

MICHAEL DOWSE
BRINGS FRESH
HOSER HUMOUR
TO THE SCREEN
WITH *FUBAR* AND
*IT'S ALL GONE
PETE TONG*

BY LINDSAY GIBB

AS I READ the blurb about Calgary-born filmmaker Michael Dowse in the 2004 Toronto International Film Festival program guide for his sophomore feature, *It's All Gone Pete Tong*, I was surprised. Accompanying his credits, including fine accomplishments like his debut film *FUBAR*, was a note about his education that I wasn't expecting. Most of the biographies on filmmakers in the program guide list accomplishments such as "she took film studies here" or "he studied theatre there," but in Dowse's bio there was something a little different—an MBA from Yale. I wondered, how does a man who went to Yale to get a master's of business administration end up making films in Canada for a living? Especially one like *FUBAR*, which has become, since its release in 2002, something of a head-banging hoser classic.

He tricked me.

It turns out, this biographical information speaks more of Dowse's sense of humour than it does of his academic qualifications. When I ask him about it, I don't get the story I am anticipating; instead, I'm shocked when he tells me that he made it up. He tricked me. Listening to the commentary track on the DVD for *FUBAR* (a mockumentary about two rockers whose lives revolve around partying), I learn that I'm not the first person he has tricked with his made-up stories. Many of the people who wound up as extras in *FUBAR* thought that they were in an real documentary (until, of course, for legal reasons they were asked for their consent to appear in the film). I guess shocking people with phony accomplishments is only an extension of being a comedy writer and director. It's similar to the way he writes his movies. Both are hooked on the element of surprise.

They are also based, as Dowse slyly points out, around the notion of torturing the main character. Indeed, what tortures the protagonists in his films is the surprise, or at least the beginning of a chain of surprises. At the beginning of *FUBAR*, the main characters, Terry (David Lawrence) and Dean (Paul Spence), are one-dimensional. They

are so-called adults trying to extend their youthful lifestyle by drinking, non-stop partying and breaking stuff, living a life of carefree idiocy. It isn't until we learn that Dean has testicular cancer that we discover



Paul Kaye as DJ Frankie Wilde, centre, in *It's All Gone Pete Tong*.

there is more to the film than just laughing at the shenanigans of two idiots.

The same thing happens in *It's All Gone Pete Tong*, a faux biopic about a world-famous DJ Frankie Wilde (Paul Kaye) from the U.K. Instead of *FUBAR*'s long-haired hosers who drink beer all the time and only talk about partying, in *Pete Tong* we get a cooler-looking guy who gets wasted all the time and only talks about partying. Despite the similar idiotic exterior, Wilde is a more complex character than either Terry or Dean, and the surprise in *Pete Tong*—while also medical—is more of a career ruiner than it is life threatening. Wilde, a brash remix genius and superstar of the Ibiza club scene with loads of money and fans, goes deaf. “The first drafts I wrote about Frankie, he had the same decline [as he does in the film]. But he was just a drug addict, which wasn't that interesting to me,” says Dowse. “Then it hit me; probably the worst thing that could happen to a DJ is that he goes deaf.”



Michael Dowse



While the torture of his lead characters undeniably creates an underlying serious tone to *FUBAR* and *Pete Tong*, Dowse's purpose is to make people laugh. When Wilde loses his hearing, the film doesn't lose its sense of humour. There's a very funny scene where his agent, Max Hagger (Michael Wilmot), tries to tell him that he has lost his hearing, and the classic "you're-deaf/sorry-I-can't-hear-you"-type banter is utilized. However, Hagger's sarcasm, juxtaposed with the ditzyness of Wilde's response, gives new life to this old dialogue. Even the way Dowse approaches Wilde's drug addiction is witty, if a bit disturbing. Every time Wilde attempts to break his cocaine habit, a frightening, human-sized, plush badger pushes him back into the white stuff. The badger is scary, with white powder caked under his nostrils and an evil expression plastered on his face. But the humour comes in the extreme steps the badger takes to keep Wilde on drugs—and the little apron and fairy wings he wears are a cute but odd touch.

When asked how he fits into the Canadian film scene, Dowse hesitates and doesn't seem sure how to answer. "I like making comedies, so hopefully I can fit in that way," he says after a bit of a think. "Making films that people can actually respond to because they're funny would be a step in the right direction." He feels many Canadian films are made without any audience in mind, which may be part of

the reason why so many never get seen. In fact—and this may seem an odd complaint coming from a director—the reason for this is that too many homegrown films are director driven. "I think a lot of directors in English Canada get whatever the hell they want, and I don't think that necessarily equates to better films," he says. He feels that if directors were curbed more often by their producers and made films that were commercially viable instead of, as he puts it, "a personal exploration of their past," there might be more of an audience for Canadian films.

