

Production Notes

The New Zealand Film Commission Presents

DEAN SPANLEY

In association with
Screen East Content Investment Fund
Aramid Entertainment
and
Lip Sync Productions LLP

A Matthew Metcalfe/Atlantic Film Group Production



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DEAN SPANLEY

Directed by Toa Fraser

Produced by Matthew Metcalfe & Alan Harris

Written by Alan Sharp

Based on the novel 'My Talks With Dean Spanley' by Baron Dunsany

Executive Producers Finola Dwyer and David Parfitt

Executive Producers Simon Fawcett and Alan Sharp

Editor - Chis Plummer

Director of Photography – Leon Narbey

Production Designer – Andrew McAlpine

Music by – Don McGlashan

Cast

Fisk Jr	Jeremy Northam
Dean Spanley	Sam Neill
Wrather	Bryan Brown
Fisk Sr	Peter O'Toole
Mrs. Brimley	Judy Parfitt
Swami Prash	Art Malik
Nawab	Ramon Tikaram
Harrington Fisk	Xavier Horan
1 st Lady	Barbara Wilshire
2 nd Lady	Angela Clerkin
Marriott	Dudley Sutton
Wine Shop Proprietor	Shaughan Seymour
Woman in Cloisters	Charlotte Graham
Boy in Cloisters	Haydon Downing
Foxy Lady	Miriama McDowell
Shepherd	Bruce Hopkins

SHORT SYNOPSIS

England, 1904. Henslowe Fisk (Jeremy Northam) and his ailing father, Horatio Fisk (Peter O'Toole), decide to go to a lecture given by the Swami Nala Prash (Art Malik) on reincarnation, called 'The Transmigration of Souls'. While there, they meet one Dean Spanley (Sam Neill) as well as Wrather (Bryan Brown), a self-described facilitator from the Colonies.

Later encountering the Dean at his father's club, and then in the grounds of the cathedral, Henslowe takes this to be more than coincidence and decides to ask the man to dinner, enticing him with the promise of his favourite tippie Imperial Tokay, a rare Hungarian sweet wine. Using Wrather to procure a bottle, Henslowe begins a series of dinners between with Spanley, in which – after two glasses of the wine – the Dean begins to recount strange recollections of his past life.

Incredulous at first, Henslowe becomes intrigued by the Dean's clear-headed accounts of his days during his former life. But as these alcohol-induced investigations continue, it becomes clear that Dean Spanley has an intimate connection to someone close to Henslowe, a revelation that will ultimately prove incredibly cathartic for all concerned.

LONG SYNOPSIS

England, 1904. Our narrator, Henslowe Fisk (Jeremy Northam) arrives for his weekly Thursday visit at the home of his father, Horatio Fisk (Peter O'Toole). As we learn, Henslowe's brother, Harrington, was killed in the Boer war while their mother died soon after, unable to cope with the grief.

Greeted at the door by his housekeeper Mrs. Brimley (Judy Parfitt), he is ushered into the kitchen, where he spies a copy of *The Times*, advertising a lecture on 'The Transmigration of Souls'. Henslowe goes to visit his father in his study, taking the copy of *The Times* with him, which they scan for inspiration for an afternoon diversion. They settle on the lecture, if only because it's being held at the home of the

cricket-mad Nawab of Ranjiput, who has infamously built a pitch in the middle of his marble hall.

Arriving at the Nawab's mansion, Henslowe pushing his father in a wheelchair, the pair are joined by Wrather (Bryan Brown), a friendly Australian who even helps Horatio up the stairs in his 'buggy'. Once inside, while the lecture is poorly attended, Henslowe spots Spanley (Sam Neill), the new Dean of St. Justus, as one of the audience members.

The Nawab enters, complete with cricket whites, to introduce Swami Nala Prash (Art Malik), the host of the lecture. Dealing with notions of reincarnation, when audience members ask questions at the end, one topic broached is the possibility of animals having souls. Explaining that they do, the Swami notes that man and dog have a particularly special relationship, and that those able to recall past existences found their immediately previous incarnation was particularly interesting.

