

ROBERT AND JOHN

WHETHER WORKING AS DIRECTOR/PRODUCER OR PRODUCER/PRODUCER, JOHN MAYNARD AND ROBERT CONNOLLY ALWAYS MAKE A FORMIDABLE MIX. RUBY BOUKABOU FINDS OUT HOW.

ROBERT CONNOLLY:

I was at film school and became very good friends with a New Zealand filmmaker I was studying with who introduced me to a lot of New Zealand cinema. John's name kept appearing as the producer on all of these films that I loved. So I talked to the head of producing. The word on John was that he was really scary. I was typically nervous. I was 25. I rang him and, being in my uni student days, when he said, 'Why don't you come over in the morning?' I said 'Okay, yeah, I'll see you about 11.' He said, '7.30am. Rustic Cafe!'

When we had that early breakfast, we actually didn't talk about cinema. We just talked about books. He was probably just trying to suss out what my politics were, what I thought about things. He was my mentor for that year and he wasn't doing any films, so he got me to do the gardening. I enjoyed it – it was fun. We used to chat about stuff, I got to know him. In my third year he got *All Men Are Liars* funded and got me a job on it. So I went from living in a share house in Chippendale which cost me \$35 a week rent and had



JOHN MAYNARD AND ROBERT CONNOLLY.
PHOTOS BY MIA MALA MCDONALD.

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Robert Connolly on John Maynard

a curtain for a door, to having a job on a film in far north Queensland. I think I'd produced one short film. He was releasing in NZ *Once Were Warriors* at the time and at one point he disappeared for a week. I picked it up. The key moment on that film was when we got the funding from the FFC. That day, he took me to Jupiter's Casino. I'd never been in a casino before. He gave me 100 bucks and took me around and taught me how to play roulette.

I think the thing he's consistently reaffirmed in my own work is this need to have a maverick creative spirit in the work. John ran a very innovative art gallery before he became a film

producer and he was friends with a lot of great, renowned artists, so he has some understanding that the creative process is something that involves a little bit of chaos.

As a person he's a very, very principled man – in the way of the *Three Dollars* character being tested. The way John leads his life is rock solid and I can't think of any example where he's compromised. John has been very influential on me in terms of encouraging me to be bold and not shy away from things that may be contentious politically.

When I met him, my ideas weren't as formed in what I believe to be the power of cinema: that

is, to [take] some political action. With the first draft of *The Bank*, I had an anti-globalisation agenda but I remember coming to the office one day and John had brought in a John Ralston Saul – *The Unconscious Civilisation*. *The Bank* was my idea and I'd written the screenplay but once John got his hands on it, it really strengthened that political agenda. So I'd say for me there's been an evolution over the time I've worked with John with my politics kind of firming up, whereas John I think has always been very resolute.

Together we have a good dynamic. It's able to engage on a whole lot of issues that require a lot of robust and healthy discussion, which I think really is the key to making a successful collaboration in any area of artistic endeavor. And he's always telling me to get back in my box as a producer when I'm directing!

Also, I'm his daughter's godfather. Our family lives have become enmeshed. Someone made the observation that they thought John had softened up



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a bit from working with me and I'd toughed up a bit. But I think we have a similar set of priorities. John leaves to pick the kids up. The way we make our films, it's not an exclusion of other things in our lives. John has this artwork that a New Zealand friend of his made that says, 'Don't Worry, it's Only Money'.

John and I don't have any signed agreement between us. When I left film school in '94, we were in New Zealand doing post-production on *All Men Are Liars*. If he'd said, 'I need someone to be my assistant and I can't pay you', I would have said yes... But instead he actually said, 'Why don't you and I run this company.' I said yes, we shook hands, he signed over the shares. I couldn't believe it. He gave me half a company with a back catalogue of films. Like all things, if the foundations are solid in any creative endeavor you're giving it its best chance of working. That's not based on some legal scrutiny... there's something in that.

When I look back at myself as a 25-year-old – I turned 40 this year – I was a very different person from the person I am now.

JOHN MAYNARD:

Robert just turned up and I thought, 'Oh well, why not'. I thought he was very intelligent and witty. I liked him. He asked for some sort of advice and I said, 'Read a novel a week, that's a good start'.

He finished most of his film school year with me. It was film school on the run. He came on as associate producer and it was a little bit of a 'baptism by fire'. I was actually releasing a film at the time as well, being also in distribution. But I was on the other end of the phone, so never that far away.

We just got to work together, liked one another and so eventually we became equal partner in both our companies – the production company and the distribution company. That was 14 years ago. Working for me would have had a fairly short-term result. He would have come off and formed his own

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John Maynard on Robert Connolly

company and worked independently etcetera, so it really is a way of sharing risk, sharing reward. It's a business of collaboration. If you don't get that right, then you're already behind the line ball, aren't you?

One of the most interesting things certainly for me (and I'm sure it was for Robert too) was the first day that we walked on the set of *The Bank* and Robert was really directing a feature film and I was really producing it – you know, it's quite a lovely thing.

I've worked with Robert now in the same office, not every day obviously because we move around a bit, but we've worked out of the same office for 13 years. We didn't have separate offices, we actually sat beside each other. It's interesting now that we've got independent offices in different cities. With telephone and email we're in contact with each other all the time. He always copies me in to everything and vice versa.

The advantage that a small company has that we can change its direction by looking at each other across the table. If you're a large corporation, a big television corporation, or film production or film distribution, it may have to go to a head office in another country to turn around a monster like that. We can respond to change immediately. Within seconds if necessary.

It's an unusual relationship and it works extremely well. There are many ways of working; this is the one that seems to suit us best. Sometimes you get lucky, I think. Good humour is important. It's a difficult business being an independent producer and director and writer. It's a very difficult

business to run on your own. It's a two-way thing. Sharing success and sharing risk.

We share absolutely the same core values. We want to influence the way that people think. It's a great privilege to make films, to make someone sit inside a dark room for 90 minutes and we're always very aware of that. We also have basic core political values too – that's essential, I would have thought.

It's a lot of fun when we're working together as a producer/director – with very, very clear and interesting roles. We've got the age difference too, which I think is quite unusual. I'm 25 years older than Rob but the relationship is very close. Robert came to me when he was at film school and he was single, and now he's married with two children and during that time I've also had children. We learned to respect each other's families and give each other family time; a bit of work/life balance. We have very similar thoughts and attitudes towards life. All of our lives are part of change. And we're just very aware that our lives in our film business are only part of our lives. Both of us do have independent lives that are rich in their own way and other rich relationships with other people. We also have relationships which are quite often independent of each other within the film business.

Each of us has enriched the other. I've been introduced to a whole new generation of filmmakers and so has Robert – to a much older generation. I'm most proud of our body of work; that it still continues, that it has a house style and political content of its own. **📍**