

– ARTICLE –

## Storytelling for Our Own People: A Reflection on Working with Māori Filmmaker Barry Barclay

*Christina Milligan*

### **Abstract**

Māori film director and writer Barry Barclay is recognized among international indigenous filmmakers as a foundational figure. As a philosopher and a filmmaker, he was fierce in pursuit of what he saw to be tika, that which is true, upright and just. He worked in an often expensive, always collaborative medium, and his unwillingness to compromise was sometimes seen as intransigence. He was thus frequently at odds, not just with mainstream film funders and distributors, but also with some of his compatriots in the world of Māori filmmaking. Yet from my perspective as a producer working with him late in his career, the process of developing a screenplay with him was a constructive, deeply creative experience where disagreements were always focused on enhancing the work itself. While he is best known as a film director, this article is a practice-led exploration of his work as a screenwriter as revealed through two film scripts we worked on in the years between 1995 and 2007. It discusses his process as a screenwriter on these films, exploring his strengths as a writer while also placing these two projects within the wider frame of his complete oeuvre.

### **Introduction**

Barry Barclay (1944-2008) was a screenwriter and director whose philosophical drive as a storyteller was grounded in his own whakapapa as a descendant of Ngāti Apa. His debut feature *Ngāti* (1987) was easily accessible to mainstream, non-indigenous audiences, and it remains his most popular and best-known work. However, his subsequent trajectory as a storyteller in both drama and documentary steered more and more towards a rejection of compromise with the expectations of mainstream audiences, as he became increasingly politicised in both the content and the methods of his filmmaking. Barclay laid out a theoretical framework for indigenous filmmaking that he named Fourth Cinema, in writings and public debate from the late 1980s through to

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Christina Milligan is a film producer, screenwriter and lecturer at Auckland University of Technology. She is a descendant of Ngāti Porou, and her industry work is focused principally on Māori storytelling, as reflected in her most recent credits as executive producer of the feature film *Mt Zion* (2013) and the producer of the feature documentary *The Price of Peace* (2015).

the mid-2000s (1988, 1990, 2003a, 2003b). In principle, he argued that the control of indigenous image-making must be in the hands of indigenous people themselves. He saw community as the pivot of all Māori endeavour and sought to apply this to filmmaking, not only in terms of content and the filmmaking process but also in terms of reception, arguing, ‘... if we as indigenous story-tellers become hell-bent on satisfying the mass audiences and the commercial barons ... we may cease to be storytellers for our own people’ (Barclay 2003b, 15). Barclay is here summarising one of his principal concerns, the consuming influence of the commercial imperative in cinema. As Stuart Murray points out, ‘The tendency such a system possesses to commodify its images is obvious, and the consequent evacuation of cultural specificity is exactly the threat ... Barclay sees in the packaging of indigenous images’ (2008, 19).

However, while Barclay’s Fourth Cinema thesis was a validation of indigenous experience, it was not a rejection of other cinematic practices. He was the first to recognize the danger of prescription, and from his early theorising, he wrestled with the complexity of the arguments he was putting forward. In *Our Own Image*, he comments,

A Māori film might be very violent, or frivolous. Māori films might deal with incest, robbery, or love under the apple tree – who is to say? A Māori film might have nothing whatsoever to do with what both Māori and Pākehā are pleased to think of as ‘the Māori style of life’. (Barclay 1990, 20)

It is with this in mind that this paper discusses the scripts of two feature film projects Barclay wrote later in his career. As a film producer, I worked with him on both projects and I discuss the screenplays from this experience of close collaboration. For a variety of reasons, neither film went into production but both scripts – *It Was Darkness* and *The Man Who Said No* – offer illumination of the complexity of his thinking on cinema. Specifically they illustrate his skill as a screenwriter and how he brought that skill to bear on the dramatic questions which lay behind much of his work.