After the lecture finishes, Wrather bids farewell to the Fisks, proffering his card, which reveals he is a 'Conveyancer', or a facilitator, as he explains. Meanwhile, Horatio Fisk admits he was unimpressed with the lecture, aside from the brief strange past life interlude. As he tells his son, he used to have a dog, named Wag. The pair decide to go to Horatio's club, which he hasn't been to for years.

Upon arrival, they spy Dean Spanley, and head over to introduce themselves. They solicit his opinion on the lecture, and he admits that the beliefs of others are always of interest to him. At his table, the Dean is drinking a glass of Imperial Tokay, a rare sweet Hungarian wine. After seeing this, Henslowe order a glass himself but finds that it is unavailable and that Spanley's bottle is private stock.

The following evening, in an event Henslowe takes to be a significance, he encounters Dean Spanley for a third time, in the grounds of the cathedral, looking at a cat stuck in the branches of a tree. Henslowe asks Spanley to dinner. The Dean is reluctant until Henslowe claims he has acquired a bottle of Imperial Tokay, an '89 vintage. They agree to meet the following Thursday at 7 o'clock.

Invariably, Henslowe finds it impossible to acquire the wine on account of the fact it was made solely for the Hapsburg monarchy and it takes a Royal Decree to have one uncorked. He then decides to pay Wrather a visit, and explains what he is on the

hunt for. By chance, in his vault, Wrathier has a bottle – though it is a '91 – and charges Henslowe five guineas for the privilege of taking it.

Henslowe visits his father, explaining that he is unable to take him out next Thursday because he is having dinner with the Dean. Needless to say, Horatio is extremely put out and the pair exchange some terse words regarding Henslowe's brother and mother. When his dinner date with Spanley arrives, Henslowe admits tasting the Imperial Tokay was hardly illuminating, yet it has an entirely different effect on his companion. He begins to talk as if from the perspective of a dog, espousing on the trouble with cats.

Startled by Spanley's revelations, Henslowe returns to Wrathier's house to procure another bottle of Imperial Tokay, explaining to the Australian about the past life memories the tittle induced in the Dean. After a brief visitation with his father, who is in a particularly foul mood, Henslowe reunites with Spanley for a second dinner and more wine. More memories are forthcoming of his past life.

Henslowe returns to Wrathier's house once more, to obtain more of the Dean's favourite drink. Intrigued, Wrathier wants to sit in on what he calls a séance – promising Henslowe that he will say nothing to interrupt proceedings. Before the appointed dinner, Henslowe goes back to see his father, to apologise for the quarrel they had the other day. Unimpressed, Horatio tells his son not to grovel, that it reminds him of his former dog, Wag. He then goes onto explain what happened to his dog, who ran off and never came back when Horatio was just 7 years-old.

Wrathier, Henslowe and Dean Spanley then all meet for dinner, with some more Imperial Tokay to drink. Once again, after much not-so-subtle prompting from Wrathier, the Dean drinks and begins to recount more recollections from his past life on all fours. After the dinner has concluded, Wrathier is keen to hear more, and offers Henslowe his services to find more wine, for free, in order that he may attend a further session. Henslowe agrees, and they pair troop back to the Nawab's mansion, where they are gifted a crate of Imperial Tokay. While there, the Nawab lets on that Spanley is known as Wag, a nickname that derives from his initials, Walter Arthur Graham.

Believing this revelation is far more than coincidence, Henslowe decides to also recruit his father for their next encounter with Spanley. They decide to host the evening at Horatio's house, where Mrs. Brimley will cook her lamb stew for four.

On the night, after Horatio cruelly recalls an incident when his two young sons were stranded on a lake on a particularly blustery evening, the Dean once more begins to recount his former life. This time, he blatantly reveals that his Master referred to him as Wag, a fact that leaves Horatio dumbfounded.

