

State of Independence

As we all know, making a film is hard work and it often takes a little DIY ingenuity for new filmmakers. If you have to go it alone, BEATRIX COLES advises on ten rules for self-funding

The term 'breaking into' the industry is ridiculously apt when talking about working in the film and television world. In reality you might have more luck planning some kind of heist than getting your project off the ground. Structurally, the system isn't geared for newbies, and there is no clear avenue to encourage young blood. After countless rejections from funding bodies, sometimes the only available route to get your film made is to self-fund (and hope for some post-funding later). Whether you dream of making the great independent movie or want to leap across to the mainstream, a self-funded project will at least give you a calling card.

It is a particularly tough market at the moment, with short and feature film seemingly geared towards international sales and overseas festivals, and television looking at the long-running series rather than one-off dramas or documentaries. But what if you have a burning project that you can't give up. Ducking out to do your own thing might seem like the best – indeed, only – option. However, let's not forget that with real budgets comes freedom from some very basic worries, such as paying the rent and grocery bills. So although no one claims that self-funding is an easy road to take, if you do decide to make a film outside the conventional funding routes, how do you go about it and survive?

1 HAVE FRIENDS

The first rule in independent filmmaking is make good friends who will help out. Writer-director Amit Tripuraneni has completed two self-funded, low-budget digital features. His second feature, *Five*, has recently got distribution. As he points out, "It is always a team effort and the synergies that form during any project can make or break a project." Tripuraneni works in collaboration with friends on both sides of the camera. If getting people on board is difficult, then keeping them going is even harder. Kirsty MacDonald has directed several short films, including *Black and White*, which won Best NZ Documentary at the DOCNZ Festival 2006. She says that if the project is an 'independent' film, and you have very little money but a strong idea and vision, collaborators can be amazingly generous with their support. "I find [friends'] practical help is essential in getting a strong film idea made cheaply, and then this can attract funding to keep going."

BELOW LEFT:

There Once Was an Island,
co-produced by Lyn Collie

BELOW RIGHT:

Mani Bruce Mitchell, *Black and White*,
directed by Kirsty MacDonald

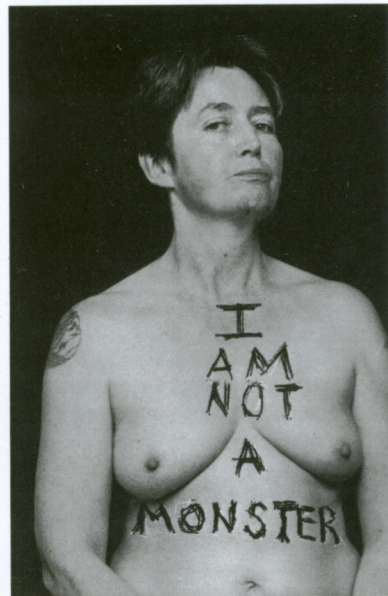


Photo: Rebecca Swan

There Once Was an Island: Director Briar March, Producer Lyn Collie and DoP Zane Holmes



Blur, DoP Chris Pryor and director Kirsty MacDonald, with Jack Byrne Photo: Rebecca Swan



2 OFFER SOMETHING

One way to keep people on board is to offer them something they can't get elsewhere. Director and video artist Tim van Dammen has completed two self-funded, low-budget feature films, including one Dogme certified feature (*Despair*). He knows that a self-funded project must offer something to the cast and crew to get them involved. "A 'something more' can manifest itself in various forms," says van Dammen "From artistic input, to an amazing location, to simply a personal belief in the idea. But there must be room for people to take ownership of the project and everyone should feel as if it is their own – because it is."

3 HAVE ANOTHER JOB

Unless you are independently wealthy – and let's face it, how many of us are? – it is rare to meet a young independent filmmaker who doesn't do something else for a living. Kirsty MacDonald has worked as a Director's Assistant for Vincent Ward and is about to work for Niki Caro on her latest film. She is juggling her work with Caro with her own project – a feature-length documentary about alternative gender identity and creativity. Amit Tripuraneni is currently working for TVNZ as a video tape editor.

