



# way out west

Swinging saloon doors, tough guys squaring off and a climactic shoot-out are just part of the action in contemporary western *Netherwood*, a feature film shot entirely in Waipara that is set to tour small-town New Zealand.

Words Kim Newth Photos Joseph Johnson

A remote gravel road stretches into the blue distance, overshadowed by limestone hills. The air is hot and still. Along the road walks a solitary figure, dressed in black. He pauses for a moment at a road sign bearing a single word, "Netherwood".

So the scene is set for Canterbury's very own western-style movie. The opening shots feature on a promotional trailer and, judging by the reaction of an enthusiastic audience of film cast and crew, guests, and locals at the Waipara Hotel recently, *Netherwood* is poised for public success.

This independently funded, locally made movie is to premiere in Amberley in March, and a nationwide tour of small-town cinemas is to follow.

The co-producers are two former *Shortland Street* actors, Owen Black and Will Hall, who played, respectively, creepy surgeon Ethan Pierce and romantic larrikin Kip Denton in the long-running series. Will also starred in *The Insider's Guide to Happiness* and *The Insider's Guide to Love* as soul-searching James from Wanganui.

Prepare to see both actors in very different roles in *Netherwood*. Owen is Stan, the man dressed in black at the start

of the movie, who is passing through the small township of Netherwood when he gets tangled up in a local dispute. A good guy at heart, he doesn't like what he finds and wants to put things right. Will plays moustachioed bad boy Mex, the son of a scheming landowner who is greedy to get his hands on every last scrap of local real estate.

Also in the mix are humble landowner Gordie (played by Mick Innes), who is a good friend of Stan's old man, Carl the barman at the local pub (played by comic great Peter Rowley), and a mysterious woman of the forest, Maria (Miriam Smith).

This epic tale of feuding farmers, set on Canterbury's coast, is being described as not so much a cowboy western as our own "farmer eastern".

"But the themes are universal," Will says. "It's set in this vast brown landscape. People will love the look of Waipara and North Canterbury in this film."

Most of the shooting – by cameramen and gun-slinging actors – took place in March, with some re-shooting and final shots filmed in November. Funding to date has come entirely from private funders and sponsorship, with most of the money raised in Canterbury.

There is enormous goodwill and grace associated with this project. Big names in the industry, such as professional horse wrangler Wayne McCormack, became involved at very modest rates. With gigs such as *Lord of the Rings* and *Prince Caspian* on his resume, his usual fees would have been prohibitive for *Netherwood*.

Wayne and Owen had earlier met through fantasy television series *Legend of the Seeker*.

"Wayne more or less said, 'I see you're doing a western – I'd love to be involved. He brought the horses down for us and gave his time for free. It was just amazing,'" Owen says.

The movie's first assistant director, Edd Bennetto, worked on the United Kingdom television police drama series *The Bill* before *Netherwood*.

"I bumped into him on a flight down to Christchurch and we got talking while we were waiting to collect our luggage," Owen says. "I'd worked with him on *Shortland Street* in 2000, so I said, 'Edd, do you remember me? We're doing this film, would you be interested?' He was back in Christchurch, as his Mum was ill. He said, 'Sure, I'd love to be involved.' He ended



Owen Black, Will Hall and Mick Innes in "Netherwood" country.



up doing it for next to nothing, sleeping in a tent on the back lawn. Without him, it would not have happened. He was another key player for us."

It's a similar story with actor Peter Rowley. His home town is Amberley and he'd always wanted to be in a western.

"He was the one who approached us wanting to be involved," Owen says. "Peter is a wonderful man for us to have behind the bar in this film."

At the Waipara Hotel, publicans Willie and Mel Inia proved to be the best possible hosts, more than happy to see their usual clientele of farmers and vineyard workers joined by actors and film crew.

Waipara farmers Stu and Sue Thomson offered their farm, Manahune, as a shoot location and ended up renting their farm house as a production base.

"Stu was the 'go to' guy," Sue says.

"Whatever needed doing, he'd do it. Everyone worked so hard, but it was a real blast and we had so much fun."

