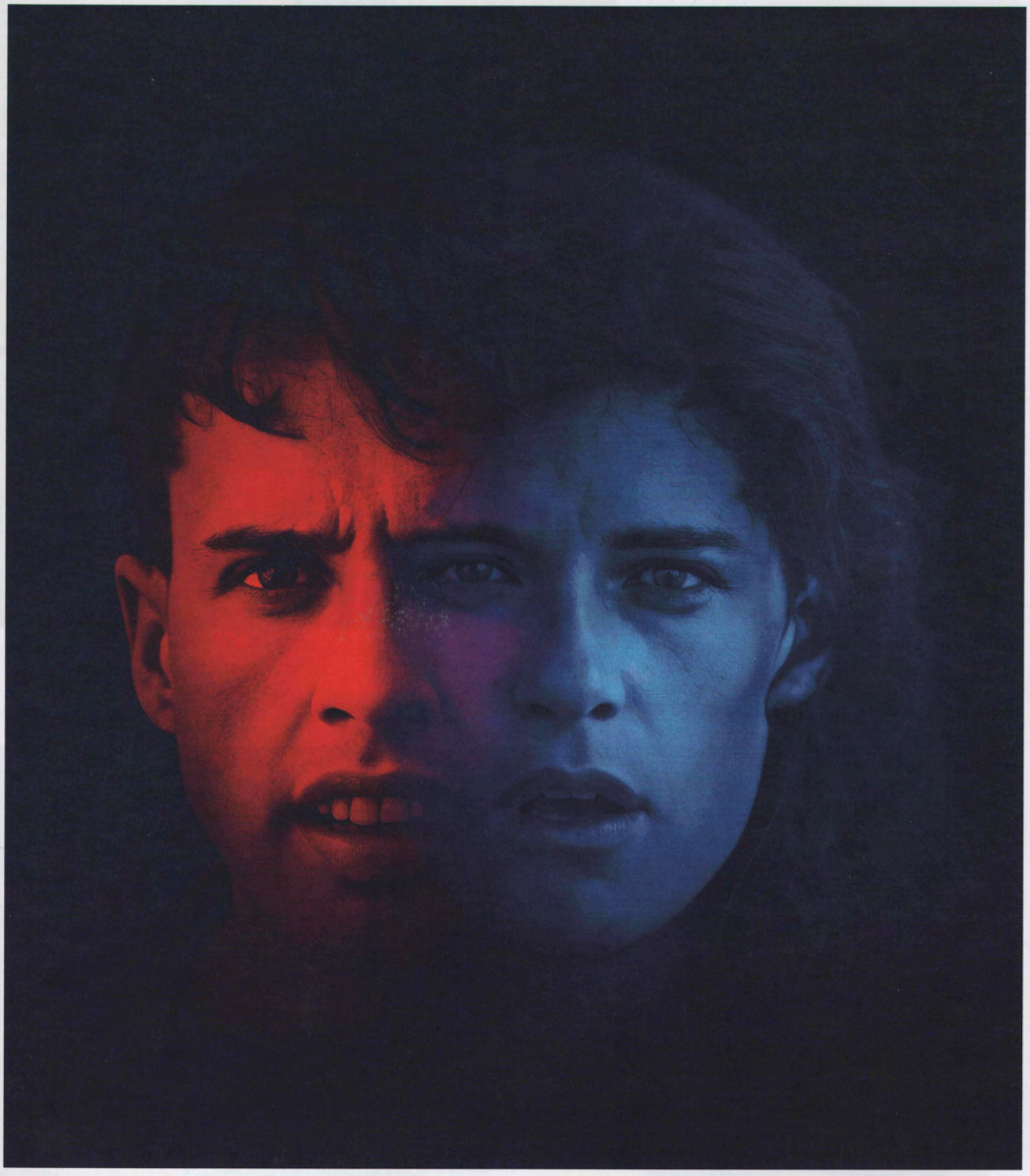

Dir. Garth Maxwell *Jack Be Nimble* 1993.
Photo: Aaron Needham.

