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# there's no place like home

However big their budgets, New Zealand's film-makers share an independence of spirit and unbridled love for their homeland

Words Clare Barker





*Whale Rider* star Keisha Castle-Hughes at the Academy Awards in 2004.

I t's an ear-numbingly cold Sunday evening during the 2004 Auckland International Film Festival and Emily Barclay – the latest Kiwi prodigy to arrest audiences with the maturity of her acting craft – has taken to the stage at The Civic theatre. She picks up where *The Piano*'s Anna Paquin and *Whale Rider*'s Keisha Castle-Hughes left off (the latter put her film career on hold after this year's Academy Awards, swapping Hollywood for high school in a bid to reclaim some semblance of a normal childhood). Nineteen-year-old Barclay, in black with a punkish pink ruffle skirt and a gothic slash of blood-red lipstick, looks more like Karen O from New York band The Yeah Yeah Yeahs than the vulnerable teenager she plays in *In My Father's Den*.

The film, the latest celluloid triumph to cement New Zealand's place on the movie-maker's map, is the first from visionary newcomer Brad McGann. It has just had its New Zealand premiere (it opened the Sydney Film Festival in June) and the moist-eyed audience is going wild. Everyone is here from Barclay's fellow cast members – with the exceptions of Miranda Otto and compelling Brit Matthew MacFadyen – to producer Trevor Haysom and Prime Minister Helen Clarke.

In fact, Clarke kicked off the proceedings with a stirring patriotic speech about the strength of the local film industry. And why not? Several major movie projects are currently in production here, including the epic romance *River Queen* with Samantha Morton and Kiefer Sutherland, and the Anthony Hopkins vehicle *The World's Fastest Indian*. Down south Naomi Campbell is in town, where her beau Adrien Brody is gearing up to shoot Peter Jackson's latest baby, *King Kong*. Tilda Swinton and Dawn French are on their way, having signed up for the film version of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. And forget all that guff about sheep: New Zealand's pastures are now better known for their starring role in *The Lord of the Rings* (LOTR) movies than for harbouring the fluffy protagonists of so many grubby jokes.

This year *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, the final film in Jackson's Tolkien trilogy, scooped so many Oscars the competition surely wished they'd stayed home. Jackson was crowned Best Director, his colleagues took out Best Art Direction, Costume Design, Film Editing ▶



Director Christine Jeffs and Gwyneth Paltrow on the set of *Sylvia*.

and Sound Mixing. By the time it came to the announcement that the thing was obviously the best damn picture of all time, some Americans had even worked out that Wellington wasn't in Australia (though one local film-maker might disagree – but more of that later). To say the LOTR phenomenon was good for the local film industry is the ultimate understatement.

By June this year *The Return of the King* had taken \$US1,118,592,916 at the box office worldwide. Seven years in production, the three films employed armies of New Zealanders: in 2002 production employment reached 1,500 people per week and 5,000 “vendors”, from caterers to digital effects specialists, were on the payroll. All this activity was a substantial boost to the domestic economy – not including the amount charged by Liv Tyler in Zambesi stores across the land. More than \$NZ4 million was thrown at Wellington's Empire Theatre to spruce it up for the world premiere – an event that generated \$NZ25 million in international media exposure.

It was good for tourism too. The trilogy spawned a glut of geeks' treks designed to take fans to the heart of Hobbit country (“You will come as strangers to a distant land and part as a fellowship of companions who have shared a unique experience, exploring the length and breadth of the

country that became Middle Earth” promises one outfit). Fanatic Ian Brodie (he's read the books 39 times!) has penned his own tribute in the form of *The Lord of the Rings Location Guidebook* (armed thus fellow obsessives can undertake self-guided geek tours of their own). Wellington airport remains festooned with LOTR flags and posters; there's even a giant Gollum model leering over the tarmac. The LOTR exhibit at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa

“You're only as good as the crew you hire and, to my mind, the best crews are here in New Zealand”