4 INDULGE

Take advantage of the fact that while you are working independently you can indulge in projects close to your heart. Producer Lyn Collie and director Briar March are currently in post-production on their documentary about a sinking island, *There Once Was an Island*. For Collie, artistic and political criteria currently take centre stage with her filmmaking projects. "I loved taking a very small role in Claudia Pond-Eyley's three films about activism (*No Nukes is Good Nukes*, *Departure and Return* and *The Women Who Launched a Rainbow*), and in Briar's film *Allie Eagle and Me*. Although all of these documentaries had support from various funding bodies, they weren't commercially driven. They're films I'm pleased to have supported." Kirsty MacDonald admits that "the documentary subject

matter I've been focusing on for the last couple of years [alternative gender identity] is not an easy area to attract funding. But then, I don't think anyone finds it easy to get money for their films, mainstream or not." For MacDonald, having artistic control over content and aesthetics is important. "So while of course money is very helpful, I have thus far been able to collaborate with my participants without compromise and make the films I want."

5 MUTUAL SUPPORT

There's plenty of cause for complaint when working independently, but supporting each other should be obvious. For Amit Tripuraneni the most difficult aspect of working low budget is the fact that "no one seems to recognise the mammoth efforts taken to complete these independent projects". Morgan Williams, of Christchurch production company Gorilla Pictures, expresses what many of us feel: "Feeling like you have to beg for things gets a little demoralising ... but as long as you keep your head up, the hard work will pay off."

6 BE REALISTIC

Applying for funding forces you to take a long hard look at your project. It (hopefully) makes you draw up a realistic budget and forces you to condense that 300 page script to 20 pages. You have to think about how you'll crew it, how you will get actors on board, how you will survive the post-production if you do manage to shoot the film. It's not fun to struggle, but it at least it makes you ditch superfluous material.

7 IT'S LONG TERM

You'll be with this project for a long time, believe me. With any short, feature or documentary remember that you're going to eat, sleep and breathe it. You'll probably hate it at some point, but chances are you'll come full circle again.

8 KEEP GOING

As Lyn Collie points out, there is usually no external validation of what you are doing, so it can be hard to continue to convince yourself that it is really

worthwhile. You can't stop because the whole gang would grind to a halt. And the people who are working with you have invested time, resources, even money, by this point.

9 REALISE THE POSITIVE

On the bright side, it's good to recognise the amazing positions that working independently can find you in. For Lyn Collie this meant working on a documentary about a place which is literally sinking. "*There Once Was an Island* is about an unique culture which will disappear when the island the people live on sinks. So it's really important to document this, even if the film never sells. It's important to record those stories and that moment in time because it will be something that the community can hang their identity on after their relocation."

10 POSITION YOURSELF

Use this time to position yourself. If you want to use a film to get yourself noticed in the mainstream, bear that in mind. Or if this is the beginning of a beautiful indie career, you need to play to that card. Tim van Dammen is in the former camp: "Eventually I think most low-budget filmmakers will end up in the mainstream if they want to be due to their passion, drive and determination. In the time a hopeful director has worked as production assistant, runner, boom-operator, AD etc, the low-budget filmmaker has written and/or directed (and often produced) four or five feature films, and chances are they have reached a level where one of these films has been noticed." Kirsty MacDonald leans more towards the latter camp of arthouse. "I hope to become a better filmmaker through working as a filmmaker, so will pursue any interesting opportunities wherever I can find them. I'm not sure what use the mainstream would have for me, but I'm open to many things."

There's a groundswell of filmmakers who are working without conventional funding (at least initially), but they are working with passion and mutual peer support. Creating your own opportunities isn't easy, but undeniably it is a process that many new filmmakers must go through. ■