The movies, mate: Part Two

In the Queensland gemfields

by Barbara Samuels

Queensland – June 28, 1984:
“Adventures across the Queensland bush is not in the death of the local picture show.”

Airborne again. Melbourne to Brisbane is a traditional DC-9 plane ride, but Brisbane to Emerald most assuredly is not. A Fokker F27 with seating for 36 passengers flies into the brilliance of a Queensland sunrise and then climbs north, right up through the tropic of Capricorn. Pretty fair drama in itself, but I’m still waiting for a glimpse of Australia’s biggest movie star – we’re 10 minutes away from landing, and that famous arid wasteland hasn’t yet put in an appearance. A glance at the inflight map straightens things out. Although the earth below has turned a shade of deep rust, this part of Central Queensland doesn’t quite belong to the “Great Red Heart” of the Australian interior: the true outback lies another hundred miles to the west.

But I’m not complaining. There are suggestions of desert everywhere in this landscape, crossed with an amazing blend of mountains, bush and very fertile farmland. The vista is mesmerizing, even though it seems ludicrous a Canadian who’s travelled west of Ontario should find herself awestruck by this image of sheer space. And there is a passing resemblance to the western provinces here, although the terrain is rawer, harder-edged than anything I’ve ever seen at home. Last frontiers come to mind, and not for the last time, either.

Emerald’s runway is a strip of charcoal-coloured asphalt, and a concrete bungalow serves as the terminal. As we taxi in, a member of the ground crew approaches the plane clad in what I’ve come to understand as the Australian male uniform: a polo shirt, shorts, knee socks and loafers. He wheels an aluminum staircase up to the door as though it’s meant for human passengers.

We climb through the open door and make our way to the back seat of my car. “I’ll take you from here,” he tells me, and points toward the nose of the car. As is the case with every other vehicle we’ve passed so far, the grille is fronted by a grid of black metal tubing. “But bars,” he explains. “Protects the car if you hit a roo.”

“Why not avoid the roo altogether?”

“We can’t. They come out at night to eat the new grass of the roadside. Hop right in front of the cars. The impact can wreck the fenders or blow the radiator, and sometimes the thing goes right through the windshield and into the back seat.”

“What do you do then?”

“You get out of the car. Fast.”

I am to spend a fair part of the many drives I’ll take through the Highlands scanning the bush for live kangaroos, but they never materialize. The corpses on the highway are my only glimpse of Australia’s national mascot.

Halfway to Moranbah – quite literally in the middle of nowhere – Paul slows down as an American sedan heading in our direction does the same. Both cars execute wide arcs and pull over on opposite sides of the road.

We climb out of our respective vehicles, and presentations are made on the shoulder of the highway: the new arrival is Paul’s father Jim, who’s here to take over escort duties for the rest of this cross-country odyssey. It’s another transfer of luggage, and then both cars head back where they came from – Paul’s off to Emerald, and Jim Turner and I make for Moranbah.

This warm-hearted extrovert provides me with a few surprises. Aside from his status on the Belyando Shire Council, he’s also a local real-estate magnate, and in a state widely regarded as Australia’s most conservative (Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen’s right-wing National Party has ruled Queensland for 27 years now), Turner actually stood for a local Labour seat during the fiery, short-lived era of Gough Whitlam. He is sadly nostalgic about the experience.

“Everyone thought it didn’t make a difference,” he recalls. “Here I was... a 110% capitalist if anyone ever saw one... standing for Labour. People couldn’t understand that my position has always been the same. I’ll work for whatever helps the community most. And if that meant Labour back in the 70s, then that was where I went.” He shakes his head at the memory. “It was a difficult time; Gough knew he was in trouble. He came up to this region to support my campaign, and they were really hard on him. We lost the election, but I knew I was on the right side. And when it’s all said and done, that’s what really counts.”

Jim is not quite what I expected. And neither are these supposedly pastoral surroundings. This part of Central Queensland is coal country – Alberta’s biggest international competitor, in fact – and Moranbah itself is a 10-year-old mining town. The surrounding terrain has been divided up among the giant Australian-owned BHP and various multi-national conglomerates, and the coal companies have torn into the task with a vengeance. The mining here is of the open-cut or “strip” variety, and the monster-sized machinery used to break open the earth has left the exposed rock scarred with mile-long teeth marks. This lunar landscape stands shoulder to shoulder with pastureland and sun-coloured wheatfields, and the juxtaposition is positively eerie.

Once in Moranbah I am orderly little town of new houses, new stores, new roads; the search for Dingwall’s van is on. It is not undertaken by phone, or prearranged meetings, or particulars of any sort at all. Jim pulls into a parking lot when he thinks he spots Dingwall’s van.

