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Clubland Director Cherie Nowlan [left]

To Love More: An Interview With Cherie Nowlan

A REVIEW AND INTERVIEW BY RJURIK DAVIDSON

Let’s start off talking about Clubland and what attracted you to the script.

The truth of the script is what attracted me to it. It was very funny and there were certain things in it, certain lines that made me think it had to be from [scriptwriter] Keith Thompson’s real life. There were certain things that touched me in a way that a lot of other scripts didn’t – lots of the humour, but particularly the preparedness to be vulnerable. The personal nature of the script I really loved.

The journey of both Tim [Khan Chittenden] and Jean [Brenda Blethyn] was something that really interested me and I don’t think you see mother/son relationships in films that often. I always say that the theme of it is, ‘The only remedy for love is to love more’. That’s a quote from Thoreau, but to me that’s what the film is about. I thought it was a very positive message about how families can overcome the kind of rites of passage and hurdles that you face as everyone gets older or leaves home and negotiates adulthood and makes choices and decisions that not everyone approves of. I thought he handled that so honestly and originally.

The character of Jean is really interesting. She’s a stand-up comedian, which is an interesting world for starters. But in Jean’s case she’s suffered disappointments also. You obviously were attracted to telling her story.

Definitely. She’s the sort of hero of the story; she’s the person who has to undergo the change, in a way. It’s a coming of age story, but for her and not for Tim, and that’s a nice trick in the film, or surprise, I should say. The fact that she’s a stand-up comedian makes it extra interesting because, as a rule, a comedian has to be angry about something; they’ve got to have an axe to grind. So that background enables her to say and do things in a comic context and performance context that allows her to get away with bad behaviour in her own private life. Even though she does some unlikable things, you never dislike Jean. You love her from the jump and that’s what makes her extreme behaviour all the more powerful. Because you’re wanting her not to be like that and you’re hoping like mad that she’ll redeem herself, ultimately, but you’re very fearful that she won’t. The fact that Tim doesn’t give up on her was very appealing to me because in a more conventional version of that story, she’d probably try to kill herself, or crash the car, or he’d leave and it’d be a terrible rupture and the family might not re-



ABOVE: SONTIM (KHANCHITTENDEN)
AND JILL (EMMA BOOTH)

cover from it. But he never lets go of her; he just keeps on loving her more. I guess because she doesn't have any choice, she has to save herself in that situation, after a fairly lengthy tantrum. And she embraces that moment of grace and sees, in the end, that she's gained something, not lost something from the experience.

It's interesting from a storytelling point of view: she's not the point of view character, her son Tim is. So she's seen a little more from the outside,



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so to speak. It's an interesting decision because in some ways she's a more unique character, whereas his story is perhaps more generic.

That's absolutely true. His story on its own would be an ordinary one. It's only interesting in the context of his mother's story and her journey. While he on the surface appears to be the protagonist, it's actually a dual protagonist story. But we 'are' Tim and we experience everyone through his eyes – there's hardly any moments when we see his parents without him in the scene. It's a bit of a trick, but I think it works because, as you say, it's his story but she's the one who goes on the journey. Yes he grows up and by discovering sex and love he's able to leave the only other love he's known in his life. When sex walks in the door, Tim walks out [with it]. I was aware that it was a

dual protagonist story – she was the antagonist to his story and she was also the hero – so it's a pretty unusual structure. Probably no one else would have let us get away with that. I think it works.

No one else except for whom?

No one else but an Australian independent filmmaker would get away with blurring those kinds of lines and being that realistic. You're constantly under pressure as a filmmaker and a director and a writer to make films about likable people: people who are one shade, good or bad, nothing in between. I think it's much more interesting to investigate characters that are battling the angel and demon within them. And you relate to it because we're not all good and we're not all bad. I'm Jean – I understand her. I'm Tim. I

can appreciate all those characters.

