Interview: Roger Donaldson

**by Carlo Cavagna**

D irector Roger Donaldson has had a long, productive career, featuring such glossy Hollywood productions as *No Way Out*(1987), *Cocktail*(1988), *Species*(1995),[*Thirteen Days*](http://www.aboutfilm.com/movies/t/thirteendays.htm)(2000), and *The Recruit*(2003). He got started in faraway New Zealand, back when there was no film industry there to speak of. When Donaldson directed Sam Neill in both their feature debut *Sleeping Dogs*(1977), a political drama set in the near-future, it was the first feature film made in New Zealand in about fifteen years, and also the first one to open in the United States. Later Donaldson he came to the United States himself, directing a mind-boggling cast in *The Bounty*(1984), including Mel Gibson, Anthony Hopkins, Laurence Olivier, Daniel Day Lewis, Liam Neeson, Edward Fox of *Gandhi*and *Day of the Jackal*, and Bernard Hill of [*Titanic*](http://www.aboutfilm.com/movies/t/titanic.htm)and [*The Lord of the Rings*](http://www.aboutfilm.com/movies/l/lordoftherings2.htm).

A man named Burt Munro inspired Donaldson to make movies. In 1971 Donaldson, who is a motorcycle fanatic, went to remote Invercargill (the southernmost town in New Zealand) to visit a local eccentric. He'd heard Munro had a motorbike that held the land speed record and wanted to see it. Two years later, Donaldson had visited the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah with Munro for a racing event called Speed Week, and finished a documentary for New Zealand television called “Offerings to the God of Speed.”

With [*The World's Fastest Indian*](http://www.aboutfilm.com/movies/w/worldsfastestindian/worldsfastestindian.htm), starring Anthony Hopkins, Donaldson goes back to the beginning of his career, writing and directing a feature film about his original source of inspiration Burt Munro. In Los Angeles, Donaldson talked about making the film and how Anthony Hopkins and he managed to establish a friendship after their notorious feud on the set of *The Bounty*.

**AboutFilm:**You've said that you have a lot of passion for this character. Can you talk about your sources?

**Donaldson:**This movie encapsulates my whole filmmaking career, really. This movie started out as a documentary that I made at the very beginning of my career. It was one of the first films I made. I made a documentary about the real guy this film is inspired by. It was one of my first trips to America and I came here with Burt Munro, myself, and my co-filmmaker. We went with him to Bonneville and followed along behind him and tried to keep up, and made this little naïve mini-documentary on him, mostly on a hand-wind Bolex [camera]. Then years later I'm making feature films. I never thought I was ever going to do that. It was never even an ambition, let alone a reality. But when I did start making films I remembered Burt. He was this extraordinary character. I guess it was the potential of making a film about the link between the place I had come from, New Zealand, which is very different to America, and then my experience with coming to America, which is a Mecca for people to come and do something that you can't do anywhere else in the world. For me it was filmmaking, and for Burt it was to get to the Bonneville Salt Flats where they have a yearly event where people try and set land-speed records. America is a place where things happen that don't tend to happen anywhere else in the world. I think that was what my fascination with making this film was. It came out of my experience personally with coming to America.

**Question:**You filmed during Speed Week. Was it difficult filming during the actual event?

**Donaldson:**No, it was a help because many of the cars are still relevant to today. They upgrade the engines, but the exteriors are still the same. They were on one track and we made another track parallel to it so the real event was happening there with Burt Munro's name still in their record book—and their program actually—and we were running a replica event next door to it.

**Question:**Was the Burt Munro as friendly and open as Anthony Hopkins played him?

**Donaldson:**Yes. That was the part of the character and the real story that I found most appealing, and was why I wanted to make a movie about him. It wasn't really that he rode a motorbike and set a land-speed record. He had this amazingly outgoing, positive quality about him. The word “no” was not in his dictionary. He did have his heart problems, and he'd fallen on his head many times and had lots of accidents, and the bike was always blowing up, but he didn't let that get in the way. He knew where he was going, and he just loved being on that bike, and he loved tinkering away with it. When we were making the film, the shed that he lived in—what we built was a replica of what he really lived in—all the pieces in that shed in our movie are the bits that were in his original shed. They were all bits that he handmade.

He was living in this shed. I think he was going to build a new house, so he built a garage and moved into that, but for twenty years never built the house. I know the local town planning people would come around every month and say, “Burt, when are you going to start your house? You're not allowed to live in a shed.” So he always told them, “Yeah, I'll start it next week.” He didn't even have water on the property. He collected rain water off the roof. Before I'd met him he'd obviously been married, because he's got four kids who are still alive. They're in their seventies and eighties now.

**Question:**Have any of his kids seen the film?

**Donaldson:**Yes, they've all seen it. In fact, we had this amazing event in New Zealand, which we billed as the world premiere, in this town of Invercargill. They had renovated a beautiful three-story opera house in this town. They took out some seats and put a movie projector into the cinema. The guys who set up *The Lord of the Rings*premiere down in New Zealand put in the sound system, and it was a fantastic sound system. We had forty of Burt's descendants come to the screening, and the prime minister flew in. I don't know where they got so much red carpet from. They paved the street in red carpet. It was an event like I've never had for a premiere. It was amazing.

