Piecing Together the Puzzle

An interview with Peter Duncan


LET’S START with the title ‘Unfinished Sky’: whose idea was the large jigsaw puzzle that seems to consist mainly of sky?

It was my idea. My wife, Stephanie, and I went away to the central coast of New South Wales one weekend when I was writing the script, and two fortuitous events happened. One was a blackout, and I thought I could use that. The other was that Stephanie had brought a jigsaw puzzle with her, so we were doing this puzzle by candlelight, which I thought was quite romantic.

And I thought this could be a great metaphor for John’s [William McInnes] life before Tahmeena [Monic Hendrickx], a life of struggling with the impossible – to complete this vast expanse of pure blue sky was a daunting task that could take him the rest of his life. But people take different things from the puzzle: some think its incompleteness is a tribute to his late wife’s influence; others, myself included, think it’s about his not letting go of her, as a result of his guilt over her death. So it becomes representative of a sort of enslavement to his past.
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PETER DUNCAN
Why did you choose ‘Unfinished Sky’ for your title? Does it imply that everyone’s life is a work in progress anyway?

Yes, we never have that last piece of the puzzle to put in – or if we do that’s when we die.

Is this the first Australian/Dutch co-production? How did it come about?

It’s not technically a co-production, but it’s based on a film called The Polish Bride [Kareem Traïdia, 1998], produced in Holland about ten years ago and very successful there. It was made by a Dutch company that got tired of making good films in Holland that only had very small international distribution because of the language barrier. So they decided they should try to find some partners in the English-speaking world, and they ended up hooking up with a couple of Australians, Cathy and Mark Overett, who had their own company. They formed this joint venture called New Holland Pictures, and decided their first film would be an adaptation of The Polish Bride. When they decided they were ready, I went to speak to them and give them my take on the script. Obviously, it had to be substantially adapted, not just to the physical circumstances of the shift of setting from Holland to Australia, but some of the personal circumstances are very different. And my approach was to make a different film.

What was the nature of the Dutch involvement, apart from the leading lady (Hendricks)?

Anton Smit was the co-producer along with Cathy Overett, and because [Dutch production company] IdTV Films was involved in the joint venture, New Holland, their senior people participated in the development of the project and in getting significant Dutch financing out of various film funds. So there are elements of ‘co-production’ but not in the strict sense of how we use the term.

Would you agree that the film’s narrative is a classic one in the sense that here’s a life without much point or purpose, just waiting for something to flick a switch?

Yes, I think that’s right. The tension of the film comes from the fact that John is not only without purpose but has isolated himself quite deliberately from the outside world, and has almost become a stranger in his own home. He has a choice when Tahmeena comes into his life: she could flick a switch and he could come to life, or he could choose not to engage with her. This is what really attracted me to the film. There are obviously political issues which we didn’t want to be didactic about, but they’re inherent in the story. One of the very sad consequences of 9/11 is how Western people have become more fearful, and less trusting of things that are different. That strikes me as tragic when you think that part of the enrichment of life is to be part of that difference and to embrace it. So I thought, there’s a little metaphor here in John’s choice: is he going to embrace the difference or is he going to shut it out or push it away? Once he makes the choice – and his heart isn’t quite dormant – he’s unable to shut her out.

Your protagonists are John, the farmer who seems to just be going through the motions, and Tahmeena, a damaged woman fleeing exploitation. Her damage, the physical aspect anyway, is clearly visible. How did you go about suggesting John’s emptiness?

Well, there were a few strategies we used. The credit sequence depicts a day in his life, suggesting a very isolated man with no human contact apart from watching banal television. We did a number of things in terms of the cinematography, by not letting the colours be too saturated or bright, making it a bit grainier and rougher. Also, there was much more handheld camera work in the first half of the movie, because we’re looking at a life not quite in balance, with no clear rhythm or flow. And the same thing applies to Tahmeena: jagged camera moves, unsaturated colours and cutting in a deliberately jarring way to show her sense of dislocation and inability to comprehend her circumstances when she wakes up on the farm. All this gave us room to move in the second half of the film, where we could bring the colours up, make it feel richer, keep the camera on a dolly and keep it flowing, with a cutting style that was more traditionally rhythmical.

