

Taking tonal proof to the world stage

**Developing a framework of creative and strategic choices to
enhance an aspiring Australian feature film director's vision**

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
May 2021

Declaration

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing, which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except where specifically indicated in the text. It has not previously been submitted, in part or whole, to any university or institution for any degree, diploma, or other qualification.

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Abstract

This thesis is informed by my own transition from short filmmaking to the writing and directing of my first feature film, *The Butterfly Tree* (2017). It investigates the crucial role of domestic distributors within the context of an Australian feature film ‘mainstream’ funding model and focuses on how domestic distributors evaluate an Australian feature film pitch and project. It also explores the power of tonal proof (for the purposes of this thesis, defined as a short-form project tonally reflective of the long-form project in terms of genre, tone and style). Its central line of inquiry investigates how aspiring Australian feature film directors can efficiently transition from short filmmaking to feature film directing by strengthening their creative vision while simultaneously meeting funding body and funding system requirements. This process has synthesised primary and secondary research with reflective creative practice and praxis, and involved the creation of two short films and an award-winning feature film. The feature competed at the Toronto International Film Festival, one of the most prestigious ‘A list’ film festivals in the world and was also released theatrically in Australia.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

AACTA	Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts Awards
AFC	Australian Film Commission
AFDC	Australian Film Development Corporation
AFF	Adelaide Film Festival
AFTRS	Australian Film, Television and Radio School
AWG	Australian Writers Guild
DG	Distribution Guarantee
DOP	Director of Photography
FFC	Film Finance Corporation Australia
FLICS	Film Licensed Investment Company Scheme
TIFF	Toronto International Film Festival
MIFF	Melbourne International Film Festival
NFSA	National Film and Sound Archive
PDV	Post Digital and Visual Effects
SPAA	Screen Producers Australia Association
SVOD	Subscription Video on Demand
TVOD	Transactional Video on Demand
VOD	Video on Demand

Acknowledgements

The journey of this thesis has been a mammoth undertaking and there are inevitably people who deserve to be thanked, but who I will miss in the following paragraphs. I apologise and sincerely thank you regardless – please forgive me.

To my family and friends, thank you for your endurance, emotional and spiritual support, and in specific cases generous financial support.

To my Griffith University and industry colleagues and friends, thank you for your open hearts and ears. Your humour, advice and support have always made me feel that somewhere, somehow, this may all just be worth it. A special thanks to Sean Gilligan and Dean Chircop: I owe you some serious air time. To Sue Jarvis and Joanne Tindale, thank you for your attention to detail and patience.

To my creative collaborators – my amazing producer Bridget Callow-Wright (producer of *The Butterfly Tree*) and fabulous co-writer (of *The Breathing Sea*) Heather Phillips – as well as the cast, crew and investors of all three films – *The Butterfly Tree* (2017), *Beetlefeeders* (2012) and *Tidal Marks* (2009) – thank you all for both teaching me and exceeding my expectations.

To all the industry practitioners who willingly took part in the research component, I thank you for your precious time, generosity, knowledge and insight. A special thank you to Tait Brady, Andrew Mackie and Sue Maslin for your unwavering generosity.

To my long-suffering supervisors, Margaret McVeigh and Trish FitzSimons, your patience, guiding intellect and emotional intelligence have endured long beyond what is fair or humane. I thank you. A special thank you to Margaret McVeigh for her unwavering belief and support – you were my first ever mentor and a great role model for nurturing creative hearts and minds.

Introduction

Why would you want to do that?

‘Why would you want to do that?’ At the tender age of 21, this is what I was asked by the head of a state film funding agency when I said I was about to co-write, co-produce and co-direct a no-budget feature film. The incredulous look on his face and the slight shake of his head left me in little doubt that he thought it a naïve choice. He had the wisdom of hindsight while I, having just graduated from film school, harboured a fire in my belly and possessed the blissful ignorance of youth. Instead of pausing and pondering the question, I launched myself headlong into a tempestuous journey that would span many precious years.

I had a long-term goal – to make feature films – and I had a short-term goal – to make great short films; however, I did not have sufficient knowledge to formulate a clear set of objectives that would enable me to transition efficiently, in terms of time and resources, from short-form writing and directing to long-form screenwriting and directing. My writing/directing career has spanned nearly 20 years and, as part of my own trial-and-error journey as well as the research and creative practice undertaken as part of this doctorate, I have discovered that before you can set goals as part of a wider strategy, it is critical to understand the business of film distribution and marketing in order to become a valuable member of the producer, director, distributor team.

The journey begins

The seed of this doctorate began the moment I realised that just focusing on the art and craft of writing and directing had left me unprepared for what is a crucial stepping-stone in the

financing of an Australian feature film using a mainstream finance model dependent upon the producer offset rebate: the attachment of a domestic distributor.

Australian domestic distributors are responsible for distributing feature films in Australia and New Zealand. For their services, they retain a percentage of returns from those territories. The Australian feature film industry currently relies on government funding for its survival, and domestic distributors are a powerful piece of a mainstream funding puzzle within this context. Since 2007, with the introduction of a range of incentives known as the Screen Production Incentives, domestic distributors have been given a formal role in the allocation of this funding to producers. Without a commitment from what Screen Australia deems to be an appropriate or recognised domestic distributor demonstrating a bona fide intent to distribute a completed feature film theatrically in Australia and New Zealand, an Australian feature film project will find it difficult to secure federal and state screen agency financing in the form of the 40 per cent producer offset rebate (a source of funds for eligible Australian projects underpinned by income tax legislation) and/or federal or state screen agency equity investment. For eligible television documentary production, the offset is 20 per cent (Screen Australia 2018). In some cases, up to 75 per cent of an Australian feature film's budget can be funded through the 40 per cent producer offset and Screen Australia equity investment alone (Screen Australia 2019a). The relationship between the domestic distributor and government finance is discussed in Chapter 3.

Given the significance of the role of the domestic distributor within this construct, this thesis discusses how emerging Australian directors can minimise domestic distributor risk, secure their commitment and strengthen an original vision by understanding how domestic distributors evaluate a first-time director's pitch and project. This research also contributes to the critical process of project development and pitch preparation, enabling filmmakers to make strong strategic and creative choices; this process includes providing

tonal proof, which for the purposes of this thesis is defined as a short-form project that is tonally reflective of the long-form project in terms of genre, tone and style.¹

Back to my defining moment in 2009. My then producer and co-writer and I had spent a number of years developing a feature film script that had a budget of around \$5 million, and previously had been fortunate enough to benefit from two rounds of script development support from the federal screen funding agency, Screen Australia. The script had won a prestigious national screenwriting award, the Australian Writers Guild and the Adelaide Film Festival (AFF) Insite Award, in a biennial national competition for unproduced screenplays, and was selected to be part of the Berlinale Co-Production Market and the Australian German Co-Production Market in Cannes.

During its financing phase, an appropriate domestic distributor responded well to the script and requested a phone meeting. Being naive and unaware of the true nature and importance of this conversation, the producer and I took the call totally unprepared for what was in fact our chance to pitch the project and potentially secure their commitment. During this conversation, as the director I was asked whether I intended to make another short film. Having already written, directed, produced and mostly self-financed my previous four short films, as well as having just been through a long and exhausting script-development process for the feature, I naively assumed that I had had enough directorial experience within the

¹ Following completion of this thesis, on 20 September 2020, ‘the Australian government announced proposed changes to the Producer Offset, which will come into effect for productions commencing principal photography on or after 1 July 2021’ (Screen Australia 2021). These include increasing the producer offset for television from 20 per cent to 30 per cent. In private communication, Screen Australia (2021) proposed that it would no longer be a requirement of the producer offset to attach a domestic distributor and an international sales agent; ‘however until the legislation is amended Screen Australia cannot be prescriptive with what will be required’ (Screen Australia, pers. comm. 2021). I will briefly reflect on these changes and how they may affect the relationship between Australian filmmakers and domestic distributors in my concluding chapter. COVID-19 has seen unpredictable and unprecedented changes within the industry; however, its ramifications lie beyond the scope of my research and therefore will not be addressed.

short film format, so replied, ‘No, I hadn’t been planning to make another short.’ The response of the distributor was that they were concerned because they couldn’t see anything tonally like the feature we were pitching on my ‘reel’ (a showcase of a director’s work, now usually available online). This was at a time when first-time feature film writer/director David Michod had successfully made two proof of concept short films, *Crossbow* (2007) and *Netherland Dwarf* (2008), which were tonally representative of the critically acclaimed feature film *Animal Kingdom* (2010) (Michod 2010). (The methodology of using tonal proof to minimise domestic distributor risk is discussed in Chapter 4.)

