

## RETURN OF THE QUEEN

**On the eve of Her Majesty's nationwide tour of New Zealand's theatres, a chat with Mark Gordon, the film's writer/director.**

*So, what possessed you - as an American who'd never set foot in this country - to write a script based entirely in New Zealand, in which all the characters are New Zealanders?*

For starters I've had this taunting quote taped to my bookshelf for the last 16 years:

"Only those who attempt the absurd, achieve the impossible." So I'm thinking that may be the root of things.

Additionally, it was probably some sort of a knee-jerk reaction to the pat advice often dished out by studio executives and development types to "write what you know"... I always felt it would be more of a challenge to write what I didn't know and try to make it believable...

Creatively it can be extremely liberating to do what people don't want or expect you to do. So I guess I was looking to create something as non-American and anti-Hollywood, as possible. New Zealand, a country which, at that time, most studio execs probably couldn't find on a map, seemed like the ultimate challenge. At minimum I hoped I would end up with a good writing sample - something on the other end of the spectrum from the broad comedies I had been writing.

*At what point did you decide it would be a family film from the point of view of a 13-year-old girl? And at what stage were the plot elements of the Queen's visit and the town's strained race relations included?*

I'm not sure I really set out to write a family film, per se, as much as I wanted to create an engaging story that would work on multiple levels and make people feel good when they came out of the theatre.

Sometime in 1987 I discovered there was a small library in the waiting room of the NZ Consulate in Los Angeles (I think it was on one of my several trips to get a tourist VISA to NZ that I was never able to use). At that point I really didn't have a story that was working properly - I was procrastinating by doing more research. That's when I stumbled on a little pamphlet that featured a story describing the day in the life of a 13 year-old NZ marching girl who was preparing with obsessive commitment for a big meet. The very next moment I pulled a Year in Review annual off the shelf and opened it to a single paragraph that described Queen Elizabeth II's Royal Tour of Australia and New Zealand during 1953/54 in the months following her lavish, fairytale-like coronation. That was my "Eureka!" moment: young girl-obsession-Queen.

Still, that angle seemed a little thin to me. I'm a big history buff, and, in preparation for my twice aborted trip [to NZ], I had been reading quite a bit about Māori culture, NZ history and its colonial past. The element of strained race relations, in otherwise seemingly placid and innocent time, gave me that additional layer of depth and texture I was looking for. It also felt like it would resonate strongly not only with American but international audiences as well. That's when I really starting getting excited about the story.

***When did you decide to bring the project to fruition yourself, and how long did it take before you'd raised the required budget?***

Well, I definitely had some help.

For 12 years I watched other people try to get the film made. During that time there were several unsuccessful attempts to put the film together as an Australian-New Zealand co-production, or with funds from the NZ Film Commission. As I was only involved as the writer during those attempts, I wasn't privy to the decision-making rationale or the politics. But I do remember in one scenario I was given the option (by the Australians) of giving up or sharing my screenwriting credit with an Australian producer in order for the "package" to have enough co-production points to qualify for funds. Obviously that did not go over too well.

Over the years I learned from watching what not to do, and realised the only way to get this film made, with me as a first-time director, would be to raise the money privately, put it in the bank, go to NZ and cast the best actors we could find, and make the movie.

In late 1999, after finishing a second stint working on a sit-com staff, I informed my then agent (who wanted nothing to do with features) that instead of writing another spec TV script, as he would have liked, I was going off to raise the money to make an independent feature to be filmed in NZ, which - by the way - I intended to direct. Our parting was amicable and instantaneous.

At that point I teamed up with our two very dynamic and well-connected executive producers - my sister Lisa Gordon and a longtime friend, Susan Hailey, both of whom were living in Silicon Valley in the San Francisco Bay Area. Fortunately, they had no preconceived notion of how difficult - In fact, nearly impossible - it can be to raise money to make a movie. We formed an LLC and had an attorney who specialises in independent films create an offering memorandum. Six months and 35 courageous private investors later we had raised the requisite funds.

***Given your success in attracting key US personnel like producer Walter (All the President's Men) Coblenz to the project, why did you decide to draw the vast majority of the crew and 100% of the cast from NZ, rather than bringing in as many Americans as possible (which unfortunately tends to be the norm)?***

Economic necessity. Fortunately we didn't have the budget to bring more of us over.

From a cast standpoint, I always wanted it to be 100% pure NZ, for authenticity and truth.

***Did you research the NZ screen industry's capability before making that decision?***

I had definitely been following the industry for many years, since the late 1980s... I knew there were very capable crews and adequate resources, and with the long run Xena was having I thought, from a skill-set standpoint, we might benefit from that a bit as well.

Of course, until we actually got to NZ the truth is we really didn't know if we had the proper funds or could get the key production personnel needed to make Her Majesty at the studio quality level we all wanted.

***When you arrived in NZ and announced your intention to make Her Majesty, what kind of reception did you get?***

I suppose there was some bemusement. No one was indignant, but perhaps a few folks were a tad guarded at first, and understandably so. However, once people realised our intentions were genuine, and we wanted to make a purely NZ story and not some kind of bogus hybrid with New Zealanders speaking in American accents, we were warmly embraced, or at least patiently tolerated.

In terms of the industry, we had done some homework. Early on in the process of raising the money we made contact with the New Zealand Consulate in Los Angeles and, in particular, Diana Cloughley at Investment NZ. We kept Diana in the loop on our efforts and she directed us to Jane Gilbert and the folks at Film New Zealand, who offered guidance, introductions, and, once we arrived in country, facilitated our initial whirlwind recce...

