

Topless Women

Harry Sinclair Talks About His Film

For anyone who has sat through about as many soft drink-filtered, hair product-styled movies ostensibly about their lives, but patently not, they think they can handle without taking up a loaded Pepsi bottle and bringing it down on the head of the next Fudge-styled cretin who dares to lecture them on how Generation X we all are whether we like it or not (whew!), Harry Sinclair has come to the rescue. There's only one glitch in this scenario, and that is the fact he never set out to save us from the aforementioned narrative nightmares with his unconventionally plotted (just!) first feature film *Topless Women Talk About Their Lives* in the first place; but he has, whether he likes it or not.

"I wasn't thinking about cinema at large," our reluctant saviour explains. "I had no desire to remedy anything in the world of film; it was just something that came naturally out of the style of the way we were shooting - the fact we just shot in people's houses, and people wore their own clothes, and that kind of thing — it has a very natural feeling, compared with some fantastical story... I mean, this is obviously not the only way to make films, but it's definitely a way to make films that leads it to have an element of realism, I suppose. Although, it's pretty silly for realism."

A less loaded term to describe the film could simply be 'reality'. If you've ever woken up with a Chinese takeaway in your head, copped a drunken fumble with someone you possibly shouldn't have, or been cut off at the pass by that insane Auckland tradition known as the *Round the Bays*, you'll find plenty worthy of terming 'reality bytes' in *Topless*.

The film began life as a series of four-minute, late-night soap opera episodes, shot in the everyday environments of those taking part in them on weekends.

"As we were making the first episodes of the TV series, I was keen to present an unsanitised view of these people's lives.

So, I guess that was partly a reaction to what I was seeing on the TV. I was just trying to describe the things I saw around me."

When one of the series' stars, Danielle Cormack, arrived at work and announced she was pregnant, a larger scheme began to form in Sinclair's mind.

"She was worried she was gonna ruin the TV series," Sinclair explains, "and I suddenly just had this idea that the story of somebody's pregnancy was an interesting sort of shape for a longer story that obviously wasn't gonna fit into three or four minutes. So, that was one thing that really kind of triggered the idea of the film."

"Also, the characters and everything were working so well, it was great to take the whole thing a step further, and not just leave it as the little episodes - although they worked pretty well. It was just nice to sort of take a leap into the unknown. We started with no budget and had no plan at all, just shooting one night

with some friends, and then, a year later, it was at the *Cannes Film Festival*, so it was an amazing progression from nowhere to being a feature film."

With shooting continuing on a week-end-only basis, and Sinclair's script evolving in the weeks preceding each shoot, he says he never had time to think of any important message he could impart to viewers through *Topless* - although that hasn't stopped people reading their own ones between the lines.

"I think the interesting thing is how meaning sticks to things even when you don't intend it to," says Sinclair. "In a way that can be more effective than something you've struggled with for ages - 'cause there are some moments people have found very moving that just sort of happened. I like the idea of something that allows people to interpret it in different ways, rather than it having a specific agenda as a story."

Sinclair elaborates on the way how a situation is perceived can be wholly dependant on the angle one is looking at it from: "A sunny day can be a totally depressing thing for someone. I remember summer coming on once, years ago, when it used to really come on, and I found that really depressing because I hadn't done anything all year and, ohmigod, it's summer. So, really, sunny

days were depressing for me."

He laughs as he says this, perhaps because it's raining outside the window of Footprint Films, the *Topless* distributor; but it could be because he's managed to make a piece of something out of a bunch of other people's nothing — which is surely one of the finest paradoxes art can offer us.

On the subject of art, and circumstances conspiring to stop life from imitating it on this occasion, it is perhaps a good omen for *Topless* that the *International Film Festival* has moved away from the Civic in Auckland this year, as the film's New Zealand premiere coincides with its prestigious placement as the *Festival's* opening night film at the St James on July 11 (it is also the *Festival's* opening night film in Wellington, on July 18). Without wishing to confuse you, it should be explained that *Topless Women Talk About Their Lives* is actually the name of an ill-fated film within the film you have been reading about, and during its premiere at the Civic, its director gets all overcome, for reasons best left to the plot turn, and runs outside for a vomit.

"That was strange at Cannes," Sinclair laughs. "I was standing there nervously in front of all these people, and it was so like the scene in the film it was not funny."

