BRIAN MCFARLANE: You’ve been making films together regularly for twenty-five years now. How difficult has it been to maintain a career like that in Australia?

NADIA TASS: Oh, impossible. It’s the toughest thing. That’s why we work overseas so much. We’ve made both features and television in America and the Stark mini-series for the BBC. I think it’s really too difficult to just make films in Australia. So we fund the making of films in Australia by working overseas!

We couldn’t have afforded a reasonable lifestyle if we hadn’t ventured out and made films in America, and we’ve currently got a slate of films we’re going to be making there in the future.

DAVID PARKER: Most of the television stays on mainland USA, which is good in a way as we prefer to be going down the feature film route, but it’s terrific when, say, Disney or Warner Bros. come to Nadia saying, ‘We’d like you to direct this or that piece.’

NT: It’s the material, too. I’d much rather do a really good high-end television story than some crappy feature.

Why do you think it is so hard to keep a filmmaking career going in Australia? Do you think there should be more government support, for instance?

NT: I think a lot of money is pumped into the Australian film industry, but the questions are: how is that money managed? where does that money go? how are the projects chosen? what are the objectives of institutions like Screen Australia? In one week about three years ago, we were in Film Finance Corporation being assessed for this film we’ve just done, Matching Jack. The two people considering this film at that time did not assess it accurately. One of them said, ‘The father needs to be a nicer person.’ Now, I don’t know where that person’s judgement was coming from and why he was sitting in that chair. His opinion was completely wrong: if we’d followed his suggestion we’d have had no film. The woman assessing it also wanted the female lead to be a battered wife. So where did these people, who in the same week rejected films by us, by Fred Schepisi and by Bruce Beresford, come from?

DP: I suspect that some of the people who inhabit these positions are failed filmmakers. That may be okay in the sense that they may be better bureaucrats than filmmakers, but on the other hand they carry with them a lot of baggage. Also, we perhaps find it difficult because we have been around for so long. People love discovering new talent and being responsible for that. And this isn’t just our
view; it's a criticism levelled at the agencies by other experienced filmmakers.

I think Screen Australia and the state bodies have their hearts in the right place. It's a matter of being sure they're putting in the best intermediaries between the money and the filmmakers.

What do you think of the idea floated in a recent article I took exception to which argued that Australian films should aim to be more like Hollywood — more sex, more love stories, more happy endings, etc.? NT: I need to look at that statement, because if what they're saying is that the subject matter that Hollywood concerns itself with is what we should be dealing with, then I disagree with it. But if they're saying we should be approaching Hollywood's expertise in, say, the matter of ensuring the maturity of scripts to ensure they're ready for shooting and in paying the same sort of attention to detail that Hollywood does to its work, then I totally agree with such statements.

That's a valid distinction not often made. How did both of you come to be involved in filmmaking? How did you come to start working together?

DP: I started as a stills photographer and had gone through the RMIT photography course after dropping out of mechanical engineering, which wasn't what I wanted to pursue.

One of my early clients after leaving RMIT was the magazine TV Times, which was half-owned by Packer and half by the ABC, which ran it, and I was the Melbourne photographer on that. This led me into all sorts of things — television, films, ballet, theatre, opera — and I started honing in more on stills for movies. I remember talking to Colin Friels during the making of The Coolangatta Gold [Igor Auzins, 1984] about the idea of Nadia and me making our own films, and it was he who suggested I should write our films myself when I was wondering whom I'd get for the job. I thought it was a pretty audacious thing to do, as I regarded the art of scriptwriting very highly. When you were asked to do the stills photography for a film, you'd read the script first and decide if it was something you wanted to work on, so I'd see it from script stage right through and I'd be there on opening night. I saw the whole process, the films that worked and those that didn't, and started to glean an idea of how, if I were making a film, I'd go about it. One of the things that concerned Nadia and me was how the technical side took over, whereas it was really the story that mattered and how it was told. On a shoot they'd invariably spend half a day setting up the shot, the lighting, and that was something we talked about as we prepared to make our first film.

Nadia, I understand you had worked in the theatre as an actress and I wondered if you felt there was much sense of carry-over when you turned to film. Did it, for instance, give you a special appreciation of performance and actors?

