

New Zealand Moviemakers' Masterclass with ANTOHNY McCARTEN



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An interview with director Anthony McCarten, on how he makes movies. October 2008.

New Zealand Moviemaker Masterclass; *a series of interviews with New Zealand's foremost directors, on how they make movies.*

Based on the excellent book 'Moviemakers' Masterclass' by French director Laurent Tirard, the same set of questions is posed to a range of New Zealand directors. The questions are deliberately pragmatic and focus on the craft of filmmaking. The result aims to offer a cross-section of opinions, and a rare insight into Kiwi filmmakers' creative processes; valuable to both those wanting to make films and film fans looking for a more insightful way to watch them.

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Anthony McCarten

*Anthony McCarten came to filmmaking as a writer. His first novel **Spinners** was released in 2000 to critical acclaim, and his second - **The English Harem** - was adapted for the screen in 2005. His most notable success on stage is **Ladies Night** - NZ's most commercially successful play of all time. His debut feature film was 1998's **Via Satellite** – adapted from his own stage-play, starring Danielle McCormack and Karl Urban – which screened at Cannes and Toronto film festivals among others. We spoke with Anthony as his second feature, **Show of Hands**, opens in cinemas. **Show of Hands** is another adaptation of his own work (from the based-on-fact novel of the same name).*

Anthony McCarten Filmography

Show of Hands (2008)

Via Satellite (1998)

How would you teach film making if you had to? Would you screen films, and if yes, which ones, and why?

I have no idea how I would teach film making. I feel I know so little about it, I'm not sure I'd be the right person to steer new artists in the right path. The number of questions I still have far outweigh the answers. I feel that I'd need to have made two or three films, in several genres – that's a dozen films - before I'd be able to say – 'Listen up guys, here's what you do'. My teachers are the films I love. They are films which attain a mastery of the moment. Pure cinema, visceral, illuminating, emotional. I look at these films, these moments and realize, this is the level. This is what will drive me to go further, be more imaginative, to take more risks than I otherwise might have. Also, the cameramen and editors and composers and production designers and make-up and wardrobe people I collaborate with; this is the real on-the-job training for which no class is a replacement.

How did you learn film making?

On the fly. I am a writer first and foremost and so come to filmmaking from the perspective of story. Where the camera goes, how the frame is filled, what the actor does or doesn't do, it's all about selling the moment in the most powerful way I can. How will it help to tell the story if I do this, or this, or this? This is the conversation I'm constantly having with myself.

What do you feel have been the main turning points in your approach to film making?

One big turning point for me was the realisation, on my last film, that films are made in pre-production. Getting all the elements in place before you start shooting, storyboards in my case [Ed's note: storyboarding is a planning process in which the shots of a film are drawn within frames to help pre-visualise the end result. Not unlike a comic strip] - I personally like to board every frame of the film - getting the casting right, the crew, the whole team, this is the big insurance policy you need before you start in on the high-risk, heart-breaking, exhausting, error-strewn, uplifting, sometimes glorious process of shooting.

Do you feel you make films to express a particular idea, or is the making of the film a way to explore what it is that you want to say?

You go in wanting to state your case, make a point, and oftentimes find you've made another point altogether, or complicated a quite simple idea. Often, the themes fan out - and the audience will follow threads you never thought very interesting. They'll decide 'we're not interested in the blind man at all; we're interested in his dog'. You suddenly have a hostile audience asking 'what happens to the dog?' If you're lucky, and if you have the footage, or the ability to pick up extra shots, you can satisfy this curiosity that you've accidentally created.

The converse can also happen. You think a certain plot line is powerful, say a B-story, and for some goddamn reason it fails to convince, and you have to cut it out, or make it work, serve some other purpose. This happened on *Show of Hands*. The car salesman had this whole back-story, very well played by Stephen [Lovatt], but it detracted from the A-story too much. So we had to re-invent this storyline in post-production. You never work harder, or angst more, as when a major thread like this dies on you and you have to hide this fact from the viewer.

Is the final product always exactly what you had in mind, or is it more of a surprise?

A surprise. Personally, the rough-cut is always sobering for me. Not the film I wanted. I generally hate the film at this point. Feel privately disappointed. I'm the harshest critic of the film at this stage. But then I grow to accept the footage as being another creature from the film I'd planned, form a new bond with it, and start to improve it, along with the editor. Bit by bit, the film is remade and the creative excitement grows all over again.

Do you make films for yourself or for the audience? And if for an audience, is it necessary for NZ filmmakers to be aware of not just their local audience, but a greater international audience as well?

I make films for a wide audience and try to do so to a quality that satisfies my own personal ambitions. If I can pull this off then I feel that all the other commercial considerations, such as who will like this film, what's the specific audience demographic, what countries will be interested in it, these will all take care of themselves.

On a given film, what is the share of decisions that are made for artistic reasons, and what is the share of decisions made for economic reasons?

You go in each time as an uncompromising artist and come out a beaten-up pragmatist. But what I've recently tried to do is turn this on its head a bit more. Be more realistic up front with what time and money we have, prune my ambitions ahead of time, cut the script down, prioritize the money scenes, reduce the cast so that, when this is done, and before we start shooting, we know we're not going to have to compromise anything else. I find this situation more conducive to a creative, positive shoot.

Is there, for you, a real difference between a director who writes his own material and one who doesn't? And do you have to write the screenplay to be the author of the film?

I can only speak to my own experience, as a writer/director, but for me the stories I film are very personal. In some cases I wrote them as a novel or a play first, so I've lived with them for a very long time. I have no problem seeing "A film by Anthony McCarten" at the head of a film. I feel it's deserved. It's up to directors of other people's scripts to make the case that they are the author of their films. I'd doubt it would be justified unless they have deeply transformed the idea in some powerful way that supersedes and transmutes the work of the screen writer.

