

The Achievement So Far

It's important, and inspiring, to acknowledge and to celebrate the good films that have been made and the people who have made them. We like to think of ourselves as being a part of a dynamic film making culture, and we are. We like to think of ourselves as boxing well about our weight, and we do. There is much to love about our cinema, and there is much to be proud of. Here are some highlights of NZ film achievement:

- ***The First Pioneers***

Len Lye, our first innovator – his work as an abstract film maker is still internationally recognized. **Rudall Hayward** and **John O'Shea** had the outlandish audacity to not only think that New Zealand films were important, but against all odds to actually make them.

- ***The 70's Agitators***

Who coalesced around **Pacific Films** in Wellington and **Alternative Cinema** in Auckland and who came together in the mid 70's to state the case for a cinema of our own so passionately and so forcefully that they compelled the government to establish the New Zealand Film Commission in 1977 to fund New Zealand films.

- ***The Good Kiwi Blokes***

Who really kicked things into gear. When we watch films like "Sleeping Dogs" (1977), "Smash Palace" (1981), "Good Bye Pork Pie" (1981), "Utu" (1983), "The Quiet Earth" (1985), "Came a Hot Friday" (1985), "The End of the Golden Weather" (1991), and "Illustrious Energy" (1987) we think not so much about the challenges that **Roger Donaldson, Geoff Murphy, Ian Mune** and **Leon Narbey** went up against in making these films, but that these films still stand the test of time. One of my personal favorites - "Carry Me Back" by **John Read** (1982).

- ***Vincent Ward***

Astonishingly young (27 years old when "Vigil" was selected for Cannes) and astonishingly talented. With *State of Siege* (1978), *In Spring One Plants Alone* (1981), *Vigil* (1984) and *The Navigator* (1988), he brought the language of pure cinema to our screens and introduced New Zealand cinema to art-house Europe.

In combination these men achieved what they had, self-consciously as members of one generation, set out to achieve – they brought a national cinema into existence. For the first time New Zealand audiences saw their own culture on the big screen, and they liked what they saw. For the first time they saw their landscape, their relationship with that landscape, and the men who wrestled so fiercely with it, and with themselves, through the lenses of their own film makers. For the first time they saw their own dramas, their own humor, their own history and their own potential futures – good and bad – as envisioned by their own. These films have all passed the test of relevance through time in that they are all still a living part of our culture.

- ***Our Women***

Who were never going to be content to play support roles. On the contrary, they took over from the men in defining the culture. **Gaylene Preston** led the charge with a film of female friendship in "Ruby and Rata" (1990), a story of a working class hero with "Bread and Roses" (1994) and six stories of love, loss and adversity in "War Stories Our Mothers Never Told Us" (1995). **Jane**

Campion followed up with the best biopic that's yet been made here with "An Angel At My Table" (1990) and the Oscar winning "The Piano" (1993). **Alison Maclean** delivered what is still perhaps the most memorable short film ever made here with the journey into suburban noir that was "The Kitchen Sink", and then her Cannes selected first feature "Crush" (1992).

Niki Caro made the Cannes selected "Memory and Desire" (1997) and then one of our most iconic films and far and away our biggest ever international box office hit with "Whale Rider" (2002). **Vanessa Alexander** made a gem from an ultra low-budget with "Magik and Rose" (1999) and in the same year **Annie Goldson's** feature documentary "Punitive Damage" told one of the more harrowing, and inspiring, stories of a search for justice one is ever likely to encounter.

In 2000 **Gillian Ashurst** made the highly imaginative Alice in Wonderland of the Canterbury plains that was "Snakeskin" and in the same year **Christine Jeffs** took us on the summer holiday of adolescent longing, inebriation, illicit lust and marriage breakdown that was "Rain" (Cannes 2001).

In the past year **Sima Urale's** "Apron Strings" premiered at the Toronto Film Festival and **Armagan Ballantyne's** "The Strength of Water" premiered at Berlin. **Juliette Veber's** "Trouble Is My Business" enjoyed a successful release. Niki Caro's "The Vintner's Luck" will premiere shortly at this year's Toronto Festival and **Simone Horrock's** "After the Waterfall" is currently in post-production.

There is no other country in the world where women have played a more important, or more internationally recognized role, in the development of a national cinema. There has also been no other country whose female filmmakers have been more successful when they have ventured out to make international films beyond their own shores.

- ***Our Maori Film Makers***

It is important to acknowledge the primacy of their role in our stories told on screen. **Merita Mita's** Springbok Tour documentary "Patu!" (1983) is a film as powerful as any that's come out of this country. **Barry Barclay's** "Ngati" (1987) is as charming a story of community and of homecoming as has been told on our screens. Let us acknowledge the novel of **Alan Duff**, the screenplay of **Riwia Brown**, and the direction of **Lee Tamahori** that brought us the most powerful film that has been made in this country - "Once Were Warriors" (1995). And let us remember the novel of **Witi Ihamaera** that enabled the film of "Whale Rider" and note that two of the films that have had both the biggest impact on our culture, and the greatest international acclaim, have been Maori stories.

