

At 81, Fred Schepisi is fighting fit to keep his own cinematic style

The film legend, who first appearing in the Australian Financial Review in 1964 and who directed Meryl Streep and Kirk Douglas, still has the fire in the belly to make uncompromising films.

[Michael Bailey](#)



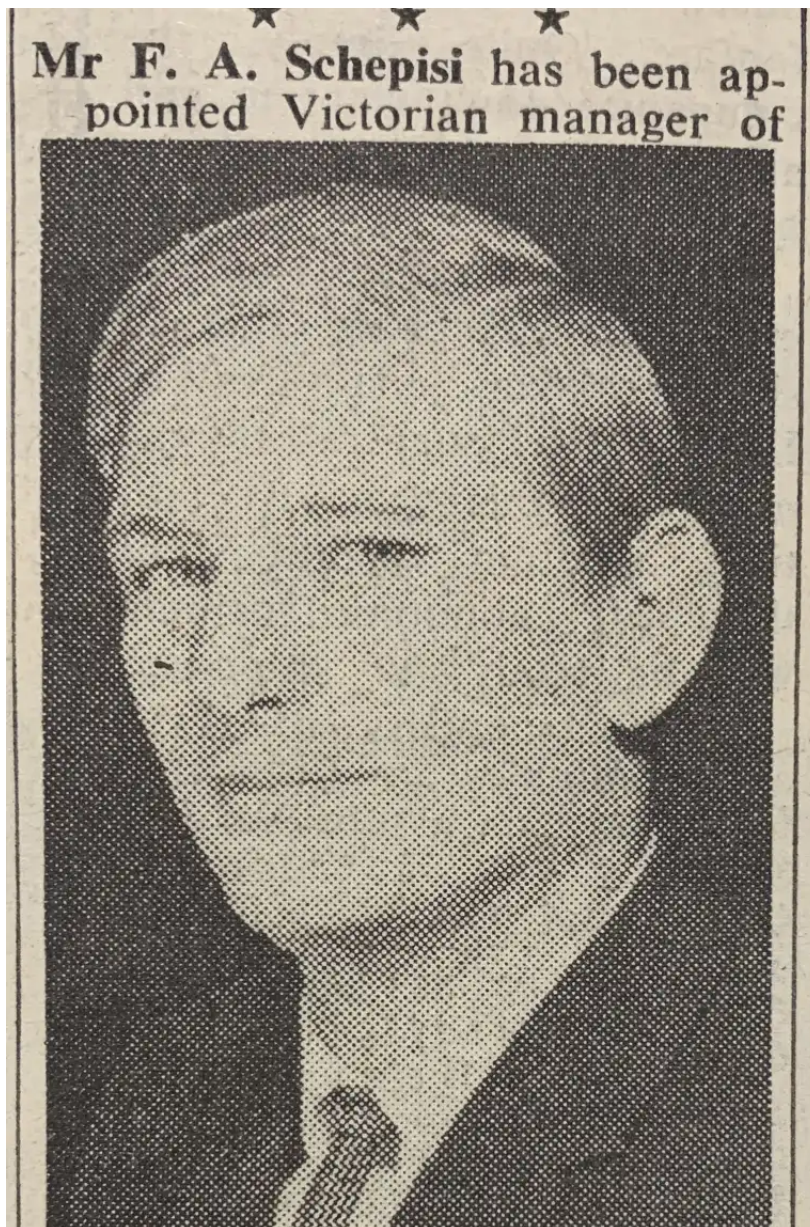
Fred Schepisi today at his home in Red Hill, Victoria. The indefatigable director wrote a five-part TV series in lockdown. **Arsineh Houspian**

When [Fred Schepisi](#) directed Willie Nelson in the western *Barbarosa* in 1981, he became one of the first Australians to crack Hollywood: a place where youth, or at least the appearance of it, rules.

Ironic, then, that 17 years earlier, Schepisi had supplied a photograph to *The Australian Financial Review* that he hoped would make him look older than he really was.

The occasion of Schepisi's first coverage in the national financial daily in 1964 was his appointment, at just 24 years of age, as Victorian manager for Cinesound. It had made the iconic Australian movie *On Our Selection* in

1932, but by then was a stodgy producer of newsreels and corporate films.



News of Fred Schepisi's appointment to Cinesound's Victorian office, as reported in the Australian Financial Review in 1964.

