Michael James Rowland: Helen’s a novelist and she doesn’t generally write for the screen, but we’d met at an AFTRS writing course and became mates. We’d written together once before for one of SBS’s DIY television projects, and we’d had a good experience with that. The genesis of Lucky Miles was in my reading of Thomas Friedman’s book, The Lexus and the Olive Tree in 1998. He’s the roving editor on globalization for The New York Times. His position on globalization is that the world is shrinking through global markets and telecommunications; businesses are becoming more efficient and living standards keep going up. I agreed with what he said was happening to the world, that it is shrinking, but I also felt that when cultures come in contact with each other there are losers as well as winners, and that this was going to be the situation for the foreseeable future. I wanted to make a film that explored these ideas, and I came across these true stories that reflect them. I decided to make this film about what happens when cultures meet.
In my experience, conflict precedes harmony in such a
situation. So, I sent this treatment I’d written to Helen, who’s one of the smartest people I know. I find it challenging to work with someone like that, and I do regard film as a collaborative medium. I don’t know whether I could have done it alone, but Helen sets a very high standard and that’s very bracing. I gave her what I’d done, then she spent a year working on it and threw most of it out. She then passed on what she’d done and I spent two or three months pretty much throwing out what she’d done. Then we argued the toss until it all fell into place. It was a very robust process. Some of the problems I’ve seen with scripts in the past have been one writer’s work, and they’re into a world of diminishing returns by the time they reach the fourth draft. Sometimes better results come from a more brutal process. I’m creatively ambitious, and this was the most ambitious way I could imagine producing a script.

Do you regard the film as being essentially political?
Yes, I do, but, oddly, our harshest critics have been those who’ve claimed it’s not saying the right political things. It’s been slightly bizarre that these [criticisms] have come at the issues from a compassionate point of view. On the other hand, some of our biggest supporters, practical supporters, like Nick Greiner, the former New South Wales premier who was the first investor who came on to the project, have come from the conservative side of politics. Some people who’ve spent long, cold years flying the flag, have felt they’re surrounded by Johnny-come-latelies who don’t really care.

It’s not political in the sense of pushing a line …
I remember Kierkegaard saying something like, ‘When you label me, you negate me’. And I think too of the journalist Phillip Knightley who wrote about how you can deprive people of their humanity by denying their banal characteristics, by always describing them in a heightened dramatic sense, as victims or fighters or whatever. If you deny people their everydayness, you deny them the full spectrum of their humanity. I felt that the film often worked on the banality of their existence. The other thing was the story of the good Samaritan in which someone says, ‘Sure, I’ve got to love my neighbour, but can you define my neighbour strictly enough so that it doesn’t include everyone?’ The point, of course, is that everyone is his neighbour. We’ve resolutely stayed away from the issues of the 2001 election because they were not really relevant to the bigger questions I was trying to take on.

It’s set chiefly in 1990, but would you agree that it’s bound to be viewed in the light of later political events?
Yes, it’s meant to be relevant, but it’s not a reaction to those events. Basically, it speaks to this idea of a shrinking world and what that means. Those ‘outworkings’ do include those political events of 2001, but also the political unrest in other countries with the rise of Islam and nationalism, and other responses of different cultures to a shrinking world. So, while our film does have a guy who is seeking asylum, he’s only one of nine characters, and the consistent thing amongst all those characters is that they’re speaking across a sort of a void, across some kind of ‘deafness’ in understanding each other’s cultures, and everyone is struggling with the same thing with varying degrees of success. That’s the theme of the film and it does pick up the character of Youssif who has come here specifically to seek asylum under Article 1 of the United

‘I decided to make this film about what happens when cultures meet. In my experience, conflict precedes harmony in such a situation.’
[Director Michael James Rowland, pictured on set, above]

The film has been invited to Czechoslovakia, Jerusalem, and as part of the WOMAD (World of Music and Dance) festival in the UK, and that's all being pushed forward by our sales agent who's South Korean. It has a lot of handles that people are picking it up with. We're talking about the politics of the film, but in South Korea they're saying, 'What politics?' They just see it as a character-driven comedy. They don't get the political implications that we do when we see two Asians struggling in the desert.

Do you think one of the political strands derives from a growing envy of the West?