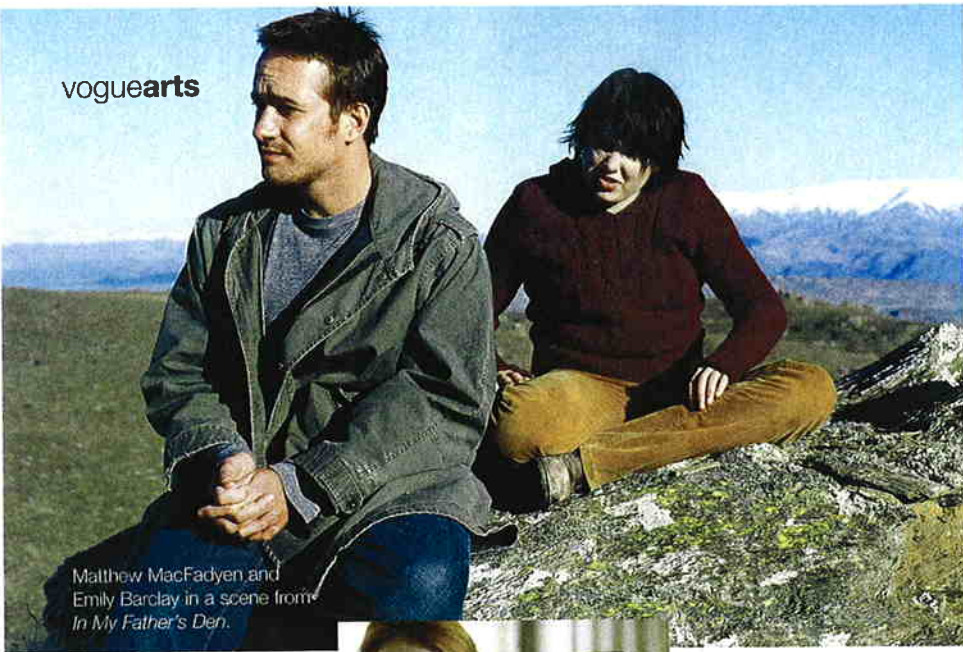
Tongarewa sucked in 220,000 visitors between its opening in December 2002 and this year when it started touring internationally (though this is hardly surprising; so kids, which will it be? *Que Tutto Bene*, a look at what it means to be Italian in this country, or Orlando Bloom in tights?).

Those who engineered the brouhaha maintain they had no idea that it would grow so big. “We never envisaged getting here,” insists Richard Taylor, who with Jackson and Tania Rodger heads up Weta Workshop and Weta Digital, the twin peaks of the LOTR film-making empire.

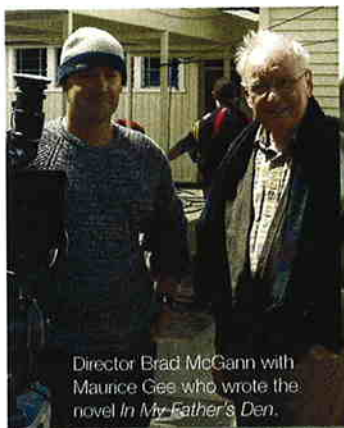
A couple of weeks after the *In My Father's Den* premiere and Taylor has agreed to talk before he dons his dinner jacket in support of a New Zealand Tourism PR push in Sydney. “When we met Peter 14 years ago, he was still living with his mum and dad making *Bad Taste*,” he grins. At that time Taylor was shooting commercials with his partner Rodger, and Weta was little more than a shed. He and Jackson, who shared the same dreams and sense of humour, decided to pool their resources and churn out such cult horrors as *Meet The Feebles*, but Taylor claims it wasn't until they made the creepy Kate Winslet project *Heavenly Creatures* in 1994 that they got their first computer. At the height of the LOTR madness they had a bank of 450.

“The growth of the company has been quite staggering,” he says. “It's not that we thought small; you just can't imagine this level of opportunity, to work on *King Kong* and *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, it really rushed up on us.” Right now Taylor and Weta are nutting out special effects for the film version of C.S. Lewis's first Narnia book, directed by Andrew Adamson of *Shrek* fame, himself a prodigal Auckland son happy to be back on home turf (it is, he says, a “magical land filled with magical people”).

