

## Screen Australia's Indigenous Department celebrates 25 years

Correct as at 4 June 2018.

Indigenous readers are forewarned this document includes the names of people who are deceased.

2018 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.

The key objective of the Department is to support Indigenous perspectives and imaginative, resonant stories authored by Indigenous Australians.

As well as identifying and nurturing talented Indigenous filmmakers who display bold, distinctive and diverse voices, Screen Australia's Indigenous Department aims to:

- Promote an Indigenous perspective as central to Australian culture, and pivotal to the wider success of the Australian screen industry.
- Foster in Indigenous screen content creators the skills and ability to contribute a distinctive and diverse body of creative work, as well as the ability to work in and contribute to the wider industry.
- Ensure Indigenous works are acknowledged and recognised in both the local and international marketplace.
- Play a leadership role in the development and advocacy of policy relating to Indigenous screen content creators.

### History of the Department

To date, the Indigenous Department has provided over \$35m in funding for development, production and talent escalation, with over 160 titles receiving production support alone. The model has been so successful it has recently inspired the [Canada Media Fund](#) to create their own Indigenous Film Fund.

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 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. Ten individual projects were developed through a Visual Storytelling workshop to a stage where the strongest six were selected for production. Six Indigenous writer/directors were funded to make their own short films, including a young Warwick Thornton with [Payback](#), and Richard Frankland with [No Way to Forget](#), which won Best Short Film at the 1996 AFI Awards and was selected for screening in the Un Certain Regard section of the Cannes Film Festival. The films premiered at the Chauvel Cinema in Sydney in 1996.

The Department secured its own discrete funding budget from 1996/97 on the back of the first successful Indigenous Drama Initiative. From 2001/02 the Department supported both documentary and drama projects and from 2006/07 started making large investments in feature films and later TV Drama series. From humble beginnings, the Department now awards over \$3m in funding annually.

Since its creation, 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 creator, 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 [Bran Nue Dae](#) and [Jasper Jones](#), Wayne Blair directing [The Sapphires](#) and [Top End Wedding](#), 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 Indigenous protocols and intellectual property rights.

The Indigenous Department has 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.

## Timeline of the Department

Key: [blue](#) indicates items funded by Screen Australia outside of the Indigenous Department.

**1993** - The Indigenous Branch was launched by the Australian Film Commission (AFC) in 1993 with the objective "to promote the quality and diversity of Indigenous films and develop a wider audience for films written, directed and produced by Indigenous Australians." (1993-94 AFC Annual Report).

**1994** - The Indigenous Drama Initiative was conceived in collaboration with state film agencies, Film Australia, SBS Independent, and the Film Finance Corporation (FFC) to enable Indigenous people to create their view and representation of the world through the production of films that are written and directed by Indigenous people. The Branch has no budget allocation, so Wal Saunders pre-sold the dramas to SBS Independent thereby triggering development and production funding from the Film Development Branch. After promoting the Initiative nationally, a total of 47 applications were received. Ten films were shortlisted by the AFC and their creative teams were invited to attend a Visual Storytelling workshop to help develop their projects from page to screen.

**1995** - The Branch developed Hidden Pictures, an Indigenous touring film festival to showcase films that were shot in local areas to the Indigenous people in those areas and to educate people on the issue of representation. The program consisted of 14 feature films, one documentary and a short ethnographic film that Eddie Mabo used as part of his submission to the High Court of Australia to destroy the colonial legal fiction of 'Terra Nullius'. A compilation of essays written by Indigenous people was also printed to accompany the touring festival.

The Branch created The Bush Track Meets the Information Superhighway, a multimedia and online services workshop in 12 Indigenous communities.

**1996** - Five projects from The Indigenous Drama Initiative launched in 1994 were selected to go into production, including works from Rima Tamou and Darlene Johnson. The AFC supported the national distribution of the films through the Australian Film Institute Distribution (AFID). AFID distributed the films as a package titled *From Sand to Celluloid* and they were screened at 24 locations from as far afield as Coober Pedy to Broome. The films received industry awards and critical acclaim, and stimulated and contributed to informed debate about issues of cultural representation. They remain available for [purchase via the National Film and Sound Archive \(NFSA\)](#) and a retrospective of the films are included in the [2018 Sydney Film Festival as part of the anniversary year celebrations](#).

From 1993 to 1996 the four federal film agencies including the Australian Film Television and Radio School, Australian Film Finance Corporation, Film Australia and the AFC embarked on a national Indigenous Employment Strategy for the film industry. An interagency employment coordinator was appointed in February to November 1995 and worked from the Indigenous Branch of the AFC. The coordinator completed a review of the employment strategies of each agency. The Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs was also involved in the strategy and Wal Saunders Head of the Indigenous Branch engaged John Harding to run the strategy. After the success of the first Indigenous Drama Initiative Wal went on to extend the scope of the strategy to include Indigenous placements on film and television productions, as well as employment and training within the four federal agencies.