Wrong one. I soon find out that word of mouth is faster than the speed of light up here; since the travel agency staff haven’t spotted our man and the local haberdasher hasn’t seen him since yesterday, it’s safe to assume he hasn’t arrived. Jim views it as an opportunity moment for a tour of the town, and offers a backgrounder on Dingwall as we drive.

“Here’s been traveling around this area with his sister Denise,” he explains. They live in their van, move around with all their equipment. He’s showing the movie all over this area because a lot of the ordinary folk up here invested in it. John’s gone back to an old Australian tradition and become a ‘picture show man.’ Been a long time since that kind were around.”

With that mysteriously impeccable timing you only find in rural environments, we return to the haberdasher just moments after the arrival of John.
Dingwall spent several weeks in the region, hanging around the local pub. "I just watched people. I couldn't figure out why they were all so relaxed and happy, why they'd given up well-paying jobs in the city to come live in the makeshift shacks. And finally they told me; they said 'Because we're free here.'"

He based the two principal characters in Buddies on a couple of miners he encountered in the pub. "I got into their car, went out to their claim with them and we talked all night. They both got fairly drunk, and I noticed that under the mateship, there was a certain animosity. And that's when they'd call each other 'buddy.'" After three weeks in that environment, I knew what I wanted to write about.

The process of raising coin for Buddies is very much in tune with the rest of the picture's history. Dingwall combined major chunks of investment with individual commitments from gem and coal miners in the Central Queensland area. "At one point," he said, "we went to the sapphire fields with an enthusiastic miner, and we were flagging down other miners who signed $2,000 commitments on the back of their trucks." And he traces his determination to get Buddies made back to the same spirit that rules the region. "Queenslanders are determined to have a go at life, regardless of the odds. That's the feeling in the main event are the digs, and they're just about everywhere: giant anthills dot the fields like a pox."

Dingwall is aware that some of his compatriots have politely suggested he's in need of a long holiday, but the scorn doesn't faze him. Buddies is his first shot at producing, and represents what he terms "a highly personal reaction to American influence in the film industry." After a year's service as chairman of the Writer's Guild of Australia, Dingwall resigned and set out to make "a distinctly Australian movie. I felt that what we have here is important to the rest of the world, and I felt that they'd get the message, if not that out. It's the simplicity; we're still in touch with the earth. So I hired a car, set out from my hometown of Rockhampton on the Queensland coast and drove straight through the Central Highlands right on to the sapphire fields."

I stop him cold.

"Sapphire fields," he repeats. "Some of the best gems in the world come out of this area. You'll see them tomorrow. Anyway, the first thing I saw was a group of Thai buyers seated at a table in the post office. They had a set of scales, a pile of sapphires, and a case full of cash in the back room. That was my first image, and it stuck with me. It's a cash economy up here: people stake out a claim, pay the government $300, and whatever they find in that earth is theirs. Buyers from Bangkok buy the stones and then ship them back to Thailand for refining. It's a unique environment, because people come from all over the world, and it's a cash and life, and just disappear into the fields. Bank robbers, murderers, accountants, housewives... people actually come up here for their three-week annual holiday and never leave. They sell their property in Brisbane or Sydney and set up camp in the sapphire fields."

What the Moranbah crowd lacks in size it makes up for in enthusiasm. Buddies receives a warm reception from this town of coal mining families, and people wander into the night with smiles on their faces. And Denise has done a brisk business in the souvenir department: a gaggle on 14-year-old girls leave the hall clutching some beefcake stills of star Colin Friels.

There's another screening scheduled here for tomorrow night, so the projector and screen are left in place. "We're still behind on the ticket takings, so we're going, 'We're playing it again.'"

McCormack is agreeable. He's spent a fair amount of time spreading the word on behalf of Buddies and set up camp in the government operators' cinemas. "I've got a projector, a print and his sister?"

McCormack is aware that some of his mates are "in need of a long holiday, but the Moranbah crowd is very much in tune with the rest of the world, all walks of life, every state. "Queenslanders" is perfectly described by the town's name - especially when pronounced with an Australian accent. The place is famous both as the gateway to the sapphire fields and the site of a once-ultra-rovdy pub; when we stop for lunch, the local barman is the counter and gun-toting prospectors, but at this moment, the establishment's as calm as an English tea room. It is, however, as good a setting as any to fill me in on the history. From what he says, the whole area's a kind of nutty 'last stand' for desperadoes, fortune-seekers and rugged individualists. It's no exaggeration to suggest that America's wild west has been relocated to Central Queensland.

As we drive along dirt roads to Rubyvale, yes, they do find some of those among the sapphires - Dingwall's crazy backdrop comes to life. The fields are covered with corrugated iron sidings propped up against a bus, and from the looks of them, the architects should be shot. One house consists of corrugated iron sidings propped up against a few feet of seaweed that's half underwater. It's no exaggeration to suggest that America's wild west has been relocated to Central Queensland.

