



Local Stars

The silver screen appearances of the Blue Mountains.

Story by Michael Burge

Since the advent of moving pictures, the natural beauty and evocative built environments of the Greater Blue Mountains have been captured in feature films. In the lead-up to the premiere of the latest locally-shot feature film, *Blue Mountains Life* looks back at some of the filmmakers who have brought the area to the big screen.

January will see the international release of 'A Few Best Men', for which director Stephan Elliot (creator of 'Priscilla Queen of the Desert') has teamed-up with the producer and writer of 'Death at a Funeral' for a Brit-Aussie comedy that promises to turn the traditional wedding on its head.

"Stephan was adamant that a perfect location could be found in the Blue Mountains, and we found it in Yester Grange" Producer Antonia Barnard recalls.

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Built as a private home c.1890 on a vast estate directly above the waterfall that lends it name to the township of Wentworth Falls, the view of the Jamison Valley from Yester Grange's verandah probably ranks as one of the finest in Australia.

"Making 'A Few Best Men' in the Blue Mountains was one of those great film experiences" Barnard says. "The weather was perfect (if a little hot) for eleven straight days, which enabled us to achieve our wedding day as if it was all shot on one day."

With a cast of emerging actors from Australia and Great Britain, 'A Few Best Men' also features Olivia Newton-John and Jonathan Biggs as the bride's parents, and will showcase the Blue Mountains before a new generation of international movie fans. ▶

For the three decades since the resurgence of the Australian film industry in the 1970s this region has attracted location scouts. Period films in particular have been able to capitalize on the heritage feel of Mountains townships.

One-time Lawson resident Clytie Jessop's 'Emma's War' (1986) is the semi-autobiographical story of a single mother (Lee Remick) who brings her young family (including Miranda Otto) out of Sydney during World War Two. The casting of this coming-of-age story is notable as Remick's final feature film role, and Otto's screen debut. Terence Donovan, Mark Lee, and the late Dame Pat Evison also featured.

Filmed at Leura's Everglades (which doubled as a Theosophists' School), homes in Wentworth Falls and Katoomba, and the Megalong Valley, 'Emma's War' was Associate-Produced by long time Blue Mountains resident, award-winning filmmaker David Hannay.

Hannay's film work in the Blue Mountains began after moving to the region in 1977, and a meeting with Scottish film director Bill Douglas at the 1979 San Remo Film Festival. "We became very close friends," Hannay recalls "and we created a film project to collaborate on."

That collaboration was 'Comrades', based on the true story of the Tolpuddle Matyrs, a group of 19th century Dorset farm labourers who were transported to Australia after making a stand for fair wages, and ended-up creating Britain's first Trade Union.

An epic story spanning Britain and Australia, the movie's creation was a long-term and often complex venture. "It was essentially a British picture, so we needed a British Producer" Hannay says, explaining how the search included location scouting in the Blue Mountains with Ismail Merchant (of Merchant Ivory Productions), whom Hannay recalls as the polar opposite of Bill Douglas in background and temperament.

The shoot for 'Emma's War' progressed in the Blue Mountains in 1984 while a more suitable producer for 'Comrades' was found in the form of Simon Relph, "the pre-eminent British Film Producer of the time" Hannay says.

The Australian location work for Douglas' film was completed in 1985-6, using settings across NSW. Locally, the Grose Wilderness, the Megalong Valley, Hampton, and the creek at the top of Wentworth Falls were backdrops to the story of the Matyrs' years within the penal system. The huge British and Australian cast included James Fox, Vanessa Redgrave, Robert Stephens, Arthur Dignam, Lynette Curran and John Hargeaves.

'Comrades' debuted at the 1986 BFI London Film Festival, where Douglas was awarded the Sutherland Trophy for the most original and imaginative feature of the year. It also screened in competition at the 2007 Berlin International Film Festival.

The enduring production force on 'Comrades' was undoubtedly Hannay, based on his conviction that the film could be completed as an international co-production, with the Blue Mountains as an integral location. "The region is just so accessible to Sydney" Hannay says. "It's the only city I know which is surrounded by a World Heritage National Park."

On occasion, that accessibility has sparked controversy. In 2004 the Blue Mountains Conservation Society, the Colong Foundation, and environmental protesters successfully prevented the use of a location near Mount Hay (on the edge of the Grose Wilderness) for the production sci-fi action thriller 'Stealth'. The NSW Land and Environment Court ruled that the planned shoot contravened the permitted use of a wilderness zone.

Predictions of a downturn in production companies using NSW for film locations were splashed throughout the media at the time. Despite these fears, in the seven years since the ruling, production companies ➤



PROUD 'PARENTS' Olivia Newton-John & Jonathan Biggins play the bride's parents in 'A Few Best Men', pictured at Yester Grange during filming.



CELLULOID COMRADES (L-R) Charles Hannah (Production Manager) Vanessa Redgrave & David Hannay (Australian Associate Producer) during the production of 'Comrades' in Hampton.

have continued to film in the region (and indeed across the state), but the 'Stealth' case has created an 'environmental line' which has so far not been crossed again.

The Blue Mountains is also home to movie fan and international critic David Stratton of the ABC's 'At the Movies' program. A former director of the Sydney Film Festival, Stratton is currently patron of the Blue Mountains Film Festival.

The region has hosted its own film festival in one form or another for the last decade, and the opportunity for local exhibition has encouraged a new generation of Mountains filmmakers. This year's festival exhibited 'Last Ride', a feature directed by resident James Phillips. The story of a group of mountain bikers making their way through the Devil's Wilderness, using accessible digital technology Phillips shot the film in one take from the point-of-view of the main character.

At the 2011 Australian International Movie Convention on the Gold Coast earlier this year, David Hannay caught an advance screening of 'A Few Best Men'. In his opinion it was the "best received" movie by audiences of film exhibitors. "They just loved it," he reports "I think Stephan Elliot is really on form with this picture." ❖

'A Few Best Men' opens nationally on Australia Day 2012. 'Emma's War' and 'Comrades' are available on DVD.



SWAN SONG Lee Remick's final feature film appearance was in Clytie Jessop's 'Emma's War' shot on location in the Blue Mountains.



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Location Blue Mountains

1955 Jedda

Charles Chauvel's last movie had an inadvertent need for a Blue Mountains location. This groundbreaking feature, the first Australian production to cast indigenous actors in lead roles, was shot in the Northern Territory. When the last roll of film negatives was lost in a plane crash on its way to England for processing, Chauvel was forced to reshoot close to the post-production office in Sydney. Magnificent Kanangra Walls was chosen as the backdrop for the dramatic ending of Jedda's incredible journey.

1985 Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome

The post-apocalyptic world of Mad Max continued to a third installment with this movie, filmed in part at Mermaid's Cave, just off the road to the Megalong Valley from Blackheath. Standing in for 'Crack in the Earth', the destination where Mad Max (Mel Gibson) encounters a group of orphaned children living in a desert oasis, Mermaid's Cave is a classic Blue Mountains canyon with rainforest-like vegetation and a watercourse.

1993 Sirens

The controversial life and work of artist Norman Lindsay was the subject of John Duigan's feature, filmed on location at the Lindsay's home in Faulconbridge, now a National Trust property. Featuring Sam Neill and Pamela Rabe as Norman and Rose Lindsay, Sirens tells the whimsical tale of a straight-laced English pastor (Hugh Grant) and his wife (Tara Fitzgerald), drawn into the sexually liberated world of Lindsay and his models, played by Elle MacPherson, Kate Fischer and Portia de Rossi.