

## Celebrating 25 years of Indigenous screen stories

**Wednesday 28 February 2018:** This year marks 25 years since the Indigenous Department at Screen Australia was established, resulting in some of the nation's most beloved films, television shows and documentaries. Over 160 titles have been funded by the Department including [Redfern Now](#), [Samson & Delilah](#), [Spear](#), [Mystery Road](#), [Goldstone](#), [Toomelah](#), [8MMM Aboriginal Radio](#), and numerous documentaries including [We Don't Need a Map](#), and the historical series [First Australians](#).

The anniversary year has begun with one of the most highly awarded and critically acclaimed works in Screen Australia's history - Warwick Thornton's [Sweet Country](#), in cinemas now. The hotly anticipated television adaptation of [Mystery Road](#) will [air on the ABC](#) later this year, starring Aaron Pedersen, Deborah Mailman and Judy Davis. The documentary [Black Divaz](#) chronicles the lives of Indigenous drag performers and will [premiere at Queer Screen's Mardi Gras Film Festival tonight](#) before being seen on NITV on 1 March.

"As Screen Australia celebrates 25 years of our Indigenous Department, we acknowledge everything we have achieved has been the result of a shared dream," said Penny Smallacombe, Head of Indigenous. "SBS, NITV, the ABC, [AFTRS](#) and other Indigenous organisations like [CAAMA](#) have all been on this incredible journey and together we have gone from a place where we were absent from screens, or stories were told about us, to being able to tell our own stories."

"Our faces are now routinely seen on television. Our languages are heard at the cinema. Our stories are now shared online with people around the world. Our work is celebrated at international festivals, treasured at home and has become a cultural and commercial resource for our people."

In August the anniversary will be formally recognised with a function in Sydney, with guests attending from around Australia.

Screen Australia CEO Graeme Mason added, "Twenty-five years of work by our Indigenous Department has not only given Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples a voice, but has given our industry some of the most distinct and acclaimed storytellers in our history."

"Indigenous creativity has gone from being excluded from our screen sector to becoming an essential part of our day-to-day business. From television to cinema to online, across documentary and drama, and both on screen and behind the camera, the incredible body of work created by Indigenous talent is truly something to celebrate."

Planning for the next 25 years of the Department has commenced with the formation of the Indigenous Strategic Reference Group, including industry veterans Darren Dale, Rachel Perkins, Erica Glynn, Dot West and Deborah Mailman. The group first convened earlier this month in Sydney, with other members joining the next sessions in Cairns (July) and Melbourne (Dec).

Further information regarding the Indigenous Strategic Reference Group and the anniversary event will be released in the coming months.

People who have had a connection with the Indigenous Department over the years are encouraged to get in touch ahead of the anniversary event by emailing [Savannah.Glynn-Braun@screenaustralia.gov.au](mailto:Savannah.Glynn-Braun@screenaustralia.gov.au).

### INDIGENOUS DEPARTMENT ABRIDGED HISTORY

Since its inception, the Indigenous Department has provided over \$35m in funding for development, production and talent escalation, with over 160 titles having hit screens in that period. The model has been so successful it has recently been replicated in Canada.

The 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Programme' (and later called the 'Indigenous Branch') was established in 1993, as a result of consultation with the Indigenous community conducted by the Australian



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Film Commission in the previous year. On 25 June 1993, Walter Saunders was announced as the inaugural Manager of the Department and the watershed *From Sand To Celluloid* initiative was developed. Six Indigenous creatives were funded to make their own short films, including a very young Warwick Thornton. The films premiered at the Chauvel Cinema in Sydney in 1996.

The Department secured its own discrete funding budget from 1996/97. From 2001/02 the Department split documentary and drama funding and from 2006/07 started making large investments in feature films. From humble beginnings, the Department now awards over \$3m in funding annually. On average the Department has funded eight titles a year to go into production.

A hallmark of the Department has been to put Indigenous people in control of their own stories, and as such Department production funding only goes to titles with both an Indigenous director and writer attached (or lead writer in the case of television). As the careers of Indigenous creatives have grown, it has become common for their talents to be seen in projects funded through different streams within Screen Australia, such as Ryan Griffen creating *Cleverman*, Rachel Perkins directing *Jasper Jones*, Wayne Blair directing *The Sapphires* and Leah Purcell being one of the directors on *The Secret Daughter*.

Over the years the Department has also been involved in setting industry guidelines for genuine Indigenous consultation and navigating intellectual property rights.

The Indigenous Department has also had a dramatic impact on the visibility of Indigenous characters on screen. A 2002 study entitled *Broadcast in Colour* found that in 1992 there were no Indigenous Australians in sustaining roles on Australian TV, and by 1999 there were two. Screen Australia's 2016 study *Seeing Ourselves* revealed a remarkable shift, with 5% of main characters being Indigenous, despite making up 3% of the population. The 5% figure matched exactly to the proportion of Indigenous actors in the period, suggesting authentic casting of Indigenous actors in Indigenous roles.

Celebrating Indigenous Screen Stories  
<https://youtu.be/41UumRe5BVA>

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