

# Iron men

The resources boom is spreading to the red carpet, as miners throw their weight – and cash – behind Australian movies.  
By GARRY MADDOX.

If those Chilean miners who were trapped for 69 days last year want to tell their story in a movie, they should come to Australia. Not only has filming started on the telemovie *Beaconsfield*, based on the dramatic rescue of Tasmanian miners Todd Russell and Brant Webb in 2006, but some of the profits from the country's mining boom are filtering into the film industry.

Take *Red Dog*, a heart-warming drama about a kelpie who helped unite an isolated mining community, which reaches cinemas next month.

Based on a novel by Louis de Bernieres (*Captain Corcoran's Mandolin*), director Kriv Stenders's film was inspired by a real-life dog famous for hitching rides and befriending locals around the rugged Pilbara region, in northern Western Australia, in the 1970s. He was so beloved that the community erected a statue of him in Dampier after his death.

Having nabbed the film rights by promising to shoot *Red Dog* in Australia rather than the US, producer Nelson Woss knew he had to head to the Pilbara for authenticity.

"The story takes place in a really remote, hot, harsh, difficult location where there's no sets, no infrastructure, no crew," he says. "So if I was to shoot a picture up there and make it authentic by taking the crew up there, I had to find ways to feed, house and water my crew."

With the resources sector booming, Woss, who produced the Heath Ledger version of *Neel Kelly*, says a small mining hut or "donga" costs more in the Pilbara than a hotel room in Sydney. Airfares from Perth are more expensive than from Sydney to the western capital. And once a 60-strong crew arrived, there would be all sorts of logistical problems.

For mining companies producing iron ore around the clock for China and India, having a film crew wandering around high-security locations must have seemed like a headache waiting to happen. Instead of hard hats and other safety requirements now mandatory on mining sites, the filmmakers wanted their actors to wear shorts, singlets and thongs from the '70s.

If you're an industry worth more than \$160 billion a year, why do you need a \$10 million or \$15 million film? And do you really want arty filmmakers interrupting your work by getting a truck to drive down a road again ... and again ... and again?

For reasons that say something about both industries – pragmatic miners and persuasive filmmakers – Woss convinced the mining companies Rio Tinto and Woodside, the mining equipment company WesTrac and regional airline Skywest to back *Red Dog*, getting access to a mine, a port, heavy machinery and a helicopter for aerial shots.

"For a producer, it was like being in a candy store," Woss says. "When I was in Hollywood, if you were on a big movie, you might have cars and trucks. But on *Red Dog*, I got my own train."

"For a whole day, I had a train almost three kilometres long – one of those massive iron trains that the mining company gave us."

Woss's pitch to the mining sector was



Kimberley calling ... musician brothers Alan (left) and Stephen Pigram in *Mad Bastards*.

that the film would show the rest of the country what they were doing.

"We basically show the heartbeat of the Australian economy – we show the mines, we show the trains that take the ore to the conveyor belts, we show the conveyor belts and the crushers then we show the ships being loaded and the iron ore being taken to China," he says.

It's not hard to see how persuasive Woss was as he raves about the region.

"People forget that's the engine of Australia that's going 24/7 and it's

***'When I was in Hollywood, if you were on a big movie, you might have cars and trucks. But on Red Dog, I got my own train.'*** Nelson Woss, producer

billions and billions of dollars," he says. "It's the reason our economy is in reasonably good shape after the GFC. And it's the reason our dollar is at parity with the US dollar."

Whether it's arguing against the federal government's carbon tax; Gina Reinhart investing in the Ten Network; Andrew Forrest tackling indigenous employment; Clive Palmer buying a football team, a yacht or tourist resort; or Nathan Tinkler snaffling his own teams and racehorses, wealthy mining identities have become influential in many areas of Australian life.

When the government introduced a new incentive for filmmaking – a 40 per cent tax rebate called the producer's offset – it came as no surprise that miners became involved. But it wasn't necessarily to add to their healthy bank balances. The slight chance of a profit from an Australian film is no incentive at all: it's much more practical to invest in real estate.

The chief operating officer of Screen Australia, Fiona Cameron, says miners are one of the "communities of interest"

who are investing because they identify with films being made in their local areas, often in regional Western Australia or Queensland.

For last year's World War I drama *Beneath Hill 60*, mining suppliers from Townsville backed a film about the region's miners who went to the Western Front to become tunnellers.

And for this year's heartfelt Kimberley drama *Mad Bastards*, miners from the region came up with the final 15 per cent of the budget because they responded

a film about the issues facing Aboriginal men.

"It's a reflection of the stories being told," Cameron says. "[*Red Dog*] is set in the Pilbara so there's a natural synergy. If a film is being made in an area that has a 'community of interest', you're going to have local investors happy to come on board."

One such investor is knockabout Colin "Gumby" McCumstie, who has taken film so seriously that he is quitting as mine manager for Mount Gibson Iron to get more involved in executive producing.