In **Taika Waititi** with the Academy Award nominated "Two Cars One Night" and his first feature "Eagle v Shark", we have a new talent who promises to match any that have come before. Currently we look forward to the completion of his second film "The Volcano" and the release of "The Strength of Water", written by **Briar Grace-Smith**.

Let's also look forward to the production of some of the numerous indigenous stories that are currently in development with the New Zealand Film Commission, and the ones which have recently gone into development through the Mana Maori Pae Pae initiative.

- ***Our Gay Film Makers***

In particular the films of **Peter Wells** and **Stewart Main**. With “A Death in the Family” (1986) they led the world in making a film that dealt with the tragedy of aids. They didn’t only deal with tragedy. With films like “Jewel’s Darl” they brought a unique vision to stories of gay rights of passage and initiated the development of a truly gay cinematic language in this country. With “Desperate Remedies” (Cannes 1993) they took things further with the audacious reinterpretation of New Zealand colonial culture through a flamboyantly gay lens. With “Newest City on the Globe” (1985) and “The Mighty Civic” (1989) they celebrated our architectural heritage with great imagination and, in the case of the Civic, played a very direct role in saving this living monument to our film heritage from destruction.

- ***Our Originals***

Two film makers whose work is distinguished chiefly by its refusal to be categorized in any way except by its virtuosity of imagination. **Harry Sinclair**’s shorts and his features, “Topless Women Talk About Their Lives” (1997) and “The Price of Milk” (2000) fit this bill. More recently **Florian Habicht** has announced himself as a remarkably original new talent with “Woodenhead” (2003), “Kaikohe Demolition” (2004) and “Rubbings from a Live Man” (2008).

- ***A Great Kiwi Film Made By an Englishman***

“Bad Blood” (1981) was directed by an Englishman, **Mike Newell**, and starred an Australian, Jack Thompson, but in terms of story (based on a book by **Howard Willis**, adapted for the screen by **Andrew Brown**) and setting, it is absolutely a New Zealand film and is actually one of our best.

- ***Brad McGann***

With “In My Father’s Den” (2004), Brad made one of our most mature films, and one of our very best, as his first film. I am sure I am not the only one to more than occasionally wonder what Brad might have gone on to achieve if such cruel tragedy had not struck.

- ***The Films Made By Our Departed Pioneers When They Returned From Abroad***

Roger Donaldson’s “The World’s Fastest Indian” is a classic tale of Kiwi ingenuity, charm and ambition. Whilst “River Queen” fell short of its ambition, “Rain of the Children” clearly represents a return to form for Vincent Ward.

- ***The New Crop Of Films Made In The Past Few Years***

Not only have they heralded a new generation of talent, they have succeeded in finally managing to celebrate the full diversity of our society on screen. They have also finally achieved what everyone set out to achieve when this grand project began in the 1970’s, in that they have consistently delivered large New Zealand audiences to New Zealand films. They have made a New Zealand film one that distributors will compete to secure, and whose release will be eagerly anticipated by audiences. It’s not so long ago that this was not the case.

With **Jonathan King**’s “Black Sheep” (2006) (and soon “Under the Mountain”) the son of a man who defined our culture showed his talent for satirizing it. In **Robert Sarkies** with “Scarflies” (1999) and in particular with “Out of the Blue” we have a drama director of as high a caliber as one is likely to find anywhere else in the world. In **Toa Fraser** with “Number 2” and “Dean Spanley” we have a playwright, screen writer and screen director who is also world class. With

“Sione’s Wedding” (2006) (**Chris Graham**) we’ve seen the potential of Pacific Island culture to generate box office success. And with the success last year of “Second Hand Wedding” we have seen the emergence, literally, of a second generation of kiwi film directors with **Paul Murphy**, son of Geoff.

The **Headstrong** team have demonstrated just how much can be achieved with low-budgets with “The Devil Dared Me To” (**Chris Stapp** and **Matt Heath**, Producer: **Karl Zohrab**) and “Song of Good” (Writer/Director **Greg King**, Producer: **Mark Foster**) and amongst the latest crop of short filmmakers we find talents whose first features promise to be serious events.

- ***The Novelists and Playwrights Who Provided the Source Material***

Try to imagine our film history without **Karl Stead’s** novel “Smith’s Dream” (which became “Sleeping Dogs”), **Craig Harrison’s** “The Quiet Earth”, **Ronald Hugh Morrieson’s** “Came A Hot Friday”, “The Scarecrow”, and soon “Predicament” (currently being directed by Jason Stutter), **Bruce Mason’s** play “The End of the Golden Weather”, **Janet Frame’s** books “State of Siege” and “An Angel at My Table”, **Peter Well’s** “Memory and Desire”, **Witi Ihamaera’s** “Whale Rider”, **Kirsty Gunn’s** “Rain”, **Alan Duff’s** “Once Were Warriors” and **Maurice Gee’s** “In My Father’s Den” (and soon, “Under the Mountain”).