Our very capable and energetic liaise, Lisa Kissin, made sure people understood we were "good" Americans, not the other kind. Ultimately, she was instrumental in helping us get about two months worth of location scouting and interviewing done in less than two weeks, as was producer Michelle Turner, who assisted us superbly once we reached Wellington.

Most importantly, by the time we were ready to leave, we had secured the invaluable services of an experienced production manager, Judith Trye, who became our New Zealand co-producer, as well as hiring a first-class production designer, Kim Sinclair, and stellar casting director, Terri de'Ath.

***Did you feel the race relations aspect of the story was risky material to tackle, especially as "an outsider"? Or did that afford you a position of neutrality?***

Yes and no. And yes.

As a first-time director, and not a New Zealander, I probably would not have attempted a contemporary story that deals in any significant way with elements of race relations because the issues and landscape are constantly shifting. Particularly since I had never been to NZ prior to shooting the film. (I was willing to be singed if I stumbled but I didn't want to be vilified.)

However, because the story is set in the 50s, in sort of a magical, frozen moment in time, I felt confident I could effectively and accurately capture the milieu in a way that would ring true, but more importantly, be entertaining.

Nevertheless, I do clearly remember thinking as I began work on the story (over 16 years ago) that this could be a potential minefield - for any writer. But I guess in a way, the thrill of the challenge made it even more enticing.

Once we were under way, I had several Kiwis tell me they thought a New Zealander might never have gotten *Her Majesty* made. Perhaps, as you suggest, we were afforded a wee bit of diplomatic immunity because we were "affectionate outsiders", and were able to fly reasonably gracefully under the radar screen.

***How important was Don Selwyn's input as cultural consultant?***

For me it was vital. I had always hoped we would find someone of Don's stature to offer guidance with the film. The fact he is so well-respected both within the Māori community and as a filmmaker was a real bonus...

While some purists, both Māori and Pakeha, may notice minor license taken here and there for dramatic effect or production necessity, Don clearly understood the intent of the piece and the potential impact of a positive cross-cultural story designed for both local and international audiences, and gave us his blessing and endorsement without reservation.

***How difficult was the casting process for you, and were you satisfied by the calibre of performers you got to work with?***

Making an independent film is always a risky proposition. Doing so with no distributor attached or recognisable stars, and shooting in a "foreign" country with kids, a dog and a first-time director, tends to put a little extra pressure on the decision-making process.

I knew our cast had to be perfect - everyone down to the smallest cameo role - or we were DOA. With the help of our casting director in Auckland, Terri de'Ath, and Rachel Bullock, down in Wellington, Walter and I spent an extraordinary amount of time looking at tapes, auditioning folks, putting them together in different combinations, staring at head-shots, and praying for the stars to align...

Not only was I "satisfied" with the calibre of the performers, I was bloody thrilled. We found a great choice for every role. And we had almost 50 parts. I'm obviously biased but I don't think there's a weak link in the lot. And that's what we are constantly hearing from American audiences who have seen the film thus far. They love the cast of *Her Majesty* - especially those irresistible Kiwi faces. (Thank you award-winning make-up supervisor Debra East and costume designer Lesley Burkes-Harding.)

Most importantly, as shown by the film festival audience awards, they're totally enraptured with the stellar, melt-your-heart debut performance of our 11 year-old star (now 15 if you're counting) Sally Andrews, who appears in almost every scene of the movie.

Honouring the unselfish, spot-on performances of this cast - including Mark Clare, Liddy Holloway, Anna Sheridan, Craig Elliott, Alison Routledge, Stuart Devenie, Cameron Smith, David Stott, Geoff Snell, and Rachel Wallis, but especially Sally and co-star Vicky Haughton - is the main reason I've spent the past three-and-a-half years doing everything in my power to make sure audiences everywhere get a chance to see Her Majesty on the big screen. Whether you're a New Zealand producer or an offshore one, I strongly encourage you to consider their work.

***What did you think of the NZ crew?***

They were hard working, talented, resourceful, and good humoured. In fact, I'm not sure I would want to shoot again in New Zealand unless I knew that most of our key people were available. I was really touched by how personally involved and totally committed so many of our crew were to making Her Majesty.

If you get a chance, watch the film on the big screen. When you see the production value and extraordinary rich detail that we were able to achieve with very modest resources you'll understand what a truly amazing job everyone did, and why I tend to get rather gushy when singing their praises. They worked their butts off, and it shows. Many saved the day - more than once. Producers would be lucky to get them on their film or project. We were.

***It must be gratifying that Her Majesty has finally been picked up for a proper release in NZ.***

Very much so. To his great credit, John Davies of Arkles Entertainment recognised the untapped potential of the film and realised it had not received the exposure or national attention it deserved.

John clearly understood the potential synergies with our ongoing U.S. activity [where the film is enjoying a long-term rollout by distributors Panorama Entertainment and has been racking up awards from many film fests] and, supported by the NZ Film Commission, he and his marketing team have designed a terrific plan to launch, promote and distribute Her Majesty theatrically nationwide.

***What's your pitch to the potential audience?***

I would say Her Majesty is a multi-generational film for people to experience with their children and grandchildren that offers a glimpse back at NZ in the '50s. Her Majesty premieres in the Waikato on 12 January, with the national release starting on 20 January.

For a longer, more detailed version of this interview, see [www.onfilm.co.nz](http://www.onfilm.co.nz)