



TRANSCRIPT

Broadcast Monday 07 July 2008

Cinema

On Location – and in Adelaide!

John J McGowan

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to take part in a movie with an Oscar-winning Hollywood star? Well, that's just what I did recently so let's go to Hollywood – well, sort of.

A few weeks ago I performed in a scene for a movie with Hollywood actor Timothy Hutton who, in 1981, won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor for his performance in the Robert Redford – directed hit *Ordinary People*. In that movie, Hutton played a suicidal teenager, guilt-ridden because he survived the boating accident in which his older brother drowned. Hutton, then aged just over twenty, became the youngest-ever winner of the Best Supporting Actor category and stills holds that record.

The name “Timothy Hutton” may not be high on your list when you think of current Hollywood stars and I must admit I had to do a little research of my own to bring him to mind. I found that he's had quite a busy career and that, now in his late forties, he is still finding an enviable amount of work. In this year alone he is appearing in no less than ten movies and television productions.

And one of those movies, remarkably, has been in production in Adelaide in recent weeks. The working title of the movie is *Broken Hill* but I believe it may end up being called *Songlines*. I'll go along to see it when it's released and let you know what I think of the finished product.

The movie will unfold the story of a musically-talented teenager from Broken Hill who dreams of becoming a composer. His father – played by Timothy Hutton – thinks that he should do something more practical with his life and so the two fall out. The lad, of course, pursues his dream and, in a crucial scene in the movie we find him conducting one of his compositions performed by a sizeable orchestra and a large choir. This performance takes place in front of an audience of three hundred people at the Adelaide Town Hall – and this is where *I* come in. I was one of the three hundred audience members.

But I *was* directed to sit in the front row so there's a slim possibility that you'll catch a glimpse of me, even in the final cut. I'm the old geezer who just happens to be flanked by a couple of attractive young women. We all leap to our feet and applaud with wild enthusiasm when the music finishes. Even though we had to do the same thing quite a few times in order to get it just right it was surprisingly easy to maintain the enthusiasm because the music was quite dramatic and exciting. We only heard one piece of music which was pre-recorded for the sequence in which we took part but, if all the music for this movie is up to the same standard, then it augurs well for the movie as a whole.

And so does the performance of the actor in the leading role, a very personable young man by the name of Luke Arnold whose charming smile is reminiscent of the young Tom Cruise. Now *that's* getting into *real* Hollywood territory isn't it?

And what of Oscar-winner Timothy Hutton? Well, Mr. Hutton was also part of the audience at the Adelaide Town Hall – just like me. However, unlike me, Timothy did not get to sit in the front row. He

sat several rows back and was, literally, just a face in the crowd. He, too, didn't have much to do on this occasion.

The action goes like this: his conductor-son walks out to the front of the stage to say a few words to the audience before beginning the concert and then is surprised, and pleased, to see his father in the audience. At this point Timothy Hutton's role is to acknowledge his son with a quick nod of the head, presumably indicating approval and, perhaps, reconciliation.

It was clearly a crucial moment in the story and the director and film crew worked with great care to ensure that the appropriate footage was achieved. Close-ups and wide-shots were taken of the young man reacting to his father's presence – and this was before Mr. Hutton even came into the hall to take his seat in the audience. Once the shots of the young man were done, Mr. Hutton entered and sat down in his allotted seat and he, too, was ready for his close-ups and wide shots. This time the close-ups required the camera to track in over the heads of the audience members in the first three or four rows so the camera and its operator were positioned – somewhat precariously - on the end of a long crane.

This dolly crane was attached to a set of wheels which ran on tracks along one side of the audience and, of course, out of shot. As the camera slowly floated in and eventually hovered just in front of Timothy Hutton, the boom arm of the crane crept over the heads of those of us in the front rows, skimming our heads by a few centimetres. There was little room for error but the procedure was carried out with great efficiency.

Indeed the shooting of the entire Town Hall sequence ran very smoothly. If there were any delays they were generally because the two, and sometimes three, cameras being used, had to be re-positioned to achieve a variety of angles and images. There were about thirty members of the film crew including the director; three assistant directors; camera operators; a continuity person; lighting operators; sound recordists; a still photographer; costume and make-up people; dolly-crane technicians and so on. The names of some of these people will end up in the closing credits of the movie under weird titles like gaffer and key grip and best boy.

For those of us who had volunteered as unpaid extras for the shoot, the longest period of delay came before we were ushered into the Town Hall. After turning up early in the afternoon at one of two designated venues near the Town Hall, we spent three hours just waiting...and waiting. However, we *were* well-fed with free sandwiches and cream cakes which helped to pass the time.

Listeners to this program may be surprised to learn that this was the first time I had taken part in a feature movie. I've worked on numerous productions as a director – and sometimes as a performer – but all of these productions have been what are referred to as *short subjects* – such as documentaries; commercials; training films and educational films. Curiosity was my motivation in volunteering to take part in the Town Hall shoot.

I must say that I found no surprises in the manner in which the production work took place. The *modus operandi* was very similar to the way in which I have always worked on my own productions – just using a larger crew. But it was all good fun.

For me there was also a kind of nostalgic element in the Adelaide Town Hall shoot. My childhood home was the Earl of Zetland Hotel, now gone. It was located in the next street, on the corner of Gawler Place and Flinders Street. And many of my fondly-remembered early movie experiences took place at the Majestic Theatre, just a few doors down the road from the Town Hall in King William Street, where the Commonwealth Bank now stands.

It seemed very appropriate therefore that my first participation in a feature movie – be it ever so humble a role – should take place at a venue about midway between where I used to live and the location of one of the theatres where my delight in the movies first began to spread its wings.