

WARWICK AND KATH

THEY MIGHT LOOK LIKE CHALK AND CHEESE BUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PRODUCER KATH SHELPER AND DIRECTOR WARWICK THORNTON IS A TRUE MEETING OF MINDS, DISCOVERS **RUBY BOUKABOU**.

KATH SHELPER:

Warwick had written *Green Bush* and I was supervising the development workshop. I remember reading the script and going, 'Oh my God, I have to produce this film, it's such a good script!' When you first meet Warwick he's a bit scary and I knew that he was really wary of producers. I think I may have sidled up to him and said, 'I really like your script' ... but that was kinda it.

Beck Cole, his partner, also had a script in that series. We were both working on another film in Alice Springs and she asked me to produce her film *Plains Empty*. One day I called to speak to Beck, and Warwick answered the phone and said, 'Oh yeah, I was gonna ring you... do you want to produce my film too?' and I was, 'Yes!' So that was how it began and now we're stuck with each other. [laughs].

Green Bush and *Plains Empty* were both part of a new series called Dramatically Black, an initiative by the AFC. I became attached to *Green Bush* just after the development workshop. That was in 2004 and it was finished at the beginning of 2005. Warwick was shooting *Plains Empty*, so we shot them back to back.

Even though he comes across as being a bit gruff, Warwick's actually incredibly sensitive and I think that's what makes him a good filmmaker. That was a really nice thing to discover; seeing how he relates with everyone – his partner, his daughter, the crew and cast. He's also a very loyal person and very respectful. Respect is probably the most important thing in his whole process.

He's pragmatic. He doesn't hold onto things. He knows what are the fights to fight for and what are the things to let go of. Making films in Alice Springs is quite difficult and you have to have that rolling-with-the-punches approach. He's very good at keeping his mind on the bigger picture.

I think Warwick has a pretty unique life experience and take on the world; a great sense of humour and a great sense of fun. His films have a real truthfulness to them that people respond to. When people watch his films, they feel like he's really sharing something with them. The sorts of films he makes are films that are firstly entertaining and then social/political issues. First and



foremost, we aim to tell good stories and let people walk away with an experience.

The hardest thing for Warwick is writing. We're working with script editor Keith Thompson at the moment, and trying to take it week by week. But it's the hardest thing because I can really see him struggling – but it's hard to work out how to help him.

[Sundance] had actually said no to *Green Bush* – they loved it but couldn't find a place for it. Warwick was almost in tears and Bec and I were trying to be happy [for her film's acceptance] but not too happy. We were saying, 'Well you shot that film!' Then we were walking into the AFC for a meeting when the guy from Sundance rang and said, 'Call me back in 10 minutes, I want to make a proposal to you'. There was a spot in a special section before a feature. It was perfect in the end as the feature had a radio theme as well.

[At Sundance] there were already a number of other filmmakers there who had already had their films invited to Berlin so we were saying, 'Well, we obviously didn't get invited.' Then we got the call: *Green Bush* was one of those films that was like the poor cousin that didn't get invited, then got an invitation and found its feet.

Winning Berlin was amazing. We were at an

Australian drinks function and a journalist came up to me and said 'Congratulations!' – he'd got an embargoed press release and just assumed that we would know... It was all in German so all I could see was blah blah *Green Bush* blah blah. So then we weren't able to tell anyone and had several hours to let it sink in.

The win was good for everyone who's put so much money into these films over all the years. It's indicative that there's an audience out there for these films and that they are being appreciated worldwide. That a film like *Green Bush* can win a critic's prize from a panel of international judges like Berlin, then win a popular prize at home at IF, it's validation that everyone's doing something right: the system of support is working and also the way that we're working together is working.

We're in the process of financing a feature that we hope to film next year. Warwick has about three ideas a week he wants to do. So between him and Beck, I will probably be busy for the next five years!

Warwick and Beck and their daughter are sort of like family now. We spend a lot of time together – a lot of time talking about filmmaking and a lot of time not. They're like part of my extended family.