Jack Be Nimble: Thirty Years On

Tom Augustine meets the minds behind a gothic-horror classic.

'It sounds like it was a little bit cursed', jokes RNZ's Jesse Mulligan, after hearing about the litany of bad luck and unfortunate circumstances that befell the release of Garth Maxwell's film *Jack Be Nimble* (1993). Maxwell gives a wry, knowing chuckle. He demurs on whether the film bore a fate-tempting target on its back.

Maxwell was being interviewed following a resurgence of interest in his film, with a revival screening at New York's Museum of Modern Art and a gorgeous new restored Blu-Ray release. *Jack Be Nimble* has been many things over the years: a source of commercial disappointment, a lost cult classic, a defiant outlier in Aotearoa New Zealand cinema, and a compelling dispatch from a queer artist during the AIDS crisis. 'It was tough but … things have changed. The stars realigned, and we're about to have another really major re-outing for the work. I never lost hope', says Maxwell.

Jack Be Nimble was released in the same year as Jane Campion's *The Piano*. I first saw it on a scratchy old DVD in the back room of my high-school media-studies class. I remember the horrifying sequence in which the titular Jack, as a young man, is whipped with barbed wire by his brutish adoptive father, before falling into the mud of their miserable farmstead. It was a scene of uncommon, unflinching cruelty that stuck in my brain like a splinter. And this same cruelty was my most stark takeaway upon rewatching the film this year.

This unfailingly strange story of two long-separated, abandoned siblings who find their way back together via a psychic connection is fantasy-cum-horror-cum-domestic-drama, with plenty of other elements mixed in. It follows its own dreamlike logic. Played by Alexis Arquette and Sarah Smuts-Kennedy, Jack and Dora—particularly Jack—endure obscene suffering, which drives Jack to engineer a revenge mission, continuing the cycle of pain to which he was subjected.

It is a horror film, but its horror is based in the dehumanising pain of abusing another. While it involves telekinesis, mind reading, a strobing hypnosis machine, and a quartet of nightmarish, murderous adoptive sisters, the root of its agony is not obscured by fantasy or outlandishness. There's an almost biblical nature to the way pain is meted out and the way those who suffer carry it into their lives. It's a brutal watch, and, by the director's own admission, not for everyone. The potential for alienation is a testament to the importance of a strong distribution plan, which *Jack Be Nimble* initially lacked. Despite attracting strong reviews, its release was mishandled at almost every step, including being programmed as part of the Toronto International Film Festival's Midnight Madness programme, which clearly assumed it to be a lurid, gonzo grand guignol, to accompany a few beers and a rowdy crowd. While the film possesses a wicked streak of gallows humour, it's too high pitched and too severe in its purpose to be taken purely on simple shock tactics.

The film's commercial failure was devastating for Maxwell, and for co-star Sarah Smuts-Kennedy, whose acting career stalled. *Jack Be Nimble* dropped off the map. But interest was preserved by piracy and a small, loyal cadre of cult fans. Finally, the worm turned, and it was picked up by queer distribution house Altered Innocence, who supported a restoration and re-release. At the same time, it was championed by Ron Magliozzi, Curator in the Department of Film at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), who included it in his showcase *Horror: Messaging the Monstrous* at the Museum earlier this year.

As far as Aotearoa New Zealand films go, there are few more deserving of a reappraisal. *Jack Be Nimble* is shot through with expressionistic flair. Maxwell conjures images of everyday beauty and otherworldly eeriness with aplomb. The film is this country's closest answer to David Lynch, scratching the sunny surface of our

Dir. Garth Maxwell *Jack Be Nimble* 1993.

suburban exterior to expose the darkness beneath. Some of this is achieved because of the excellent performances from the cast. Arquette—transgender icon and member of a Hollywood acting family, who passed in 2016—is an exposed nerve of anger and vulnerability. Arquette is ably matched by Smuts-Kennedy, as heroic and tough as she is soft and fragile. In one of his final performances, Bruno Lawrence rounds out the cast as Dora's lover and psychic mentor, while Elizabeth Hawthorne is terrifying as Jack's monstrous adoptive mother.

