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FAMILY TIES

by Erin Free | September 17, 2008 12:18 | Edited September 18, 2008 12:23

With his debut feature BITTER & TWISTED, actor/writer/director CHRISTOPHER WEEKES announces

himself as a major talent to watch.



Where did your inspiration come from in creating these fascinatingly troubled characters?

"The whole project really came about because I was trying to depict the Sydney I grew up in - suburban Sutherland filled with power lines and water reserves, large open parks and empty streets filled with parked cars and giant driveways. I wanted to see that version of my Sydney up on screen. I'd already seen it a thousand times as a steel metropolis and a never ending beach. I really wanted to show what my Sydney looked like and what I found beautiful about that. The characters in *Bitter & Twisted* were just these personalities I dreamt up that slot into that world quite nicely. They didn't see their suburban home as a reward or their little slice of heaven. They saw it as something quite isolated. They all find themselves at a point in their life where they desperately need to be around people and human contact - but this small little bubble they're stuck in is making that impossible, and so I guess that's how they end up so troubled in the film. That probably makes it sound far heavier than it really is. There's more hope than hopelessness with these guys. The fun, I hope, is in watching them all embrace their inner quirk."

How difficult was the project to get up financially?

"It seemed impossible. For years I got sent rejection letter after rejection letter from the funding bodies, but eventually I just realised this film was never going to get made that way. I was twenty when I finished the first draft of the script and I spent so much time and effort chasing this magic blank cheque that years started to slip by without me knowing. Just after I turned twenty four, my mum died rather suddenly on me, which was the true defining moment of my life so far. I lived alone with her and my brother - and she had only just turned fifty when this sudden tragedy took her away from us. I felt this compounding of time come crushing down on me. I was almost half of her age, and I was stuck staring at the mailbox every day hoping a miracle was going to arrive and make my dreams come true. So I took the decision to save up and make this movie on my own. It was my dream and it wasn't going to wait any longer."

You've gathered a wonderful cast of Australian actors? Any dramas in getting them all together?

"Once I'd decided I was making *Bitter & Twisted* on my own, the first thing I did was try and get a copy of the script to Noni Hazlehurst. I'd always written the main role of Penelope with her in mind from the start. I just knew in my heart she was the right actress to bring that character alive. I had a friend from school who was working on *Better Homes and Gardens* as a boom operator - and I begged and begged him to drop it on her makeup table one day. About twenty four hours, later I got a call on my mobile, and it was

Noni. Straight away she said she was going to make this film whatever it took. That was really how the incredible cast begun. Everybody I went after from that point said they wanted to come on board once they found out Noni was going to play Penelope. And that was no small risk for them. Almost all of these actors are well respected, highly successful professionals in their field, and I was trying to assemble a film with no money, no experience and no idea how we were going to pull it off. The risk they took agreeing to lend their name and talent to a film directed by a twenty four year old guy from Sutherland with no previous credits was enormous. Every door that opened, opened because of Noni and her amazing faith in the story. She believed in me probably even before I did."

How did it feel stepping onto the set/location on your first day as a feature filmmaker?

"It was terrifying. I had no idea how we were going to finish *Bitter & Twisted*, but it was my dream and I was going to get to the end no matter how daunting it all became. I had a lot to learn but, to be honest, I've never felt happier or more at home than I did with a crew, some actors and a camera. Every day of shooting was a giant adventure. I enjoy insurmountable challenges, so perhaps making an independent film feeds right into that."

Obvious question: did the fact that you'd worked as an actor make it easier for you to work with your actors?

"I hadn't really worked as an actor since I was a young kid. I did a little time on *A Country Practice* when I was 9, then the odd random line on an Australian drama here and there until I was 15, but then that was really it. I spent the year before we made *Bitter & Twisted* holding umbrellas above the cast on the set of *Home & Away* when it rained. I really wasn't a working actor by any stretch of the imagination. But I love sets and I love actors. I love the excitement of taking written words and trying to make them sound natural, giving them a new life. I understand why people fall in love with that side of film-making so easily. On set, you all turn into a family so quickly. The fact I hadn't really done this before became an after thought after the first day."

It's a big ask to act as well on your first film as writer/director - did you always want to play the character of Ben?

"I'd never really thought anyone would take me seriously if I acted in the film as well, but it was something that just happened. I went looking and auditioning for other actors to play Ben, but there was a certain goofy humour to him that seemed hard to explain to actors if they didn't read it that way straight away."

Any major dramas/problems/stories from the shoot? Or did everything go fairly smoothly?

"Only the ones that were scripted. We didn't have time to stop and dwell on things that weren't how we'd imagined. There's a sequence towards the end of the film where Ben is chasing Indigo on a hilltop with

a VW, and that whole six page scene was shot in twenty minutes as a storm came rolling in from across the city. The DOP saw the storm clouds drifting across, and instead of getting flustered by our bad luck, we took it and used it to our advantage. We changed the scene to be in a giant storm, and used what was there. I think that's one of the keys of getting to the end on independent film shoots. Use everything you can. It's better if everything doesn't go to plan. That's life. It makes the film more truthful. And what else are you going to do???"

It can be tough getting local films into the market place; how do you feel on the eve of the film's release?

"Everyone keeps asking me about the decline of the Australian film industry, and what's wrong. I think the biggest problem is the one people aren't even thinking about - it's the death of dreaming. Young (and old) film-makers are so overwhelmed by the barriers put up to second guess how to make a great Australian film - the fun is fading. The dream of making a film is something most people think they can't reach, and so they give up - and that's the worst thing that could happen. Great movies come from great dreamers. People should be empowered and reminded that you can grab a camera, coax a couple of friends and go out and shoot anything if you put your mind to it. Forget whether people say it will save the industry or not. Just live the dream. I hope *Bitter & Twisted* can help inspire more people to go pick up that camera. That and enjoy the story of course!"

What's next for you?

"I have two projects in various stages of production - a US series based on *Bitter & Twisted* which was commissioned during the Tribeca Film Festival, and the other a feature which hopefully I might be shooting by the end of the year. But with these things who knows. The most reliable thing is to keep dreaming, and that's what I plan to do!"

***Bitter & Twisted* is released in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide on September 18. For more on the film, head to www.caspproductions.com.**

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