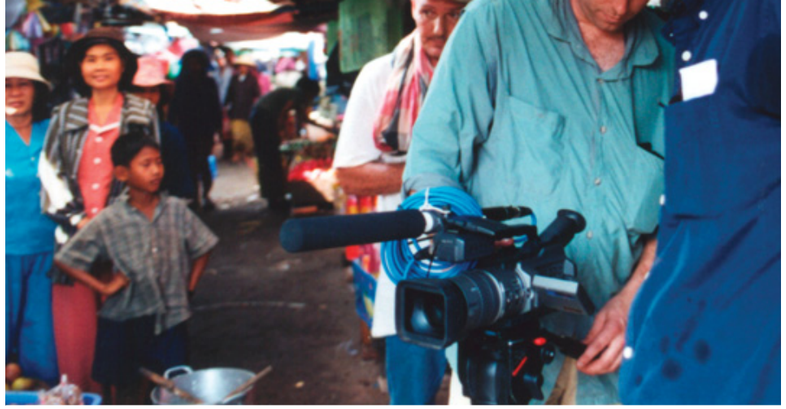
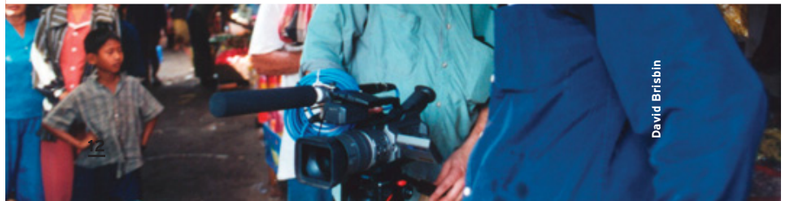


Below the Line



David Brisbin

At the time of writing, David Brisbin's latest project, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, was already generating buzz on the online discussion boards and movie sites. Anticipated as a genuinely intelligent horror film, it is expected to boost the career of its director, Scott Derrickson, and showcase standout performances from its leads, Laura Linney and Tom Wilkinson.

Brisbin's work as the production designer will play a pivotal role in the audience's perception of the film, but he will receive little or no credit for its critical or commercial success. In fact, most people who see it won't know that he exists.

Brisbin is responsible for designing some of the most interesting and original – if not the most commercially successful – movies of the last 20 years. His credits include *Drugstore Cowboy*, the film that marked Matt Dillon as the archetype of alternative cool, and *My Own Private Idaho*, a picture almost as famous for its strikingly beautiful design as it is for River Phoenix's best performance. Even the less critically acclaimed films on his Internet Movie Database listing – the Hughes brothers' *Dead Presidents* and Jane Campion's *In the Cut*, to name two – have received significant kudos for the way they look.

Being a production designer requires a combination of artistic vision and near-fanatical attention to detail. But Brisbin had less lofty reasons for his career

TEXT BY DANIEL GIBBONS; IMAGES BY DAVID BRISBIN

choice of first art direction and subsequently production design: "I needed a job after film school and there were few jobs to be had in writing or direction."

Production designers also require a certain lack of ego. Ask average moviegoers what a production designer does, and few will be able to answer. They are even less likely to know that the production designer typically manages the most people and the largest budget of any other individual on set.

Brisbin speaks often of the "below- the-line community," the dozens, sometimes hundreds, of names in the credits most of us don't bother to read as the lights come on and we leave the theatre. Unlike the stars, the majority of these people don't experience vast commercial success and celebrity. Their lives may be less mundane by virtue of their association with Hollywood, but mostly they are ordinary people with kids, mortgages and no healthcare benefits or job security. These people are almost entirely separated from the real engine that drives mainstream cinema: the deal-making that, as in any other industry, seeks the highest returns from its investments. That the film industry's product is always at some level creative and most of the below-the-line community signed up for this reason alone makes the process that much more poignant.

A career that is both very challenging and not publicly rewarding is fitting for Brisbin, and goes some way in explaining his dedication to another project, one in which he has made considerable personal and financial investment without the expectation of commercial success or celebrity.

Brisbin has recently completed his first full-length film, a documentary feature about Cambodia. In it, the motif of the hat is used to trace the history of a country known to outsiders only in fragments (the brutalities of the Khmer Rouge, most likely learned through a couple viewings of Roland Joffe's *The Killing Fields*, for example). The hat is significant for Brisbin because "it carries such political and cultural baggage, and it's attached to the face" – the ideal device through which to explore stories about history and culture. The film is called, appropriately enough, *Nice Hat: Five Enigmas in the Life of Cambodia*, and Brisbin is its writer, director and narrator.

Nice Hat sounds impossibly obscure at first, but that's part of the point: through this film, and a planned series of others, Brisbin hopes to challenge our collective ignorance about the part of the world that doesn't fit into the five-second sound bites of modern news media.

But it's not obscurity for its own sake. Rather, in the case of Cambodia, there is simply so much to be learned from times before, during and after the Khmer Rouge, about colonialism and Western foreign policy in the post-colonial world, about the lives of real people, rather than the caricatures of poverty or exoticism we occasionally see on TV. As Brisbin says, in this age of globalization "nobody wants to get to know the neighbours."

