

THE FAX OF LIFE FOR FILM-MAKERS

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Books | This collaborative account shows how films, almost miraculously, get to the screen, writes *Brian McFarlane*

Right:

Exchanges charged with wit: Bruce Beresford and Sue Milliken on the set of *Paradise Road*. Jasin Boland



There's a Fax from Bruce

By Bruce Beresford and Sue Milliken | *Currency Press* | \$29.99

“**Y**ou can’t judge a book by its cover” is a maxim I first heard during my distant youth. Well, the cover (front and back) of this book immediately lets us know what we’re in for. Its images prepare us for an insight into the business of getting films made – in this case, films being made by director Bruce Beresford and producer Sue Milliken – and for glimpses of personal lives as well. About the latter, there is even an exchange from Bruce in Canada about his need for Vegemite, with Sue’s efficient reply: “A year’s supply of Vegemite is being arranged.” There seems to be no end to the producer’s function.

Plenty of learned volumes have been published about almost every aspect of film – critical appraisals of finished products, studies of directors’ oeuvres or of various genres or of the phenomenon of stardom – and there has recently been a trend towards production histories. But *There’s a Fax from Bruce* is something different. Here, the regular exchange of faxes between the director and his producer – sometimes almost on a daily basis, all thoughtfully saved by Sue’s assistant, Chris Gordon – offers a unique sense of immediacy, of the day-by-day dealings that enable films to get off the ground and, ultimately, onto the screen.

In some circumstances, this could be a bit tedious. You could feel you were being given more detail than you need about this or that film before actually going to see it at your local multiplex or arthouse. But not when the exchanges, charged with wit, chronicle attempts to balance the professional and personal claims of those involved. The leavening of wit becomes apparent early

on, when Sue describes two bizarrely dressed women at a premiere as “look[ing] like a couple of drag queens who had inadvertently crashed a meeting of the Masons,” and it is confirmed when Bruce mentions that his daughter, who is going to USC film school, “is *very* smart with excellent taste, but these are not essential requirements for a career in the film industry.”

Apart from the wit, there is the emerging spectacle of two people in positions of power, power of different kinds but with the common goal of getting projects started, made and sold. The exchange of faxes accretes a sense of the drama inherent in these processes. For instance, there are endless problems related to casting (studios sometimes favouring “names” over the director’s idea of suitability) or other personnel; tensions and conflicts about securing appropriate finance; and, most frustrating of all, cherished projects that fail to get up. As for the latter, at least in retrospect, there has sometimes been reason to cheer: Bruce was surely lucky to be saved from the preposterously overrated *The Bridges of Madison County*, which Clint Eastwood took over.

The two productions that come in for the most crisis-ridden coverage are *Black Robe* (1992) and *Paradise Road* (1997). The former, set in wintry seventeenth-century Canada, deals with a young priest’s attempts to convert Indian tribes to Christianity. It ran into serious casting difficulties before settling for Aden Young in the lead role, and the eloquent production that resulted was Bruce’s favourite of his own films to that time. There is an honest self-appraisal in his attitude to his films, including disappointment with *A Good Man in Africa*, which fell short of his expectations.

But the problems of making *Black Robe* seem as nothing compared with the endurance-taxing lead-up to *Paradise Road*. This film was based on Betty Jeffrey’s wartime memoirs recording the experiences of a group of women, imprisoned by the Japanese, who form a “vocal orchestra” to alleviate the rigours and horrors of their lives. The screenplay was originally called *A Voice Cries Out*, and even getting a *title* acceptable to the backers as well as to Bruce and Sue was a prolonged affair. The faxes dramatise the discussions about how far the characters would be fictionalised, how much music there would be and when it was most apt to introduce it, the financial practicalities of filming in Southeast Asia, and the interminable casting dilemmas. Regarding the latter, Bruce writes: “I can say without exaggeration that I’ve never made a film in which the cast came together without massive problems.” This time there was talk of such disparate “names” as Judy Davis and Joanna Lumley, Jodie Foster and Jean Simmons, none of whom made the cut. Bruce also “very much liked a Sydney actress named Cate someone” who had been brought to meet him – and Blanchett *did* appear in the final film.

The tribulations involved in getting this very moving film into production make for absorbing reading: the conflicts of interest and how these are settled; an enjoyable strand of gossip, often involving a parade of names of such diverse provenance as Dodi Fayed, Barry Humphries and Phillip Adams (the latter two crop up regularly); and even the literary controversy of Helen Demidenko.

There is, then, a big supporting cast, but it is essentially the two principals who command our attention. It has sometimes seemed to me easier to understand the function of almost anyone

connected to film than that of producer. What are producers *for*? How do they interact with directors? Are they there to act as go-betweens, as buffers between director and backers or anyone else who comes between the director and the work? This book gives as full and lively a sense as you're likely to come across. When it's a matter of endless rewrites or juggling titles or ensuring publicity – all issues on which a producer might be called into play – Beresford is undoubtedly fortunate in having had an intelligent collaborator he could count on for intervention where and when he needed it.

What this utterly readable record offers, above all, is an engaging study of a relationship that emerges between two people whose sights are set on the same outcome, even when this is inevitably approached from different professional perspectives. Mutual respect and affection keeps this relationship steady in the most troubling climates as they steer their vehicles to the desired havens. •

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