With the renewed interest and action, Maxwell and Smuts-Kennedy are happy to see the film finally get its moment in the sun, a chance to be considered among the very best of this country's cinematic offerings.

Tom Augustine: Tell me about your career leading up to *Jack Be Nimble*.

Garth Maxwell: I grew up on Auckland's North Shore. I made a short film with Simon Marler, *Come with Us* (1983), featuring forward and backward refilming of dance images. Later, I made an impressionistic black-and-white short, *Tandem* (1986), with sound designer Greg Brice. In it, I experimented with filmic ways of depicting unreal states using optical printing and front projection. It won the inaugural Gofta short-film prize. I had started an MA, but couldn't be bothered, and left university to go into the cutting room as a trainee editor. I left editing to direct *Beyond Gravity* (1989), a one-hour gay love story. Then two interesting, energetic young producers, Jonathan Dowling and Kelly Rogers, were looking for a project. They were supported by John Barnett and Murray Newey at Endeavour Tucker. This group of producers, emerging and established, had support and goodwill behind them, which I think gave them confidence to back this unusual project. And that's where *Jack Be Nimble* found a home.

Was *Jack Be Nimble* a product of talks with them or did you bring it to them?

Garth Maxwell: It was my story, which I already had. I put it together quickly. The characters, the story arc, and everything. Then I brought on my friend Rex Pilgrim as a co-writer. He wasn't a film person, but he was extremely literate, had a sense of the dramatic, and supported my perversions.

Sarah Smuts-Kennedy: I did my first film when I was fourteen. Then, after drama school, I had this intense trajectory of films. I'd been in Jane Campion's *An Angel at My Table* (1990) and Leon Narbey's *The Footstep Man* (1991), and I'd had television appearances. By the time I auditioned for *Jack Be Nimble*, I had runs on the board and I anticipated I'd get the role. But something special happened for Garth and me in the audition. We really connected. We got each other. I got what he wanted. It was exciting to have somebody who was so present to the performance.

The film is striking for a number of reasons, but the cruelty—Jack and Dora's suffering and the suffering they inflict on others—is so acute. Garth, was there something you drew that from?

Garth Maxwell: It came out of two things. Firstly, I'm gay and had to come out to my parents, and it was brutal. I was expelled from my family. Good, got it. So, this was my revenge. Secondly, while I saw the Homosexual Law Reform Bill go through, I'd also seen the hatred directed not only at gay people but at a whole range of people. I had a friend who had been whipped with barbed wire. Welcome to New Zealand. That all got directed into the film. It was my fairy-tale translation of that. Also, I'd come from doing *Beyond Gravity*, which was a nice, polite gay love story, but was promptly shelved by the investor. We finally got it on air. But my experience of doing a palatable piece of romance was bruising. So my response was: 'Fuck you, I'm going the other way, I'm going dark and hard. And, yes, it'll be artful and lush, but I'm not going to muck around.'

Ron, how did you and MoMA become involved?

Ron Magliozzi: During the 2020 pandemic lockdown, I worked from home for seven months. I spent more time than ever on my sofa in a state of distress, watching the news and films on cable, comedies first. Around October, horror films were resonating with me. They seemed relevant, with their fictional experiences merging with what was happening in the real world. Horror filmmakers were voicing concerns about the state of the world they shared with their audiences. For MoMA, I proposed the show *Horror: Messaging the Monstrous* shortly after, then began watching horror films non-stop. There were 469 titles on our master list and we met weekly to discuss and shape the series. I wasn't aware of *Jack Be Nimble* before coming across a description of it in a book, *Fangoria's 101 Best Horror Movies You've Never Seen: A Celebration of the*

World's Most Unheralded Fright Flicks (2003). I discovered a muddy-looking copy of the film on YouTube and realised I'd hit gold. With the virtuosity of the filmmaking, it was pitch perfect. Script, casting, performances, locations, production design, costuming, and music were all in harmony. As a horror film, its vision was singular and rooted in issues of gender. Learning that Altered Innocence had just restored it and was releasing it on Blu-Ray was a stroke of luck. We had worked with their head, Frank Jaffe, on the restoration of films by the legendary gay filmmaker Fred Halsted, and he gave us Garth's contacts. Some things are meant to be.