Elizabeth Yake, the co-producer of *Pete Tong*, understands what Dowse is trying to say. "There seems to be a fondness for the writer/director, the auteur, and I just think that there are not that many people who have that much talent," she says. "With this movie, Mike was given resources and parameters. He was free to come up with some good stuff on his own, but I think the producers were really steering the project in a commercial direction." Co-produced by True West Films, Yake's B.C.-based production company, and U.K.-based Vertigo Films, *Pete Tong* is certainly entertaining. When it debuted last year at TIFF, the industry screening was packed. It went on to win the Toronto City Award for Best Canadian Feature, which carries with it a \$30,000 cash prize, and it was named one of TIFF's Top 10 Canadian films for 2004. All this before the film has even opened commercially. Odeon Films brings *Pete Tong* to Canadian theatres this spring, and Redbus Film Distribution will have the film on 300 screens in Europe about the same time. In addition, *Pete Tong* will be the first film distributed by the new company, Matson Films, in the U.S.

However, without the success of *FUBAR*, Dowse admits, it's unlikely he would be where he is today. After that film was completed, it was shown at Sundance, where it was greeted, he remembers, by a packed audience tingling

“I was always the guy with the video camera at the party recording people throwing up,” remembers Dowse.

with anticipation. *FUBAR* then went on to play for six weeks on Toronto screens, making it the sixth-longest running Canadian film in Toronto that year. “We knew we had a good film,” says Dowse, “but I think the surprise of its success continues to grow as it keeps gaining momentum.” Now on DVD, the film’s fan base keeps expanding. Spence and Lawrence have even recently published a book based on their *FUBAR* characters, appropriately called *Just Give ‘r*. Given that the film had no script and was funded basically on pocket change (with a little help from Telefilm), its popularity is a big achievement.

The story of how Dowse ended up in the filmmaking business is reminiscent of a Steven Spielberg interview. Thinking back on his childhood, Dowse says he was always interested in photography and filmmaking, but sports were really his main focus. He played football at

high school and when he got older he worked at a golf course for a year, but he continued to watch a lot of films. Suddenly it dawned on him that filmmaking was what he really wanted to do. “I was always the guy with the video camera at the party recording people throwing up,” remembers Dowse. In 1996, he got his chance to learn about what goes on behind the scenes in the television industry when he won a contest to be a temp at MuchMusic. Rather than becoming an on-air host, like most of the current temps now strive to do, Dowse learned how to edit film. Finishing his stint at Much, he went on to complete a degree in communications from the University of Calgary. After graduating, he stayed in the West and took a freelance gig with MuchMusic shooting segments for the Calgary host. Jobs like this taught him a lot about the technical side of filmmaking, but they also taught him another important lesson—he did not want to work in television.



It's All Gone Pete Tong

So began his career in film. He started by editing the work of other people, such as Gary Burns's *waydowntown* (2000), Steven Clark's *Looking for Leonard* (2002), and made his own short, *237*, the story of a hotel room that gains a life of its own through the people who stay there. Then came the unexpected success of *FUBAR*, which he wrote, edited, produced, shot and directed. With *It's All Gone Pete Tong*, he not only wanted to improve his storytelling skills, but strove to be innovative in his filmmaking style as well, pushing the possibilities of sound. "That's really what got me excited," says Dowse. "Not only the location [the film was shot on the Spanish resort island of Ibiza] and the character, but also telling a story through sound and being able to get a response out of an audience through the actual use of subwoofers and all those sound systems that exist in all those theatres, which barely get pushed at all."

seems pretty honest. In fact, he doesn't even know about the new lie that is circulating on the Net about *Pete Tong*. When I tell him that there are people posting notes on the Internet movie database complaining that the real Frankie Wilde is pissed off because someone made a movie about him without asking his permission, Dowse cracks up. Then he pauses, "Really? That's great!" Of course, even though he didn't start the rumour, he sees this interview as an opportunity to keep the tale going, so he asks me to help. "For the article, just tell everybody that Frankie's real. Don't say that he doesn't exist. Maybe we'll keep this going."

Sorry Michael, I just couldn't do it.

Lindsay Gibb is a freelance journalist and a member of Take One's editorial board.

Aside from the fake MBA, Dowse seems pretty honest.

Making the audience feel the music, the way they would if they were at a club with Wilde spinning his discs, was an exciting prospect for Dowse, who has used music as more than just background in both of his features. Though he insists he's not a big dance music fan, he has an appreciation for a score that is well woven into the fabric of a film. "I love films that are driven by music, like those of Martin Scorsese or Hal Ashby, where they're absolutely music driven. But I'm not from a musical background. I barely play an instrument and I don't go to many live shows." So he felt lucky that *It's All Gone Pete Tong* was a co-production when it came to getting the right music—people he worked with were in touch with the hot London club scene. The chance to audition actors from both Canada and the U.K. was another bonus of the film's co-production status. He was astonished by the amount of talent that was available in England and credits superior British theatre training.

As for Dowse's future, he sees himself doing more comedies. "I'd love to work with the funniest people I can find, you know? Like actors that people have forgotten about who are just geniuses." Aside from the fake MBA, Dowse

FUBAR

