

Who is Watching? Lessons from a Life in Australian Film

Michael Domeyko Rowland reflects on his extensive filmmaking career and argues that if Australian films are to succeed, they must be made, and marketed, with their audience in mind.

What a week it was. First of all a documentary appeared on the ABC about the television series *Skippy the Bush Kangaroo*. To see myself at the beginning of my career forty years ago was a great reminder of how short our time here on Earth really is, and how necessary it is to do the very best we can at every moment of our lives. Just like the films we make, there is no second chance to do it again.

Two days later I was reminded of the limitations of life on Earth. I attended the funeral of one of our best first assistant directors, Mark Turnbull. He had worked for many directors including Jane Campion and Gillian Armstrong, who gave a noble speech exulting Mark's qualities. Cate Blanchett spoke with a marvellous voice that set the tone for the service and captured the whole church of 300 people.

Mark's death resonated deeply with me as I had given him his first job as my third assistant director when I was the first assistant director on the television series *Silent Number*. It is always a shock when someone you have known for decades suddenly dies.

At the end of the same week I had the release of my first feature film as producer/writer/director, *Being in Heaven* (2009). The film is about finding heaven on Earth as opposed to it being a place somewhere in the sky. The launch took place at the Dendy in Byron Bay. Fortunately, it was a big success. The cinema of 275 seats was sold out and we had to turn another fifty people away. The feedback we received after the film was incredibly positive.

It was a gratifying first response. I was determined from the outset to make a profitable film that did not involve human beings torturing, maiming or slaughtering each other in horrific ways, as has been the case with some of the financial successes we have seen that originated here in the last few years.

Films are an expression of the psyche of the nation that produces them. The gore and blood addiction, which originated in the United States, seeing humans butchering each other hopefully will not catch on here. We can make other types of films: profitable films that uplift audiences and make them feel good about being alive.

I began my career as a teenager in the United Kingdom in a completely different atmosphere to what we experience in Australia. It was 1967 and I was a seventeen-year-old unit runner at MGM, working on a Gregory Peck film.

At the time, MGM were making Robert Aldrich's *The Dirty Dozen* with Lee Marvin and Charles Bronson, and Roman Polanski's *The Fearless Vampire Killers* (a.k.a. *Dance of the Vampires*), as well as Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. *Casino Royal*, with David Niven and Peter Sellers, was also being produced, and John Frankenheimer's *Grand Prix* was being completed.

During lunch in the canteen I marvelled at the myriad of characters around me, including vampires, astronauts and Second World War soldiers. Dave Prowse, the muscled giant

who went on to play Darth Vader in *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), was also there as Frankenstein's creature.

I loved to watch Kubrick directing *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The sets were huge, with the moon landing base and the interior of the spaceship, where Keir Dullea ran around, each taking up giant sound stages. With the latter, the set actually revolved while Keir ran on the spot. These were, of course, the days before computerised special effects.

Kubrick demanded perfection. The giant black monolith in the film, which signified a higher intelligence, was originally made on his instructions as a transparent glass-like slab. The special effects people had to create the largest Perspex moulding facility in the UK, a huge oven, to manufacture this gigantic block of pristine, glass-like see-through material.

Kubrick, in his normal uncompromising ways, insisted on refinement after refinement. They had to keep making these gigantic blocks until they had one without any tiny bubbles or flaws. He wanted the Perspex slab to be without the tiniest imperfection, and it had taken many people weeks and weeks of work, and hundreds of thousands of dollars, to get it exactly how he wanted.

He had almost driven the special effects team mad and they had sweated blood and tears to overcome all the problems in manufacturing such a large piece, which no one had ever done before.

Finally, they did it. Kubrick came in. They all stood there proudly. It sat there like a block of perfect glass. Kubrick took one look at it and said, 'Paint it black' and left.

This is how a perfectionist behaves. No compromise. But of course you need the brilliant mind to go with that. No use being uncompromising if you are a fool. As Jack Nicholson said of Kubrick: 'He was the man.' No one else came anywhere near him in the mastery of his craft and the brilliance of his vision. He was intensely serious about his work.

I left MGM and went to work at Pinewood Studios as a runner on the film *The Long Duel* (Ken Anniken, 1967), a British India epic starring Yul Brynner and Trevor Howard, and then on to *The Battle of Britain* (Guy Hamilton 1969). Pinewood Studios were also making the latest *James Bond* film and the *Carry On* series and Charlie Chaplin was directing Marlon Brando and Sophia Loren in *The Countess From Hong Kong* (1967), so there was a lot to see.

Then came the opportunity to come to Australia, to work on *Skippy The Bush Kangaroo*. My father had worked on *They're a Weird Mob* (Michael Powell, 1966) as a production accountant, with writer/producer Lee Robinson. Lee was visiting London to sell the *Skippy* series. He came to our home and said he would give me a job on the series.

