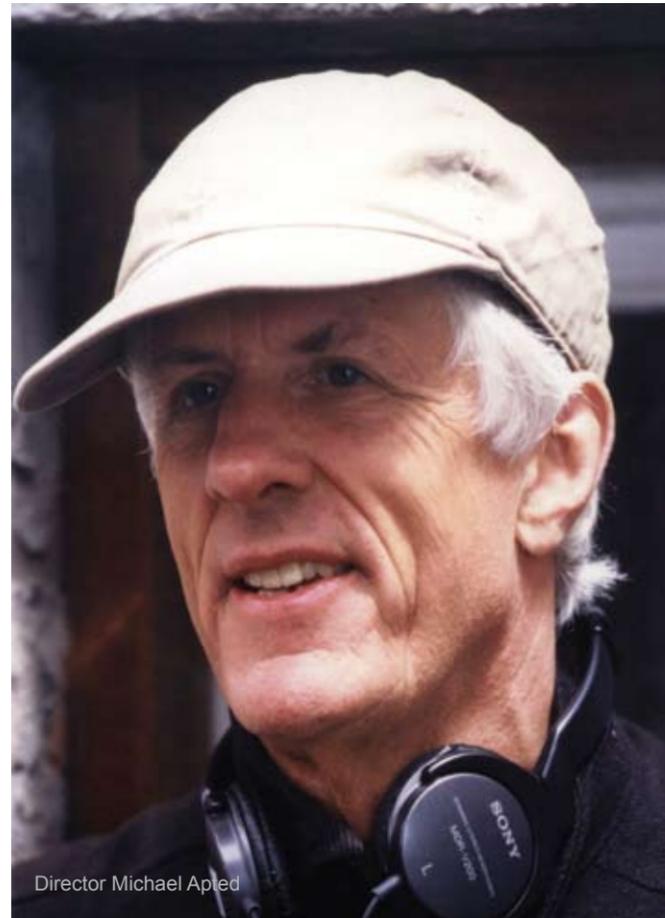


# Michael Apted Straddles Features and Documentaries

... But the Up Series  
is the 'Most Important  
Work I've Done'

by Larry Jaffee



Director Michael Apted



Jackie, Sue and Lynn as seen in *49 UP*, a film by Michael Apted. A First Run Features release.

Although for the past several decades he's been a regularly working Hollywood feature film director, Michael Apted finds himself often returning to documentary, which is how the transplanted Brit launched his career as a researcher for Granada Television. Apted, currently the president of the Directors Guild of America, has directed such Oscar-winning films as *Coal Miner's Daughter* (1980), *Gorillas in the Mist* (1988) and *Nell* (1994) or a big-budget blockbuster like his contribution to the James Bond canon, *The World is Not Enough* (1999).

This duality suits him fine, and in fact, Apted almost doesn't have a choice, as he's the prime mover behind the Up series, a landmark documentary series that Granada began in 1964 as *Seven Up!*, a study of British school children of different backgrounds and social spheres at the age of seven to find out their hopes and dreams. He was a researcher on the original

production, and has since directed the series every seven years, regrouping with as many of the original kids who will participate.

"The Up series is the most important work I have done in my career," Apted tells a New York Film Festival audience of film critics following a screening of *49 Up*, which was recently released on DVD by First Run Features and is the seventh film of the series.

Roger Ebert calls the Up series, "Brilliant. An astonishing, almost noble use of the film medium (which) penetrates to the central mystery of life. On my list of the ten greatest films of all time."

In an exclusive, follow-up telephone interview, Apted elaborated on what the Up series has meant to his career, his need to keep it going while pursuing other film projects—both feature and documentary—in between, and how the concept has been spun off in Russia and now the U.S. As far as the U.K. version, Apted

has "never even thought about not" continuing the series.

"I will always make space to do an Up. It's more important to keep this going. A head-on collision [between directing a feature and the working on the Up series] hasn't happened; I managed to juggle it. If it was headed toward a head-on collision, I'd definitely keep the Up going."

During *49 Up*, one of the women, Jackie, who grew up working class in the East End of London, tears into Apted that she's fed up with the way he's portrayed her in *42 Up*, suggesting that she's miserable over the way her life had turned out (single mom with three sons), which is not the case.

Asked about the scene during the press conference, Apted concedes that "Jackie had a fair point, and that she and I should discuss it [on camera]." He acknowledged that he might have

been guilty of similarly manipulating another situation earlier in the series.

"When Tony (who also hails from the East End) was 21, I drove him around all the big crime places [trying to give the impression] that he was headed for a criminal life," Apted admits, only that it didn't work because that's not who Tony [Walker] is.