### **Screenplay Development and the Screenwriter**

In the work of developing screenplays, there are as many different ways for the process to be conducted as there are writers and producers. Usually the writer will produce a treatment, which is a detailed prose summary of the plot (Aronson 2000, 279). They will then write a succession of drafts, with discussion and feedback from a producer at each stage, until the script is ready for a director to be attached, which is effectively the first step towards actually making the film. It is not unusual for a script consultant or script editor to be engaged, especially if the producer lacks the necessary skills to be of use to the writer as sounding board, critic, mentor and emotional support. In my own practice, I have a history as a writer and script editor as well as a producer (Conbrio Media 2017; NZ On Screen 2017), so on both these projects, I was able to work directly with Barclay.

The screenwriter is an odd mix of poet and virtual engineer. The best have a poet's ability to bring images alive on the page, married with the ability to develop a structure on which a large and varied team, from the director and actors to the designer, editor and composer, can work their magic to create the actual film. When the screenwriter sets out to write a screenplay, he or she is in pursuit of an 'idea', a notion of what the finished film will look, feel and sound like. As Ian Macdonald notes, 'the screen idea is invisible ... [it] exists in the minds of all of those involved in its production ... though of course it can never be exactly the same idea' (2013, 5). This speaks to the mutability of the development process and the difficulty of the screenwriter's position: while the screenplay is a record of the screen idea as the writer interprets it, the screenplay itself is not the end of the creative process but only the beginning. As the foundation document, the feature screenplay generally follows a specific technical layout, yet within that a good screenplay offers an immersive experience, enabling the reader, as Pier Paolo Pasolini discussed, to 'construct the potential film in his or her mind' (Inglestrom 2014, 30). On both the projects discussed here, Barclay was working towards that immersive experience. Neither project reached that stage but both offer insights into his craft and his dramatic thinking.

### ***It Was Darkness***

In January 1996, the Auckland-based production company which I co-owned, TopStory Productions, signed an agreement with Barclay giving us an option on his screenplay *It Was Darkness* (TopStory 1996). He and I had already been working together on the project for several months, after he approached me to see if I would be interested in producing the film. It was a conspiracy story inspired by the worldwide indigenous response to the Human Genome Diversity Project (HGDP). The HGDP (not to be confused with the Human Genome Project) is a very large international scientific project designed to collect biological samples from a variety of population groups to establish a database of human genetic diversity. Given its aim of collecting and storing blood and tissue samples, the HGDP ran into fierce opposition from indigenous peoples from early on (Mataatua Declaration 1993; Mead 1996). A story based on such an issue, which spoke to the heart of indigenous activism and which was coming from a filmmaker with unquestionable commitment to the indigenous viewpoint, offered the possibility of an original and intriguing film.

*It Was Darkness* is a political thriller, an international story set among the Tūhoe people in New Zealand and the Pitjantjatjara people of the Central Australian desert. It centers around a modern dance troupe who travel from their spiritual home in the Urewera to tour throughout Australia. The dancers' creative drive is political and their performances evolve to include both spiritual and political commentary relevant to the Aboriginal tribes they are travelling among. The troupe become caught up in a major smuggling operation, which is revealed to be using their tour as a cover to transport crates of body tissues. This material is stolen from indigenous peoples in Indonesia and countries further north and is being trafficked to a North American black market via

Australia and New Zealand. The dancers use the performance in Alice Springs at the climax of the film to blow the cover on the smuggling operation. The local people, assisting them, ensure that the worst of the traffickers is left alone with his awful contraband to die of thirst in the desert.

My work with Barclay on the film required many hours of discussion and, in the days before emails were common, letters and faxes with written feedback. On occasion, he came and lived in a small apartment above our garage in Auckland, and as we had been friends for many years, the relationship was more relaxed than some professional relationships, though this does not imply any less rigorous. The work was spread over a period from late 1995 to mid-1997. It was funded by the New Zealand Film Commission through our company's Producer Operated Development Scheme, and included supporting Barclay on a research trip to central Australia, when he decided to shift the original setting of the story from Canada to Australia. In the development period we spent together, Barclay redeveloped the story to incorporate the Australian setting, working through several drafts of the film's treatment and producing a first draft of the complete screenplay. In late 1997, my family decided to move to Australia and the production company was closed down, so with Barclay's agreement, we passed the project on to another New Zealand producer. A rule of thumb among filmmakers worldwide is that only one screenplay in ten succeeds in being put into production (Bloore 2014, 80), and regrettably *It Was Darkness* did not prove to be the one in ten. As a film, it remains unmade. As a screenplay, it is a valuable window into the interval in Barclay's filmmaking career between the long line of his most productive period from 1972 to 1991, and his last two films, *The Feathers of Peace* (2000) and *The Kaipara Affair* (2005).

