

# MURPHYS' LORE

Born into a filmmaking dynasty, siblings Matt and Robin Murphy talk to Sarah Lang about growing up on a hippie commune, going into the “family business” – and still having a finger in the pie.



A 1969 photo of the Murphy clan and three of Bruno Lawrence's children, taken to be used as a production prop. Clockwise from back left: Geoff Murphy, wife Pat Robins, baby Linus Murphy, Paul Murphy, Thad Lawrence, Robin Murphy, Melissa Lawrence, Veronique Lawrence and Matt Murphy.

SARAH LANG IS A NORTH & SOUTH CONTRIBUTING WRITER. PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADRIAN HEKE.

**M**any a Kiwi watching the 1981 film *Goodbye Pork Pie* has cheered on the yellow Mini that literally falls to bits as it evades its police pursuers – and finally makes it the length of the country from Kaitaia to Invercargill.

Bringing some much-needed humour to New Zealand film, it was directed, co-written and co-produced by local screen legend Geoff Murphy, whose son Matt (then 15) was lighting assistant/best boy and daughter Robin (then 18) was wardrobe manager.

Fast forward 36 years and Matt, an award-winning director of television commercials, has written and directed the reboot. His first feature *Pork Pie*, in cinemas from February 2, isn't a strict remake (for instance, they don't visit as many towns) but its essence is the same. Dean O'Gorman plays Jon, a failing writer taking a road trip to win back his lady, with James Rolleston and Ashleigh Cummings playing wise-cracking passengers Luke and Kiera.

Talk about a family affair: Matt's sister Robin was location manager and her son, Charley Murphy Samau, was unit assistant; one of Matt's younger brothers, Miles, was second-unit director; Matt's partner, Kath Raphael, was associate producer and post-production supervisor; Matt's elder brother, Paul (who's directed films such as *Love Birds* and *Second-hand Wedding*), provided script advice; Matt's daughter, Saoirse Murphy-Twhigg, was a costume assistant; his cousins, Veronique and Melissa Lawrence, were script



supervisors; and Veronique's daughter, Lily Lawrence, worked in the art department. Fifteen other family members – Matt's children, grandsons, sisters-in-law, nephews and nieces – mucked in as extras.

The Murphy siblings had an unusual upbringing. When Robin was 11, Paul nine, Matt eight, Linus three and Miles two months, the family moved from a Wellington flat to live communally in the coastal village of Waimarama, Hawke's Bay. Geoff's collaborators Bruno Lawrence (also his brother-in-law), Alun Bollinger and Martyn Sanderson all lived at “Snoring Waters” with their families at various points, on a block with rundown houses, shoulder-high grass and long drops. As 1971 became 1972, the kids joined musical-and-theatre co-operative Blerta's three-month South Island tour.

Geoff and wife Pat Robins split after 22 years. Pat, who's worked



Top: Matt and Robin Murphy catch up at Matt's home in Wellington, while Robin was in town working as location manager on a yet-to-be-revealed American production with her brother, Paul. Above: Dean O'Gorman plays accidental-outlaw Jon in the *Pork Pie* reboot, opening February 2.



in the film industry since the 1960s as a production manager, wardrobe manager, script supervisor (including on *The Lord of the Rings*) and director, still lives on the Waimarama property. Geoff had a son with *Utu* actress Merata Mita, spent 10 years working overseas – mainly in Hollywood – and now, aged 78, lives in Wellington with wife Diane. In 2015, he wrote the candid memoir *Geoff Murphy: A Life on Film*.

Robin, mother to 25-year-old actor-musician Charley, is on the road a lot so has moved her base from Wellington back to the family home in Waimarama. A location manager for the likes of *The Lord of The Rings* and an assistant director, she also develops and produces short films, feature films and web projects – such as Wellington series *Pot Luck* by writer-director Ness Simons (viewed nearly a million times, it’s just received NZ On Air funding for a second series) and Welby Ings’ buzzed-about short film *Sparrow*. Currently, Robin has four features and one short in development, two of them written and directed by brother Miles. Matt, an experienced art director and production designer for film, is circling back from directing TV commercials here and internationally, and looking to write and/or direct features. A father by the age of 21, and a grandfather at 39, he has five children and has a home at Waimarama, although he and partner Kath live mainly in Newtown, Wellington.

## MATT MURPHY, 52

**“It was never** the plan for my first feature to be a remake of something Dad did. An executive producer approached me about doing it, and it was a good opportunity to make a film with a great plot. It was more about borrowing from rather than recreating Dad’s recipe. Dad was pretty interested in it. We discussed the original’s philosophy and heart. The script took three years to get right. Paul gave detailed advice on early drafts, and Robin had a look too. The film was a real family affair. It was a matter of who fit the jobs, and who could make it work. With all those car chases, I remember



The original poster for *Goodbye Pork Pie*, when it was released in 1981.

thinking, ‘I’ll need one of the country’s best location managers.’ So my next thought was ‘Where’s Robin’s number?’ She turned down a well-paying job to do this. In today’s health-and-safety-conscious environment, the shoot was so much more complicated than the original’s – especially the Wellington car chases, with sirens blaring and driving up the railway station’s front steps. Robin had a lot of paperwork, meetings and phone calls, but she made it work. I’ve always admired Robin. She brings a responsibility and professionalism to her work, and I’ve never seen her lose her temper. When there’s politics and drama, she stays cool, steady, and focused on the outcome. Growing up seeing films get made and things get done without many resources, we both have a calmness and a confidence that we can find a way. My daughter Saoirse, who’s 18, was *Pork Pie*’s costume runner. She couldn’t believe her Aunty Robin was the whole wardrobe department on the original at the same age. What an awesome accomplishment for a teenager. Mum was production manager. At 15, I was supposedly a trainee lighting assistant, except

