

Up for the Count

Rai Fazio is used to being in the media spotlight. However, recently it's not been for gym fires or alleged underworld tiffs, it's been for one of the most talked about feature film productions in WA's history. We step behind the ropes as Rai pulls on the gloves for the fight of his life. **text**> Sarah Szabo **illustration**> Mike Rigoll

The boxing announcer silently exercises his lips, smoothes his form-fitting pinstriped blue suit and tries again, “no more do we talk... the fists will do the talking,” he says, in a voice amplified enough to penetrate the most caulflowered of ears. It's a trained, professional voice and we are watching a man teetering on the edge of his own personal abyss.

By the sixth or seventh take the sweat beads have multiplied at each fluff of what sounds like a clunker of a line. When he gets it right about 300 extras exhale as one. We are getting a first-hand look at the blood, sweat and tears of feature film-making on the set of *Two Fists, One Heart*, each, in our own small way, becoming a part of the digital fabric of its creation. Our cheering, jeering, blurred faces will form the backdrop to the penultimate fight scene, shot at Challenge Stadium.

If truth be told we are a fairly motley collection, distinguished mainly by our complete lack of resemblance to the audience at an actual boxing match, unless fight fans are made up of 14-year-old girls, pale, badly-coiffured emo boys and one immaculately dressed, 60-ish English teacher, next to me, who keeps herself busy by proof reading teachers' reports (riddled with errors, she confides).

We are in the language of film – a brave casting decision but herein lies the magic; some fast panning, an artful blur and flashing lights will



soon have us looking the goods. The real goods eventually turn up on set clad in black-hued boxer's silks with a disconcerting array of tassels around a six-packed torso.

Rai Fazio enters the ring and begins to shadow box. Rai's name is rarely unaccompanied by the twin monikers of “colourful” and “controversial”. He has the kind of face that might cause you to flinch on a darkened street and a rumoured shady past that could cause a skittish bureaucrat to pull government funding from an already green-lit project (a \$375,000 grant for script development from ScreenWest was clawed back by Arts Minister Sheila McHale after “concerns” were raised). One way or another he has made regular appearances in the newspapers mostly by being on the right or

Lord of the ring: Rai Fazio (playing Nico Mancini) limbers up on the set of *Two Fists, One Heart*.

wrong end of a fist (Golden Gloves Champ, public stomping by bikies). His Northbridge gym was also firebombed shortly after the bikie brouhaha in a rumoured feud.

The boxing world is not known for its connection with knitting circles, and some of Rai's past associates would struggle to make the cut of Perth's most admired citizens. As he had his first organised fight as a four-year-old (no kidding) and had to be carried into the ring because he was too small to navigate the steps, Rai has had plenty of time to hang with an A-list of bad boys, including alleged underworld figures.



No holds barred: All actors in the film have boxed in real life; crew on set capture the dynamics in the ring.



‘His first organised fight was as a four-year-old and he had to be carried into the ring because he was too small to navigate the steps.’

For the record Rai denies having one, apart from a spent conviction for demanding property by way of written threat. In conversation, he defies his stereotype with a ready wit and a philosophical bent, albeit with an understandable wariness of journalists who insist on using words such as “colourful”.

In the movie Rai plays his own fictional nemesis – the menacing, muscled black-clad Nico; a casting decision that did not require a leap of faith.

His impetus for writing the semi-autobiographical script was to kick-start an acting career, just as Sylvester Stallone wrote *Rocky* to play the starring role. Instead former soapie actor, Daniel Amalm, who has the kind of face (cinematic) that only the connubial splicing of Swedish and Malaysian genes could produce, plays the Rai character – Anthony Argo. Confused? Don't be.

The journey from script to screen has been a rocky road and quite possibly the fight of Rai's life – a nine-year skirmish to realise his dream. Along the way Rai found the yang to his yin in veteran producer David Elfick (*Newsfront*, *Rabbit Proof Fence*) and together they have taken on all comers to put the story on screen.

The ups and downs of the production have been regularly reported with an undercurrent of

faint derision and Rai's involvement as writer, executive producer and actor are integral to what we will see on screen, but possibly prejudicial. How to put it gently... he has a lot to prove and he knows it.