As the conversation continues, it becomes clear that the day in question, when Wag never returned to his Master, came about after he met a fellow dog and the pair raced off into the countryside. It emerges that, tragically, Wag was shot dead by a shepherd, protecting his sheep, when he was making his way home. Inevitably, this upsets Horatio, who then experiences a great outpouring of grief, as he thinks of his late son, Harrington, who was also returning home when he was killed.

After Mrs. Brimley makes her employer some tea and calms his nerves, Horatio returns to his hallway to bid farewell to his guests. He seems a changed man by the experience. Wrath and Spanley leave together, and the former offers the latter the final bottle of the Imperial Tokay as a token of his esteem. In return, Spanley then tells him he's convinced they have met before. A few days later, Henslowe arrives at his father's house to find him playing in the garden with a cocker spaniel that he has just acquired.

DEAN SPANLEY

Reincarnation and reconciliation form the heart of DEAN SPANLEY, a new feature comedy-drama inspired by the 1936 novella *My Talks With Dean Spanley* by Lord Dunsany. Set in Edwardian England, it follows a father and son as they encounter the eponymous eccentric, a man-of-the-cloth who claims to have had a rather strange past life.

Adapted by Alan Sharp (*Rob Roy*), DEAN SPANLEY is directed by UK-born, NZ raised Toa Fraser (*No.2*). A truly impressive international cast is led by eight-time Academy Award nominee Peter O'Toole (*Venus, Lawrence of Arabia*) and also features Jeremy Northam (*The Winslow Boy, Gosford Park*), Bryan Brown (*Cocktail, Gorillas In The Mist*) and Sam Neill (*Jurassic Park, My Brilliant Career*).

Shot in England and New Zealand, in late 2007 and early 2008, the film is produced by Matthew Metcalfe, of General Film Corporation, and Alan Harris, of Atlantic Film Productions. The cinematographer is Leon Narbey (*Whale Rider*). The costume designer is Odile Dicks-Mireaux (*10,000 BC*) and the production designer is Andrew McAlpine (*The Beach*). Executive producers are David Parfitt (*Shakespeare in Love*) and Finola Dwyer (*Backbeat*).

General Film Corporation and Atlantic Film Productions present a Matthew Metcalfe production of a film directed by Toa Fraser, DEAN SPANLEY. This UK-New Zealand co-production is financed by Aramid Capital Partners, the NZ Film Production Fund, the NZ Film Commission, Lipsync Productions and regional screen agency Screen East. International Sales are by NZ Film.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Appropriately enough, *My Talks With Dean Spanley* began life at a dinner party, almost eight years ago. New Zealand-born producer Matthew Metcalfe was visiting a friend, when he slapped a short script on the table, penned by Scottish screenwriter Alan Sharp (*Rob Roy*), and asked Metcalfe to take a look. It was an adaptation of *My Talks With Dean Spanley*, a novella by Anglo-Irish writer Lord Dunsany, published back in 1936. “I read the script, and thought it was amazing,” recalls Metcalfe, “but it was fifty pages long and there wasn’t really anything you could do with it for a commercial point of view.”

Two years went by, and Metcalfe was about to begin work on his most recent feature, the 2007 horror-thriller *The Ferryman*, when he had a Eureka moment. “I literally sat bolt upright in the middle of the night and went ‘Dean Spanley! I have an idea to make that into a feature film.’” It meant tracking down the New Zealand-based Sharp, taking him to lunch and convincing him to turn his short script into a feature-length work. “He was very sceptical about that, thinking it was really based on just a novella. So we went through this wonderful dance where he would write some more and I would say, ‘Just make it ten pages longer – I know it can’t be a feature but just humour me!’”

