

HE WHO DARES, WINS

TROPFEST FOUNDER JOHN POLSON SPUN AN \$80 BUDGET INTO THE WORLD'S LARGEST SHORT-FILM FESTIVAL. HE TELLS **SHANE CONROY** THAT ALL IT TAKES IS A GREAT IDEA.

The rain is bucketing down in Sydney and I'm sheltering in a Darlinghurst doorway, scanning the street for some sign of John Polson's inner-city office. I'm lost, water-logged and late, but these are not my most pressing concerns. I'm more troubled about how to best break the ice with a man who has bossed around Robert De Niro, considers Tom Cruise a close friend and founded the world's largest short-film festival, which turns over up to \$1.2 million a year. All this in between box office triumphs of his own.

But I needn't have worried. When I finally find the building, Polson greets me personally in the reception area of Tropfest's modest office space. There is no young assistant at his heels and no breathless PR briefing me about what I can and cannot ask him. Instead, he alone leads me to a nearby conference room and starts enthusiastically explaining that this trip back to his native country is the first for his six-week-old daughter.

"I've been living in New York for eight years and my wife [Amanda] is from New Jersey. She still doesn't understand half of what I say," he jokes in his thick Australian accent. "My daughter was born in Brooklyn ▷



PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDREW SHAW, GETTY IMAGES, NEWSPIX

Tropfest creator John Polson has big ideas for the future of the world's largest short-film festival.

but I tell my wife that she's a true-blue Australian, and don't you forget it."

Polson remembers where he comes from – "Au-stray-ya," as he proudly puts it – and despite having spent a decade building his career in the trenches of Hollywood, the successful director's sense of self remains as untarnished as his accent. At 43, he exudes a youthful enthusiasm for the movie business and a passion for the Australian product.

He's so passionate in fact, that he maintains an active role running his celebrated short-film festival. Held every February since 1993, Tropfest presents new films by amateur filmmakers to a crowd of more than 150,000 people at simultaneous screenings in Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra, Perth, Brisbane, Hobart and Adelaide. This year, it was also broadcast to a live television audience.

"Tropfest's goal has always been to help launch the careers of young filmmakers,"

he says. "And to send a signal to filmmakers that money doesn't always matter. That it's the idea, the acting and the dialogue that make a film."

The festival has launched the careers of many successful directors – 1995's winner, Gregor Jordan, went on to direct Heath Ledger in *Two Hands* (1999) and *Ned Kelly* (2003), and past finalists Robert Connolly and Clayton Jacobson had success with *The Bank* (2001) and *Kenny* (2006), respectively. But the most successful Tropfest alumnus is Polson himself.

FROM DARLINGHURST...

As a teenager, Polson, who is also a talented jazz saxophonist, was invited to attend the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. But having watched his musician parents struggle to make a living throughout his childhood, he saw greener pastures in the world of acting. He accepted a role in a small theatre

production, but the ambitious young actor was soon eyeing up the director's chair.

"Almost straight away, I was using the money I made as an actor to make short films," he says. "I was cast in a TV mini-series called *Vietnam* (1987), in which I played Nicole Kidman's boyfriend. It was a big step but I was mostly interested in getting my hands on the leftover film stock to make my own short films."

It was around this time that the promising young talent could often be found enjoying the refreshments and ambience at the Tropicana Caffe in Sydney's inner-city Darlinghurst – a creative hub often used by artists, writers and filmmakers. Handheld VHS video cameras had appeared on the market in the late 1980s, so Polson no longer had to beg for film stock and was set free from the high costs of processing. Little did he know that he was right on the cusp of setting other filmmakers free too. ▶

“ Money doesn't always matter. It's the idea, the acting and the dialogue that make a film. ”



This image: Polson with actress Nicole Kidman in 1989. Right: Tropfest's humble beginnings in Sydney's Tropicana Caffe in 1993.



JOHN POLSON'S TOP THREE TIPS FOR SUCCESS

:: Never take no for an answer. No is just another way of saying yes.

:: Find your own voice. Many young filmmakers and entrepreneurs naturally mimic their idols, but the key is to find your own style.

:: Have fun with what you're doing and people will be attracted to it.

Held every February, Tropfest helps launch the careers of Australian filmmakers.

“Frankly, if some guy in a suit doesn't give you the green light, that shouldn't stop you.”

“It was a real community feeling at the Tropicana Caffe, but I noticed that there were a lot of people drinking their coffee and complaining that they didn't get their Australia Council grant, or whatever,” he says. “It seemed like a victim attitude to me. Frankly, if some guy in a suit doesn't give you the green light, that shouldn't stop you from pursuing your goal.”

He had recently wrapped up his latest short film and, determined not to join the ranks of whingers but without the money to hire a cinema to screen his movie, he approached the owner of the Tropicana Caffe in 1992 with a modest proposition.

“I asked if he would mind if I put a TV in the corner to show my film to a few friends one night – and 200 people showed up,” he laughs. “To be honest, it was not a great film, but the response to the idea was amazing. Australia was swamped with movies from the US at the time, so there was something really great about hearing our own accents on film.”

Polson held a similar screening the following year – with a budget of \$80 to rent a few TVs – but this time he invited other filmmakers to submit films. More

than 7,000 people descended on the cafe and surrounding streets had to be closed. The festival was later moved to The Domain, a large outdoor venue in Sydney, to cater for the growing crowds.

...TO HOLLYWOOD

But not everyone was happy about the juggernaut Tropfest was becoming. “I remember, very vividly, in the mid to late 1990s people asked me ‘Why are you making it so big? Why can't it stay at the Tropicana?’” he says. “My argument has always been that the purpose of this is to provide the biggest possible launch pad for unknown filmmakers.”