Why did you choose to make Tahmeena an Afghan, and one who speaks no English?

We had many discussions about where Tahmeena should come from, before deciding it should be the Middle East for obvious political reasons. We wanted to give Tahmeena a back story that audiences would comprehend. To say ‘Afghanistan’ is really a way of saying ‘this is a woman who comes from a very, very troubled place’. Secondly, I really didn’t want it to be about an Islamic woman. I wanted it to be about a man and a woman who come from different places, and if she were Islamic there would have been all sorts of rituals and traditions that would have to be observed in the script, and I kept thinking this would get in the way. Instead, I wanted a woman who was smart, who had a background of intelligent parents, perhaps academics, who questioned authority and perhaps got into a lot of trouble for it. Looking at the history of Afghanistan really helped us because, while it’s inherently an Islamic nation, under the Russian occupation and even before that, when Russia was running puppet regimes, it was a relatively secular place. It’s therefore credible that someone like Tahmeena, born in the early seventies, grew up with a socialist way of thinking about the world rather than an Islamic way, and that helped me with the character.

Would you say that Unfinished Sky is as much a political film as a love story?

I would never say the political element is as strong as the relationship, though there are unquestionably politics inherent in it, and the politics are represented by the circumstances in which we meet these two people, who could be seen as representatives of the Western world and that part of the Arab world that is suffering so badly at the moment. Yeah, inherently political but I wanted the politics to work on an almost subconscious level, and for the strength of the movie to be in the relationship.

I was surprised at the first full shot of the house, at how substantial it was. Did you deliberately plan to keep this until the film was well under-way?

Absolutely. It was part of the voyage of discovery that Tahmeena goes on as she and John learn to share the house. Previously, John has only been using about one-fifth of the house, so that’s all we need to see, and in Tahmeena’s first few days there she...
is totally disoriented and can’t get a full picture of it. And we very deliberately held that back till the scene where she’s playing with Elvis [the dog] and she turns around and sees that it’s really a rather magnificent country estate. It also reveals something about John, the fact that he’s shut himself down – that he hasn’t come from rural penury, but from a family that has once had a lot of money, probably made a fortune out of wool in the sixties, sent him to boarding school and gave him a lot of opportunities. This makes his life sadder, but at the same time it makes the potential for him to re-claim his heritage that much stronger.

The unemphatic serenity of this countryside seemed to me to throw into contrast the violence that erupts towards the end. What was your attitude to the way the landscape is represented?

We wanted to suggest John having ceased to notice the landscape. To him, it’s just background, not eventful. In the first half of the film we didn’t want the countryside to be dramatic; we wanted it just to exist. He’s so lost his sense of place that he doesn’t notice the beauty around him. And what Tahmeena has been able to do is to open his eyes to his own environment, so that in the second half the images of the countryside become much richer.

I was impressed with the way the film is shot and edited, especially in getting the narrative underway at the start. How deliberate were your decisions in these matters, both in relation to this early part of the film and later?

We’ve covered a bit of that. The broad thing for me is in the relationship, and when I was writing drafts I found that the longer I put off John being nice the greater the tension became. And throwing in the stuff about his wife and the allegations of murder increased the tension further. Hope and fear is what it is all about. Unlike in The Polish Bride, I wanted the audience to feel the tension from the get-go.

How did you go about casting your two leads?

If you want a big, burly Aussie, William looks perfect and he’s also a great actor and really smart. I didn’t want him to be the typical Australian farmer down on his luck. About Monic, Anton Smit said, ‘Can I get you to meet her?’ but there was no pressure about having to use her. When she walked into the room, though, I saw this Amazonian beauty, not as I’d remembered her from The Polish Bride, and again with a fabulous mind. On the first day of shooting, the crew, who’d wondered why I was getting a Dutch actress to play an Afghani, were very impressed not only with her courtesy and intelligence, but by the sheer quality and power of her acting. There was a real feeling among the crew on the first few days that they were on to something special, and this led them to pull out all the stops. Her English was perfectly fluent; she was almost embarrassingly multilingual.

