

THE LURE OF THE EH

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It must have been sometime in 1975, on the Pacific Highway at St Leonards. I nearly ran off the road when I spotted a 1963 EH in a car yard. I'm not sure why I had always found this model appealing; perhaps it was because it vaguely resembled a miniaturised version of the American cars of the 1950s I admired.

Around \$900 changed hands. It seemed a lot to me at the time, but I had just signed a contract to direct a film of David Williamson's play *Don's Party* and was thrilled to be receiving a \$10,000 fee – though, in retrospect, it was not all that spectacular for a year's work, even in the 1970s. I was, however, intent on establishing a little critical credibility after the hammering I'd taken with two *Barry McKenzie* films.

I know that now the EJ and EH Holdens are much sought after (a quick browse on Google revealed they sell for anything from \$20,000 to \$35,000), but at that time this was not the case. I remember a rather furtive salesman looking at me with curiosity as I walked purposefully around my new purchase, hoping, undoubtedly in vain, to give the impression of someone who was not simply an impulse buyer. The exterior two-tone gunmetal grey was profoundly unexciting, but the 1950s American Chrysler-style dashboard and, especially, the purple-and-silver vinyl seats were a joyous counterpoint. These stretched gaudily across the front and rear – none of this individual aeroplane seat nonsense with headrests that are all the rage these days, a

PREVIOUS SPREAD:
THE EH PREMIER – NEW STYLING, NEW
'RED' MOTOR

'development' originated, no doubt, by some misogynist, a man deeply unappealing to women who resented the thought of attractive girlfriends, or possibly even wives, snuggling up right next to the driver with their right hand resting, arousingly, on his left thigh as he skilfully manoeuvred the EH through city traffic.

The next five or six years were a delight. The EH was driven all over NSW and Victoria with never a hint of a mechanical problem. In fact, the engine was incredibly simple in comparison with cars built after the year 2000, where there are so many bits and pieces that mechanics need PhDs to be able to carry out minor adjustments. Even then they'd be stuck without access to computer diagnostics.

A further delight was the exceptional vision from the interior. Huge front and rear windows provided perfect views of all the other vehicles on the road. Modern cars are a definite step backwards in this area. Now, tiny windows give the driver the miniaturised panorama of a WWII tank

commander, entombed under a cupola with a peephole. The side mirrors on modern cars are a further trap (there were none on the EH) as they are aligned with a lethal blind spot, which leads inevitably to minor collisions and scrapes, providing plenty of opportunity to witness otherwise normal people insane with road rage.

Perhaps the only modern addition meriting my endorsement is the now ubiquitous air-conditioning. I remember a number of EH outback trips in over one hundred degrees Fahrenheit (otherwise known as thirty-three degrees Celsius – another unwelcome change) with the only faint relief being the air (hot) blowing in from a small side window that could be angled onto the driver. I invariably ignored the screams of my three children sitting on the back seat as their sweating legs became stuck to the vinyl.

In 1979 I directed the film *Breaker Morant* to considerable critical acclaim. After twenty-one years in the film industry, I was an overnight success.

Despite the critical enthusiasm, *BM*

was ignored by vast audiences worldwide. I found out recently its box-office takings now total \$4 million, a figure it has taken thirty-four years to reach. My film *Double Jeopardy*, released in 1999, which never had a single favourable review, took \$26 million in its opening week.

In Los Angeles, *BM* screened for only two days in a decrepit theatre (now closed) on Wilshire Boulevard so I was surprised to be sent a number of scripts from Hollywood executives. It turned out the film was showing as an in-flight movie on the LA-NYC run, so my directorial skills were on display to a captive audience.

From the numerous scripts sent to me (no email in those days) I selected a beautifully written drama by the playwright Horton Foote, *Tender Mercies*. I found out only a couple of years ago that this simple story, set in Texas, of a country-and-western singer and his girlfriend had been turned down by a gaggle of American directors – luckily for me. The film had five Academy Award nominations in 1983 including one for me as

Best Director. It won two awards: Best Actor (Robert Duvall) and Best Screenplay.

I am now moving rather lugubriously to the point of this recap of my film career. The move to the US to make a film clearly meant I would be leaving the adored EH for some time – for some years as it turned out. I knew it would rot away if left in a garage untended so I managed, after an extensive search without the aid of Google, to find a place on the outskirts of Sydney where the car could be left in the company of other vehicles. The somewhat feral owners of this property assured me the car would be started up from time to time, and cobwebs and various nesting marsupials would be removed.

Tender Mercies was filmed in 1982, another American film followed, and I didn't return to Australia until sometime in 1986. The day after landing I managed to find my way out to the bush-car resting home. The EH looked a bit grimy, but there was no rust and the engine started instantly. I drove back to the city, lovingly washed the car, and RE-POed the glorious two-tone grey duco. (RE-PO was

‘ONCE AGAIN, THE EH RELIABLY CARTED MY FAMILY AND ME ALL OVER NSW.’

the polish of that time; Google tells me it still exists.) I was aware that the cost of a couple of years garaging was considerably more than the value of the car, but ... I had it back.