But back to Taylor & Co. So how did two scruffy Kiwi blokes with a passion ▶



Matthew MacFadyen and Emily Barclay in a scene from *In My Father's Den*.



Director Brad McGann with Maunce Gee who wrote the novel *In My Father's Den*.



Miranda Otto and Colin Hanks in *In My Father's Den*.



Sarah Peirse in Christine Jeffs's *Rain*.



Anna Paquin and Holly Hunter in *The Piano*.



Alicia Fulford-Wierzbicki in *Rain*.

for puppets, but no formal training, launch a blockbuster factory with the power to pull pretty much any project half way across the world with a pile of cash to boot? (Universal Pictures is throwing \$US150 million at the *King Kong* remake, which stars Brody, Naomi Watts and Jack Black.) To Taylor's mind it's down to

hard graft and people power.

"Ultimately success is born out of hard work. People say to us: God you're lucky, you've won all these awards. But everyone knows you don't get anything without working hard. We've also had the great fortune of an amazing group of people – having a business partner and a friend who's a visionary director – so it's a combination of favourable things that's helped us achieve what we have. I've never worked overseas and I have no desire to. You're only as good as the crew you hire and, to my mind, the best crews are here in New Zealand."

That's easy to say if you're as rich as, if not Croesus, at least Steven Spielberg. For those starting out it's more often a different story. Back in Auckland director Christine Jeffs, a thirtysomething looker with a mass of unruly black curls and an earnest expression, is huddled against the cold in a hip Ponsonby bar. She's explaining how she spent five years trying to convince the New Zealand Film Commission to back her debut feature *Rain*. "It took forever to develop because it wasn't initially a film they wanted to make," she says. For many years she, like Taylor, paid her rent by making commercials.

"I always knew I wanted to make a film though many times it seemed like I never would because getting the money was so very hard. I'd all but given up and it was really through other people's encouragement [like that of cinematographer John Toon] that it was pushed through in the final stages."

The Film Commission eventually stumped up \$NZ1.8 million – good job too: *Rain* made it to the Cannes, Toronto and Sundance film festivals and found an American distributor. Jeffs wrote the screenplay herself, based on local Kirsty Gunn's chilling coming of age novel, and cast unknown ingenue Alicia Fulford-Wierzbicki as Janey, the sexually precocious 13 year old who's transfixed by her mother's affair with a drifter and intent on luring him for herself. The result is a moody and disturbing portrait of a family unravelling in their holiday house by the sea, and the final scenes are some of the most harrowing in the history of New Zealand cinema. People noticed.

Jeffs's next job was directing Gwyneth Paltrow in *Sylvia*. About this she displays an almost pathological refusal to be star struck. "Gwyneth," she shrugs, "was nice. She did a good job." Jeffs personifies that stereotypically no-bullshit attitude that drives many of her kind.

"I only came on board eight weeks before we started shooting," she says, explaining that there was another director involved in the development of *Sylvia*. "One minute I was flying to New York to meet Gwyneth; the next I'd moved to London." Was she not daunted? "Only by the timing. It's basically the same old story; the key is trying to find some kind of emotional integrity. You have to do that as a director wherever you work and however big your budget."

One of this size, though, doesn't half open some doors. Jeffs has recently been in LA working on a screenplay with *Forrest Gump* writer Eric Roth, and in the longer term she's clearly Hollywood-bound. "I would love to do something here, but how? I think it's one of the better times for New Zealand film, but I don't know that people in America really get it. I still meet people all the time who think New Zealand is in Australia. There's still that feeling that we're at the bottom of the world. People might be momentarily intrigued but at the end of the day is that enough?"

Jane Campion didn't think so. She relocated to Sydney after *The Piano* immortalised Auckland's Karekare black sand beaches. Her child star, the Canadian-born New Zealand-raised Anna Paquin is long gone, now a Hollywood stalwart at 22. Russell Crowe is an honorary Aussie. Martin Henderson, once the pin-up of ▶



Keisha Castle-Hughes was nominated for a Best Actress Academy Award for her performance in *Whale Rider*.

dire local soap opera *Shortland Street*, is cutting it up stateside (he won a few hearts in *The Ring* and *Torque*, but will set many more aflame as Mr Darcy in the upcoming *Bride and Prejudice*). *Whale Rider* director Niki Caro is undecided – she’s currently filming the Warner Bros. flick *Class Action* in northern Minnesota with Charlize Theron and Frances McDormand but will film her next feature, *The Vintner’s Tale*, back home. Even Sam Neill is not so sure.

