



MONICA DAVIDSON

TROPFEST DREAMS

I'VE BEEN TEACHING FILM FOR ten years, and what started as a media in-joke has become prestigious—the path to success as a filmmaker is no longer determined by a place at film school, but by a place in the Tropfest finals. So exactly what is Tropfest, and what should we be telling our starry-eyed students about the competition?

A full history of the competition is available from Tropfest's comprehensive web site, located at <http://www.tropfest.com>. I'd like to start with a look at Gregor Jordan's role in making Tropfest a filmmaker's lodestar.

Swinger's Legacy

Tropfest began not as an event but as a one-off screening for John Polson's



first film in 1993. It grew steadily, but exploded two years later when a 29-year-old music video director named Gregor Jordan made a dark comedy called *Swinger*. The film was selected as a finalist in the competitive section of the festival, and ultimately won. The entire budget for the film was around \$500. After winning, the AFC provided Jordan with \$15,000 post-production funding, which allowed for the titles to be re-done, a Dolby sound mix, and a 35mm blowup. Around \$5000 was set aside for marketing, which included entry into various film festivals.¹

Swinger won the Palm d'Or (Prix de Jury) for Best Short Film in Short Competition at the Cannes Film Festival in May 1995. From that point on, both Jordan and Tropfest were catapulted into the limelight. Tropfest became the perceived launching pad for a generation of ambitious

young film-makers. In 1993, eleven films were entered into Tropfest and 1000 people attended. By 2000 entries reached 723 in total, with over 100,000 people attending screenings in Sydney and Melbourne.

Serena Paul, Tropfest's Project Director, believes that Jordan's win at Cannes in 1994 definitely changed the trajectory of both Tropfest and the film-makers that aspired to win. 'I think he was the first real proof we had that winning Tropfest could actually make a real difference', Serena says from the Tropfest offices in East Sydney.

And as each year has gone on it's become quite cemented that winning Tropfest will pretty much ensure you a career in film, television or media in Australia, because you're being exposed largely to the entire industry here.

Time has shown that Jordan's win at Tropfest was a sure indicator of his talent as a film-maker. In 1999 Jordan directed *Two Hands*, a critical and financial success, and he has since made *Mad Kelly* (2003) and *Buffalo Soldiers* (2000, released 2003).² Other film-makers who have received a jump start from Tropfest success include Rowan Woods (*The Boys*, 1997), Robert Connolly (*The Bank*, 2001) and Paul Fenech (*Fat Pizza*, 2000).³

Not all of the people mentioned above were outright winners. Just being a finalist can make a career. 'Nowadays you don't need to be the winner of Tropfest in order to attract attention and have a lot of job offers', says Paul.

Tropfest Dreams

In 1993 my students made short films

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I think overall, wherever you want to show your

as part of their overall educational experience. In 2003, around eighty-five per cent of my students now state that Tropfest is a primary goal for them, and they usually hope that the film we make in class as a learning tool will in fact be good enough to enter into the competition. They all have Tropfest dreams.

Kharrh Vu is a 27-year-old film student. He has been studying evenings and weekends for almost a year, while balancing his full-time career working in risk management in a large invest-

ment bank. He has already made one student film that will be entered, and is working on another.

Kharrh's Tropfest dreams for the films he will be submitting are typical—he wants to be a top sixteen finalist: "The greatest thing that could happen is that people will see it". Is launching his career as a film-maker part of his motivation for making Tropfest films? He laughs. "Unashamedly yes."

Tropfest can be a way to fame and a career, but when only sixteen films



Right: Kharrh Vu in costume photoed by Vu in 2003





film or whatever you want to do, just get into it. —Khanh Yu (pictured left third)

are selected from over 700 entries, the odds are not good. Some debate exists around the mysterious "X" factor that defines a finalist. Although the judging procedure is straight-forward, one factor that inspires a tremendous amount of gossip is money.

Khanh has done his homework about Tropfest and has thought a great deal about the budget for his films. He is definite about how budgets relate to his Tropfest dreams. "Personally I do think that you need to spend money", he states. "To show it to such a huge

audience, and to produce something that you want to show to people, I feel that you do need to spend some money. Which is unfortunate because the money's not out there!"

Sewra Paul flatly denies that budgets have anything to do with being a finalist. "Spending money on their film isn't a factor in the selection process, but it depends on where people place their budgets, I guess", she says. "We've had films in before that are very grainy, and shot hand-held, very much a home kind of thing, cut

on Final Cut Pro in the bedroom, and they've gotten in."

