

## Who do you have to f\*\*\* to get a grant in this town?

Multi-hyphenate Alan Brash on why and how he self-funded his short film *Be Careful...*, and why he calls himself a "content creator" rather than "screenwriter", "producer", "filmmaker" – or simply "wanker".

Being a Brash, it's not surprising that my first professional short (ie, "made by professionals", as opposed to "being paid to do it"), would seek to utilise a public/private partnership model. What is perhaps surprising is that I'd approach the public entity that funded not one but two left wing polemics about my father. (Sorry, I mean, "even-handed, thoughtful political commentaries about my father".) Maybe I was always on a hiding to nothing. In any event, a week ago I found out that the public/private partnership would, for now at least, have to be a private/private partnership.

If I'd been successful securing the **Screen Innovation Production Fund** post-production cash I sought, I might have called the article "Be Careful What You Pray For (You Just Might Get It)" – the title of the **Paul Kelly** song that was part of the inspiration for the film.

The other inspiration was a dream I had five years ago in which I screamed at my mother, "I'm 35! My life is passing me by!" (It makes sense when you see the film.) Well, it continued to pass me by until this past March when I finally got all my ducks in a row and shot the thing. Ironically my company is **Shoot First Productions** – implying a devil-may-care, "shoot first, ask questions later" attitude. I, on the other hand, asked questions for a decade before shooting anything. But, in the end, it felt like the right thing to do.

You see, I wasn't someone who knew exactly what they wanted to do from Day One. I vividly remember getting short shrift from one **Geoff Steven**, in his pre-TVNZ days, when I called for advice on breaking into the



First shoot for *Shoot First*: Lisa Chappell and Craig Hall in a scene from Alan Brash's short film *Be Careful...*

industry. When he asked what I wanted to do, I was at a loss, not really knowing what you *could* do. He told me to come back when I knew. Eighteen years on, I'm still exploring.

Early in my career I considered writing short films, but struggled to have anything meaningful to say. Then, five years ago, inspiration struck. I wrote a version of *Be Careful...* which I duly submitted to **Creative New Zealand** for funding. It was declined. The feedback was that it felt too much like television. Crestfallen at the time, in retrospect there was truth to the charge. By 2004 I had been writing TV drama for nearly

10 years, and perhaps that showed in the work. While I believe it held the kernel of an interesting idea, the script was very "talkie". However, during a sabbatical in the UK last year I had a flash of insight about where I could take the story. With encouragement from my long-suffering wife, I decided to self-fund the film, with me in the director's chair.

There's a school of thought that says you shouldn't try to do everything on a film. I think this idea has a lot of merit. However, I've never been one who cherished the solitary life of the

screenwriter. I knew I was capable of articulating a vision, and the thought of working collaboratively filled me with excitement, rather than dread. I also believed that – even though I wasn't an experienced director – a great film could be made if (a) the script was solid, (b) the performances were great, and (c) it was shot by pros who knew what they were doing, took pride in their work, and were using the best equipment I could afford.

I'd dabbled (and trained) in acting over the years and felt confident that the script was sound. I also decided that, having been in the industry since 1991, if I was ever going to pull some favours, it should be now. These factors helped make *Be Careful...* the lovely (albeit dark) little film I believe it to be.

Almost everyone – cast and crew – who read the script was keen to come on board, despite the lack of money. The crew were made up of my industry contacts, the HODS' contacts, contacts of contacts, **Unitec** graduates, and a few **Unitec** 3rd year students. **Dan Wagner**, my talented and tireless DP teaches camera at **Unitec**, where I teach screenwriting. My ever-resourceful art director **Brent Hargreaves** teaches art department there.

The first person cast was **Craig Hall**, who plays the male lead, Mike. I knew Craig from working with him – and laughing my arse off! – when he played a dim but well-hung Aussie stripper in *The Strip*. Craig was incredibly professional and generous throughout and "got" Mike right away. The femme fatale of the piece was played with relish by an old (sorry, former) schoolmate of mine, **Lisa Chappell**. **Lynette Forday**

and **Narelle Ahrens** rounded out the wonderful cast, with **Mike Edward** graciously agreeing to a cameo, as did acting/directing teachers **Elizabeth Hawthorne**, **Milton Justice** and **Mike Saccente**.

Lisa and I acted together in high school in something called *The Insect Play*. I'm pretty sure she was a butterfly. I was an ant. Make of that what you will. In my last year at school, I played Shylock opposite Lisa's Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* and I've been after my pound of flesh ever since. However, despite such a promising start, our career paths didn't cross again for many years. I tracked her down through the good folk at **Johnson & Laird Management** and, after reading the script, she enthusiastically signed-up as Fi.