NT: Yes, I was acting on the stage and in television as well at that time, so I had an appreciation of the way I was being directed. I had my first television role when I was fourteen in Division 4, I think. To me, I always felt there was something strange in the way directors came at me to give me instructions about what to do. I realised that it was really important if a director was to get the best out of actors to know the processes of acting and how actors actually arrive at the point of performance. I was directing theatre then, so I felt very confident about the creative processes involved in telling a story, and this wasn't daunting to me as I went on to direct films. And because I'd done acting for television I was familiar with the type of acting that was necessary for the screen — that's where I come from. Then I did courses to make sure I knew what the technical side required. But I knew my strength was in telling a story and working with actors, and I continue to love and respect the work that actors bring to the screen or a stage production or to television. They are the faces that ultimately tell our stories, and what we do behind the scenes is to prepare them, if it's for the stage, and record them, if it's for the small or big screen.

You've really answered one of the questions I was going to ask you about the actors in your films: you're clearly someone who enjoys actors.

NT: Yes, and as a director I continue to find out about performance. Every time I'm in New York, I'll go and do a workshop about the latest thoughts on acting, whether it's the Method or Meisner, or Berkoff in London. There are new teachers and constant developments in acting techniques. I took a Stanislavski course in Yugoslavia over twenty years ago, but I can't just sit on my laurels. I think directors have to be informed as to how the actors go about their work.

What can you tell me about the formation of Cascade, your production company? How does it function?

DP: We formed it in 1984 and at that stage we were starting to work on Malcolm [1986]. I was beginning to think about casting ...

Sorry to interrupt, but I notice, Nadia, that you are usually listed as casting director on your films. Is that usual?

NT: No, I think that was a bit of a mistake. I did all the casting for Malcolm and went on doing it, but we had a casting agent on Matching Jack. I've tended to come to the casting having very strong opinions ...

DP: And I think too that in that earlier period you were so connected to the theatre and the acting world, whereas now there may be actors in, say, Brisbane that we've not been exposed to and who may be very good, and a casting agent will have gone to all those areas and seen new talent. It was Christine King on Matching Jack and she was great; she had her finger on the pulse.

NT: Plus I've been out of the country for such a long time. I generally know the actors who are out there, but Christine was able to say, "There are all these new people that have come through and perhaps you're not familiar with them." I wasn't, and she was able to call them in and I could audition them, including some of the women in the film that the husband has had affairs with.

You're both listed as producers on your films: is this part of the Cascade set-up?

DP: Definitely. I remember early in the 1980s, I was working as stills photographer on a film in which the person whose project it was, who'd actually come up with the idea and had written it and was directing it, was elbowed off his own show by the producers, and I just thought I'd never want to be in that situation. We were determined from the word go that we would be producers, as a matter of self-protection. What we did need was to get someone in who could actually help us, and on those early films it was Tim White. We did need someone when we were out there working and he'd come out at lunchtime and talk about the rushes or the budget and so on.

NT: That other producer is so important to us, and Tim was exceptional. And another one we
worked with was Phil Jones, who filled that role on *Amy* [1997]. We wanted another point of view than our own, but to be in a strong enough position to resist if we wanted to.

How important is the input of others listed as 'in association with'?  
**NT:** It's usually a matter of money. Most often with Film Victoria or Screen Australia.  
**DP:** There's no other business like filmmaking! You're presenting a dream. As much as people try to design films to appeal to this or that demographic, very often those films fail.  
It's a high-risk business and we're in a very vulnerable position.

