

# IT'S ALL

Aaron Kim Johnston

# THE PAS



By Patrick Lowe

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**A**t his St. Norbert office, sitting down over coffee and cigarettes, Aaron Kim Johnston spins a quick anecdote. He had been attending the premiere of his first feature, *The Last Winter*, at a theatre in Edmonton. During a key scene when the young protagonist, Will, gets frightened by his mother, playing a few halloween tricks, one elderly woman turned to her companion and uttered, "I can't believe it. Whose mother would do that to any eight-year-old kid?" At which point Johnston leaned over and whispered, "mine."

Such childhood recollections of growing up in Oak Lake, Manitoba, during the 1950s eventually resulted in *The Last Winter*, the award-winning family drama which went on to become one of the highest grossing English Canadian film of 1990. Now he has completed his second feature for theatrical release, *For the Moment*. Starring Australian actor Russell Crowe (*Proof* and *Romper Stomper*) and Vancouver actress Christine Hirt (*Skate*), it's both a love story and a period piece set against the backdrop of the Commonwealth Air Training Plan in Brandon, in 1942. It was a time when approximately 130,000 servicemen from across the globe trained as fighter and bomber pilots, in almost 100 bases across the country. In the vein of the wartime melodrama *Bye Bye Blues*, *For the Moment* is an engaging blend of comedy, adventure and pathos, imbued with an old-fashioned sense of lyrical romanticism which has and continues to serve the director so well.

This suits Johnston just fine. "I'm not opposed to contemporary stories. But there's a level of cynicism with contemporary stories that I'm not anxious to be messenger for. I'm interested in stories about common people, who have something unique that I can share with audiences," he explains. "You experience emotions and questions, an internal exer-

cise which evokes feelings and experience, rather than a plot. It's sharing an experience that's not plot driven. Instead, it evolves around a collection of moments."

Those moments came about largely through his own father, a bomber pilot and instructor during WWII, who shared with his son some of the more humorous and colourful aspects of the war. As well, having grown up in Brandon and Virden, Johnston was more than enthralled by the remains of airplane hangars used during the Training Plan. But in the end, it was his mother who finally inspired him. "I remember her talking about being a young woman, going to a dance at Trentin, Manitoba. They shipped all these guys in from the bases, and there were thousands of them. And these fellows were very exotic—from England, New Zealand, Australia, other parts of Canada, from the States, and elsewhere. The next day she was on a tractor, and a couple of guys from New Zealand she had been dancing with the night before came up over a hill and buzzed her, dipping the wings of their Tiger Moth. And that was the visual trigger that really said there was something here."

The plot revolves around the secret affair of a young Australian pilot Lachlan Curry (Crowe) and a young farm woman, Lili (Hirt), whose own husband has been serving abroad for two years. Complementing this affair is the romance between Zeek (Scott Kraft) an American Captain, and Betsy (Wanda Cannon), a local bootlegger and prostitute. As their involvement grows, so do the tensions among Lili's family and Lachlan's mates at the training base. Ultimately, it's all part of a theme that continues to fascinate Johnston: the loss of innocence in times of change. "For people of that era, they speak of it as the best of times and the worst of times. I think because the war loomed and it wasn't going all that well, and a lot of young men in that area would be in battle, death was very present. I think under that kind of environment, a magnifica-

tion happens. People become more keenly aware of what it is that surrounds them. There's the need to become alive, because it just may not last long." Yet for Kim Johnston, it's a depressing theme. "There's tragedy. Those relationships were treasured and real for those people. There was a loss. I guess it's an acknowledgement of those temporary relationships that unfold."

At 41, Johnston has earned the laurels of his success. He began working as a cameraman and switcher at a Brandon tv station when he was 19. He later moved to CKY-TV in Winnipeg as a producer and director, producing his first award-winning drama, *The Curse of Ponsonby Hall* (which won the Golden Sheaf at the Yorkton Short Film Festival). After working freelance as a first A.D., art director and locations manager, he directed *Snow Angels* for the NFB Prairie Regional Office. This led to co-writing and directing "Mistress Madelene," a one hour drama for the studio's *Daughters of the Country* series. It was there he met up with fellow producer, Jack Clements (who was working as a line producer on *Daughters*), and they formed John Aaron Productions. They completed a half-hour drama, *Cowpunk*, for CBC's *Family Pictures* series, as well as producing two segments for a local IMAX production, *Heartland*. It was at that point that Johnston decided to take on *The Last Winter*.