To go back some years: as I understand, you had a BA and an LLB before getting a BA in Film and Television from AFTRS [Australian Film Television and Radio School]. In what ways, if any, have your earlier degrees influenced you in your filmmaking career?

I think my experience as a law student and working in a big law firm helped me to grasp some of the grim commercial aspects and practical realities of filmmaking. I’d been attracted by the prospect of being a barrister one day, and I’d always loved debating. One of my strengths is the ability to sit down with actors and have a coherent conversation so that none of us is left in any doubt about what each line means and where we’re going. If a director hasn’t ef-
fectively communicated with the actors and the crew, there are so many different ways a film can turn, and it's much better to resolve differences beforehand.

I think my training helped in these ways. For instance, I had long discussions with Judy Davis before we started Children of the Revolution and we'd sometimes disagree, but I think what she really liked was not having a director just telling her, 'We're going to do it this way.' So, we didn't have a problem on that film, and part of that I attribute to the disciplined thinking necessary for some of the study for Law subjects, and that enables you to have clear and persuasive conversations.

Where did the idea for Children of the Revolution come from? It strikes me as one of the most original Australian films of the 1990s.

My grandfather lived with my mother and myself, and he was a communist and a very smart man. He was a living paradox because he was also a bank manager. He was so fervent in his beliefs that he turned both his daughters deeply right-wing because he drove them mad with non-stop partisan rhetoric. What intrigued me about him was that he never lost the faith, and that idea started to bounce around in my brain, and I thought how hard it must have been to have spent fifty years of his life working for the cause and then, after the events in, say, Prague in the 1960s, to wonder whether you'd got it wrong: do I admit that Stalin was a brutal tyrant? How does that impact on my life? That started to fascinate me and I began writing it as a short story, then one day I thought I'd make the central character a woman – a 'hot' woman for whom all these guys are becoming communist because they want to be with her. Trying as I was not to mock communism or the fervour of communist beliefs, there were holes in her thinking. The Geoffrey Rush character is really only there because he's in love with her. He only went to meetings for that reason, but I find that charmingly human.

Anyway, I wrote this short treatment and that was part of my submission to get into the Film School, and I think it was a key factor in my getting in. I had a job in London lined up in an entertainment law firm, but took the Film School offer because I thought I'd regret it one day if I didn't at least try it. Getting in gave a certain legitimacy to what was a quite radical life change.

You wrote the witty screenplay as well as direct-

ing. Did you have any models in mind for the mockumentary mode of characters addressing the camera?

There's obviously parallels with Reds [Warren Beatty, 1981] and Zeig [Woody Allen, 1983], and I just thought that dealing with so much history and so much complexity it would be not just funny, in dealing with mock-truth, but an efficient way of telling the story. It was extraordinary that, in some of the countries where we screened it, the penny wouldn't drop until we were, say, an hour into it. There was one screening in New York where a guy said he'd enjoyed it all except for the 'fiction' that Australia was involved in Vietnam, 'I find that offensive.' He'd accepted all the fiction as fact and the one fact as bullshit.

In light of your next-but-one film, Passion, as compared with your first and your latest, would you say you are a chameleon, rather than a director who pursues a certain type of material? What seems to me to underlie your feature films is a sense of the inseparability of love and pain.

Yes, that makes a lot of sense to me. No, I'm not committed to a genre. In my early work, I was doing mainly comedy, but in Children, as you say, there are different modes. And if I can 'invent myself' in a story, of whatever kind, then I think I've got a shot at directing it.

Where did your interest in Percy Grainger come from? What fascinated you about him?

It was very much a hired-gun job. There was another director attached to the job; he left it and Richard [ Roxburgh] was involved [playing Grainger] and he got me involved. At first I said no to it, then we had more discussions about it and I began to see what it could be. What really started to fascinate me about Percy wasn't the prunence of his sexual preferences but the fact that he was such a courageous radical, yet that he was at the same time confined socially and professionally in this very restrictive mode of existence. He hated playing the piano but he was very good at it; he was forced to wear a white tie every night rather than his blue towelling clothes, and so he was a man who was struggling to be a radical in a very conservative world.