It seems to me that there are some continuing threads, preoccupations in your films - e.g., quirky dealings with machines like the tram in *Malcolm*, cars in *The Big Steal* (1990) and *Amy*, the delivery van in *Rikky and Pete* (1988), and with slightly (or more than slightly) offbeat characters. How conscious are you of such continuities or is that just the sort of thing critics write about?  
**DP:** No, it's very accurate. My take on this is that we're not a bland race of people; these kinds of offbeat people exist out there. You don't have to go too far to find them. I'm drawn to these kinds of characters and that's how they get into my screenplays. Like Danny's [Ben Mendelsohn] parents in *The Big Steal*, playing Scrabble while mayhem is going on around them. But the real formation of those characters is Nadia's work and she creates them in tandem with the actors.  
**NT:** And it was really important that Danny and Joanna [Claudia Karvan] be more or less regular people because they're the ones the film hangs on, and they need to be characterful to the viewer can relate to. Generally you'll find that it's the peripheral characters who add that quirky quality.  
**DP:** I'm fascinated with that side of society that isn't merchant bankers or bank tellers or shop assistants. There's another kind of person out there, who's often frowned upon in the community at large. I like that scene in *Malcolm* when Judith [Lindy Davies] is talking to Mrs T [Beverley Phillips] in the milk bar and Malcolm [Colin Friels] walks past with two seats strapped over his shoulders, one in front and one over his back, and no one takes any notice of him. In real life, if you saw this figure you'd almost certainly avoid eye contact, whereas in our film we know he's completely harmless - though he does rob banks!

What about all these bizarre preoccupations with machines?  
**NT:** David's fascinated with machinery. I love trains and trams all over the world, but the mechanical bent here is David's.  
I like the way these get integrated into the plot, like the two guys endlessly working on their car in *Amy* and you wonder what the point of this is until the final sequence...  
**DP:** I remember when I had a house in Carlton and there were these guys who worked constantly on a car in their backyard. I wondered what they were doing and not till the police arrived did I find out what they seemed to be spending their whole lives changing engines and so on. But I should admit that I was the kid who took the engine off my mother's motor mower and put it on my sister's bike to try and make a motorbike out of it. Of course it never worked and I couldn't ever get my mother's mower to work properly again. I had a similar experience with devising a self-opening garage door that did work but settled on the top of my mother's car. I wasn't a popular boy. But yes, I did love machines. If you look at the Malcolm devices - a car that split in two, ashtrays that rob banks, a little remote-controlled car that robbed a bank - they were the results of a couple of friends and I working at our place on the weekends. I was worried whether those round ashtrays would work, and of course it's one of the most memorable bits of the film.

When it came to the big job with the ashtrays, did you have in mind the famous silent heist scene in *Rififi* (Jules Dassin, 1955)?  
**DP:** I think Nadia might have, but I hadn't. I just wanted to make sure they worked.  
**NT:** I wanted to build their presence, emphasise that they were there and build expectations about what these entities are going to do. That's the reason for that silence. It's one thing to actually have them built, and thank goodness David can do that, but the next task is to breathe appropriate life into them, so that their presence doesn't become overheightened. And also not to let the machines and objects dominate the people. They mustn't overshadow the functions of, say, Malcolm, Frank [John Hargreaves] and Judith - the three ashtrays represent them and had to seem appropriate to each.

What attracts you about Malcolm as a character? Is it the notion of the innocent at large among unscrupulous characters?  
**NT:** He's not a simpleton. He's really a complex character who's had distorted messages about how to function, and he has his own strengths, which are mechanical, and he's very capable in this particular area, but incredibly incapable in communication and liaison and socialisation with people. Because he doesn't know how to operate with people, he hasn't really grown up. He's still an infant in that area, and he learns in the course of the film how to live with a mother and father, which is how Judith and Frank seem to him. He tries to please them by creating the split car for Frank, and Frank rewards him by saying it's great when he sees it operating. It's irrelevant to him what use Frank is putting it to. The morality of it doesn't enter into his psyche. The serious side of it is in the way the unscrupulous people take advantage of him, but they also have their own demons that they haven't been able to deal with, which is why they land up in prison. All the characters in *Malcolm* are inanimate in some way.

**DP:** Judith's the one with the overview. She sees that both Frank and Malcolm are going to get into a lot of trouble. She leaves them to their own devices up to a point.  
**NT:** She's the matriarch who takes over and says, I know you guys are going to get into trouble and I'm going to stop you even if I have to implicate myself, which is what a mother does. And this gives the story a sort of human depth that it wouldn't get from the gadgets without it.  
I always maintain that comedy is a serious business, that if it doesn't have a real backbone to it, it's just going to be trivial. What do you say to the idea that all good comedy has a sort of serious underpinning?  
**NT:** Well, it won't last if there's no underlying seriousness; it's merely transient. You're not going to be talking about someone slipping on a banana skin in three weeks time.  
And on another level, that tram has become an iconic image in Australian film, like Peter Weir's cars in *The Cars That Ate Paris* (1974).  
**NT:** Both David and I love trams, especially old green and yellow ones.