It's interesting that you say that no one else but an Australian filmmaker could do those kinds of things, because it struck me as a very Australian film: a suburban comic drama. It's the sort of film that Australians make really well. Do you think that's true?

Yeah I do. I'm not really sure why. There just doesn't seem to be the same set of rules that you have on a bigger budget film, where you're either a PG rated film or an R rated film. There just doesn't seem to be as much grey in the more mainstream film world as there is in independent cinema. Perhaps there is a particular Australian humour. I think we allow our characters to be funny in a more realistic way. Not everyone speaks like a character in a sit-com. The script isn't gag-driven; it's funny because the characters are funny. Also it's unusual because sexual intimacy is not often dealt with in films. It's often avoided. For some reason we can explore all extremes of violence in cinema but we're not really comfortable with exploring intimate subject matter and I think that sets the film apart too. You know, it's either kind of gross or inappropriate or exploitative, not made for the story or characters –

Or romanticized in some cases, with soft shades and strings –

That's right! I loved that about Keith's script: there were certain lines that I was alluding to earlier. [When I read them], I just knew it was straight out of Keith's life. When Jill [Emma Booth] says to him, 'Would you like me to take my nightie off?' and Tim says, 'No that's all right, I'll do it,' and he turns the light off. 'What are you doing?' He says, 'I'm turning the lightie off.' I got to that line and

Clubland and the Dramas of Everyday Life

RELATIONSHIP DRAMAS have been particularly prominent in Australian film for some time. Indeed, Australia is generally very good at these films, even if sometimes they provide the viewer with a sense of déjà vu. Whether comedies or plain dramas, the characters are often familiar: the single struggling mother, the precocious teen, the young man or woman struggling to commit to a relationship, the lovable rogue, the slow but endearing sidekick. These films tend to be stories of suburban Australia and the dramas of everyday life; many of them are 'quirky' and have feel-good endings. They speak as much about the state of the Australian film industry

as they do about the quality of the script, the vision of the director or the power of the performances. There are, for starters, financial imperatives to all this. There is an ease and safety to the relationship drama. No complicated sets or effects are needed. A fairly solid number of viewers can be assumed. At their worst, such films tend to evoke television. A great many of them are what a director friend of mine describes as: 'A middling story competently told.' These threaten to overwhelm us with their lack of daring, though even the worst have redeeming moments, again a result of their subject matter: while an action movie filled with clichés

can be abysmal, it is almost impossible for a drama about everyday loves not to have *some* moment of truth or artistry. At their best, these films can be touching and deep, though most often when they combine the relationship drama with other elements, like the crimes in Ray Lawrence's *Lantana* (2001) or *Jindabyne* (2006) ('dead-body films' as another friend describes them).

Clubland, directed by Cherie Nowlan, is the latest of this kind of Australian film. In the protagonist Jean Dwight (Brenda Blethyn, on whose excellent performance the film rests), it explores an interesting and unusual char-



LEFT PAGE: MOTHER JEAN DWIGHT (PLAYED BY BRENDA BLETHYN).

acter. Jean is a stand-up comedian, who once looked likely to crack the big time until marriage and children intervened. Jean's life, then, has had its disappointments, though she still dreams of show business success. She needs constantly to be in the spotlight and is alternately generous and selfish.

The world of the stand-up comic is inherently interesting. It provides not only comic potential, but the possibility of exploring the public/private relationship in novel ways, as the best comedy tends to be a critique of both social mores and the individual's life itself. The life of a disappointed or failed per-

former is all the more interesting, because it opens up a world of failed dreams, of hopes deflated, if not dashed (Jean's estranged husband John [Frankie J. Holden] is also a disappointed performer – in his case a country musician). Who among us doesn't know artists desperately trying to 'make it' despite ongoing disappointments or failures? Part of the interest in this topic is that career disappointments often occur because of social or political reasons out of the control of the person involved. The question it asks is: how responsible can we be for our failures?