Walker, who owns a taxi cab and owns a summer home in the south of Spain, joined Apted for the press conference. "I feel privileged to be part of U.K. television history," Walker says of Apted, who interviewed him for five days.

Apted finds himself "all the time" having to twist the arms of his original group of school kids to continue. "You have to use every piece of diplomacy or blackmail you can think of to get them to agree to do it. It's very hard, tiring and nerve-wracking work. I don't want to lose people."

One of the early subjects, Charles, dropped out at 21, and refuses to return. That refusal completely bewilders Apted because Charles became a documentary filmmaker. "He's been under a lot of pressure to do it from his peers, but he's resistant for a long time now."

*49 Up* was the first installment of the series that was shot on DV [as opposed to film], although Apted has worked that way on other documentary projects for the past

The UP series, 7 plus 7, Neil and Peter



The men and women from the UP series at 21. A First Run Features release.

two or three years. But shooting digitally helped the *Up* series because it allowed him to do longer interviews "without interrupting every 10 minutes to change a can of film. But as a whole, the day of the **film** documentary is over. I can't imagine people spending the money to do it."

While he can appreciate the economic reasons for shooting digitally and advances in technology to streamline the post-production process, when it comes to a big-budget feature film if Apted had his druthers he will stick with celluloid.

His most recent feature films have been period pieces, and he's never considered shooting anything but film. "I cut on tape, HD, and preview it on tape. We never see it on film until print on film. We go through most of the post-production without ever seeing it on film, which is not what I used to do, but it seems the most compact [process]. Certain low-budget things I would shoot digitally—I haven't done it yet. So far I prefer the texture of film. If I had to do something down and dirty and quick, dark and all that stuff in the Michael Mann mold, I would certainly think about [DV], but that hasn't presented itself to me as of yet."

Apted is cognizant that theatrical windows have shrunk and there's a greater reliance on DVD to recoup a release's investment, especially for a documentary, but *49 Up* is holding its own, playing at New York's IFC for nearly two months at the time.

"Most of the press has been wonderful. It's going out on DVD much quicker this time, so it'll be in a certain number of theaters for a month then go out on DVD with the hope that it can catch a buzz from all these reviews, and hit out to a very wide market quickly. So that's a whole different way of doing it. We'll see how that works, rather than slowly rolling it out across the country over 18 months, then put it on DVD and then television. The whole process is much quicker this time. They'll keep running it theatrically as long as it pays for itself. It still seems to out-gross a lot of the stuff that comes to the IFC. *28 Up* ran for nine months in a small theater on Bleecker Street, long since demolished. New York City has always been my best market in theatrical terms. *49 Up* will be on 'POV' on PBS next year."

Apted is executive producer of a new, American version of the *Up* series that

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already was screened at the Silver Docs festival, the Chicago Film Festival and in Los Angeles. Same concept: interview a diverse group of kids every seven years, starting at seven. The Discovery Channel funded the film, and will televise it in 2007.

Of the American Up series, Apted notes, "It's very interesting how knowledgeable kids are, how savvy they are about the world compared to my generation of kids. In the great scheme of things, if you put my 14 with their 14 it would be pretty shocking, and you see how the world has changed. It's not just a cultural thing between England and America. I don't think they would know a tenth of what they now know."

There also have been three Russian Up series, the latest being *21 Up*, also all executive produced by Apted, who comments about the Russian kids: "They've evolved unbelievably between 7 and 14. There's a chilling moment in 14 when someone asks, 'Tell us about communism,' and he says, 'What's communism?' Incredible. That film started at a very appropriate time—as the [Soviet] empire was disintegrating. We chose the kids geographically. We watched how this Soviet empire has become fragmented,

and the effect it had on these kids. It really dramatizes the breakup of an empire. We're trying to find a home for it here [the U.S.]."

Apted's next feature, *Amazing Grace*, played the Toronto Film Festival. The film is coming out on the 200th anniversary of the Anti-Slave Act, which is what it's about.

Another Apted-directed documentary series, *Marriage in America*, is slated to be aired by the Hallmark



Channel around this Valentine's Day. It follows nine married couples.

Apted also has recently made two documentaries about soccer, which he still calls "football," despite living in Los Angeles for a quarter century. His official film of the World Cup is complete, which the other film he's still cutting deals with the impact of the game on different parts of the world.

"I want to do another feature. I don't want to do another documentary. With *49 Up*, I've done four [consecutively]. I take what's going. If there's a good documentary, or a good documentary falls into place for me, I'll do it. If I were planning my work, I'd just want to find a movie and concentrate on that."

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Suzy as seen in *49 UP*, a film by Michael Apted. A First Run Features release

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