Schepisi would not only turn the Cinesound branch office around, he would soon buy it out, rename it The Film House, and make it integral to the scene that produced the [1970s "new wave" of Australian film-makers.](#)

Along with Gillian Armstrong, Bruce Beresford and Peter Weir, Schepisi left an undelible mark on world cinema. In 1978's *The Chant Of Jimmie Blacksmith*, he was one of the first to put a First Nations story on screen, before going on to direct everyone from Meryl Streep in 1988's *Evil Angels*, to Kirk and Michael Douglas in 2003's *It Runs In The Family*. At 81, he's still fighting to get pictures made his way.

Born Frederic Schepisi in Melbourne on Boxing Day of 1939, the son of an Italian-born car dealer, he caught the film bug in his late teens, watching post-war European masterpieces such as *Wages of Fear*, *Rocco And His Brothers* and *The Bicycle Thieves* at the only place in town that showed them – The Savoy.

“I used to go and see these so-called ‘continental movies’ – and not always for the right reasons,” Schepisi says from his home at Red Hill, in the Mornington Peninsula hinterland. “I thought I’d see a bit of sex. But I found myself lost in wonderful worlds I knew nothing about, yet at the same time I discovered myself in them.”

After a repressive education in a Catholic “juniorate” at Macedon in regional Victoria – an experience he’d turn into his first feature film – Schepisi finished his leaving certificate at 14, and briefly worked as a motor mechanic in one of his dad’s car yards.

“I was hopeless at that. He was probably very glad when I discovered advertising,” he has previously said.

Schepisi started as a messenger boy at Carden Advertising – today known as Clemenger – and knew he’d found his people, if not his calling.

“It seemed to be a refuge for those who hadn’t gone overseas to be playwrights or novelists or whatever. A lot of journalists came through the place as well.”

‘I put my age up by three years’

One of those was Phillip Adams, the future radio broadcaster who would be pivotal to Schepisi’s film career.

Those two weren’t the only nascent creative forces labouring over ad copy in the 1960s but for Schepisi, the silver screen was already calling.

“I joined a lot of film societies like the Moggs Creek Moving Clickers, and we’d have the time of our lives, making parodies of big films with our little

8- millimetre cameras,” he says.

“There was this collaborative spirit among creative people that I’d never experienced before. It became pretty obvious to me that I really hated advertising and wanted to do film.”

So when he spotted the job ad for Cinesound, Schepisi decided to give it a crack despite his relative youth.

“They wanted a manager, so I put my age up by three years on the application,” he recalls.

“Cinesound had just made a bit of a foray into advertising themselves, but they weren’t really hip enough to get anywhere. In the interview, I somehow convinced them that I was the guy to change that.”

Founded in Bondi Junction in NSW, Cinesound’s Victorian unit had all of six people working for it when Schepisi joined.

One of those was Russell Boyd, who went on to become the cinematographer on most of Peter Weir’s films.



Sean Connery, Michelle Pfeiffer and Fred Schepisi on location of Russia House in 1990. **Getty**

However, Schepisi lucked into an ingenious way of finding more talent. Using a connection provided by Adams, he became an examiner for the fledgling film course at Swinburne University Of Technology.

“They didn’t pay me and it didn’t matter. I’d offer all the best students jobs with us,” he says, noting that this was how he found Jill Bilcock, who went on to edit his *Evil Angels*, among dozens of other Australian classics.

This injection of talented youth soon showed up in the public relations films that Cinesound would make for the likes of Volkswagen and Alcoa.

“They weren’t the usual ‘two hundred pounds of steel pressed 20 different ways’ sort of thing. They were very avant-garde – we were using them as training for the movies we all wanted to make,” he says.

Yet far from perplexing the clients, these PR films were instrumental in the Cinesound branch office “making its first real profit” within 18 months of his arrival, Schepisi claims.

“Amazingly enough, we’d show the people running these companies the films we’d done for them, and they’d cry,” he says.

“We saw the beauty in what they did that they’d always seen, but nobody else noticed.”

A 16-minute film that Schepisi made for *The Age* – 1965’s *People Make Papers* – is still shown to trainee journalists today.



Fred Schepisi and Meryl Streep in September 1987.

'I wasn't a newshound'

While Cinesound's PR and advertising arms flourished, Schepisi didn't do much for its newsreel business, its traditional mainstay then only starting to feel the threat from television bulletins.

"I remember The Beatles were in town at the Southern Cross Hotel and the cameraman wanted to go and cover it," he recalls.

"I told him you're not going down there, why feed the hysteria? It was obvious I wasn't a newshound!"

Newsreels were soon to be a moot point. Teaming up with graphic

designers Bruce Weatherhead and Alex Stitt, who would go on to create “Norm” and the “Life. Be In It.” campaign, Schepisi bought out Cinesound Victoria in 1966 and renamed it The Film House.

