

# Lighting up the silver screen

WA is gaining an international reputation for quality film production.

■ Russell Quinn

**T**WO significant feature film projects progressing towards production in Western Australia highlight the growing international prominence of the state's film and television industry.

Stephen Van Mil, who's producing the \$50 million film on the life of CY O'Connor called 'The Drowner', based on Robert Drewe's award-winning novel of the same name, told *Business Class* he was jetting to London this week for further talks with renowned British director, Michael Apted.

He says the project has morphed from the development phase into pre-production as well-received investor presentations last week were outshined by a conference call involving scriptwriter, John Collee, and Mr Apted.

"We had a very long and productive Skype call with Michael Apted, the famous UK director," Mr Van Mil told *Business Class*.

"Right now he's got a very strong interest to do it."

Mr Van Mil hopes meet to with Mr Apted, who's best known for the '7 Up' series and 'Gorillas in the Mist', and secure the director's services.

"He's currently in post-production on the latest Narnia film and he's already indicated that he'd like to come out here and see the Goldfields. We're hoping that at the end of the first week in June we'll have him out here," Mr Van Mil says.



**BIG GUNS:** 'The Drowner' producer Stephen Van Mil is keen to sign acclaimed veteran director, Michael Apted, to the project. Photo: Grant Currall

Securing the veteran director is vital to attracting a strong cast and crew, according to Mr Van Mil.

"Part of the attraction of the cast is conducive on the quality of the director; assuming we sign Michael Apted, John (Collee) and Michael then work hand in glove on the progress of the script," he says.

"Simultaneously to that we start to shore up the production budget so we're working very closely with Screen Australia on the producer's

offset, which is up to 40 per cent of the total budget of the film, so you can get close to 35 per cent in the bank before you start."

Mr Van Mil says he'll revisit all the equity funds and private investment banks in the UK, which he hopes will garner a further 30 per cent of the production budget.

"The balance of 35 per cent or whatever will be a combination of studio money, Icon money and private investors," he explained.

"A lot of the high net worth investors in this state want to roll on into the production budget."

Mr Van Mil says while he is currently collecting the next \$1 million to add to the existing \$1 million in the bank from local investors, Melbourne's Icon Film Distribution had already underwritten the project to the tune of US\$2 million plus the 30 per cent return to investors.

Confidence in the future of this project and the strength and suitability of WA as a filmmaking location has led Mr Van Mil to relocate the headquarters of his company, Impian Films, to Perth.

"WA is buoyant, the economy is buoyant, and people here have vision and are willing to back and support things they may not know a lot about," he says.

"We've had wonderful support from ScreenWest and the business (community) and the community at large.

"And we're looking at other major projects here and it's my firm intention to help establish a significant sustainable film and television industry in this state."

Upcoming projects for Impian examining Albany's whaling heritage and Broome's pearling history will be of similar scope to 'The Drowner', which Mr Van Mil says is hoped to be in production in about a year.

Connections of another local feature film, 'Red Dog', recently announced that Hollywood actor Josh Lucas (best known for his work in 'Sweet Home Alabama' and 'A Beautiful Mind') has been cast in the lead role.

In August 2009, Culture and the Arts Minister John Day confirmed that ScreenWest had committed up to \$510,000 for the adaptation of award-winning author Louis De Bernières novel about the rusty kelpie that wandered the Pilbara during the 1970s and 1980s.