He really wanted my father, Vivian Falloon, work for him but Dad didn't want to go as he had already worked in Australia twice (also on 1971's *Walkabout*, directed by Nicolas Roeg and featuring David Gulpilil) but as I was so keen Lee gave me the job. So off we went to Sydney and I became the third, then second, assistant director on the first year of *Skippy*. After *Skippy* the film industry started to take off again, albeit with overseas directors. I worked as the third assistant director on *Age of Consent* (Michael Powell, 1969) and *Wake in Fright* (Ted Kotcheff, 1971).

Lee Robinson caused the resurgence of the Australian film industry. Nothing had been made for years and he kick started it. It was his influence that inspired Michael Powell to

make *Age of Consent*. He was also a great friend of Chips Rafferty and together they had worked on many films.

I worked with Chips on his last film, *Wake in Fright*, and the last episode of his Australian television series *Spyforce*. He was the classic laconic Australian and the screen role model for his generation, a representative of a past now long gone.

In *Wake in Fright*, his character had scenes where he had to drink large quantities of beer. Ted Kotcheff offered him a non-alcoholic beverage instead. Chips looked shocked and refused, saying he would only drink the real thing. Even after many takes he never once looked or behaved as though he'd been drinking.

One day he told me that when he had been in Broken Hill, where the film was shot, as a boy of ten, he had gone along to see one of the last public lynchings of an Aboriginal man. It had made a strong impression on him, and from that day on he had made it his business to include Aboriginal people in his work wherever he could. He really was a link to our deep past.

Age of Consent was one of the last films made by the great director Michael Powell. It starred Helen Mirren in her first screen role, as well as James Mason, who found his wife in Clarissa Kaye, who also had a part in the film.

Age of Consent exemplified an idyllic Australian life, the one many people dream of. Dunk Island was used as the location, and we basically shot on the beach. The beautiful Helen Mirren swam naked in the sea and James Mason played a painter who was living an exquisite life in the subtropics.

James himself was an adventurous and charming man and a great actor. One day during at low tide he walked across to the next Island, Beddara Island, on his own to have lunch. The water disappeared at low tide, leaving only sand. On the way back, unbeknown to him, the tide started to turn. It rose so quickly and moved so fast that by the time he reached Dunk Island the water was up to his neck. He only just escaped being washed out to sea.

Later that day, in exactly the same spot that James came ashore a fisherman caught a very large hammerhead shark. James stared at it for a while and said: 'I'm glad I wasn't his lunch.'

Often at lunchtime two fishermen who worked for the company that was ferrying us around would dive off the wharf and come back with a dozen fresh barramundi that they caught with spear guns. The water was teeming with fish and it only took a few minutes to catch them. Each fish was over a metre and a half long and we would barbecue them for lunch.

Making that film was like living the Australian dream, like a long holiday watching the great professionals at work.

Wake in Fright was such a contrast to *Age of Consent* when looked at as an expression of the Australian psyche. This dark and foreboding film showed the brooding horror of the shadow side of Australian males. That enjoyment of violence, the objectification of women, dehumanisation by alcohol, and the male rape of the hero John Grant (Gary Bond), a teacher who is thrust into the madness of the desert and its occupants. When looked at as an expression of the mass Australian psyche, John, the teacher, represented the changing

face of Australia into a more sensitive and sophisticated place. Unfortunately the past, with its rabid dogs, destroys not only kangaroos, but also the opportunity of a better society.

Our hero ended up barely alive, cowed and beaten, his head fully bandaged from a gunshot wound – this was what he got for trying to upgrade the Australian way of life. In those days the pubs, even in the cities, had tiled floors and walls, so the vomit and urine could be hosed down every night. That's where you went. There was nothing else. A long way from the trendy latte spots we see today.

Wake in Fright showed us the basis from which we have all come. It also revealed how we failed to move on. The film, although an excellent work, was hated and rejected by audiences in Australia.

When Ted Kotcheff was Cannes in 1971, where the film had its world premiere and Ted was nominated for the Palme d'Or, a young man behind him in the cinema was obviously enjoying *Wake in Fright* very much. He was saying things like, 'My God, is he going to go there ... Oh no he is! ... How can he do this ... This is incredible ...' And when it got to the male rape scene, he nearly jumped out of his seat.

Later, when Ted was standing in the foyer talking to some people, he mentioned this young man to them. The young man then came out of the cinema and one of them knew him. It was Martin Scorsese.

After these two films, we moved into the bland period of Australian cinema, where many 'nice' films were made: historical dramas, sex comedies and sensible films about the difficulties of migration and life in the bush. Many of these were pleasant works, and some even attracted audiences to the cinemas.