While many novellas lend themselves automatically to feature film adaptation, *My Talks With Dean Spanley* was structured around a series of dinners between the titular Dean and the story’s narrator, Henslowe Fisk, during which the former recounts his life as a dog in a previous existence. “That is where the book begins and ends,” says Metcalfe, but to expand the story, he and Sharp decided there had to be a reason why Fisk was continuing with his dinners with the Dean. “Finally we went, ‘Maybe he’s doing it because he wants to understand something important to him – he’s reaching out.’ That’s when the idea of the father came up.”

Enter the character of Horatio Fisk, who not featured in Lord Dunsany’s original. As Sharp’s script reflects, it’s his strained relationship with his son, the narrator, which helps form the emotional arc of the film. Thus reincarnation is swapped for reconciliation. “What it really reflects is that I think every father has, at some point, struggled to understand his son, while every son has struggled to understand his

father,” says Metcalfe. “It’s about how sons feel when their fathers don’t say they approve of them, or they appreciate them, or that they love them, or that they think they’re worthy. It’s about how fathers seems to struggle to communicate this to their sons, and how sons don’t feel they can pull their fathers up on this.”

Fast forward to November 2006, when Metcalfe was at AFM with *The Ferryman*, accompanied by Alan Harris, who co-produced the film. They received a copy of Sharp’s script – still missing the final thirty or so pages but now definitely shaped like a feature – and decided to proceed. With the title now shortened to *Dean Spanley*, in January 2007, Harris and Metcalfe decided to set up an Anglo-New Zealand co-production to fund the film. “I’ve only ever done co-productions, and putting together an Anglo-New Zealand co-production is pretty straightforward for me,” says Harris. The next few months were spent finding the finances, while Harris and Metcalfe decided on who should direct *Dean Spanley*.

“I felt very strongly that *Dean Spanley* should be told by someone who understood families,” says Metcalfe. “As much as it’s a comedy, and it’s wry, dry and acerbic, and very wonderful and eccentric, it’s also deep down got a lot of heart. It’s very powerful from that point of view.” They decided to go with the New Zealand-raised director Toa Fraser, an emerging talent whose 2006 debut, *No.2*, won the prestigious Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival. An adaptation of Fraser’s own 2000 play, it’s story of a Fijian-Kiwi matriarch gathering her clan around her for one final barbecue hit a chord with Metcalfe. “I looked at that and thought, ‘This guy really understands human beings and the way they communicate.’”

Sent the script, Fraser read it and responded immediately. “Matt originally pitched it to me as a guy who used to be a dog,” laughs Fraser, “but I began reading the script and it was really surprising to me that actually it’s a quite charming and emotional story about a father and a son. That wasn’t what *No. 2* was about, but there are definite similarities. They’re both stories about what it takes to bring family together in a sense – although they’re very different families. *No. 2* is a story about a very large, immigrant Fiji family in Mount Roskil in modern Auckland. And this is obviously a reasonably small family in turn-of-the-century England, so it’s a big, big change.”

Just as *No.2* was a nod to his Fijian roots on his father’s side, Fraser sees this as a tribute to his mother, who hailed from Essex. “I see *Dean Spanley* as a love letter to my Englishness,” he says. “The family of *Dean Spanley* reminds me a lot of my

English family. On a personal level, this project has given me the chance to reconnect with my English roots.” Nevertheless, Fraser concedes that not being steeped in the heritage of British period dramas, by not being raised in the UK, helped keep *Dean Spanley* fresh. “Nobody wants to do anything that talks too specifically about class or about Englishness,” he says. “We’re just making a story about some very particular individuals.”

If the story appealed to Fraser’s English side, he found he was fully able to take on board the reincarnation element of the story. “It was one of the things that attracted me to the script, in relation to my Fiji background,” he says. “We don’t really think of reincarnation, you don’t talk about it in those terms, but you do say, ‘Oh, there’s your grandmother outside’, when a bird arrives on the lawn. And it’s not a big deal. We go to church on Sunday and do all the Catholic stuff, but at the same time we have this relationship with animals and spirits that feels very normal. In the Pacific, that’s very, very common. So I like the fact that we’re not making too much of a big deal out of it. This is the truth of the story.”