Judgement Day

Every competition has rules, judges, and selection criteria. However, Tropfest's rules have not always been easy to read. Rumours have abounded about the opacity of the Tropfest judging procedure.

Khanh has researched all available information about the competition, but still has some doubts about the



purity of Tropfest judging. 'For me, it's like you sit for an exam, and you want to know what you're being assessed on. Who's marking it? With Tropfest, I don't know what they're looking for, it's a bit unknown.'

Serena is refreshingly honest about the gossip. 'The stories of corruption and nepotism that go on in relation to Tropfest are abundant, and I'm well aware of them, but people come and they spend a few weeks involved in the process as volunteers, for example, and then they realize how rigid it actually is.' So what exactly is the journey for a video once it has been entered?

After entry deadline day, the first step is data processing. 'We have volunteers working pretty much around the clock [for three days] to get each film's information entered into our system. It's very, very thorough, in the sense that the films are carefully monitored and assigned a number, and that number then becomes the way we track that film through this entire process', says Paul.

After that, the first round of judging begins. Three groups consisting of three judges each watch one third of the films per group, over a five to seven day period. 'And it's full-time for them, so they arrive like they're going to a job', says Serena. 'They sit there, their mobile phones are not allowed to be on, they're not allowed to have remote controls so they can't fast forward, which at times is torturous for them', she laughs.

The groups are first briefed by Festival Director, Polson. 'This first round of judging is not designed to be a selection of what those judges believe will be good finalists', Serena clarifies. 'Even if that judge doesn't necessarily think the film will make it to the final, if there's something promising about the film, or something that indicates it should be viewed again, then we want to see it.' At the end of the first phase the judges must come back with a minimum of twenty films per group. There is no maximum per group, so

in 2003, eighty-four films made the short-list.

The judges in the first round are a mixture of people involved in all levels of film-making. As Serena explains, 'So you might have a director who is a past Tropfest finalist, you might have an editor who's also worked on a Tropfest film, and maybe an actor who has been in some way involved with us, or has come with a recommendation because they're interested in a certain area of film-making.'

The next stage relies entirely on John Polson. 'Those eighty-four films are shipped over to John in the US, where he's currently working, and he'll watch all of those films. He's very, very involved in the selection process for the festival. Obviously he's the festival director. People don't realize how much he is integrally involved', Serena says.

While Polson watches the films in the US, another panel of advisors watches and assists in his decision making process. 'Basically at the end of the day the decision on those final sixteen comes down to him, but he looks to his peers and Tropfest staff and associates for feedback on the films.'

Who are these advisors? Serena explains: 'Producers occasionally, and it is really varied, so they're associates of John's mainly. Maybe people who work at the FFC, maybe actors, it really depends.'

The final sixteen are judged by a panel of celebrity judges. In the past this has included Bryan Brown, Toni Collette, Ewan McGregor and Susie Porter, as well as the previous year's winner.

Serena has one final comment on the judging procedure: 'The reality is we are so fiercely protective of the way that this system runs, to ensure that it is fair for everyone. We realize the implications of it ... so I can guarantee to you that every single one is seen.'

The Fine Print

Anyone involved in a Tropfest film

should be aware of the details of the entry procedure. There are a number of forms to be read and understood. The Tropfest Entry Information Guide, available as a PDF file from the web site, contains a 'plain English guide' to the entry terms and conditions.

There are some concepts that must be clarified. Firstly, Tropfest owns the exclusive rights to both the top sixteen finalists and the other sixty plus films that are 'pre-selected'. This allows Tropfest to act as exclusive distributor for the films in Australia, and their partner Hypnotic to distribute the films world-wide.

Those pre-selected films can change the arrangement with Tropfest's permission, but the final sixteen are locked in to Tropfest's ownership. As stated in the Tropfest Entry Information Guide, 'It basically means that neither you nor any other distributor will be able to sell your film on your behalf and that Sony Tropfest solely represents the film around the world'. 'These arrangements may be changed, but no promises are made.'

Khanh was unaware that Tropfest retained ownership of all the short-listed films, not just the finalists. When told, he said, 'It's an interesting dilemma. Here you are, you're film-makers, you put all your blood, sweat and tears, and your money, into this film, your own time into it, and then someone says, well, we'll own it. And what do they give you? I guess they give you a screening opportunity if you make it that far, but is it worth selling your so-called soul for?'

Serena explains her history with previous Tropfest finalists who have entered into this arrangement. 'To be honest, in my whole time here, I've never had a problem with a film-maker who has been unhappy with the way that we've handled their film.'

