudo-indies like *Owning Mahowney* and *American Psycho*, collaborations with Canadian stalwarts Jeremy Podeswa, David Wellington and Deepa Mehta, as well as numerous TV series and certain smaller films to which he feels particularly drawn.

He’s working on one of these as we begin our conversation – a film called *Cardia* by Su Rynard – patiently cueing up the sound of a baby’s sleeping breaths, running the track over and over again on the large speakers that flank his projection screen. “I always work on speakers, never on headsets,” says Brennan, insisting that this isn’t simply an idle preference. The exacting manner in which he goes about his work – evident in his neatly arranged office, his precisely arranged notes and the carefully ordered sound tracks on his computer desktop – is consistent with his pragmatic ethos. Brennan has a healthy respect for the audience, the artists, and the authors of a film, which he sums up with his pet phrase, “Does it serve the work?”

Fresh out of school in Winnipeg in the mid-’70s, Brennan drove out west to work as a driver on the set of *Who Has Seen the Wind?* From there, Brennan landed in Toronto, where he started working in television sound departments under the aegis of two veteran British sound editors who had begun in the profession circa WWII. The all-around knowledge that Brennan picked up from these men served him well as industry pressures pushed sound departments toward increasingly narrow specializations. After stints writing and directing commercials, it eventually drew him back towards what he knew best: language.

“I came to dialogue editing through theatre, through poetry and writing, through a fascination with the cadence of words, with breathing patterns,” says Brennan. “We are rhythmic beings...and in a film, when the synchronization of sound and image is off just a bit, the audience can feel it.” The audience is always Brennan’s starting point in his work: “In a way, I don’t work for the producer or the director, I work for the audience. If they can’t hear what’s going on, if the sound track is

muddy, then the film is not successful.”

Brennan takes pride in being “part of the chain from author to audience, one of those pairs of hands,” but his intermediary role extends to all stages of the production. “I like getting in at the pre-production stage... There’s a lot I can do at that point beyond strictly technical matters. If I can make the director aware of the importance of sound right from the beginning, that awareness will filter onto the set,” says Brennan. “So rather than a lackadaisical crew which doesn’t really care about the sound, there will be far more emphasis on preserving the original performance.”

Despite all the manipulations afforded by technological advances, Brennan still looks to that original performance as the locus of his work, especially in the sometimes-difficult process of post-synch dialogue recording. “A lot of actors hate it,” he concedes. “It’s hard to come back after eight months and look at yourself on screen and try to remember who you were. That’s why it’s key to create a safe space for the actor.” To that end, Brennan prefers to work in one

open room with the actor, director and recordist seated close to one another, and with one extra little touch. “When the actor comes in to the recording session, I’ll often have a prop from the film waiting for them,” says Brennan. “The hat he wore, a cane, a photograph that hung on the wall. Something to help them find their way back.” That concern for the organic qualities of the film, for the meaning and intent behind the work, is what anchors the often fragmented process which Brennan has made his specialty. It is by serving the work with his own care and precision that Brennan filters that care through all the other pairs of hands.

Andrew Tracy is freelance film writer. He is on the editorial board of Cinemascope and contributes articles to POV, Reverse Shot and Film Comment.

BEING FRED BRENNAN