BRONWYN TRUDGEON



L to R: Uncle Isa (Isa Vakatau), director Harry Sinclair, & Mike (Shimpal Lelisi)

Film Fest 97

The anticipation starts building up about the end of April. Just what might Bill Gosden and his team be offering us in this year's International Film Festival? This year it all kicks off in the City of Sails, and Gosden is most excited about the change of venue to the St James, "with that wonderful sound and screen which are so much better than the Civic".

It seems we're in for two weeks of pleasures and surprises, according to Gosden: "We've gone out of our way to identify the films that seem to us the purely pleasurable and the one that's most likely to surprise people is *Ulee's Gold*. It's always been difficult to take Peter Fonda seriously as an actor and here he is playing a grandfather and being incredibly moving".

Gosden's cagey about predicting 'hits', but finally goes for *Dream with the Fishes* which is "fairly fresh and wild and funny. It's a not a film that resembles anything else recently, whereas some other films are appallingly conscious of Scorsese and Tarantino. The only films I could think of that could have influenced it were all 70s ones. I found that particularly refreshing.

The British movie *Small Time* could be described in the same way, and its director Shane Meadows is going to be visiting us. He even sang the theme from *Shortland Street* over the phone — part of his research for his New Zealand visit!"

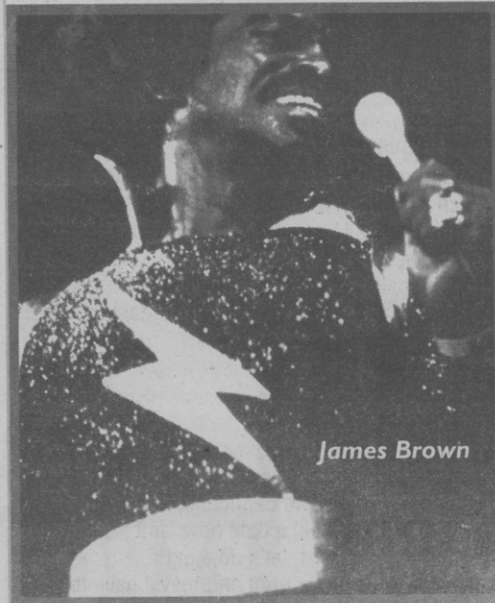
Bill Gosden is a man who effortlessly comes up with a snappy couple of words on the films he's dealing with. He feels that, "French film in general catch the 90s very nicely", and *Diary of Seducer* reminds him of, "the ambience of the DeLuxe Cafe in Wellington".

The Chinese film *King of Masks* is, "a family film for a family who can either understand mandarin or read subtitles", and, best of all, it reminded him of being a kid at the movies. The Australian *Kiss or Kill* is, "pretty smart, and Matt Day looks good in a singlet". *Love's Debris* is, "probably the campest thing on the programme, with some wonderful anecdotalage", and *Wednesday 19 July 1961* a, "surprisingly funny, upbeat picture of life in post-Soviet Russia".

He's particularly excited about *Sunday*, the Jonathan Nossiter film with Lisa Harrow which has been a last-minute

replacement for the Iranian Cannes winner, *The Taste of Cherries*. It's a prize-winner in its own right — Best Screenplay and Best Film at the latest Sundance Festival.

Now that the marketing boundaries of fetishism have been extended, why not try *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist*. A New York writer describes the film in the programme as 'an elaborate pas de deux of dominance and submission'; Gosden warns that it is, "utterly graphic — he hammers his dick to



James Brown

a board, but the worst thing is watching him take the nail out".

It has long been physically impossible to see every single film in the Festival, and this year's programme seems more generous than ever. Previews have been thin on the ground, but a few gems have surfaced: Leon Gast's *When We Were Kings*, a doco about Muhammed Ali's 1974 bout with George Foreman in Zaire, is a riotous compendium of 70s style (including some electrifying footage of James Brown) with Ali rapping with the best of them. *Suzanne Farrell: Elusive Muse* is that rare doco that lets a wonderful person speak (and dance) for herself, and Joni Mitchell's plea from the stage for respect and humanity will ring in your ears long after you leave *Message to Love*.

And don't forget that the MIC are staging a number of programmes of shorts. Mike Johnson's *The Devil Went Down to Georgia* is a hoot, a stop-frame take on the Charlie Daniels song, complete with choos strutting in formation. Local filmmaker Charlie de Salis's seven-minute *A Moment Passing* is a poetic salute to the mysterious sea that surrounds us in this country and, fittingly for an International Festival, it's up there with the best of them.

WILLIAM DART