The outcome was that the domestic distributor passed on the project and, after years of development, it stalled. It was then that I decided two things: first, I needed to determine how domestic distributors evaluated a first-time director’s pitch and project; and second, I committed to making another short film that was tonally reflective of the feature we were seeking to finance. Thus, the challenge of how to efficiently transition from short-form screenwriting and directing to feature film directing while minimising domestic distributor risk and enhancing an original vision began.

That challenge has spanned nine years, during which there have been many deviations – some more significant than others. The most significant was the financing and production of *The Butterfly Tree*, which was greenlit for production in early 2016 at a time when I was preparing for my doctoral submission. This fortunate turn of events culminated in an 18-month hiatus and afforded me valuable insight, which I was able to include in the final thesis. This same fortune has also, to a degree, complicated my doctoral completion, because the four and a half years since this hiatus commenced have coincided with considerable changes in the feature film funding ecology in Australia. As I will emphasise in the concluding chapter, however, the principles of being attuned to that shifting ecology and positioning one’s production ambitions in relation to it are stable, even as the world to which they apply keeps changing.

To highlight the considerable journey that transitioning from short filmmaking to feature film writing and directing has entailed, I use the Sydney-based short film festival Tropfest as an example. Touted as the world's largest short film festival, Tropfest draws an annual live national audience of some 150,000 people and accepts a yearly average of 700 seven-minute short film submissions, out of which 16 are selected for screening (Tropfest 2015). A filmmaker entering Tropfest has approximately a 2 per cent chance of making it through to the finals. In contrast, on a five-year average (2012/13–2016/17), Australia produces 36 domestic feature films per year (Screen Australia 2017e, 8). The issue is knowing how many of these short filmmakers are then able to transition into feature filmmaking while competing with the 204 already active feature film directors (Screen Australia 2017a). I overcame this challenge through the research and reflective creative practice undertaken during this doctorate, which in 2017 culminated in the writing and directing of my first feature film, *The Butterfly Tree* (2017).

The Butterfly Tree stars critically acclaimed actors Melissa George, Ed Oxenbould, Ewen Leslie and Sophie Lowe (the cast biography can be found in Appendix 1) and is a coming-of-age drama told through the lens of magical realism. It tells the story of Fin, a boy on the cusp of manhood who falls in love with Evelyn, an older, glamorous burlesque queen who bewitches both Fin and his father, Al, with her zest for life. When father and son discover that they are competing for the affections of the same woman, old wounds are reopened over the death of Fin's mother. Through the vivacious Evelyn, Fin learns the power of forgiveness and relinquishes his goddess in return for family. In this seductive and heart-warming story, both men discover the power of selfless love.

It has been an exciting time, as many years of persistence, passion and hard work have garnered the film significant recognition on the national and international stage. In late 2017, *The Butterfly Tree* premiered domestically at the prestigious Melbourne International

Film Festival (MIFF) and internationally in the Discovery Section at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), one of the largest film festivals in the world, where in 2016 a total of 26 international feature films were selected to screen out of the 5,693 submitted (TIFF 2017). In the same year, *The Butterfly Tree* was nominated for three Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts (AACTA) Awards for best original screenplay (for Priscilla Cameron), best actor (for Ewen Leslie) and best original score (for Caitlyn Yeo). (A full festival and awards list can be found in Appendix 2.)

Figure 1.1 shows the marketing flyer for *The Butterfly Tree*. I would now invite the reader to watch the film at the following vimeo link: <https://vimeo.com/220746388> (Password: thebutterflytree2017) and to read the script, which can be found in Appendix 10.



Figure 1.1 *The Butterfly Tree* poster

As noted above, the initial challenge I had to overcome was finding out how an emerging feature film director (and their team) could secure the commitment of a domestic distributor as a means to utilise a mainstream funding model. For the purposes of this exegesis, I refer to a mainstream funding model as a feature film budget, which includes the producer offset as well as the attachment of an international sales agent. This model does not include ultra-low budget feature films – for example, those with a budget of less than A\$50,000. An example of a low-budget mainstream feature film budget model can be found in Chapter 1. Most Australian feature films that employ a mainstream finance model are part-financed via the federal government’s 40 per cent producer offset rebate. The producer offset is described by Screen Australia (2018a) as ‘a refundable tax offset (rebate) for producers of Australian feature films, television and other projects’. Because it is underpinned by income tax legislation, it represents a source of funds for producers of eligible Australian projects and is worth:

- 40 per cent of the Qualifying Australian Production Expenditure (QAPE) incurred by the applicant company in the making of a feature film, and
- 20 per cent of the QAPE incurred by the applicant company in the making of TV and other eligible projects, other than feature films.

Screen Australia (2018b) explains that feature films are only eligible for the 40 per cent offset if they are produced for exhibition to the public in cinemas and meet all offset requirements, while films produced for home entertainment, TV or VOD release are not eligible for the 40 per cent offset but instead are eligible for the 20 per cent offset if they meet all offset requirements: ‘The higher offset is available for feature films because they generally have higher production costs and it can also be more difficult to finance feature films because they are one-off projects.’ Projects must be feature-length and intended for theatrical release. The

producer must demonstrate, subject to the approval of Screen Australia funding, that the project has a complete finance plan, which must include (but is not limited to)

an acceptable offer to theatrically distribute the project in Australia (with sufficiently detailed commercial terms) from an appropriate domestic distributor, and an acceptable offer to represent the project for Rest of World sales (with sufficiently detailed commercial terms) from an appropriate international sales agent. (Screen Australia 2017h)

An exception can be made to this rule if the production budget is under A\$1.5 million. (Screen Australia 2017g). How a limited number of domestic distributors became the unwitting gatekeepers of a mainstream finance model dependent upon Australian Government finance, and how linking government finance with theatrical distribution in a time of content and viewing platform abundance has created significant issues, will be discussed in Chapters 1 and 2.

This original investigation into how an emerging Australian feature film director could secure the commitment of a domestic distributor grew into a rather large tree with many branches. These included understanding the current challenges facing the Australian feature film industry in a time of content and viewing platform abundance, understanding the structure and associated challenges of a mainstream finance model and being cognisant of the value of accepting marketing and distribution as a collective challenge while still nurturing the art and craft of filmmaking. It was only when the tree had matured that a hybrid seed emerged, which in turn became the research question addressed by this thesis and the accompanying studio work:

How might an aspiring Australian feature film director efficiently transition from short filmmaking to feature film directing by minimising domestic distributor risk while simultaneously strengthening their creative vision?

The challenges facing the future of independent Australian film production and distribution are not new, and have been discussed by academics, journalists, filmmakers and screen agencies alike. They can be summarised briefly as follows: increasing competition for federal government screen funding, competition from the rise of subscription television such as Netflix and Stan, falling physical video revenues, shrinking theatrical windows and the effects of piracy, under-performing online revenues, declining international sales, declining upfront financial commitments from domestic distributors and international sales agents, tightening cinema ‘shelf space’ and the need to cater to the tastes of both international and domestic audiences and an ageing Australian cinema-going population (all of which will be discussed in Chapter 2). In particular, regarding issues surrounding Australian feature film distribution, alongside scholars such as Verhoeven (2006), Aveyard (2011) and Maher, Silver and Kerrigan (2016), writer, artist, academic and broadcast critic Lauren Carroll Harris has contributed extensively to the discourse in her PhD dissertation, ‘Theorising the Cultural impacts of Film Distribution in the Cinema and Beyond’ (2017a) and in books and articles in various journals, including ‘Film Distribution as Policy: Current Standards and Alternatives’ (2016), ‘Window of Opportunity: The Future of Film Distribution in Australia’ (2014), *Not at a Cinema Near You: Australia’s Film Distribution Problem* (2013) and ‘Theorising film Festivals as Distributors and Investigating the Post Festival Distribution of Australian film’ (2017b). Carroll Harris’s scholarship not only identifies and investigates a considerable collection of distribution challenges and opportunities, but also argues for a distribution-centred approach to cultural policy that ‘encourages a way of thinking that sees proactive distribution-centred policy as a way for Australian cinema to take a piece of the future, and to diversify film culture in theatres and beyond’ (Carroll Harris 2016, 253). Carroll Harris’s recommendations include a ‘direct investment in distribution and exhibition as well as

incentivising diversification and lengthening the release windows of Australian titles in local cinemas' (Carroll Harris 2014, 101).