There's a serious matter, too, at the heart of *The Big Steal*: the young guy on the brink of manhood trying to impress a girlfriend, or the real feeling that motivates *Mr. Reliable* (1996).  
**NT:** It's the faux pas of everyday life that create the laughs. The comedies out of Hollywood are different, the big slapstick comedies, and that's not what we do.  
*Rikky and Pete* is unusual in that the leads are brother and sister, not girlfriend and boyfriend. Was this the starting point for the film?
DP: That was certainly something I was interested in exploring. I loved the idea of the relationship—the older sister and her concern for her younger brother. They have their own interests and their other relationships but the essence of that film is the one between the brother and sister.

NT: That's the reason for telling that story. How far is this boy who's off the rails going to go? And the sister really compromises her life to make sure he's going to be okay.

There's great comic invention, too, as in the machine that delivers your paper to your lawn instead of up a tree, but again it's serious because of the family background: the effect of an overbearing father and a handicapped, perhaps indulgent mother. Was that important to you?

NT: Absolutely. Without that background there's no story. You just have a crazy guy who makes gadgets and the question then is 'so what?' But these are real people in need. The brother-sister relationship was of paramount importance to me. Both David and I have transferred our knowledge of a brother-sister relationship into that story. And the way the parents are helps to explain how Rikky [Nina Landis] and Pete [Stephen Kearney] are, especially in the domineering father's lack of real communication with the son, which has interfered with the son's capacity for expressing himself and accounts for a lot of his anger. I guess what I was working with was a passive-aggressive young man, who was expressing his anger in an interesting and inappropriate way.

Teen movies were popular in the 1980s, perhaps still are. Did you feel The Big Steal was your go at a teen movie?

NT: I didn't consciously think that. I was just interested in youth and I love the idea of first love. Young people are desperate to connect with their first love and are concerned with how far they can go without compromising themselves and manoeuvring in order really to love. Young people are desperate to connect with their first love and are concerned with how far they can go without compromising themselves and manoeuvring in order really to love.

DP: Yes, I always thought there was a good story in the boy who gets ripped off when he buys his first used car. That's a real kind of boy experience. Also, I'd heard about someone who'd had an engine swapped in a car. And I thought that was a really interesting idea, so I integrated that.

I like the way you're both coming at the story from different directions. Each of the leads had a supporting cast of friends around them.

NT: Well, that's normal life. I wasn't setting out to say that either Danny or Joanna was a loner, without friends. If that had been the case, we'd have had a different story. These are very normal young people, with recognisable needs in an early-1990s world, and part of being seventeen or eighteen is to have friends who provide support for them literally.

How interested were you in the class divide separating Danny and Joanna? How important was Paddy Reardon's production design in saying things about class?

NT: Very. It's about choice of location, which is really David's and my responsibility, though this is certainly in conjunction with the production designer. David and the designer usually go out and find the locations that basically reflect the characters, then I have a look at it and we finally decide. The designer then says what he can do with the locations within his budget, such as change the curtains, fix up the garden, etc.

Did they recreate those places in the studio?

DP: No, we used the actual houses. For the little house on the railway line in Footscray, Danny's house, we had to do extensive work on that. Paddy actually built a whole new back on that house to take advantage of the views of the city and the docks beyond the railway line. The family was happy to be moved out. They had a concrete garden, so we had to put grass down on the concrete garden, and it was very much a set when the art department finished with it. I remember opening a cupboard one day and there was a toilet inside—it was their actual bathroom! When we got to the end of it, the art department said to the owners they’d fix it up and leave it for them, but the owners said they wanted it returned to its original state, so we had to pull it all down. The other house, Joanna's, was pretty much the way it was. The only thing we had to be careful of was in a scene when a fire extinguisher goes off and we had to take care that the carpets and so on were covered in plastic and taped, and we repainted the walls. The folks who owned the house were terrific, very generous and accommodating.