“I don't doubt that we are going to make a good movie because I don't think things would have got this far, considering I am a newcomer, without it being a bloody good story. I mean people have read the script – they have laughed, they have cried, they've been angry, they've got emotional. If you can do that in black and white and you get a good director and a good producer, which we have and we have got some great actors – the chances are good,” he says.

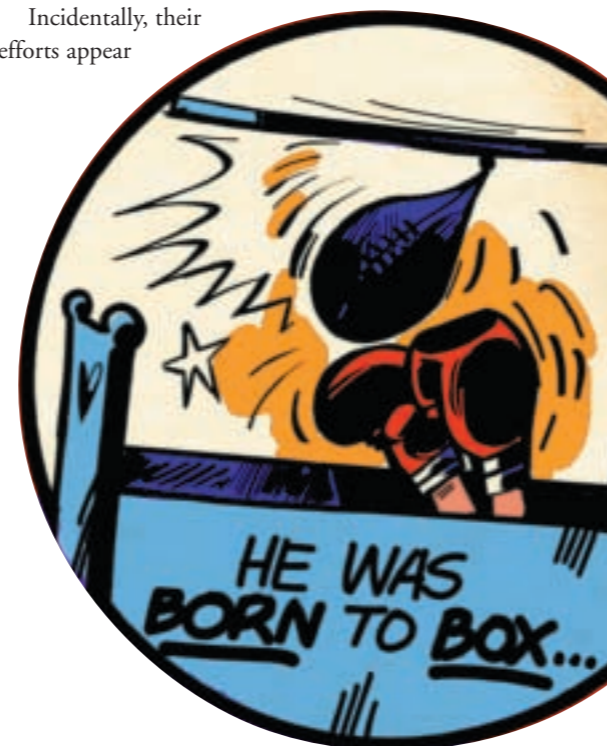
After the state funding backflip, David Elfick packed up the WA script by a WA writer about a WA boxer and headed back east, eventually finding a sympathetic ear and a ready chequebook at federal agency, the Film Finance Commission (FFC). After all the FFC had recently funded another WA story – *Rabbit Proof Fence*. It was a world-wide box office hit, becoming the most successful-ever film dealing with Indigenous themes.

David did the rounds getting post-production funding from the NSW Film and Television Office and, in a significant coup, an agreement

from Walt Disney to distribute the movie. He says the key to pulling it all together and putting it back across the Nullarbor where it belonged was WA's mining boom and the 32 private investors, both great and small, who kicked in \$3.8 million of private money to keep the production here.

Many of the smaller investors were friends of Rai, often from the building industry, who just wanted to help out. Socialite Rhonda Wylie hosted a soiree whose cashed up invitees were charmed by Rai and David into investing \$1.5 million. Time and initiative eventually brought the \$8.8 million budget together. Says Rai on David, “he never gave up.”

Incidentally, their efforts appear



to herald a brave new world of filmmaking in WA, with private money behind another current production – *Crush* by John Soto.

The State Government's recent promise of a \$73 million arts package, including \$3.2 million for the film and TV sector, also promises to bolster activity. ScreenWest reports that 2008 will see four or five features from WA completed or released from a national total of about 15. Cast and crew on *Two Fists, One Heart* number more than 100, with at least 30 of the crew from WA. Well-credentialed Italian actor Ennio Fantastichini (he has worked with Italian film icon Marcello Mastroianni, John Malkovich and Gerard Depardieu) has been brought over to play Anthony's father and trainer, complete with authentic accent and gesture (well, he's not Sicilian exactly, but he can do Sicilian).

He tells me passionately that, “I don't find one person wrong casted.” Having won the equivalent of an Academy Award in Italy, his cachet may put bottoms on seats in international theatres.

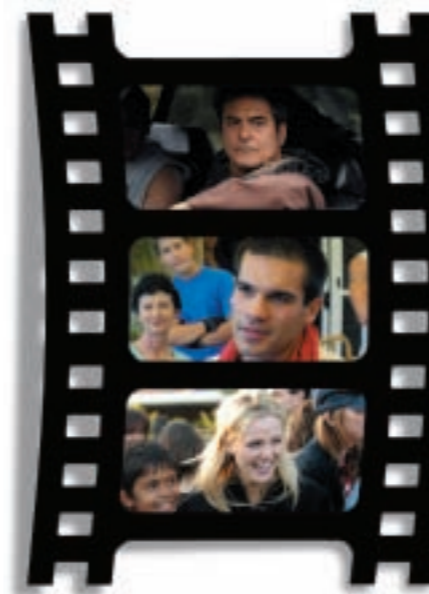
Luminous NIDA graduate Jessica Marais plays Anthony's main love interest (Kate), while ex-Merredin model Nicole Trunfio also shakes her booty in that direction. She is on set today wearing a dress carefully designed to reveal everything a dress would normally cover.

