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INDUSTRY NEWS

Stephen Van Mil: adapting to a new role

by: [Anne Richey](#)

Screen Hub

Thursday 29 September, 2011



Stephen Van Mil, veterinarian-turned-producer, has five films lined up on his slate. The directors include Bruce Beresford, Ray Lawrence and John Collee, and they're in advanced talks with Fred Schepisi and Roger Donaldson. The scriptwriters include Andrew Bovell, John Collee and Peter Yeldham. Four of the five projects are adaptations.

We talked first about the *The Drowner*, where everything is progressing well. They had Fred Schepisi out for a visit to the location a few weeks ago. They decided that a helicopter would be the best mode of transport for him to take his first look at the Western Australian goldfields region. They followed the pipeline all the way, to give him "a sense of the scope of the original project and then a real sense for the landscape that we'd be filming in."

Unfortunately, they only had 24 hours to look around, but Fred was able to see the town, history and buildings, and get a good sense of what was there.

They started discussions with Fred Schepisi about directing the film last year at the Toronto Film Festival, and they've had numerous meetings since. Fred's met with both the screenwriter John Collee and the novelist Robert Drewe, as well as Stephen and the producers from Icon. They're very keen to get the deal over the line.

Stephen Van Mil is "a Perth boy and studied veterinary science at Murdoch University in the early 1980's before shifting to Sydney and setting up hospitals there." Pretty early on, he also became involved with the media through Channel Nine. He worked for 14 years presenting on the Today show as well as other programs. He explained that he started to build up a portfolio of shorter stories, then in the mid 1990's he began making documentaries, particularly wildlife-based documentaries. About five years ago, he started branching out into feature films. His company is [Impian Films](#).

Mel Gibson narrated one of the documentaries, *The Last Trimate*. Through the process of getting Mel signed up, a relationship was formed with Mel's company, Icon. At around the same time, the opportunity came up for Stephen to purchase the rights to Robert Drewe's *The Drowner*. The idea was discussed with Icon and they were keen to become involved. "It started a relationship that's gone from strength to strength," Stephen said.

He's found that "Icon are very judicious about the films they support and make, and they have for a long time been looking for high quality films to make in Australia and have really not jumped on board until more recently. I think it's a case of finding the right projects at the right time that attract the right people, that then get the people like Icon interested. We've been fortunate with *The Drowner* and now *Shallows*, the Tim Winton novel, to have two of a handful of projects that Icon have picked up after the last few years." *The Drowner* will be the first cab off the rank.

They're in discussions with Roger Donaldson about *Shallows*. Tim Winton has also indicated that he's keen to be involved in the writing of the screenplay. Their intention at the moment is to "secure the right director and we all believe that Roger's the right guy for the job." They hope to have an answer on it soon. Their intention is to work with Roger and Tim to select a scriptwriter and "build the creative process from there."

Tim Winton was involved in the screenwriting process on *Cloudstreet*, and the screen adaptation of *Breath*, but Stephen said, "I don't think we or Tim are keen to see him alone take on something like *Shallows*" so their intention is to attach a professional feature film script writer and Tim would work with that person.

Shallows is Tim's second novel, and the one for which he won his first Miles Franklin. It's similar to *The Drowner* in that it mingles fact with fiction, and the factual story is about the closing of the last whaling station in Australia, which occurred in Albany in WA. Tim set *Shallows* in the 1830's, when whaling started, and ends it when that whaling station shuts in the 1970's, largely as a result of Greenpeace activity in the area and a Fraser Government inquiry into whaling.

The novel carries the family line from the 1830's through to the 1970's, but in the film version, they'll be continuing the family line to the modern day. They've spent a lot of time with Paul Watson from the Sea Shepherd organisation, and they're keen to be involved in the film. Stephen believes that the aspect that won over Icon was that rather than doing a period drama that ends in the 1970's, they'll have it running over three eras with the common family line. "Whales and whaling are big universal themes and maritime stories are always very popular," Stephen said.

They've gone to Roger Donaldson "A. Because he's just a terrific director, and B. Because he did *The Bounty* which starred Mel Gibson, so we know he's got the credentials to film adequately on water.

Asked whether it was going to be a hard film to make, Stephen noted that with sophisticated CGI it will be a lot easier than trying to make a similar film 40 years ago. Also, with the sea Shepherd on board, they have access to a lot of potential footage that may be very difficult otherwise.

Both *The Drowner* and *Shallows* are big budget productions. The budget for *The Drowner* is likely to be between \$30m and \$40m, and they're not yet sure about *Shallows*, but Stephen finds it hard to imagine that it would be any less than *The Drowner*.

The next step for *The Drowner* is to formally put John Collee and Fred Schepisi together to finalise the screenplay. John's already been working on the script for two years and has written a number of drafts but "it's not quite there yet." Fred will be engaged on the project as co-writer, and Fred and John completing the screenplay will be the next step. They'll then lock down the budget and start signing up the people that they've been talking about the project over the past two years. At present, they're still finalising their negotiations with Fred.