The draft of the screenplay completed in 1997 is 235 pages long, roughly twice the length of the average screenplay. It does not conform to the standard technical layout of a screenplay and in fact Barclay was still calling it a treatment. It resembles more a cross between a novel and a screenplay, with very detailed visual description and much of the dialogue included. There are a large number of major characters, the plot is extremely convoluted and it is not satisfactorily resolved. For all this, it has what Barbara Masel and Cory Taylor call the screenwriter's 'capacity to surprise [that] we experience as originality' (2011, 122). The characters come alive on the page, the action is absorbing, and the scene-setting is masterful, from the humid forests of Te Urewera to the chilly board-rooms of Auckland and Adelaide, to the pitching deck of the freighter carrying the contraband across the Timor Sea, to the scorching red earth of the Australian desert. An extract from a scene called 'A Meeting of Traitors' gives the flavour. In it, Canadian arts festival director Donald Hanning and a New Zealand Pākehā undercover agent meet with an Aboriginal police liaison Yarrin:

There are vehicles parked back in the dark, Yarrin is ready to leave.

He looks appreciatively at Donald: 'May your ancestors deal kindly with you'.

'And yours with you.'

Yarrin bursts out laughing: 'At least you can escape yours. Mine – they're all around. No escape!' He waves in a restrained way, so do the Aborigines with him, it's like a salute, and straight away they're gone. Donald stands staring into the dark after them.

'I could have quizzed him on where he's going, couldn't I? I could have said to him, "What is your next step, your next move?" "Lay your cards on the table – or else!" What do you think, John? Should I have done something like that?'

But who is there to do the answering to that sort of question so far out here on these remnant soils, soils ground and compacted and swept barren over millennia, soils sometimes under tropical forest, sometimes under glacier, soils hoisted as high as the Canadian Rockies, buried under billions of tonnes of salt-rich water, soils stubborn and dried and drained – and almost eternal. Donald turns to go back to the caravan, taking John with him. Behind them, it's blackfella business. (1997, 207-208)

This last paragraph is not conventional screenwriting. Such lengthy description slows down the reader's progress in following the action. Yet this dense, poetic style, consistent throughout the screenplay, achieves the goal of bringing alive in the reader's mind the look, the smell, the taste of the landscape in a story where landscape imbues the characters and action with a rich sub-textual depth, something which is hardly original in terms of filmmaking but not usually spelt out in such detail in a screenplay. As Masel and Taylor note, 'A screenplay is a personal investigation in which the writer publicly tests a private version of experience' (2011, 122), so it is no surprise that Barclay explores the landscape in this way. The landscape itself in a sense becomes a character as the outback desert, where most of the action occurs, exerts an inescapable pressure on how the action unfolds and ultimately becomes the weapon of justice as the villain meets his fate.

As a story of indigenous activism, *It Was Darkness* can be seen to correspond strongly to Barclay's earlier film, *The Neglected Miracle* (1985). A feature documentary, *The Neglected Miracle* was well ahead of its time in terms of its content. It explored 'the geopolitics of the genetic resources needed to sustain our major crops' (Barclay, n.d.) and in the film Barclay brought his indigenous worldview to an exploration of the developing international concern regarding the patenting of seeds. The film ranges from Central and South America to Europe to outback Australia as it explores how seeds harvested from indigenous crops are genetically modified by Western companies and how the subsequent patenting of the new genetic strains requires the indigenous

owners of the base material effectively to pay for what was originally theirs. As Angela Moewaka Barnes notes, 'Barclay's articulation of genetic exploitation was visionary and expressed indigenous and Māori struggles before the full significance was realised' (2011, 193). Writing about *The Neglected Miracle* in 1992, Barclay himself said, 'the film becomes a metaphor about control among nations of the very guts of life - plants - but by implication, the metaphor speaks of control of many kinds' (1992, 121-122). With its focus on the exploitation of human genetic material, *It Was Darkness* takes this concern over control of resources to an even darker place.