Considering this, it is no surprise that Jean

has some of the best moments in the film. In the opening scene, she is filled with a *joie de vivre*, dancing around to the radio in the morning, her middle-aged 'shaking' in humorous contrast to the blues-rock blaring out. Her caustic wit is on show at the various (skillfully directed and shot) club scenes where she performs stand-up. Writer Keith Thompson describes his impetus for Jean:

When I was a kid, my mother had a dance band in England. I used to sit at the side of the piano while she was performing and so I was always around clubs. The working class milieu in those clubs is really interest-

I just cracked up. I said, 'Keith, this is from you, isn't it? You said this.' And he just giggled and said, 'Yeah. I couldn't have made that up.' So that's the stuff that I found delightful. Even though his mother is not Jean, all that stuff was from his own life and some of it was from his working life: the whole character of Mark [Richard Wilson] sprung out of his time as a writer-producer on an SBS series set in a share house with disabled people. His sister worked at the Cerebral Palsy Association in Queensland for a long time and he was very interested in the effect that a disabled child has on the dynamics of a family. And that really interested me too. The originality of Keith's voice was what got me and I saw myself and my family in the script, even though it was nothing like my family. I think that's the magic of the script: even though it wasn't my family, it was. It somehow articulated key moments in the maturation process.

In the scene where Jill wanks Tim, every bloke in the audience announces himself during that scene. It's just fantastic. The other funny thing that always happens is when they applaud when John [Frankie J. Holden] says, 'the only thing you've got to know about women is that they've got to be right, all the time, about everything'. We have unusually high scores with men in this film – like off the dial, almost unheard of, outside genre films. And I always bring this up with the marketing teams. And they always say, 'Yeah, but men won't go and see this, they've got to be taken

to it.' And I say, 'Yeah, but we're double the scores of where we should be with men.' It's been a really curious thing for me because I never thought I would direct a film for men, but I have, it would seem.

Is there something about coming of age stories, which are also, often, 'first love' stories, which means it is easy to explore questions of love and intimacy or independence?

Coming of age stories are always appealing, aren't they? That's because we all see ourselves still as eighteen and nineteen year olds. That person still lives within us and we kind of harken back to it, and try to recapture that innocence and loss of innocence, and try to remember what it was like to be unsullied by the slings and arrows of bloody bad love stories. I never tire of watching those films. What makes it different in this film is that dual story: that she has to grow up as much as he does, that she has to let go and that's one of the most painful lessons in life. And it seems to be much harder to resist it than to give in to it and allow what you love to be set free. I guess as I've gotten older, I'm more Jean than I am Tim, obviously. I'm closer to that experience in life than I am his. I don't really have an answer to that question except that in independent cinema you don't have to be as black and white as you do in perhaps an overtly commercial film. I think this film is a commercial film; more by accident than design, though. I think that's because we were being really truthful to the story

and Brenda Blethyn is such an amazing actress and she was surrounded by fabulous actors. And it's funny. And it's moving. And it's truthful. And it's about something.

You managed to bring out some strong performances from your actors: Brenda Blethyn in what is a difficult role, and then Khan Chittenden and Emma Booth, both young actors, who look like they're on the rise.

I loved working with them. It's thrilling to work with someone as extraordinary as Brenda Blethyn, but it's just as much fun to work with those young people. And Khan had a really hard role. It's so difficult to pull off that kind of vulnerable but appealing young man. He's not a very overtly masculine character. I was surprised we didn't get more opposition than we did to that because I've encountered that before. If you don't have an all-conquering, active male character then it seems to disturb people, particularly other men. In this case, I think it's just because Khan is so believable and you're with him, you're not against him, and in all the screenings that we've had the men have just loved all of those themes. That's Keith's writing but it's also Khan's performance. And Emma is incredible. She's got so much talent. She was the second actor I cast after Brenda and we had to wait around for another six months for the film to be fully financed and I was certain someone else would discover how good she was. I knew that as soon as people started seeing the film that would be it, she would be

ing and really powerful. Plus, I love writing about women's humour. Guys get so many opportunities to be funny, but what makes me laugh is the way women relate to each other with their humour. It's a kind of domestic humour; they were doing observational comedy thirty years ago before it became popular with Seinfeld ...¹

