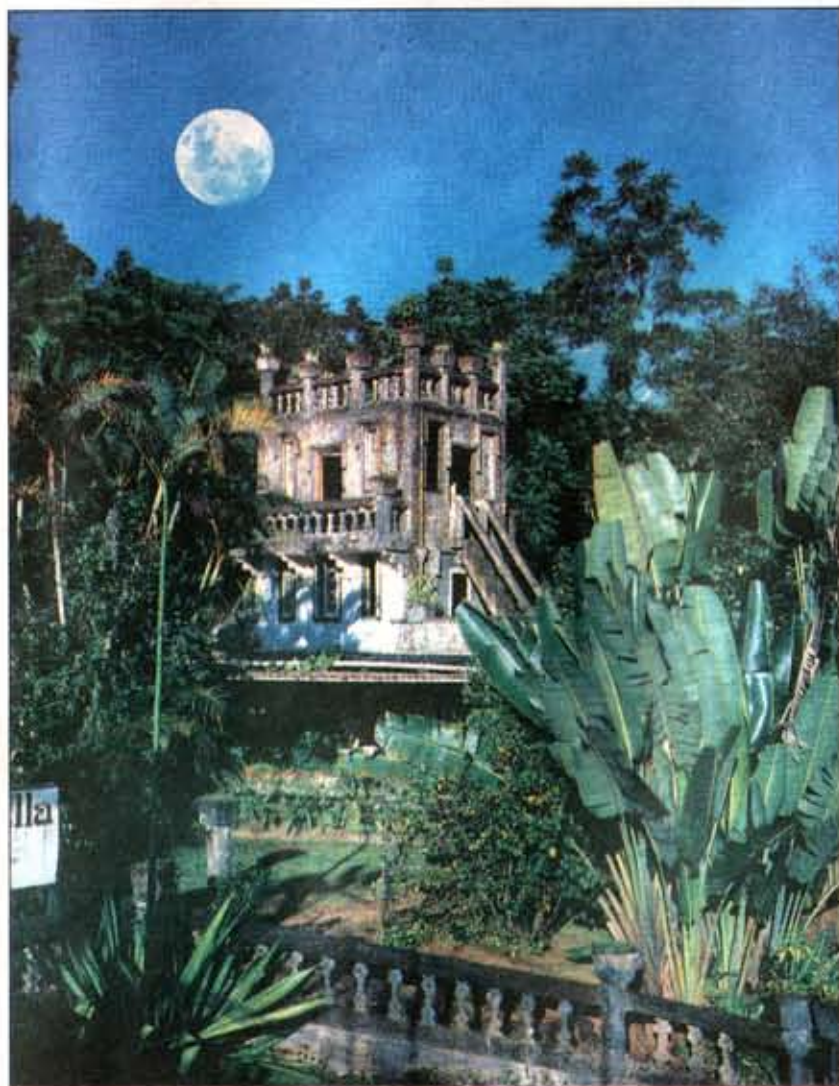


# True-life drama

Paronella story to be given the Hollywood treatment



**SPOTLIGHT . . .** above and left, the majestic Paronella Park and, above, Shirley MacLaine and Rachel Griffiths top the director's wish list

By ISIS SYMES

FROM the bright moon to a bright spotlight – Paronella Park is set to shine in Hollywood.

The popular tourist attraction has been tipped to be the main star of young Australian filmmaker Ben Hackworth's second feature film, *Cure For Serpents*.

The 30-year-old director is currently at the Cannes International Film Festival where he is trying to secure his casting wish list of bringing two award-winning Hollywood stars to the set including Australia's Rachel Griffiths and Tinseltown legend Shirley MacLaine.

Mr Hackworth said the film, to be shot at Paronella Park, tells the story of Bette, an eccentric old woman who decides to end her life in an unusual way, her young gardener and an ex-showgirl who owns a shop.

"MacLaine is the sort of woman you really could believe is like Bette, she has that quality and brings lots of different baggage and links," Mr Hackworth said.

"Rita is a tough woman and former showgirl and I thought of Griffiths because she used to be in a theatre troupe and there is something in that to give the character an organic quality," he said.

Signing up A-listers for only his second feature may seem ambitious but Mr Hackworth, born in Brisbane and a former Victorian College of Arts Student, has impressive credentials.