Like Craig, Lisa couldn't have been more dedicated and professional. Frequently we only shot one or two takes. This was due not only to the cast's immense talents, but also the exceptional work done by the crew. It was rare that we had to "go again" for technical reasons. Which was just as well as it turned out to be a more challenging shoot than I imagined – despite the high level of experience of most of those involved.

While primarily involving interiors, there was a "stuntette" where we cheated Narelle-Sure-you-can-throw-me-off-a-building-in-the-name-of-art-Ahrens falling off an exterior balcony; there were some nights across the four day schedule; and we were shooting with a **RED camera** that most of us weren't very familiar with.

Five days out from the shoot, things looked decidedly dicey: my third option costume designer pulled out; the owner of the bar location – where we planned to shoot for an entire day that coming weekend – wasn't responding to phone and email messages; **Britomart** decided at the 11th hour that we couldn't shoot there on the day we'd planned; and we didn't have extras for either location. So all things considered, the shoot went

very smoothly!

I was also lucky in some of the great locations we secured. While being a Brash might close some doors, it did help to open others. Such as the door to **John Banks'** office at **Huljich Wealth Management**. This luxurious office became Mike's office (he plays a wealthy actuary) and it sure looked like *The Real Deal*. Thanks to my co-producer, the charming and diligent **Maile Daugherty**, we also secured a wonderful inner-city apartment for the climactic scene of the film (after the initial recce, Brent declared it was the best apartment he'd ever shot in). And despite last minute hiccups with **Britomart**, the staff on the day were wonderful, and I was rapt with the added production value of seeing Lisa arriving downtown by train. A shout out as well to **Suite's Dave Hawk**, who gave us unfettered use of his bar on his day off. While "production value" can't take the place of great performances and a solid story, it was the icing on the cake.

So why did I do it? As much as I bitch and moan about missing out on funding (don't we all?) I concede I didn't have a directing track record prior to embarking on this project. I'd been writing on spec for a few years (mostly features) but was getting tired of the lack of "result." People were saying all the right things – "You write very well; send us the next one", etc – and I'd placed highly in prestigious script competitions. But the accolades and praise weren't translating into produced films. It's like you're pitching the *Taj Mahal*, but only have some vague blueprints. And people were having a hard time imaging the finished mausoleum.

People lament the "sausage factory" that is *Shortland Street*. But writing on fast turnaround TV has the advantage of providing if not instant gratification then at least a fairly quick feedback loop – and it was the feedback you get from actually seeing a finished product that I was missing.

I was also inspired by **Chris Jones**,



Careful does it: Filming inside John Banks' office at Huljich Wealth Management are (l-r) best boy Matt Harte, camera op Roko Babich, Craig Hall, focus puller Jonny Yarrell, DP Dan Wagner, 1st AD Tony Forster, writer/director Alan Brash.

a filmmaker I met in London. He co-wrote the *Guerilla Film Makers Handbook* series, and he decided a couple of years ago to make a short film that would win an Oscar. That film (*Gone Fishing*) didn't win an Academy Award. But it won a bunch of festival prizes along the way and made the official Oscar short-list last year. It also landed him an agent and made him more money than any of the three indie features he'd made previously. Britain has its own version of *Tall Poppy Syndrome* and I admired Chris' "the sky's the limit" attitude – especially as he's also incredibly "grounded".

So I decided to direct the short film script I'd written. OK, so it's not a feature, but it is (or it will be) a "finished product".

The dirty secret in the film industry is that everyone hates reading scripts. Partly because most of them are crap, but also because it's hard work. You have to imagine what the finished result will be. But a film, once it's post-produced, is finished. A comic or graphic novel, once illustrated and lettered, is also in its final form. Which was the motivation for turning an action/thriller feature screenplay I'd written into a graphic novel. *State's Evidence* is being illustrated by Italian artist **Giuseppe D'Elia**, whom I've never met (except on Skype). We

mostly correspond via email, and the relationship is working so well we're contemplating a weekly online comic strip series.

Which neatly brings me to "content creator". In this age of new media and media convergence, intellectual property might be "simply" a film (or screenplay). Or it might be a TV series, comic, novel, video game, or web series. Or all of the above. Everything I'm hearing suggests that content creators must take on a greater degree of responsibility for finding their audience – on whatever delivery platform they're using. Which is at once both liberating and daunting.

So what's next for **Shoot First Productions**? I can reveal exclusively to *Onfilm* magazine that a disillusioned National supporter has been leaking me text messages between **Bill English** and **John Key**. I figure the resulting doco should be sufficiently "innovative" to secure production funding. I'll call it *The Stuffed Men*. It'll be done entirely with sock puppets. You heard it here first... ●

• Check out the progress of *Be Careful...* at the **Shoot First** blog: [www.shootfirstproductions.com/blog](http://www.shootfirstproductions.com/blog) where the script can also be found. If you have deep pockets, contact me about being an executive producer on the film.

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