And in among all of those suddenly appeared Peter Weir with *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) and *The Last Wave* (1977), and George Miller with the *Mad Max* series (from 1979). At last real filmmakers, people committed to excellent work and their audiences, appeared on the scene. Men of intelligence and a deep understanding of what an audience enjoys. These two men are still at the top of the profession.

I travelled the world with Peter Weir and producer Jim McElroy as they promoted *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Peter is not only highly intelligent, but he has a great sense of humour. He once came to a party with a small cassette recorder strapped to his belt. It was playing music and he told me that it was his soundtrack, as life should also have a soundtrack like in movies.

We were walking through the Chateau Marmont hotel in Los Angeles when Peter suddenly stopped in the foyer and looked at the lounge and showed me how he would shoot it. When he held up his hands as directors do, I could see what he had seen, and it was a beautiful shot. This is what directors do. They can see things that no one else does.

I worked as first assistant director for Dušan Makavejev (*Mysteries of the Organism*, 1971) on the pre-production of *The Coca-Cola Kid* (1985). We were walking through Kings Cross in Sydney when Dušan suddenly burst into laughter, pointing to a single shoe that was in the gutter. When I looked at it, somehow I could see what was funny too. When keeping company with these people something brushes off on you, a sort of osmosis takes place.

This is really the first key to making films that people want to see. Develop a depth of vision and a level of intelligence that allows you to see things no one else can. And then

that quality of your intelligence will be embedded in the film to influence the subconscious minds of the audience.

You can see how this works by watching the films by the likes of Kubrick, Spielberg and Hitchcock. Their work possesses a quality that is unmistakably theirs. Film has the ability to capture the energy and personality of the director. It is one of the strange things about this art form.

I was second assistant director to Rudolph Nureyev when he was co-directing *Don Quixote* (1973). What an extraordinary character. His dancing was stunning; it was awe-inspiring to watch. And his temper! He would want to shoot into the night and the electricians would object and they would all have slanging matches with him and he'd be swearing at the top of his voice in the most foul-mouthed language you can imagine. They would turn all the lights off in the aircraft hanger at Essendon Airport, where we shot the film, and we'd be plunged into pitch darkness, which would cause him to scream at them even more, so they would turn them back on. Then he would laugh and start shooting again.

These were great times as I assisted in making great films that meant something. Each of them sought perfection in their craft, a quality that has not seeped into the industry as a whole.

I had often wondered why so many other Australian films have fallen by the wayside. On reflection, it seems to me that most of them did not plan for success. Nor did they realise that they had not planned for success – an even more serious oversight. It's important to have the audience in mind when writing a script. Films that mean something to an audience will have a much greater chance at financial success.

I worked with Kim Williams, now the head of Foxtel and previously of Fox Studios, on a show called *LaserDome*, a valiant but failed attempt by the McElroy brothers to create a new form of entertainment. I read an article in the paper that when Fox Studios opened Kim had called for scripts, as Fox was keen to make Australian films. The article mentioned that 600 scripts had been sent in but none of them was suitable for production. I took that to mean that they were all useless or badly written, which was a bit sad, as you would have thought at least one would have been capable of being produced.

I met Kim later at a party thrown for George Lucas. I asked Kim whether the article about 600 scripts being rejected was true. He smiled and said, 'Of course not, that was a media beat up.' Then he lowered his voice and said, 'Actually it was 1200!'

Kim is one of the smartest people I have ever met, as was his father David, previously head of Greater Union. I know Kim would have loved to have had a slate of Australian scripts to produce while at Fox, and money would not have been an object. But again we see a cause of our problems revealed. Badly presented stories. In other words, a lack of the attitude of perfectionism, coupled with a lack of knowledge of what the audience wants.

The question that regularly regurgitates in the film industry is: Why don't Australian audiences want to see Australian-made films?

The simple answer is that the films aren't good enough. They are dull, uninteresting, and about characters no one wants to identify with – drug addicts and dope dealers, the mentally ill, the sexually confused, neurotics, those totally gripped by negative emotions,

losers, layabouts. And, if the characters are 'normal' or interesting, the story is often insignificant or unoriginal.

I always remember Jack Thompson (whom I worked with on *Wake in Fright* and *Spyforce* as the first assistant director) saying to me as he was offered feature film script after script: 'Why can't they give me scripts where the hero wins, instead of losing all the time?'

One year I committed myself to watching all the twenty or so films that were entered for the AFI Awards. I remember sitting next to Ross Matthews at one of the films. I knew him socially as well as in a professional capacity, having given him his first job in the industry and having worked with him on the series *Silent Number*. He is now head of production investment at Screen Australia.