Another of Barclay's films, the dramatic feature *Te Rua* (1991), offers strong resonances with *It Was Darkness* in its thematic and character concerns. *Te Rua* is a complex political story of a group of activists seeking the return of misappropriated Māori taonga from a Berlin museum. Like *Te Rua*, *It Was Darkness* sets up a group of characters in pursuit of a common goal but with varied, often conflicting motives, which are sometimes far more selfish than any of them will admit. In this, both narratives can be seen as more sophisticated than the better-known *Ngāti* (1987), in the range and complexity with which Barclay sets the characters against one another, even as they pursue a common dream. In *It Was Darkness*, it is revealed that the trafficking of the stolen genetic material is being organized by a group of operatives acting with the secret compliance of a consortium of Western governments. Thus, like both *The Neglected Miracle* and *Te Rua*, *It Was Darkness* has at its heart the anger Barclay was driven to express at his perception of the historical and ongoing lack of justice indigenous people experience at the hands of officialdom. Where the screenplay diverged from both its antecedents, however, was in its structure.

*It Was Darkness* is a thriller and the thriller is a genre with some quite specific requirements: the audience must be kept constantly in a state of suspense, with each story element taking them by surprise while pushing the plot relentlessly forward. In this case, William Goldman's dictum 'screenplays are structure' (1983, 195) holds true, for without a correctly-plotted structure, the thriller will not achieve the desired impact on the audience, no matter how interesting the characters and intriguing the set-up. We were to find, as the work progressed, that the technical requirements of such a structure were the hardest writing problem to grapple with. The fact that the film was a *political* thriller, however, offered fertile ground for us to make a film which might attract an audience, for while this genre remains rare in the New Zealand film canon, it has proven commercial appeal. This meant that from a producer's point of view, the film might be able to attract the funding we would need to get it made.

Barclay had been through a bruising experience with the release of *Te Rua*, which he said was 'universally loathed outside Māoridom' (quoted in Murray 2008, 77). It is possible, though we never discussed it, that this may have influenced his decision to pursue developing a story that on the face of it took a far more mainstream approach to its plot. Murray comments of *Te Rua* that questions of accessibility must be seen 'in the light of its technical aspects and the structural nature of the narrative' and he notes that

‘it is a confusing film to watch’ (ibid., p77). With the screenplay of *It Was Darkness*, the plot may be difficult to follow, but, given that it is effectively a first draft, this is not surprising: first drafts are explorations, when the writer is still near the start of the journey towards the eventual film. Whether and how Barclay would have resolved the structure had we moved forward one can only surmise. However, the fact that he was pursuing a genre structure at all I see from this distance as a reflection of Murray’s perceptive comment about *Ngāti*, where he writes of Barclay’s ‘process of ventriloquism, by which certain radical ideas about iwi and community are contained within a narrative that appears to suggest more conformist opinions’ (2008, 8). In notes I exchanged with Barclay during the writing period, I quoted back to him his story intentions as he had described them: he wished to ‘tell a story of a young woman who effectively uses her position within a clandestine operation set up by a multi-government agreement, to take revenge on the white police state which contributes to the denigration of her people’ (fax to Barclay, 25 April, 1996). This is a statement of radical story intention, echoing *Te Rua*, but intended to be wrapped within a structure very familiar to non-indigenous filmgoers, perhaps to find the broader audience that *Te Rua* had struggled for.

It is impossible to know how the finished film might have looked, had I or another producer succeeded in getting it made. That Barclay was shaping his story within a mainstream genre does not in any way give the lie to Murray’s assertion that ‘[a]t heart, Barclay’s films are a refutation of the logic that European ... modernity asserts a claim to a singular legitimacy, one that other cultures and other narratives can only ... ever be “outside”’ (2007, 100). The screenplay of *It Was Darkness* is imbued with a wairua that reaches across indigenous borders, bringing together Māori and Aborigine characters in common cause to fight for the principle that was central to all Barclay’s work: the dignity of sovereignty (Barclay 1992, 118; Murray 2008, 67). Ten years later, when Barclay and I met again to work on another story, he was driven by the same philosophical impulse, but, reflecting his recent difficult experiences with broadcasters and his producer on the documentary *The Kaipara Affair* (2005), his dramatic approach was rather more raw.

