

## Green light for rural comedy *The Merger* from the makers of *Backyard Ashes*

**Monday 29 May 2017:** Screen Australia and Create NSW have announced production investment funding for *The Merger*, a feature adaptation of comedian Damian Callinan's one-man live show, about a country football coach who hatches an unorthodox plan to rebuild the local football team by recruiting recently settled asylum seekers.

From Crow Crow Productions, Dream Genie Pictures and Definition Films, *The Merger* has also secured funding from the Create NSW Regional Film Fund and a grant from the City of Wagga Wagga, who will host the production when filming commences later in the year.

*The Merger* will reunite the team behind 2014 low-budget comedy *Backyard Ashes* - producer Anne Robinson, director Mark Grentell and actor Damian Callinan - and has been adapted by Callinan from his 2009 live comedy show, which toured nationally for six years and earned him nominations for the Barry Award at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival and the West Australian Editors' Choice Award at Perth Fringe.

"The live version of *The Merger*, which has toured every nook of the nation, used empathy to simplify the confusion over the refugee issue and was well received by audiences of all ilks," said writer **Damian Callinan** and director **Mark Grentell**. "We are excited to be able to take the story to a wider audience. Go Roosters!"

*The Merger* tells the story of former professional football player Troy Carrington who has returned home to the fictional town of Bodgy Creek after an abrupt end to his sporting career. He is persuaded to coach the hapless local footy team, the Roosters, where he sees an opportunity to recruit refugees from the Regional Support Centre to turn the team's fate around. What follows is a comedy about a man seeking redemption, a team trying to reclaim victory, and a community coming to terms with the changing face of Australian rural life.

"*Backyard Ashes* is a low-budget gem that showcases the charms of regional Australia to great effect," said **Sally Caplan**, Head of Production at Screen Australia. "*The Merger* goes one step further and weaves important social issues through the story. We are delighted to be supporting what represents an excellent career opportunity for Mark, Anne and Damian to tell this witty, topical and engaging story that we expect will resonate with city and country folk alike."

"This terrific project was developed in Wagga Wagga, following the regionally developed and filmed *Backyard Ashes*," said **Michael Brealey**, CEO of Create NSW. "As well as showcasing this region on screen again, it's great to see a diversity of NSW voices both on and behind the screen."

Damian Callinan is a comedian, writer and actor best known for his appearances in *Skithouse*, *Spicks and Specks*, and the Melbourne Comedy Festival Gala. Director Mark Grentell has a background in theatre and has worked on musicals such as *Doctor Zhivago*, *Spring Awakening* and *Rock of the Ages*, and made his feature film debut in 2014 with *Backyard Ashes*. Producer Anne Robinson has over 20 years' experience in the industry and has produced features selected for film festivals around the world including Berlinale.

Umbrella Entertainment, who ran a successful strategic regional distribution campaign for *Backyard Ashes*, will also distribute *The Merger* locally with 108 Media representing for international sales.

*The Merger* is expected to release theatrically in 2018.