



HOLLIE ADAMS

# SPARRING PARTNERS

Decades after their freshly published letters, Bruce Beresford and Sue Milliken still bicker, but it usually ends in laughter, writes **Rosemary Neill**

**'A**m I boring you?" Sue Milliken interrupts herself, mid-sentence, to admonish her friend and long-time collaborator Bruce Beresford. "Yes," Beresford replies impassively as he casually flips through a pile of CDs on his living room coffee table.

"You're trying to attract attention to yourself," Milliken says in a pointed yet calm tone, as if she is a therapist dealing with a patient who suffers from attention deficit disorder.

"No!" exclaims the Oscar-nominated director, pretending to be shocked at the idea he would pull focus during a media interview. At this the duo cracks up and the tension between them dissipates as quickly as it erupted. It will surface again, though, when Milliken complains, with some justification: "I'm just trying to get a word in here, Bruce, if you've got a second." (Margaret and David's on-screen bickering had nothing on these two.)

Clearly this double act — Milliken is a pioneering film producer and Beresford one of Australia's most successful movie directors — has a relationship built on sparring as much as mutual respect. For this interview, they are sitting, like a divorcing couple undergoing mediation, at opposite ends of a huge, statement sofa (it's made of pale yellow leather and crafted in an antique style) in Beresford's Sydney mansion. It might not seem immediately obvious,



**Bruce Beresford and Sue Milliken at Beresford's home, above, and on the set in younger days, left**

but theirs is a professional partnership that has endured across several decades and three award-winning feature films (*The Fringe Dwellers*, *Black Robe* and *Paradise Road*), and has yielded a new, provocative book.

Titled *There's a Fax from Bruce*, the book comprises Milliken's and Beresford's private correspondence — sent via fax — between 1989 and 1996, the year they went into pre-production on the World War II feature *Paradise Road*. These curated faxes serve as a barometer of the times, as well as an unusually candid account of the trials and tribulations of getting films greenlighted, cast and promoted. Beresford jokes: "They were confidential faxes. Sue is the sort of Julian Assange of the film world."

As Milliken points out, filmmaking is a business that blends dreams and other people's money — sometimes large pots of the stuff. So it often takes years to get a film up; along the way, there can be as many setbacks as breakthroughs, coupled with disputes over everything from casting to press kits. Actor and filmmaker Rachel Ward calls *There's a Fax a*

filmmaker's "survival manual" and Beresford agrees that "in a way it is, because it tells you what you're in for. You are in for a lot of heartache." The characteristically forthright director says that when he hawked the scripts for *Tender Mercies* and *Driving Miss Daisy* around Hollywood, "everybody hated them". He went on to direct these movies, "and they both won the Academy Award for best screenplay. It just shows you how hard it is to get people to read a script and say, 'Well, actually it's quite good.'"

Hollywood has always been the home of hype, but *There's a Fax* posits a far different reality: that people spend as much time on films that don't get made as on films that do. Beresford has garnered Academy Award nominations for *Tender Mercies* (best director) and *Breaker Morant* (best screenplay), while his 1989 film *Driving Miss Daisy* won four Academy awards including best film. He has also won a swag of AFI gongs. Despite these impressive achievements, he tells Review he has worked for two years on projects that didn't see the light of day. Milliken concurs: "The ratio of films that

don't get made to the ones that do is enormous." Because of this dispiriting reality, she says "there was a point where I thought, 'What am I doing in this business? I would try prostitution, but I am too old.'" She quickly adds, "I'm not really serious ..."

"Oh, what?" cuts in Beresford, feigning surprise that his colleague has never resorted to sex work. Cue more laughter. Dressed in a brown, tweedy suit and scarlet socks, the director — who admits (but only reluctantly) to being 75 — is a natural comedian and storyteller. He recently saw himself being interviewed on television and "I thought, 'Who is that old guy who bears a faint resemblance to me?'"