He was hand-picked by Cannes organisers this year to join a special filmmakers program called L'Atelier, in which 15 directors are flown to the world's biggest movie get-together to meet the industry's top producers and financiers.

Mr Hackworth said *Cure For Serpents* was inspired by the true story of Jose Paronella – a Spanish man who built a palace for his wife in North Queensland in the 1930s.

"He made this amazing castle for his bride, all of clay, then he died

after building it," he explained.

"It's been ravaged by cyclones over the years and survived and I imagined the story of this lady that has been left behind.

"I like those stories and places where really strange people end up moving, people on the margins."

Paronella Park owner Mark Evans said Mr Hackworth had been to the location eight years ago as a visitor.

"This happens a lot where people who come here keep the location at the back of their minds and come back for their wedding or to shoot a movie," Mr Evans said.

"We have had movies like *Sniper* and *Traps* filmed here but they both hold the theme of war, drugs and shooting," he said.

"To have this film shot here, which is more in keeping with the theme of Paronella Park and the continuation of Jose's dream will be magnificent.

"I think what Baz Luhrmann's *Australia* did to Bowen could happen here if this is to be an inter-

national movie."

Jose Paronella's grandson Jose Paronella III was excited about the film but also held some reservations.

"Maybe I can be an extra in it," Mr Paronella said.

"The only concern I have, and not to be derogatory, is how much license a director may have in portraying the family as they were," he said.

"It doesn't worry me what cobwebs come out but it would be nice to see the family story be portrayed correctly."

Mr Paronella said he lived at Paronella Park before it was turned into a tourist attraction.

"I left in 1977 and was the last Paronella to live there."

Mr Hackworth said he hoped to start shooting *Cure for Serpents*, which already has more than \$US1 million (\$1.07 million) in funding, next May.



Joe Paronella

## Fairytale castle was Jose's dream come true

JOSE Paronella's dream was to build a castle.

He arrived in Innisfail from Catalonia in northern Spain in 1913 to plan a life for himself and his fiancée Mathilde.

He worked hard for 11 years, creating his wealth by buying, improving and selling cane farms.

Then he discovered a virgin forest alongside Mena Creek Falls – perfect for his dream.

Here, on 5ha of land, he was to build his castle, picnic areas at the lakeside, tennis courts, tunnels and bridges – wrapped up in an amazing range of 7000 tropical plants and trees, including an avenue of kauris.

Returning to Spain, Jose discovered Mathilde had married another.

Determined to sail back to Australia with a bride, Jose proposed to Margarita, Mathilde's younger sister.

One year later the happy newlyweds were bound for Australia and by 1929 had purchased the land of Jose's dreams.

He had a grand staircase built up to a new stone cottage and the couple moved in on Christmas Eve.

Their fingerprints in the



The grand staircase

foundations remain as testament to their extraordinary effort.

A movie theatre transformed on weekends into a huge ballroom.

The region's first hydro-electric plant was built in 1933 to power the park, and the castle grounds were ready to welcome the public in 1935.

The Paronellas invited everyone to movies on Saturday nights, built tennis courts from crushed termite mounds and a pavilion with turret-topped balconies, refreshment rooms and changing cubicles for swimmers.

There was a museum of coins, pistols, dolls, timbers and interesting keepsakes.

Disaster struck Paronella Park in 1946 when a mass of logs from a clearing upstream swept away a railway bridge and descended on the park, destroying the refreshment rooms.

Undaunted, the Paronellas replanted gardens, repaired what they could, and re-opened for business.

Jose died in 1948, leaving Margarita, Teresa and son Joe.

In 1967 Margarita died, leaving Joe and his wife Val as custodians of Jose's dream. The park was sold in 1977.

Fire virtually destroyed the castle two years later.

In 1986 Cyclone Winifred tested the park's endurance.

In 1993 Mark and Judy Evans, the park's current owners, set about reviving Jose's dream.

With the help of the Paronella family, Jose's story was written (*The Spanish Dreamer* by Dena Leighton).

Paths were uncovered, buildings repaired and a museum created in Jose's original home.

Heritage Listing has identified this unique property as an important part of the Far North's history.