

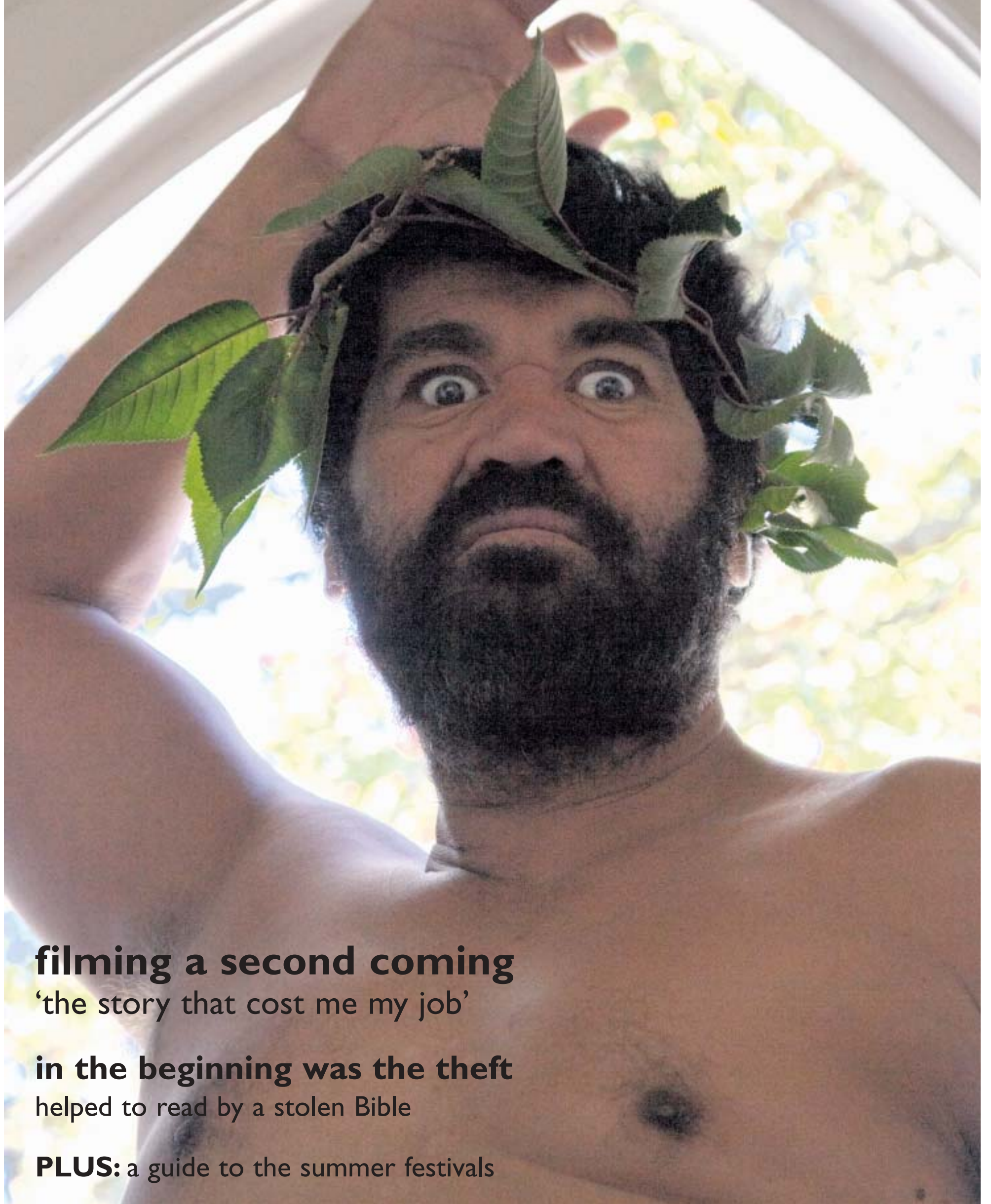
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filming a second coming
'the story that cost me my job'

in the beginning was the theft
helped to read by a stolen Bible

PLUS: a guide to the summer festivals

Launching a Kiwi moon mission

Mike Riddell's novel *The Insatiable Moon*, about a Maori 'Messiah', cost him his Baptist teaching job. He describes the problems of turning it into a film



Identity crisis: Arthur (Rawiri Paratene) believes that he is the second Son of God

ARTHUR came knocking on the door. A big Maori man with wild hair, a genial face, and a history of psychiatric care, he had become a friend. As a Baptist minister in the centre of Auckland, I had a lot to do with "psycho patients". But not many of them were as intriguing as Arthur, who claimed to be the second son of God.