**1997** - Following the success of the national *Bush Track Meets the Information Superhighway* project, which identified the training and development needs of Indigenous people in regards to new media, the Indigenous Branch unveiled *Online, On Track*. The aim of the project was to provide Indigenous people with an understanding of digital manipulation, online technology and the creation of CD-ROM in order to help them make informed choices about their involvement in the development of multimedia.

# BACKGROUND

The Branch was involved in the development and delivery of a submission to the World Intellectual Property Organisation at the UNESCO Conference on Indigenous Intellectual property in April, 1997. The submission outlined concerns of Indigenous Australians for the protection of Indigenous intellectual property.

The success of the National Drama Initiative model inspired a similar initiative the National Indigenous Documentary Fund Initiative which was originally funded by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC).

1998 - The second Indigenous Drama Initiative was completed. Sixty applications were received with 10 projects being selected to attend a Visual Storytelling workshop. From the workshop six projects were selected for production as part of the series *Shifting Sands - from Sand to Celluloid Continued*. Several of the funded projects including [Tears](#) by Ivan Sen and [My Bed Your Bed](#) by Erica Glynn, went on to win awards domestically and receive critical acclaim at Australian and International film festivals. [The series remain available for purchase via the NFSA](#) and will also feature at the [2018 Sydney Film Festival as part of the anniversary year celebrations](#).

As part of the National Indigenous Documentary Fund, the AFC provided development funds to a 30-minute documentary from central Australia called [Bush Mechanics](#), written and directed by Francis Kelly & David Batty. [Bush Mechanics](#), tells the story of Indigenous ingenuity in the outback - the people and their cars. The series was [highly awarded](#) and returned in 2001 and 2004.

1999 - As a continuation of the presale agreement with SBS Independent that saw the development and production of the Indigenous Drama Initiative 1996, the Native Titles stage of the initiative went into development. Four projects went into production including [Wind](#) (Iven Sen), [Saturday Night, Sunday Morning](#) (Rima Tamou), [Harry's War](#) (Richard Frankland) and [Confessions of a Headhunter](#) (Sally Riley). [Wind](#) and [Harry's War](#) received AFI Award nominations and were broadcast by SBS as Crossing Tracks.

2000 - As part of the AFC's restructure, the Indigenous Branch joined the Film Development and Marketing Branch and was renamed the Indigenous Unit. Sally Riley took over from Wal Saunders as the Head of the Indigenous Unit. AFC funded films [Dust](#) and [Road](#), screened around the country. The films from *Shifting Sands* continued to feature in film festivals around the world. Two Indigenous programs funded by the Unit - [Bush Mechanics](#) and [After Mabo - The Amendment](#) - won AFI Awards. [Confessions of a Headhunter](#) won the AFI Award for Best Short Film.

The documentary [Stolen Generations](#), directed by Darlene Johnson, was nominated for an International Emmy. The Unit supported Darlene's development as a director by funding her short film [Two Bob Mermaid](#) which was part of *From Sand to Celluloid* in 1996.

2001 - The AFC's Indigenous Unit in collaboration with the Industry & Cultural Development Unit, organised an Indigenous Film Festival in Germany. The festival was a major recognition of Australian Indigenous practitioners on the international stage. The Indigenous Unit funded practitioners Rachel Perkins, Erica Glynn and Warwick Thornton to attend the festival and present their films. Australian Indigenous art of all forms remains incredibly popular in Germany to this day. In 2017 [Bangarra Dance Theatre](#) performed in Berlin as part of [Australia Now](#), a year-long program showcasing Australian culture in Germany, which also included an art exhibition from the National Gallery of Australia called Indigenous Australia.

The Indigenous Unit assumed management of the National Indigenous Documentary Fund in association with Indigenous Screen Australia (ISA - an organisation unrelated to the present day Screen Australia). The fund provided production support for new and emerging Indigenous documentary filmmakers.

2002 - At the Tudawali Awards (The Indigenous Film and Television Awards), the AFC Indigenous Unit inaugurated and sponsored an award called the Bob Mazza Memorial Award. The award was for emerging acting talent for professional development, and was awarded to Ursula Yovich who starred in [My Bed Your Bed](#).

Indigenous talent that the Unit had supported since its inception started to receive international recognition for their projects. Ivan Sen's debut feature film [Beneath Clouds](#), which received support through funding of an acting and casting workshop, won two awards at the Berlin International Film Festival.

Rachel Perkins' short feature [One Night the Moon](#) was selected for Sundance Film Festival, and Wayne Blair's short film [Black Talk](#) was selected to screen at the Hawaiian Film Festival.

Catriona McKenzie's [Road](#) made a huge impression at the Flickerfest International Short Film Festival, winning Most Popular Film. [Road](#) was also joint winner of the Audience Award with [Confessions of a Headhunter](#) and screened in the Cinema des Antipodes at the Forum of the Cannes Film Festival.