- ***Our Screen Writers***

Keith Aberdein with “Utu”, **Graeme Tetley** with “Vigil”, “Ruby and Rata”, “Bread and Roses” and “Out of the Blue”. **Nick Ward** with “Stickmen” and “Second Hand Wedding” (with **Linda Niccol**). **Oscar Kightley** and **James Griffin** with “Sione’s Wedding”. **Dianne Taylor** and **Shuchi Kothari** with “Apron Strings” and **Matt Grainger** and **Jonathan King** with “Under The Mountain”. That this list isn’t longer is of course symptomatic of a director driven film culture and in particular a writer/director film culture. But it does also point to some rather serious issues in our screen writing culture – more on that later.

- ***Our Producers***

Imagine our industry without the contribution of **John Barnett** with films like “Footrot Flats”, “Whale Rider” and “Sione’s Wedding”, three of our biggest box office hits, and with “Whale Rider”, far and away our biggest international success ever. This month John’s announced the green-lighting of “Banana In A Nutshell”, **Rosanne Liang’s** feature version of her acclaimed documentary by the same name.

How about **John Maynard** with “Vigil”, “The Navigator” and “An Angel At My Table”? All three films were selected for Cannes - that’s quite a hard record to beat, and that’s not including all the films he’s made in Australia.

Jim Booth played a key role in the early career of Peter Jackson as the producer on “Brain Dead”, “Meet the Feebles”, and “Heavenly Creatures”. **Don Reynolds** has produced three kiwi classics with “The Quiet Earth”, “Illustrious Energy” and the “End of the Golden Weather”. Maybe the “River Queen” experience knocked him around a bit but it would be great to see him back making films – we need people with his experience to keep going. **Larry Parr’s** made a massive contribution with producing roles on “Sleeping Dogs” and “Smash Palace”, as the producer of “Came a Hot Friday”, as the driving force behind the Kahukura films and yes – as a survivor – seems like he’s still going strong and that’s great to see.

Bridgit Ikin has been a trail blazer with films including “An Angel At My Table” and “Crush”, and she has also added a succession of important films in Australia. She was among the first of many female producers to make their mark. It’s an illustrious list:

Robin Laing with “Ruby and Rata”, “Bread and Roses”, “War Stories”, and “The Vintner’s Luck”. **Robin Scholes** with “Once Were Warriors” and “Rain”. **Philippa Campbell** with “Rain”, “Number 2”, “Black Sheep” and “Rubbings From a Live Man”. **Fiona Copland** with “Topless Women Talk About Their Lives”, “The Price of Milk”, “The Strength of Water” (and currently “Matariki”). **Ainsley Gardner** with “Eagle v Shark” (and currently “The Volcano”). And **Rachel Gardner** and **Angela Littlejohn** with “Apron Strings”.

As with our female directors, our female producers have made a contribution to our film culture, and are continuing to make a contribution, that’s perhaps bigger than has been the case in any other country.

I don’t think any other New Zealand producer has made more films than **Tim White**, many of them memorable including “State of Siege”, “Number 2” and “Out of the Blue”. We’ve seen the great work that **Trevor Haysom** did with “In My Father’s Den”, and more recently **Steven O’Meagher** with “Out Of The Blue” and **Matthew Metcalfe** with “Dean Spanley”. This Christmas holidays we’ll be seeing “Under The Mountain” from **Jonathan King, Matt Grainger and Richard Fletcher**.

Few of these producers are rich, if they are its sure as hell not from the New Zealand films they’ve produced. They make New Zealand films because they care about them. The sacrifices they make are extraordinary and they should be acknowledged perhaps a little more than they have been.

- **Our Actors and Crews**

More books could – and should - be written on our actors, our directors of photography, production designers and all the other people in the various vital roles that have made such a creative contribution to our films. None of our films would have been possible without them. Apart from the work they’ve done on kiwi films they’ve played a fundamental role in establishing NZ as a shooting location second to none in the world.

- **Peter Jackson**

A separate book could be written, and several already have been, on the achievements of Peter Jackson. They are of a magnitude that makes one sometimes wonder if his career does in fact hold practical lessons for those of us who labour in less exalted realms. However I don’t actually think that this is the case. With “Bad Taste” (1987) he delivered possibly *the* classic kiwi victory of ingenuity over resources. With “Meet the Feebles” (1989) and “Braindead” (1992) (with writing assistance from **Stephen Sinclair**) he defined a genre. With “Heavenly Creatures” (1994) he showed that he could write (with **Fran Walsh**) and direct drama of the highest quality, and integrate the world of reality with the world of the imagination seamlessly through special effects. With “Forgotten Silver” (with **Costa Botes**) he showed that he was capable not only of being a kiwi legend himself, but of creating one and satirizing the very notion. With the films that... well who doesn’t know the story, he brought Hollywood to New Zealand and conquered the world from a studio in Miramar and he’s not half finished yet. With regard to the aspirations

that these notes are all about he represents, for me, the ultimate in kiwi ingenuity, in strategic planning, talent, guts and the apparently limitless achievements that this combination can lead to.