What is, for you, the ideal way to work between a director and a writer?

Be the same person. I have never directed anyone else's material.

Is there a grammar of film making, the same way there is a grammar in literature? Is there a set of rules that you can always rely on, and is that still true today, or is every shot an experiment in itself?

There are so many rules its crazy. The artists of tomorrow, the geniuses will absorb them, know about them, and then do something else.

On a given scene, how do you decide where to set the camera? (Is it more of an intellectual decision, or an intuitive decision?)

I stick the camera where it best captures the action. This is the guiding principle. And after this I

cover my ass and shoot it from everywhere else!

When you arrive on the set, do you set the camera first, then rehearse with the actors within the frame you've decided, or do you set the camera after you have blocked the actors?

My set is a pressurized place, because of the low budgets. I wish it weren't so. But we're always in a state of transcendent panic. There is time for a couple of rehearsals but not a lot - the actors need to have done their homework and by and large they always have. I will have met with all the leads before the shoot and discussed in great detail their character so we are usually always on the same page. Then, after a couple of rehearsals for the actors on set we rehearse the camera moves, and then start in with the first take.

Do you cover yourself a lot, or do you shoot just what you need?

On a low budget there's no time for major coverage so you have to get the goods real early and cleanly. I've recently taken to using a second camera and shooting different sizes on the one take, close-ups and loose mediums, say. When you get a great long take, it's very exciting to know you have the option to use either size of shot, or both.

Are you a director who likes a lot of takes or, on the contrary, very few? Can you recall the most takes you did on a given scene?

Again, I can't afford to be shooting a lot of takes. On *Show of Hands* we seldom took more than three or four takes. The actors knew it and it scared them into early brilliance.

How do you communicate with a Director of Photography? How much freedom do you leave him or her?

A Great Director of Photography (DP) knows so much - you'd be an idiot not to share the vision with them. But they're not always right, and even a good DP can get it wrong, or fail to see what you're after. At such times you have to press for what you want, even while all around you there is doubt, the first murmurs of dissent, or downright mutiny.

How strict are you on following the script on set?

I try to treat the script, which I will have written, as if it had been written by someone else, by someone not quite so intelligent or sensitive as myself, and therefore open to excision and rewriting and improvement. I don't allow the actors the same point of view, however, for down that road lies madness and very many tears before bedtime.

From your experience, what would you say is the key to directing actors?

Give them everything you can think of to make them feel that they're not acting, not standing in the centre of 50 people who are staring at them under lights. Allow them to envelop themselves in a private space, the world of the story.

How do you choose actors? Do you ask them to read or do you just talk with them? Do you choose them because they fit to the part, or do you choose them because they interest you, and then try to tailor the part for them?

I choose actors on instinct, an instinct for what will be right for the story. I have always asked to meet the actor first and have them read. Once I know that we can work together, play together, and if they are dead right for the role, then I sign them.

Do you see the editing process as being potentially a complete rewrite of the film, or is it just a confirmation of what has been shot?

You pose two extremes. A centre position is more correct, I find. It would be a disaster of a film that needed to be completely reconceived or 'rewritten', and I'd can't imagine how you'd hide such a failure from the viewer, no matter how talented your editor. On the other hand, the film you shot, no matter how well you shot it, is an inert thing until it is given life through inspired cutting and collage. I see editing, therefore, less transformative, and more enlivening.

What do you think is the biggest mistake a beginning director must try to avoid?

Over-reach. Cut the cloth to fit the garment!

What filmmakers do you admire?

I tend to admire individual films rather than film-makers. The individuals behind my favorites are (and because it simply won't do to admire one's contemporaries I must list only the dead): David Lean. Sergio Leone. Billy Wilder. Stanley Kubrick.

What filmmakers working today do you think will be remembered as the most influential?

Those who seem already to have spawned schools are Scorsese, Woody Allen, Michael Mann, Mike Leigh. The eclectic stylists will outlive the rest.

There is much attention given to the need for local filmmakers to tell New Zealand stories. What do you think makes a 'New Zealand story', and do you believe this sentiment to be valuable?

More important than telling a 'New Zealand story' would be telling 'a good story', one that may or may not be set in New Zealand. As an audience we're captivated by character, situation, authenticity, detail, fine observation, wit, originality, and conflict, not national in-jokes or trading in cliché or serving some search for national character. Artists don't work for the trade commission and shouldn't see themselves as cultural ambassadors. There's a big difference between culturally specific, which is good and necessary, and being culturally servile. The whole notion that a film has to be set in NZ to be a kiwi film is flawed. Sorry.

Much has been discussed on the issue of the 'cinema of unease', which has characterized a lot of New Zealand cinema so far. Do you think these themes are prevalent in your work? Do you see NZ cinema evolving into something different? [Ed's note: The term 'cinema of unease' refers to the idea of New Zealand films as characterised with a sense of disquiet, or of having a dark and brooding nature.]

The whole concept of the 'cinema of unease' makes me uneasy, frankly. I think it must refer to the brief search for powerful dark subject matter that, for a while, seemed to be the only way for a low-budget kiwi film to get into a major film festival. When film-makers saw you could get your film to travel by revealing an incest perpetrated by a blind grandfather with one leg, a movement was born. While new film-makers might want to continue in this line, a quick squizz at what turns heads at the major festivals these days will serve a major corrective. You don't have to be dark to

be winning. The sunshine is what we all want in our lives, isn't it? Let there be light. Bring on the cinema of illumination.

Many thanks to Anthony McCarten, and to Laurent Tirard for his generous co-operation.

This interview is published at www.flicks.co.nz/nzfilm_anthonymccarten.php

Cover image: Anthony McCarten, courtesy of Rialto Distribution.

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