The AFC supported the attachments of two practitioners including Danielle McLean and Darlene Johnson to the feature film [Rabbit Proof Fence](#). Darlene Johnson also wrote and directed the documentary [Following the Rabbit Proof Fence](#) about the process behind making the feature film.

2003 - The Indigenous Unit launched and completed two major initiatives to support the development and production of Indigenous films including *Dreaming in Motion* (five 13-minute dramas including [Black Talk](#), [Mimi](#), [Shit Skin](#), [Flat](#), and [Turn Around](#)), and *Skin, Kin and Country* (five 26-minute documentaries including [The Foundation](#), [Big Girls Don't Cry](#), [Me and You](#), [Ngangkari](#), and [We of Little Voice](#)). A third initiative *Fifty/Fifty* was developed to bridge the gap between short film and the transition to a full length feature.

The Unit organised a selection of films to be featured at the International Film Festival in Rotterdam. The Unit also worked to curate the program at *Crossing Tracks*, a film festival held at the Asia Society in New York.

The Unit launched the new initiative Dramatically Black in association with SBS Independent, who offered a presale and investment in each project. The initiative aimed to support Indigenous filmmakers with at least one short fiction film credit, to attempt a half hour drama.

2004 - The Indigenous Unit funded the Message Sticks Indigenous Film Festival at the Sydney Opera House. Films screened there included the Australian premiere of [Wirriya: Small Boy](#) (directed and produced by Beck Cole) and [Mr Patterns](#) (directed by Catriona McKenzie) as well as Indigenous films from Canada, the US and New Zealand.

2005 - The AFC continued to support Indigenous filmmakers to attend International film festivals for screenings of their films. Three films in the Dramatically Black series were selected to screen at two major festivals and the AFC funded the filmmakers and leading actors in [Green Bush](#) (directed by Warwick Thornton) and [Plains Empty](#) (directed by Beck Cole) to attend Sundance Film Festival. The AFC also supported writers and directors of [The Djarns Djarns](#) (directed by Wayne Blair) and [Green Bush](#) (directed by Warwick Thornton) to attend the Berlin International Film Festival, where both films won major awards in their categories. [The Djarns Djarns](#) won the Crystal Bear for Best Short Film at Berlin and [Green Bush](#) won the Panorama Best Short Film award.

The documentary [Yellow Fella](#) received AFC Indigenous Branch development, production and post-production funding. It was written by Mr T. E. Lewis and Fleur Parry, directed by Ivan Sen and produced by Citty Williams. It screened at the Cannes Film Festival in Un Certain Regard, making it the first Indigenous Australian documentary to screen at the prestigious festival.

2006 - The Indigenous Unit (reverting to its former title of 'Indigenous Branch' for 2004/05 and 2005/06) launched a new drama initiative A Bit of Black Business with SBS Independent to support new and emerging Indigenous filmmakers. Thirteen projects were selected to go into production including works from Aaron Fa'aso and Jon Bell.

The Branch partnered with the Sydney Opera House and Indigenous Screen Australia on the Message Sticks Indigenous Film Festival. The [seventh series](#) of the National Indigenous Documentary Fund had its premiere at the festival. The series comprised of four films, including Aaron Pedersen's deeply personal tale [My Brother Vinnie](#), about his relationship with his brother who has mild intellectual disabilities and cerebral palsy.

Leah Purcell, whose screen credits include [Jindabyne](#), [Lantana](#), and [Black Chicks Talking](#) won the AFC funded Bob Mazza Fellowship to help further develop her career internationally.

2006 - [Ten Canoes](#), the feature film directed by Peter Djugirr and Rolf de Heer that was shot on and around the Arafura Swamp in north-eastern Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia, was the first feature film to be shot entirely in Indigenous language. The film starred Jamie Gulpilil, son of the great David Gulpilil. It received international acclaim playing at Cannes Film Festival, Toronto International Film Festival, and Telluride Film Festival in the US.

2007 - Aaron Pedersen (*The Circuit*, *City Homicide*) was the recipient of the Bob Mazza Fellowship. Aside from being one of Australia's most frequently cast actors, Aaron featured in and wrote the script for the award-winning documentary [My Brother Vinnie](#), directed by Steven McGregor. The film won Best Documentary Short Film at the 45th Melbourne International Film Festival Short Film Awards.

The short drama [Nana](#), directed by Warwick Thornton and produced by Kath Shelper, which received funding through the A Bit of Black Business initiative, screened at opening night of Sydney Film Festival. [Nana](#) went on to win awards at the Berlin International Film Festival, Melbourne International Film Festival and Hamburg International Short Film Festival.

2008 - The federal screen funding agency Screen Australia commenced operation on 1 July 2008 following the merger of the Australian Film Commission (AFC), the Film Finance Corporation Australia (FFC) and Film Australia Limited. Screen Australia's Indigenous Department continued funding programs and initiatives devised by its predecessor - the Indigenous Branch.