### ***The Man Who Said No***

In early 2007, New Zealand on Air and Television New Zealand put out a Request for Proposals for dramatic telefeatures for screening on their TVOne channel in Sunday night primetime (TVNZ, 2007). This was the start of a line of locally-made and -funded telefeatures that have continued sporadically on that channel to this day. By now our family had moved back to New Zealand and I was a partner in a new production company, Conbrio Media. Together with another Māori producer, we developed several ideas to submit to TVNZ, one of which was an idea that Barclay suggested when I contacted him. It was a dramatic exploration of what he called ‘the chilling, off-hand brutality of the State against the individual’ (email to author, 22 May, 2007), an idea he called *The Man Who Said No*.

Barclay worked up a draft treatment, essentially a short story, telling of a man called Lick-Lick, a 'frumpish white guy' caught up in the spell of a Māori sage who is viewed by the authorities as a threat because of his way with words (Barclay 2007, 3). The story is set in a small harbour village, unidentified but it could have been Tinopai or Hokianga or Raglan, all locations where Barclay had lived. It is highly impressionistic, such that it is hard to tell exactly what is behind Lick-Lick's fate. His 'abduction ... by the state for interrogation' (ibid., 6) and eventual execution are the making of a young Māori woman, his love Rosa. After his death, she shakes herself out of a state of depression and loss, and is able to call back to the harbour the huge flocks of seabirds who vanished just before Lick-Lick's capture by the authorities. The sage, the man who says no, is a supporting character in the story of Lick-Lick and Rosa. Yet he carries the underlying narrative drive which puts the story in motion by drawing the attention of the authorities to the village in the first place, though he is revealed early on to be just a 'huckster' (ibid., 3).

Barclay was tilling very familiar soil in terms of issues of sovereignty, for the dangerous words of the Māori sage are his claim that 'the state's authority over a given territory is limited to the territory it can actually see' (and therefore by definition very limited indeed) (2007, 4). Unusually, however, the central character Lick-Lick who is executed is a Pākehā, and while the other central character is the very sympathetically drawn Rosa, the cause of all the problems is not a genuine Māori sage or elder, but a huckster (though a reference in one of our working documents to a 'futuristic Te Whiti' strongly suggests that Barclay was in the process of moving on from the huckster characterisation) (email to author, 27 May, 2007). As with *It Was Darkness*, the characters are complex and unpredictable, but placing this short piece against Barclay's work as a whole reveals the strongest resonances, not surprisingly, to be with his final film, *The Kaipara Affair*. This feature documentary, telling the story of a small coastal community riven by arguments over fishing rights, was recut for television without Barclay's approval. He had been further developing his ideas on Fourth Cinema through the early 2000s, as well as working on his book *Mana Tuturu* (2005), a deep consideration of the problems surrounding the commercialization of indigenous knowledge. He planned that *The Man Who Said No* would be a 'full-on statement of sovereignty and tikanga' (email to author, 27 May, 2007), something that he sought to achieve also with his *Kaipara* documentary. His creative approach to that documentary, with his intention of giving voice to all in the community, was a notable influence in the visual style notes he wrote for *The Man Who Said No*. He saw the film as having 'a touch of myth and magic' and commented, 'I would like to think there is a level of social conviction ... a passion about community struggle ... Here I think of Ken Loach, of course, film after film ... With Loach, community counts, every single individual in it' (email to author, 17 June, 2007).

The draft of *The Man Who Said No* reads as a first exploration of a really promising idea. My partners and I didn't pursue it very far; my concerns were reflected in an email I wrote to one of my colleagues when I received it, saying '[Barry] Barclay sent this to me

... I think it is probably way too outside the curve for TVNZ ... I think it's a breathtaking idea but suspect I'd rather develop it for some other medium or broadcaster ...' (pers. comm., 15 June, 2007). My instinct was right and after a couple of months of discussing it back and forth, I met with Barclay to tell him I did not think we would be able to take it any further. He took this with good grace, and we moved on. Rereading the document now, what strikes me is the visual, again poetic, quality of the writing:

And speaking of the ever-ever, speaking in whispers now - what about the three domes out on the tidal flats, morbid white at the half moon, covered at each high tide by the sly waters? You don't get representation out there, you don't have rights, that's what the rumours tell. Lick-Lick and Rosa stood way back in the shadows, hand-in-hand, when those domes were installed.