Because he could not read, he asked me to share some passages from the Bible where Jesus claimed to be the only son of God. I scabbled around and recounted a few verses. Arthur drew a deep breath, sighed, and with a shake of his head declared: "Boy, he's gonna be in trouble!"

Sometimes, after he went on his way — usually with an "advance" of \$20 — I would muse on Arthur's claim to divine lineage. What if he was the second son of God? How would I know? After all, the first one arrived in unexpected circumstances. Jesus's family tried to drag him off home once, because he was "beside himself"; they thought he was mad.

Slowly, that vague territory that occupies the border between madness and divine revelation became an idea. Some years later, when Arthur had died, that idea reached gestation in a novel, *The Insatiable Moon*. It was a fictionalised account of Arthur's attempt to find his Queen of Heaven.

I had a lot of fun writing it, because I doubted that it would ever be published. In particular, a sex scene that occupied an entire chapter enlivened the task. By this time, I was lecturing in theology at the Baptist theological college in Auckland. When HarperCollins was foolish enough to agree to publish the book, I foresaw possible ructions.

It occurred to me that styling a Maori psychiatric patient the second son of God might induce theological indigestion in those of a conservative bent. I sent a preview copy to the head of the denomination. He congratulated me on the book, and confirmed that I would have to leave my employment once it was published.

The theology was never mentioned: it was the sex that undid me. While Baptists presumably engage in sex, they do not speak about it — certainly not at length. I went quietly. I was one of those who had thought the Baptist principle of "freedom of belief" was important, but, in my case, it proved not to be.

THE divide proved momentous for several reasons. It provoked a change of career for me: I nervously began to describe myself as a "writer" rather than a

"lecturer". Our whole family relocated to the other end of New Zealand, where it was cheaper to live, and a writing career was viable.

Most significantly of all, however, the exile drove a steel wedge between my faith and my art; and, after several months among the unchurched, I eventually washed up on the shores of Roman Catholicism.

My writing career flourished in every way — except that of earning a decent income. There were another couple of novels, a theological text, and a few handbooks about the spiritual journey. On the back of these, I managed to keep up regular visits to the Greenbelt Festival, and other gigs in the UK, as a speaker and storyteller — which proved useful in catching up with my many friends in that part of the world.

One of those friends, Pip Piper, was so entranced with *The Insatiable Moon* that he took an option on it for a film. I confess that, even while writing *Moon*, I had envisaged its filmic potential, and Pip shared that belief. Together, we set out to develop the project, and he asked me to write a script.

It was a challenge. Although I had recently written a play about the New Zealand poet James Baxter, I had no knowledge of writing a screenplay. My ignorance was compensated for by enthusiasm — I knocked out a script in two weeks.

The script followed the bones of the novel. The enigmatic Arthur (is he mad, or wiser than most of us?) lives in a boarding house full of misfits. Through a half-baked miracle, he finds and woos his Queen of Heaven (less sex than the

book — phew!). At a funeral for one of his friends, the mood turns on a sixpence from gut-wrenching sadness to gut-busting humour. And Arthur delivers a powerful message of broken hope.

When his home comes under threat from unreliable developers, our hero, with the help of a bewildered vicar, fights back. But the maybe-messiah deteriorates, and it looks as if the little people might lose again. But things have a way of creating surprises where Arthur is involved. It is a story of redemption for all concerned.

WHILE completing this first draft, I received a letter from Rawiri Paratene — a legend in New Zealand acting circles. Rawiri was in the middle of generating publicity for his latest film, *Whale Rider*. He had read *Moon* while on set, and wanted to take an option on it. When I informed him that it had already been reserved, he demanded that he be given the role of Arthur. We happily agreed.

Rawiri introduced us to Tim Sanders, the producer of *Whale Rider*, who had also produced *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*.

On a memorable night in the summer of 2003, a small group assembled in an Italian restaurant in St John's Wood. Rawiri and Tim were there, along with Pip and his business partner, Rob Taylor, and — helping to polish off the wine — me.

In a spirit of bonhomie, we pledged to make a film together. As we stumbled out on to the street afterwards, the London horizon was overshadowed by a full moon. We took it to be a sign, and Pip and I were confident that we would have the film up and running by 2004 at the latest. Such innocent imagining.

Dante's nine circles of hell were incomplete — he neglected the innermost chamber, "development hell". I was about to explore its torturous parameters. I will not describe the twisted path that led through the "Valley of Despond" for the next seven years, but, taking the Shakespearean estimate of a 70-year lifespan, I invested ten per cent of mine.