The Bob Mazza Fellowship was presented at the Message Sticks Indigenous Film Festival at the Sydney Opera House. The award was won by actor Luke Carroll providing funding for him to further his professional development and raise his profile internationally.

The Producers Initiative was created by the Department with the aim of developing new Indigenous creative producers within the industry, as well as providing professional development for less experienced practitioners. Participants included Penny Smallacombe, John Harvey and Ryan Griffen.

[First Australians](#) aired on SBS. The landmark seven-part documentary series produced by Australia's finest Indigenous filmmakers, melded landscape, art, interviews and first-hand accounts with archival material to present the birth of contemporary Australia, from the perspective of its first people. The series directed by Beck Cole and Rachel Perkins and produced by Darren Dale received critical acclaim, and went on to win a Logie Award, AFI Award, Australian Director's Guild Award, Australian Writer's Guild Award, Deadly Award and NSW Premier's Literary Award.

2009 - Between 2008 and 2009 the Indigenous Department supported the development of five feature films, eight short films, two television series, 10 documentaries and one digital media project.

The first feature film funded by the Indigenous Department for production was released. Titled [Samson & Delilah](#), it was directed by Warwick Thornton and produced by Kath Shelper. It won the Caméra d'Or at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival - the festival's highest honour for first features. It screened in the Un Certain Regard section of the festival and received a standing ovation. The film also won the audience award at the Adelaide Film Festival. Alongside its critical success the film performed well at the local box office, becoming the fifth highest earning Australian film that year.

In May 2009, Screen Australia published a comprehensive guide for all filmmakers working with Indigenous content and communities, titled [Pathways & Protocols: a filmmaker's guide to working with Indigenous people, culture and concepts](#). The guide which is still used today assists and encourages recognition and respect for the images, knowledge and stories of Indigenous people. It provides essential advice about the ethical and legal components involved in transferring Indigenous cultural material to the screen.

2010 - [Sampson & Delilah made the shortlist](#) for an Academy Award® nomination in the Best Foreign Language Film category.

Musical feature film [Bran Nue Dae](#), directed by Rachel Perkins, starring Jessica Mauboy, Ernie Dingo and Deborah Mailman, was released nationally and took nearly \$8m at the local box office, earning it a place in the Top 50 all-time Australian films. It was also selected to screen at Toronto, Sundance and Berlin International Film Festivals.

# BACKGROUND

2011- Feature film [Toomelah](#), directed by Ivan Sen and produced by David Jowsey, was selected for competition in Un Certain Regard at the Cannes Film Festival. The film about a young Aboriginal boy growing up in NSW was given a standing ovation by the festival audience.

The new head of the Indigenous Department, Erica Glynn, along with her predecessor Sally Riley, now Head of Indigenous Department at ABC TV, were jointly awarded the Cecil Holmes Award by the Australian Directors Guild for their services to the Indigenous screen industry.

2012 - [Redfern Now](#), a six x 1-hour television drama series produced by Blackfella Films (Darren Dale, Miranda Dear), premiered on ABC TV in November. Internationally acclaimed writer Jimmy McGovern worked as story producer, and the series was written and directed by both emerging and established Indigenous filmmakers. The series was entirely written and directed by Indigenous practitioner and produced by an Indigenous production company.

2012 - [The Sapphires](#) won multiple AACTA awards including Best Film, Best Direction and Best Adapted Screenplay, was invited into the Official Selection in Cannes, and was the best-performing Australian feature at the domestic box office that year, taking over \$14.47 million. The film (based on a true story) followed four young and talented Aboriginal sisters who in the chaos of 1968, are plucked from the obscurity of a remote Aboriginal mission, branded as Australia's answer to The Supremes, and - grasping the chance of a lifetime - dropped into the jungles of Vietnam to entertain the troops. It starred Jessica Mauboy, Deborah Mailman, Miranda Tapsell, Shari Sebbens and Chris O'Dowd.

2013- ABC series [Redfern Now](#), produced by Blackfella Films and funded by the Indigenous Department, won a Logie for Most Outstanding Drama Series. Actress Shari Sebbens received a Logie for Most Outstanding New Talent. [Redfern Now](#) also won two AACTA Awards for Best Screenplay in Television (writer Steven McGregor) and Best Lead Actress in a Television Drama (Leah Purcell).

Feature film [Mystery Road](#), written and directed by Ivan Sen, opened the Sydney Film Festival. [Mystery Road](#) was produced by David Jowsey, with a cast including Aaron Pedersen, Ryan Kwanten, Hugo Weaving, Jack Thompson and Tasma Walton. David Jowsey would go on to become a frequent and highly respected collaborator with Indigenous talent, along with his producing partner Greer Simpkin.

[Buckskin](#), written and directed by Dylan River Glynn McDonald, was awarded the Foxtel Documentary Prize at the Sydney Film Festival. [Buckskin](#) was developed and produced through the Call to Country National Indigenous Documentary Fund (NIDF) series.

The Indigenous Department helped curate and support the inaugural Berlin International Film Festival program NATIVE: A Journey into Indigenous Cinema.