Milliken, 76, is a former chairwoman of the Australian Film Commission and her producing credits range from the Vietnam film *The Odd Angry Shot* to the 2014 documentary *The Redfern Story*. Like Beresford, she is as sharp as a tack (and gives as good as she gets). She has a whippet-thin, agile frame — despite her advanced age, she still skis.

This irrepressible pair could serve as an advertisement for that seemingly ageless generation who rose to prominence on the back of a wave of cultural nationalism in the 1970s and 80s ... and just keep going. Beresford directed an episode of a widely admired *Roots* remake that has just premiered in the US and will air on SBS later this year. Meanwhile, he and Milliken are raising finance for a feature film adapted from *Women in Black*, a novel by the Australian novelist and Booker Prize finalist Madeleine St John. "Madeleine was a wonderful writer," says Beresford wistfully, "and she was so keen for the film to be done. It broke my heart when she died [in 2006] and we hadn't done it." (*Ladies in Black*, a stage musical adapted from the same book with songs by Tim Finn, was staged in Brisbane and Melbourne recently.)

Much of their narrative-by-fax dwells on Milliken's and Beresford's quest to bring *Black Robe* and *Paradise Road* to the big screen. The book homes in on the moment *Paradise Road*, about a group of white women imprisoned by the Japanese during World War II, almost fell





apart. In January 1996, Beresford fired off a fax, threatening to quit the film if Fox Searchlight insisted on casting Jodie Foster or Annette Bening. “Fox’s suggestions are just simply ludicrous. I’d rather not make it with miscast people,” he fumed. At that point, the movie was weeks away from pre-production; years of work had been poured into it.

How did Milliken react? Tellingly, she didn’t panic. “You think, ‘If he’s going to do that, I have to pick him up somehow.’ As a producer, you’ve got to try and find a way through the impasse, you’re between the director and the studio, trying to get the show back on the rails.” (In the end, Beresford prevailed — the film starred Glenn Close, Cate Blanchett, Frances McDormand and Julianna Margulies). Milliken reminds Beresford he also threatened to quit over the editing of *Paradise Road*, “Did I?” he asks, sounding mystified.

The next Milliken-Beresford project, *Black Robe*, an Australian-Canadian co-production that dealt with 17th-century Jesuit missionaries who tried (and largely failed) to convert Canadian First Nations tribes to Christianity, was also marked by fierce disagreements, this time over the US distributor wanting to cut a controversial scene. Beresford desperately wanted to retain a shot in which a child’s throat was cut. The Samuel Goldwyn Company feared that if left in, this scene would have precluded an R rating, rendering the film unmarketable in the US. (In this case the distributors had their way, at least in America.)

In the faxes, Beresford vents freely: he complains about *Black Robe*’s “pathetic press hand-outs ... seemingly aimed at a class of five-year-olds” and the “impossibly pretentious” agenda at a Venice film directors’ conference. He mentions meeting Harrison Ford but found the actor “totally uncommunicative, even mo-

rose”, and he refers to strained relations (since repaired) with former film producer and broadcaster Phillip Adams.

Today, he says breezily of the tensions that flare over the promotion of films: “Oh that happens all the time. That’s usually the publicity department. They’ll go in and promote something and you think, ‘Wait a minute, they’re selling a different film to the one we’ve got!’ ” When it comes to choosing Hollywood actors, he says “casting is a nightmare because they frequently have this list of actors they want, and you’ll say, ‘But they’re completely unsuitable for this particular film’, and they’ll say, ‘We don’t care; you can make it work.’ ” In 1994, he made headlines when he walked away from love story *The Bridges of Madison County* because he thought Jessica Lange was wrong for the lead role — he

had resisted her casting, “pointlessly”. (Ultimately, Meryl Streep got the part, and Clint Eastwood directed and starred in the film.)