**Question:**What did the children think of the movie?

**Donaldson:**They loved the movie. Maybe they were embarrassed to see that grandpa was a bit of a womanizer, but I think the word was out already!

**Question:**He seemed a bit eccentric and naïve—

**Donaldson:**He was. I think part of his naïveté was that he came from a very isolated part of the world. In New Zealand, especially the bottom part of it in the 1960s, the closest place to it is Antarctica. He *was*naïve. I think it was that naïve quality that allowed him to do what he did do. He would go where others wouldn't go. I remember him telling me a great story; it was a pity I couldn't put it in the movie. He was driving along past Edwards Air Force base, and he sees a big sign, “Welcome to Edwards Air Force Base,” so he assumes, “Well, that means me.” So he just drives on through the gate and for some reason they didn't stop him, or he got past without the guard seeing him. So he's now out on the edge of the runway. He'd heard they had this rocket plane called the X15 at the time. So he said he thought he might look for it. Sure enough, there's the X15 about to do a takeoff run. He got his camera out; he was there on the edge of the runway taking pictures of it, and all these cops turned up and arrested him. They kept him for three days before they let him go and decided he wasn't a spy. This is a true story. That's the craziness of this guy. I've got a hundred stories like that.

**Question:**Is the scene where the cop pulls him over on the highway when he's riding a his bike based on reality?

**Donaldson:**Yes, it was.

**Question:**How about the transvestite story?

**Donaldson:**The transvestite story was an amalgamation of stories, some of my own, coming to Hollywood early on, and characters that he had known. One thing I was looking to do with that scene is that Burt had a wonderful quality about him where he was color-blind. He didn't see race or religion or anything. To tell the story nowadays where not only is the guy black, but a transsexual, the real Burt would have been exactly like this character was. He would have treated him normally.

**Question:**Did the Indian company support this film?

**Donaldson:**No, the Indian company has recently been bought and sold. In fact myself and my co-producer were interested in buying the company, but we were too late by a few days. It had already been sold to another group of investors.

**AboutFilm:**What kind of budget did you have?

**Donaldson:**Fifteen [million].

**AboutFilm:**Did you have to stretch, or were you comfortable?

**Donaldson:**Every movie is always a stretch. You never have enough money, and this movie I made as if I was making a studio picture. Everybody made the movie for scale and we stretched our dollar. This would have cost forty or fifty million if we had done it in the studio system without changing a thing. My co-producer and me worked hard. We did the movie for nothing, and Anthony helped us out. Everybody contributed.

**Question:**What would have been your Plan B if it had rained during Speed Week at the Salt Flats?

**Donaldson:**There was no Plan B. Sometimes you can only hope for the best because if the worst happens, the movie is over. It would have been the end of the movie, as it was planned anyway. I don't know what we could have done. In fact, on the very last day of shooting, it rained and flooded the Salt Flats and it was over. It literally spread our set over fifty square miles. It took weeks to find it all. There were hurricane force winds out there and inches of rain. We had finished that day. That was the first part of the shoot. Maybe we were smart scheduling it first, so if we were wiped out there we would have canceled the rest of the movie. We did two weeks at Bonneville. We shot the first two thirds in America, then we moved to New Zealand and did a third down there.

**Question:**What deleted scenes will be in the DVD?

**Donaldson:**There was a scene we cut out when he goes to a hospital when he has a heart attack. They check him out and they say, “You're really sick. You've got to stay in the hospital.” He says, “Well, how much is it going to cost?” They say forty dollars a day or something. So he says, “I'll die in my car,” and off he went. We shot the scene but it didn't make the movie—it slowed things down at that point. There was another scene we show where he blew the radiator hose after he lost the wheel. So he just blocked the whole road with his vehicle so that nobody could get past. An eighteen wheeler comes by and he stops it and says, “I'm hitching a lift.” The guy says, “What are you doing blocking the road?” and he says, “Because we've got to take the whole lot.” The next scene showed him towing the bike and the trailer and so forth.

**Question:**Was Anthony Hopkins your first choice?

**Donaldson:**Yes. I think it's one of those things that in retrospect I realize there was nobody else that could do it, especially nobody else that the world would be interested in. Trying to find an actor of his age, with his box office potential and appeal—the list is a list of one.

**Question:**When you worked with Anthony Hopkins before, there are some stories about some friction between you?

**Donaldson:**It's no secret that Anthony and I were ready to kill each other when we were doing *The Bounty*. It was a really tough movie to make. I guess in retrospect, I realize how much it takes to produce a performance like he did with William Bligh. You can't just take that character and do it that convincingly and not become a little bit like that yourself as you're doing it. We were shooting in the tropics for ten weeks and he was wearing his blue navy woolen uniform done up to the neck every day. It was 100 degrees with 100 percent humidity, and everybody was getting seasick on the boat and being sick. It was like the real Bounty. And then years later we saw each other again and we realized we were both pretty proud of that movie and that it was one of the most memorable movies we'd been involved in, so we became friends again. It's hard to believe it, and I don't know how it happened, but now we are just best of friends.

