



BLUE-TONGUE WIZARDS: IF IT WASN'T REAL, YOU'D THINK THE STORY OF A BUNCH OF MATES CONQUERING HOLLYWOOD WAS SOME RIDICULOUS BUDDY FLICK.



# B L U E - T O N G U E F I L M S



A DECADE AND A HALF AGO THEY WERE A GANG OF STARRY-EYED KIDS HOPING AGAINST HOPE TO BREAK INTO THE MOVIE BIZ. THESE DAYS THE GANG GOES BY THE NAME OF BLUE-TONGUE FILMS AND MAKES MOVIES THAT DELIGHT AUDIENCES AND CRITICS ALIKE.

**IF EVER** there was a hotel synonymous with Hollywood, then the Chateau Marmont on Sunset Boulevard is it. Its connections to Tinseltown's great and good are myriad: it's where John Belushi fatally overdosed, where Greta Garbo decided she really did want to be alone; and where Sofia Coppola has set her new film, *Somewhere*. It is also the favourite watering hole of one Lindsay Lohan (admittedly not so great or good). As legendary Columbia Pictures founder Harry Cohn told actors Glenn Ford and William Holden: "If you're going to get into trouble, do it at Chateau Marmont."

So it's perhaps no coincidence that a group of Australian filmmakers (plus one "wannabe Australian" – more of which later) chose the architecturally-over-the-top West Hollywood hangout to gather for something of a celebration dinner last February. And while they haven't got into trouble – apart from when one of their early renegade filmmaking endeavours earned them a ticking off from the cops – they are starting to make Hollywood take notice.

Most of the group – members of the Sydney-based filmmaking collective Blue-Tongue Films – had just flown in from Park City, Utah, location of the Sundance Film Festival. Around the table was David Michôd, writer/director of Australian crime drama *Animal Kingdom*, who had just seen his film awarded a prestigious jury prize at the festival. Then there was Spencer Susser, whose own directorial debut *Hesher*, was also in competition at Sundance, along with actor Joel Edgerton and his older brother Nash, whose film *The Square* was soon to open in the US. Rounding out the pack was the self-confessed "little brother" of the gang, Luke Doolan, who was not only celebrating his 31st birthday, but his very own Oscar nomination (for his short film *Miracle Fish*) just two days earlier. The only Blue-Tongue member missing was expectant father Kieran Darcy-Smith, back in Australia working on his own film *Say Nothing*.

"It got a bit freaky that week, what with David's win at Sundance and my Oscar nomination," laughs Doolan. "The best part was when we sat down and had dinner together. I looked around the table and thought, 'God, these are my contemporaries. My friends. And this may never happen again, so let's enjoy it.'"

Michôd agrees. "When we all went to the Chateau Marmont, we were just looking around the table thinking 'Look where we are.' All those years ago, this dinner at this table would have been just a silly dream. But here we are and we're doing it."

While you may not be that familiar with the name Blue-Tongue (which of them actually coined the moniker is unclear, although Nash thinks it may have something to do with the blue-tongue lizard he and Joel had as kids), chances are you have seen some of their work. There are the numerous short films, many of which have been seen at the Tropfest short film festival over the years (Nash actually won it in 1997 with *Deadline* and followed that up in 2005 when he came second with *Lucky*).

There have also been commercials and countless music videos for artists such as Ben Lee, Toni Collette, The Sleepy Jackson and, more recently, international acts like Bob Dylan and Brandon Flowers (Nash directed the video for Flowers' debut solo single "Crossfire" starring Charlize Theron).

And of course, in the last couple of years, there are the aforementioned feature films, the most successful of which, *Animal Kingdom*, has been nominated for a record 18 AFI Awards. The gritty crime drama, starring Jacki Weaver, Ben Mendelsohn and Joel, was also critically acclaimed on release in the US and its success has been a source of inspiration for the rest of the guys. After their night at the Chateau Marmont, for example, Nash and Joel went straight back home and started writing their next film.

From a distance, the group's success looks well thought-out, a series of calculated steps to achieve their collective goal of directing feature films. And while some of them will admit to having harboured such ambitions since they were teenagers ("I always had this dream of working in films and directing stories," admits Darcy-Smith), they all say there was never a grand plan with Blue-Tongue. "And there still isn't," stresses Nash. "It's more about, if you have any idea and you want to make it, then you try and make it. Everyone just enjoys the process of making stuff."▶

## { C R E A T I V E F O R C E }





**B**lue-Tongue's genesis can be traced back to 1996 when Nash joined forces with Joel, friend Tony Lynch, and Darcy-Smith to make what would become the short film *Loaded*. Remembers Darcy-Smith: "Joel and I had been to drama school together and when we graduated we wanted to get something down on tape to kick off a show reel. At the same time, Nash and Tony were both working in the stunt industry and wanted to do the same. So we decided to knock up a story and shoot it. It only cost us \$500 but it really put us on the map." (For the record, Tony Lynch is considered a founding member of Blue-Tongue and, although he's worked on various projects with the group over the years, he has focused mainly on stunt work. Doolan jokingly calls him "the fifth wheel" of the group.)