I was the only lighting assistant. I’d helped on Dad’s sets before, and just loved it. The six-week road trip was exciting and intense. Travelling in convoy, I’d often drive a police car to the next location. We weren’t allowed the sirens on. Okay, maybe we did once or twice... I was aware our childhood was a bit different, with three families living together in pretty rundown houses, and visitors arriving with tents and caravans. But I really liked that we were creating something original and doing things our way, using whatever resources we had. Not just film-making but finding creative solutions, like lighting a fire to boil coppers to fill the bath. There’s something very grounding about that. We kids needed to pitch in, but it was never overly enforced. There was a dishes roster, though; you’d need five of us each night. I was often given a hammer to de-nail recycled wood. I used to trail around after Dad. I was one of the Crunchie Bar-eating kids in the classic 1970s “Great Crunchie Train Robbery” ad, starring Dad and Bruno. Once, my bedroom was painted as a submarine set for a skit. Dad made models of World War II tanks, battleships and planes from cardboard and wood, then left Paul and me playing battles, working out our own strategies and moving the pieces around in the paddock. Maybe he wanted us to conquer the world? Robin usually didn’t want to play war games, but she wasn’t a bossy older sister at all. She was a fairly independent girl and let everyone go about their own business. Our first collaboration was Robin’s short film *Dear Belinda*, which she made aged 16, as a school project. Dad built a cowboy-town set at Waimarama and shot a TV commercial for Cadbury Toastie Bars. Robin borrowed a wind-up Bolex camera from her friend Belinda, and shot me and my cousins acting out cowboy fights, and, later, time-lapse footage of the set being pulled down. There was a voiceover ‘letter’ to Belinda, and the final shot is the camera being carried to a box to return it to Belinda. It was a cool little film. Back then, blatant sexism regarding

jobs for women in film was often the default position. Robin once explained the injustice with surprisingly little drama. I doubt I’d have such poise if I faced that kind of discrimination. But Robin’s never been a victim of circumstances. She always just gets on with things. We’ve always got on, understood and appreciated each other. I’m proud of what Robin’s doing, especially producing films and web series to support young talent. You can grow something out of nothing with her energy and attitude, and she’s constantly doing that.”

## ROBIN MURPHY, 55

**“Matt can be** hard to read. He’s a dark horse, a bit intense, and slightly introverted – like Dad, in that there’s this whole world going on inside their heads that I’d never get access to. Matt has a very dry humour. He and I have always had a kind of comfortableness, probably more than I have with my other brothers, where you sit there and don’t even have to talk. But we do yak away about film and family. Matt’s a great father. As kids, Paul, Matt and I were the tight three because we were close in age, with a five-year gap before Linus and later Miles. Matt was the one at Dad’s heels, and Dad would ask him to help make props or skits because he was diligent and focused. Dad made these models of battleships and tanks, and Matt and Paul would have actual war games in a paddock. I’d rather read and hang out with the adults. We still play spotlight at our New Year get-togethers at Waimarama. It’s a tradition. There wasn’t much to rebel against in that environment. We could roam the countryside, come back for food or plasters, then disappear again. The Blerta road trip was the best thing ever. We kids were a bit oblivious to small-town prejudice against hippies, because we were mini superstars among motorcamp kids. I knew we were living an extraordinary life. When I was 16 and Matt was 13, I drove our Kombi van with Matt, Paul and the Sanderson girls, heading to Mahia to make a Superman film. Two hours in, the van broke down, next



Waimarama, 1973: Linus (front), Paul (left), Robin and Matt.

to this rest area, so we set up our camping gear there. Matt hitchhiked into Napier, called our parents, said we were fine camping, bought the necessary car parts, and hitchhiked back. We made our Superman movie there on Super-8 film. Matt lay down, pointing the camera up. Paul, playing Superman, put on a cape, climbed a sign, then dived over the camera and landed on a mattress, so it looked like he was flying. Three days in, Matt had fixed the van and we went home. My trajectory in film was through the costume and art departments, as girls didn’t do technical work then. In 1979, straight out of school, I applied for a trainee position with a camera-and-sound department at Avalon Studios in Lower Hutt and they accepted me, thinking I was a guy. When I walked into the room, I knew from the look on their faces that they wouldn’t let a woman anywhere near their equipment. So I asked to be a costume trainee for six months. Then I asked Dad if I could be a costume assistant on *Goodbye Pork Pie*, and he said ‘No. You are the wardrobe department.’ I didn’t have a clue. I once accidentally left the main actors’ clothes in a Kaitaia motel and left for Auckland. I called the motel owners,

who put them on the next flight, and they arrived minutes before they were needed. Otherwise I would have been in deep shit! With the car-chase scenes, we didn’t even have radio transmitters, so people were strategically placed in the bushes to signal to someone who’d signal to someone else when the Mini was coming. I often shared motel units with Matt. With so many brothers, smelly shoes were just part of life, but I had to tell Matt to leave his shoes outside. Man, they stank. I haven’t worked much with Matt because he’s done lots of TV commercials, which isn’t my sphere, but once I was first AD [assistant director] on a TV ad he directed. We clashed a little because we both like exerting control. But we were a good team on *Pork Pie*. I really wanted to be involved, to support my brother and because I’d worked on the original, so I made the timing work. Our family often works together. I’m producing a short film and feature by Miles. I co-produced a short film with Paul that was written and directed by my mother; he was often grip on jobs where I was AD. Not even Linus escaped; he’s an accountant for the film industry. We were so caught up in that life that working in film felt as familiar as breathing.” +