When he died he left a letter saying he didn't want any of the things he left behind (the stuff that's now in his museum) to be gone into for at least ten years. 'I'm hoping that people will be able to cope then.' We haven't got to where Percy was yet in 2008 – perhaps we never will.

Do you think of Passion as a biopic or as a study in a kind of creative genius, driven by strange lusts and anguish and joy?

We got some odd criticism saying we'd left out this or that bit of Percy's life, but (a) that might not be where the drama lies and (b) you can't tell every page of a person's diary in 100 minutes. You have to be selective, so it was my decision just to concentrate on those pre-war years in London and get an edit of the man, rather than make it episodic. I think television is better for biography than film, because you can do it in an episodic way that reflects the life.

What was your experience of working with Richard Roxburgh? Do you normally give your actors much direction?

No. With Richard, it was like it was with Judy: our work together is done before we get on the set. It's a matter of conversation, of understanding; we've been over the lines, debated the script, decided what works and what doesn't, and because he's so smart he required very little direction. For me what matters is to be on the same page; the nightmare is to be on set with an actor who thinks he's playing an apple and you think you're directing an orange.

On Unfinished Sky, Bob Humphreys [cinematographer] and I decided to shot-list the whole movie; I'd never done this before, but we talked about every scene and what would be, in an ideal world, the best shots we could get. It's like what I was saying about talking to the actors: the mere fact that we'd had that conversation helped enormously, and on the actual day of shooting we were able to rationalize the shots knowledgeably so as to fit in with the brutal filming schedule. It is the most economical, cost-effective way for a director to spend his time.

At least one review I once read mentioned Ken Russell as a comparative figure, in relation to films about obsessed artists. What do you think of such a comparison?

My recollection is that there was a Ken Russell film that had Grainger in it as a character, who did a lot of running about. Don [Watson, co-writer] and Richard and I had a lot of conversations about his physicality but we felt there was also an inherent intellectualness about the man, so we had to respect that and to give him some stilliness. I think there were some reviews
that felt we hadn’t captured that essence of madness. I thought we had, that it was just a question of degree and balance.

**A Little Bit of Soul** takes a while for the viewer to be sure of having caught its tone. Was this deliberate on your part?

No, that wasn’t my intention. There was a desire on my part to have a Brad-and-Janet situation with the two scientists going away to the country house for the weekend, and when Geoffrey’s [Rush] character comes in you realize it’s all a bit mad. I wasn’t setting out for it to be a long tease.

Where did the idea for its bizarre plot come from?

After we’d finished *Children*, several of us were in Italy where we rented a magnificent villa, where there were all these alarming-looking farm implements and axes. It looked as if the Borgias had decorated it. So I just got this idea: what if these people invited you round to dinner and it turned out to be something else entirely?

**Did you find directing the telemovie *Hell Has Harbour Views* (2008) a very different experience from making feature films for the cinema?**

It’s different because the economy of scale is more brutal. It’s much harder. We’re all subject to budgetary constraints in this country, whether it’s film or television. The fixed costs go up as the budgets go down. You have four weeks with an ABC drama. I’m not being critical of the ABC in this matter, but it’s four weeks whatever the content is. *Hell* was actually quite big because we had big sets, film locations with big houses suggesting Sydney at its most garish. The tight schedule really does affect your style, your capacity to do different things, and if you’ve got a big script in terms of locations, as *Hell* was, you have to play it carefully and think creatively. What plans do you have for your next project?

Valentine’s Day (2008) has been shot and screens [on ABC1] on 6 July. We shot that last year in Melbourne. My next feature is *Miracle at Virgin’s End*, which is like a religion version of *Children of the Revolution*, with struggling motel owners on the brink of committing arson to collect the insurance, while being quite ethical devout people. When a young girl turns up pregnant, it’s as if the second coming is about to be unleashed in Virgin’s End. Its title suggests I’m getting back into my Preston Sturges/Coen brothers mode: it’s a bit mad, a bit anarchic.

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