The Department also partnered with the Sydney Film Festival for the Screen: Black program, which saw the world premiere screenings of feature film [Mystery Road](#), documentaries [Buckskin](#) and [Big Name, No Blanket](#) directed by Steven McGregor and short film [The Chuck In](#) directed by John Bell.

2014 - [Redfern Now series 2](#), produced by Blackfella Films and funded by the Indigenous Department, won the Logie for Most Outstanding Drama Series and the AACTA Award for Best Television Drama Series.

The Indigenous Department partnered with NITV on [Songlines on Screen](#), an ambitious documentary initiative to record Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Songlines (creation beliefs) through short documentaries. The documentaries screened in 2015 as part of Screen: Black program at the Sydney Film Festival and later on NITV. This initiative was significant as the rights to the films will transfer to the Traditional Owners and Custodians after NITV's screening and online rights, rather than staying with the producer. This was an important step in preserving these creation stories and keeping record of them for future generations.

Writer/director Warwick Thornton's feature, [The Darkside](#), was selected to screen at Berlinale's 44<sup>th</sup> International Forum of New Cinema, which screens the most daring and experimental works.

Family drama [The Gods of Wheat Street](#), a six x 1-hour television series, aired on the ABC in April to critical acclaim. Supported by the ABC and Screen Australia's Indigenous Department, the series was written solely by Indigenous writer Jon Bell and was produced by Every Cloud Productions.

2014 - The [First Contact](#) documentary series that received production funding from the Screen Australia Documentary Department aired in November 2014. Hosted by Ray Martin, the series followed a group of six non-Indigenous people, from different walks of life and with strong and varied opinions, and immersed them into Aboriginal Australia for the first time. It aired on SBS and NITV and prompted extensive discussion and media coverage: the hashtag #FirstContactSBS trended number one on Twitter in Australia for the three consecutive nights it was on air. It went on to win the 2015 TV Week Logie Award for Most Outstanding Factual Program. The series was produced by Blackfella Films' Darren Dale and Jacob Hickey with Rachel Perkins as executive producer.

2015 - [8MMM Aboriginal Radio](#), a six-part narrative comedy series developed and financed by the Indigenous Department and the ABC was filmed in Central Australia and aired on the ABC in April. The series, written by Trisha Morton Thomas and Danielle MacLean, directed by Dena Curtis and Adrian Russell Wills, and produced by Princess Pictures and Brindle Films, took a brave step into the vortex of Aboriginal Australia, where truth and comedy collide.

[Redfern Now: Promise Me](#), the final instalment of the award-winning TV drama [Redfern Now](#), screened on ABC. It was written by Steven McGregor, directed by Rachel Perkins, and starred Deborah Mailman, Wayne Blair, Rarriwuy Hick and Anthony Hayes.

The films from Pitch Black shorts, an emerging filmmakers short drama initiative run by the Indigenous Department, were showcased during the Screen: Black program at the Sydney Film Festival. [Nulla Nulla](#), directed by Dylan River Glynn McDonald and produced by Tanoth Glynn-Maloney was selected to screen at the Berlin International Film Festival and at the Toronto International Film Festival. It also won the AACTA for Best Short Drama.

The feature film [Spear](#), funded by the Indigenous Department and directed by Stephen Page, executive produced by Rob Connelly and produced by John Harvey screened at the Toronto International Film Festival in the Discovery Programme in September to great acclaim, ahead of its Australian premiere at the Adelaide Film Festival. The film is a contemporary Indigenous story, told through movement and dance, of a young man Djali (Hunter Page-Lochard) as he journeys through his community to understand what it means to be a man with ancient traditions in a modern world.

2016 - Screen Australia's [Seeing Ourselves diversity report](#) showed Indigenous representation in TV drama has risen from zero in 1992 to 5% of main characters between 2011 and 2015. With Indigenous Australians making up 3% of the population, this dramatic and positive change was the result of work by the Indigenous Department at Screen Australia, the ABC, SBS/NITV as well as other organisations and production companies.

[Cleverman](#), a series eight years in the making, made its world premiere in February [at the Berlin International Film Festival](#), a great achievement for the Australian television industry and a boost for Indigenous storytelling. The show premiered on the ABC in June 2016 and was created by Ryan Griffen, incorporating Indigenous stories into a modern-day setting. It was produced by Goalpost Pictures and New Zealand company Pukeko Pictures as an Official Australian/New Zealand Co-production.

The Indigenous Department in association with Goalpost Pictures and Screen NSW supported six emerging Indigenous internships to work on the second series of [Cleverman](#). It was actually through an Indigenous attachment at Goalpost Pictures that creator Ryan Griffen first began to develop [Cleverman](#) with producer Rosemary Blight.

