

Cannes: from the McDonnell Ranges to the
Mediterranean with joy
by: [Ruby Boukabou](#)

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Kath Shelper, Bec Cole and Warwick Thornton bailed up in a corner of the Screen Australia office in Cannes.

We really, really wanted to know what it was like for the 'Samson & Delilah' folks to be swept up the madness of Cannes. And Ruby Boukabou is just the woman to find out...

Over the last few days you've probably heard about *Samson & Delilah's* wild ride through Cannes. A standing ovation, a small amount of media attention, some red carpet photographs, some disappointment in the Un Certain Regard section, where it took no awards... and then the wondrous moment of a Camera D'Or for Best Debut Feature.

But what is it really like for the filmmakers in the bubble and what does it mean for the film? We track the nitty gritty of audiences, critics and the commercial dance of the Paris based sales agent Elle Driver.

I am sitting in the press office at 11pm on the last night of the festival; the frenzy has wound back up with the heat of approaching summer calmed ever so slightly by the light breeze from the Mediterranean but we're frenetic under the fluorescent lights as hundreds of journalists

file their last stories and edit their footage of the prize winners as the artists and production teams make their way up to the official celebrations.

Writer/director of *Samson & Delilah* Warwick Thornton took the Camera D'Or award with humility and genuine delight. "I don't know what to say". Vive le cinema. They have just come out from the prize ceremony, press conference and closing film and on their way to the official celebration.

I met with producer Kath Shelper and writer/director Warwick Thornton at the Screen Australia Cannes office two days ago. We backtrack... When they heard that the pre-selector for Cannes film festival liked *Samson & Delilah* "very, very much", they could only hope what that meant, they tell me. And when finding out made them feel "pretty surreal", Kath Shelper admits that "it wasn't actually until we were here, sitting in the screening when the Cannes logo came up on the screen that I felt 'oh my god', we're here and it's happening."

While the Adelaide Film festival opening (and audience award), the Alice Springs opening and Message Stix opening in Sydney were like a rehearsal for Cannes, particularly for the two teenage leads (Rowan McNamara and Marissa Gibson), they didn't really know what to expect from Cannes which, says Warwick "we'd desperately wanted to get into with this first feature."

But first, why did they make this film? Says Thornton: "You get an opportunity to make a feature film and have you got something to say about life, about humanity? I had to ask that question before I wrote the film. And do you want to go and see this film? Would you go and see your own bloody film? And the answer was yes, yes and yes. That's kinda the reason to make it. And I wanted to make a really unique film that maybe everyone in Australia, let alone the rest of the world would see, about how these teenage kids grow up in the desert."

"We've made a film that's very specifically central Australia and for world cinema to recognize it as a really good bloody film is really special as a writer, yet alone a director. The film transcends oceans and languages," he

says.

For Tanya Chambers (FT0), also present at Cannes this year, "with Samson and Delilah there is this wonderful sense of there being a fresh voice and fresh vision in the industry that has startled people". Her voice is firm but soft and proud, "That's emotionally a gorgeous thing to be a part of when you know that it is in a world context with a story that is deeply Australian and a story that is deeply personal and honest and authentic as an indigenous voice and is being welcomed and lauded by people from all sorts of cultures and all sorts of backgrounds."

She continues, "It is a wonderful experience being here, but it is also quite overwhelming; emotionally I can't even imagine what it must feel like having a world premiere or having a screening...People in Australia don't understand that this is an environment where films frequently get booed. And where people stand up and let you know what they think about that film-not standing ovation stuff."

As for the international press, it's good:

"Every shot imparts plot and character information with simplicity and intelligence," said Variety of this "meticulous portrayal".

The Telegraph (UK) remarked on the global appeal "their teasing, testy exchanges will be familiar to anyone who has ever been young and in love" and praised the craftwork: "The film is remarkable for the skill with which it exerts a rich sense of texture and atmosphere. At the same time, it constantly surprises and even wrong-foots the audience: are we watching a social documentary, a teen romance, or an undercommons comedy? The answer is: all three-and then some." And that's not it, it "looks and sounds (its sound design, both playful and dissonant, is terrific)- like no Australian film I've seen. Timeless and also utterly contemporary..."

The Hollywood Reporter praised Thornton's "empathetic storytelling" predicting that "it should have a dream run on the international festival circuit..."

"We had a crush immediately on the film" says Adeline Fontan Tessaur, managing director of the

Parisian based Sales Agency Elle Driver, explaining that their goal now is to "open eyes on the talent of this director."

"It's very impressive and promising for a first film," she says. "We wanted to point out the quality of the Australian cinema. It is also a great opportunity for Elle Driver to focus on new talents in Australia and to meet producers and directors."

Elle Driver have had meetings with worldwide buyers, focusing more precisely on the Arthouse companies. "They have all been impressed by the quality the beauty and maturity of the film," says Fontan Tessaur.

While too soon to confirm the details of all sales, Fontan Tessaur mentions positive sales meetings with UK, France, the Middle East, South Africa and other territories. She believes that it is the story, the mis-en-scene and the subject, (not so known in Europe) that are the qualities of the film attracting the buyers.

The campaign for the distributors is expected to be Arthouse Theatrical release and then cable. "I think the film will travel everywhere in the world. It is a festival driven film and it's really, really important for this genre of film."

Back to the *Samson & Delilah* team... have they (20 in total of entourage) been having fun? "I've heard lots of bad and lots of good stories (about Cannes)," says Thornton. "And I've pretty much had every good story. It's been absolutely fantastic. You get looked after so well by the festival."

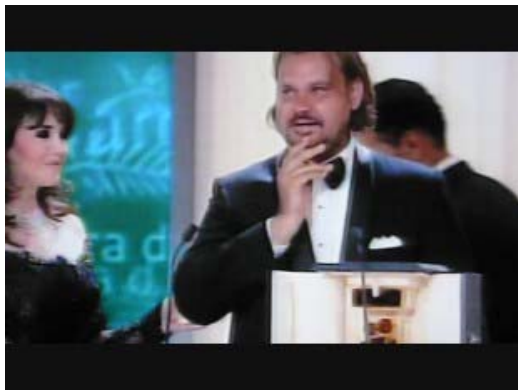
For Kath, "I've been twice before to go to the market and have meetings. The market is really hard core, really stressful... so it's been such a pleasure to come with a film and to not worry about anything else and enjoy it as a film festival, and go and see films. Eat good food, drink good rosé. We've had a really lovely time."

The difference between the Alice opening and Cannes? "The similarities were the same film and we were there at both", laughs Kath. "Completely and utterly chalk and cheese. Particularly the response from the audience. The response in

Alice Springs was very visceral and people were very expressive during the screening- laughed a lot and made a lot of noise, whereas the screening here was so quiet. It was very reverent; people took it very seriously."

As for all the glam, they're pretty unaffected. While they have been enjoying the red carpet parties and functions, "I prefer to hang out with six friends at a pub than strangers and spotting Francis Ford Coppola," says Thornton. And indeed it's this down to earth attitude that is resonating and making everyone around them proud.

Next? Shelper is producing Bec Cole's making of *Samson & Delilah* (stay tuned), Cole's first feature then moving on to Thornton's next feature. So, we're likely to be seeing them back here soon...



Ruby Boukabou

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