In a film you can immediately pick up information about a social gulf, say between Joanna and Danny's family, from the mise en scène that would take a novelist paragraphs to detail.

NT: Yes, in seconds you've actually communicated an enormous amount of information to the audience. By taking great care in choosing what you show, you can give the audience the message that is right for your story. In Malcolm, for instance, when the designer presented us with a room that was Malcolm's mother's room, when Frank opens the door, the message we get as an audience needs to be very clear, because Malcolm is the product of that woman. If that room is not dressed according to who that character was, then the audience will be confused. It's much more than setting: it's there to support the characters and to...
give the audience the information it needs to understand the character. The original design for this room was all purple scarves and crystals, hippy stuff, and I said, ‘No, strip it back, this woman is a church-going Protestant, very severe, and this room needs to reflect that.’ Locations and props are paramount in establishing and reflecting character.

How difficult to film was the final car chase [in *The Big Steal*] with Jimmy (Mark Hennessy) hanging on to the caravan? DP: It was pretty tricky, and also [Mark] had been a stuntman who was keen to get into acting proper. He wasn’t entirely happy to be doing this scene, as he wanted to be acting more than stuntng. That sequence was filmed round Kavanagh Street in Southbank, near where the [Australian] Ballet [School] is now, though of course they weren’t there then. It was a tricky scene to film. The main sequence was shot where the casino is now. It was a great block because it was on the river and it was a triangle that only took three policemen to close this whole area off. It was all industrial, so all the workers were gone and we could work all night there; there was the [King Street] Bridge above us, and the city clearly visible. It was a brilliant setting.

I’d never seen *Mr. Reliable* until last week and must say how much I enjoyed it. NT: Can I just say that *Mr. Reliable* was the film that Jodie Foster loved, and she then wanted me to direct a film for her company? So these films do have a life beyond Australia. DP: And beyond a normal audience, too. They can become a sort of calling card.

How much liberty do you feel you can take when you’re using a real-life event as a starting point? *(Mr. Reliable* is based on a siege that took place in Sydney in 1968.) How far can you fictionalise? What sorts of records did the screenwriters Terry Hayes and Don Catchlove use? NT: Again, I had to take everything they had written to that other level, where it becomes real, so I took the necessary liberties to ensure this. I mean, not about factual accuracy so much as that the audience can be convinced. It’s not a matter of ‘authentic fact’ but whether it’s going to communicate in a truthful way with an audience.

How come Wally Mellish (the main character, played by Colin Friels) was illiterate? It gives a whole level of poignancy to the film when you learn that. This was surely unusual? NT: He was a petty criminal and he came from a family that didn’t necessarily send its kids to school. I’ve come across quite a few adults who can’t read or write but who are trying to do something about it now they’re older. I grew up in Fitzroy when it hadn’t been gentrified, and in the late 1960s and 1970s there were numerous people who were illiterate.

I can’t remember the press coverage of the siege. How sympathetic was it to *Wally*? NT: Initially it was ‘crim’, but it’s very strange in Australia. As soon as someone looks as if they are being victimised, the media turn the other way and they’re supportive. That sort of thing happened very early in Mellish’s case, and the media became so pro, weren’t convinced that he was a criminal, wanted to know if he was really holding the woman hostage. They were also interested in finding out how vicious the establishment authorities were.

Were you consciously intending a commentary on the nature of TV celebrity, of the crowd’s fascination with the situation? NT: Totally. It ended up becoming a circus. Wally was the animal inside the house, and everyone was coming to the circus, partly because it was summer. Television was still fairly new in 1968, so there was still a sense not so much of setting down to watch the television as of deciding to go out for their fun. I really needed to create what amounted to a recreational place for the community outside of Wally’s house.