“We’ve had some reasonable successes, but that doesn’t guarantee momentum for the rest of our natural lives. It’s unpredictable,” says the veteran who’s acted in more than 70 films. He’s constantly globetrotting but manages three or four months in New Zealand each year. His latest appearance is in the Kirsten Dunst romance *Wimbledon*, but the last project he

happiest working in Australia and New Zealand, where he can tell stories with their roots in his own culture – indeed he’d “feel derelict” if he didn’t – but he’s constantly hampered by financial constraints. “It’s always going to be a struggle. The Peter Jackson phenomenon will attract capital from all over the world, which is fantastic and completely without precedent. People will throw money at Peter to do whatever he wants and he’ll never have to leave home. However this is a small country where capital is scarce, if there’s a potential problem that’s it. In an industry one would expect to find factories scattered across the land. One Fox Studios and one Warners Gold Coast does not an industry make – but that’s two more studios than we have in New Zealand. In New Zealand we have none.”

## “I think in the way that the French make psychosexual dramas, we tend to make dark family stories”

filmed on home turf was the haunting *Perfect Strangers* with the jaw-droppingly good Australian Rachael Blake. Is he aware of the New Zealand industry enjoying an unprecedented boom?

“I think that at any given time we have a lot of very interesting individuals working on some very interesting projects, and on a reasonably regular basis one of those projects makes an international splash, the most noticeable of these being Peter [Jackson] and [screenwriter] Fran [Walsh]’s things,” he says. “But to talk of an industry, that’s just a misnomer to me. We call these things industries but of course they’re not, they’re more like sheltered workshops.” He says this with his tongue planted firmly in his chiselled cheek, but there’s a palpable sense of frustration here. Neill says he’s

He does acknowledge that there’s been significant progress since he started working for the National Film Unit in the 70s. “Things have changed immeasurably. We have a level of professionalism now. We were all rank amateurs 25 years ago, which was fun,” he guffaws. “But people actually know what they’re doing now, that’s something we didn’t anticipate back then.”

He’s talking about a kind of progress that has nothing to do with Jackson’s inimitable success (consummately professional though that is), rather the kind that has seen a wave of independent film-makers – people like Jeffs, McGann and Caro – taking less showy steps towards defining a movement, making arresting independent films that mark New Zealand cinema as a thing apart and, according to some, a thing characterised by a decidedly grisly undercurrent.

“There is a dark current that runs through New Zealand cinema,” insists

Neill, adding that in 1995 he made a documentary, *Cinema of Unease*, about this very subject. “It may be something to do with our history and our psychological make-up. We don’t naturally gravitate towards comedy ... Abba soundtracks are not the first thing that come to mind.”

McGann agrees: “I think in the way that the French make psychosexual dramas, we tend to make dark family stories, and there always seems to be a generation gap in the New Zealand dynamic; maybe we fixate on that.” Indeed both these elements are key to *In My Father’s Den*, a twisted murder mystery that follows MacFadyen’s character Paul as he returns home to Otago for his father’s funeral. Once there he feels the pull of family history and revisits a string of disturbing childhood experiences, befriending the teenage Celia (Barclay) along the way.

“There was a time when we made a lot of comedies in the mid 90s, but possibly it’s the darker stories that have resonated more with international audiences: *Rain*, *Heavenly Creatures*, *The Piano*. Or maybe it’s just that we’re not funny ...” he chances, eyebrow raised.

But *In My Father’s Den* is funny, at least in parts. One scene sees Celia interviewing Paul for a school project. She’s flirting and play-acting, and Paul’s discomfort makes you squirm, but it’s funny too. McGann says there was plenty more where that came from, though much of it ended up on the cutting room floor. Ultimately, he was attracted to Barclay’s “playfulness” – it allowed her to make Celia rounded and believable, the aim of the game in a character-driven drama such as this.