It was near the end of the run of the films and he asked me what the upcoming film was about. I answered that I suspected that it was going to be another film about losers losing again, as all the others had been. He was quite surprised at the term, and a few years later, when I met him again, he mentioned that phrase back to me. He said he had always remembered it. Now, with his powerful position in the industry, I am sure he is trying to do something about changing that aspect of our stories.

What is needed is a deliberate attempt by filmmakers to do something different, original and daring, and which also communicates with the hopes and aspirations of Australians. We want to see winners, not losers; people who make a success of their lives, not a mess.

If the hero can't win on the screen, then the film can't win at the box office. The attitude of the great filmmakers has been simple. A hero is a hero, not a loser.

Our problem in Australia is that we have never celebrated great creative and original minds. Sports people, yes, but artists, no, at least not in the general population.

Jack Thompson is one such example. This highly intelligent and widely read man is usually offered parts in this country that never give him the opportunity to express those sides of his being, apart from Bruce Beresford's *Breaker Morant* (1980) almost thirty years ago.

Why is it that no one has offered Jack (who is really the screen representative of Australian manhood for his generation as Chips was before him) stories that allow Australian men to be portrayed as sophisticated, intelligent and cultured individuals on a par with the best in the world?

What is the benefit to our society to have our men portrayed as simpletons, thugs, unpleasant loud mouths, violent criminals and various other forms of male degradation? Where is the male film character the present generation can all look up to and respect and admire?

The first rule of success for a film is to have a lead character that the audience can identify with and join on the journey. If that doesn't happen, then the audience is left outside as an observer, not a participant, and the film then has no option but to fail in its purpose of generating emotion.

A master filmmaker can create characters whom we identify with, even though they may be behaving in ways we would never consider. The power of what the character does draws us in, as we recognise what we have hidden within us.

The solution therefore gets down to two things: the story and a mass changing of the perceptions of all those who contribute to making films. Basically they need to be interested in the audience before they begin considering making the film.

This of course means sales, that word which sends tremors of fear or revulsion along the spines of the so-called creative artists, whose films tend to end up in the bin. But we do have our salesmen and saleswomen.

I remember when Baz Luhrmann and Nicole Kidman were on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* promoting *Moulin Rouge!* (2001). Luhrmann was having a challenging time as the film was not running in the cinemas as strongly as it could. But he was out there ensuring its success. What a brilliant professional. He was a master showman, an exquisite salesman, presenting himself as a warm and friendly boy next door, whom the audience immediately fell in love with. He played Oprah like a violin and she lapped it up.

Once you have Oprah on side, as we have recently seen, you can become president of the United States. So fuelling *Moulin Rouge!* was child's play for her. The film became a success. Baz left nothing to chance. His intention was clear: 'I will make this film a success.' He works with each of his films until they make a profit, however long it takes.

How different it is for nearly all the other filmmakers who hand their films to distributors, only to watch them drown and then wonder why. Clearly, they did not have the intention to succeed. **Blaming others is not the right reaction to rejection at the box office. Filmmakers need to do their wondering before they begin making the film, not after it has failed.**

But it is not just the filmmakers who have this problem. The Australian film industry, like any other film industry, is really a clear reflection of the whole culture of Australia. And the problems with the Australian industry accurately reflect the Australian culture. It is impossible to separate the two. We are all in this together.

So what kind of films should we be making to attract a large and profitable audience? It is no use just saying that we need great stories, because what does that mean? We need a reality check.

Films need to follow the classic requirements of story and not deviate from them. Even the very foundations of story seem to be continually missed in most Australian films. **The basic requirement is this: a protagonist that the audience can identify with is in pursuit of an object of desire and is confronted by challenging obstacles created by the antagonist.** Their life is on the line, either literally or at the very least psychologically, and they must persist as the confrontations become more and more life threatening until they succeed in vanquishing the antagonist and grow into a better person. That describes almost all the top 200 films of all time.

On a per capita basis, Australia is one of the richest countries in the world based on its resources and economy. So why can't we create the best and most sophisticated society in the world, instead of one where *The Footy Show* garners the eyes of millions of people?

We will never have this question of success for the film industry solved until we remove this core problem. For as the old saying goes: 'When you can identify a problem precisely, the solution becomes apparent.'

We have all been looking in the wrong place for film success, which is why the scripts are hopeless. We need to look at the causes of the failure of Australian stories. The culture is the problem.

I have just given a series of free seminars about *successful* screenwriting and story writing all over the country, and over a thousand people attended. So there is definitely the desire from many to become successful writers. I emphasise successful, because many writers do not have success as a concept in their head. They are from the 'hope for the best' school, where they believe that success is in the hands of others and if they are lucky all will be well.

Let us from now on make success via high quality the purpose of our writing and our films. If we do, we will have the best film industry in the world.

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