I know what you mean. If we advertise Western life-styles, it's not surprising that a lot of people might want to come here, but talking to Jabo [actor Sawung Jabo, playing Western life-styles, it's not surprising that a character-driven comedy. They don't get the idea of taking a set of characters that we all think are emblematic of a situation or a country and then, as quickly as we can, whip them into the structure of a feature film. Then, mainly what we've got to go on is the status-transaction between the guys. The things that matter are a bottle of water, a map; basically, they're screwed, they're stuck together, and I think they're remarkably polite with each other, considering their lack of resources and the situation they're in. But their essential ordinaryness was what I wanted to stress. We didn't want to do what reportage does better. We know the back-stories of these guys; we know where they come from and where they go after they come into our society. It's what they do when we're not watching them that interests me.

The central character keeps shifting too: the Iraqi (Youssif) is educated, articulate, but the Cambodian (Arun) begins and ends the film. The Indonesians are the bad guys. How did your sympathies move among them?

I liked them all, even the Indonesian guy. I was trying not to demonize anyone. I know what it's like to be Youssif, and how, the more you talk, the more you erode your own authority. You should just shut up, even if you think you're right. I think Arun has a faith in something other people think is stupid: the idea of Perth as his grail, even if you think you're right. I think Arun would have gone about her casting; she's a professional actor working in the Australian scene, who'd played small roles in various cop shows, for instance, but people would perhaps have reacted to them as types rather than fully drawn characters, whereas they are individualized here. These are professional actors working in the Australian scene, who'd played small roles in various cop shows, for instance, but people would perhaps have reacted to them as types rather than fully drawn characters, whereas they are individualized here. These are roles they can really invest their craft in. You’ve got to look at stage productions and television and that’s how Jo Dyer would have gone about her casting; she’s a producer with the Sydney Theatre Company. We think theatre has a much better record of representing the true face of Australian society. By way of example: Jabo’s an Indonesian and the last time there was an Indonesian on the big screen was in The Year of Living Dangerously [Peter Weir, 1982], twenty-five years ago. Is Indonesia a big and important neighbour of ours? Yes it is, so how do you explain that lack? In fact Jabo was in The Year of Living Dangerously, but if you’re an Indonesian actor wanting to work in Australia it’s a long time between films, whereas back home, he’s been described (by Rolling Stone) as the Bruce Springsteen of Indonesia. He’s an enormous pop star in his own country, whereas in Australia I think we often blithely turn a blind eye to the society we live in and to our neighbours. When did we last have a film with a New Zealand character, or one from Papua New Guinea?

What can you tell me about the casting processes? Most of the actors will be little known to filmgoers and the few that are known (Andrew Gilbert, Gerard Kennedy) have very small roles. Was this deliberate policy, to have a largely unknown cast?

We wanted the very best actors we could for every single role and that’s why we ended up with Geoff Morrell, Gerard Kennedy and so on. They all had small roles and to their credit they all said, yes, they’d do it. Rodney Aif [as Youssif], Srisacd Sacdpra-seuth [as Ramelan] and Kenneth Morale-da [as Arun], are all NIDA and WAAPA graduates. These are professional actors working in the Australian scene, who’d played small roles in various cop shows, for instance, but people would perhaps have reacted to them as types rather than fully drawn characters, whereas they are individualized here. These are roles they can really invest their craft in. You’ve got to look at stage productions and television and that’s how Jo Dyer would have gone about her casting; she’s a producer with the Sydney Theatre Company. We think theatre has a much better record of representing the true face of Australian society. By way of example: Jabo’s an Indonesian and the last time there was an Indonesian on the big screen was in The Year of Living Dangerously [Peter Weir, 1982], twenty-five years ago. Is Indonesia a big and important neighbour of ours? Yes it is, so how do you explain that lack? In fact Jabo was in The Year of Living Dangerously, but if you’re an Indonesian actor wanting to work in Australia it’s a long time between films, whereas back home, he’s been described (by Rolling Stone) as the Bruce Springsteen of Indonesia. He’s an enormous pop star in his own country, whereas in Australia I think we often blithely turn a blind eye to the society we live in and to our neighbours. When did we last have a film with a New Zealand character, or one from Papua New Guinea?
So, wanting the best actors we could get means that, in some cases, there are actors [that] audiences won’t have seen before, as well as some familiar actors, even if, as in the case of Geoff Morrell, we only ever see the back of his head. But he was the best actor for the father, and Gerard Kennedy was the best for the kangaroo-shooter, though he only gets two lines. They read the script and liked it, and maybe rather enjoyed the perversity of their small roles, and the large vista of the script.