A longtime friend of the Pigram Brothers, the Broome musicians who helped produce *Mad Bastards* and also appear on screen, he learnt they needed private investment to top up government funding.

"I turned up six weeks later with half a million dollars and said, 'Is that enough to make the film?'," he says.

After travelling with *Mad Bastards* to the Sundance and Cannes film festivals, McCumstie has caught "the bug" of filmmaking. He is now executive

producing two new films, *Satellite Boy* and *Break the Sky*, with finance from well-off miners, his own funds and mining companies wanting to support positive messages about indigenous and community issues.

"There's a propensity there to make charitable donations to ease their tax burdens," he says. "We're not all pretending to be completely noble here but it does tick the community and indigenous boxes, plus the fact we're supporting arts and media ... is a good thing for all corporate citizens."

McCumstie is not just a passive investor either – he has a background in explosives so he will "blow things up" during filming for *Satellite Boy*, just as he did for *Mad Bastards*.

"I'd be kidding if I didn't see it as a means of picking up an EP fee on things I raise a significant amount of money on," he says. "But if we think it's a viable enough project and it looks like it will fly financially and make money – and, of course, there's no crystal ball that can assure you of that – people are happy to invest and take a punt."

For Rio Tinto executives, boosting the morale of their Pilbara workforce was part of the reason for getting involved with *Red Dog*. The company's communities manager in Dampier, Robyn Sermon, says mining companies have had a long involvement in the arts, including bringing opera, ballet and theatre to the area.

"Any projects that really celebrate regional and remote areas and that employees get to be part of, whether it's arts or sporting programs or whatever, are fantastic things to get involved in," she says.

*Red Dog* celebrates a story that's well-known in the Pilbara – a dog so much a part of the community that he was made a member of both the transport union and the local sports and social club.

"We have a lot of people still in Dampier, which is a town Rio Tinto originally built, that still remember *Red Dog*," Sermon says. "For us to bring that to life and celebrate the culture and a time in the Pilbara of rapid expansion and lots of change and people coming from lots of different areas was a really lovely thing to support."

Did Rio Tinto require corporate logos to feature in the film or want script changes in exchange for filming at its mines and ports?

"There's normally certain amounts of recognition we'd expect, obviously in the credits," Sermon says.

The company also wanted the chance to host a preview in the area and have staff visit during filming.

"I think we did read the script but ... we're usually open to creative licence," Sermon says. "We're miners, we're not scriptwriters or film producers so we wouldn't pretend to get involved in the creative side of the project."

Whatever the intricacies of the negotiations, Woss was delighted with the company's involvement, which included putting the cast and crew through a mining induction course, supplying full-time safety co-ordinators and mandatory drug and alcohol testing.



Animal magnetism ... Josh Lucas and Koko in the Australian film *Red Dog*, which was shot in the Pilbara region with the backing of Rio Tinto and Woodside.

"They realised we were going to make a positive movie [but] it wasn't going to be a commercial," Woss says.

"It was the story of the book and it just happens to take place in the backyard of where all these mining operations are. It was just a beautiful natural fit that worked for both parties."

It also made Woss realise that the scale of mining dwarfs filmmaking.

"When we were shooting, these trains were going by every couple of hours carrying iron ore from the mines," he says.

"Some of these trains were two or three kilometres long and they'd take five or 10 minutes to go by. I asked one of the Rio executives, 'What's the value of the iron ore in one of those trains?'"

"He said, 'We can't tell you that, it's confidential information. But I can tell you one of those trains would probably cover your entire budget.' And they're going by every couple of hours, seven days a week."

*Red Dog* opens on August 4.

## Movies made with mining dollars



Gold ... Brendan Cowell in *Beneath Hill 60*.

### BENEATH HILL 60 (2010)

Mining industry suppliers around Townsville contributed \$2.5 million to the \$10 million budget for the World War I drama about miners from the area who tunnelled under the Western Front.

### MAD BASTARDS (2011)

The Aboriginal drama set in the Kimberley sourced \$650,000 of its \$3.2 million budget from the region's mining community.

### RED DOG (2011)

A feel-good drama about a famous kelpie, starring Josh Lucas and Rachael Taylor, was shot in the Pilbara with support from Rio Tinto, Woodside, WesTrac, Skywest and dog-food company Pedigree.

### SATELLITE BOY

Expected to shoot in the Pilbara next month, indigenous director Catriona

McKenzie's \$2.5 million family film centres on an Aboriginal boy trying to save an outdoor cinema from developers.

### BREAK THE SKY

Producer Sylvia Wilczynski and director Kim Mordaunt are adapting their award-winning documentary *Bomb Harvest*, about explosives left over from the war in Laos, into a \$3 million film.

### THE DROWNER

Mining executives have backed a planned film based on Robert Drewe's novel *The Drowner*, about how water was brought to the West Australian goldfields.

### BANJO AND MATILDA

One of *Beneath Hill 60*'s investors is helping develop a film about Banjo Paterson writing *Waltzing Matilda*.  
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