This scholarly research forms the landscape in which my own niche contribution to research is situated. Yet, while it offers an in-depth understanding of the existing challenges and opportunities present in the Australian feature film distribution and exhibition landscape, and argues successfully for a policy-led approach to a sustainable Australian feature film industry, it does not offer a framework in which new Australian directors who wish to use to a mainstream finance model can collectively work with their producers to secure a domestic distributor and potentially overcome some of the challenges they face. While Carroll Harris's research is viewed through the lens of a scholar working from the outside, my own research is viewed through the lens of a writer/ director – a film practitioner working from the inside out. To the best of my knowledge, this has allowed me the opportunity to become the first doctoral candidate in Australia to have written and directed a fiction feature film produced through mainstream funding mechanisms that has been distributed both locally and internationally. The intention of my scholarship is to enable future and emerging Australian feature film directors become effective members of the producer, director, distributor team.

My research therefore focuses on the following areas:

- balancing the art, craft and business of filmmaking while protecting and prioritising a filmmaker's time to nurture creativity
- the importance of embracing marketing and distribution as a collective challenge with respect to the director, producer, distributor relationship
- the historic role and power of the domestic distributor in the context of the Australian feature film landscape

- understanding how domestic distributors evaluate a first-time director’s pitch and project in terms of: selling the concept; targeting a core demographic of viewers and defining their core experience/s; understanding the business of distribution; script and story expectations; embracing the benefits of a tonal proof of concept methodology; creating a reputation and leveraging the value of key international film festivals and awards; managing investor expectations via a responsible budget and an appropriate marketing spend; understanding the value of a bankable cast and self-promotion as well as other critical elements of the pitch package
- defining tonal proof and creating a strategic framework to not only identify key challenges and assets within the long-form project, but also prove them via a tonal proof of concept short-form project, the purpose of which is to minimise investor risk while strengthening a director’s vision.

The research and creative practice components of this doctorate consist of a 56,000-word thesis, the feature film *The Butterfly Tree* (2017) and its accompanying screenplay, and tonal clips from the tonal proof of concept short film *Beetlefeeders* (2009), which was made to support *The Butterfly Tree*. The creative practice journey has spanned many years and the key creative milestones are highlighted below. An expanded list of key research and creative practice milestones can be found in Appendix 8.

Key creative practice milestones

- | | |
|------|--|
| 2008 | <i>The Butterfly Tree</i> (then named <i>The Insect King</i>), a feature film screenplay, won the prestigious Australian Writers Guild’s Monte Miller Award for Best Unproduced Screenplay by a New Writer. |
| 2009 | Motivated by a domestic distributor declining to commit to an existing feature film project, due to lack of tonal proof on my director’s reel, I wrote and |

directed my first attempt at a tonal proof of concept short film, *Tidal Marks*.

Unfortunately, *Tidal Marks* failed due to lack of research and poor creative reflective practice (discussed in Chapter 4).

2012 The production of *Beetlefeeders*, a 15-minute proof of concept short film, made to tonally reflect *The Butterfly Tree*. The flyer and synopsis for *Beetlefeeders* can be found in Appendix 4. *Beetlefeeders* succeeded in tonally reflecting the feature and was used as a successful pitching and selling tool.

2010 Binger Film Lab Participant. In early 2010 I was selected as one of eight directors from around the world to attend the prestigious five-month Binger Directors' Lab in Amsterdam to focus on the development of *The Butterfly Tree*

2016 The production of *The Butterfly Tree*. *The Butterfly Tree* went into production in August 2016 and was completed in March 2017. It was released nationally and internationally to critical acclaim in August (Melbourne International Film Festival) and September (Toronto International Film Festival) 2017.

While I acknowledge that the evolution of the business of feature filmmaking in Australia is fast-paced and constant, and I encourage feature film directors to regularly update their knowledge.

This thesis demonstrates how the application of available knowledge was used to create a successful framework of creative and strategic choices that enabled the production of an award-winning feature film. While I cannot guarantee that my methodology will suit all aspiring feature film directors, I do believe that the framework at which I have arrived as a result of this doctoral journey will remain a relevant tool for all future and emerging Australian directors developing feature film projects in the future.

Balancing the art, craft and business of filmmaking while nurturing creativity through choice

To begin the process of understanding how domestic distributors evaluate a first-time director's pitch and project, this section argues for emerging directors to make more strategic choices in order to learn the business of marketing and distribution. I am certainly not advocating that new directors neglect to nurture their art or practise their craft; rather, I suggest that by making choices to protect their time and nurture creativity, aspiring directors can grow as a creative force while still allowing the space to learn the business of distribution and marketing. After all, a director's ability to problem-solve, think laterally and find innovative solutions under considerable time and financial constraints could be viewed as an asset to be employed to help connect a feature film with its target audience. As Bridget Callow-Wright, producer of *The Butterfly Tree* (2017), notes:

At the end of the day, the key stakeholders who pay for the film – investors, distributors, international sales partners share the same goals as the producer and director, which is for the film to succeed and find its audience. It's only by working together with these partners and understanding what they need to do their jobs, that the path to success can be found. (Callow-Wright, pers. comm. 2015a)

Callow-Wright's comments are reflected by Australian Producer Lee Matthews, known for *Emo the Musical* – the feature film (Triffet 2016) and *Emo the Musical* – the award-winning short film (Triffet 2014). Matthews believes it is critical for new directors to have a broad understanding of how Australian feature films are traditionally financed, marketed and sold. The aim is to allow them to not only imagine the best possible stories without being inhibited by budget, but at the appropriate time to have the ability and knowledge to be able to evaluate, explore and refine an idea in conjunction with their producers, to see 'if there's an

opportunity in the marketplace’ (Matthews, pers. comm. 2017). Sue Maslin AO is one of Australia’s most successful film, television and digital content producers, with a track record of creating award winning feature and documentary films – some of which include; *The Dressmaker* (Moorhouse 2015), *Road to Nhill* (Brooks 1997), *Japanese Story* (Brooks 2003), *Celebrity: Dominick Dunne* (de Garis, Jolley 2008) and *Hunt Angels* (Morgan 2006). In 2008, alongside her business, partner Daryl Dellora, Maslin created Film Art Media, a rights-management and distribution company. She concurs (Maslin pers. comm. 2021) that it is right to interrogate the traditional hierarchical approach of directors being ‘kept outside of the strategies developed by distributors and exhibitors’. Instead, Maslin advocates expanding the traditional role of the director by allowing them a stake in the creation of the strategy surrounding the release of a film. As examples, Maslin cites two directors who were invaluable in the process of strategising the marketing and release of their films alongside Maslin and her marketing team. The first is Catherine Dwyer, known for the feature documentary *Brazen Hussies* (2020); the second is Ben Steel, known for the feature documentary *The Show Must Go On* (2019). Both directors were engaged in the building blocks of the marketing strategy, such as the creation of the film’s title; the creation of the core marketing messages that were consistent with the film’s vision and the creation of the impact strategy, which Maslin (pers. comm. 2021) describes as a process that ‘defines the ongoing ways in which the powerful ideas in the film are going to connect with the audience in service of social change’. Maslin, Matthews and Callow-Wright all emphasise the need for directors to become knowledgeable in areas that may be perceived as existing outside their field of expertise. While the above producers do not expect a director to sacrifice their official role or creative contributions, they view an understanding of the industry that encompasses marketing and distribution as allowing directors to collectively work backwards

from strategically considered outcomes to form a creative practice that better serves the filmmaking team and the project as a whole.

