



Although his first official film accolade came as a 16yo for his filmic spoof on high school life, it wasn't Chris Noonan's childhood dream to make films. Had the Oscar- and BAFTA-nominated director of *Babe* listened to career advisors at his North Sydney high school, he might have found himself teaching for a living. The film industry's gain may well have been the education sector's loss, as the freethinking schoolboy helped set up and chaired a secondary students' union which established a weekend school to show the Department of Education how it should be done.

chris  
NOONAN

INTERVIEW BY SALLY BROWN

When Chris Noonan short film won an award at the Sydney Film Festival in 1970, it brought him into contact with his alternative destiny to write and direct films. "I just loved the idea that I wouldn't end up being a teacher and would do something more exciting," the 54yo recalls.

Last month's release of *Miss Potter*, a charming biopic about children's author and painter Beatrix Potter, heralds the end of a decade-long directing hiatus for Chris. While a profusion of offers made their descent from the hills of Hollywood following the triumph of his debut feature, nothing inspired him quite like the script that was eventually brought to his attention by friend Cate Blanchett. Before lagging funding precluded her involvement, Cate was originally to play Beatrix, a role ultimately brought to life by Renee Zellweger.

Characters like Peter Rabbit, Jemima Puddle-duck and Tom Kitten have cameoed in many a childhood, but it was the artist's personal life story that so intrigued Chris. "I knew who Beatrix Potter was, I thought, but actually I had no idea about what her life had been. Her achievements in a world that discouraged women were so extraordinary; I really feel she's like a modern woman who finds herself in this really restrictive world in turn-of-

the-century England."

After *Babe*, which earned US\$280 million in its 1995 world theatrical release (not to forget its *Bambi*-esque bearing on pork sales), the 54yo had the luxury of being "very choosy, very picky."

"I didn't want to blow that success or throw it away with something that was somehow more cynical or less idealistic in its intent. It took a long time to find something that was sufficiently fascinating." In essence, Chris was looking for a script with emotional integrity.

"Reading this script I had tears in my eyes. Film is, at heart, an emotional medium. Personally, I go to the movies for an emotional experience, whether it's terror, love, joy, whatever. It's something humans love to do, to put themselves in the skin of a fictional character and experience things they haven't."

Although neither of his parents worked in creative industries, Chris reflects they were formative in his early career choices. His father, a furniture tradesman, wrote book reviews on the side, and his 'creative-minded' mother was an avid reader. "Creativity was very much valued in our family environment. I'm forever grateful to them for that because it led me into a very interesting life."

At 21yo, Chris secured one of twelve coveted places in the inaugural directors' course at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School alongside Phillip Noyce and Gillian Armstrong. While the innately creative soul has never tried to emulate any one person, he has been mentored by Australian filmmaking talents of the calibre of Peter Weir and *Babe* producer and co-writer, George Miller. Nor does he subscribe to one particular religion or life philosophy, though he recites readily a mantra that he and his *Babe* co-writer repeated to themselves while writing the script, "An unprejudiced heart can change the established order."

Notwithstanding his healthy inventory of career credits, which include absorbing documentaries and television dramas about WW2 prisoners of war, the Vietnam War and the Fitzgerald Inquiry, Chris muses that his greatest challenge is his own inertia. "I have a latent laziness. It's all too easy to be tempted into inactivity. It takes a certain sort of energy and determination to get yourself off your backside and actually do something. I think it's something we all have to fight in ourselves."

Where Chris finds peace is in the natural world. "I feel very shocked when it's disrupted or destroyed."

He shares his profound respect with 'proto-environmentalist' Beatrix, who bought up, and later bequeathed to the National Trust, thousands of acres of farmland in England's picturesque Lake District when she saw that progress was starting to destroy it.

What some might regard as the zenith in a film director's career, seven Oscar nominations for *Babe* can't compete with the buzz Chris gets, sitting with an audience and hearing their reaction to one of his films. "It's a real thrill when you feel the audience laughing and crying with your film. You feel you've really achieved something, you've really done something."

With modesty, Chris articulates his success, "I manage to make a living in an occupation that I love. I'm able now to choose what sort of films I make and to attract stars into those films. I have a satisfying working life, doing things that don't harm anybody."

For nascent directors and screenwriters, Chris offers these motivating words: "The means of production are within everyone's grasp. Take the Nike solution and just do it. There's no reference you can produce that speaks as eloquently as even just a five minute piece of video, that would show people that you have an eye or the talent or something you want to say." ■