The Indigenous Department funded 18 attachments across various departments on productions including [Jasper Jones](#), [Dance Academy: The Movie](#), [The Secret Daughter](#), [Hyde and Seek](#), [Alien: Covenant](#), and [Thor: Ragnarok](#). The largest number of attachments was on [Thor: Ragnarok](#) where [eight emerging Indigenous creatives and crew](#) worked across departments including directing, stunts, set design, production and grips.

[Goldstone](#), the follow up feature to [Mystery Road](#) screened as the opening night film of Sydney Film Festival in June and was released in cinemas in July. Directed by Ivan Sen and produced by David Jowsey and Greer Simpkin it again follows Indigenous Detective Jay Swan played by Aaron Pedersen and also starred Jacki Weaver, David Wenham and David Gulpilil.

*Thor: Ragnarok* director Taika Waititi said: "Being Maori, it's extremely important to me to have native presence on any film. We're bringing a huge Hollywood production to this country and it's only right that we make an effort to include Indigenous filmmakers on the journey."

In August, the new three-part ABC docudrama [Blue Water Empire](#) began production, aiming to tell the largely unknown history of the Torres Strait Islander people. Directed by Steven McGregor and produced by David Jowsey, Aaron Fa'aoso and Greer Simpkin, it was supported through development and into production by Screen Australia's Indigenous Department.

The documentary [Servant or Slave](#) directed by Steven McGregor and produced by Mitchell Stanley was supported through development and production by the Indigenous Department. It was broadcast on NITV in November and received the single biggest ratings a one-off program has ever received in NITV's history.

2017 - The ground-breaking 13 x 12-minute series [Little J & Big Cuz](#) for NITV marked the first time Australians could watch an animated children's series with Indigenous characters and languages set in modern-day Australia. It was supported through development and into production by Screen Australia's Indigenous Department. Written by Indigenous writers, including Erica Glynn, Danielle MacLean, Dot West, Jon Bell, Beck Cole (who was also voice director) and Bruce Pascoe, and animated by Tony Thorne it was created to help young Indigenous children with the transition from home to school. The series followed the adventures of five-year-old Little J (voiced by Miranda Tapsell) and nine-year-old Big Cuz (Deborah Mailman) - a couple of Indigenous Australian kids who live with their Nanna and four-legged friend Old Dog, just a short stroll from their school and friends. At its peak, close to 40 people and two animation studios worked on the series, which was completed in January 2017 and aired on NITV and SBS On Demand in April 2017.

The ongoing commitment by Sydney Film Festival to support First Nations storytelling in partnership with Screen Australia's Indigenous Department was particularly evident in the 2017 program. Warwick Thornton's documentary [We Don't Need a Map was the Opening Night film](#) as well as an Official Competition contender. [In My Own Words](#) and [Connection to Country](#) were also screened at the festival and were funded through a joint NITV and Indigenous Department initiative called Moments in History. All up, Sydney Film Festival screened more than eight titles from First Nations storytellers from Australia and around the world.

The Canada Media Fund (CMF) announced it is developing an Indigenous Media Fund modelled on Screen Australia's own Indigenous Department.

8 x 30 minute drama series [The Warriors](#) screened on ABC. The series followed two Indigenous football players plucked from their modest lives to play in the AFL. Dislocated from traditional values, the boys struggle with their new-found celebrity and its lure of sex, drugs and fast living. The series was supported by the Indigenous Department with an Indigenous creative team led by Adrian Russell Wills, Beck Cole, Steven McGregor, and Catriona McKenzie at the helm. It was produced by John Harvey, Tony Briggs, Liz Kearney and Robert Connolly.

Five documentary projects were broadcast; [Carry the Flag](#) (NITV) honouring the 25th anniversary of the Torres Strait Islander flag, and four documentaries making up the Moment in History slate on SBS examining the place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Australia today - [In My Own Words](#), [Occupation: Native](#), [Connection to Country](#), and [We Don't Need a Map](#).

Documentary feature [After the Apology](#) premiered at Adelaide Film Festival. The series was funded Department as part of the Indigenous Feature Documentary Initiative between the Indigenous Department, Adelaide Film Festival, Kojo, and the National Film and Sound Archive. The landmark documentary was written and directed by Larissa Behrendt and explored the continued practice of child removal and the community response.

As original multiplatform content explodes across small screens, the [\[Black Space\] initiative](#) was designed to bring Indigenous stories, authored and crafted by Indigenous people, to online audiences. The Indigenous Department funded two [Black Space] multiplatform projects, [The Chance Affair](#), from writer Steven Oliver making his directorial debut and producer Majhid Heath (both from *Black Comedy*), and [Zero-Point](#), from emerging Darwin-based Indigenous animator Jonathan Saunders.

2017 - The riveting and moving Australian coming of age story, [Jasper Jones](#), based on Craig Silvey's acclaimed novel was released. Directed by Rachel Perkins, the film follows Charlie Buckin (Levi Miller), a bookish boy of 14 who embarks on a dangerous journey with the town's mixed race outcast Jasper Jones (Aaron McGrath). Set over the scorching summer holidays of 1965, Charlie defeats the local racists, faces the break-up of his parents and falls head over heels in love as he discovers what it means to be truly courageous. The film had the third-largest box office taking of Australian films that year.