A number of Australian feature film directors have engaged closely with the business of distribution and marketing, and it is at this juncture that we turn to the critically acclaimed writer, producer, director and distributor Robert Connolly for inspiration. Under the mentorship of veteran producer John Maynard, Connolly learnt the complex web that is successfully developing, producing, directing, marketing and distributing Australian independent feature films. During their 15-year partnership, managing their production company Arena Film and their distribution company Footprint Films, Maynard and Connolly were responsible for producing award winning films such as *The Boys* (1998), *The Monkey's Mask* (2000), *The Bank* (2001), *Three Dollars* (2005), *Romulus, My Father* (2007) and *Balibo* (2009). As a director, Connolly's credits are impressive. He has directed feature films including *The Bank* (2001), *Three Dollars* (2005), *Balibo* (2009), *Underground: The Julian Assange Story* (2012), *The Turning*, segment *Aquifer* (2013), *Paper Planes* (2014) and *The Dry* (2020), as well as multiple television episodes (IMDb 2017). Connolly's continued success in juggling producing, writing, directing and distributing can be found partly in his recognition and appreciation that maintaining creativity is at the forefront of his methodology – an idea instilled into him by Maynard:

Maynard does come out of a visual arts background, so he has this idea that filmmaking should be a bit like splashing paint on canvas, that the industrial model of it can kind of crush the creativity, and I think that is so true ... I think that Maynard showed me that cinema is about ideas, and then you bolt on the financing bit.

(Connolly 2017)

Another industry figure who recognises the importance of nurturing creativity while juggling the demands of production, distribution and marketing is the US-based critically acclaimed

filmmaker, distribution and marketing consultant, educator and author Jon Reiss. In the conclusion of his practical and comprehensive book *Think Outside The Box Office: The Ultimate Guide to Film Distribution and Marketing for the Digital Era*, Reiss (2010) outlines ways in which filmmakers can nurture themselves creatively. They include acknowledging that film distribution can be draining and ‘soul sucking’; networking with other filmmakers to not only share distribution ideas but also commiserate; disciplining themselves to write or do something creative for one hour each day; meditating for five minutes a day; keeping their creative brain oiled by doing something creative, even if it isn’t related to filmmaking, such as painting, drawing or playing a musical instrument; reminding oneself of the goals you have established and embracing all the reasons why you are releasing a film; welcoming the relationship with the audience; and understanding that during the release of a film you need to devote yourself to a business mentality but to also set a date for that to end – to know that you will go back to being a creative person when the release is over (Reiss 2010, 345–6).

This continual juggling or honouring of the various elements of a successful filmmaking practice is becoming increasingly important in an evolving world of digital distribution. To paraphrase Ted Hope, critically acclaimed US producer, entrepreneur, author and educator, who formed Good Machine with James Schamus and produced over 60 independent films, it is imperative that filmmakers move beyond the old art versus commerce divide (Hope, in Reiss 2009). The next section therefore argues for emerging feature film directors to embrace marketing and distribution as a collective challenge.

Marketing and distribution as a collective challenge

In a multi-screen landscape with an increasing number of online media platforms, in order to connect films with a target demographic and generate returns, some filmmakers are choosing to embrace marketing and distribution as a collective challenge. As Maher, Silver and

Kerrigan (2016) argue, the problem of monetising a target demographic for Australian feature films is multi-pronged. While part of the problem lies with producers lacking the skills, or being unwilling, to adapt their production strategies to focus on return on investment (ROI), which is described as ‘a profitability ratio calculated by dividing the negative cost of a film’s production with its box office returns’ (2016, 123), research suggests that another part pertains to producers attributing a lack of value to audience research, where 26 per cent of the 109 film producers who partook in a 2012 producers’ survey perceived audience research/user testing as being of no value (CC1; Bergent 2012 in Maher, Silver, Kerrigan 2016, 125). These issues are compounded by a lack of cinema space for Australian feature films (Carroll Harris 2013, 8) at a time when box office performance remains a key determinant in a film’s life-cycle success as well as a lack of research and transparency needed to identify financially successful online distribution models where ‘large audiences not translating into remuneration is one of the core issues arising from digital disruption and represents a globally shared challenge affecting distributors and producers alike’ (Maher, Silver & Kerrigan 2016, 125, 120). In response to this rapidly changing screen environment, Maslin encourages future screen content makers to embrace uncertainty by becoming ‘more entrepreneurial, more idiosyncratic, more diverse and [to] take more creative risks than ever before’ (Maslin 2019, 13). Maslin also argues that our collective challenge as creative screen practitioners is to:

integrate our screen story telling skills with business, communication and marketing skills so that our films have a chance of connecting with audiences and rising above the noise. This engagement with the market cannot be left up to third party distributors. Creatives need to give this equal weight alongside development and production. (Maslin 2019, 11)

Perhaps, in order to meet this challenge, some filmmakers are choosing direct distribution models, whereby they wholly or partially take responsibility for the marketing and distribution of their films. As producer and marketing expert Martin Walsh (2010) advises, to be successful, current filmmakers need to be part-creative, part-distributor, part-marketer and part-business manager in order to define and meet audience expectations with appropriate and sufficient distribution plans and marketing apparatus (Walsh 2010).

Director as distributor

For those filmmakers who have made the choice to self-distribute, the need to learn to think like a distributor is even more relevant, and as Carroll Harris's (2013) previous research finds, the limitations imposed by Australia's traditional funding models, which require the attachment of a domestic distributor, have encouraged some directors to choose to opt for self-distribution. In an industry panel discussion moderated by Carroll Harris in 2013, as part of the Australian Directors' Guild conference, titled 'The Director as Distributor', Carroll Harris encouraged a panel of filmmakers to share the challenges and opportunities they experienced when they became the distributors for their own feature films. The panel consisted of two director/producers who had self-distributed their own documentary features and a producer/distribution consultant who specialises in direct to fan and alternative models of distribution. The two directors were Bob Connolly, who successfully self-distributed with Sophie Raymond their documentary *Mrs Carey's Concert* (Connolly, Raymond 2011), which became the fourth grossing non-IMAX Australian documentary of all time; and Genevieve Bailey, who self-distributed her documentary feature film *I Am Eleven* (Bailey 2011), which had an initial 16-week run at Cinema Nova in Melbourne and was so popular that it was asked back for an additional 10 weeks. The distribution consultant was Thomas Mai of Fandependent. One of Fandependent's largest projects was *Gayby Baby* (Newell 2015), a

documentary that in 2012 raised A\$118,375 from 1,244 people via crowdfunding. At the time, this was one of the biggest crowd funding campaigns for an Australian film.

Over the course of the discussion, the three filmmakers shared information and insight into the complex, time-consuming and sometimes rewarding journey that is self-distribution. The discourse explored the reasons why both filmmakers chose the theatrical self-distribution route. For Bob Connolly, it was motivated by the fact that in his 35 years of making feature-length documentaries, all of which had had cinema releases, Connolly had not received a single cent from the cinema release stage of distribution (until *Mrs Carey's Concert*) and he realised that he could circumnavigate the traditional and more expensive forms of advertising and connect directly with his audience online. For Bailey, a deeply felt belief that this was a film that had a wide audience (anyone who had ever been 11 or was soon turning 11), coupled with the fact that she had made the entire film herself without government funding, led her to believe that, even though she had offers from four distributors, she felt no one would be prepared to work as hard as she would to distribute her film.

While these filmmakers spoke to the necessary key ingredients to successfully self-distribute, they were also honest about the sheer amount of time and effort required. This acknowledgement of the human and financial resources required to self-market and distribute is starkly reflected by Reiss in his concluding chapter, aptly titled 'Keeping Sane', when he states that 'the new model of distribution is very time intensive. This not only takes time away from making films, but the process for many filmmakers is antithetical to their creative process'; regardless, he also says we are at a point in time where developing a business sense is necessary for filmmakers (Reiss 2010, 343).

Like Walsh, Hope, Connolly and Bailey, other internationally renowned filmmakers, authors, educators and advocates of direct distribution models have been assisting filmmakers

to explore their marketing and distribution options. Some of these include international advocates such as Peter Buckingham from Sampo Media, who was responsible for the creation of the world's first Digital Screen Network (DSN) in the United Kingdom and the Find Any Film website (SampoMedia 2015); Peter Boderick, president of Paradigm Consulting; and Sheri Candler, digital marketing strategist and author. Candler has written books on independent film distribution in collaboration with The Film Collaborative, Jon Reiss and Wendy Bernfeld. These include *Selling Your Film Without Selling Your Soul: Case Studies in Hybrid, DIY and P2P Independent Film Distribution* (2011) and *Selling Your Film Outside the US* (2014). All three are known for assisting filmmakers and media companies to develop strategies to maximise distribution, audience and revenues. Like Reiss, they support the notion that distribution is as much a part of the producer's and director's role as production, and subscribe to the belief that 'filmmakers need to share information to help each other in this turbulent time' (Reiss 2010, 349).

