

RYAN KWANTEN IN GRIFF THE INVISIBLE.

AGENTS SPECIAL FEATURE

TALENT AGENTS PLAY A CRUCIAL ROLE IN BRINGING SCREEN PRODUCTIONS TO LIFE. SAM DALLAS DELVES INTO THEIR WORLD.

# AUSTRALIA'S GOT TALENT

**E**XPERIENCED TALENT MANAGER Mark Morrissey says an actor shouldn't use the Australian film industry as a "stepping stone" to Hollywood.

"I don't want actors here or young actors in general to think that to achieve success they have to go outside of this country," the Sydney-based veteran of 25 years tells INSIDEFILM.

"There's still remarkable creative work done in this country by great producers [and] great directors.

"I think it's important that if an actor is seeking an international career that they concentrate doing the work here and learning their craft..."

*Tomorrow, When the War Began*, the biggest Australian film of 2010, is a key example of a local movie that should have international success and could result in actors moving to Tinseltown.

It's exciting times to be an Australian agent/manager with many of our young actors getting work overseas, such as Ryan Kwanten (*True Blood*), Isabel Lucas (*Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*) and Chris Hemsworth (*Star Trek, Thor*) to name just a few.

But actors can't just head overseas and expect to pick up work straight away, American-born agent Rob Woodburn says.

"Just because you have a manager or an agent in the US doesn't mean you're getting auditions or you're getting work," says Woodburn, CEO of Woodburn Sweitzer Management, who now calls Sydney home after moving from the US in late-2006.

"I'd prefer for actors to work and excel here as much as possible – and go when we get the call from... the US – [such as] casting directors, network and studio executives – saying 'hey get on a plane and get out here'.

"We're losing a lot of great actors who are going over there prematurely and they're waiting for the phone to ring.

"In doing so, they're losing that heat and buzz they were generating over here."

An analogy Woodburn likes is simply: "You don't want to go to a party you're not invited to."

Why are Australians the flavour of the month?

"I think one of the reasons that they're so well accepted is that they're eager, they're interested and a lot of the kids have dreamt about this growing up," says Morrissey, whose client list includes Hemsworth.

Woodburn says there's more interest than ever due to the recession and the Writers Guild of America strike. As a result, there is a real lack of job security in the US entertainment industry right now.

"Nothing puts you on the map as a US agent or manager or casting director, than finding somebody from outside the US borders," he says, indicating Australia, NZ, the UK and even South Africa are now targets.

"It just shows that you've got a global reach. They're really aggressive about finding people – more so than ever there's interest in international actors."

BGM director Marea Jablonski says the US sees Aussies as "untapped talent".

As a result, agents and managers need to have key relationships in the US – and it's something that won't be going away in a hurry.

"It is absolutely essential that we have working relationships with numerous agents, managers and attorneys overseas," JM Agency's Joanna Milosz says.

"Our industry here is not big enough to sustain the careers of its talented performers, so sooner or later some of them will have to spread their wings.

"I travel to LA on a regular basis to maintain my personal contacts and to discuss clients, who may be ready to make that move. We assess and prepare our clients very thoroughly for the US market, based on the particular and individual advice we get from those who are at the pulse of the US entertainment industry."

Jablonski says it's a three-way relationship – between American management, Australian agents/managers and the actor.

Furthermore, Kermond founder Claudine Kermond – who started the company when she was 22 – says you need to have strong working relationships with casting directors and producers – both locally and overseas.

Other working relationships are strongly needed with TV networks, film and TV studios, production companies, advertising agencies, TV/film writers and directors, financiers,

investment organisations (public and private) and government organisations (such as Screen Australia and Ausfilm), Woodburn adds.

Former actor and singer and now Australian Drama Agents Association (Vic) president Mark Gogoll says performers should concentrate on their craft and let the agent do everything else.

"It's like you having an accountant, or a lawyer...you can't do it all yourself," says Gogoll, who manages performers for stage and screen.

"Some actors have been freelance and that's fine if they can do it but we specialise in our field.

"From my experience as a performer, I can see now why people do need an agent."

So what does an agent/manager actually do in Australia?

"We represent actors whose talent we believe in and who believe in us because it's a personal and professional relationship," says Nicky Gluyas, who has her own management company on Sydney's Northern Beaches.

"We use our knowledge of the industry to source work for the actors, suggesting them for roles, arranging auditions, promoting their talent and selling their skills to secure roles.

"We manage their calendars, arrange publicity, negotiate contracts, invoice jobs and arrange payments. We also help them overcome disappointments and advise them on the direction of their careers."

Furthermore, Morrissey says when actors head overseas for meet-

ings, accommodation, mobile phones and car rentals are organised, making it as easy as possible for the client.

Milosz, a former New York Times journalist, says it shows the difference between the Australian and US industries.

"The range of what we do is very wide, and tends to cover what in the US is done by an agent, manager, attorney and publicist," she says.

"Some specific actors in Australia may want to hire a publicist or may need services of a legal advisor, but this would most likely be on a job-to-job basis, when specifically required."

