

# Downriver Q&A



*Downriver* is one of five [MIFF Premiere Fund](#)-supported films for 2015.

We sat down with director Grant Scicluna to ask him a few questions about the making of his film, and why MIFF is so special to him as a filmmaker as well as a film fan.

## ***Downriver* is your first feature film. How was it different from directing short films?**

Apart from the endurance required, the process is not dissimilar. I just applied the process that had worked for me on short films again and again as we went through. What's the best way to present this character? What would the audience like to look at? Simple really.

The big difference is that in feature films, more people are invested and so the stakes are much higher. People genuinely wanted us to succeed but so many things can go wrong in the making of a film. The most difficult thing for me was to try and banish from my mind the "career defining" aspect of making my first feature, because that kind of thinking is crippling and gets in the way of doing the task.

## **You started writing this film when you were still a film student. Can you tell us a bit more about your creative process when writing the script?**

It grew out of a student project and if there's one thing that I've always had, it's good, encouraging teachers. I wrote possibly seven drafts, with each draft containing several stabs, but the essential concern of the script – redemption – has never changed, although the plot has been many things.

I am extremely solitary when I write. Everyone leaves me alone and I become a nightmare to my suffering partner. I never write "on top" of an older draft, so each draft begins as a blank expanse. It means every scene, every line, every action must earn its right to exist over and over. It leaves space, too, for new discoveries. All I really want to achieve is compelling, dimensional characters; characters actors want to inhabit. The way I do this is by acting everything out as I write. I'm actually quite a good actor... alone in my own living room ;-)

### **What were the biggest challenges you faced being on a lower-budget production?**

Time. Never enough of it. People cost money and the way to save money is to have less people, less amount of time. That financial rationalisation becomes a false economy pretty soon, because not having people ends up taking more time to achieve anything.

There was this perception amongst some quarters that I would make a handheld, gritty (read: "low budget"-looking) film because that's all we could afford. Therefore I didn't need gear, didn't need people to operate the gear, in fact I didn't need time! My biggest challenge was the constant to-and-fro around ensuring essential resources *were* there. A film cannot apologise for its lack of resources. I wanted the film to transcend the need to do that. Thankfully I have a producer who shares that vision and together Jannine Barnes and I prioritised what we needed people and time for, and what was waste. We became a lean, mean machine.

### **Your film has an amazing cast including Reef Ireland and Kerry Fox. How did you select your actors? And how did you prepare them for the film?**

The most important part of my job is casting. I work with a very good casting agent who knows everyone and who throws surprises at me constantly. Both the actors you mention were in my mind fairly early on.

Reef and I worked on *The Wilding* together and I effectively wrote the role of James in *Downriver* to showcase everything Reef is good at, which is a good many things as you'll see.

For Kerry's role, I wanted an actor who we felt like we knew but remained an essential mystery to us. Kerry Fox has that quality, and has proven herself one of the bravest actors we've got.

The one thing I know for sure is that all actors are different. There is no "one size fits all" process of preparation. Some actors need lots of conversation, lots of rehearsal; others want none. I had the full gamut on *Downriver*. I convey very early on, as clearly as possible, my intentions for their characters, for their performances, for the film itself, so that they understand the baseline of what we're seeking to find together. Anything above that is pure discovery and the joy of working with actors.

### **Which filmmakers have inspired you the most in your work as a director?**

My favourite director is possibly Roman Polanski. He exorcises a few dark demons in his work, like I do. I also like Michael Haneke films very much. I have been influenced by directors from the Queer New Wave like Todd Haynes (*Carol*), Gregg Araki (*Mysterious Skin*) and Tom Kalin (*Savage Grace*), the last two of which I have been lucky to meet via their attendance at MIFF.

However, my biggest inspirations are not filmmakers at all, to be honest. The novelist Dennis Cooper is a large influence on my work, and the way his novels evoke life through their absolute preoccupation with death. Also, the painter Caravaggio (who DoP László Baranyai calls the Patron Saint of Filmmakers) taught me more than anyone about image as narrative, morality, even casting (he cast prostitutes as the

Virgin, beggars as Christ). My juxtaposition of the brutal with the tender, that's come from Caravaggio.

**You participated in the [MIFF Accelerator program](#), with *Hurt's Rescue* premiering at MIFF in 2014; and this year *Downriver* is part of the [MIFF Premiere Fund](#). Can you tell us more about your special relationship with MIFF?**

My most startling film experiences have always been at this festival, purely just as a viewer. As a young filmmaker, having access to other filmmakers has been immensely influential. I was in the Accelerator program with one of my first short films, in a class with David Michôd, Sophie Hyde, Adam Arkapaw, Taika Waititi, to name a few. I had the fear of god struck into me because it was clear even then what they would go on to achieve.

I just applied what I learnt and kept working, hoping too my day might come. *Downriver* is a MIFF Premiere Fund film. Our first investment came from MIFF and without that support, *Downriver* would simply not have been made. It was committed with such force and confidence in us that it shook other investors into action. Like dominoes, they started to fall and commit and MIFF was the agitator. The film grew like a tree grafted on the roots of this festival. So to describe my relationship with MIFF as being "special", absolutely hits the nail on the head.