WARWICK THORNTON:

I'd heard how fantastic Kath was producing *Confessions of a Headhunter* and then she came up to Alice Springs to work on a film called *Cold Turkey*. Beck and I had some films we had written and gotten the money for, so needed producers. We'd heard of the work Kath had put into *Cold Turkey* – because that wasn't an easy shoot and she had held it all together, she and Steve [McGregor]. We thought, 'She's very calm. We'll ask her if she'd be up for producing our films'. Beck and I keep everything together, so having the same producer is really good.

It was painless working with Kath. You're used to asking for things and not being able to get them because of budget requirements and stuff, but she never said no. She'd say, 'We don't have the money but we'll find the money'. That kind of attitude was really good for me straight away!

We like that idea of sticking to the same people, because then we can really understand each other and know our pros and cons. It was just really easy. The shoot was painless, the edit was painless, everything was perfect and we just got on very well.

I grew up as a cinematographer and hadn't really directed that much. Cinematographers are put on pedestals and easily become wankers, and I'm guilty of that just as much as anybody else. Kath brings you back down to earth. She's a great lie detector. You can't lie to Kath: you can't use smoke and mirrors. She'll pull you up really, really quickly. Because she's a close friend as well as the producer of the film, you do look at her position and see where she's coming from rather than just chucking a tantrum. [I admire] her calmness and her sensibility. Nothing's really a big deal. And she likes what I write, which is good!

I hate writing. It's a lot harder than directing. It's a lot harder than being a DP. When you're directing or shooting, you've got all these tricks up your sleeve. When you're writing, you don't have any of that. It's just blank and on the page and you can't hide behind a good shot or a good performance. If it's crap dialogue or a crap scene it just doesn't work.

I come up with an idea and I talk to Kath about it. She sends me away and I write a two-page outline. She helps me find the money and I usually spend all the money before I've actually written it – so I get in massive amounts of trouble and she has to put me on retainers. She comes up with comments and instant feedback. If I



WARWICK THORNTON. TOP: KATH SHELPER. PORTRAITS BY SARAH NGUYEN

write some really bad dialogue that doesn't fit the character or the period – because she knows the character just as much as I do as she's watched the script be developed – she'll go, 'That's a bit dodgy' and I'll go, 'Oh, ok' and fix it up.

Sundance is such a hyperactive film festival and then it was interesting to go to Berlin that was very serious – just as much fun but in different ways. Making films isn't rocket science but they are hard work and the true pay-off is an audience. The next pay-off will be getting people actually paying to buy tickets for the cinema. You write a film and ask, would you pay to go and watch your own film if you hadn't made it but seen it in the paper? We talk about things like that; that's how we work.

It's great to have the balance of having Kath as a non-indigenous producer. I make Aboriginal films. Us blackfellas have unbelievable stories on the basic instincts of love and anger with an Aboriginal perspective. I stick to that because that's what I know. There's a lot of stuff that makes absolute sense to me but Kath's reading it from her perspective and says, 'Well, that doesn't make sense to me

– what's all that about?' and I'll explain it, and she'll say, 'So why don't you put that in the film so that a non-indigenous audience can understand?' If you made indigenous films only for indigenous viewers, your market would be way too small.

I like to make her cry. I write by pen and paper, then I come with all these books to Kath and read, and she'll type it in and put it into scenes and numbers and pages and all that sort of stuff. If she has a tear, I go, 'Ha! It's working!' I love that relationship we have. It's great to sit down with a bottle of red wine and work on the film. Sometimes I come along with a couple of scenes ... sometimes with the whole film.

We spend a lot of time over here cooking and eating and talking about things and she spends a lot of time at our place ... we're desperately trying to get her to sign an exclusivity [deal] saying she'll never work with anyone else ever again! Our aim is to have a really good body of work together. **ff**

Kath Shelper features on the selection panel for the 2007 Aflac IF Award for Rising Talent.