CASTING

For a script so dialogue-driven, Fraser and Metcalfe knew the casting process would be critical. “I said going into it that I didn’t want to make it without a very good cast,” he says, and he got his wish, drawing on the crème-de-la-crème of talent from New Zealand, Australia and Britain. The first on board was Bryan Brown, the veteran Australian-born star of such films as *Cocktail* and *Gorillas In The Mist*. He was cast as the Australian entrepreneur Wrather, who befriends Henslowe Fisk and helps him lure the Dean into further revelatory dinners. “He can hustle up things,” says Brown. “He calls himself a middle man or a facilitator. In other words, he intends to do well and he’s happy to get in and graft.”

Just like Wrather, who also takes an interest in the Dean’s stories of reincarnation, Brown is open-minded when it comes to such topics. “I don’t have a problem with the spiritual world. Sounds quite logical to me. I had a ghost jump on my back and wrestle with me when I was a young actor in England, after I’d been to the Orange Tree Pub in Richmond. I went back to a house, three nights in a row, and that house had a ghost and on the third night it jumped on my back. It was scary for me, but also for the other actor whose room it was I burst into, trying to smash the ghost against the wall at 4 o’clock in the morning! That ghost had been hanging around for three nights!”

At this point, the attention turned to the casting of the Horatio Fisk. Metcalfe, along with Harris and Fraser, decided to “dare to dream” and send it to eight-time Oscar nominee Peter O’Toole who had also worked with Bryan Brown twenty-five years previous, on a TV film adaptation of Rudyard Kipling’s novel *Kim*. “Months went by, and it was really was months,” says Metcalfe. “I was actually filming a documentary in Northern Iraq, when I managed to listen to my voicemails through a Sat phone, and I got a message from the casting director, Dan Hubbard, saying ‘Peter is interested. He really likes the script. Is it still on offer?’ And Peter was solid from the get-go.”

As for O’Toole, reading *Dean Spanley*, and being reminded of its source writer, Lord Dunsany, was a blast from the past. “I’ve not heard of him for fifty years,” he remarks. “I looked through his credits, and I remembered him for three works. I knew him as a short story writer and I knew him as a playwright, but not for fifty years have I even

heard his name. An amazing man, as we now know – and a great chess champion!” He also pays tribute to Alan Sharp’s adaptation. “It’s a most unusual script. It’s different. I can’t compare it with anything – except it’s a sophisticated comedy of a high level.”

Not one who likes to “play big parts anymore”, nevertheless O’Toole admits he loved his time on the set. “We’ve been working like dogs – pardon the expression. We’ve all got lots to do, but the pleasure of working with top pros is that it’s alive. You can always tell when the crew joins in and they’re watching the monitors. They know that it’s going to be different. A number have come up to me and said, ‘I watch that, governor, and it reminds me of me and my Dad.’ Take away all the occult, all the transmigration, and what it is, is a father and a son who are estranged by events. It is truly just a reconciliation – and very beautiful and on a simple human level.”

For Fraser the chance to work with O’Toole, who was most recently Oscar-nominated for his lead role in Roger Michell’s *Venus*, was an intimidating task he took to with relish. “He’s just a man who is at the very peak of his capabilities. He knows completely what he can do with his face, with his voice, with his body, with his heart. He doesn’t have any...literally, you can whisper one word in his ear and it changes his performance completely. He can just do that. It gives him an idea and sends him spinning to a different nuanced performance that’s really exciting, but at the same time keeps very faithful to making sure the scene and story works.”

As it happens, it was O’Toole who recommended British actor Jeremy Northam to play Horatio Fisk’s son, Henslowe. “Peter hadn’t worked with Jeremy before but he knew of Jeremy’s work, and suggested him, effectively,” says Metcalfe. While Northam is a veteran of numerous English-set period dramas, from David Mamet’s *The Winslow Boy* to Robert Altman’s *Gosford Park*, it was Michael Winterbottom’s post-modern comedy *A Cock and Bull Story* that tipped them off. “We saw this different side to Jeremy Northam,” says Metcalfe. “He was more alive, more vibrant, more daring – after all, our character is one who goes on a crazy adventure!”

