

Finding Joy

Production Notes

Finding Joy first came into being when Billie Dean (writer/director) entered the Sunrise Pitching Competition in 1999. The 500-word concept about a woman who wanted to be a singer but couldn't sing was one of 10 finalists out of 535 national entries.

Encouraged, Dean and Andrew Einspruch (producer) raised enough money from friends and supporters to make a decent short. However, understanding that character-based stories lend themselves to low-budget filmmaking, they felt they could make a feature without compromising the script.

“The secret to working with low budgets, is to use what you have,” said Einspruch. “We had a beautiful location in Braidwood and a great dog.”

The story of Finding Joy came to Dean when Braidwood's monthly Folk Music Nights were held at the Eureka Pizzeria. Dean wondered what it would be like to be someone who wanted to be a singer, but couldn't sing.

“Joy is a compilation of many of my comic characters from when I was a stand-up comic,” says Dean. “Low self esteem is as big an epidemic as depression in the Western world, and I felt lots of people could relate to her because of that.”

“What I do in my humour is to simply reveal the things unspoken in our society. In the 80's I talked about first night nerves with a new man, orgasms and cellulite. Today it's aging, perimenopause and menopause.”

“Joy doesn't have much confidence in herself but she's not afraid to have a go. She can't believe Peter loves her – especially when she finds out the truth of his marriage and past. Joy was married to a successful singer, and his success stifled her own creativity to the point where she had to leave him. It crushed her love and her spirit because she wasn't secure enough in her self.

“Her insecurity stemmed right back from when she was a kid, with a bright and beautiful older sister. I'm sure we all know people like that.

“Is Joy like me? Sure, I'm sure there's a part of me in Joy. I love dogs and like Joy I'll give things a go even when I'm scared. But there was no fear in my heart when I met Andrew. Neither of us had the emotional baggage that keeps Joy and Peter apart. We met, fell in love and that was it.”

Peter Wolfman (Andrew Einspruch) is a love interest with a difference in Finding Joy.

“Peter is typical of the men friends Andrew and I have around us. They're caring, they love their kids, and they're either into saving the earth or being creative. Peter's a lot like Andrew in that way. When I first met Andrew he was a maniac comic improviser. The press called

him the ‘mad scientist of the stage’. So to me he was perfect casting for a charismatic, yet sensitive performer.

“Besides I didn’t want to kiss anyone else.

“Peter’s big fault is that he isn’t completely honest with Joy from the start. He doesn’t lie, he simply omits the truth. But women are intuitive and Joy ‘knows’ there’s something not quite right. It builds a wall between them without them ever realising it and fuels Joy’s insecurity.

“But Peter and Joy are soul mates, and I purposely had them dress in similar colours and styles so that the audience would be aware subliminally that they were meant to be together.”

The big star in the movie is Raffi the dog who’s unconditional love helps Joy to find her strength and turn her life around. Coincidentally, Raffi turned up at Dean and Einspruch’s old farmhouse, just when Dean was thinking about the story for Finding Joy. Right away she knew he was the right dog for the part.

“Raffi has an appeal that I knew would transfer well from the screen to the audience. He also turned out to be a terrific actor, hitting his mark for the camera every time and looking depressed or joyous on cue,” says Dean.

“We didn’t bother to train him, we didn’t have to.

“My original idea was to try and make people aware of dogs as gifts to be treasured, not thrown away in the pounds when they get a bit naughty. Many people don’t even realise that dogs need exercising. If they had a good run in the morning it would solve a lot of ‘problem behaviour’.

“I got the line ‘You should go to Toy’s R Us for a pet’ from an animal rescue worker when she complained to me about people who get dogs and then dump them in backyards, expecting them to already be well behaved and perfectly trained.

“Dogs are pack animals and love to be with the family. I tried to make the characters in Finding Joy good doggy companion role models. Raffi pees on Peter’s guitar and he doesn’t dump him in the pound or lose it with him. He simply takes him for a run.

“The issue of dogs is central to the themes in Finding Joy. If a man treats his dog right, then you know he’ll probably be a good dad and husband. That’s what makes Sally so nervous about Matt. Like many people Matt says he’s an animal lover, but he doesn’t embrace the caring for them like Sally wants him to. And after the death of her dog, she learns to stand up to him and say what she really feels.”

Dean dedicated the film to all homeless animals because she wants to help raise awareness of the problem in our society.

“Hundreds and thousands of dogs (and cats) are killed every year in shelters because people lack commitment. We have seven dogs and each one is an irreplaceable gift. The idea of them being thought of as a disposable commodity is completely foreign to me. I find it cold-hearted and shocking.”

The Shoot

The casting for Sally, Matt, Tessa and Nick was quite extensive and local auditions in Braidwood attracted over 70 people trying out for the minor roles.

“As a director, one of the biggest compliments I get is ‘oh you just got a bunch of your friends together’. Other than Andrew and Tamsin, I knew none of the other key cast and it means that the chemistry is indeed working,” says Dean.

“I met Janet Watson Kruse at a screenwriter’s workshop in Melbourne and immediately thought of her as Tessa. I was delighted to find out she was an actor.”

Actors had a week’s rehearsal with Dean and to familiarise themselves with the local culture of Braidwood. “Braidwood’s culture is unique. It attracts a lot of city people and artists, but it is still very down-to-earth,” she says.

“One production designer we were considering wanted to make the sets all up-market and Berry-like, which is a tourist town on the south coast of NSW. He wanted Joy to wear dresses and I’m sure he pictured someone beautiful and willowy. He was shocked to hear I was playing the part – and in jeans and work boots.

“But it was set in Braidwood and I wanted it authentic. We didn’t end up with a production designer at all.”

Dean wanted to try shooting with a digital camera so she could minimise crew, and do maximum takes for performance. She also wanted to experiment with low light conditions.

“I was very influenced by the naturally shot, small stories of England and Ireland, which are about real people living in small towns, and their culture. In these films, you feel the warmth of support from friends, there’s humour, and there’s stunning photography of the landscape in which they live. I felt I could do this, painting the landscape with an Australian brush.”

Dean worked a lot on gut instinct and one that paid off was her desire to shoot in March 2001, before they were properly funded. Straight after the shoot, the country fell into the worst drought the country had seen for over 100 years. Two years later it still hadn’t recovered. Shooting when they did, meant that Dean had her lush scenery in the can.

“We were blessed with some incredible movie magic during the shoot,” says Dean. “I always visualised Joy in a blue VW, but we didn’t have one. Then one of the crew turned up in one. And another crew member had a JOY number plate. So Joy got her car – with personalised number plates!”

Shooting was done on a professional Sony DSR-500 and took 19 days.

“The shoot was tough on us financially,” says Einspruch. “Our car died, and we were out of work for a while afterwards, living on home-grown tomatoes and wild fat hen, an edible weed.”

“We didn’t get the support from the industry we expected and had to finish the film out of wages. We’ve had a very, very quiet lifestyle the last couple of years and made good use of the library.

“We payed for the sound design from public screenings, using the digital format and decided to go ahead and self distribute as well.

“It hasn’t been an easy journey. We’d rather be making the next film. But audiences are finding Finding Joy and responding so well to it, that it makes you want to go the extra mile.”

Finding Joy is one of the first Australian features to be screened digitally in select cinemas around Australia and it is also the first Australian feature to have its trailers screened digitally as well.

Einspruch pioneered relationships with emerging digital cinema advertising agencies (who install digital projectors at no cost to the theatre), to help them give their clients additional value by screening features using their equipment.

It is this kind of tenacity and lateral thinking that makes Dean and Einspruch two of today’s truly independent film makers.

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