I felt you’d made a great comedy out of what must have been a very dangerous situation. How do you feel about this viewpoint? NT: Once the script is given to me, David and I talk about it every day. One day I might say, ‘this is how this scene is going, but I think I want to push the comedy a little more’, and David usually has something to present. DP: I didn’t take a writing credit on that film, but I recall we did quite a lot of work on it. I think the history of it was that Don had done a documentary on the siege originally, and then wrote a script that Terry Haynes then rewrote. Terry was pretty busy when we were shooting, so he was quite happy for me to have some input. We discussed the idea of an additional credit but I very stupidly didn’t take it. My main focus on that film was the visuals. It was the first film we’d worked together on with Jon Dowding [production designer]. We found a paddock with an old power station, and when Nadia saw it she thought it was brilliant. We built that whole strip of houses, including the one where Wally is holed up. The only thing that existed was the big brick power station … NT: … and we used the power station to put our cameras on to get an overhead shot of what was happening down below. It was just perfect for what we needed.

I loved the comedy touches from very early on: Beryl (Jacqueline McKenzie) dropping the sauce bottle over the rev’s shoes; the comic touch about the spelling of ‘siege’, the key term for the rest of the film; Wally being so chuffed about getting a phone call from the commissioner of police. NT: I personally am very proud of that film and the reaction it received from filmmakers. Terry Gilliam introduced it at one of the festivals and he couldn’t stop raving about it. The reaction from overseas about it has been amazing; it won accolades overseas but it didn’t do good business here. Polygram went down the gongler at the time, and as one of the distributors, that didn’t help. And sometimes we in Australia don’t really get behind our films. It was insane that that film was overlooked here.

Where did you film it finally? DP: In Brisbanee. The suburb of Tennyson was where that main location was.

One of the recurring pleasures of your films is the use of urban settings. NT: I’m very fascinated by those urban scenes—when I walk through Collingwood I love the shapes and sizes of buildings put up against each other, huge blocks of flats next to wonderful little cottages.

What are your views on location shooting? What sorts of experience have you had with it? How difficult is this? Are the authorities usually cooperative? DP: Generally you get cooperation, but it’s getting harder. On *Matching Jack*, we obviously used Williamstown a lot, and the folks down there, including the council, were terrific and very film-friendly. On the other hand, I find shooting in Sydney is tough now and the councils’ financial demands are quite tough. It’s to do with peripheral demand, such as how much if you want to park those vehicles there, etc. Around Melbourne it also varies.

What about the use of the Myer Music Bowl in *Amy*? How difficult was that? DP: That was okay. NT: Yes, but we did it while Yothu Yindi were doing a concert there. What we filmed wasn’t Yothu Yindi itself; we really filmed the crowd. DP: I had to go into hospital just as we were about to start the shoot and we couldn’t get the stage at the [Myer Music] Bowl when we needed it, because they’d put in an ice rink in the five weeks we’d delayed. Part of our insurance claim was that we had to redo this out at the
showgrounds, so there's a combination of the crowd at the Bowl and the actual concert we shot at the showgrounds. And when the police go looking for Amy over a hill, that's in fact the top of the Myer Music Bowl, though it looks as if it's in the country.

Whereas comedy is uppermost in the earlier films, it's not absent from the later ones. Their core concerns, however, are very serious: Amy deals with a child's trauma after her father's death and Matching Jack is unflinching about leukaemia in children. Are you consciously moving towards more serious themes would you say?

NT: Perhaps not consciously, but these are issues that have really troubled me, and I'm really happy to have done these films. This doesn't mean that we're going to stay at this place, because David has written a script called Tying the Knot that is more obviously comic, though it's still based in the truth and reality of normal life.

There's still comedy in the other two. There is something quite comic about a woman going round interviewing her husband's ex-mistresses in Matching Jack, and those guys with the car and the sniffling neighbour, Mrs Mullins [Mary Ward], in Amy.

NT: Yes, it's just that the seriousness is more upfront. The next film we'll be shooting, Tying the Knot, is more in the line of The Big Steal.

In Amy, it's not just the illness I mean, but also the clash between the child's mother and the social services people. What were your chief interests in the film?

NT: It's a concern of mine. The bureaucracy just drives me nuts. Human beings, and human direction but also of working sympathetic approach, entirely by the rules.