The film is framed almost enigmatically, avoiding Hollywood-style feel-good closure. Was this an idea you started with?
It was important for me that this guy [Arun] might have an Australian father, and therefore a legitimate claim to be here. There’s a prologue that lasts for about a minute; then there’s a very taxing journey that takes about a hundred minutes, and you’ve got to sort out who the main characters are and what the main story is, then it goes somewhere you don’t think it’s going to go, then it ends in a way you didn’t expect.

How important was the parallelism between the three guys on the run and the three army unit chaps who are also stranded?
You’ve got the same problem being worked out in two different ways. The three refugees are trying to interpret the landscape with bad information, and the guys behind them are trying to interpret the tracks that don’t make any sense to them. In both groups, there’s increasing frustration and sense of being lost with the sort of information they’re getting, and they’re all under the same big sky. We were making a point about what they have in common.

It seemed to me you wanted to draw attention to this by giving both groups a damaged vehicle to deal with.
Yes, and, not to give too much away, when they get the ute going, that’s straight out of Bush Mechanics. That’s the kind of thing that people in reduced circumstances, in the desert, say, do by necessity. And you see some parallel behaviour in the way the Kangaroo 4 guys get their Land Rover going. This was all part of trying to bring it back to the idea of shared humanity.

And what about a third, perhaps lesser parallel: that of the two Indonesians whose boat has been sunk?
There’s some contrast with the Indonesian guys inasmuch as they are the only ones who have a familial relationship with each other. And because of their shared language, which the film gives in subtitles, they are talking comparatively sophisticated concepts.

It’s pretty daring making an Australian film where most of the dialogue is in subtitles...
In the first twenty minutes, it’s more or less wall-to-wall. We’ve actually lifted the subtitles up into the frame which you may have noticed.

How will you go about selling this film? Do you anticipate that the subtitles will be a problem?
We always understood we weren’t making a Strictly Ballroom, and I’ve always thought this film was only going to appeal to forty per cent of the population, but perhaps there are forty per cent who are unrepresented in cultural or political circles. So I suppose, like a lot of Australian films have to do, we’re looking for a niche market. I think Australian films have to go for high-concept films, with bold, well-stold stories and not try to compete with the big-budget Hollywood films.

How consciously were you drawing attention to water as a scarce national resource? And as a plot mover?
Well, I always thought the desert was going to act as a metaphor for the West, and that’s how it’s played overseas. The desert is a character in the film, a constraining character that really does have a look and a voice and imposes its will on the other characters. I know this sounds a bit waffly, but I think the only way forward on issues like water and climate is to make compassionate connections with other people, to seek cooperation. I think back to Ridley Scott’s Alien (1979) and how that was later seen to offer a metaphor for the AIDS virus, and maybe we’ve made a picture more relevant than we’d thought it was going to be.

Tell me about the choice of locations and the difficulties of shooting in remote and difficult terrains – if that’s what they were? How long was the shoot?
The choice of location was a very early decision. The budget was just over $3 million, which was about half of what I thought we could do it for, so planning had to be thorough and to start quite early. We committed to shooting in South Australia, standing in for Western Australia, for two reasons. One was that I wasn’t sure what the political climate in Western Australia was going to be about making a film on boat-people by the time we were due to start production, and there have been examples of films that didn’t judge that issue right, and were either never made or seriously delayed.

South Australia, on the other hand, has a rich socially liberal tradition. Also, in South Australia, because of the Leigh Creek coalmine there’s a highway running up into the Flinders Ranges, with motels along the way where we could house a crew of fifty.

The logistics determine where you can go. We needed remote locations but also accommodation for fifty people. And because of that dual need, that’s why most desert movies get made in South Australia; it’s got these fantastic locations and it’s got the infrastructure that can support a crew. In the opening sequence, we were shooting at Coffin Bay, where they shot Gallipoli [Peter Weir, 1981], and at Nilpena, where we shot about sixty per cent of our film, the last film they shot there was Rabbit-Proof Fence [Phillip Noyce] in 2002. Those places know what film crews need, and this makes it a lot easier.

