



"It's very alarming for people if the director appears to not know what's going on" / The humble Kiwi director made *Topless Women Talk about Their Lives*. Now he talks to *No* about his own.

One of Harry Sinclair's first film memories was a rather macabre scene of a man being pulled part - or 'quartered' - by four horses. The film was *Genghis Khan*, the place '60s Auckland. His mother had given her two boys pocket money for the movies while she paid a visit to the dentist, but little Harry was so distressed he chose the dentist's waiting room over the cinema.

This strong gut reaction to film was something that stayed with Sinclair throughout his childhood. "I had a bit of difficulty adjusting to reality afterwards," he says, "sometimes feeling the movie was more real than my real life. I had that feeling a bunch of times."

But who is Harry Sinclair? You could say he's a Hollywood director or an indie short filmmaker. Ask a *Lord of the Rings* buff and they'd tell you he was the evil Isildur. Anyone plugged into the '80s Kiwi theatre scene would tell you he was part of comedy music group, The Front Lawn. Then there's that iconic little triumph, *Topless Women Talk about Their Lives*.

Sinclair's career has been sprawling, sometimes sporadic, yet always successful. He comes from a sizeable strain of storytellers and lovers of performance, with his brother Stephen also a television and film writer. His father was Keith Sinclair CBE, the charismatic and wonderfully clamorous Auckland University history professor and

poet. Keith, who wrote *A History of New Zealand*, was "larger than life," says Sinclair.

"My father was a phenomenally loud man who would shout anyone down at a party. He was a fantastic and charming individual. I was kind of shy and retiring. I didn't want to become an actor, and had no interest in performing for some time. I think I was a little overwhelmed by the noise of my father, because he was kind of intimidating."

Eventually, after dropping out of university in his early 20s, Sinclair took up acting at Auckland's Theatre Corporate. Vastly impressed by a touring actor from Europe, he then learned of a Parisian theatre school renowned for its sense of fun - L'Ecole Philippe Gaulier - and promptly flew to Paris.

It was a steep learning curve both professionally and personally, with any sense of introversion kicked firmly to the curb. "I'd grown up in a pretty safe and comfortable existence," he says, "and to suddenly find myself at 23 really having to fend for myself was character building... I had to get over myself and get to know people."

Back in New Zealand in the '80s, Sinclair sunk his teeth into The Front Lawn. It featured rock 'n' roll royalty Don McGlashan, and he has fond memories of the collaboration between two friends who'd both been away and had "outsider eyes". The Front

Lawn de-constructed the way New Zealanders used language and interacted with each other, as in *How You Doing*, from the album *Songs from the Front Lawn*. But really, Sinclair says, it was the sheer delight of the camaraderie and humour generated by mateship that made it work.

"Our writing wasn't very good. We'd just get through it by being goofy and entertainers, and it was the energy of me and Don together."

The success story of his film and then television series, *Topless Women Talk about Their Lives*, was built around much the same formula. So much so, that "I thought, 'It doesn't matter what I call it, no one's going to see it'. I just thought I'd call it the oddest, most silliest name that popped into my head."

Labouring over a thorny thriller at the time and in need of a distraction, Sinclair called pals Danielle Cormack, Joel Tobeck and Ian Hughes and they started filming on Saturday afternoons.

The process reflected what he had learned in Paris that a project could spawn naturally from working with actors right from the genesis of the process. "The joy of working with these actors... sort of liberated me as a writer and that enabled me to write something fresh with people I enjoyed."

With all three of Sinclair's feature films (*Topless Women Talk about Their Lives*, *The Price of Milk* and *Toy Love*), he chose to cast the actors first and then write the script. His latest short film, *Call Me*, features actors who aren't even actors, just people with interesting personalities he thought would produce a good story. "I often enjoy working with people I have to plead with to act," he says. No doubt directing US drama *90210* is a different ballgame. The show uses a system of guest directors and Sinclair has now been given the call-up four times. He loves the challenge of the big set, including the big budgets and personalities, but "If you take it all too seriously, you can go a little nuts."

Sinclair says directing the show is a performance in itself. "Standing in front of the cast and crew and praying they're going to believe you know what you're doing. And a lot of the time you're not entirely sure, but you have to look sure! Otherwise it's very alarming for people if the director appears to not know what's going on... people will just freak out, they don't suffer fools gladly."

A fool Sinclair is not. You could say he's a writer/director/producer/actor, but really he's a storyteller. And a humble one at that. "I don't love my own work to be honest," he says. "I always think, 'That's okay, but I should try harder next time.'"

This quest for perfection and crowd-pleasing has kept him going in the past, and propels him today. As Harry Sinclair himself puts it, "I like entertaining people - that's all it is, really." *Interview/ Gina Williams Image/ Rebecca Sinclair - toplesswomentalkabouttheirlives.com*