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Sunday Territorian, Darwin

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Lighting up the silver screen

Flat tyres, bogged cars and crocodiles are just some of issues faced by Territory filmmakers, as **CHELSEA HEANEY** reports

ISOLATION, inspiration and frustration. These are the defining terms of being a Top End film maker according to director Lee Frank.

His film *Lured*, a psychological thriller involving a prized piece of tackle and the quarrel between two fishing mates about who should go and retrieve it from croc infested waters, is one of 10 Territory films about to hit the road in a groundbreaking new film festival.

Mr Frank said the logistics of making a film in the Northern Territory could be

enough to scare even the most experienced creatives away.

“It was a nightmare to find a waterway that looked like it could have crocs but that didn’t actually have crocs,” he said.

“Eventually we settled on Lake Bennett, which had the right kind of look. But, having said that, the spot was some distance away from the main area and required us to get a boat.”

That was only the start of their dramas. Mr Frank said the boat was barely up to the task of transporting the crew and soon broke down.

“We had to paddle and then one time the f**king thing

sank and the director of

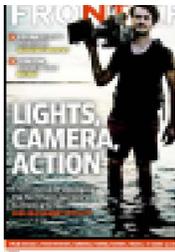
photography had to swim with his camera high above his head,” he laughed.

“Another time the camera and the audio equipment heated up so much that we had to cool them off in the ice box — twice.”

But ultimately, Mr Frank said it was worth it.

“If you’re going to be genuine about filming in the NT, I really think you can’t cheat shots.

“Ultimately the film comes through ... and it captures a genuine voice or voices from the Territory.”



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His experiences and sentiments are echoed by his NT peers.

Highly-acclaimed indigenous director Dylan River, whose film *Nulla Nulla* takes a comedic look at a white cop's first taste of Aboriginal community life, said there was one thing that kept popping up, or blowing out.

"Flat tyres, bloody flat tyres," he said.

"I have been in situations where you are going remote and a job ends up being a bit more about survival."

Mr River, whose mother and father are NT filmmaking icons Penelope McDonald and Warwick Thornton, said seeing the impact his parent's films had made drove him to pursue the "family business".

"I'm very much about

making stories close to home, and the Northern Territory is my home. Telling stories in Central Australia and Alice Springs is very important to me," he said.

"When other filmmakers come here and start telling stories from here I'm always like, what are they doing? What have they got to say? What angle are they going to take?"

"I'm always interested in how they are going to interpret it. It's important to me to tell stories that are truthful."

Mr River said his film *Nulla Nulla* was not pointing any fingers but was asking audiences to think about what the education system in Australia teaches people about Aboriginal culture.

"It's lighthearted but what that is looking at is the wider population of Australia's naivety and lack of understanding of Aboriginal culture, people and way of life," he said.

"It's basically saying that, through the education system

that is in this country, people don't learn about Aboriginal people.

"For me, living in Alice Springs, I see a lot of people coming here with these expectations and their expectations are usually cut off pretty quick when they are thrown in the deep end."

Ms River said that although the NT film industry had its issues, it still punched well above its weight.

"I think Territorians are very successful at getting their films nationally and internationally shown," he said.

However, Mr River said there was plenty of room for growth.

"Because the industry is so small

and everyone is a creative, there's no technical support for specific jobs in the Northern Territory," he said.

"What that means is that when I make a film, I've got to fly crew in. For the bigger projects there just isn't that support and that's where we're seeing the industry still growing here."

"One day you'd hope we'd be self-sufficient and that we don't need to be going to Sydney or Melbourne or Brisbane to do post production"

"That's only going to come with more projects, more money and more time."

Producer Alison Page said her film *Bakala* had, at times, also become derailed by the

often unforgiving nature of the NT outback.

"We use very expensive cameras and we lost one," she said.

"It got wet, which is a \$60,000 camera. If that had happened in Sydney we would have just gone and hired one to replace it. You've really got to be quite resourceful, as with most aspects of life in the Northern Territory.

"And then there is getting cars bogged, where we're just about to get washed away by the water. They're not fun times for me.