In its comprehensive paper *Issues in Feature Film Distribution*, Screen Australia, shared similar views to Reiss and drew attention to the need for those in the Australian feature film industry to share information and learn from each other's failures as well as successes in order to remain strategic while maintaining a strong focus on the audience through the various stages of production and release (Screen Australia 2015c, 5). This is a concept also supported by Maher, Silver and Kerrigan (2016, 126), who emphasised the need for 'sustained research engagement on how Australian feature films can win back Australian box office appeal' and 'a forthright business analysis, more informed by distribution practices'.

This is a decision many feature filmmakers must make: how much of their creative time and space, be it for the project/s they have in production or for the projects they have in development, are they willing to sacrifice in terms of opportunity cost to accommodate the

knowledge and skills it requires to successfully identify, connect with and monetise a target audience? As Tait Brady, former General Manager of Palace Films, former MIFF Director, former FFC and Screen Australia executive, now co-principal of film and television content distribution company Label, states:

The truth is you could digitally distribute yourself but it's a lot of time and work and resources ... it's a lot easier because we [domestic distributors] have the relationships and we know how everything works. And for us it's half the amount of time and work as it is someone coming in cold. (Brady 2021)

Personally, even though I still grapple daily with the question, 'How can I protect and focus my time and energy to grow my priority passion/s while still allowing time to learn the critical business of film marketing and distribution?', I see my thesis as not just a solution to my multiple needs but as a series of stepping-stones across an expansive and fast-flowing river. My research project contributes to three fundamental areas of the Australian feature filmmaking process. First, it provides a framework of creative and strategic choices thus enabling emerging Australian feature film directors a greater chance of securing the commitment of a domestic distributor and triggering finance in the form of the producer offset rebate. Second, it discusses the value of emerging Australian feature film directors embracing marketing and distribution as a collective challenge. And third, it provides a process by which emerging directors can address the strengths and weaknesses in their long-form projects via a tonal short form proof of concept, thus enhancing their creative vision while minimising domestic distributor risk. It is my goal that they will gain sufficient knowledge and forge creative and sustainable pathways that will enable long and inspiring careers in feature film storytelling.

Methodology

From a constructivist position, which can be explained as a ‘belief in a socially constructed reality that is specific to a particular culture and time’ (Kerrigan 2015, 20), this thesis and accompanying studio work use a practice-led methodology that draws on underlying and preparatory qualitative mixed methods, investigating the research question through reflective practice and the use of a survey instrument and interviews. This process can be further defined as screen production inquiry (Kerrigan 2015, 13). Kerrigan (2015, 13) describes screen production inquiry as involving ‘the production of a film (or other screen work), an iterative process of practice and reflection by a researcher who is also the screen practitioner, and a theoretical perspective that informs the overall research’. As already noted, it is practice-led research, which is consistent with Smith and Dean’s (2009, 3) argument that practice-led research is ‘conducted in the process of shaping an artwork’ in the form of writing and pitching a feature length screenplay that evolves into method-led research. According to Grotty (1998, 12–13, in Kerrigan and Batty 2015), this is what transpires when ‘the focus of our research leads us to devise our own ways of proceeding that allow us to achieve our purposes’.

This practice-led research employed reflective action learning methodologies, culminating in successful creative praxis and practice in the form of the production and prestigious international recognition and domestic appreciation of the feature film *The Butterfly Tree* (2017). This process synthesised formal interviews with domestic distributors and filmmakers as well as qualitative surveys with domestic distributors. The surveys were conducted with 11 Australian domestic distributors between 2009 and 2014, which also involved a formal interview process. While nine of these domestic distributors agreed to complete the survey, two domestic distributors (Seph McKenna from Village Roadshow and Tait Brady from Label Distribution) chose to speak to each individual element using the

survey as a guide. This was followed up by another round of formal interviews with domestic distributors in 2021. The initial 2011 survey instrument was used as a springboard to the research and creative practice process. With interviews undertaken over more than a decade, and a range of different interview techniques consistent with the stage of the project adopted, the overall data from this element of the methodology are not able to be summarised as a whole. However, Appendix 9 presents a summary of the results of the 2011 initial domestic distributor survey. In addition, the list of participating domestic distributors can be found in Appendix 5 and the list of participating producers can be found in Appendix 7, while a copy of the domestic distributor questionnaire is available in Appendix 6.

Mark K. Smith, researcher, author and educator, describes praxis as practical reasoning – not just an action-based learning process based on reflection, but rather a process that begins with a question or situation that embodies certain qualities such as a commitment to human wellbeing and the search for truth, as well as respect for others based on our understanding of what is good and what will enhance human flourishing. He explains that unlike the productive sciences, which follow a plan or design that, if followed, will produce a tool or artefact, praxis begins with a question:

As we think about what we want to achieve, we alter the way we might achieve that. As we think about the way we might go about something, we change what we might aim at. There is a continual interplay between ends and means. In just the same way there is a continual interplay between thought and action. (Smith 1999, 2011)

To draw on Thomas Schwandt's (2007, 244) definition of praxis as being the realisation or comprehension that occurs within a vulnerable relationship that one is seeking to understand, my motivation behind this interwoven journey of creative practice, praxis and research has continued to be fuelled not only by my own wish to transition into feature film writing and

directing, but also a growing desire to enable emerging and future Australian directors to navigate the enormous challenge that securing the commitment from a domestic distributor while strengthening their creative vision entails. The process of how to efficiently navigate this challenge was not known at the outset, and has evolved continually through praxis. In the context of my work within the Australian film industry, my own creative praxis is ongoing, and the outcomes of this doctorate will continue to evolve both for myself and for those who choose to embrace these strategies in their own creative practices as feature film directors.

The ability to reflect upon direct practice outcomes in order to improve future outcomes has been emphasised by many observers. For example, Carr and Kemmis (1986, 162) provide a widely accepted definition for action research:

A form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out.

Significantly, Chris Argyris and Donald Schön (1978, 2–3) explore the nature of organisational learning through their *single loop* and *double loop* process:

When the error detected and corrected permits the organization to carry on its present policies or achieve its present objectives, then that error-and-correction process is single-loop learning. Single-loop learning is like a thermostat that learns when it is too hot or too cold and turns the heat on or off. The thermostat can perform this task because it can receive information (the temperature of the room) and take corrective action. Double-loop learning occurs when error is detected and corrected in ways that involve the modification of an organization's underlying norms, policies and objectives.

This approach of ‘learning from mistakes’ is also reflected in Kemmis and Conlan’s (2006) revised version of *The Definition of Critical Participatory Action Research*, in which Kemmis (2006, 14) describes the aim of the process of critical participatory action research as being the ability to identify current irrationalities, injustices, dissatisfactions and suffering in the situations they inhabit; to ‘read’ them as possible consequences of past and continuing historical conditions and circumstances; and to act to ameliorate or overcome such consequences by changing the practices and conditions that produce them.

Within the context of reflective action learning, Schön’s notion of *reflection in action* and *reflection on action* is described by Smith as involving looking to our experiences, connecting with our feelings and attending to our theories in use. It entails building new understandings to inform our actions in the situation that is unfolding (Schön 1983; Smith 2001, 2011).

