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# Hardly Bitter & Twisted

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What do Robert de Niro, Bridget Callow and Christopher Weekes have in common? Apart from an admiration for Martin Scorsese and a sense of humour, as of next month, they will all be pounding the streets of New York.

De Niro's influential Tribeca Film Festival has picked up the Australian feature *Bitter & Twisted* to play as part of the Discovery Program where it will enjoy its World Premiere. Not a bad start for a couple of debut-filmmakers from New South Wales. The news so overwhelmed the film's producer that emergency scotch was called for.

"I felt an absolutely palpable mix of relief and excitement that everyone's hard work was going to be recognised in such a significant way," said Callow. For director Chris Weekes it was a dream come true.

Shot in the shires south of Sydney, *Bitter & Twisted* joins an emerging trend of self-funded features. It's a double-edged sword that offers complete creative control on one hand, and leads to finance-anxiety induced ulcers on the other. "It doesn't get much riskier than this," said Callow. Producing the film without backing, pre-sales or distribution support required a large leap of faith, but one that can be a circuit-breaker to feature (film) production for its crew. "I'll never regret the experience, but I also wouldn't want to repeat it!"

Which makes the relatively expensive decision to shoot on 16mm film stock, rather than video formats, a bold one. "You think 16mm and you think grit," said Weekes, "but it doesn't have to look like that. It gave me that cinematic look without that video quality. And it focused us. When you heard the motor running, you had to be on. I think it made a better film."

*Bitter & Twisted* is a 'multi-narrative drama about longing and loss' written and directed by Weekes. Personal tragedy focused the aspiring screenwriter who used the event as a trigger for his film. "I was 20 when I started *Bitter & Twisted* and I adapted it over some years to explore what I'd been going through at the time. I always wanted to tell a story about my family, people from Sutherland when I was growing up. It's an observation about repressive lifestyles."

Weekes' screenplay attracted the attention of significant Australian talent - AFI Award winning actress Noni Hazlehurst among them. "I loved the script," said the co-star of *Little Fish*. "I don't care whether a film has a big budget or not, I just want to work on good films." She was unfazed by the production team's youth and inexperience (Weekes and Callow were 24 when they embarked on this, their debut project). "The idea of working with a young team on something that meant so much to them was exciting."

Weekes had always wanted Hazlehurst, and wrote the role with her in mind. "I think it was partly the whole *Playschool* thing in the '80's. She stuck in my mind and represented that 'perfect mother'. I wanted to explore what it was like when the doors were shut, and that's why I thought of her. She was so supportive and lovely about it."

Hazlehurst is joined by bright Australian talent including Leean Walsman (*Looking For Alibrandi*, *Star Wars: Episodell - Attack of the Clones*), veterans Steve Rodgers (*The Bank*) and Gary Sweet (*The Tracker*) and Matthew Newton (*The Bet*).

The Tribeca Film Festival's Discovery Program is designed to unearth new talent from across the globe. Weekes and Callow will be travelling with cinematographer Sam Collins and editor Simon Wright. "What would I say if de Niro sat down beside me?" laughed Weekes. "Nothing. When George Lucas visited AFTRS a few years ago I had the chance to say something to him. I'm not going to embarrass myself like that again..."



Noni Hazlehurst as Penelope Lombard in *Bitter & Twisted*  
Photo: Casp Productions

**"I don't care whether a film has a big budget or not, I just want to work on good films." - Noni Hazlehurst**

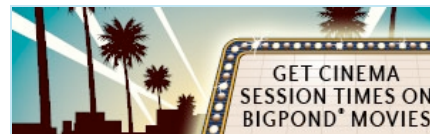
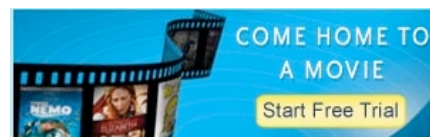
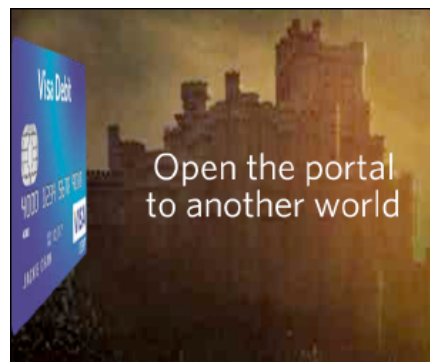


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