Was the terrain actually difficult? It looks arduous for the actors...
It was a very difficult shoot, with sometimes six- and seven-day weeks, over seven-and-a-half to eight weeks, living in reduced circumstances. We just had great people who would get up before dawn and soldier on till dark. It’s very much a manpower industry; there’s not a lot of automation, particularly not where we went. We couldn’t take dollies and cranes; everything just had to be carried in and carried out. We didn’t want to film on the outskirts of Adelaide and fake it; we wanted to go to the actual environments, even though they were difficult. And it was really hard for the actors, especially for Rodney, Ken and Sri: they had it tough, they were pulling prickles out of the bottoms of their feet after I’d asked them to run through the bushes – and not once but several times, and without shoes. They went far beyond the call of duty. The delicious waterhole they jump into, because it was winter, was actually four degrees, and they were really hurting to be in it.

In Geoff Burton you had one of Australian’s most famous DOPs. How did he become involved? How did you find working with him?
I think Geoff is one of the world’s great cinematographers. Working with him, you feel he’s got such a resource in himself: he’s very bright, and a great lover of life and of art. We sent him the script, he read it and sent us a long letter about how he’d want to do it. He really sank his teeth into this film and his natural authority and generosity, and his capacity to kind of ‘roll with it’, really makes the film
what it is. I storyboarded the entire film before he came on, and he took the storyboard and worked through it really diligently, and I found it a very easy, unstressful relationship. You know, it could have been the other way with me being told how to direct my first feature film by a guy who knows how to direct, but Geoff came to the project with enormous passion and respect.

He makes the desert look threatening and unforgiving…
He’s the chief interpreter of the Australian landscape: on films like Sunday Too Far Away [Ken Hannam, 1975], Storm Boy [Henri Safran, 1976], The Year My Voice Broke [John Duigan, 1987] and Sirens [John Duigan, 1994]. You can go through his films and get a sense of what Australia looks like. Most people haven’t been to the desert and owe their perception of it to Geoff’s eye. When you gather up someone like Geoff for the project – someone who doesn’t need to say ‘Yes’, someone who has demonstrated remarkable judgment over the years – that is a great bonus.

How long were you involved in pre-production?
How difficult was it to raise finance?
Pre-production was officially eight weeks, and unofficial pre-production was sixteen weeks, but I’ve been working on this for seven years and the last two years were full-time. We had a mixture of money from the Adelaide Film Festival, from the South Australian Film Corporation, and from the FFC, and we were quite unusual in that we raised a lot of private money. We’ll probably have been the last 10BA film before the system changes. We had half a million dollars from twenty individual investors, who accounted for the gap after the FFC grant. We had investments from people in advertising, in education, from a graphic designer, from a guy who runs a construction business, and so on, with investments ranging from $5,000 to $200,000. We sent people the script, saying, ‘This is the deal.’

I was struck by a comparison with Michael Winterbottom’s refugee drama In This World (2002). Do you know it? It shares a sense of semi-documentary, of social issues, of road-movie affilia-
tions, use of subtitles, of uncertain outcome.
I thought that was a great film. I saw it in a cinema with only six other people, and, as we walked away from the cinema, we had to turn to each other and say, ‘Did you just see what I saw?’ Dendy came on to Lucky Miles early on, and they’d released In This World. They were passionate about the script and were quite realistic about the audiences it would reach, because of how they’d fared with In This World. In some ways, the script owes more to, say, Down by Law [Jim Jarmusch, 1986], than it does to In This World. But the Winterbottom film was a sort of touchstone, and it did flag marketing problems we might have. I can still conjure up sections of that film as we talk. I was very moved by it.

There is an alarming moment when a goanna attaches itself to Arun’s back in the desert. How did you manage this – or is it a trade secret?
It’s a stuffed goanna. Henry Dangar edited the film, and it’s all in the edit! It’s the only gag in the film, but it seemed appropriate, and it’s fun. It’s great to sit among an audience and know it’s coming up. Some of the shots in that sequence are only four frames, but any slower and you lose the illusion.

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