Argyris and Schön’s *single-loop* and *double-loop* process, Kemmis’s *critical participatory action research* methodology and Schön’s *reflection in action theory* have been fundamental to the creative practice journey, whereby the continued evaluation of my evolving creative practice significantly affected the creative process; this involved producing screenplays, short films, a feature film and other pitch materials (such as one-page flyers and pitch documents). In particular, the failure, subsequent debriefing and analysis that occurred after my first tonal proof of concept short film, *Tidal Marks* (2009), produced different learning frameworks and strategies, which then informed the primary research criteria as well as the creative practice methodologies used to produce the second tonal proof of concept short film, *Beetlefeeders* (2012). In turn, the success of *Beetlefeeders* strengthened my creative vision, minimised domestic distributor risk and culminated in the production of *The Butterfly Tree* (2017). This synthesis between primary and secondary research and reflective creative practice is discussed in detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

A significant part of my process of coming to understand how to minimise domestic distributor risk while strengthening my creative vision was (as previously noted) due to the survey instrument and formal interview process conducted with domestic distributors. In 2009, the domestic distributors who were approached to contribute were those who were both willing and active at the time. In 2021, most of the domestic distributors who participated in the research remain in business, with the exception of eOne/Hopscotch, which exited the independent domestic distributor marketplace in 2019 (Groves 2019b). The survey questionnaire was devised with the assistance of Dr Bill Metcalfe (then Research Methodologist, Griffith Graduate Research School). The goal during this stage of my research was to determine how domestic distributors evaluate each element of a first-time director's pitch and project. These elements included; the script, the cast, the key creative team surrounding the director, key film festivals, awards and events to which domestic distributors attribute value, what to include on a director's show reel, other pitch materials, the value of building a media presence and reputation, a responsible budget and an appropriate marketing spend. Each of the original domestic distributor participants gave each element a rating, on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 was the highest and 5 was the lowest. These results were collated in table form, and I was able to calculate the number of participants who rated certain elements at 2 or higher, or alternatively below 2. As participants were able to return the questionnaire via email or phone, many chose to speak via phone or Zoom, which allowed for a formal interview process.

This practice-led methodology using qualitative mixed methods produced the following creative research outputs:

- two tonal short film screenplays and completed films, *Tidal Marks* (2009) and *Beetlefeeders* (2012)
- a feature film screenplay and feature film, *The Butterfly Tree* (2017).

Thesis overview

The remainder of the thesis consists of the following chapters.

Chapter 1: The Domestic Distributor Challenge contextualises the critical role of the domestic distributor within the Australian feature film landscape and emphasises the need for emerging Australian feature film directors to understand how domestic distributors think in order to become valuable and effective members of the director, producer, distributor team.

Chapter 2: Literature Review – A Challenging Landscape examines the challenging environment in which domestic distributors and the Australian feature film industry operate, thereby presaging new directors regarding why they may be perceived as a ‘risky proposition’ by domestic distributors and other investors.

Chapter 3: Inside the Domestic Distributor Challenge discusses how domestic distributors evaluate an Australian first-time live action feature film director’s pitch and project.

Chapter 4: Meeting the Domestic Distributor Challenge examines my tonal proof of concept methodology. It discusses my own process of identifying the key challenges within the feature *The Butterfly Tree* (2017) and the ways I went about proving that I was up to meeting them via the tonal proof of concept short film, *Beetlefeeders* (2012). It also discusses the ways in which the domestic distributor findings, examined in Chapter 3, informed certain pitch preparation elements during the development, financing and actual production process (the filming) of *The Butterfly Tree*.

Chapter 5: The Experience of Domestic Distribution continues the discourse by examining my own experience of the distribution process, synthesising it with former research (before the production of *The Butterfly Tree*) and later research (after the production of *The Butterfly Tree*). This latter half of the chapter combines the findings discussed in

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 in a 10-point decision-making compendium in the form of a table of strategic and creative considerations, which include domestic distributor concerns versus emerging director concerns, while offering creative solutions with respect to an emerging feature film director's pitch and project.

Chapter 6: The Conclusion acknowledges the imminent producer offset changes with regard to feature film production and distribution. Even though the interplay between the two remains unknown at the time of writing, I argue that by providing emerging and future Australian directors with a framework of creative and strategic choices designed to enhance an original vision while minimising domestic distributor risk, my contribution to knowledge remains a relevant methodology in the rapidly changing world of Australian feature filmmaking.

1

The domestic distributor challenge

Introduction

This chapter contextualises the critical role of the domestic distributor within the Australian feature film landscape and explains how a limited number of domestic distributors became the ‘powerful gatekeepers’ (Carroll Harris 2017a; Finney 2010, 14) of an Australian mainstream finance model dependent on Australian Government funding. It also examines how linking government finance with theatrical distribution at a time of content and viewing platform abundance has created significant issues, as well as highlighting the need for emerging Australian directors to understand how domestic distributors think.

The following areas will be discussed:

- the domestic distributors’ power in relation to a mainstream finance model
- the generous nature of Australia’s screen agencies finance incentives, particularly the 40 per cent producer offset rebate (when compared with other developed countries)
- a lack of transparency regarding the current appropriate domestic distributors and how a lack of choice creates substantial challenges for emerging directors (and their teams)
- how, as a result of shifting government policy, domestic distributors became the unwitting gatekeepers of a mainstream finance model
- how linking government finance with theatrical domestic distribution has created issues for producers wishing to use a producer offset dependant finance model in a time of content and viewing platform abundance
- why a new director needs to understand how domestic distributors think in order to become a valuable member of the director, producer, distributor team

The power of the domestic distributor

As previously noted, most Australian feature films that employ a mainstream finance model are financed partly via the federal government's 40 per cent producer offset rebate, a source of funds for producers of eligible Australian projects that is underpinned by income tax legislation. A prerequisite of this funding requires the commitment of a what Screen Australia deems to be an appropriate domestic distributor. Since the inception of the producer offset rebate in 2007, 'over 900 successful claims have been made' (Screen Australia 2016, 12) across film, television and documentary production, and in 2019 the producer offset accounted for A\$207.69 million in screen funding (Screen Australia 2019a).

Table 1.1 provides an overview of the success of the producer offset from 2008 to 2017.

Table 1.1. Producer offset statistics

Total final certificates issued 1 January 2008–30 June 2017

\$991,799,684 rebate – 291 features

\$399,870,138 rebate – 309 TV projects (including animation)

\$139,058,250 rebate – 582 documentaries

More than \$1.5 billion in total for rebates on 1,182 projects

Notes: The producer offset is a tax rebate. Before a rebate can be paid, a producer has to obtain a certificate that confirms that the project in question has met all the eligibility criteria. The above figures represent the aggregate amount from all the certificates issued during the nine-and-a-half years up to 30 June 2017. (Screen Australia 2017b)

To illustrate the percentage of budget that is reliant upon the commitment of a domestic distributor, I will use a mainstream finance model (Table 1.2) based on an independent low-budget feature with a total budget of A\$2 million. This budget has been supplied by producer Bridget Callow-Wright and is similar to the original financing structure used for the feature

film *The Butterfly Tree* (2017). It is a budget model that has been approved by both Australian state and federal screen funding bodies and other investors (Callow-Wright 2015b).

Table 1.2. Sample mainstream budget for a low-budget feature film

Funding body	% of funds	Amount
Screen Australia Producer offset rebate	32.4	\$648,000
State film agency incentives	25.0	\$500,000
Screen Australia grant finance	25.0	\$500,000
Post-production partner equity	7.6	\$152,000
Domestic distributor distribution guarantee	5.0	\$100,000
Rest of World international sales agent guarantee	5.0	\$100,000
TOTAL	100.0	\$2,000,000

As demonstrated in this finance model, Screen Australia finance plus the producer offset account for 57.4 per cent of the total budget and make a significant contribution to the overall budget.

To understand the relevance of government screen agency finance within the broader context of the Australian feature film industry, I will briefly compare the 40 per cent producer offset rebate with similar tax rebates offered by a selection of other developed countries.

An industry that relies on limited government funding for its survival

In 2019, Screen Australia ‘provided more than \$45 million in production funding for drama titles. That included \$17.1 million for television drama, \$12 million for features, \$8.4 million

for children's television, \$4.3 million for online drama productions and \$3.5 million for Indigenous productions (Screen Australia 2020a).

According to Screen Australia's CEO, Graeme Mason (2019), despite the major ongoing reconfiguring of global entertainment business models and the explosion of platform viewing choice, the Australian screen sector remains resilient, with Australian audiences still seeking out local stories on television, in the cinema and online. Mason states that this is 'in part due to the bedrock of direct and indirect government funding' and 'compared to other English-speaking markets, Australia produces exceptional, internationally regarded content at a fraction of the budget one would expect in the UK and US, and at a volume that belies our small population' (Mason 2019f).

Not surprisingly, compared with other developed countries, Australia has some of the most generous government-funded feature film initiatives in the world. Federal government support is available in the form of direct support in development and production through Screen Australia and indirect support through the Australian Screen Production Incentive, which consists of three mutually exclusive, uncapped tax offsets (akin to rebates), one of which is the producer offset. With regards to feature films, the producer offset is particularly attractive compared with other initiatives worldwide, as most territories with a rebate set at a similar level do not also have Australia's filmmaking attributes or experience (Screen Australia 2016, 7).