Jean's ambiguity makes her the most original character in the film. She is not ready to let her 21-year-old son Tim (Khan Chittenden) grow up, and makes life unfairly difficult for his new girlfriend Jill (Emma Booth). Indeed, there's a mean streak to Jean and she is at times controlling and manipulative. Yet the film's portrait of her is ultimately sympathetic: these unattractive traits are the expressions of her career disappointments and her love for her children. In other words, the film does not fall into the 'evil mother-in-law' stereotype as it could so easily have done, but

manages to present Jean as a more rounded and complex person.

By contrast, the other two key characters in the film – Tim and Jill – are, ultimately, *nice*. Tim, the point of view character of the film, and his new girlfriend, Jill, are both likeable and fairly ordinary, despite their insecurities. Tim's love story with Jill is thus fairly conventional. He is awkward and shy and has commitment issues, brought on by a previous break-up. We suspect that this is because his previous girlfriend left him, and he is scared of getting hurt again. Tim's is thus a coming-of-age story and the scope of the conflict is clear to us in advance. Can Tim take the risk and dedicate himself to Jill, risking being hurt? Or will his fear sabotage what he really wants? Will he stand up to his overbearing mother, or let her ruin his relationship? There are some nice explorations of awkward and youthful sexuality and Jill's

own insecurities about her body ring true, yet, despite its competence, their plotline doesn't sparkle or shine partly because the two of them are, perhaps, just too 'nice'.

Being nice is a dangerous trait for any character, either in film or fiction. Nice characters threaten to become boring because we come to know early on that they'll act in pretty much predictable ways. Tim and Jill's story, while never boring, does have a sense of déjà vu. The story of their relationship is strong enough, however, due to a tight script, fine direction and satisfying performances. Khan Chittenden's star is clearly rising in Australian film. In *Clubland* he plays Tim, a difficult part, with sufficient aplomb. With time and experience, his performances should develop with greater subtlety. The winsome Emma Booth, cut from similar cloth to Abbie Cornish, debuts strongly and is equally likely to become an important young

a rocket, and sure enough that's happened. She's fantastic. I don't know how much acting she'd done before my film, probably an hour's worth of screen time, not a lot.

Since your earlier film, *Thank God He Met Lizzie* (1997), you've worked in television. How do you find the differences between the two forms? Have you said goodbye to television?

No, not at all. I love television. I don't think you can be a director anywhere anymore without either needing or wanting to work in television. The lead time in feature films in terms of development, let alone production, is just so long that it's not practical to say 'I'm only a feature film director' unless you're directing blockbusters. You learn how to be a director from directing television. I couldn't have done what I did on *Clubland* had I not done all those hours of television. Just working that quickly and being under that kind of pressure, creatively and physically, is excellent training for film-making. So I've loved every minute of my television directing and my commercial directing. It wasn't for the lack of trying to make another feature film, but for one reason or another it didn't happen. So I'm just so thrilled I got a chance to make another film and for it to have had this dream run so far. It's just fantastic. I've done more than I ever said I'd do, so I have nothing to complain about. I've been lucky to get the support I've had from Rosemary Blight (the producer) and all the television producers I've worked for, and the commercial producers.

Can you tell me a bit about directing *Clubland*? The scenes in the comedy club must have presented quite a lot of challenges.