Made for \$3.1 million, the film was a sensitive and intimate look at a young farm boy, Will (Joshua Murray) coming to terms with leaving behind his idyllic rural existence in Oak Lake for life in the city. After a successful screening at the Vancouver Film Festival, Johnston began to suspect he had a hit on his hands. "I



Kim Johnston with baseball glove

could see that it worked with an audience, and so from that first screening, we realized that the movie had some power to it." But while struggling to secure distribution, Johnston, along with help from NFB producers Ches Yetman and Joe McDonald, opened the film at the Convention Centre in Winnipeg as a charity fund raiser. Immediately, via word of mouth, the film was a smash hit across the prairies (in Brandon, it outgrossed *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*), as well as winning top awards at festivals in Paris, Tampere, and Colorado. Recently, it opened independently in theatres across the United States where it has been doing good business, with the usual routes of television and home video still to be explored. Through that success, they began to pursue *For the Moment*, their second co-production with the NFB, with additional backing from Telefilm Canada and CIDO (Cultural Industries Development Office for Manitoba).

While raising funds, they made a concerted effort to find the right lead for the role of Lachlan. Johnston and Clement saw Crowe in *Proof*, which Malofilm was distributing. "We watched the film, and I loved Russell's performance. There's such a natural quality to it. I liked the fact that he's not chiseled, dazzling and dark." Crowe, whose own

father had trained in Canada during WWII, readily accepted the part. But in addition to finding the right lead, the next greatest challenge was the period aircraft itself. "We had considered scaled-down models that would create the illusion of a great many aircraft, but that proved cumbersome, difficult and expensive." So Clements and Johnston scoured across Canada for models of airplanes needed for the picture—Tiger Moths, B26s, Harvards and Avro Ansons. "Certainly, the economics of getting these aircraft to a spot in the middle of Canada was always in question," explained Clements. "We might find an aircraft in the East, but it just wasn't feasible for us to bring a Lancaster from Hamilton. It was going to cost us a fortune." But luck prevailed, and they were able to get a bomber from Alberta, as well as several planes from the West Coast. "We hired Geoff Palmer (an Aerial Co-ordinator and Helicopter Camera Pilot from LA), and from his experience, he knew a lot of guys who had them," said Clements. The end result was the largest collection of vintage wartime aircraft assembled in one spot in Canada since the Second World War.

Filming, which began in August, 1992, and finished in late October, proved to be difficult, especially due to the terrible weather conditions. "The summers in Manitoba over the last two years have been horrible. That's what we faced," recalls Joe McDonald. "I mean, we got snow and clouds all the time. We did get lucky at the end, and we got great weather for two days. It was a bless-

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ing." Things got worse when Crowe himself got sick and had to be taken to hospital, as well as the usual delays associated with production. But neither McDonald nor the NFB's confidence in Johnston wavered. "He's someone you know can pull it off. We had weather problems, people getting sick, aircraft and safety concerns. All those things."

Thanks to cinematographer Ian Elkin (who shot *The Last Winter* and *Lost in the Barrens*) and Palmer, the film is a showcase for many memorable, often spectacular aerial shots, especially of the Tiger Moths and Harvards in flight. Special credit should also go to Murray Palmer, a pilot from Souris, Manitoba, who served as stunt pilot for some of the movie's striking acrobatic stunts, including one where a pilot commits suicide in his Harvard ("when you slide between the air tower and the hangar, that's getting pretty close," chuckles Johnston). While there were no casualties, Johnston does remember one close call during shooting. He, Elkin, and Geoff Palmer were shooting a bomber up at the East Grand Beach area, near Lake Winnipeg. "I remember asking Geoff to park the helicopter 2000 feet up, and asked the pilot of the bomber to turn, come right at us, and just go below us. Well, Geoff's got it all leveled off, and Ian's got the shot. He thought the plane was coming right through the helicopter!"

Now, with the shooting but a distant memory, comes the difficult task of distributing and promoting the film. Malofilm Distribution has approved a 119-minute print for release. Whether or not this indigenous feature stands a chance against the usual pitfalls of Canadian distribution to follow in the steps of its successful predecessor remains to be seen. Yet, whatever the odds, the future seems fairly bright for both Johnston and Clements. Already another project is being considered, *Partners in Time*. Written by Allan Borden, it concerns a young boy entering another dimension to revisit his dead mother. And with *The Last Winter* still playing in theatres across the States, and *For the Moment* for future release, the opportunities continue to expand. But for now, as Johnston points out, he will be satisfied just to see the film given its gala premiere in this province. And if he has it his way, he'll take it to where he's always wanted it to go—Brandon, of course •

*Patrick Lowe is a freelance writer and animator, living in Winnipeg. He currently reviews films bi-monthly for Interchange magazine.*

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