

The Making of 'Even Emu's Need To Dance'

By Director Mike Rubbo

How the project began (The story of the making is part of the story)

I was visiting Maleny last year to show my film, All About Olive, at the annual Maleny Film Society Australian Film Festival.

After the screening in the charming community hall, I got talking to Susanne Haydon the organiser of the festival about the battles we were having to save our lovely Avoca Beach Theatre and what a drama that was. She said I should make a film about it and I reported I already had made a save the theatre campaign film called, Our Little Treasure. ([link to web site](#))

She then asked me if I could help make a film in Maleny like the one that I had made 20 years ago with passengers on a ship in China. She remembered me telling the story, of that adventure. I'd been in China researching my children's feature film, Tommy Tricker and the Stamp Traveller and had decided to take a slow boat out of Shanghai as part of the way home. I soon found myself on a decrepit liner with about 100 backpackers, all coming home from their own adventures. There was absolutely nothing to do on the ship except watch flying fish.

So, we all decided to make an Agatha Christie type, rough and ready, whodunnit in the three days we faced between Shanghai and Hong Kong. I had a small camera and here was a bunch of people who had never acted before, ready to try anything to relieve the boredom. It worked a treat with the non-actors enthralled by what they'd accomplished.

The idea of making a similar movie in Maleny languished for a while. But when I took on a job teaching film at QUT with monthly visits to Brisbane, it became possible to also visit Maleny and make the film.

Susanne Haydon soon swung into action and MMAM (Maleny Makes a Movie) was born.

Writing the story and finding some funds

I went off to write up a story outline. There was never going to be a script as such. Susanne put out to the community the magic phrase, "Who wants to be in a movie?" We made it clear we were not looking for professional actors and were not being too strict about choice or talent. This was the town's movie, and if the performances were a bit clunky, so be it. The movie never needed to leave town. A screening in the community hall and DVDs for the participants was all that was required for MMAM to be a success as a community gluing exercise.

Susanne set about raising money from the Caloundra City Council, finally managing to pull in \$5,500 primarily for editing and expenses. All of us would volunteer our time to make this happen. So we were off!

Casting the film from the local community

People who wanted to be in the movie came along to a meeting where we talked about the possible scenario and asked how people saw themselves in that story. They were given a short screen test and asked to improvise on a potential scene in the film.

Looking for the lead, a woman turning 70, I had noticed Sue Stevens at a Maleny Film Society evening and thought there was something very expressive and a bit sad in her face. Her audition consisted of me checking her age, whipping her into the cloak room, sticking a camera in her face and saying, "talk!" I have never done a more cursory audition but also have never felt so right about my choice.

The film became the story of Sue, an older woman sitting on a valuable property who recently lost her husband Phillip (She had). Sue's daughters were chosen by inviting a few women of approximately the same age (Susanne's top picks did not respond to her ad and so were invited personally). We asked them to improvise with Sue and see and check the chemistry. Being so different, Robin warm and hippie-ish and Louise, more cool and conservative, they made a great pair as both sisters and daughters.

It was not hard to find our men. Louise already knew Johan with his intriguing foreign accent(he's Dutch). Johan became the more pro-development son-in-law, the 'bad guy'. Touchingly in the end credits, when everyone gets a chance to say what it was like to be in the movie, Johan says it was fine to be the bad guy on the screen as long as you are the good guy in real life. As

the second son-in-law, Jon Woodlands (also picked by Susanne) promised to be very funny, someone torn between his belief in sustainability and the possibility of making a killing in real estate. For Maleny folks, Jon's performance is especially touching as he was one of the leaders in the fight to stop Woolworths coming to the town

Incorporating elements of their real lives into the story

In each case, once we liked someone and signed them on, we explored their life stories to see what dimension they could bring to the movie. I had the sense that they would act much more convincingly if they were playing scenes which related to their own lives and this hunch was right. Their personal hobbies, homes, pets and cars became an integral part of the film. Jon's amazingly colorful car, so right for the greenie hippie couple, was the perfect vehicle and a great contrast to Louise's Mercedes and both vehicles actually owned by them.

For romance, local emu farmer, Peter Thompson came into the story, bringing along his emus and the tango lessons he teaches at his home. In this, and many other ways, the film mirrors the characters' real lives. We had originally imagined a suave outdoors painter fellow who would fascinate Sue with dreams of painting together in Tuscany. Since no-one remotely like that existed, the story switched to Peter, the tango and the emus.

The joys of improvisation

When making regular multi-million dollar features with crews of 50 or 60 people which I have done four times now, few changes or improvisations are possible. The script is usually locked off months before with everyone who has put money into the flick having had their say again and again, demanding change after change. Shooting such a film is a bit like fulfilling an audio visual contract. Finally, you are lucky if any spontaneity remains.

Even Emus Need to Dance was by comparison a joy to make. We had agreed beforehand that there would be no dialogue script; that we would draw better dialogue from our non-actors using improvisation. A script is daunting for a non-professional. It stands as a trial to both learn and deliver naturally. It takes a lot of professional training.

Improvisation delivers all the quirks which make us different. There are many fresh lines in Even Emus for which I'd like to claim authorship but can't. I can

only claim to have steered the actors in mood terms, to have set up situations where lines seem to just tumble from them.

To get the freshest improvisation, I decided to only tell the actors the meaning of a scene just before the cameras rolled. I believed that this would make the moment fresher and more interesting. This turned out to be the case.

Continuity concerns

We shot the whole film in a week with Jessie Begun making this possible by drawing up an excellent schedule which had everyone in the right place at the right time. I had shot the film on the ship in China sequentially, laying down every shot as it was needed because editing was not possible. I had hoped that we would work sequentially on this film - feeling that to do so would add energy and excitement for the actors as they felt the story gradually unfold.

But people and place availability meant this was impossible. The Queenslanders used as our key location, was only available on certain days which meant that the biggest scene, Sue's birthday party, had to be shot last even though it is one of the first scenes of the film.

The documentary aspect

The film has a strong documentary feel due to the way it was shot - with a hand-held single camera. We also take time out from the story to document a few moments in the daily life of Maleny. This doesn't advance the plot but brings the film alive. Thus, I've called the genre-fictumentary. Many small towns have made documentaries or had them made about their town. If you are motivated and excited as you read about what we have done in Maleny, why not set about and tell your own film story and make your own fictumentary.