Any shoot is challenging [especially] when you've got to shoot that quickly and squeeze in that many locations, with extras and song and dance numbers. The only thing we didn't have were children and animals, which I was grateful for. But we certainly had a high location count and high page count and all those things that stretch you to the limit. The club scenes were definitely difficult because of the number of scenes that I had to do and musical numbers to be staged. The first club scene ... Brenda was incredibly nervous because she'd never performed stand-up before and she wrote all the material herself. In the end pretty much all of it was hers. And she was constantly rewriting the monologues and testing it out on all of us, and me at all kinds of hours of the night and she was really, really nervous and I'd never seen her nervous before and so that was interesting.

A lot of the club scenes were filmed in poker machine areas that we couldn't lock down. Some of those areas are only closed for about two hours of the day, between four and six am, so we shot those scenes with real patrons in the background, calling out, making comments, playing away on the machines, sort of half-tuning in – enough to be disruptive. That was funny. But I'm under so much pressure to get the day shot that there are a lot of funny things

that happen, but I've just got to soldier on.

The cast were so much fun. When they come on board the party starts for me. When you're trying to finance a film and you're in preproduction, there's not a lot to laugh about. It's painful. It's very rewarding to go to the disabled services factory and work with the disabled actors and have Richard Wilson go out and work with them in character and be accepted.

Is there anything that you really wanted to say about the film?

What I'm proud of is that it's an entertaining film that means something; that you walk out of it and feel that you've experienced something and felt something. So there's not really a question that I haven't been asked but that's what I hope impresses other people. I hope it makes them want to go and see it and support Australian film. I can't tell you how many times I walk down the aisles of the new releases in a DVD shop or look at the multiplex films and think, 'Christ, there's nothing there for me. Am I out of step with the world or ...?' I hope that I've made a film that I would want to see. I'm just so thrilled with how the film has travelled so far and I just hope that we score a few hits at the box office in between all of those blockbusters. We couldn't have come out with any more blockbusters if we tried! I think there are six of them, so it does feel a little bit like David and Goliath, but hopefully our film is different enough to capture the imaginations of people. •

Australian actor. Richard Wilson gives an excellent performance as Tim's disabled brother, Mark, while Rebecca Gibney and Frankie J. Holden provide typically professional performances as, respectively, Jean's friend Lana and her estranged husband John.

Stylistically – in terms of direction, set design, cinematography – the film is laid back. Cherie Nowlan explains that:

Being a film about relationships it was important that we didn't let the camera get in the way of those relationships. The thing was to find the visual language which suited the film. I tried to deconstruct the visuals a little so that everything is not perfect. I didn't want audiences to feel like they are watching a 'film'; it was really important to ground the film in reality and honesty.²

Clubland, then, is another addition to a par-

ticularly Australian type of film. On the whole we leave the cinema satisfied, having been immersed, nevertheless, in the familiar. This kind of film might be considered a pretty accurate reflection of Australia: a place of small everyday dramas (among white suburbanites) rather than great political or social struggles. Beyond the financial imperatives, there are probably political preconditions for the prominence of this kind of film in Australia. Such a world could be criticized as complacent, self-satisfied, apolitical – that is, as a reflection of what might be termed 'Howard's Australia'. Perhaps this lack of political edge contributes to a lack of artistic edge in many of these films. Indeed, it seems to me that those films that foreground their political concerns – say, *Last Train to Freo* (Jeremy Sims, 2006) or *Jindabyne* – stand at the cutting edge of Australian film. But even those 'relationship drama' films which critique middle-Australian concerns (say, *Lan-*

tana or *Jindabyne*, again) work on a metaphorical level that is different to the more political films of the 1970s: it's a long time since *Sunday Too Far Away* (Ken Hannam, 1975). This is because Australia itself has changed; the social movements and political struggles of the 1970s have themselves passed away. Yet there may also be something appealing about the lack of political edge in many contemporary films, for it means that in Australia some people's dramas are small, personal ones. These films can be generally about decent people and the challenges that face them. *Clubland* is just such a film.

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Endnotes

¹ Clubland Press Kit, p.6.

² Clubland Press Kit, p.8.