

It's been a frustrating but exciting road to paradise

A review of a concert that recreated the vocal orchestra of prisoners of war on Sumatra caught the eye of film-maker and scriptwriter Martin Meader in 1990.

The review had been written by Neville Cohn, who reviews for The West Australian and was then The Australian's music critic.

Cohn had described the Perth Concert Hall event as one of the most moving in his long career in concert-going and the emotion of the occasion obviously conveyed itself to Meader, who was then studying film-making at Swinburne College, Melbourne.

Meader sensed the potential for a film version of these women's lives and their vocal orchestra. So he rang Cohn in Perth to find out more about this extraordinary concert.

Cohn referred him to Cara Kelson, a former concert pianist who had an intimate knowledge of the historical background to the vocal orchestra through her friendship with camp survivor Vivian Bullwinkle. Kelson had been musical adviser in the staging of the Perth concert, which was held to commemorate the 45th anniversary of the liberation of army nurses from the camps.

Meader finished his film course at Swinburne and moved back to his home in Brisbane, where he began a lengthy correspondence with Cara Kelson about the historical material. When Meader decided that he would write his own screenplay for a film with the working title *A Voice Cries Out*, Cara Kelson became his researcher.

The screenplay was written in collaboration with David Giles, an Englishman who, like Meader, also lived in Brisbane.

Later they teamed up with Western Australian film lawyer, Graham Rattigan, and the trio decided to finance the film themselves through their own production company Planet Pictures.

Armed with their screenplay and a tape recording of the recreated vocal orchestra, Meader and Rattigan began a series of trips into the international marketplace in the search for finance.

A few friends kicked in with the initial investment money but it was in Asian centres such as Singapore and Kuala Lumpur that some of the big money was to be found for film-making.



Meader admits that it was a tough slog across the world in the effort to finance their film. As a new company, with no previous track record, doors do not open easily into the world of film financing.

During these trips to Asia and Europe, Meader moved back to Perth, where he had previously lived and studied at university, because it was closer than Brisbane to Asian markets.

He now lives in Fremantle, where he continues his career as a film producer and screenwriter, though most of his efforts now go into children's films.

He admits that at times during two years of pitching their film to potential investors the team became depressed about whether their film would ever be made.

At other times they were buoyed by investments from individuals and finance houses that became enthusiastic about the project.

One of Planet Pictures' biggest coups was in Singapore, where businessman Andrew Yap agreed to invest \$8 million in the film project.

As the investments mounted, Planet Pictures approached Bruce Beresford to come on board and direct their screenplay.

Beresford agreed in principle to direct the film and his influence opened more doors to big-name Hollywood stars and more money.

Village Roadshow became a major player in the film and the prospects were looking good for a big-budget production.

However, Beresford decided that rather than go with Meader's original script, he would write his own as well as direct the film.

It involved more research by Beresford and producer Sue Milliken, who revisited the survivors all over Australia.

Meader said by this time the budget for the film had blown out to about \$26 million (\$8 million of it still committed by Mr. Yap).

"I think that when Beresford became definitely committed to the film and Village Roadshow were part of the deal they wanted us out of the way," Meader said. "They were the big boys and we were a small production company."

Planet Pictures sold their rights to the film, though Meader and Giles got a story credit at the beginning of the film, and are listed, along with Graham Rattaigan as co-executive producers.

It seems that without Meader's initial enthusiasm for the film, Paradise Road would never have been made. It was his initial research, his own script and his team's attempts to find finance that led to Beresford's involvement, even if Beresford's final script varies considerably from that envisaged by Meader.

In the introduction to his shooting script Beresford wrote: "Most of the characters are based on actual people, although detailed information was difficult to obtain because of the passing of time and fading memories, so there is a great deal of invention.

This is not a documentary about camp life but a feature based on a little-known arena of the World War II. It is a story of suffering and heroism that rivals, I believe, any widely known stories of the war.

To allow greater artistic invention, Beresford has changed the names of the major characters to fictional ones. Thus Norah Chambers, played by Glenn Close, becomes Adrienne Pargiter, a 35-year-old wife of a tea planter, and Margaret Dryburgh becomes Margaret Drummond, a 55-year-old missionary and musician played by Pauline Collins.

For Meader, the long path to making Paradise Road has proved exciting as well as frustrating and he is philosophical about the fact it is not his script --- or his production company --- that finally made the film.

"That's the world of film-making," he says. "It's a challenging industry."