Here he would be at the vanguard of the renewal of Australian cinema, which ironically had been in the doldrums since Cinesound stopped making movies with the outbreak of World War II.

Redirecting nearly every dollar he made from ads and PR films into his passion, Schepisi developed scripts with writers from the theatre and literature worlds.

“I found that mixing up the mediums helped to kickstart everybody,” he says.

A notable partner from this period was [Thomas Keneally](#), a fellow product of a staunch Catholic education, who wrote *The Priest* for Schepisi’s first contribution to a feature film, 1973’s four-part *Libido*.



Director Fred Schepisi during the filming of *The Eye of the Storm*.

Schepisi was also an assessor for the Gorton government's Experimental Film Fund, a \$150,000 marvel created after Phillip Adams got in the ear of another contact – Labor politician, and then member of the Australia Council For The Arts, Barry Jones.

“The biggest amount we parcelled out from that was \$7000 to Tim Burstall, and he used it to make *Stork*,” says Schepisi, referring to the director who would go on to make the definitive “Ozploitation” film, 1973's *Alvin Purple*.

Schepisi also organised short film showcases, aimed at helping himself and his advertising friends convince the government and potential private funders of their ability to make movies.

“The biggest prejudice back then was ‘Oh, but you just work in 60 seconds’, or 10 minutes or whatever, so the chance to expose our skills was really important in that era,” he says.

“But it wasn’t a breeze. It took me until ’75 to get to make *Devil’s Playground*.”

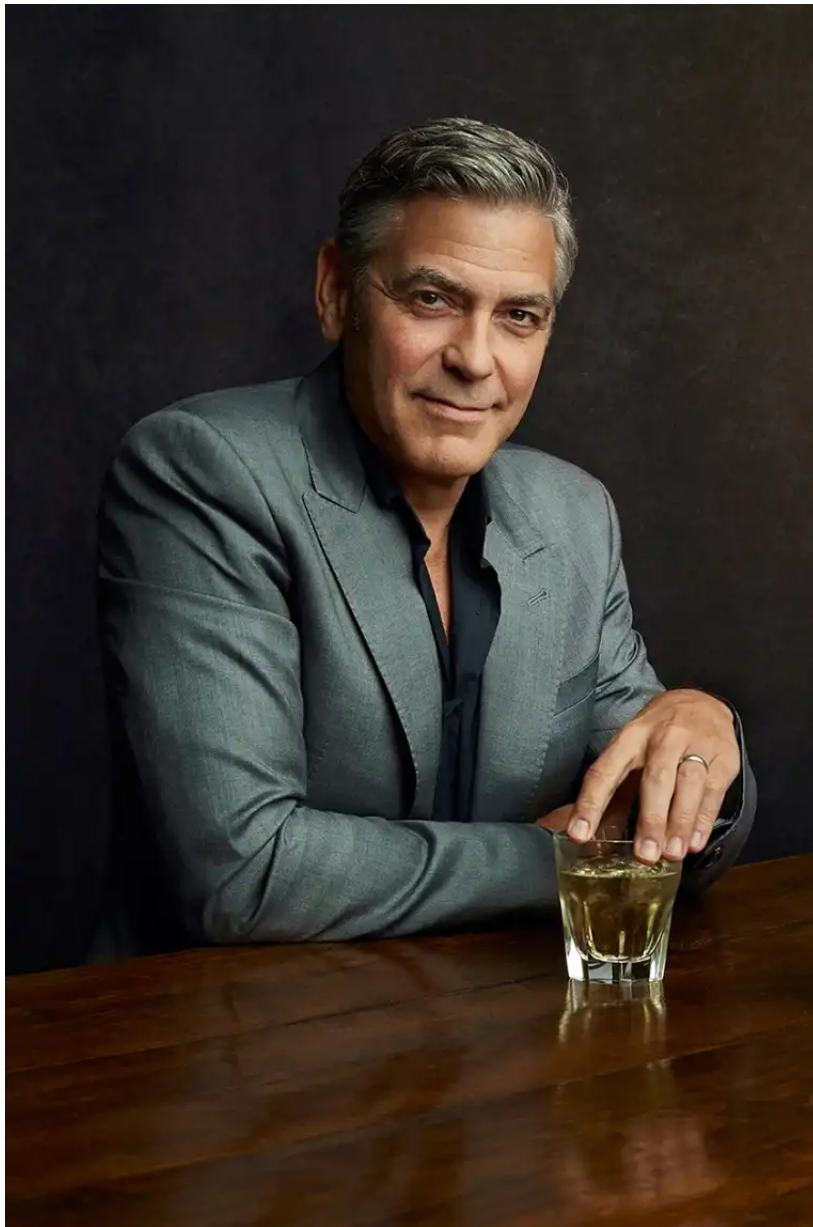
The critical success of that semi-autobiographical movie – to which The Film House contributed \$154,000 of the \$306,000 budget – led to Schepisi’s most famous Keneally collaboration, a 1978 movie based on Keneally’s novel *The Chant Of Jimmie Blacksmith*.