Northam sees his character’s journey in slightly different terms. “I suppose he thinks he’s doing something in order to lift his father out of his gloom, the stasis that he’s in. But actually, the son is in his own gloom. He’s in his own situation that he’s trying to resolve. A lot of people, certainly by the time they reach a certain stage in life, have fairly complex relationships with their parents, if they’re still around. But it seems that

parents generally of a certain age don't say to their kids what they think of them. It's very easy for people to get crossed wires and the offspring to think that they're not cared for perhaps. And it's very easy for the parents to think that they're detested by the children. I think that's at the nub of their relationship."

As the narrator of the piece, it meant that Northam was in virtually every scene – and was required to be on set for every moment of the 36-day shoot. "It takes a bit of concentration, but it's quite fun doing every scene pretty much. You've got a chance to get a real way through it." With most of his lines spoken as voiceover, it meant Northam had less dialogue to learn than some of his peers. "It's a very reactive part, I think you could say!" He admits he's been impressed, in particular, with Fraser. "For someone relatively inexperienced, he's incredibly level-headed. He doesn't blow smoke up people's arses! There's no hysteria and throwing his weight around. He has a quiet authority about him, and he thinks on his feet."

Concurrent to the casting of Northam was the crucial selection of who to play Dean Spanley. "There's only one name we ever talked about: Sam Neill," says Metcalfe. "We had never actually discussed another name. I don't know what we'd do if we didn't have him." Yet as Harris reports, the New Zealand-raised Neill, star of such prestige projects as *Jurassic Park* and *The Piano*, was not easy to get on board. "Sam turned us down a couple of times, but we just kept going back at him. I think initially he thought, 'They're going to have me down on the ground licking my bollocks, scratching myself and being dog-like!'"

In the end, Neill decided to take on the role, presumably – as an owner of three working vineyards himself – taken by the idea that Dean Spanley always begins his canine recollections after two glasses of the Hungarian sweet wine, Imperial Tokay. "It's a sort of desert wine, one I know nothing about, but I'm prepared to believe it's transcendent," says Neill. "It seems to have this magical effect on the Dean. He's a fool for Tokay." It also undoubtedly helped that, not unlike his character, Neill is also a dog lover, owning a Staffordshire bull terrier "of whom I'm inordinately fond!" It certainly helped with his preparation: "What I've drawn on is embedded in myself: a familiarity with odd people and dogs!"

The biggest challenge for Neill was learning the lines. "There's as much dialogue in this film as I've done in the last five years across I don't know how many films," he says. "It's very unusual in that respect, in that it's very dialogue heavy. It's all about

ideas and stories.” In the final scene, for example, in which Dean Spanley recounts a crucial day in the life of his previous incarnation, he had to learn lines spanning some nineteen pages. “When you start a film, it always seems like a mountain too high to climb. But once you’ve got your crampons on and a rope around your waist, it doesn’t seem too bad – once you realise you’re enjoying yourself. That’s terribly important.”

Rounding out the cast as Horatio Fisk’s housekeeper, Mrs. Brimley, was Judy Parfitt, another favourite of O’Toole. “Judy and me, we go back ages,” he says. “She’s an excellent actress. She’s good news.” Also cast was Art Malik as the Swami, whose lecture on reincarnation is where the main characters all first meet. Malik admits he didn’t base his interpretation of the spiritual guru on any one in particular. “There’s been a myriad of Swamis that have come out in my lifetime,” he says. “There was a lot of Indian mystics – even an 11 year-old Indian schoolboy. He came to London and we thought he was fantastic. So I’ve always thought it was interesting.”