**Question:**When was Burt Munro's first record set?

**Donaldson:**The record that he broke and still stands was set in 1967.

**Question:**When is the movie set?

**Donaldson:**In 1962, even though I never mention the year or show any cars [from the period]. That was the first year he went [to Bonneville]. That was visually determined by the shape of the tail of his motorbike. After 1962 he changed the shape of the tail. He set a record then, but the record that still stands was not set then. It was set later. He kept upping the record and he also changed the capacity of the engine, so he held records in different classes as well. The one he set for streamline motorcycles under 1000 cc is the one that still stands, and that was set in 1967.

**Question:**How old was he in 1962?

**Donaldson:**The real guy would have been sixty-four.

**Question:**He died in 1978, right?

**Donaldson:**Right. What I did with the movie, and what Tony's done with the character, is take the character I knew in my documentary. When I knew him he was 72, and that's the character we really put on screen, even though the motorcycle is an earlier motorcycle.

**Question:**Would he have been amused by this film?

**Donaldson:**He would have loved it. He wasn't shy about publicity. He wasn't a bragger, but he wasn't shy to tell you what he's done either. He didn't feel like he was bragging. He would just tell you the facts.

**Question:**With all the stories, it seems like this guy's life would make a great television series.

**Donaldson:**It would. He kept coming back year after year and every time he had stories. He had hundreds of stories. One of the characters, Marty Dickerson, is still alive, who in the film was played by Walton Goggins, who's in “The Shield.” Marty came out to the Salt Flats and he had some pretty risqué stories! Burt was no saint, that's all I know.

**Question:**Did he retire?

**Donaldson:**He retired by dropping dead. He died of a heart attack and pneumonia.

**Question:**Where is the motorcycle now?

**Donaldson:**The engine is in New Zealand. When we made the movie we built two exact replicas of the real bike, and then we built two replicas where the exterior looks the same, but the engine is different, so we had four bikes. The original engine of the original bike is in New Zealand, and the frame is here in America.

**Question:**How many times did he go to the Bonneville Salt Flats?

**Donaldson:**He went nine times, I think. I think 1974 was the last time.

**Question:**Did he remember to register after that?

**Donaldson:**I'm sure he did. They weren't going to let him run, and then they said they would give him a handling run just to appease him. They thought his bike was a joke, really, and thought he was a bit of a joke as well. He was just like he is in the movie, a naïve simpleton sort of character. They said they would give him a handling run to prove he could keep it upright, and he just opened it up as in the movie and took off. They let him ride it, and he did set a record on the first run. What in reality he had to do was set the record in two different directions, and it's a story that goes on and on. He did the fastest time in the wrong mile and then he crashed the motorbike as he does in the movie and burned himself as in the movie. In the interest of telling the story we had to compress it.

**Question:**Did he really go 200 miles per hour?

**Donaldson:**With his character it's hard to find the difference between the fact and the fiction. I've seen reports he did 206 miles per hour and others that said 213. I honestly don't know what the real facts are. I just know what I saw, which was that the bike went very fast and he was pretty crazy.

**Question:**Are you into motorcycles yourself?

**Donaldson:**I am. I've always been into moving fast myself. I don't know why. I guess I do know why, I had a grandfather who was a doctor who was crazy about motorcars and going as fast as he could go. He inflicted that on my father who passed the disease on to me. I'll pass it on to my kids now I guess.

**Question:**What do you have now?

**Donaldson:**Right now I have this crazy little car called a Suburu WRX STi. It's a little rocket machine, and then also a family car. I don't have any motorbikes now. I sold my motorbikes when my kids started to show an interest in them, but I think it's time to get another one.

**AboutFilm:**Which of your Hollywood films are you proudest of?

**Donaldson:**Someone was asking me that the other day. I have eight kids and if someone asked which was my favorite I would have to say honestly they are all different and I love them all. I think that's pretty much the way I feel about all my movies. Each one represents a large chunk of my life. They are very different movies. If you compare*Cocktail*and *Species*to *Thirteen Days*and this movie, they are very different movies. Yet they all found their audience and their fans and their detractors. I'm personally proud of all of them. I've never done a movie that I didn't come to it believing in it and trying hard to make a great movie out of it. Sometimes the critics love you, and sometimes they don't. Sometimes the audience loves you, and sometimes they ignore you. For me filmmaking is the experience of making the film. It's hard to have a preference about which movie you think is the best movie, because they are so different.

**Question:**What is next?

**Donaldson:**I honestly have no idea. I started reading scripts really in the last few weeks.

<http://www.aboutfilm.com/movies/w/worldsfastestindian/donaldson.htm>