"We didn't know anyone so trying to get people to help us make it was quite impossible — we had to do it ourselves," continues Nash. "Kieran wrote the dialogue, Tony and I came up with this action sequence, we were all in it, Kieran and I directed it together, and I edited it. We had so much fun making it that we thought we should make something else. And the more we did it, the more we liked doing it."

Joel, probably the most well-known of the group thanks to his acting gigs, says their early short films were made on the smell of an oily rag. "We nearly used to get ourselves arrested for the sake of making movies," he remembers. "We had to borrow equipment and steal locations. But that's the point, we didn't care, we just wanted to do it. We had no responsibilities; we had nothing to lose, so we just made stuff."

Michöd, Susser and Doolan were later additions to the Blue-Tongue

in it), and edited by Nash and Doolan. *Hesher*, which has just won an award for Best First Feature at the 2010 Philadelphia Film Festival, was directed by Susser, and co-written with Michöd. *Animal Kingdom* was directed by Michöd, edited by Doolan and, obviously, starred Joel. You get the picture...

**M**ost crucially of all, each member of the group is involved in each other's projects, giving honest opinions on scripts even at their most basic stage. "We are all there to support each other when things don't go great and are also there to high-five each other when they do go great," explains Joel. "But the major thrust with Blue-Tongue is really about the beforehand, before the film gets financed and made. What's the script like? How could it be better? We're really on each other's case throughout the creative process."

"What is kind of cool is that there isn't any ego attached to it either," muses Joel, who, having worked extensively in the US, must have seen a lot of that up close. "David postponed shooting *Animal Kingdom* so he could come and direct a 'making of' *The Square*. And I made a short and convinced David and Nash to be in it. There's no sense of 'Hey guys, I have achieved this, this and this, so I really can't come and be a bit player in your short film.'"

Darcy-Smith, about to start shooting *Say Nothing*, starring Joel along with Nash's girlfriend Teresa Palmer, believes Blue-Tongue's strength is its lack of formality. "It operates very differently to the way most film outfits work, where everyone has assigned roles. But we are not an official production company — we're a genuine collective. It was always meant to be loose, we

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'clan'. Susser, an American who laughingly describes himself as a "wannabe Australian", met the guys when he was making a 'making of' video for *Star Wars: Episode II - Attack of the Clones* at Sydney's Fox Studios (Nash was stunt doubling for Ewan McGregor and Joel was in the film). "We just became friends," says Susser. "Nash would be making something and I'd go hang out and make a few suggestions and he would do the same to me. The great thing about how we all work with each other is that it's really supportive. There is zero ego, it's just about wanting your friends to do well."

Doolan jokes that he got involved in Blue-Tongue after "stalking Nash". "I saw him win Tropfest in 1997 and I was seething with jealousy, I so wanted to be him. I followed him around but I didn't know what to say, I was too nervous. But then we started travelling in the same circles and he ended up giving me editing jobs he couldn't do. From that, we've spent the last few years cutting a lot of stuff together. We just found our groove, I guess."

Last in, best dressed was David Michöd, who joined the group after having a bit of an altercation with Nash. "Those guys had an office in the same Darlinghurst building as *Inside Film Magazine*, where I was working a few years ago. Nash and I met arguing over a car space — his car space, basically — out the back," he laughs. "At some point, we all started hanging out and then somehow we all started working together in one way or another. It was all pretty fluid."

What makes Blue-Tongue unique — in the Australian film industry, at least — is how the boys work as an interchangeable collective, adopting different roles on each other's projects, depending on their individual talents. (Doolan describes it as a "leaky boat" mentality in that they all leap in and adopt whatever roles need filling.) So while one might be the director, another will be the editor, or the writer, or a combination of all three. *The Square*, for example, was directed by Nash, written by Joel (who also acted


didn't want it to become corporatised in any way. That would kill it. There is a kind of punk rock energy to the whole thing that we all really treasure.

"It works like a quality control thing. We show each other what we are working on and get feedback and opinions. We're trying to make the stories good and fresh and exciting. It's all about the story and the impact it's going to have, not only on an Australian audience but an international audience too."

Ultimately it is the support these like-minded souls give to each other that is the collective's greatest strength. Everyone knows how tough the film industry is, especially in this country, where films face a struggle to get made and then an even tougher battle to get seen.

Joel, who reckons that his work as a writer and director with Blue-Tongue has kept him "interested at times when I haven't been that excited as an actor," admits to being disappointed when *The Square* failed to set the Australian box office alight last year. "Nash and I were a little confused with the experience of releasing it here. Did we market the film wrong? Was it not appropriate for an Australian audience? You start to doubt the quality of your work, but in hindsight, I feel like we made a really great film."

"Then it got released in the US and it felt like it was far better understood by people there," he says. "It felt like the film found a home. Like *Animal Kingdom*, it didn't make bucketloads of money — I don't think any of us are in it to make money — but it did stay at the cinemas for a long time."

The last word can go to man of the moment Michöd, who should, if there's any justice in the cinematic world, shortly be the proud owner of a clutch of AFI Awards. "I think more than anything, what we give each other is someone with whom to share the delusion that making movies is even do-able. It can be pretty lonely and seemingly insurmountable without fellow dreamers around you." 

TO CHECK OUT THE BLUE-TONGUE YOUNG GUNS GETTING THEIR AWARD GO TO [GQ.COM.AU](http://GQ.COM.AU)