Perth comedian Tim Minchin plays a comedian very much like Tim Minchin, except he's called Tom. Tim as Tom is Kate's brother and has written a couple of comedy pieces especially for the film which he performs very much like Tim (as Tom).

The movie promises plenty of fisticuffs, hot bods, flash cars and humour but is at heart, a love story. No, not your boy-meets-girl-loses-girl caper (although there is one of those in there), but of the love between a father and son.

Rai's dad (Joe) is a Sicilian immigrant with thwarted boxing ambitions of his own and the real life cultural and generational clash between father and son lies at the heart of the narrative. Rai admits the movie is, in part, a way to say things to his father that could not be said in real life.

On set with...



Ennio Fantastichini on his character Joe

“I think in life we can meet powerful people, fake people, proud people, humble people but we are not, of course, only one thing. When you read a script if you are an idiot you take only the superficial but your work is to read between the lines and go deeply inside. It was interesting to meet the real Joe and see the simplicity of the man. As an immigrant he has had to fight to build a new life still holding on to his traditions and keeping his patriarchal sense of command. He is like a big tree but he doesn't have many shades of grey. I hope it comes out in the movie that there are many elements in Joe – they are buried deep but sometimes there is a hand that comes up from the ground. There is another Joe inside that is searching to have a breath but it gets pushed down.”

Daniel Amalm on his character Anthony

“I spent a good week with Rai prior to getting started... I just asked heaps of questions and it helped to see where he was coming from. My character Anthony is a guy who struggles between being a lover and a fighter. His father is very intent on him boxing but he starts to feel that it is not what he is about.”

Jessica Marais on her character Kate

“Kate and her family have moved from London. She lives with her brother Tom in a share house in quite a bohemian arty environment. She studies psychology, which is a huge key to her interest in Anthony. I think she finds Anthony a bit of an enigma... someone she could possibly come in and rescue from his dark past. She is attracted to him initially for the very reason she becomes disturbed by him. She finds a bit of bloodlust and excitement in this guy who lives life very dangerously.”



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"I had this great idea for a film but the truth is I never had an ending," says Rai. "I never could say to my father what I wanted to say to him. My drama teacher said to me 'well what did you want to say to him?' and he said 'there is your ending.' The beauty of this film is that I can give something that I couldn't give in real life."

If there are any misgivings about how Joe will react to this very public conversation they are shrugged away as just another blow to be dodged. Says Rai, "with old Sicilians – no matter what you do you are wrong. If you made a million on a house he would go 'you shoulda made two million – you sold it too cheap.' He is a hard-headed old Sicilian and I have endured 40 years of him. I love him because he is my old man and whatever he throws at me – I still love him."

Back on set, director Shawn Seet jumps into the ring to position Rai and Daniel for their on-screen stoush. The Challenge Stadium lights have created an authentic sheen of perspiration on the boxers and unsightly sweat stains for the rest of us. Daniel Amalm is a real find for the lead.

Unusual for an actor – he has trained as a boxer; more unusual for a boxer, he is a classically trained flamenco guitarist. A *Home and Away* heart-throb at 14, and a gigging musician for most of his 20s, Daniel is built like the a brick outhouse. Rai has 10 years on him but looks as if he has spent every one of them pummeling his muscles into an aesthetic arrangement.

Both have been in training for months for this moment and the pair run through well-rehearsed moves while Shawn leads a scrum of crew, who move in a conga line of connected cables.

Says Daniel: "The beauty of using real life boxers is that we choreograph what we want to do and then sort of agree that we will mix it up a

little and that way we have worn a couple of good shots, which is brilliant. We have all worn shots before in dingy little sparring rings and so to cop one for the movie is no problem at all."

