Bruce Beresford was one of the most prolific and proficient of the first generation of filmmakers in the Australian revival of the 1970s. More than most he worked adventurously across a wide genre range, and perhaps it was this facility that made him such an attractive proposition to Hollywood and elsewhere.

WHEN Bruce Beresford was in Melbourne in August to promote his memoir, Josh Hartnett definitely wants to do this … true stories from a life in the screen trade (HarperCollins, 2007), he spoke to Brian McFarlane about his Australian films.

To get the trivial over first, did you once, as one database confidently states, use the pseudonym ‘Martin Agrippa’?

No, Barry Humphries and I made a film for one of his stage shows about a moviemaker whose name was Martin Agrippa. It was a send-up; he was an underground filmmaker and we called him Martin Agrippa.

How did you come to get your first film, The Hunter, made?

It was made when I was still a student. I’d just got a 16mm camera, a wind-up Bolex, and I was in the country. It was the first 16mm film I’d made, though I’d done quite a lot of 8mm films before that. I shot it out at my uncle’s farm at Coora in New South Wales, and then, when I came back to Sydney, I thought it would be nice to put sound on it. I didn’t really know how to do this, so I went to one of the studios where I got a girl who played the violin to play a couple of folk songs, and then I added some gunshots. There was a guy at the studio who said, ‘That’s easy,’ and I could see how he did it – laying the film in one synchronizer and putting parallel ‘bang-bangs’ in the other. I thought this was a pushover and we just mixed the sound. The film was shown at the Sydney Film Festival, then it went off to a few European ones.

As I understand it, you spent the early part of your career in the UK. What took you there?

When I graduated from the University of Sydney in 1962, there was actually no film work here of any kind, and also I found no one was interested. I used to talk about films to people and there wasn’t much response. It’s completely different now. So I got on a boat, even before I knew whether I’d got my degree or not, and I went off to England thinking I’d find some sort of work there. That was the only reason I went.

Did you then get involved with BFI [British Film Institute] Production Board?

When I first got to England, I started applying for some jobs … There was a job...
"The only reason I made all those very different films is that I find each film so absorbing of my time and thought that, when it's finished, I like to think of something completely different, because it's more stimulating to me."

BRUCE BERESFORD [PICTURED RIGHT]
When did you start with the BFI Production Board?

I can't imagine! [laughs] Maybe people had never seen Australian comedies on the screen. Everyone was surprised, because when we first showed the Barry McKenzie film to distributors they didn’t want to show it at all. No one showed the remotest interest, so Philip Adams [producer] arranged to hire the cinemas and we just showed it ourselves. Maybe they thought it was too ‘rude’, but also there’d never been any tradition of Australian films being shown and drawing an audience.

How did you become involved in the ‘Barry McKenzie’ films [The Adventures of Barry McKenzie, 1972; Barry McKenzie Holds His Own, 1974]?

They [the ocker comedies] really got the revival going, didn’t they?

They did, but they didn’t do me any good. It was a huge mistake for me. I suppose it did get my foot in the door, but the critical reaction was so hostile I could hardly believe it. Barry and I would read some of the reviews and say, ‘What on earth are they on about?’ It’s just a comedy, and a very good-natured one. They were going on as if, in some way, we were betraying the country. There was a whole period where I was totally persona non grata. The Film Commission would have cocktail parties for visiting directors and I’d never be invited!

You are one of the major names of the 1970s Australian revival. What would you say to the idea that you were the great craftsman of the period across a wide genre range?

That’s usually taken as a sign of essential triviality! The only reason I made all those very different films is that I find each film so absorbing of my time and thought that, when it’s finished, I like to think of something completely different, because it’s more stimulating to me. Perhaps if you settle to one genre, you’re likely to get more acclaim.

Did you have any sense of pattern? Were you deliberately moving from broad comedy to period drama to heist thriller, or did you just take whatever came up?

No, to any of that. I just took whatever in-

advertised in the papers for a film editor at the Central Office of Information on the South Bank. I applied for that, and I showed them The Hunter and a couple of little films I’d done in Australia, and they said, ‘These are good, you can have the job.’ I thought this was great, but they added, ‘The thing is you’ve got to go to the union and get their approval. They’re running a closed shop and they’ve got to approve you."

So I went to the ACTT’s [Association of Cinema and Television Technicians] place in Soho Square: it was very hard even to get in there, as it had a great big steel door. I finally got in and met a funny little man who said he thought the role should have, and I talk to them quite a bit about their roles. I always like to exploit what they can do rather than put them in a straitjacket.

I was going to ask you if you just like working with actors, because you are a director who always gets good acting performances from casts. How much and what sort of direction do you give them?