Brisbin's first experiences of Cambodia were as a reporter visiting refugee camps on the border of Thailand in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror. More recently, he designed Matt Dillon's directorial debut, *City of Ghosts*, which was filmed on location in Cambodia and whose backdrop touched on many of the themes that are front and centre in *Nice Hat*. It was after *City of Ghosts* that Brisbin decided he simply had to make his film, which is now in post-production.

Watching the film, the lasting impression is one of a commitment to telling a story because it needed to be told, rather than because it is one that is particularly sellable. From the 12th-century temples of Angkor Wat to the killing fields and their aftermath, to modern-day hat makers in Phnom Penh surviving amid fierce competition from Chinese industry, Brisbin's narrative is resolutely about the extent to which Cambodia today originates from a vital and fascinating history, and that this history requires much more than superficial treatment. That the film is eminently watchable and engaging is a tribute to Brisbin's skill at telling a complex story at least as much as it is to the charisma of 16-year-old Ven Vern (who also likes to call himself James Bond), the on-screen narrator for the film's opening chapters.

The highlights of Brisbin's life and career at times read themselves like a movie script, some kind of boy's own adventure. Life as a child in Derry, Northern Ireland, film school at the California Institute for the Arts, work as a reporter covering the collapse of the Marcos regime in the Philippines. He has also worked in apartheid-bound South Africa, poverty-stricken Haiti and militarized Guatemala. All these experiences have contributed to his sense not merely of the world's persistent injustices, but also the humanity that exists among those living in political and economic conditions unknown to most of us in the comfortable West.

As Brisbin puts it: "There is a perception out there of disaster countries. It is dangerous, because it is a depersonalization that puts populations at risk. No country has been relegated more severely to this list than Cambodia. And now, at the moment when it is in regeneration mode, is a time to reconsider the before, during and after."

Another topic that comes up time and time again in conversation with Brisbin is the terrifying, overwhelming

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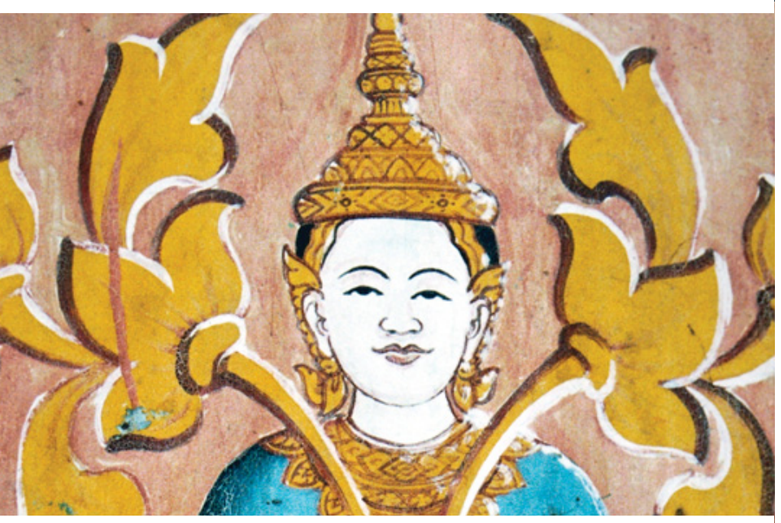

odds that face any filmmaker looking to raise money and find distribution. If you don't have a friend who's making his own film or writing a screenplay, you're almost certain to have a friend who knows someone who is. It's two degrees of separation, not six.

Documentary filmmakers, recognizing how important the festival circuit is to the success of their films, might initially be reassured to discover that in 2004's Sundance Film Festival, a record 46 of the 137 full-length features screened were documentaries. Unfortunately, those 46 films were selected from 2023 entries. In the Documentary category, just 16 were chosen from 624 entries. Even a screening at Sundance doesn't guarantee mainstream distribution. At best, perhaps 10 of the successful entries will make it to theatres, few if any of them documentaries.

Documentaries, one might think from the box office success of *Super Size Me, Fahrenheit 9/11, The Yes Men* and countless others, are enjoying a renaissance. Films that would once have been confined to art house cinemas are showing up at suburban multiplexes. The reality is in some respects nothing more than an extension of the reality TV phenomenon. The documentaries we see in theatres are not so much stories as they are series after series of shocking and provocative vignettes in which the persona of the filmmaker dominates the proceedings. Some make serious and interesting points, and many avoid easy sensationalism, but they are a very different product from the films Brisbin is interested in making. They are by their very nature populist, fleeting and consumable; most of all, they are "real" stories used to support the opinions of their creators, rather than reveal wider truths about the world in which we live.

In facing these odds while remaining committed to making a film that seeks to educate its audience, Brisbin is candid about his lack of marketing savvy. His comment about the conventional process of making a film – pitching an idea and placing it into "development" – is particularly revealing in its irony: "Creativity dies the day development begins."

The odds that *Nice Hat* will be seen by millions in movie theatres around the globe are slim to say the least. At the same time, there's no doubting Brisbin's belief that it will in the end be enough to have done a very good job of telling an important story. If his film succeeds for these reasons, it should give hope to us all._OL

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