

First pick

Director Marshall Lewy wrote the lead part of a Brit rocker in California Solo for actor Robert Carlyle (right)



PHOTO: SUNDANCE CHANNEL

yip wai yee

You could say that when American writer-director Marshall Lewy cast Scottish actor Robert Carlyle in his latest film, he tried to pull a Quentin Tarantino.

American film-maker Tarantino, whose works include *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), is famed for picking once-brilliant but waning stars and catapulting them back into the spotlight in his cult films. Careers he has relaunched include John Travolta's in *Pulp Fiction*, Pam Grier's in *Jackie Brown* (1997) and David Carradine's in *Kill Bill* (2003).

In a similar vein, actor Carlyle may have been off the radar of late, but Lewy had full confidence in the actor as the "perfect" lead for his movie, *California Solo*. The film, about a United States-based Britpop rocker facing possible deportation and the demons of his past, is showing on Sundance Channel (via TV Channel 51) tomorrow at 8.05pm.

In January this year, the film premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, the famed annual event held in the American state of Utah that showcases the best of independent cinema.

Over the telephone from Los Angeles where he is based, Lewy says: "Robert has always been an actor whom I admire a lot and he really hasn't been in as

many leading roles in American films in the last few years.

"You know, he's like one of many great British actors who you see in British films, but they don't really get to be the leads in American films, so I was very excited about having him in the lead here."

Carlyle, who was especially popular during the 1990s after appearing in films such as *Trainspotting* (1996) and *The Full Monty* (1997), has not enjoyed the same amount of fame since. He is currently in the hit television show *Once Upon A Time*.

Adding that he even went so far as to write the entire role specifically with Carlyle in mind, Lewy, 35, says: "While writing, I had his voice in my head the whole time and that process helped me, because he has such a distinctive voice."

The film is Lewy's second film after his independent feature debut, *Blue State* (2007), a romantic comedy starring Breckin Meyer and Anna Paquin.

Since its premiere, *California Solo* has received mixed reviews. Some commented on the lack of characterisation for the supporting characters and its use of clichés, but Carlyle's performance was almost unanimously praised.

The *Hollywood Reporter* wrote that Carlyle's "layered performance as an embittered musician facing his demons gives this fragile drama emotional heft", while British film magazine *Total Film* wrote his was a "stunning central performance... perhaps his best since *Trainspotting*".

Lewy, who is married with a daughter, chuckles when asked what would have happened had Carlyle not accepted the role. "Obviously, I would have had a Plan B. I would have been very upset if he did not join, but I wasn't so stupid as to write a role where it would be dead had he not done it."

"It's not something like *Being John Malkovich* (1999), where John Malkovich had to be a part of."

The way that the script found its way into Carlyle's hands in the first place, was also "incredibly fortunate", adds Lewy with a chuckle.

"I am writing a screenplay based on the book *Born To Run* with Peter Saarsgard, the actor who is directing the film. It just so happens that Peter's manager is the same as Robert's, so I could send the script to his manager and get it to him that way. I had a weird confidence too that he would accept the role."

Like most other indie film-makers, however, Lewy faced the usual problems with "a very low budget". He says: "When you don't have a lot of money, you have to constantly ask people to sacrifice. We filmed this within miles of where I live in Los Angeles, so I can rely on the resources that I am most familiar with."

"The thing is, it's tough making independent films. But when you love it, you love it, and you just got to do it."

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'While writing, I had his voice in my head the whole time and that process helped me'

Writer-director Marshall Lewy on how his script was written with actor Robert Carlyle in mind