Caro would say that it’s this love for strong characterisation rather than Neill’s heart of darkness that unites the disparate players in the local indie cinema drama. “Sam is right in terms of a lot of films that have made an impact,” she says. “But when I was writing *Whale Rider* I was very conscious that it wasn’t going to be one of those films. It sounds kind of kooky but I had a strong image that *Whale Rider* would step into the light. That was taken even further through my approach to film-making. Look at the way the film was lit: [Castle-Hughes’s character] Pai represents hope and she’s often shot surrounded by light.”

That’s as maybe but it was the emotional reach of the story (even the biggest of butch guys went for the Kleenex when Pai was disappointed by her grandfather) that kept people talking about the film.

Adapted from Witi Ihimaera’s much-loved novel, it interweaves two stories; that of Pai, a luminous young ▶



Eowyn, played by Miranda Otto, surveys her father's kingdom, otherwise known as New Zealand's Southern Alps.

orientated, not trying to make the next *The Castle* or *Love & Other Catastrophes*," says McGann, who prior to making *In My Father's Den* did time in Sydney on a gothic horror project that was ultimately stillborn. "They're willing to take a punt on a film that may end up only screening at film festivals. Of course they would like things to work commercially, but in my experience that's not the only driving factor. When I was working in Australia I had a real sense that it was harder to get through, that the funding bodies had a very defined sense of what they wanted and you had to tailor



Director Peter Jackson discusses a scene with actor Bernard Hill on the set of *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*.

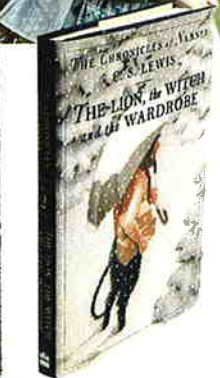
your script to suit." Caro simply says: "It's no big mystery why people like Brad and I are getting the opportunity to make the films we want to make, and it's no big mystery that those films are successful. The Prime Minister was also minister for the arts." Which brings us back to Clarke big-upping the industry before *In My Father's Den*. Ever seen Bush taking time out to support a Cohen Brothers flick? Or Howard telling a cinema crowd what a treasure we have in Toni Collette? Perhaps New Zealanders really do have a more all-pervasive love for the cinematic arts. Or maybe Clarke is simply a movie buff, which is good news for those working in the field. She surely knows a good PR exercise when she sees one as well as the value of the Hollywood dollar. But there's no escaping the broader cultural appreciation for independent art, and most importantly the home-grown stuff. Of all the film-makers interviewed for this story, only Jeffs really fancied a sojourn overseas and she still admits to being happier in her own backyard. Even as New Zealand's celluloid sons and daughters lament their lack of seriously big bucks, they just can't stop serenading the land of the long white cloud. There's Jackson and Taylor proud as punch that they've never had to work overseas. Adamson coming home to his "magic land" as soon as he'd made his name. Caro admitting "it was never my dream to go to Hollywood, which makes it all the more paradoxical for my friends who can't believe I'm [working there now]". McGann going even further: "America has its fair share of storytellers, you'd just be yet another one. I hope this film becomes a springboard for me never having to go there." Let's leave the last word to Mr Neill: "It's great to go away, but best of all to work at home."



Veteran New Zealand actor and director Sam Neill.



Melanie Lynskey and Kate Winslet in Peter Jackson's *Heavenly Creatures*.



Shrek's Andrew Adamson's next film project is an adaptation of C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

One could fritter away innumerable pages picking over the minutiae of the funding network, but all that really needs to be said is that New Zealand has one of the more progressive of these around. It's simply easier to get dough to make a debut film here than it is elsewhere, even if said dough doesn't come in particularly large piles. Both Caro and McGann are full of praise for the government bodies set up to help out start-up film-makers. McGann, who wangled a chunk of his \$NZ7 million budget from the Film Commission, calls it visionary. It was set up in 1978 and has funded or co-funded more than 60 features, including *Perfect Strangers*, *Once Were Warriors*, *The Piano* and maverick Harry Sinclair's cult *The Price of Milk*.

"There's a really good cross-section of people on the board and they're not purely result