Barry [Humphries] and I were friendly in London and ‘Barry McKenzie’ was a comic strip in Private Eye. Well, I was reading it one day and thought, This would make a very funny film, and I suggested to Barry that we should do a film script of it, because I’d heard they were going to set up a film fund in Australia and I thought that was the kind of thing we should make first off because it would probably be popular. It seemed to me a good idea if they put government funding into a film that people actually went to watch. This would create confidence. And it was very funny.

Anyway, I did an adaptation of it while Barry was away on some tour, and when he came back we went through it together and polished it a bit. He gave me some stuff from a musical he’d written based on the comic strip; it was never quite finished but I put quite a bit of the material from it into the film script, including some of the songs.

A lot of it was filmed in England. It had to be, really, because it was a sort of ‘innocent abroad’ story, but we did about a quarter of it back here.

Why do you think that strain of ‘ocker’ comedies (Alvin Purple [Tim Burstall, 1973], Stork [Tim Burstall, 1971], etc.) were so popular then?

I don’t know how watchable those ocker comedies are now ...

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Did you have any sense of pattern? Were you deliberately moving from broad comedy to period drama to heist thriller, or did you just take whatever came up?

No, to any of that. I just took whatever in-
terested me or excited me. Things like The Getting of Wisdom [1978] I’d wanted to do since I read [Henry Handel Richardson’s] book when I was about fifteen, and I always wanted to make a film of it.

What attracted you to it particularly?

I heard that you were once trying to set up a production of [Henry Handel Richardson’s trilogy] The Fortunes of Richard Mahony and I wondered what has become of the project.

I wrote a miniseries adaptation of it. I’ve read all of the Richardson novels, and very much liked Maurice Guest, which they made into a film called Rhapsody [Charles Vidor, 1953], a real shocker. About Mahony, I wrote first of all a thesis script and expanded it into a miniseries, and they both exist. I haven’t given up on this and there are people in Melbourne I’m talking about to about it. Zelda Rosenbaum and Oscar Whitbread commissioned the script about two years ago now. Financing has been a problem. At one point the ABC was interested, then it wasn’t.

It’s a harrowing story but it would make a great miniseries. I greatly simplified the number of characters. When you break down those three volumes of the book, there’s not all that much plot. It’s fairly straightforward, but it’s got a huge cast of characters, though people keep coming in who are recreations of earlier characters, so in the miniseries I combined some of these, because there was often no advantage in introducing new people.

When and where did you first see the play Don’s Party?

I didn’t see the play at all. I was in London, where I’d gone to live after the critical batting of the Barry McKenzie films made me persona non grata in Australia. The play was sent to me by Phillip Adams. I thought it was quite outstanding, very funny, very acute and with a great bunch of characters. Part of the enthusiasm of my response was that it was about types of people I knew, mainly from my days at university. It’s the only film I’ve directed where I didn’t have to do extensive research.

If you were asked what is this play/film about, how would you answer? For example, is it a study in disappointed aspirations? Is its satire chiefly directed at suburban middle-class leftism?

The targets seemed to me to be both left and right. David [Williamson] cleverly wove the characterizations into the politics – all are failures in some way and most were compensating with political/social idealism.

I think he based all the people on friends of his.

Was it reading Myself When Young that inclined you to change Laura from a budding novelist in the novel to a promising pianist in the film?

Yes. But it was also a matter of its being much more filmable. It meant we had scenes of Laura sitting at the piano and out-raging people by playing Thalberg, whereas it would have been much more difficult to make it interesting to show her writing.

It was one of a number of classic Australian novels adapted to the screen then …

I know. Someone recently wrote an article in a literary magazine saying this wasn’t so and I wrote a rebuttal naming them all.

Why do you think there were so many of these adaptations of novels, often period pieces about young people coming of age?

Maybe they were from books people had read when they were younger and that had made a big impact on them, and they just felt ‘I’ve got to film this’.

Do you think there may have been an element of hoping the prestige of the novels and their titles would rub off a bit on the films?

I don’t know. You see, I don’t think those novels were all that well known – perhaps in Australia but not really outside the country. I even wonder how well known they were here. As for My Brilliant Career, I think it’s a pretty boring book.

I had the impression that Phillip and David didn’t think much of it at first, but when it was shown publicly it had a good response. Critics were in general quite enthusiastic.

Am I straining too hard to find continuity in your early work if I suggest that in their different ways quite a few of them deal with people straining against authority figures and structures of various kinds – Barry McKenzie and the Brits; the Labor voters in Don’s Party [1976], Laura in Wisdom, the soldiers in Breaker Morant [1980], the girls in Puberty Blues [1981]?

You’re right, I think, though I’ve never really thought about it. I guess I’m attracted to certain kinds of story and that’s probably true for everyone, according to their personality traits, to something that’s already within them. It may have something to do with what I said before about ‘casting’ myself as an outsider.