I'm not sure if Dingwall's timing could be more right. That's the feeling in the movie my way, and get the money back out why they were all so relaxed and happy, why they'd given up well-paying jobs in the city to come live in the makeshift shacks. And finally they told me; they said 'Because we're free here.'"

It's ten past eight in the evening, and Moranbah's community centre is holding a quater of its capacity crowd. Dingwall stands at the door beside the ticket taker and peers out into the night. "Let's give them another 10 minutes," he urges to Jim Turner. The Shire chairman is agreeable. He's spent a fair amount of time spreading the word on the Buddies screening throughout his constituency, and was hoping for a better turnout. The local travel agent remarks that Dingwall's timing could be better; a major Australian miniseries would do better there," Dingwall muses as we walk to my motel. "You know, the whole 'last stand' adds pragmatically. "Some nights there's hardly a turnout, and other nights..."

"Other nights we're filled to overflowing. We opened in Rockhampton and took a lot of money in three sessions. I mean, cinemas are closing all over the Australian interior. In one town, we opened and had to call the movie theatre in order to show Buddies. It's the death of the local picture show, and that's a hell of a tradition we're losing. We've got to turn that around."

My glance heavenward is meant to be philosophical, but I can't take my eyes off the sky. Never much of an astronomy buff, it's still obvious to me that the world is concluding tonight, and the population has for the most part stayed home to watch TV.

At eighty-three-five, they decide to run the movie. John and Jim welcome the crowd with short introductory speeches, and I can't help staring at the screen behind them: Dingwall's seen together two bedsteads to create a remarkably uniform 2:3:1 surface for the wide-screen 16mm print.

Denise has laid out a table of lobby cards, stills and posters for sale at intermission "which comes," Dingwall whispers to me as he sets the projector going, "when I have to change the reels going."

He settles down to watch the film for what must be the thousandth and third time, and actually seems to enjoy it.

"The Gemfields and beyond"

I take leave of John and Moranbah next morning, and - halfway to Emerald - of Jim, who's behind Paul's car for the rest of the journey. In town, the younger Turner hands me over to Glen Elmes, and then it's more highway this time, we make for the gemfields.

While Emerald is an apparent misnomer (a normal black soil is found in this area), the state of affairs in Anakie is perfectly described by the town's name - especially when pronounced with an Australian accent. The place is famous both as the gateway to the sapphire fields and the site of a once-ultra-rovdy pub; when we stop for lunch, the local barman is the counter and gun-toting prospectors, but at this moment, the establishment's as calm as an English tea room. It is, however, as good a setting as any to fill me in on the history. From what he says, the whole area's a kind of nutty 'last stand' for desperadoes, fortune-seekers and rugged individualists. It's no exaggeration to suggest that America's wild west has been relocated to Central Queensland.

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then as a geophysicist. She is another soul who was converted to the gem fields lifestyle on sight: "We saw the Anakie Hotel with the sign 'We deal in quality sapphires' - where we wanted to be. I fell absolutely in love with the region."

That passion has endured. This is Pat's territory, and she takes over the jeweller's display with a flourish, even managing to convince a Thai sapphire buyer to pose for a picture once she assures the woman that I am not an Australian journalist. In 'a Rubyvale gemshop, the jeweller displays a rainbow of gems that knocks me off my feet when he identifies them all as sapphires: instead of the ice-blue colour traditionally associated with the stone, this collection runs from the dull black of an unpolished gem to a piece with the clarity of a diamond. And there's a range of green, yellow, orange and pink hues in between. I recognize with some resignation that the fever has hit me.

It is quite literally a dazzling afternoon, and it ends in Gregory's private claim. She has staked out territory in the fields so that when the field is "all go," she and I don't even wait for an invitation. In a flash, I'm down in the orange dust on my knees, scratching at the 'waste' with my fingernails. The fields are like Las Vegas in the raw, and like Vegas, the kid is in the doing. No sapphires this day in Queensland, but a grand deal of truly unbeatable fun.

Time for another small-scale odyssey. It begins with a bus ride across the Highlands to the sea - Emerald to Rockhampton. Then up the coast to Mackay and a flight out to Lindeman Island, an exquisite piece of dirt lodged smack in the midst of the famed Whitsunday Passage. There is a steely logic at work here. Queensland is also the site of the Great Barrier Reef, and I don't intend to leave this country without paying my respect to the fish.

So for a few blissful days, the Australian film industry learns to do without me. The only movies in the picture here are those extraordinary Jacques Cousteau specials running twenty-four hours a day underwater, and the screenings are private to boot. The whole region is a fantasy of azure seas, lush rainforests and the sensation of waking each day to the sound of wild cockatoos arguing with kookaburra. The end of the financial year comes and goes as I grab some snorkeling gear and dive amidst the coral.