What do you credit the film's re-emergence to? Greater interest in queer stories?

Sarah Smuts-Kennedy: There's no question, although it's hard to call it a queer story, even if it was written by two gay men, and one of the leads is Alexis. Thirty years ago, people didn't like the way it 'genre hopped', but that's why it's endured. It doesn't feel dated. It's stylish, in a way particular to itself. Garth has held the flame for the film. He's got us together multiple times since, to record our stories. He sensed that the film would be revisited and was prepared.

Garth Maxwell: The film retains its power. Its purpose was to deliver an intense visceral experience. It was lush, confident, and intense in every way I could go for—emotionally, visually, cinematically. It's been criticised for genre hopping, but the genre aspects feel secure when you're watching it. I'd like to think I could make something with a similar energy now.

***Jack Be Nimble* parallels other films of that era, like David Lynch's *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (1992), which similarly conflates transcendence and suffering. It's the beauty within suffering.**

Garth Maxwell: That's what I was aiming for. Lynch was a touchstone. In *Jack Be Nimble*, I took that sense of temporal suspension from him—holding shots for longer than you would expect. I used a zoom lens a lot; slow zooms that keep creeping forward.

Like when the camera zooms in through the windshield on Dora as she's having a vision of her mother, and then when she's lying in bed and her head turns away to the curtain. Those moments become quite uncanny.

Garth Maxwell: Donny Duncan shot the film. He was less enthusiastic about the zoom. He always felt it was a poor man's dolly move. For me, it's not. The zoom has its own logic. It's like you're being pulled forward by a magnet, drawn in. It's one of the reasons those Italian giallo horror films of the 1970s are so effective. Then the zoom was new, and, if its use now seems dated, I'll take those associations anyway. I love the zoom. Donny did an exquisite job and at speed. He deserves recognition for the film's lovely rich look. It was shot on 16mm, with smaller cameras, quicker to move.

I'm fascinated by the editing. There are moments when you hold for a long time and moments when you cut a few seconds before it feels you should. It creates this unsettled rhythm that keeps viewers on their toes.

Garth Maxwell: That's the editor John Gilbert, who's an Oscar winner. I had a few super talents on that crew.

***Jack Be Nimble* fits within the 'New Zealand gothic' subgenre of the time, but it still feels distinct to me, because it's so expressionistic and surreal.**

Garth Maxwell: Working with Grant Major (production designer), Jackie Gilmore (art director), and Ngila Dixon (wardrobe), we moved it out of a recognisable twentieth-century design, towards an unplaceable Victorian one, with subdued dowdy florals, long hair, and grotesque trees. It had fairy-tale aspects. I was influenced by Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Rackham, his illustrator—those fearful tableaux with shadow and wind.

Where does the film sit in the modern gothic-horror canon? Is it a queer film?

Ron Magliozzi: Garth's personal history and queer identity shaped the film. But what continues to make it so relevant is its focus on gender roles in the context of the family. The film satirises and rejects traditional, socially sanctioned notions of the family, and suggests there are other models for what family could be. What makes it work as horror is the way it exaggerates the family theme in gothic ways that are frighteningly close to reality. Toxic masculinity and toxic femininity and the extreme behaviour that results from them—emotional and physical violence, self-harm, bullying, sexism, child abuse, and so on—are themes that fuel and recur in the horror film today.

Garth Maxwell: It was as much to do with Alexis as me. Alexis was Hollywood royalty. Back then Alexis was not very well known, but now there's a lot of interest in their legacy. Their identity had been shifting throughout their whole career. For the film, that point of contact has strengthened over time.

Ron Magliozzi: Garth, Sarah, and Alexis brought personal experiences of pain to their work on the film. The conflict Alexis channels through their performance is a revelation. In retrospect, looking at the whole of Alexis's complicated, up-and-down history on screen, *Jack Be Nimble* should be recognised and celebrated as a prime example of the non-binary performance art they pioneered and practised.