"All the other crew thought it was hysterical but it was pretty stressful for me. I can laugh at it now but that's

because I've been to therapy.

"But then you have those moments when you're out on a remote beach and the sky is just melting into the horizon and you can't see the different between the sea and the sky. It's one of the most beautiful places on earth."

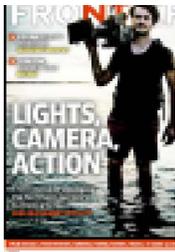
Ms Page's feature film was shot on Groote Eyelandt during the wet season.

"The whole thing about making films in the Northern Territory is, of course, that one of the main characters in all of these films is the country itself and the land itself," she said.

"And when I say that, it's not just the physical ground, it's seasons as well."

"We were shooting in Groote Eyelandt over New Years, so it was right in the middle of the wet season. It was a really interesting time to be on the island and to be part of the community at that time because everything was really shut down."

"Steve (Bakala) is one of the spiritual leaders in the community and so when he put his hand up to say I want to make my story, the



community was just totally

there for him. “As film makers, that is a dream come true. Because you’ve got all co-creators really.

“Although we were the ‘film makers’ it’s fair to say that every single person in that film helped write and direct it.”

Ms Page said her time spent in the Territory had given her an insight into traditional indigenous culture.

“I’m an indigenous woman, but I’m from Sydney. It’s a really fantastic opportunity to see Aboriginal culture that is really so strong and still thriving,” she said.

“But they also want to see their culture in the digital form as well. That’s what is really quite special about making films in the Northern Territory, is bringing these ancient stories to life with the best cinema-grade technology.”

Director Will Tinapple has been working within the NT film industry for about 20 years. Much like his industry comrades, Mr Tinapple has his fair share of mishaps.

“I had a flat tire this week, as I drove into Minyerri which is 700kms away. I get so many flat tyres,” he said.

“That’s what film making in the Territory is about, getting flat tyres in a roopy and figuring out where you are and where people are,” he joked.

For Mr Tinapple, it’s the people of the NT who breathe life into the films made here.

“Definitely the people are at the top of the list, there are really interesting people and really interesting stories,” he said.

Apart from a shared distaste for flat tyres, sunken boats and dead cameras, these filmmakers also share a spot on the bill at the inaugural Northern Territory Travelling Film Festival (NTTFF).

For three weeks, from May 21 to June 9, some of Australia’s most sunburnt lands and tropical paradises will be transformed into spectacular outdoor movie theatres, showcasing the very best in local short films and ancestral stories.

NTTFF creative producer Britt Guy will be taking the show on the road, covering over 8000kms during the 18 screenings.

Ms Guy said Territorians were natural storytellers.

“Whether it’s traditional

dreaming stories from the indigenous cultures, that have existed for a very long time on these lands, or a good story at the pub and those bigger than Ben Hur tales of crocodiles and animals,” she said.

Ms Guy said this was the largest logistic project she has ever undertaken.

“We’re travelling with a two tonne trailer that has a solar cinema. We carry the blow up screen with us’ she said.

“We’re travelling with absolutely everything.”

Starting in Alice Springs before making their way north, the NTTFF will also host groundbreaking screenings in remote communities

including

Tangentyere, Ntaria, Mungkarta, Elliot, Borroloola, Beswick, Gunbalanya, Barunga and Binjari.

The inaugural program includes acclaimed award-winning films,

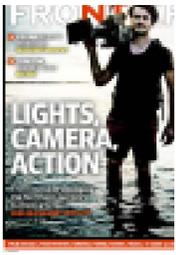
including four SPARK short film initiative entries — *Sumatra*, *Lured*, *Snowdrops keep falling on my bed* (The mystery down under) and *DEADLINE*; four original works from the Indigenous Short Film Program — *Carry*

The Flag, *Finding aawirrangga*, *The Greedy Emu* and *BAKALA*, which touch on prevalent cultural issues and finding solace in ancestral locations; and Capricornia Film Award gems *Nulla Nulla* and *After Tracy*.

Local filmmakers and young people will have the chance to participate in workshops and see their own creations on the big screen before the program of shorts.

For more information visit nttravellingfilmfestival.com





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