Rosa could not be shut up, going on and on and on, hissing out the words till Lick-Lick reassured her. And that's where (if justice has its way and they do call it justice) he is going to quit this earth, in one of those domes, no appeal. Others have been frog-marched out mid-morning, mid-afternoon, and days later, months later, at some bitter dawn, carried back again in a body bag, the mud sucking at the boots of the recovery team.

Ah, Rosa.

Ah, those long evenings, the summer ones when Lick-Lick (but you called him by his real name, Rosa, that's right, isn't it, the secret name, the one everybody else has forgotten?) took you right past Matarika Point to the gravel bar when the birds congregate; how he called to those birds, stood the birds - the terns and the shags, the pipers, the haughty heron - how he stood them calm as you walked with him amongst them. Did he really have a special speech, a way of calling them to come together, of farewelling them as darkness came in with the incoming tide? Was that his crime, his true crime, what he did to the birds? Was that why they had you both on surveillance for three whole months, police and military cameras filming you every time you moved about in the open? (2007, 3-4)

What was exciting about working with Barclay, as with any true artist, is the courage and willingness to explore that is exhibited in the work. Margot Nash speaks of the creative process inevitably involving uncertainty 'and those brave enough to enter this space must prepare themselves for both frustration and the possibility of failure' (2013, 151). Barclay was no stranger to frustration and failure, but as a collaborator he was always able to bring a freshness and commitment, even when, as in this case, we both realized early on we were probably not going to succeed with this project. Nash makes the point that 'film investors often have a poor tolerance for experimentation and risk ... yet it is through taking risks that we learn "what we do not know"' (ibid., 151). I always

felt working with Barclay that I was learning what I did not know. He wisely emailed me during the development of this project:

I can't imagine the broadcaster will have much of a stomach for *The Man Who Said No*, no matter how much we smother the proposal in their kind of jam ... I am well aware that we are fronting up with a weird one, not regular television ... I figure that submitting *The Man Who Said No* is both a political and a creative act ... and I am more than happy to take my chances ... If it fails I will await another opportunity or even work it through as a short novel. (email to author, 22 May, 2007)

## Conclusion

*It Was Darkness* and *The Man Who Said No* were very particular projects, differentiated not just by genre and intended medium, but also by the point in Barclay's career trajectory when they occurred. One was developed to an extremely detailed first draft, the other did not progress beyond a story outline. Both illustrate Barclay's facility as a writer in terms of evoking a sense of place and mood, and of wrapping thematic intention into the progression of story. They also demonstrate his ability to reveal complex characters with the capacity to surprise, a skill he brought not just to his feature films but also to his documentary work, where the choice of subjects is every bit as crucial as the creation of character in fiction. That neither of these projects proceeded beyond the development stage I see not as a reflection of his skill but more one of the vagaries of film and television development, where, for many different reasons that a screenwriter or director may have no control over, a large number of projects come into being that never reach their intended audience.

I have written elsewhere that Barclay 'enjoyed being a provocateur' (Milligan 2015, 348). As he became progressively more concerned with articulating what he saw to be a faithful representation of those whose story he was telling, so he became less concerned with how his insights might be received by the films' producers and/or investors. It may be that because neither of these projects went into production, I was spared some of the difficulties that others experienced working with him. The period of development, while it can be draining for all concerned, is a time when anything is possible with the story and the film. This can create an intoxicating sense of freedom even when working within constraints, so it was perhaps my good fortune that the two working experiences I shared with Barclay were processes of development only. I view them, however, with a sense of real loss, and regret that the difficult path that Barclay and other pioneers of Māori filmmaking, notably Merata Mita and Don Selwyn, were forced to navigate in the very Eurocentric world of New Zealand film and television means that as a nation our filmmaking heritage is much the poorer.

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