No cast or key crew have been attached as yet, although they've spoken to people like Geoffrey Rush, Cate Blanchett, Liam Neeson, James McAvoy and Emily Blunt "and that sort of level of actor." No-one's signed until they've seen the final script and we agree on the terms.

The Drowner will be an Australian-UK co-production. Around 30% of the funding will be raised out of the UK, and "realistically most of that will be spent there because there will be a shoot in the UK." The rest will include the offset, plus Icon will bring a studio in, there will be presales, and post-production deals on the table. They also have a number of investors who have indicated that they want to roll into the full production budget.

The post production is still up for grabs but is unlikely to be done in Perth. He suspects it will probably end up being a blend of Sydney, LA and London.

They're working closely with ScreenWest who "have been supporting the project from day one." They've also been dealing with various levels of the WA government, including the Premier's department to Arts and Culture and Water Corp and so on. Stephen indicated that the film has "generated a lot of energy and passion and enthusiasm in the state. It's a big project. When you look at the recent success of something like Red Dog, it proves that you can take stories and make films here that do resonate and will find a sizeable audience."

Shallows will likely be filmed in WA as well. Stephen pointed out that "it doesn't have to be but I would be very disappointed if we couldn't make it happen there. We've made numerous visits down to the Albany region already and I've got great support again from the development commissions down there, and the Albany City [council] and so on. We would look to emulate what we've done so far with The Drowner with Shallows in the Albany region."

Stephen hopes that The Drowner will go into production in around 12 to 18 months, although it depends on key cast and crew's availability.

Impian Films also have three other feature films on their slate. Drylands, based on the Thea Astley novel, will likely go into production "quite soon." Peter Yeldham has written the screenplay and Bruce Beresford is set to direct. Sam Neill and Greta Scacchi are attached to star. The film is being co-produced with Anthony Buckley and at this stage, Queensland appears to be the location most likely. The film is set in Queensland, and so of course Screen Queensland are very keen to have it filmed there.

There's also Black Honeymoon which is based on an original script by John Collee. He'll also be making his directorial debut on the film. Stephen is producing it with Martin Brown. It's a romance-thriller set in Europe and the Congo. "He's a beautiful writer and a lovely man...I guess a lot of people aspire to other positions in the industry and it's not uncommon for writers to want to direct, or actors to want to direct. John's very keen to cut his teeth on this one, and we're getting a lot of support overseas for it too."

Stephen noted that because John's work is in such demand, "it's hard for him to... put the writing away for about a year. And I don't want him to do that until we've finished The Drowner script." They're looking at making the film sometime next year, ideally. It won't be shot in Australia at all.

The third script is A View from the Bridge. It was going to be shot in Melbourne with Robert Connolly directing, but it fell over. Anthony LaPaglia then approached Ray Lawrence, with whom Stephen had been in discussions regarding other projects. Ray sent him the script written by Andrew Bovell and "it's just outstanding."

They're looking to shoot the film entirely in New York City with Anthony LaPaglia starring. Vera Farmiga was previously attached and "we'd like to continue with that." They're looking for the young female lead now. Stephen believes that there are many reasons for the film to be shot in New York City "and that's exactly what we're planning to do."

Four of the five projects discussed are adaptations of novels, and Stephen explained that "if you've got a proven product, it's a hell of a lot easier to get it over the line than something that's original."

Black Honeymoon is original and "it's got ears around the world because it's John Collee, but the reality is that the others are very good novels," Stephen explained. Shallows and Drylands both won the Miles Franklin Award, and Robert Drewe won "every state premier's book award, and the Australian Book of the Year with The Drowner." The stories also have international resonance, and he believes that it's easier to base the films on factual events that have been fictionalised or a very realistic novel, or an iconic play. It offers "very rich material on which to modify and build a film." He added that there's also a lot of proof of original films getting up, "I think there's always a safety factor in taking proven product and turning that into another format."

Stephen pointed out that the main challenge that's faced when developing

adaptation is “taking something that’s rich and complex...and putting them into 90 to 120 minutes of screen time without losing any of the esoteric elements that you can gain in writing. I think there’s a deftness required in A. The script adaptor and B. The director to not lose any of those elements. I think that creatively they’re the hardest challenges – to not lose the lyricism of the written word in conveying to the screen. I think you need patience to do that. I think you need direction with patience.”

It’s also vital to match the sensibilities of the screenwriter and director with the appropriate project. Stephen said that, “One of the things that I’ve done that other producers probably wouldn’t do, and I don’t even know that Icon would, but it’s done anyway, is that I’m very happy to put writers and scriptwriters and directors together. I think that having Robert Drewe involved as far as input to John Collee and to Fred Schepisi now so, I think it’s important because the person who dreamed up the baby and lived it and dreamed it for many many years has a hell of a lot of insight that shouldn’t be ignored.”

They’re doing the same thing with Tim Winton on *Shallows* but they’re of course unable on *Drylands* as Thea Astley died in 2004. With all due respect however, Stephen believes that “the screenplay is outstanding and far far better than the novel. But if you can do it, and it’s appropriate, I think it should be done.”

Anne Richey

Anne Richey is a screenwriter and Screen Hub's assistant editor.

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