

Q&A with Spud 3 director John Barker



By [Daniel Derksen](#)

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When I first met John Barker 15 years ago when he attended my workshop for screenwriters and filmmakers, he was cocky, self-assured and really wanted to be a filmmaker. Today he is touted as South Africa's foremost comedy director since making a lot of noise when he produced and directed SA's first music mockumentary, *Blu Cheez*, wrote, produced and directed *Bunny Chow*, which wowed audiences in America, Europe, the UK and in South Africa, followed by the successful *31 Million Reasons*.

He infuses his latest film, *Spud 3: Learning to Fly* with an exhilarating energy that is guaranteed to delight Spudniks.

In this third instalment in the hugely popular series, Spud Milton continues his diabolical stagger through adolescence, learning one of life's most important lessons: when dealing with women and cretins, nothing is ever quite as it seems. Set in 1992, the country may be on the bumpy road to an uncomfortable redemption, but Spud Milton is hoping for a smooth ride as he returns to boarding school as a senior where he soon discovers that his vindictive arch-enemy is back to taunt him and that a garrulous Malawian has taken residence in his dormitory, along with the regular inmates and misfits he calls friends.



■ ***Was it difficult getting involved with the third part of the trilogy, taking over the reins from Donovan?***

Yes and No. I was a little anxious about taking over from Donovan as they had all worked together on the first two films, but the cast welcomed me immediately. I didn't try to reinvent the wheel with *Spud 3*, as a strong aesthetic has already been established. As far as references go, I looked at films that created a world through the eyes of a child or teenager. The franchise needed a fresh take and I was able to bring a new look with talented cinematographer Willie Nel. I felt that the music (score) had to match Spud's new-found confidence, so Jon Savage was brought in to give us a more indie rock sound.

■ ***What attracted you to the script of Spud 3?***

I loved John van de Ruit's screenplay. It had great dramatic tone and emotion, balanced with 'laugh out loud' scenes. It was a pleasure to direct his script.

■ ***Are you a Spud fan, or was this your first introduction?***

Yes, I am a fan.

■ ***You infuse a vibrant energy into the film and make each frame come alive, don't you?***

Thanks, I was very fortunate to have talented and passionate creatives in every department.



Your career has certainly sky-rocketed since I first met you when you attended my first workshops in Johannesburg, hasn't it?

I've been fortunate to be busy. I have managed to balance some low-budget indie films (which received interest from international film festivals) with the big commercial franchise Spud.

Do you think there's a need for scriptwriters in South Africa?

Yes, we need great writers. Government organisations really need to place huge focus on this.

What excites you about the process of turning words into action?

The process of taking words and emotions from the page to the screen is a very creative process. So much magic has to happen in between page and screen, and when it works it's very special. The magic actually comes from a lot of talented passionate creatives working together, working their particular crafts and skills to make one goal: a great film. You know from reading the script that it can be a special film, but you only know it's special when you watch it back with an audience. The audience tells you whether or not you've achieved what you originally envisioned.

■ ***Tell me about your approach to bringing Spud 3 to the big screen?***

I worked extensively with John van de Ruit on the script, making sure we got the story, drama and especially the comedy right. John was always up for feedback and implemented changes and suggestions. We had many story meetings re character arcs, story beats and comedy.

I also worked extensively with the cinematographer, Willie Nel. Taking care to prep every scene, again and again, and I paid a lot of attention to the aesthetic of the early nineties. Production designer Tom Gubb and his team did a great job. The new opening titles also help to set the film in the early nineties.

Music was very important as a device to push certain emotions and help set the tone of the rebellious teens. Music was the key in placing the film in the nineties.

In Hitchcock's words, the cinema audience is the object of the director's efforts. Each shot is a statement made with the camera, for the purpose of creating a "state of mind, of emotion, in the audience. That is to say, the impact of the image is directly on emotions". Sometimes the director just wants to please the eye through the pictorial presentation, sometimes he wants to make a strong impact on the audience. In doing so, through his handling of all these narrative possibilities, the director reveals his style. And style is the crux of the matter. That is what it is all about.

My approach is to place Spud in the centre of the frame, as often as possible. Keep him close to the camera using wide-angle lenses. This allows us to focus on him - distancing him from the world around him, constantly reminding the audience that our controlling idea is about his internal struggle: choices.

▣ ***How was your working relationship with John van de Ruit?***

A great experience. John's an excellent writer and, in my opinion, was the best person to write the screenplay. He was never precious about the screenplay and completely trusted me with the script. He had the utmost confidence in me on set and with me taking the script and dialogue and employing improvisation where I thought it would work. He is a true collaborator.

▣ ***Is there another Spud in the pipeline?***

Yes, we are working on Spud 4 now.

▣ ***Any comments you would like to share?***

From my first meeting with Ross Garland to the screaming teens at the premiere, it's been an incredible experience.

Read more about Spud3: Learning to Fly and other new film releases at www.writingstudio.co.za

ABOUT DANIEL DERCKSEN

Daniel Dercksen has been a contributor for Lifestyle since 2012. As the driving force behind the successful independent training initiative The Writing Studio and a published film and theatre journalist of 40 years, teaching workshops in creative writing, playwriting and screenwriting throughout South Africa and internationally the past 22 years. Visit www.writingstudio.co.za

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