In the following section, I briefly situate the Australian 40 per cent producer offset rebate within a global context.

A brief overview: Australia's screen tax incentive compared with a selection of other countries

Australia, with the producer offset rebate set at 40 per cent, has one of the most generous tax offset rebates in the world for feature film production. According to Sarah White, writing for Reuters, other states and countries that offer similar rebates include but are not limited to the following: Colombia, which provides a cash rebate of up to 40 per cent on projects at least partially produced in Colombia; the state of Louisiana in the United States, which has up to 40 per cent transferable tax credit on production expenditure in the state; Ireland, with a tax rebate of up to 32 per cent of eligible Irish expenditure; the United Arab Emirates, in which Abu Dhabi offers a 30 per cent cash rebate on production spending, with a \$5 million cap on feature films; Malaysia, which offers a cash rebate of 30 per cent on production expenditure for foreign projects in Malaysia; Canada, in which the province of British Columbia offers a 33 per cent rebate on labour expenditure while Quebec and Ontario offer some of the most generous incentives in Canada, with a special focus on digital animation and special effects projects (White 2015).

With a generous 40 per cent producer offset tax rebate (uncapped) plus location offset (16.5 per cent on qualifying Australian production expenditure with an Australian spend of over 15 million), the post digital and visual effects (PDV) offset (30 per cent offset on qualifying Australian production expenditure that relates to post, digital and visual effects production) plus the location incentive grant (13.5 per cent of the production's qualifying Australian production expenditure (QAPE), a merit-assessed grant that complements the 16.5 per cent location offset) (Screen Australia 2019e) as well as the added bonus of direct support through development and production grants and equity investment, at both federal and state levels, Australia presents itself as an extremely filmmaker-friendly country. In

addition, funding from state screen agencies can include direct development and production grants, and equity investment, as well as location and scouting assistance.

Australia's generous state and federal government film funding incentives are necessary for the survival of the Australian feature film industry; however, access to these funds is highly competitive, and for many Australian feature films it is reliant upon the attachment of an appropriate domestic distributor.

Who are the appropriate domestic distributors?

In 2015, Screen Australia released the names of the most prolific domestic distributors of Australian films over the past five years. The four most prolific were Transmission Films, then in partnership with Paramount Home Entertainment and now in partnership with Sony Home Entertainment and Village Roadshow, both classed as majors, and the independents such as Hopscotch/eOne and Madman (Screen Australia 2015c, 16). As previously noted, Hopscotch/eOne exited the market in 2019. (Groves 2019).

In comparison, Table 1.3 presents a list of domestic distributors compiled by a local producer – 34 in total (Callow-Wright, pers. comm. 2015). But how many of these companies are currently considered appropriate?

I found that no formal list exists. Instead, Screen Australia assesses the bona fide intent to distribute theatrically on a case-by-case basis. As one producer shared:

transparency would be useful as producers also need some certainty when approaching companies – pitching to someone who then turns out to be ineligible is an enormous waste of our resources. (Coombs, pers.comm. 2013)

Table 1.3. List of domestic distributors

Curious Film	Pinnacle Films	Transmission Films
Umbrella Entertainment	Icon Films	Kojo
Rialto Distribution	Regency Film Distribution	Titan View
Hopscotch/eOne	Pack Screen	Filmscope
Backlot Studios	Footprint Films	Village Roadshow
Becker Film Group	Universal Pictures	The Weinstein Company
20th Century Fox	Metropolis Films	Inside Section Film
Studio Canal Australia	ScreenLaunch	Potential Films
Sharmill Films	Aztec Int. Entertainment	Bounty Films
Horizon One Entertainment	Antidote Films	Jump Street Films
Accent Film Entertainment	Hi Gloss Entertainment	Vendetta Films
Leap Frog Films	Bonsai Films	

Table supplied by a Producer (pers. comm. 2015).

Not only is it difficult to ascertain who is appropriate, but as Seph McKenna, then head of production at Roadshow Films, noted, the list is in a constant flux, with distributors outside the four most prolific coming and going. The Motion Picture Association of Australia (MPDAA) website lists nearly every distributor describing themselves as such. In 2021, Screen Australia provided a list of domestic distributors attached to recent Screen Australia projects as follows: ACTF (sales), Bonsai Films Pty Ltd, Cinemaplus Pty Ltd, Entertainment One Films Australia, Label Distribution, Madman Entertainment Pty Ltd, Mind blowing World, R & R Films, Rialto Distribution Pty Ltd, Roadshow Film Distributors Pty Ltd, Sony Pictures Classics, Studio Canal Australia, Transmission Films, Umbrella Entertainment and Kismet (Screen Australia, pers. comm. 2021).

Added to the challenge of determining who is currently appropriate, there is an additional hurdle for first-time feature film directors working within the lower budget ranges (under A\$2 million dollars) of limited choice. According to Academy Award-winning

producer Melanie Coombs (2009), best known for the Academy Award-winning short films *Harvie Krumpet* (Elliot 2003), *Mary and Max* (Elliot 2009) and *The Death and Life of Otto Bloom* (Jones 2016), under this low-budget, first-time feature film director scenario, the list of domestic distributors may be reduced to those shown in Table 1.4.

Table 1.4. Reduced list of domestic distributors

Madman Entertainment
Hopscotch (since exited the domestic distribution market in 2019)
Transmission Films
Umbrella Entertainment
Studio Canal Australia
Pinnacle Films
Vendetta Films
Rialto Distribution

Table supplied by Melanie Coombs (2013).

Of these eight companies, a filmmaker would then need to ask, ‘Which of these companies would be interested in my style/type/genre of project?’ and ‘What are these companies currently committed to and/or interested in?’ After researching these questions, the filmmaking team will generally find that the number of companies they can realistically hope to attach as the domestic distributor has halved. Therefore, it may come down to four or fewer companies who get to decide whether a particular project is eligible to access the 40 per cent producer offset rebate.

Other factors that contribute to this challenge include distributors such as Madman Entertainment fostering their own production arms; the domestic distributors’ ability to purchase and exhibit product from anywhere in the world (unlike domestic free-to-air television networks, which are required by law to purchase and screen a percentage of Australian content); and the distributors’ singular goal of maximising profit (unlike the

Australian screen agencies, which have a cultural remit to consider) (Brady, pers. comm. 2021).

Not long after the producer offset was established, domestic distributor Richard Payten, Joint Managing Director of Transmission Films with Andrew Mackie, agreed that the model not only handed considerable power to the domestic distributor, but also acted as a safeguard for the funding bodies: ‘I understand why that is the case because the funding bodies don’t want to put money in films and find out there’s no market for them’ (Payten 2011). Coombs (pers. comm. 2009) explains that this power was not something the domestic distributors set out to achieve and that the requirement for an Australian feature film to attach a domestic distributor and remain beholden to theatrical release exists due to the federal laws created in 2007 to administer the 40 per cent producer offset. Robertson (in Carroll Harris 2014, 101) acknowledges the imbalance of power that the administering of producer offset has created:

The 40% Producer Offset has been enormously successful, but it suffers from two major defects ... First, it favours one means of distribution of Australian feature films over all others and encourages a form of distribution – theatrical release – that is no longer optimal for many films. Secondly, it has the practical effect of giving distributors the upper hand in negotiations with producers and, being sensible business people, distributors use that negotiating position to their advantage. (Robertson, in Carroll Harris 2014, 101)

Why these laws were created, and how domestic distributors became the unwitting gatekeepers of the Australian feature film industry, are the result of decades of shifting government policy where industry and government alike have grappled with how best to finance Australian feature films and connect them with a paying audience.