Waipara residents, such as truck driver and Glenmark Rugby Club prop Jon Thomson, helped fill parts in the movie. Jon, who plays one of Mex's sidekicks and has half a dozen or so lines, had never acted before.

"I run a transport business, so being in front of a camera was a fairly different experience for me. It was really interesting seeing how it was done. There were about half a dozen other guys from the rugby team that came in to help out as well."

When Owen first decided he wanted to make a movie in Waipara, he called a friend in the trade, film director Cristobal Araus Lobos and invited him down. Their first idea was for a horror film. Owen took the rough concept – which, by then, had grown into 40 pages of script – to writer

John Argall, who decided that western was the best genre for the story.

"Then he went ahead and totally rewrote the whole story. *High Noon*, *Shane* and *The Gunfighter* were the inspirations behind the script John wrote," says Owen, who first met Cris and John at the Unitec School of Performing and Screen Arts in the late 1990s.

"I had a wish list of who I wanted to work with and it has been great to be able to bring these talented people together," says Owen, who grew up in Waipara. The name "Netherwood" comes from the family ranch where he was raised. The Black family name is not just associated with film. The Black Estate Pinot Noir 2007, produced from the family vineyard and winery, won the Bouchard Finlayson Trophy at this year's prestigious International Wine and Spirit Competition in London. Owen's father, Russell Black, is also a Hurunui district councillor. Much of *Netherwood* was shot on the family farm.

Will is Christchurch born and bred and recalls dabbling in filmmaking back in the late 1990s at a St Andrew's College holiday film and television course called

## from the heart

Fighting off the forces of evil as Gordie in *Netherwood* is actor Mick Innes (above), another cast member with a local connection. His mother, Dulcie Innes, hails from Rangiora.

Australian audiences are probably more familiar with his work, with Mick best known for playing the part of Martin Henderson's father, Darcy, in the Australian

Beyond the Camera. He's kept his "golden flossies" trophies stemming from that course, as well as his old school contacts. Sound man Tristan Maxwell, safety officer/assistant clapper Michael Marshall, second assistant director Jordan Mauger and *Netherwood* extra Jeremy London are all Beyond the Camera veterans.

Another friend from Will's college days, Dave Jensen, is the movie's cameraman. Says Dave, "Yes, it's true, I went to school with Will. We go back a long way. He was in one of my first short films. It's

soap *Echo Point*. He has appeared in many other Australian classics, such as *Blue Heelers*, *Water Rats* and *Home and Away*.

Mick is a good friend of veteran actor Tony Barry, who famously played partner-in-crime to Gerry Austin (played by Kelly Johnson) in the classic *Goodbye Pork Pie*.

"Earlier this year, Tony was crook, so I thought I'd play my part in *Netherwood* as a tribute to him. It's the kind of role that

Tony has played a lot. He's fine with that and so is the director. They don't make actors like that any more – so this is one for you, Tony!"

Mick says he actively sought a part in *Netherwood*.

"I liked the idea of a western story and I loved the way these guys were producing it themselves. It has been great to work in an area that I frequented a lot when I was a kid."

been really amazing doing *Netherwood*, meeting all the crew and the locals. We worked six days a week, 10 hours a day, but it was a lot of fun. There were no egos involved. Everyone just got on and did their job."

At the Waipara Hotel, the locals are feeling excited at just how well North Canterbury has scrubbed up for this movie. There is also unease in this community about how a proposed wind farm development might destroy the purity of that western-style landscape.

But, as the *Netherwood* trailer plays at the pub, the feeling in the room is one of pure pride.

Sharing a beer with the cast and crew is none other than rugby legend Alex 'Grizz' Wylie, who believes the film will be a huge boost for the area.

"In the old westerns, there would be the limestone rock outcrops where the shooting would happen. There would always be the sweeping landscapes – suddenly, you realise we've got all that here." ▢

“ He ended up doing it for next to nothing, sleeping in a tent on the back lawn. Without him, it would not have happened. Owen Black