One of your films which gets less written about was Money Movers [1978]. It was a bit of an oddity among the films that got the revival moving.

Well, that came about inadvertently because I had written this script I wanted the SAFC [South Australian Film Commission] to do, called ‘The Ferryman’, based on a very famous attempted murder case
in Sydney, round 1906. There was a book called Death Cellar Darlinghurst, which I’d loosely adapted. The script was about the manipulation of crowds: because the guy who’d tried to murder his wife was very good-looking, he’d managed to turn popular opinion against the wife and persuade everyone that she had administered the poison to herself in order to discredit the husband – an absurd proposition. It became a cause célèbre. I thought it was an interesting psychological study.

I fiddled with that for a while. ‘Breaker’ Morant was an interesting kind of world. It was very unusual in the context of the movies that I’ve worked on. ‘Breaker’ Morant was a founder-member of the Australian Labor Party, canonized by the Left but he was manipulative and devious in this case. My feeling was always that someone had conceived of the film, you’ll see that there’s nothing they wrote in the movie. But the judge said, ‘I have no interest in that. The contract says they are to get screen credit and they must. The contract has to be observed.’

It was very unusual in the context of the time: a genre thriller ...

Yes, and very gory too. It was very savagely cut when they showed it in England. It wasn’t at all popular in Australia. I’ve never seen it since it first came out.

How did you come across the Breaker Morant story?

I fiddled with that for a while. ‘Breaker’ Morant lived for a while near Kurrajong Heights where my parents lived in New South Wales, and my mother pointed out his house to me. It’s now a kind of convalescent hospital or hospice. I started getting a bit of interest then and did some research about him. Then a whole lot of things happened. Someone gave me a copy of this play by Kenneth Ross and a film script had been written by Jonathan Hardy and David Stevens for a TV movie about ‘Breaker’ Morant, but I didn’t like it at all.

They get a credit for it ...

I know they do! They didn’t originally but they took me to court and won. I had the only credit as I didn’t film their script at all.

What happened was that the SAFC bought their script and bought the play, and they gave them all to me and said, ‘You can use this as research material.’ Well, I didn’t use any of their script because it was completely different from what I was doing. I used a little bit out of the play, mainly in the first scene where the Scotsman’s on the stand. The play was one of those where the actors talk to the audience and you couldn’t really adapt it to the screen.

When the film was first released it only had my name on the screenplay, but David Stevens and Jon Hardy kicked up a huge fuss, and it went to court in Adelaide. The judge pointed out they had a contract with the SAFC that said they were to get screen credit. I didn’t know this and said that if you look at the screenplay I wrote and look at the film, you’ll see that there’s nothing they wrote in the movie. But the judge said, ‘I was a worry commercially! The film never made any money, even though it is quite highly regarded. In England, though, the reviews were horrendous, but very good in America.

Elements of war adventure and courtroom drama – a surefire combination?

But an inevitably non-happy ending – did that concern you?

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Were the English cross about the representation of Kitchener?

I don’t know. It opened in London about the same time as Gallipoli [Peter Weir, 1981], and that was very nasty about the Brits, but it made a fortune and ran forever in the West End, whereas Breaker Morant ran three days in London. It started on a Friday and they pulled it out of the cinema on the Monday. This was depressing but in spite of good reviews in Australia and the US it never did find an audience. But, after all these years, I’ve just been to Canberra to introduce a screening of it.

You seemed to be interested in the way hierarchies worked and in more or less enclosed milieus in films like the football club’s committees in The Club [1980] and that surfing enclave in Puberty Blues.

It’s the conflict again that’s interesting. The conflict in The Club is fabulous, with all those guys pulling in different directions. About Puberty Blues, I picked up that book in a newsagent’s while I was waiting for a bus. It was written by a girl who was only fifteen, Kathy Lette [co-written with Gabrielle Carey], and it gave me such insight into the way those kids were living. And the conflicts get heightened in groups like a club or a surfe culture, but, as well, most of

What sorts of things about it attracted you to it? In what ways does it seem a peculiarly Australian story?

It had a lot of things that interested me. The basis of any screenplay is conflict, and the conflict in this was enormous, and it had a very interesting range of characters. I had a lot of fun writing it and it took me a long time to write. I did a lot of research about the Boer War: I went to the Imperial War Museum in London and read letters home. It was in a letter from a guy in the firing squad that I found they’d held hands as they walked towards the chairs. I never found out all that much about the three main soldiers. I knew a reasonable amount about ‘Breaker’, but I kind of made up the other two characters played by Bryan Brown [Handcock] and Lewis Fitz-Gerald [Witton]. I thought, maybe the Bryan Brown character was a very ordinary, down-to-earth Australian. He’d been a farrier, so I based him on uncles I’d had. Then I thought the other one was just a naive boy, who was really quite at sea in all this conflict. So I set out to contrast those three people. They were very much up against authority, against Kitchener and the rest. The fact that those other soldiers were given orders to shoot people was true, but that doesn’t mean you should do it.

