



# The **lab** generation

Talented local writers and directors were leaving the state to find work until a bold program offered an unconventional alternative.

WORDS LOUISE PASCALE

**W**HEN RICHARD HARRIS TOOK OVER the South Australian Film Corporation in 2007 production was cruising along. Daniel Radcliffe (*Harry Potter*) had just starred in *December Boys* and Rolf De Heer's *Ten Canoes* was on the world cinema circuit. South Australia was, and remains, an attractive state to film in – yet something very different was happening for our emerging directors.

"We probably had the opposite problem to the rest of the country, which was too many writer/directors," reflects Richard. "If you were a young or emerging director you had limited opportunities so you left the state."

Recognising the need for serious intervention, Richard and his team looked around the country for something that could help South Australian filmmakers. What they found were programs that worked on script development, with no guarantee they would be made. So they created their own program.

Called FilmLab, the initiative gave local directors \$350,000 to make a low budget film. The catch was participating in a three-week intensive script program that took them out of their comfort zone.

"Filmmakers, while they are very creative, are also very pragmatic," says Richard. "We wanted to challenge them and say 'no you are not going to write the scripts for a while, you are going to be testing ideas and concepts'."

To do this they employed Stephen Cleary from Britain whose creative exercises included singing *Major Tom* in three-part harmony, recreating 3D sculptures of their film and skipping around the room.

Though unconventional, it produced scripts that attracted some of Australia's finest film and television talent. Alex Dimitriades (*The Slap*), Matt Day (*My Year Without Sex*), Hannah Marshall (*Packed to the Rafters*) and Mark Winter (*Balibo*) were just some of the actors who took a pay cut to come to South Australia to work on a FilmLab film.

"What was exciting about this was it was doing something that was very different," says Matt. "It was the timeframe; getting something done in a small amount of time for a small amount of money but it was story-based and character-driven."

Matt came straight off the set of his third season of *Rake* to work on the Christopher Houghton film *Touch*. "What really sold it was of course the script," says Matt. "It was the classic page turner. I wanted to know what was going to happen next."

Hannah Marshall was filming her last day of *Packed to the Rafters* when she got the call saying she had been cast in Hugh Sullivan's film *The Infinite Man*. "When I read it I knew that if they could pull this off it would be something really special and different," says Hannah. "It was unlike anything I had read."

*The Infinite Man* is Hannah's first feature film after almost seven years of working in television. Shot mostly in Woomera,

it was a big step away from the type of production she was accustomed to.

"You felt the hot days and there was no air conditioning or trailers or anything glamorous about it really," laughs Hannah. "Everyone was doing everyone else's job and pitching in so I think it's kind of great. You feel like you're really involved in the process because it was such a small budget and small crew and cast."

FilmLab was also the launch pad for new South Australian actors like Tilda Cobham-Hervey. After going to an open audition for *52 Tuesdays* "just for fun" she was surprised to land the lead role of Billie in this teenage coming of age story.

Sticking with the unconventional form of FilmLab this film was shot every Tuesday for a whole year. "It was so immersive," reflects Tilda. "It is hard to watch because it's like my puberty on screen and that can be full-on for anyone."

Not long after she began filming *52 Tuesdays*, director Nick Matthews approached her to be in his film *One Eyed Girl*. However this time filming would be in the more traditional form.

Tilda's performances have gained her not only national attention by signing with a Sydney-based agent, but an international one too. Meanwhile FilmLab has launched South Australian directors on the international stage with screenings at prestigious festivals – and the Australian industry is taking notice.

"When I started here it was very difficult to get people here from the marketplace," says Richard. "Because of FilmLab, interstate producers are now looking to Adelaide."

## One Eyed Girl

Nick Matthews (director), David Ngo (producer) and Craig Behenna (writer) are the FilmLab team behind *One Eyed Girl*. While they had made successful short films, this was their feature debut. Nick had directed many of those shorts and had also established himself as a cinematographer.

For him a big challenge from the FilmLab process was developing a film on a low budget, especially when the final amount was set in place from the start.

*One Eyed Girl* delves into the world of cults so the team created an immersive experience for their cast and crew by isolating filming on a farm. There they stayed, ate vegan food, were not allowed to drink, smoke or use the word cult.

Premiering at last year's Adelaide International Film Festival, *One Eyed Girl* will be in Australian cinemas early next year.



This page, from top left: Matt Bate making a 3D model in the unconventional FilmLab workshop; local actor Tilda Cobham-Hervey stars in *One Eyed Girl*; Jason Sweeney and Fiona Sprott experimenting in the FilmLab workshop; Sophie Hyde contemplating on the set of *52 Tuesdays*; and (below) Nick Matthews directing *One Eyed Girl*. Opposite page: Onor Nottle and Leanna Walsman in *Touch*.





### 52 Tuesdays

At the beginning of FilmLab, local production company Closer Productions was just Sophie Hyde, Matthew Cormack and Bryan Mason. By the end of the workshop they were joined by Matt Bate and Rebecca Summerton, who left her role at the South Australian Film Corporation where she had been working on the FilmLab program.

52 Tuesdays was shot every Tuesday to mirror its story of Billie, whose mother reveals plans for a gender transition, hence restricting their time together to just Tuesday afternoons.