In the meantime, Polson found his own launch pad. He directed his first Australian feature, black comedy *Siam Sunset*, in 1999. While it was selected to be part of the Cannes Film Festival, it flopped at the domestic box office. Shortly after the film's release, he landed a small acting role in *Mission: Impossible II* (2000) and found himself living in a luxurious LA hotel.

“I only had about half a day's work a week so the rest of the time I was sitting around in my hotel,” he says. “I thought

that I might as well do something with my time, so I sent the print of *Siam Sunset* around to a few agents. One of them set up a screening of the film, 200 people came along and they seemed to really enjoy it.”

One of those people was A-list actor Michael Douglas. In fact, Douglas was so impressed with the film that he requested a meeting with its little-known Australian director to discuss a new movie he was producing. Two hours later, Polson walked out of the meeting as a Hollywood director. *Swimfan* (2002) became his first international feature film and opened at number one at the US box office.

...AND THE WORLD

Polson's directing career may have been reaching new heights but Tropfest was hitting tough times. With the Sydney Olympics in town in 2000, the festival was struggling to gain much attention among the sports-mad sponsors.

Six weeks before the scheduled screening date of 27 February, he identified a shortfall of about \$250,000. Facing having to pull the plug, he made some phone calls to his cashed-up ▶

Hollywood colleagues and raised enough money to save the festival.

One of those phone calls was to Russell Crowe, who Polson first met when they'd both acted in *Blood Oath* in 1990 and again in 1994 on the set of the Australian film *The Sum of Us*, which won the 1994 AFI award for best adapted screenplay. The pair played gay lovers in the film. "I always tell people that I didn't play his boyfriend, he played my boyfriend," Polson laughs. "He got the lead, then I had my audition and before you know it, we're getting much more intimate than I ever hoped to be! It's no secret he was one of the people I went to in 2000 when Tropfest was struggling."

Crowe and Polson recently joined forces again in Polson's latest film, *Tenderness* (2008) – Crowe plays a police officer determined to keep a violent teen from killing again – and Tropfest has since regained its long list of sponsors. So much so, in fact, that Polson is now planning to take his festival global.

After directing Robert De Niro in *Hide and Seek* (2005), the two hatched a plan to test the Tropfest concept during De Niro's Tribeca Film Festival. Tropfest at Tribeca screened successfully in 2006 and 2007 and resulted in a stand-alone festival – Tropfest NY – in 2008. The financial crisis in the US means the next Tropfest NY has been rescheduled to 2010, however Tropfest had its first screening in Bangkok in 2008 and will screen its second event on 12 July this year. Polson is also having talks with potential partners in Toronto.

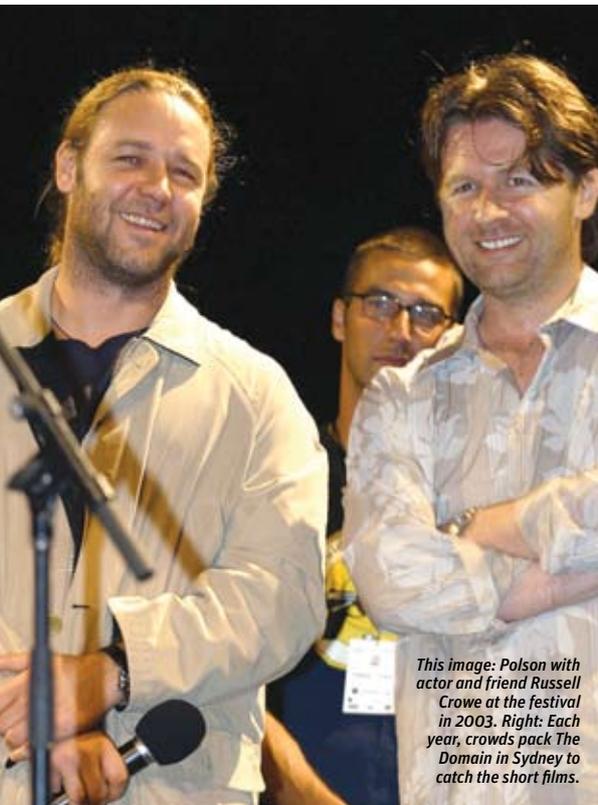
So what began in the corner of a small Sydney cafe has found its way around the world and taken the enthusiastic young filmmaker from Darlinghurst with it.

Polson is still actively involved in the festival, both as the founder and the director. "For most part the actors and filmmakers are unknown," he says. "Yet people show up like they're coming to see the biggest celebrities in the world. What they are coming to see is talent." 

NOW THERE'S AN IDEA

Tropfest's John Polson on how to strengthen the Australian film industry: "I think that there's a huge amount of talent here in Australia but the Australian film industry should be doing a lot better than it is doing. A big chunk of the English-speaking population is living in the US and we haven't made a film that has done well there for a very long time. I think there needs to be a mini revolution about how we do things here. The French seem to have figured out a way to build a strong film industry. If you want to see a Hollywood film in France, a small percentage of your ticket price goes back to the French film industry, like a tax payment. We should consider doing something like that. I believe we have the money in Australia to make good films, we have the crew and writers, the producers and actors, it's now simply a matter of pulling it all together."

“What began in the corner of a small Sydney cafe has found its way around the world.”



This image: Polson with actor and friend Russell Crowe at the festival in 2003. Right: Each year, crowds pack The Domain in Sydney to catch the short films.