There were a lot of interesting moral aspects...
And where did you film it?

In Queensland. The town was called Murgon, only about a hundred miles from Brisbane, and near there was an Aboriginal community. We shot a lot of it in Murgon but we built the Aboriginal community you see in the film. It was like the real one, but the trouble was that the real one was much further from the town, and I wanted one where you could walk into the town, so we found a grove of gumtrees and we built it in there.

It was a rarity among films being made here at the time, but nobody went to see it. I knew it wasn’t going to do any good when I went to a dinner party on the Gold Coast with these very rich people. The lady sitting next to me asked me what film I was making, and when I told her I’d just made one with an all-Aboriginal cast, she said, ‘How disgusting!’

Did you see it primarily as an individual’s story and struggle or were you drawn to the notion of the social problem film?

Those films have both got quite a bit of humour in them. Even *Breaker Morant* has got some very funny lines, right down to the ending when Morant [Edward Woodward] tells the firing squad to make sure they shoot straight.

*The Fringe Dwellers* [1986] may well have been the first feature film with all the key roles played by Indigenous actors.

No. Charles Chauvel’s *Jedda* [1955] was the first. I found Nene Gare’s novel on a street stall in London, and it had a picture on the front that looked to me like an Australian Aborigine, so I bought it just for that, but it turned out to be a very well-written novel and it was such a touching story. Her husband was director of Aboriginal Affairs in Western Australia, and they’d spent years living on various communities in remote areas, and *The Fringe Dwellers* was based on a true story.

How did you cast the film?

There were two actors, Bob Maza and Justine Saunders, who played the mother and father. They’d both had professional acting experience, but Kristina Nehm, who played Trilby, hadn’t. She was with an Aboriginal dance group, and I went up to Townsville to see her when someone recommended her.

Have there been other regular collaborators you’ve found especially congenial to work with? Editor William Anderson, Judy Lovell, Fran Burke, David Copping …

If they’re really good, like those people, it’s enormously helpful. You know what they’re like, and they know how I like to work. And it’s been like that in Australia and by and large too, like Herbert Pinter who’s designed about six films for me, and John Stoddart’s done about the same.

The [Australian/Canadian] co-production *Black Robe* [1991]: how did you come across that story?

Again, I read the novel, by Brian Moore. I’d read all of his books up to that point. I bought the novel in a bookshop in Los Angeles and when I read it I thought, This is like opening up another world. The insight he had into the Jesuits and the Indians, and how they related to one another, seemed really true, stripped of any kind of romantic overlay about either group, and I was gripped by it. I called my agent and said I had to make a film of this novel, and when I told him it was by Brian Moore, he said, ‘I think he lives here in California.’ So I looked him up in the phone book, found him and drove out to his house.

I thought it was a great story to tell, and you feel when you watch it that everyone is so real and believable. It’s not just a mat- ter of adventure but of sheer hard slog. I thought Peter James made it look great.

I also shot [Australian/American co-production] *Paradise Road* [1997], which I was greatly moved by …

We were all amazed when it didn’t do well. It was so-so in Australia, terrible in the US and Britain. I think they thought it was just silly, the business of forming that humming orchestra. I spent a year researching it all over the world, talking to women who’d been in those camps. I read Betty Jeffreys’ *White Cockles*, and there were quite a few other books by women who’d survived the camps. I thought it was a great story, but for some reason it just didn’t interest anybody.

You’ve filmed all over the place: do you value about him particularly as a collaborator?

It didn’t do any business, in spite of that fantastic cast of women. I felt it wasn’t going to work when I was at a movie, in Double Bay I think, and a trailer came on for *Paradise Road*, and it showed all the women in the camp. There were two ladies sitting behind me and one of them said, ‘There’s a film I don’t want to see.’ I think they – and other people – thought it was going to be horribly harrowing. Anyway, the critics didn’t like it. And those women! Pauline Collins was wonderful – and so was Elizabeth Spriggs.

I’m sorry you didn’t make a lot of money out of such a good film.

English actors are so charming. I’ve hardly had any English actors. The English are like that too, and the English are easy to deal with. For one thing, nobody’s impressed by celebrities, so that they tend to be very relaxed and behave normally, which does the celebrities a lot of good, because they’re not used to that. Australians aren’t rude to them; they just take it in their stride and treat it like a job. The English are like that too, and the English actors are so charming. I’ve hardly ever worked with one I didn’t like.