It's a dirty job, but someone's got to do it.

$38 million in investment and a further $3.5 million in underwriting. Together with the $13 million invested in documentaries and $12 million for one-off television dramas, the total raised exceeded $100 million, with an excess of $20 million underwritten for investment in the current financial year.

The tally is impressive: 27 features, ten miniseries, 73 documentaries and 18 one-off television dramas either are or will be in production in response to the tax incentives. According to the trades, the '84-'85 year is shaping up as the hottest yet for the Australian film and TV industry, and it is duly noted that most of the productions set to go were backed by a pre-sale, a guarantee or the involvement of an established marketing or promotional organization. Government money - state or federal - was also part of the commitment package.

But the nature of the product is the final giveaway, and the list of "definite starters" is a very mixed bag. I'm looking for the presence - or the absence - of particular names, and an example of both is immediately apparent. David Elfick's Palm Beach musings are behind him; Emoh Ruo Edgely's work for them. If the returns aren't going to be there, then the video people won't reap any of the benefits." Chissick regards government legislation for a video window as "inevitable. We've had discussions with the American companies, and they're reluctant to agree. So there's no other way to go." As part of a vertically-integrated organization, Chissick has a strong sense of the overall domestic situation. Add to this his position as an AFC Commissioner, and he emerges with a unique perspective on the overall Australian film scene. The situation worries him. "I look at the goal 'without the tax incentives, we wouldn't be able to make pictures. But there are still far too many films being made, and I've got fears about where we'll be in a year's time."

Sydney - July 8-9:

"With Australian films, we've got to start from scratch."

Back to the city again, and just in time for the Australian Film Commission's AFCU annual dinner. Barry Cohen (the Minister for Home Affairs and the Environment, under whose portfolio the film industry falls) uses the occasion to deliver the news: the investors have gone for the 133% tax incentive, and come through in force.

"Between budget night (August 31) and June 30," he states, "more than $45 million was invested in feature films under the new arrangements. A further $16 million was underwritten. The relative newcomer to the filmmaking scene - the television mini-series - attracted no attention. Few industry folk have taken up the option to receive a 25% tax incentive, and there seems little likelihood of any major producer being interested. The tax incentives are going to be too small to cover the cost of volume releases, and video will still be the most viable way of recovering investment."
in three weeks at that.

This portrait of a quirky, middle-aged eccentric has already made waves at several festivals and is set for a North American release this fall. In her mind, Director Gillian Armstrong regards the movie as another look at the theme that concerns him most. "Non-heroes," he says. "People that really matter, rather than the glamorous lights. The central character in *Man of Flowers* had to be an absolute lunatic, but a clever one. Someone who could outsmart the system. People like that are the ones I care about."

But his newest film moves him away from that realm for the first time. My *First Wife* details the disintegration of a marriage, and Cox says it's the best he's ever done. "It's really a plea for people to hang in there. We always figure that if our marriage isn't working and we have an affair, if I solve all our problems. That generally isn't true. I think it's all summed up in the last line: *We say goodbye.*"

This debate over focus has surfaced most often as part of the comparison game: the juxtaposition of Melbourne's School of Film and Television Research Centre and the AFTS. Walton thinks the facade is pointless.

"Swinburne and schools like it are complementary to the AFTS. We're not rivals. Many people with as small an arts structure as we have need strong propaganda that puts students under pressure to graduate. A lot of people have chosen to promote Swinburne's cause - and with the level of their funding, the cause itself is certainly justifiable - by beating down the AFTS. arguing that the money we get is somehow inferior, an token of swindle. We belong to entirely different systems. Swinburne is a department with a faculty within a College of Advanced Education. Our model is not in the management of the School. We're an independent statutory authority, an independent professional training institute, an independent funding institute, and we're national, and our level of funding reflects a number of things. The actual cost of producing films and videos, first of all, and then the fact that we have three major programs: a full-time program, which trains and renews people already working in the industry, as well as women, Aboriginal groups, and other specific groups. We have a collaboration with a number of institutions. We have a number of people doing research and survey departments, and we have a number of people in leadership positions. The actual cost of producing films and videos, first of all, and then the fact that we have three major programs: a full-time program, which trains and renews people already working in the industry, as well as women, Aboriginal groups, and other specific groups. We have a collaboration with a number of institutions. We have a number of people doing research and survey departments, and we have a number of people in leadership positions. The actual cost of producing films and videos, first of all, and then the fact that we have three major programs: a full-time program, which trains and renews people already working in the industry, as well as women, Aboriginal groups, and other specific groups. We have a collaboration with a number of institutions. We have a number of people doing research and survey departments, and we have a number of people in leadership positions.

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