Any money made from the distribution of the film is divided between Tropfest and the film-maker. As stated in the Tropfest Entry Information Guide, 'We split any cash received with the film-

makers just like a commercial distributor, and if your film is Pre-Selected or Selected we will give you notification of these financial arrangements in writing'.⁴

Another aspect of the fine print that bears explanation is the right Tropfest reserves to change or edit the selected and pre-selected films. Film-makers must have written permission from any contributors who worked on the film. 'The reason you need this permission is so you [and Sony Tropfest] can edit or change their contribution or performance as you see fit AND that you [and Sony Tropfest] can sell or show the film using such contribution anywhere without restriction and use their name or picture for publicity connected with your film.'⁵

Sony Tropfest states that it is 'very protective' of the films and the film-makers' rights, but sometimes changes are made. In the *Tropfest Entry Information Guide*, it states that 'For example, your film could be 'edited' or 'altered' by removing the film's credits and running them at the end of a television broadcast instead of at the end of your film. This is one compromise we may have [to make] to get your film on TV'.⁶

Serena Paul is firm but realistic about these aspects of the entry conditions. 'At the outset, if they're not comfortable with those terms and conditions, then they shouldn't enter the festival. It's that simple.'

Guidance for the Hopeful

Serena has some final tips for students and teachers interested in entering: 'People should be more brutal in participating in Tropfest. More tips for film-makers are available on the website'.

Firstly, length is crucial. 'Seven minutes is the maximum length of any film once they've cut their films', she says. 'People get very attached to what they've shot, and you can often say the same thing in three minutes that you can in seven, and probably a lot

more effectively.'

Production values are not an integral part of the selection process, but sound quality is vital. 'Audiences will put up with poor picture quality before they'll put up with poor sound', says Serena. 'So we're always saying if you do have a budget, spend it on sound.'

Watching short films is also crucial. As Serena states, 'I really just encourage people to put your energy into the script and the story, and the editing, and watch a lot of short films. The more short films people view the more they realize very quickly what works and what doesn't.'

Her final comment for hopefuls? 'What we're looking for is the strength of an idea, and the film-maker's capacity to convey that well in a short period of time. A film could be shot on a very low budget, and just show that the film-maker knows how to tell a story visually, and really work.'

In the end, regardless of why people are making the films, there can be no denying that Tropfest has lived up short film production in Australia. That has been one of Tropfest's major aims since its inception eleven years ago. 'We exist to encourage production', says Serena Paul.

And the original aim of Tropfest as declared by John Beck in 1993 was that he was sick of people sitting around talking about making films; [he said] 'Here's a deadline, here's a signature item, go out and make one'.

So are we giving our students false hopes by encouraging them to make films and enter Tropfest? I don't believe so, but perhaps we should give, as the final word to a film student: 'The process of working and creating film, especially as a student—I got far more out of it than any potential hope for putting it into Tropfest', says Khanh. 'For me, the purpose is to create a film, that's far more important.'

Khanh smiles and finishes his coffee. 'I think overall, wherever you want to

show your film or whatever you want to do, just get into it. As a student, someone who's still learning, I think you should just make something. And if you do make it into Tropfest, that's great'

Monica Deviston has worked in the film and video industry since she was 18-years-old. She started as a camera assistant in 1989, and went on to complete her Bachelor of Arts/Mass Communication, majoring in film production. After working in a number of crew roles Monica set up TwoShot Media in 1994. Her work since includes producing and directing short films, documentaries, music videos, corporate work and a feature film.

Monica has been a film trainer and speaker for ten years. Her courses include a practical short film production, making independent films, a director's master class and a film funding intensive. She also runs a series of workshops entitled *Freelance Success*, a business program for creative people. Monica was recently awarded Teacher of the Year 2002 by Sydney Community College. ■

Endnotes

- 1 Catherine Knapman (ed.), *Low Means Low: The Collected Papers of the Low Budget Feature Film Seminar*, Australian Film Commission, Sydney 1996, pp 37-38. Papers based on transcriptions from the Low Budget Feature Seminar held on 19-20 July 1995.
- 2 The Internet Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com>. Accessed Monday 27 October 2003.
- 3 Press Releases from the Sony Tropfest web site, <http://www.tropfest.com>. Accessed Monday 27 October 2003.
- 4 *Tropfest Entry Information Guide*, pp. 5-7. Available to download from the Tropfest web site, <http://www.tropfest.com> through the 'Filmmakers' menu.