Once again, the EH reliably carted my family and me all over NSW. We often visited my uncle's farm near Coolah, NSW, where the EH proved to be the master, having such high clearance, of the miles of pot-holed roads, bush tracks, innumerable gullies, and even paddocks strewn with logs and rabbit warrens.

A couple of years later I was off to America again, this time to direct *Driving Miss Daisy*, another small-scale drama with, like *Tender Mercies*, a cast of only three significant roles. Again, it was predicted that this low-budget film would sink without trace. Instead, it rose without trace: being modestly financed

by a Canadian producer and having no ‘star’ names in the cast. Jessica Tandy was a stage actress, and Morgan Freeman had previously only had a supporting role in one film. It surprised everyone, myself included, with nine Academy Award nominations. It won four, including Best Picture (1989).

Despite an improvement in my financial situation, I was not prepared to contemplate returning the EH to the outback farmyard for abandoned cars. I had, after all, been directing essentially art-house films and not the blockbusters that would have ensured the yacht, the house in Elizabeth Bay, and the holiday villa in St Tropez.

With a lot of hesitation, I acceded to my father's entreaties to leave the car with him while I was overseas. At least there was a garage at my parents' house at Kurrajong

Heights, about fifty miles (aka eighty kilometres) from Sydney, so I wouldn't be paying out thousands of dollars a year while in America. The drawback was that my father was a truly shocking driver and, like all terrible drivers, was quite convinced that he was the sole person on the road who drove well. Ever since a horrific trip to a boat race at the age of ten – during which the police had booked him three times for speeding – I refused to travel in a car when he was driving and, some years later, forbade my three children to let him drive them anywhere, no matter how he pleaded.

It was true he was now car-less in Kurrajong. (My mother, who had died about a year previously, had put her foot down about him being behind the wheel of anything with an engine some time prior to this sad event.) In fact, he even had trouble walking and imperiously refused the use of a cane to help his balance, preferring to fall over regularly.

He pointed out, in his defence, that he'd never had a serious accident and dismissed

the numerous 'non-serious' ones as the fault of other idiots behind the wheel. He even classed as 'non-serious' the time he drove well over the speed limit the wrong way down a one-way street and hit another vehicle head on. Amazingly, no one was hurt in either car, which he saw as justifying his assertion of a "minor accident".

His licence had been revoked a number of times, but he assured me he had it back once again. I actually doubted, and still doubt, that this was true, but weakly gave in to his ultimate argument that he would be driving nowhere but three or four miles up the road – a quiet country road – to the bowling club and back again. Apart from an occasional beer, he was not a drinker so there was, I knew, little chance that he would plunge over a cliff while inebriated. If alcohol had been added to his already tenuous grip on driving skills, I would have been forced to park the EH once again with the feral caretakers.

After some months in America, I had to return to Sydney for meetings. As our house



was rented out, I checked into a hotel at the airport for the duration of my brief visit. The moment I entered my room I dived to the phone to call my father in Kurrajong. I had spoken to him a couple of times while in Los Angeles; he assured me tersely that the Holden EH was running perfectly and being cared for faultlessly. I was unconvinced as I remembered various cars of his from my

childhood. They all quickly resembled mobile rubbish tips, were never washed, and had endless mechanical problems through neglect.

This time a voice on the phone told me the number had been disconnected. I began to panic. Had he suddenly died? Was he lying on the living-room floor, unable to move? Or, most likely, had he simply

**EH SPECIAL – THE EH WAS PRODUCED
FROM 1963-65**

‘THE EH WAS PARKED OUTSIDE, NOT IN THE GARAGE ... IT SEEMED TO BE IN ONE PIECE.’

failed to pay the phone bill, just as he had habitually ignored any envelopes with little transparent windows all his life? Plagued by the various possibilities, I immediately set out for Kurrajong Heights in a rented car.

It was dusk when I arrived at the house, but I could see that my mother's formerly well-tended garden was a weed-infested shambles. The EH was parked outside, not in the garage and, in the gloom, it seemed to be in one piece. The lights of Sydney glimmered in the distance, but the house itself was in darkness. Now very apprehensive, fearing the worst, I went to the front door. It was stuck, though partially ajar, and the glass was smashed. Unable to move it, I went to the side door leading to the kitchen. It opened easily, and I walked through into the living room. The TV was the only light source.

My father was sitting on a sofa watching an AFL football game. He greeted me casually but just went on watching. This wasn't really surprising, as AFL and cricket matches were his main interests. He bought every available newspaper every day and never threw any of them away (rooms in the house were piled floor to ceiling with papers dating back to the late 1930s), but never read anything except the sports pages. Current events were of no interest to him, to the extent that when he was called up into the army in 1939, he was astonished to hear a world war was looming and had to make enquiries to find the nationalities of the antagonists.

