



EMILE

"DUDE, ARE YOU DOING
THIS MOVIE OR NOT?"

Theo Crane

If Carl Bessai were an animal, he'd be a jackrabbit: quick, alert, accustomed to taking chances. Instead, he is a Vancouver filmmaker, which is helpful because I've come to his office to talk about film, specifically about *Emile*, his latest movie.

He fidgets in his chair like a man unaccustomed to sitting still, crossing and uncrossing his legs, slipping his socked feet underneath him. His untucked blue T-shirt precisely matches his eyes and the blue frames of his glasses. When our conversation turns to the loaded topic of the film's funding, he runs his hand through his spiky blond hair. "Putting the money together for *Emile* was a nightmare," Bessai recalls. "It was the hardest thing I've ever done."

**CARL
BESSAI'S
MOST EXCELLENT
ADVENTURE
IN MAKING
EMILE
WITH
SIR IAN
MCKELLEN**

Emile is the final installment in a trilogy that began with Bessai's 1999 film *Johnny*, about a charismatic 18-year-old who takes to the streets to lead a band of squeegee kids. His second film, *Lola* (2001) which screened at the Toronto and Berlin film festivals, follows a young woman who abandons her unhappy life and sets out in search of a better one. *Emile* is Bessai's most personal film yet, although on the surface it seems to have little to do with him. It's the story of an aging professor, Emile (Ian McKellen), who travels to Canada to receive an honorary degree from the University of Victoria and reconnect with his niece Nadia, played by Deborah Kara Unger, who lives there with her daughter, Maria (Theo Crane). For *Emile*, the visit unleashes a torrent of memories of his life in Canada before he moved abroad.

The film, which bears more than a passing resemblance to Ingmar Bergman's art-house classic *Wild Strawberries*, grew from a box of old letters given to Bessai when he was in film school. They were written to his father, who died of brain cancer when Bessai was four. "Reading all this mail, just because I wanted to get to know him, started the wheels turning," he says. What emerged was the tale of two lonely people yearning for a sense of family. With the screenplay finished, Bessai turned to the business of selling it.

Telefilm rejected *Emile*, while British Columbia Film and CanWest Global agreed to back the film only on the condition that a major star played the lead. Bessai had already discussed his dream list, which included actors John Hurt and Richard Harris, with a U.K. production company. The man who topped everyone's list was McKellen and, in the spring of 2002, they sent him a script. "That he even read it was just entirely fluky," Bessai admits. "He did because he was moving here and it was the only script he had in this enormous pile that was from some guy who was living in the city where he was going to live while doing *X-Men 2*." When McKellen called two months later to say he'd like to meet, Bessai could barely believe it. "I was terrified," he says. "I really was. But, because I feel like I'm better live than I am on the phone or on paper, I thought 'if I can just get in the door then I have a fighting chance at convincing this guy.'"

**"AT THE ELEVENTH HOUR,
I WAS OUT OF MONEY.
I HAD A
MOVIE STAR,
BUT NO BUDGET."**

- CARL BESSAI

In a Toronto interview to mark the premiere of *Emile* at TIFF, McKellen admits that he had serious reservations about the part. "Although I thought it was a story worth telling," he says, "I didn't think that it was something I should get involved with because the character was Canadian." Bessai asked for a week to rework the script; three months later the two were still negotiating. "We were having a great time getting to know each other," Bessai recalls, "and it was all very charming. But I was starting to get a bit fed up. So I said, 'Look, dude, are you doing this movie with me or not? I just think that we both need to know.' And he said, 'Did you just call me dude?'" Bessai laughs. "But he loved this sort of Canadian informality. And he had been in Vancouver for long enough to feel that he needed to leave something behind."

McKellen insists that his decision to commit to the film had more to do with the filmmaker. "Dude! Dude!" he says, mimicking Bessai. "Carl is a force of nature. There he was trying to make films with no money in Vancouver where he lived and no ambitions to take them anywhere else. How could you not fall in love with that?"

Bessai had him write a note on McKellen letterhead committing to *Emile*, and immediately faxed the letter to the funding agencies. With the star on board, British Columbia Film and CanWest Global upped their support, and Telefilm reconsidered the project. But Bessai was running out of time. He had promised McKellen that they would be finished production before Christmas, and it was already October. Then, in what seemed like the death knell for *Emile*, Telefilm rejected it for the second time. "At the

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- BESSAI



Sir Ian McKellen as *Emile*.

eleventh hour, I was out of money," Bessai says. "I had a movie star, but no budget. And I had a lot of people that I trusted and respected telling, me point blank, to put this away."

When McKellen offered to cut his fee in half, Bessai refused at first. "It was the most embarrassing moment," he recalls. "Here was a guy who gave, and gave again, and then gave some more." The cut, however, brought the budget down to \$1.2 million, and production on the film could finally get underway. The film was shot in less than 20 days in and around Victoria. As promised, McKellen was finished in time to return to Britain for holidays, taking Bessai with him in order to film the London scenes. "I didn't have any money," Bessai admits. "So, I stayed at his house, flew on his airplane and limoed in with this guy. He fed me and rented the taxi to ferry us around so that we could shoot the London scenes. That's Ian McKellen! But I can honestly say that he loved every minute of it. It was just like camping to him."

Deborah Kara Unger



A few times a year, Bessai puts aside the business of filmmaking to do what all jackrabbits are designed to do: run. But first he swims and bikes. Bessai has been competing in triathlons for years. It's a gruelling sport that requires an athlete to excel at more than one thing, something Bessai is already famous for in the world of filmmaking, serving as writer, director, co-producer, co-executive producer and cinematographer on *Emile*. "Carl likes to do everything," McKellen jokes. "He'd really like to play every character in his movies. Perhaps he should, one day, just go and make his movies all by himself."

"I'm probably a control freak," Bessai says laughing. "No, I *am* a control freak," he admits. "I'm pretty hard to deal with." You'd probably not get much argument on that from the distributor who suggested Bessai make *Emile* more commercial by dropping the last couple of scenes. "It's like, 'don't change my painting. Get your brushes, put them away, and get the fuck out of the studio,'" Bessai says, irritated at the memory. "I know I'm sounding like Mr. Confrontation, but that's just not done."



Bessai is proud of *Emile*, although he recognizes that his future as a filmmaker rests on producing more than intimate, art-house films. He has already started work on a horror movie, determined to stay one hop ahead. "I'm confident I'll work again," he says, "because I'm fast enough to get the next thing up and running before the final word is out on my last thing. The chance of *Emile* releasing and tanking is pretty slim. Do I worry about it though? Damn right I do." *Emile* will be released in Canada by Seville Pictures early in 2004.

Dale Drewery is a Vancouver-based journalist and television producer.