SHOOTING *DEAN SPANLEY* AND BEYOND

With the cast in place, Fraser set about gathering his key heads-of-department. Not unsurprisingly, he plumped for a series of vastly experienced men and women, led by cinematographer Leon Narbey (*Whale Rider*), with whom he had worked with on *No.2*. Also recruited was costume designer Odile Dicks-Mireaux, a three-time BAFTA TV nominee who had just come off Roland Emmerich's New Zealand-shot epic *10,000 BC*. For production design, he chose the Auckland-born Andrew McAlpine, who has worked with numerous top directors including Danny Boyle (*The Beach*), Spike Lee (*Clockers*) and Jane Campion (*The Piano*).

Filming began in November 2007, in several locations around Cambridgeshire and East Anglia, including Elm Hill in Norwich as well as the city's Cathedral's cloisters. By late January 2008, the production moved to New Zealand where the second unit material (scenes where Dean Spanley recalls his past life) was shot. According to Harris, the production was the complete opposite to his last film produced with Metcalfe. "This is almost the yin to *The Ferryman's* yang. The Anglo-New Zealand co-production that we did with *The Ferryman* sixty-five per cent spent in New Zealand, and thirty-five spent here. This was the other way around."

Unsurprisingly, numerous stately homes in England were taken full advantage of. With scenes also shot at Holkham Hall and Peckover House, one of the key locations was Elveden Hall, near Thetford, which has featured in numerous films, including Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*. The setting for the lecture where all the characters first meet – a mansion house belonging to the cricket-mad Nawab of Ranjiput – it required a bowling strip to be built in the great hall. "The hard thing was keeping Peter away from the cricket ball," laughs Fraser. "He actually recommended the guys who play the extras in the scene and put us in touch with the MCC."

Fraser admits he loved working with the British crew during the shoot. "We are trying to bring as many gifts to the British film industry as possible!" he winks. One of these is called 'the Slab'. If a noise – like a mobile phone ringing – goes off during a crucial scene, the offender has to pay a penalty. "You have to buy a whole slab [round] of beer for the crew!" Fraser explains. "They don't have that in England." He was also surprised that English crews don't do "shouts" much. "In New Zealand, at the end of a week, everyone will arrive with a big case of beer. I did a shout a couple of days

ago, and brought a whole load of beers, and hardly anyone stayed around for it. They said it was because they were driving!”

It wasn't just Fraser's ability to work with crews from the other side of the world that was called upon. “One of the reasons we got Toa in is because his background is a lot of theatre,” says Harris. “He's a playwright by profession and he's very good with actors. So I think that utilising his skills, in regard to working with the cast was very important.” Yet it was crucial to make such a dialogue-driven piece as cinematic as possible. “That's what we've tried to do – get outside as much as possible! – and demonstrate that we're in 1904, and see what was about in that period. A lot of these things are designed to make sure it doesn't look like a BBC period drama.”

Certainly, getting the tone right has been the biggest challenge. Bringing what Harris calls “an adult fairy tale” to the screen meant striking a delicate balance between the serious and the comic. “It's a surreal story, but we're playing it very, very straight,” says Harris. “People are talking about something that is very bizarre, and they're believing it. What we tried to do, in regard to the way we shot it, is to lure the audience into a heightened sense of reality, so then they're much more ready to accept this wacky idea that this guy is actually talking about his previous life as a dog. It's about bringing one up and bringing the other down and hopefully the balance will work out.”

As to the question of who the audience will be for *Dean Spanley*, Harris admits when they first started putting the project together, it was aimed at the older generation. “But the way it's been executed, it kept hitting me that this is the kind of story that younger viewers could actually find very interesting. They could be quite enthralled by the subject matter, a man talking about his life as a dog.” Yet if it's anything, Metcalfe believes it's the central relationship between the Fisks that will grab viewers. “Film and literature is filled with father-son stories,” he says. “*Star Wars* is a father-son story, as crazy as it sounds. And that's what this is ultimately about – a father and a son bridging the gulf.”

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