The film made its world premiere at the Sundance Film Festival this year where Sophie won the World Dramatic Directing Award. Then at Berlin Film Festival it won the Crystal Bear for Best Film in the Generation 14Plus program which awards children and youth focused films.

### Shut Up Little Man! An Audio Misadventure

Matt Bate began FilmLab with producer Julie Ryan, but during the process Julie left to produce *Red Dog*. Matt then teamed up with local company Closer Productions to make the only documentary in the FilmLab slate.

His film *Shut Up Little Man! An Audio Misadventure* tells the tale of punks Eddie and Mitch who recorded their drunk neighbours in the late '80s in San Francisco. These recordings went on to become a cult sensation and in his film Matt explores the pop culture phenomenon it created throughout the '90s.

While this was Matt's first feature documentary he came to FilmLab with short films that had premiered at South by SouthWest Film Festival and won awards at Melbourne International Film Festival.

*Shut Up Little Man!* had its world premiere at Sundance in 2011 and is distributed in the US, Canada and Australia.

### Touch

Christopher Houghton is a writer/director who came to FilmLab with short films that had shown at Cannes Film Festival, Palm Springs International ShortFest and Tribeca Film Festival. *Touch* is his first dramatic feature that he teamed up with Julie Byrne to produce after FilmLab had finished and the script was in its final stages.

*Touch* is a mystery about Dawn, who is on the run with her daughter Steph. Taking shelter in a secluded Hills motel an ex-cop tracks her down and her past catches up in an unexpected twist. Acknowledging making films in Australia is a long and costly process, Christopher found the FilmLab experience liberating.

"Because we had a guaranteed production budget the pressure to perform was off," he reflects. "So I was able to drill down and find out why I really wanted to tell the story on a deeply personal level. That made a difference to my stamina and passion in realising the film."

*Touch* premiered at this year's Sydney International Film Festival where it was one of only five Australian feature films in the program. It was described as "exquisite, at times dipping into the divine" and "a continual delight to look at" (Lisa Thatcher).

### Dead Speak Back

For the past 15 years Jason Sweeney has established himself as an innovative artist in the South Australian arts scene. With Julie Byrne (producer) and Fiona Sprott (writer) he was part of an observer team in FilmLab who instead of making a feature film were commissioned to make a short film. However after some persuasion Jason convinced the SAFC to allow him to make a feature film with that budget.



Eddie Lee Sausage with director Matt Bate on the set of *Shut Up Little Man!* (top left); Caroline Daish starring in *Dead Speak Back* (top right); Leanna Walsman as Dawn in *Touch* (left); and Hugh Sullivan directing *The Infinite Man* (right).  
Opposite page, top: Writer/director Christopher Houghton with Onor Nottle on the set of *Touch*; Jason Sweeney filming *Dead Speak Back*.  
Bottom: Ursula Dabrowsky (Sue Brown), Sarah Jeavons and Scarlett Hocking watching their playback on the set of *Inner Demon*.



"I guess people might think making our feature for \$25,000 was ridiculous but I would do it all again," says Jason. "I am determined to advocate for cultural production that is resourceful, embraces passion rather than high-finance, makes do with the basic tools at hand and is a collaboratively rewarding experience for all involved – regardless of money."

By the time Jason was in production, Fiona had left the team to continue her PhD. However with Julie at his side he made *Dead Speak Back*, an experimental fiction film about a mother grieving for her lost son who discovers a deceased young man wanting to be found.

Premiering at last year's Adelaide International Film Festival it also screened at Perth Revelation International Film Festival and will be at the UK's Spill Performance Festival this October.

### The Infinite Man

Hugh Sullivan is a writer and director whose short films had screened at Palm Springs International Shortfest, Flickerfest and the Melbourne International Film Festival before he began FilmLab. He was joined by local Producers Kate Croser and Sandy Cameron; together they made *The Infinite Man*, which premiered at South by SouthWest Film Festival (SXSW).

The complex film is about a scientist recreating the perfect romantic weekend for his girlfriend using time travel. It was often hard for them to see if the script was working so during

FilmLab they shot it in three days, with themselves playing the main characters.

"I can tell you that no-one will ever see that version of the film," says Kate. "But the end result gave us the confidence we needed to go ahead with our ambitious ideas."

The Indiewire Critics Network Poll of all SXSW films awarded *The Infinite Man* Best Screenplay, Best First Feature and Runner Up Best Ensemble Cast.

### Inner Demon

Ursula Dabrowsky is the pseudonym for Canadian-born filmmaker Sue Brown who moved to Adelaide on completing film school in Montreal. After making an array of award-winning shorts she made her first horror feature in just two weeks for \$6500. It won multiple awards and was distributed in Australia, South Africa, the UK and United States of America. She joined FilmLab to make the next film in her trilogy, *Inner Demon*.

"Other filmmakers in the workshop who had known me as Sue Brown had to get their heads around the fact that I was now using a pseudonym," she says. "Many couldn't understand why until I explained that I was reinventing myself as a writer director of horror films and, most importantly, I didn't want my mother finding out her nice Catholic daughter was now making gory, violent horror films."

*Inner Demon* will have its world premiere later this year. 🍷

