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# SOUTH SOLITARY

THE ROMANTIC COMEDY STARRING  
MIRANDA OTTO AND BARRY OTTO

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GENTLE ROMANTIC COMEDY *SOUTH SOLITARY* MARKS THE FEATURE FILM RETURN OF WRITER-DIRECTOR SHIRLEY BARRETT. BRENDAN SWIFT TAKES A CLOSER LOOK AT THE "MIDDLE-AGE DATE MOVIE".

# SOUTH SEAS

**M**IRANDA OTTO AND Shirley Barrett know each other well. Their alter egos, Meredith and Myra, less so.

And judging by their long correspondence by letter, they are unlikely to ever be as close.

"I asked her to be my bridesmaid but then chose a colour she would look terrible in," Barrett recalls. "That passive aggressive [nature] just came out in my letters really."

The letters – written over a period of months – were just one component used to bring the characters to life, although only Meredith takes centre stage in the windswept and romantic film *South Solitary*.

Such painstaking attention to detail marks Barrett's first feature foray as writer-director since *Walk the Talk* a decade ago. Her first feature, *Love Serenade*, also starred Otto and won the director the Caméra d'Or award at the 1996 Cannes Film Festival.

However, it was while developing another project that the idea for *South Solitary* was born.

"I was researching another film about whaling and we ended up going to Green Cape Light Station and ended up staying there," Barrett recalls.

"Reading the log books at that lighthouse just sort of whetted my appetite and made me interested in the whole idea of people working in remote places, in difficult circumstances – small groups of people thrust together."

*South Solitary* follows the unmarried 35-year-old Meredith (Otto) as she arrives on a remote lighthouse island in 1927 with her uncle Wadsworth (Barry Otto), who has just been appointed as head lighthouse keeper.

Meredith eventually finds herself stranded on the island, where a fledgling romance begins with withdrawn assistant keeper Fleet (Marton Csokas).

Barrett calls the film a middle-age date movie – a film by middle-aged women for middle-aged women. It is a burgeoning demographic but one rarely tapped into by filmmakers.

While the film is characterised by fine performances from the cast, which cements it as firmly Australian, it almost wasn't so.

The \$7 million-plus feature was originally planned to have a much higher budget when it began in 2005. By early-2007 it was slated to be a UK co-production with international stars Maggie Gyllenhaal and Paul Bettany tentatively cast in the lead roles.

But as the years dragged on, and the stars were held back by scheduling issues, they decided to "cut the budget, shoot on the mainland and use the cast we really wanted to use, particularly Miranda", according to Barrett.

The film marks just the second time that Otto has appeared in a feature film with her father since the drama *Dead Letter Office* in 1998.

"It was great in this because at the heart of Meredith and Wadsworth's relationship there is a real love between them but Wadsworth's... kind of cold and unable to show affection and those sort of things," Miranda says.

"On the surface their relationship is not very affectionate but underneath there is a bond between them definitely, so it's nice when you're working with someone who is your dad – that sort of bond is there already.

"And it was nice playing something that wasn't like us. My dad is a lot of fun – he's a wag – and off-set he's always doing funny things and keeping everybody amused."

Her performance was underpinned by copious amounts of research, undertaken alongside Barrett, as final funding was locked in over a period of months.

"We started off at the library; did a lot of research, pictures and old newspapers and getting a feel of what it was like in that period," she says.



LEFT: MARTON CSOKAS AS FLEET.  
INSET: WRITER-DIRECTOR SHIRLEY BARRETT

"I went and looked at a lot of films [at the National Film and Sound Archives] just to also get an idea of how Australia also saw itself at that time; to get an idea of how people looked."

But as filming drew closer, finding locations to recreate the late 1920s proved troublesome. Maatsuyker Island – the southernmost lighthouse island in Australia was the original destination. However, safety and budgetary concerns – it could only be reached by helicopter – ruled it out.

Cape Otway ultimately provided the location for the prism lens and service room interiors while the small Victorian town of Portland provided the right combination of rocky ledges with surf in the background and the 'haulage', used to pull equipment and luggage up a steep precipice.

"It was the way they used to have to ship supplies up in Tasmania and we had looked at locations all over Australia and the UK and never found anything," Barrett says. "It was unbelievable luck for us."

The film was ultimately funded via the Producer


Offset, which provided about 32 per cent of the budget.

Producer Marian Macgowan (who also produced Gillian Armstrong's *Death Defying Acts* under a similar scheme in the UK) says the process worked well although the current length of time to receive Screen Australia's final certification – at about 10 weeks – is too long.

"That is a potentially dangerous aspect for producers because of ... the extra interest you may have to pay for reasons behind your control," she says.

Barrett, who spent time directing TV drama *Love My Way* before *South Solitary*, says she is keen to do more work on the small screen.

"I'm keen to do a roller-skating picture set in the 1970s, set in a roller-skating rink, based on my teenage years I guess... but that I haven't written yet.

"Then there's always my whaling picture which I'm hoping someone will want to make but there's been no interest in that oddly enough [laughs]." 

**South Solitary is released in cinemas on July 29. Check out INSIDEFILM's online video content section for the trailer.**

## Solitary Components

**Budget:** Just over \$7 million

**Film Stock:** Kodak 50D (16mm)

**Camera Equipment:**  
Panavision Australia

**Digital VFX/DI/Offline Editing:** The Lab Sydney

**Film Recording Services:**  
Digital Pictures Melbourne

**Music:** Jigsaw Music;  
Trackdown Scoring Stage;  
Utopia Audio; Lumin Music

**Sound Post-Production:**  
Soundfirm Sydney

**Negative Processing:** Deluxe  
Melbourne

**Travel Services:** Show Film,  
Reelfreight

**Trailer:** Zealot

## Stormy Weather

Mainland Victoria's rugged Cape Nelson, punctuated with whitewashed lighthouse cottages and spectacular cliffs, is renowned for its tempestuous weather.

But the rough winds, overcast skies and wild seas which define *South Solitary* didn't occur on location. They were recreated in the post-production process by The Lab Sydney after an unseasonal bout of good weather hit the production.

"We had to constantly reschedule the film to get around weather conditions," Miranda Otto, who plays the central character Meredith, says.

The difficult conditions required the involvement of The Lab's 3D, 2D, VFX, matte painting and digital intermediate grading departments. The Omnilab-owned company created storms, different

sky sequences, antique lighthouse lamps, constructed an old '20s steamer and generated rough seas across 57 shots in total.

Producer Marian Macgowan says they spent more money on visual effects than originally planned, partly due to the pace of local development.

"Between the time that we selected the location and when we turned up to shoot they had built a wind farm behind the location so every time we looked that way we had to remove vast fields of windmills," she says.

The Lab's VFX supervisor, Soren Jensen (*Charlotte's Web*) took part in the original location surveys with Barrett, Macgowan, cinematographer Anna Howard, ACS, and production designer Paul Heath.

Meanwhile, head of digital intermediate, Al Hansen (*Tomorrow When The War Began*) travelled to Victoria to set up the pipeline for daily rushes at The Lab's sister company, Digital Pictures Melbourne.

Offline suites were set up at Digital Pictures Melbourne to undertake the film's rushes and editorial. The media was then delivered to The Lab Sydney where the director's cut and fine cut were locked off.

The film was shot on 16mm stock for budgetary reasons, which required a tailored two-stage grade and digital intermediate process involving grain reduction.

Hansen created and finished the DI grading with support from senior colourist Vincent Taylor.