The house was in darkness for the simple reason that all of the light bulbs had blown and none had been replaced. He intended

to do this, he assured me rather waspishly, and in the meantime could easily find his way around at night with a torch.

I slept that night in the musty spare room and rushed outside early to look closely at the EH. It was free of the minor dents that usually characterised his cars, but the seats were full of newspapers and a few old sweaters. On its exterior, there was still no rust, just plenty of grime. The windows were filthy and the two-tone grey duco was oddly mottled and discoloured. I never succeeded in finding out how this had happened in the six months or so I'd been away, though I realised the car had never been parked in the garage as it was too full of old newspapers to allow this.

I called my sister, now living in Melbourne, and told her that we would have to arrange to move the old bloke (although only five years older than I am as I write this) into a retirement village because he could no longer cope alone, despite his fervent but delusional claims to the contrary. The final straw was when I realised that he lived

on baked beans and ice-cream and washed his clothes by getting into the shower fully dressed, although without shoes. He soaped his clothes, rinsed them off, then draped them over the living-room sofa to dry. They never really did dry completely, and he simply put them back on again, damp. If there was an Olympic Games for eccentrics, my father would definitely have won the gold for Australia.

A couple of days later I returned to the house and, despite his protests, took the EH away. In fact he protested a lot less than I expected, so I suspect that the local policeman had seen him driving and issued a warning to desist.

A few miles down the road, somewhere near the town of Richmond, I found a car wash and drove through it. I then emptied the seats of the old newspapers and bits of assorted rubbish, mostly wrappers for chocolate bars. Prompted by an odd smell I looked under the driver's seat and found a vast pile of Kentucky Fried Chicken bones. I knew my father was addicted to

this delicacy, and I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised that he considered putting the bones under the seat more sensible than throwing them into a bin.

Once the car was clean, inside and out, it seemed to run more smoothly. I had noticed over the years that cars always seemed to do this, though it makes no logical sense.

Back in Sydney, I contacted an out-of-work actor of my acquaintance who I knew had a car re-spraying business on the side. He did a far better job than I expected, probably because he had realised the car-spraying business was far more profitable than thespianism. I even toyed with dispensing with the gunmetal grey in favour of brighter colours, but the actor/sprayer insisted that would take too long and he had little time as he was expecting a major role to be coming his way etc. etc.

The EH was now, unlike my father, in showroom condition. There was no rust, the engine ran like new, and I could see the admiring glances as I drove around the city. However, a disposal question arose once

again when I had to return to America to work on my next film. This time I decided I had to sell the car. My international career had moved from non-existent to sporadic, and I suspected, barring a one-hundred per cent critical disaster, I could be out of Australia for quite a few years.

I contacted a valuation service run by the NRMA and was totally stunned to be told the car was worth only around \$400. I pointed out that this was no old wreck but an impeccable vehicle. It made no difference. It was reiterated to me that \$400 would be the best I could expect.

Over the years I have sold many cars, usually because of overseas travel, and every one of them had been meticulously maintained: my old VW (my first car); my Citroën DS (sold because patriotic Australians bravely threw stones at it during the French bombing tests in the Pacific); my Jaguar; my Subaru; and the Mercedes I bought in Adelaide while filming *Breaker Morant*. I realise now I must be one of the few people who is so scrupulous. I read a

newspaper article that insisted that *most* cars in used-car yards have some disastrous fault that has necessitated their sale. A used-car salesman told me once in a moment of rare honesty that a good test when buying is to switch on the car radio. If it is tuned to a classical station such as ABC FM, then the car is most likely to be in good condition. A rock station or talkback program is a warning sign to look for an alternative vehicle.

Unwilling to give away my beautiful, gleaming, mechanically perfect EH for \$400, I offered it, as a gift, to a young cousin who had recently moved to Sydney from Brisbane. On the day I went back to the US he drove me to the airport in it. I'm always being told I'm not the sentimental type, but there were tears in my eyes as I lifted my case from the boot and walked into the terminal. I never saw the EH again.

My cousin reported that he drove the car for some years then disposed of it. I don't know the details and urged him not to tell me. I still tremble with excitement

when the occasional EH (I always look for the numberplate EH599) passes my field of vision, although reason tells me my car, now over fifty years old, is probably rusting away unhappily or has been compacted into a metal oblong.

My father went to an old folk's home near Geelong. He seemed happy there. He died quietly about a year later, shortly after watching an AFL game on TV. He was seventy-nine years old.

I'm now driving a 2002 Lexus, a first-rate car, but without the magic of my EH. At seventy-three, I am still directing films and operas, though I seem to spend a lot of time going to the funerals of my contemporaries.

At Bills Garage in Balmain, where the Lexus is serviced, I have noticed, a few times, a flawless EH: the same model as mine but more vibrantly coloured. Enquiries revealed that it's owned by a lady who has no intention of selling. The garage owner is under instruction to call me the moment that she decides to dispose of this gem.