2017 - [Kiki & Kitty](#), the six-part online series created by and starring the talented Nakkiah Lui, premiered on ABC iview. The series follows the adventures of a young Indigenous woman in a big, white world, where her vagina is personified as a fabulous black woman who becomes her best friend.

Feature film [Sweet Country](#), from director Warwick Thornton and writers Steven McGregor and David Tranter, was selected to screen In Competition [at the 2017 Venice Film Festival](#) where it won the Special Jury Prize. The film was also the Closing Night film of the Platform programme at the 2017 Toronto International Film Festival where it took out the Platform Award. It was funded through development and production by Screen Australia's Indigenous Department.

A true collaboration, [Sweet Country](#) utilised locations, government assistance and filmmakers from across Australia. It filmed in South Australia and the Northern Territory with a creative team hailing from the Northern Territory (Warwick Thornton, Steven McGregor and David Tranter, who also produced) and NSW (producers Greer Simpkin and David Jowsey), and it was post produced in NSW. The Indigenous Department supported two Indigenous interns to work on the set.

2018 - Since its release on 27 January, 2018 [Sweet Country](#) has continued to receive praise with Screen Daily calling it a "milestone for Australian Indigenous Cinema."

In February, Screen Australia [announced plans to mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Department](#), including the formation of a Strategic Reference Group to create a blueprint for the future.

In March, NITV premiered the compelling documentary [Black Divaz](#) funded by the Indigenous Department to coincide with the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. The documentary, which was written and directed by Adrian Russell Wills follows Indigenous Drag Queens from around Australia as they embark on a quest to be crowned the Inaugural Miss First Nations Drag Queen.

The Indigenous Department [supported the Top Ending Wedding Internship program](#) giving five emerging Indigenous screen practitioners the opportunity to hone their skills on the set of the feature film [Top End Wedding](#), produced by Goalpost Pictures, directed by Wayne Blair and written by and starring Miranda Tapsell.

[Gurrumul](#) the documentary was released to critical acclaim. [Written and directed by Paul Williams and produced by Shannon Swan](#), it is a poignant portrait of one of Australia's most celebrated and important voices. Blind from birth, Gurrumul found purpose and meaning through songs and music inspired by his community and country on Elcho Island in far North East Arnhem Land.

From June 2018, ABC will air the six-part drama series adaptation of [Mystery Road](#), which received production funding from the Indigenous Department. Directed by Rachel Perkins, and produced by Greer Simpkin and David Jowsey it follows the story of detective Jay Swan (Aaron Pederson) who is assigned to investigate the mysterious disappearance of two young farm hands on an outback cattle station.

In June the Sydney Film Festival will present First Nations: A Celebration, in partnership with the Indigenous Department. Boosting the voices of First Nation storytellers, the program will showcase new documentaries and short films by First Nation filmmakers from across Australia and around the world, alongside From Little Things Big Things Grow, a retrospective of short films funded by Screen Australia's Indigenous Department. The Retrospective includes 19 outstanding short films from 15 filmmakers, across four showcases: From Sand to Celluloid, Shifting Sands, Crossing Tracks, and Dreaming in Motion. Shorts by acclaimed directors include Warwick Thornton's [Payback](#) and [Mimi](#), Ivan Sen's [Tears](#) and [Wind](#), Wayne Blair's [Black Talk](#), Richard Frankland's [No Way to Forget](#) and [Harry's War](#), and current Sydney Festival Director Wesley Enoch's [Grace](#).

More information about each of the initiatives developed by the Indigenous Department is available [here](#).

## Heads of the Indigenous Department

### Wal Saunders 1993 - 1999

On 25 June 1993, Walter Saunders, a member of the Kilcarer and Gilgar Gunditj clans of the Gunditjmarra Tribe of south western Victoria, was announced as the inaugural Manager of the Department. With no budget allocated to the department in the early years Wal pre-sold six 10-minute dramas and four 30-minute dramas to SBS Independent thereby triggering development and production funding from the Film Development branch. This led to the creation of the watershed *From Sand to Celluloid* and *Crossing Tracks* initiatives where Indigenous creatives were funded to make their own short films by developing their ideas through Visual Storytelling Workshops. The filmmakers to experience this new model of development were Richard Frankland, Warwick Thornton, Rima Tamu, Sally Riley, Darlene Johnson, and Sam Watson.

During his time at the AFC, Wal's tenacity resulted in the development of a pool of Indigenous film makers who have benefited from ongoing production and development investment as well as professional development support. His legacy is a body of work that has won acclaim both locally and internationally, and in addition to *From Sand to Celluloid*, includes *Shifting Sands* and *Crossing Tracks*.

### Pauline Clague 1999 - 2000

After Wal Saunders left the Department, Pauline Clague stepped into the role of Acting Manager. Pauline was already working for the Department as a project manager for the half hour series *Crossing Roads*.