In treating them in certain circumstances it all makes sense. I don't expect these children to arrive on the set having digested the enormous tragedy of a child dying. It's my responsibility to ensure that these kids play the games I want to play with them: "You're going to be really tired. You going to lie on that bed. We're going to put some weird make-up on you. And you're going to feel more and more tired."

All the elements I'm controlling come together to create the moment. When the scene's finished, they leap out of that bed and ask 'Where's my hot dog?' There's no need for them to grasp the full tragedy and horror. On the other hand, some children are so mature, so able to cope that they can produce amazing performances.

There's still comedy in the other two. There is something quite comic about a woman going round interviewing her husband's ex-mistresses in Matching Jack, and those guys with the car and the sniffling neighbour, Mrs Mullins [Mary Ward], in Amy.

Rachel Griffiths is wonderful as the mother. How much and what sort of direction do you give your actors?

NT: A lot, but it's not just a matter of giving them direction but also of working with them to arrive at the awareness of what's necessary. And that's when it becomes meaningful. It's not a case of saying, 'I want you to move from that spot to that spot, or say the line the way I say it.' That's dictatorship, not directing. The purpose of direction is to involve the other person, to find a beginning and to arrive at an ending.

And especially, how did you go about getting such wonderful performances from the two kids in Matching Jack? How far did they need to grasp the tragic aspects of their characters?

NT: I didn't take these kids down the path of the real tragedy of dying of cancer. I have my way of working with children so that, in fact, they arrive at that moment of feeling, of behaviour and disposition, through what I do, then I ask them to say the lines, and when I marry those two elements it all makes sense. I don't expect these children to arrive on the set having digested the enormous tragedy of a child dying. It's my responsibility to ensure that these kids play the games I want to play with them: "You're going to be really tired. You going to lie on that bed. We're going to put some weird make-up on you. And you're going to feel more and more tired."

The film has such a feeling of authenticity about the hospital scenes that I wanted to ask how and where you'd filmed these?

DP: We filmed in Carlton at the Royal Women's Hospital, which has been decommissioned for a number of years, so we were able to get the place empty and make it look as if it were in working condition. For instance, it's all carpeted but we wanted to bring it back to look like long, shiny corridors with lino, both for sound and visual effects. The art department stripped the carpet out of there and got a vinyl floor laid, which was quite a feat. All the windows had to have venetians added and it had to be populated with extras. Then Nadia and Jon Dowling had to discuss all the colours, the way the beds should be. The detail was really important. Nadia wanted a slightly older-style hospital, rather than the new Children's Hospital, which is full of child-friendly things. And because it was 'our' hospital we were able to do what she felt it needed.

And what sort of advisers did you have for the medical detail, because you'd feel you had to be careful about this?

NT: I went to the Children's Hospital with my cast and we talked to young kids that had leukaemia and both our two kids also talked to the doctors. I started to make them responsible for their own research and they came away with their notes and their impressions. I thought this was a good preparation for their future work, encouraging them to take things really seriously.

David, what made you decide to have the film's David (Richard Roxburgh) someone whose career was in the preservation of historically significant houses? Did you want some kind of contrast between this kind of care and the slipshoddiness of his personal relations?

DP: It was very much in the original script that we'd work from and based on the story Lynne Renew had written. That character with that particular vocation was there in the original, and Nadia just built on that.

NT: It was important to me that the workmanship of those restored houses was absolutely exquisite to warrant the fact that he was a professor of the area he was working in. Also, you might notice that all the women he had affairs with all looked rather like his wife, and they all looked like each other, with long blonde hair ...

Except the one played by Alexandra Scheepis, as the mother of the crucial Kerry (Nicole Gulasekhar), and it's important that she looks different.

NT: Yes, he's had an affair with her about sixteen years ago. She's a model and a working-class girl, and she's not like the other middle-class women.

Thank you both for your time.

NT: On another matter, did you know that I'm a patron of the ATOM Awards? I take my connection with ATOM very seriously. We need a platform for young filmmakers to exhibit their work and get the accolades that encourage them.

Brian McFarlane is Adjunct Associate Professor at Monash University. His most recent books are The British 'B' Movie, co-authored with Steve Chibnall, and the memoir Real and Reel. The fourth edition of his Encyclopedia of British Film will be published later in 2010.