Woodburn, who started his career at the renowned William Morris Agency, says the biggest difference between Australia and the US is formalised training.

"I think a lot of agents and managers [in Australia] are forced to learn as they go as they are not exposed to 'agent training programs' that exist in the US," says Woodburn, who now offers a training program.

When joining an agency/management company, you essentially form a family.

Extensive research on previous projects will be done before a "meet and greet" with the actor; after which their work is sent to casting directors and a strategy meeting is setup, looking at the actor's short/long term goals.

In Australia, agents charge 10 per cent commission while managers can charge more as long as there's an agreement in place with the actor. Managers tend to charge slightly more (generally an additional 5 per cent) due to having fewer clients – therefore more time is given on each.

Technology and having greater access to productions has changed the way agents/managers work.

"For example not long ago scripts had to be printed and actors would come in and pick them up and overseas scripts would have to be mailed," says Gluyas, whose staff handles about 60 actors, including Nicholas Brown (*Kites*).

"Now everything is faster and on email, scripts are on PDF [Adobe's Portable Document Format], screen-tests can be shot [and] sent overseas and we can be talking to overseas casting directors about them all on the same day.

"There is much greater access to overseas work than ever before. Also thanks to new technology, we represent actors in every mainland capital; we are easily able to operate nationally and internationally."

Australia's film and TV industry is always changing and as a result, agents also need to adapt.

Milosz, who has been an agent for almost 25 years, says it's a profession that has changed a great deal over the years.

"We certainly do a lot more for our clients now, especially in terms of the international exposure," Milosz says.

"Contracts have become far more complex.

"There is a lot of new media coming into equation when deals are done."

She says paperwork has tripled, there's more stress and the competition for roles had become exceedingly ferocious.

Jablonski says it's become a more competitive industry – therefore, a more complicated industry.

Gogoll, an industry veteran of more than 20 years, says there's now more expectation from agents and managers.

What does the future hold for agents and managers in Australia?

"Agents and managers need to be more in control of their own destiny by packaging and developing film and television projects," says Woodburn, who has opened an in-house production arm.

Milosz says "hopefully" agents/managers won't have to change too much.

"Actors have very close, personal relationships with their agents in Australia – there is a lot of trust and high level of loyalty.

"We all strongly support the Australian film and television industry and a considerable amount of work we do is for love not money."

It's a tough industry and as such, agents and managers need a number of skills to be successful.

"A mixture of a lawyer, social worker, film buff and an avid reader with solid administrative skills may be a good combination," Milosz says.

And is there any advice for people wanting to get into the profession?

"You have to be strong,"

Kermond starts.

"But I think just loving talent is the main thing."

## *Modern technology*

Technology has been the biggest change for casting directors in recent years.

With everything now being done online and scripts being sent through with just a click of the button, it's exciting – and perhaps a bit more hectic – times for casting directors around the globe.

"We have become incredibly speedy with technology...auditions can be swiftly transmitted to all parties if they are not available to meet with us – ie interstate or overseas," Melbourne-based Ann Fay, of Maura Fay Casting, tells INSIDEFILM.

"Wherever anyone is...we can all go online and watch and discuss our ideas.

"[Software application] Skype has enabled a director – for instance in Hong Kong – to be seen on camera and talk to the actors in our audition room to give them direction to reach the outcome they need.

"The timing is fantastic when decisions need to be made quickly."

Chameleon Casting owner Daniella Friedman says it's a "tight turnaround" today with technology as people wanted things ASAP.

A casting director is contracted by a producer/director to audition actors for a project. They meet with them, understand the project, get information on the casting budget and read the script.

Actors are chosen simply on the script – based on certain characteristics. The producer may have already attached a 'star' and so the casting director then auditions the remaining roles in the script.

Furthermore, they'll then discuss actor availability with their agent(s)/manager(s), conduct auditions and find replacements at the last moment if required.

"The knowledge we have can at times make the process swifter for the outcome as we are the eyes/ears that are constant across projects to know who's interesting – whether it be keeping an eye on a longstanding career and what an actor has to offer or a newcomer that we may have seen in a play/short film," Fay says.

"The production company relies on us having 'fresh eyes' as we have a knowledge across quite a few projects, whether they be a feature film, a television series, a short film, or theatre or TVCs or corporate videos or musical clips – we are across all areas."

Friedman says talent agents/managers are important because casting directors rely on them to be honest, calling it a professional "collaboration".

Agents and managers are also important as there might be fresh new talent on their books and they can update casting directors on things that they might not have had a chance to see.

Friedman, who has also worked in LA, says it can sometimes be exhausting but it's always very satisfying.

"It's such an exciting job because it's so varied – no day is the same," says Melbourne-based Friedman, indicating you need to be organised and not let stress get the better of you.

"You have to be very creative, you have to be very lateral in your thinking, think beyond the square and you have to be able to put in lots of long, hard hours."

Fay says you need to give a "passionate commitment", while having patience and a love for screen and stage projects.

"We give actors the opportunity to audition for various projects and hope that we play a significant part in making their dreams come true; and watching an actor grow and evolve is very exciting."