Sarah Smuts-Kennedy: Alexis was an incredible actor. They were similar to me in not being scared of the shadows, and having a real capacity to bring an elegance to the ugliest aspects of human emotion. We looked uncannily similar and were able to match each other energetically. They were a sweetie. Alexis had such an intense and beautiful relationship with their real-life sisters, so they were able to bring the recall of this special sibling relationship to the film. I have a brother, too, who I'm close to.

Watching it the other day—the scene where Jack steps on the waitress's neck—I was crying. I was moved by this incredible scene and the amount of pain Alexis channels.

Garth Maxwell: With Alexis, you know they're in for all the right reasons. They're there to make the work as strong as it can be. It's not about vanity, it's not about moderating the material, it's about going further. The scenes as written were ignited by their blow-torch talent. With Alexis, we never really spoke about pain. We didn't need to.

I understand the incest subtext became more prominent than it was in the original script.

Garth Maxwell: We were lucky with the chemistry of the actors. Alexis and Sarah took the incestuous brother–sister thread and pushed it further. There's that scene in the gas-station bathroom where they almost seem to kiss. They worked up to that point, and I was so grateful to them for intensifying that moment of confusion, where both are on the verge of exploiting what would be a mistaken energy. But they weren't lovers, they were brother and sister, so they couldn't go there.

Sarah Smuts-Kennedy: For me, the films worth watching are ultimately about love. We had to bring an intensity to the love aspect in order for people to come on board with a story that is essentially horrific. Jack and Dora are magnetised to each other through love. You could call it incestuous, but they didn't know each other. So there's a confusion, because the relationship is so multidimensional and deep. You could call it incest, but they're really exploring deep love. That's what makes the film watchable years later.

Sarah, this is one of Bruno Lawrence's final performances and you share some powerful scenes with him. How did you achieve the tense, intimate feeling with him throughout the film?

Sarah Smuts-Kennedy: Obviously we have sex scenes—'intimacy scenes', we call them now. We had no intimacy coaches back then, so we met about it before the film started, and I remember asking Bruno, 'What's your process?' But Bruno's process is being Bruno. He just *is* Bruno. He'd say, 'Look Sarah, I don't act.' And that's his genius. It was negotiating him not acting and me acting.

Was he as much of a screen legend then as he is now?

Sarah Smuts-Kennedy: You couldn't get a more popular icon than Bruno. It didn't matter where you were, anyone who saw him was like, 'Bruno!' And he'd be like, 'Mate!' He was so open to the world. He was very sweet.

In the film, he's a bit caddish at times, but also a soothing presence.

Garth Maxwell: He works both sides of the line. He's a plausible erotic lead. He was quite sexy looking, and, when he gets his kit off, he's got a great bod. His eyes and voice are very matinee idol. The age difference was important, and I love the energy around the potential for him to exploit this young woman—and he didn't shy from it. He's a father figure, but one who alternates between being a comforting home base for the drama to spiral around and another source of danger. I originally thought of his character as a decrepit fringe dweller, skulking in the shadows. But we quickly realised that wasn't helping us to lift Sarah's character. If he was just a basket case, meeting him wouldn't help her step out of her shadow.

I'm glad you went in that direction. It tools into Bruno's allure.

Garth Maxwell: And people want to see him as a sexy guy. I did.

The four sisters are terrifying. There's the shot of young Jack pulling up at the new house and the four sisters are standing out in front, and they're dirty. It sends a shiver up my spine.

Garth Maxwell: They're the four sisters of the apocalypse. They didn't even get names, just numbers. They had to be all sisters, because they're the reason for Jack being snatched by the farming couple. They hadn't completed their family building. They needed a male. And the male had to conform to this required role, which he resisted.

Why the dirtiness?

Garth Maxwell: They were creatures of the mud, matted and sinister. They were a subset of Elizabeth Hawthorne's character—her kittens. We used cat screams for their voices when they're being decimated by Sarah's psychic storm at the end.