Its unflinching look at white Australian racism actually played better in the US, where it won a New York Critics Circle Award, than at home, where Schepisi lost the entire \$250,000 he had tipped in to its \$1.2 million budget.

“I couldn’t keep using my own money to make movies, so I went to Hollywood,” he says.

Jimmie Blacksmith’s perceived similarity to westerns convinced Universal Pictures to give Schepisi a shot at directing *Barbarosa*, and he parlayed the opportunity into a successful Tinseltown career.

“Making movies in Australia, you have to know every part of the process – how to cut corners and still come up with great results,” he says. “That stands you in good stead with the studios.”



Schepisi says George Clooney's 'Good Night, And Good Luck' from 2005 helped ring another death knell for the mid-sized movie.

Schepisi became something of a specialist in directing intelligent, emotion-driven films that were assigned modest budgets, usually between \$US10 million and \$US20 million.

He delivered solid profits to his paymasters with the likes of 1987's *Roxanne*, a *Cyrano de Bergerac* remake starring Steve Martin, and 1990 thriller *The Russia House* starring Sean Connery.

Blame Marvel and George Clooney

However, these medium-sized films now struggle to get made, for which Schepisi blames two things – the “Marvel movie” phenomenon of the last

decade, and George Clooney.

“The side-effect of all these Marvel blockbusters is that big-name actors, whom you used to be able to use to get your project greenlit because they wanted to do something interesting, will no longer do it,” he says.

“They’re under contract, and don’t want to take your job for very little if it jeopardises their availability for the next superhero movie.”

Six Degrees Of Separation from 1993 was perhaps Schepisi’s greatest critical and commercial success, but the director says he’d have little chance of attaching Will Smith to it today – let alone having the *Men In Black* star agree to the weeks of acting and accent coaching he did back then.

Meanwhile, Schepisi says George Clooney’s *Good Night, And Good Luck* from 2005 helped ring another death knell for the mid-sized movie.

“Clooney makes this film in a room and a half for \$US7 million – of course he can afford to star and direct it for nothing upfront – then when it’s a hit, suddenly the studio that might have once signed off a budget of \$US15 million only wants to give you \$US7 million too,” he says.

“Unfortunately I’m one of those idiots who want to make films that need certain production values.”

So it is that Schepisi has not made a film after 2014’s *Words And Pictures*.

Three projects since have got as far as confirming locations and cast, only to stumble at the final financial hurdle – a fate Schepisi sees befalling too many other budding Australian film-makers.

“The government helps with the producer offset but it never seems to be quite enough,” he says.

Schepisi applauds the success of Australian films like Robert Connolly’s *The Dry*, which made over \$20 million at the local box office this year as American blockbusters were postponed due to the pandemic.

However, he warns that the Marvel movies will be back soon enough, and that streaming services are not quite the panacea for mid-budget productions that film-makers once hoped for.

“In theory it should be easier and cheaper to pitch your idea straight to the guys who can finance it and distribute it, even though you’re not getting the back-end [royalty] you used to get from TV re-runs and DVD sales,” Schepisi says.

“But I’ve noticed a bit of the old studio mentality creeping in at the streamers. Like. ‘You need two big names in it before we’ll do it.’”

‘The doing of it is still the thrill’

Nevertheless Schepisi is, at 81, still as enthused about the next thing as he was when he was 24-going-on-27.

He delivers the elevator pitch for *What The !@# \$*, a five-part series he wrote during lockdown. It will open with a dramatic shot of a smoking car wreck suspended from a tree, and then goes backwards to tell the story of how the incident happened, intercut with the story of what happens next. He’s shopping it to American investors.

“Someone said to me the other day, ‘We thought you’d given up’ – no way!” Schepisi bellows down the phone.

“The doing of it is still the thrill. Never repeating yourself, getting involved with actors and writers, it’s all its own reward. It’s just a shame you don’t get paid ‘til the damn thing comes out.”

And what advice would the veteran director have for that up-and-comer pictured in the 1964 *Financial Review*?

“While you’re ignorant of the obstacles, go for it!” Schepisi says.

“Sacrifice what you have to – don’t let anything stop you.”