The movie is being shot using a HD Panavision Genesis digital camera (Oscar-winning camera guru Dean Semmler used it on Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto* and called it a "revelation"). It is reportedly excellent in low light and compared to film allows more footage to be shot. Unfortunately it's the size of a bar fridge. Luckily a Schwarzenegger-style physique seems to be the new trend in cameramen. Shawn's quietly spoken demeanor belies a commanding efficiency on set. He has rapidly made a name for himself directing Australian TV drama (*All Saints*, *MDA*, *Fireflies*) and his editor's



eye allows for a spontaneous approach that suits the project. It is apparent that together with producer David Elfick, whose permanently becalmed Zen-like expression (he meditates daily) regularly bobs into view, there are some cool hands on the rudder of this "controversial" production.

David's proven expertise and vision is a significant ace. He has ushered the script through various stages with a practiced eye on funding and marketability and a track record that has brought valuable connections (notably Disney). If it is possible to be hip and 60 at the same time then David manages it. He started off making surf films and still retains the air of youthful (though sophisticated) cool to rival any teen. He has said in past interviews he has a hankering to make a quin-

Two fists: Celebration in the ring (left) while (below) cast and crew film on a hot summer's day at Cottesloe.



A YEAR ON SCREEN

40.5 hours = total number of hours produced in WA of feature films, television drama, documentaries and short films that received ScreenWest funding in 2006-07.

\$21.867 million = total budgets of productions started in 2006-2007.

\$4.422 million = total of ScreenWest investment.

603 = jobs created by this activity

Source: ScreenWest, Australian Bureau of Statistics



tessential youth beach movie and although this clearly isn't it, that sensibility of getting to the heart of a real subculture with all its quirks, raw edges and street appeal seems to be the aesthetic.

Says David: "I am very proud that films I made like *Newsfront* really celebrated Australian culture without glorifying it. The central characters may have been very flawed but they had an Australian characteristic. I think a lot of our films do not work at the box office because we are making B-grade American copycat characters that don't really exhibit Australian traits. This film – although it is about Italians in Australia – shows the cultural divide between immigrants and their Australian-born kids that is part of living here."

Shawn agrees, saying "keeping it real" is the mantra on set with crew members coining the term "cinema aussite" (as a play on cinema verite meaning cinema truth) to describe their approach to the film.

"There is a little tradition in Australian verite which I feel we are drawing on but in a more modern way. Our great advantage on this film is that Rai is a great resource. We can tap into real locations, real people and real boxers. The thing I don't want to do is squander that magic and so instead of deconstructing a situation as you would in normal films where you are work out this shot and that shot – we try to create the world and then capture it," says Shawn.

David is emphatic about what this film is not. "It is definitely not *Rocky* – I think *Rocky* is a very simplistic film intellectually. This film has a strong narrative thrust but it also examines violence in a contemporary society – what purpose does it serve and what does it negate in human nature. We don't draw conclusions of good or evil but it is an interesting examination."

"Their efforts appear to herald a brave new world of filmmaking in WA, with private money behind another current production."

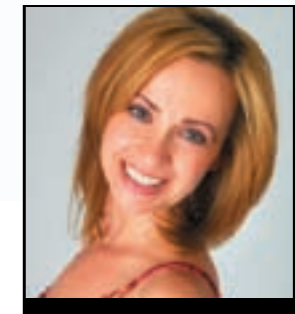
International agents, London's Handway films, which sold *Rabbit Proof Fence* so successfully around the world, has picked up the film. Well-connected in film festivals and inclined towards stylish young directors, David thinks they "smell a hit". Meanwhile... five hours have passed on set and about 300 extras are stewing less than fragrantly under the heat of the lights. Perhaps three minutes of footage has been shot. An edited promo of previously shot scenes is shown to assure us all that we are part of something worth the increasing tedium of playing a faceless mass. Film trailers are an art form that can easily make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, and with that proviso we saw some stylishly shot, atmospheric fight scenes and some convincing emoting in the drama scenes. But Rai firmly believes *Two Fists* will be a winner.

"David (Elfick) has stayed at my house many, many times. I get up at six in the morning and I run through Hyde Park religiously to go clear my head," he says. "As I run I'm going through the filing cabinet in my head, talking to myself about the film and saying you've got to do this and that. When I get home there is David sitting on my balcony out the back on a pillow with his legs crossed and he is humming and rocking and chanting and I look at him and I look at me (he is talking to himself on the balcony – I'm talking to myself in Hyde Park) and I think 'God have a look at the pair of us – between us you'd have to get a good film – wouldn't ya?'"

Two Fists, One Heart will be released in June 2008.



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