Pauline is a Yaegl women from the North Coast of New South Wales. She entered into the Industry in 1994 through the Indigenous Drama Initiative producing a short film *Round Up*. Since then she has produced documentaries and dramas, been Series Producer for various initiatives, and worked for ABC, SBS and NITV.

### Sally Riley 2000 - 2010

A Wiradjuri woman from NSW, Sally Riley has been at the forefront of Indigenous filmmaking in Australia for over 15 years.

Sally re-invigorated Indigenous filmmaking as Manager of Screen Australia's Indigenous Department, a role she held for 10 years. She initiated the development and production of a significant body of short films, documentaries and feature films, and fostered a new generation of Indigenous filmmakers including Warwick Thornton ([Samson & Delilah](#), [The Darkside](#)), Beck Cole ([Here I Am](#), [Plains Empty](#)), Wayne Blair ([Redfern Now](#), [The Sapphires](#)), Ivan Sen ([Mystery Road](#), [Toomelah](#)), Darren Dale ([Redfern Now](#)) and Catriona McKenzie ([Satellite Boy](#), [Mr Patterns](#)).

Under Sally's leadership, the Department's initiatives provided professional development opportunities for Indigenous filmmakers, creating enormous growth and a distinctive body of work. Sally was also one of the key drivers in the creation of Screen Australia's industry handbook, [Pathways & Protocols - a filmmaker's guide to working with Indigenous people, culture and concepts](#).

She left the department to take on the newly created position as Head of ABC TV's Indigenous Department where across seven years she oversaw productions including [Black Comedy](#), [Gods of Wheat Street](#), [8MMM Aboriginal Radio](#), [The Warriors](#), the multi-award-winning [Redfern Now](#) and the critically-acclaimed six-part drama, [Cleverman](#). All in partnership with the Indigenous Department of Screen Australia.

Sally is currently Head of ABC TV's Scripted Production (Drama, Comedy & Indigenous) where she has commissioned the highly anticipated [Mystery Road](#) TV Series, a spin off from Ivan Sen's feature film.

An experienced filmmaker, Sally's film [Confessions of a Headhunter](#), won the AFI Award for Best Short Film in 2000. She was awarded the Australian Public Service Medal in 2008 for her services to the development of initiatives that have increased the participation of Indigenous Australians in the film and television industry. In 2011, Sally was awarded (with Erica Glynn) the Cecil Holmes Award from the Australian Directors Guild (ADG). In 2016 she was named one of Foreign Policy's 100 Global Thinkers.

#### Erica Glynn 2010 - 2014

Erica was born and raised in Alice Springs and is connected to the Kaytetye people. A graduate of AFTRS in Sydney, Erica cut her teeth working for the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) in Alice Springs. During her eleven years working for Screen Australia and its predecessor agency, the AFC, Erica played an important role in supporting the strong presence of Indigenous practitioners in the sector.

Erica's award-winning short film [My Bed Your Bed](#) was an international success with screenings in Auckland, Cork, Hawaii and Wellington Film Festivals as well as The International Women's Film Festival of France. She has also made many documentaries including [A Walk with Words](#) with Romaine Morton and [Ngangkari](#), about traditional healers of the Central Desert Region. Erica's most recent documentary [In My Own Words](#), explored the transformative power of reading and writing in the Indigenous community in Brewarrina, NSW, and was produced by Darren Dale and commissioned by NITV with Screen Australia as part of the [Moment in History initiative](#).

#### Penny Smallacombe 2014 - Present

Penny is a member of the Maramanindji people from the Northern Territory. She has completed a cadetship with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and has a Master of Arts (Documentary Producing) degree from AFTRS. Penny produced the documentary [A Change of Heart](#) which was nominated for a Dendy Award and screened internationally at IDFA. She also worked as Producer/Director with the ABC's Indigenous Programs Unit producing numerous stories for the long running Message Sticks program, and produced the ABC's highly successful [Yarning Up](#) series one and two.

Penny was also a part of the Screen Australia Indigenous Department's Producers Initiative in 2011. She produced a series of shorts called [The Forgotten Ones](#) in 2010, directed by prisoners from the Northern Territory, and prior to heading up the department worked as a Senior Programmer for NITV, National Indigenous Television, a division of SBS.

During her time at Screen Australia, Penny has stewarded some of the Indigenous Department's most high-profile projects including the development of [8MMM Aboriginal Radio](#), [The Warriors](#), and the production of [Spear](#), [Little J and Big Cuz](#), [Mystery Road](#) (TV series), [Goldstone](#), [Sweet Country](#), plus the [Moments in History](#) documentary series and [Blue Water Empire](#). She has also overseen numerous emerging initiatives, including two series of [Songlines on Screen](#), Pitch Black Shorts, Shock Treatment, State of Alarm, [Black Space] and the Producers Initiative.

The titles listed [here](#) are titles funded by the department.