Other big names (John Hurt, John Malkovich, Steven Spielberg, Susan Sarandon, Glenn Close) surface in the faxes. Beresford says that “all the name dropping is because we were dealing with those people, especially if you were based in Hollywood, you were just doing it all the time”. Milliken adds: “That’s just the way life was at the time.” Despite ferocious casting disputes, he admires the “hundreds” of actors he has directed. “The better they are, as a rule, the nicer they are,” says Milliken, and he agrees.

The book briefly brings up the fact that in 1989, Beresford was overlooked for a best director Oscar nomination for *Driving Miss Daisy*, even though it won best film. Did he mind?

From top left, Beresford with Cate Blanchett; Milliken with Wendy Hughes on the set of *Paradise Road*; the shooting of *Black Robe*; faxes between the pair detail the trials and tribulations involved in filmmaking

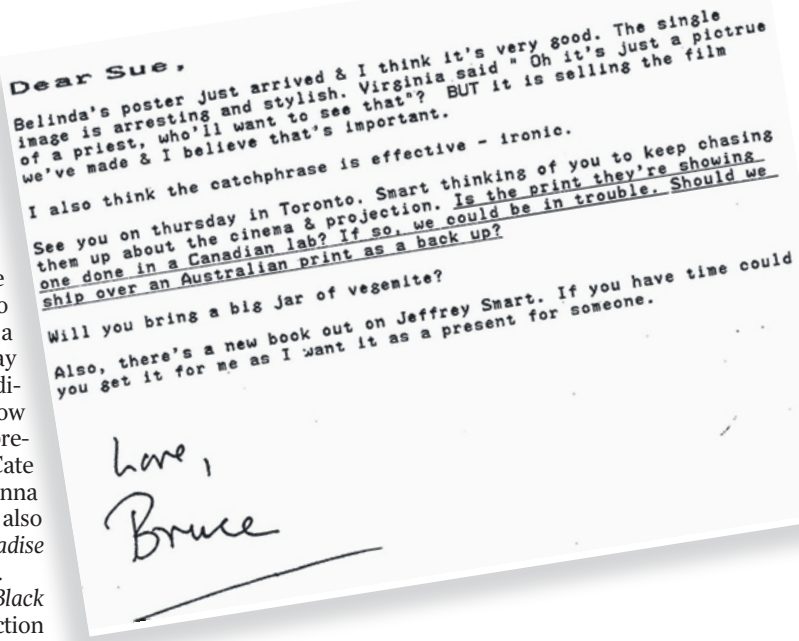
“That’s one of the things you just sort of say, tough luck and keep going. There’s no point in getting upset over something like that. I found out a long time ago that it’s better just to roll with the punches,” he says. While the director has stood his ground on artistic matters, losing some battles and winning others, this comment says much about his pragmatism and resilience.

Beresford, whose last Australian feature was *Mao’s Last Dancer* (2009), first worked with Milliken on the local, indigenous-themed *The Fringe Dwellers* in the mid-80s. So what makes their partnership tick? An effective producer-director team, says Beresford, “must have similar taste in films and a similar kind of aesthetic”. The best two producers he has dealt with, he reckons, were Hollywood’s Richard D. Zanuck, with whom he worked on *Driving Miss Daisy* — and Milliken. “If I’m working with Sue I know things will happen. Whatever she says she’ll do, she will do.”

Milliken returns the compliment: “One of the things I like about working with Bruce,” she says, “is that you can present him with a problem and some alternatives, and he’ll help you make the decision. Some directors will throw down their handbag and say, ‘I have to have \$50,000 extra.’ ” Milliken reflects on how “good directors challenge you. Working with bad directors is a very unhappy experience, but working with good ones is great fun.”

The producer says the best directors are “usually very intelligent” but Beresford counters that such directors work more from instinct than intellect. “The ones I’ve enjoyed working with have been pretty smart. The dumb ones have been quite disappointing,” Milliken insists. Clearly, this dynamic duo will have to agree to disagree. Again.

**There’s a Fax from Bruce**, by Bruce Beresford and Sue Milliken (Currency Press, \$29.99), is out now.



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