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How **Troy Lum** became one of Hollywood's
most promising filmmakers



Instinct

FOR SUCCESS

How Troy Lum became one of the world's most promising filmmakers.

STORY BY STEVE MEACHAM

PHOTOGRAPHY BY YIANNI ASPRADAKIS

Troy Lum and his fellow producer, Andrew Mason, had been working on their film project for a couple of years before they took it to their potential leading man.

The original script, by Andrew Knight and Andrew Anastasios, had been polished and fine tuned to the point of perfection.

"I got the screenplay to Russell about three years ago," says Lum at his headquarters in Chippendale – a stone's throw from UTS where he successfully completed his Bachelor of Business degree in 1994 ("I never made it to my graduation," he admits. "I was travelling").

After reading the script, Oscar winner Russell Crowe not only came aboard as the lead actor in *The Water Diviner* but "said he was interested in directing it".

As Lum recalls it, "We had a meeting, and it was obvious that he could do it. He was amazing to work with. Brilliant.

"None of that stuff people seem to associate with him. People forget he's a true artist."

The rest is history. *The Water Diviner* shared with *The Babadook* as the Best Film title at the AACTA Awards (Australian Academy Cinema Television Arts) and made over \$16 million at the Australian box office. It also proved a huge hit in Turkey. ("It's massive there," Lum explains. "The biggest non-Turkish film of the year outside of the final *Hobbit* movie").

As well as being Crowe's directorial debut, the film was also the first to credit Lum's name as a producer. That's a big step up from the executive producer title he earned on the other movies he's helped bring to the big screen – most notably *Mao's Last Dancer*, directed by fellow Australian Bruce Beresford, and *Saving Mr Banks*, starring Tom Hanks as Walt Disney and Emma Thompson as PL Travers

(the complex Australian author who wrote the *Mary Poppins* stories).

Now 40, Lum has been working on the business side of the movie industry since he was 22. His trajectory has been rapid and illustrious. Several years ago, *The Hollywood Reporter* named him as one of the world's top 50 young film executives, and *The Water Diviner* is evidence that early promise is being delivered.

Yet Lum insists he was never particularly ambitious, saying he's been blessed with a series of great mentors: "I think people saw more in me than I could see [in myself] at the time."

The middle of three children, he grew up in Carlingford and went to school at Muirfield High in North Rocks, NSW. His parents ran the long-standing Satasia restaurant in Balmain, and Lum began working part-time as a waiter there in his teens.

After school, Lum went to UTS to take a Bachelor of Business in marketing, with communications as a second major. Why UTS? "Both courses, business and communications, had good reputations. But to be honest, I just wanted to get out of Carlingford. I left home when I was 17 to go to UTS and shared a place in Darlinghurst with a friend.

"I had great university years. They were life forming. But I can't say a lot of it happened on campus. Part of the UTS experience was being in the middle of the city. A lot of people who are friends now I met at that time, but they weren't necessarily at UTS, or if they were, they weren't on my course."

During his UTS years, we worked in hospitality jobs and got involved with a group of friends who organised raves and funk parties. ●



“It is one of those moments that make you realise everything can change overnight.”

Troy Lum completed a Bachelor of Business degree with UTS in 1994.

Photo: Entertainment One Australia



ABOVE: Troy Lum at the Australian premiere of *The Water Diviner*, with Keith Rodgers (L) and Andrew Mason (R).

After graduating, Lum spent 18 months travelling through Asia and Europe. “But I do remember feeling that the travelling had gone on for too long and that I had to get more serious.”

He returned to Sydney, but still drifted. “I wanted to be a writer and I wrote every day, in a disciplined way. I wrote a screenplay, which was just terrible. And poetry and short stories. I didn’t feel ambitious. I don’t know when that kicked in.”

After various unsuccessful attempts to get a job in publishing, Lum decided to try a second interest, film: “I loved independent cinema, and the Dendy was the brand at the time.” His letter landed on the desk of Lyn McCarthy, the Dendy founder. By chance, her assistant had just resigned. She gave Lum the job.

At first the jobs were menial. “I just made really good coffee and did whatever I was told.” That included checking the session times were correct in local newspaper ads.