By the beginning of 2009, after we had dragged ourselves through swamps and quicksands, we were a \$NZ7-million film, with tentative support from the New Zealand Film Commission and Screen West Midlands. Our director was a Scot, Gillies MacKinnon (*Pure, Hideous Kinky*), and the cast included Timothy Spall, James Nesbitt, and John Rhys-Davies (Gimli the dwarf, in *Lord of the Rings*). We seemed to be on the verge of getting there.

In August of that year, however,



Joined in grief: the boarding-house inhabitants leave the funeral service of one of their friends



Out of their tree? top: Arthur celebrates royal nuptials with his Queen of Heaven, Margaret (Sara Wiseman); above: troubled boarding-house resident Norm (Ian Mune) seeks solace in nature

the New Zealand Film Commission considered our 2000 pages of application documents, and declined to fund us. After this cornerstone collapsed, the funding from Screen West Midlands joined the rubble. Eighty per cent of the finance gone, our lead actors discovered more interesting projects. And finally, reluctantly, our director walked away as well.

SEPTEMBER 2009, the beginning of spring in New Zealand, was a bleak month. Pip and I made the inevitable decision that it was time to fold our tents and move on to other pursuits. But, having made the decision, neither of us found it easy to sleep. In one of those fateful conversations we began to explore whether there was another way of making the film.

We wondered if it would be possible to shoot it using investors' money, of which we had pledges for about \$NZ300,000. But there were a few problems with this plan: we had no cast, no director, no crew, no locations, and no equipment. But many years of overcoming obstacles had ensured a stubborn belief in the story at the heart of the film.

My wife, Rosemary, was once a professional actor. When she became a lawyer, she kept up her interest in theatre, and began to direct. By now, she was a judge in the New Zealand District Court. Given our need for a director, she had three important qualities: she knew the story back to front; she had great skill in working with actors; and she could afford to do the job without pay.

When I asked her, she disconcertingly burst into tears. Five minutes later, she agreed. Rawiri, who was still on board with the project, paled a little when hearing that Rosemary



Screen debut: *The Insatiable Moon* was Mike Riddell's first screenplay

'It navigates the difficult territory between revelation and madness'

would direct. But, like the gentle, wise man that he is, he opted to stay on board. His presence was an important catalyst in providing us with valuable credibility.

Another boost was securing the Canadian director of photography Tom Burstyn. Vastly experienced, he advocated a philosophy of "frugal filmmaking", focusing on story and acting rather than on equipment. *Moon* was the perfect vehicle for him to explore this.

Our casting was enhanced by the misconception of many actors, who thought we were still a \$7-million production. We ended up securing the cream of acting talent in New Zealand.

All the gear for making our feature film fitted in the back of one Ford Transit van. The professional crew was supplemented by film-school graduates; our production office was donated; the catering was done by friends; our main location was free of charge; and neither the director, nor the writer, nor the producers were paid.

Incredibly, we ended our five-week shoot on schedule and on budget — a real accomplishment. The entire shoot was marked by magic and good will. Everyone who worked on it recognised that something special was happening. In film, it is the small things that can either go your way or take you down. We were, dare I say it, blessed.

Over the next three months, we put together a rough cut of the film, showed it to an enthusiastic audience, and immediately raised another \$140,000 to do the necessary post-production work. *The Insatiable Moon* premiered as part of the New Zealand International Film Festival in July last year, where the full house of 700 gave it a standing ovation. It was subsequently released in cinemas to great acclaim, and, remarkably, is still screening.

We had always believed that the story was universal, and this was borne out by gala premières in London and Birmingham in October

last year. Once again, we had the experience of audiences laughing and crying, and walking out of the cinema as staunch advocates for the film.

Now the cinematic release gets under way in Britain, and the film opens at the Empire, Leicester Square, today.

All of this is a long way from those visits of Arthur that inspired the film. In retrospect, we reckoned that maybe this should always have been a small film (small in budget, huge in heart).

After all, it is a story about the little people in life — the ones who live on the margins and are dismissed by the respectable people who pass by. It is a film that draws audiences into a realm where hopes are fragile but still alive.

While it is definitely not a "message" film, it explores several things: the treatment of the mentally ill; the stigma of the homeless; the humanity of paedophiles; the crossing of boundaries by community workers; and the religious faith of an alcoholic. It navigates the dangerous territory between revelation and madness. And, despite all that, it is funny.

In the film, Arthur says: "Sometimes you have to let yourself go and see where you end up." I should have pinned that line above my desk in 2002, when I began work on the script. Maybe some things have to die before they can come to life.

The real Arthur died some time ago. But his story is still being told. I like to think he is happy about it.

The Insatiable Moon is showing at the Empire, Leicester Square, London, from 4 March; and at Glasgow Film Theatre, 25-27 March. For more showing details visit www.theinsatiablemoon.com

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