Throughout the film, you return to visual metaphors, like the fluttering curtain in the house.

Garth Maxwell: I tried to build a library of metaphorical fluttering images, like the trees, the curtains, and the screens we used to create lighting effects. They related to Jack's hypnotism machine and the idea of strobing having a triggering effect, like with epilepsy. Those are Jack's tools. You have to do a bit of work to make links. We don't explain the genesis of Jack's hypnosis machine, but the suggestion is that it was born in the moment of the family's collapse, with childhood memories of windblown flashing blinds in a dark room. We don't explain his facility at metalwork. We don't explain why Dora's adoptive mother is suddenly blind or where her husband's gone. These are just given. I feel okay about that, because laboriously explaining everything doesn't add energy, but it can suck it out. The rough edges benefit the project.

I wish that there was more willingness to allow for rough edges nowadays.

Garth Maxwell: It's a problem. These well-meaning, but quite average script editors step in. And they're just working through a checklist of fashionable contemporary story processing. And for what purpose? It's often destructive.

The film's ending is obviously open to interpretation, but I'm interested in what you intended.

Garth Maxwell: I wanted to leave people reeling. In an earlier scene Dora tells Jack, 'I can't give you a second childhood.' And he shouts, 'Why not?' It's outrageous. But the film has its own natural laws. Pregnancy is accelerated and subversive. Dora knows she's pregnant immediately, and to a powerful psychic. The child is a product of these two powerful, mysterious people. At the point of his death, she draws Jack in. She knows something strange has happened and she calls out to her mother, who she can psychically connect with at that moment as well. There's a sort of crossroads in that moment of death. She can give her brother a second childhood. And her mother is disturbed by that, but Dora reassures her that it's okay because things have changed. So we present it as a harmonious resolution, but it's disturbing and strange. She's carrying her own brother. Weird.

Sarah Smuts-Kennedy: I wouldn't have done the film without the ending. I wouldn't have been so interested if they just killed him and she killed them. For me, the story arc is really important, and the film is literally one arc. People weren't writing sequels in those days, but it does set itself up for one. And now Garth is interested in writing a sequel. He was pretty angry at that time, but now he's peaceful. That moment at the end of the film talks of two forces, fear and love—which will win? Garth unwittingly creates a moment where love potentially has the possibility to win. So I'm really interested to see, thirty years later, what kind of sequel he will write.

You had a hiatus from filmmaking. Why?

Garth Maxwell: I maxed out on the whole thing. I'd done so much TV. I needed to do other things for a while. I had an interesting few years bus driving, working in a paint shop, all sorts of weird little jobs. But filmmaking is home for me, and it's what I'm moving back to. I'm interested in doing a sequel and Sarah is up for it. I feel like I'm offered this incredible moment where I can pivot from doing a sequel that is a literal continuation of the first film to something that has a looser relationship to it.

Sarah Smuts-Kennedy: We've discussed a sequel. I have the opportunity to contemplate whether or not I want to act again, which is funny after so long. I have a very beautiful career now as an artist. It was hard for me that my acting career didn't happen the way that I hoped, but otherwise it would never have unfolded to where I'm at now. With a sequel, it's like: Oh Jesus, what are we getting ourselves into!

Garth, you recently reconnected with your mother, before she passed.

Garth Maxwell: Things have changed for me since my mum died, just a month ago. She was religious, so that was part of her issues with my coming out. But I refused to let that early difficulty define us. We worked through it, for my own benefit as much as hers. It was as good as it could be. Things improved. Maybe her core feelings about homosexuality never changed, but, if she wanted access and support, she learnt she had to cede control. At the end, we did a lot of things together, like gardening and travelling. I became focused on her wellbeing, keeping her positive and moving. But now there's more space in my life.

That's a beautiful capstone to the pain of this film.

Garth Maxwell: I wasn't happy to be left in a fractured situation like that. I'll always use my anger issues to motivate my art, but you need to bring something else to it, and you need to move on in your choice of subject. Now I've got this opportunity to reorientate and look to my filmmaking again. We'll see where it goes.