By the time Dendy was taken over three years later by a public company, Lum’s potential was apparent to his new bosses. He was just 24.

“They saw something in me and took me to my first Cannes Film Festival. I was so young and naive. Like so much of my life story, I was just rolling with the punches.”

That year at Cannes, they made three purchases which subsequently helped forge his reputation for spotting independent films which would appeal to Australian audiences: *The Blair Witch Project*, *Buena Vista Social Club* and *All About My Mother*.

His standing soared even higher with the success of *Amélie*. He bought the Australian rights

for \$60,000 a year before it went into production and before Audrey Tatou had been cast as the lead. “I just thought the script was so inventive, and I’ve always been a big fan of Jean-Pierre Jeunet, the director,” he explains. His hunch proved profitable. *Amélie* made around \$7 million in Australia.

Isn’t it ironic that he wrote a terrible screenplay, but has a talent for spotting potential in other people’s screenplays? “Yes, but I am probably a much better reader than I am writer. I was one of those kids who read two novels a week. I’ve always had a good eye for a story, but I’m not a highbrow person. Even though I became known for buying interesting independent film, my sensibility is quite broad. When I am reading these independent scripts, I’m thinking about the emotional response for an audience, and who the film is for. I’ve never been an artist, and I’ve never really been a businessman. I’ve always straddled the two.”

In 2002, Lum was invited by film distribution veteran, Frank Cox, of New Vision, to form Hopscotch Films. Cox would fund it, with Lum getting half the company. “I was only 27, and it was a big risk.” Dendy’s marketing expert,





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Sandie Don, joined soon afterwards.

Their first film was American documentary *Bowling For Columbine*. “It was a massive hit,” Lum recalls. “We bought it for around \$60,000 and it made \$5-6 million. We had a lot of success at Hopscotch, but starting with such a big hit was fantastic. That led to *Fahrenheit 9/11* which made \$11 million. By the time we sold Hopscotch we’d been nominated for 35 Oscars.”

Each film presents a different problem. Hopscotch bought Woody Allen’s *Moonlight in Paris* after seeing the film at Cannes. Allen’s box office record had been tarnished, so they got it for around \$100,000. “It did \$11 million.”

On the other hand *Mao’s Last Dancer* involved investing to get a script written. “We could have lost \$50,000, which in the context of the film grossing \$17 million doesn’t seem much, but that \$50,000 could have gone nowhere.”

Hopscotch was presented with a great Australian script about Australian author PL Travers in *Saving Mr Banks*. “We loved it and got on board as co-producer,” Lum explains. “It goes

through various incarnations. I bring in a UK producer, Alison Owen, who did *Elizabeth* and *The Other Boleyn Girl*. Years go past. I feel it’s never going to get made.

“We can’t get permission from Disney to clear any of the *Mary Poppins* songs or have Walt Disney as a character.

“Then Alison happens to be sitting next to a guy from Disney at the Emmy Awards. She mentions the script. He’s never heard of it. She sends it to him and suddenly we have a ‘go picture’ within weeks. Suddenly it’s starring Tom Hanks and Emma Thompson. It is one of those moments that make you realise everything can change overnight.”

In 2011, Hopscotch was taken over by UK giant, eOne. Lum stayed on as managing director. “We’d built the company to turning over \$20 million a year. I had 35 staff. The stakes were getting higher. Four years later, turnover is \$60 million.” The future, he says “is all about scale; having links to big international organisations.”

Having said that, *The Water Diviner* was made by Hopscotch Features, a separate partnership between Lum, Andrew Mason and John Collie.

Troy Lum has achieved much in Australia, but is his future overseas? “I’ll always have a link to Australia. I’m very passionate about the local industry. I like to tell stories driven out of Australia.

“My next project as a producer is *All That I Am*. I’ve taken an option on Anna Funder’s novel, and we’ve just started on that journey. If it gets up, I’ll be spending a lot of time in London because it is set in the UK.

Lum has also recently boarded a film about legendary war correspondent, Lee Miller. Actress Kate Winslet has been attached as the lead and it is expected to go into production next year.

“I’m now 40. It sounds so exhausting when you describe it all. But it has gone so quickly. I’ve never really stopped to think what I am going to do next.” ■■■