The rise of the ‘unwitting gatekeepers’

According to Screen Australia (2015), 1970 saw the establishment of the first federally funded screen organisation, the Australian Film Development Corporation (AFDC). It was superseded in 1975 by the Australian Film Commission (AFC), which was responsible for administering government funds to assist the development of both feature and non-feature films and film-related organisations. Between ‘1972 and 1978, state-funded government film agencies were also established in every state (except Tasmania, which established a film office in 1999)’ (Screen Australia 2015b, 9). In 1981, further assistance was provided through a tax incentive scheme commonly known as 10BA (Division 10BA of the *Income Tax Assessment Act*). This scheme allowed investors to claim a deduction of A\$150 for every A\$100 spent on eligible production costs. In addition, a further 50 per cent tax concession was offered on any profit up to the amount invested, which resulted in producers financing more than 900 projects in eight years. Producers financed an average of 31 feature films per year between 1980–81 and 1987–88. During the same period, an average of 18 telemovies and 16 mini-series were produced each year. Using 10BA tax concessions, a total of 521 documentaries were also financed. (Screen Australia 2015b, 9). As part of the 10BA incentive, ‘feature films were required to screen at a cinema even if it was only one or two times’ (FitzSimons, pers. comm. 2021).

Tax evasion scandals and the rising concern about the cost to government of 10BA led to a review of arrangements, and the level of deductions and income exemptions was progressively reduced to 100 per cent from 1988 onwards and thus the ‘production bubble rapidly deflated’ (Burns and Eltham 2010, 4). With the 10BA era considered defunct during the late 1980s, in 1988 the Australian Film Finance Corporation (the Film Finance Corporation Australia, or FFC) ‘was established as the Australian Government’s principal mechanism for financing Australian features, mini-series, telemovies and documentaries’

(Burns and Eltham 2010, 2; Screen Australia 2015b, 9). As Ben Eltham's scholarship explains, the FFC was established 'to bring investment bank-style portfolio management to Australia's screen industry' and that 'over its 20-year institutional lifespan (1998–2008), the FFC invested A\$1.345 billion for A\$274.2 million recouped: a cumulative return of negative 80 per cent' (Burns and Eltham 2010, 2–5). The FFC was proposed by the Australian Film Commission's policy adviser David Court as a 'film bank' (Jacka 1988a: 16 in Burns and Eltham 2010, 5), in which projects with initial private investment interest would be 'topped up' and guaranteed in return for an ownership stake and a cut of the film's eventual profits (if any should materialise)' (Burns and Eltham 2010, 2).

Even though Australian producers have long sought the commitment of an international sales agent and domestic distributor in the form of a distribution guarantee or advance, it wasn't until the FFC era that the need for distribution guarantees from international sales agents and domestic distributors accelerated, whereby producers had to prove market interest or market value (Brady, pers. comm. 2021). As Brady (pers. comm. 2021) explained, this requirement – unlike the FFC's requirements – was not an expectation of the AFC, where it was unusual for a film to secure a distribution advance before it was made. This was largely due to a less risk-averse screen ecology that saw decent VHS, free TV and later DVD and pay TV ancillary revenue streams (Brady, pers. comm. 2021). It was an era where distributors were able to risk an upfront cost and could expect to see it paid back via later returns:

At various stages in the 80s and 90s, sales agents could comfortably offer A\$250,000 or more as an advance, knowing that they could just presell the film to Canal Plus in Germany, France, Spain, Italy, etc. for A\$500,000 (Brady, pers. comm. 2021)

During the 1990s, the FFC became the major source of screen finance and, despite operating in a less risk-averse environment, Burns and Eltham (2010, 1) argue that ‘the FFC, fundamentally failed in its stated mission of commercial screen financing’. At the end of its 20-year lifespan, in 2008, the FFC was amalgamated with the AFC and Film Australia by the Rudd Labor government into a new body, Screen Australia (Burns and Eltham 2010, 5).

Just prior to this, in 2007, with the arrival of a suite of initiatives known as the Screen Production Incentives, which included the ‘Producer Offset (replacing the 10BA and 10B schemes); an enhanced Location Offset (replacing the refundable film tax offset) and an additional Post, Digital and Visual (PDV) Offset’ (Screen Australia 2015b, 10), came the requirement for producers to prove market value; however, this time the commitment from both an international sales agent and a domestic distributor by way of a distribution guarantee (DG) and a bona fide intent to release on a number of theatrical screens became mandatory (Brady, pers. comm. 2021). Ironically, over the same period the national screen landscape grew more risk-averse as international sales and ancillary returns declined, and it became less feasible for domestic distributors to put up large ‘genuine’ distribution guarantees (such as those over A\$250,000 for films such as *The Dry* (Connolly 2020) and *Rams* (Sims 2020) (Brady, pers. comm. 2021). Brady emphasised the word ‘genuine’, as it is not uncommon for producers, driven by the need to secure a distribution guarantee as part of the finance plan in order to trigger the offset, to ‘do deals with distributors who would say they would put up a DG, but never actually pay it when the film was delivered’ (Brady, pers. comm. 2021). This manipulation of a challenged system is also reflected by Carroll Harris (2014, 101), who suggests, ‘It’s becoming apparent that many titles are being released theatrically only to fulfil a contractual agreement to do so and to access the full Producer Offset, not because they are really suitable for cinemas.’

As noted in the Introduction, currently there is continuing discourse between the Australian screen industry and the federal government pertaining to the changes to the producer offset (due to come into effect on 1 July 2021). How these changes will be administered by Screen Australia, and how producers will be required to prove pathways to audiences, remains unknown. Regardless of the outcome, in a progressively risk-averse feature film environment, understanding how best to connect a feature film with a viable target audience is considered vital, and understanding how best to engage a domestic distributor as part of this process remains critical knowledge.

Issues with linking government finance to theatrical distribution

During these times of digital disruption and uncertainty, some industry professionals and academics are questioning the relevance and value of the current legislation, which at the time of writing requires the attachment of a domestic distributor. In a landscape where Australian theatrical screen availability is being squeezed by Hollywood product, and our own voices are being drowned out by American multi-million dollar marketing campaigns (Harris 2013, 89; McKenna, pers. comm. 2013), many agree that the current policy needs to be reassessed to allow producers to target core audiences via other non-theatrical platforms rather than remain beholden to a theatrical release. Indeed, Carroll Harris's (2017, 54) rigorous PhD scholarship devotes much of its discourse to arguing that 'many of Australian industry's problems are in fact problems of film distribution policy' and that 'against the structural strength of globally dominant distribution practices, policy makers and industry professionals have never found or standardised release methods for low-to medium-budget films'.

It is a concern that has been shared among independent Australian producers over the past decade. Producers attending the 2013 Screen Producers Australia 'Screen Forever'

conference described the current model as being ‘broken’, and asked why all Australian films should be forced into a theatrical release where some are being set up to fail simply by the fact that the cinema is no longer the preferred platform for their target audience (Henkel, pers. comm. 2013). Previously cited award-winning documentary and drama writer, director and producer Cathy Henkel, known for *The Burning Season* (Henkel 2008) and *Rise of the Eco Warriors* (Henkel, pers. comm. 2016), argues that the processes by which we measure the success of a film need to be reassessed:

We produce around 30 features films per year and we classify 29 of them as failures because they didn’t do well in the traditional system, through these broken models, where the film’s success is measured, in many ways, by the screen average (Australian theatrical box office results) in the week of release, which is the way blockbusters are measured, and that is just not an accurate measure. (Henkel, pers. comm. 2013)

Henkel’s comments were again reflected in 2017, in Screen Australia’s producer offset evaluation report titled *The Producer Offset – Skin in the Game 10 Years On*, which found that:

The definition of a feature film and its connection with a theatrical release was highlighted as a persistent issue. Respondents felt projects were being ‘shoehorned’ into theatrical releases to obtain a higher rebate, while time and money would be better spent finding and achieving the best pathway to the biggest audience. (Screen Australia 2017f)

While Screen Australia (2015) admits that ‘linking eligibility for the higher offset level to a requirement for a cinema release creates a market distortion that limits a film’s ability to engage a non-theatrical target audience’, and that, ‘It can force a film into the theatrical

market even where this may not be the most appropriate or cost-effective strategy for its release', it also cautions that:

production funding from Screen Australia and other state screen agencies generally requires that feature film projects come with some kind of commitment for a theatrical release from a recognised distributor. The 'strength' of the marketplace attachment is then considered among other criteria in assessing whether the agency should provide funding for the project. (Screen Australia 2015c, 12)

Carroll Harris (2014, 102) argues not only for a policy-centred approach to distribution that includes direct investment in distribution and exhibition by incentivising diversification and lengthening the release windows for Australian films in local cinemas, as well as potentially subsidising the marketing costs for theatrical releases and providing financial assistance to domestic distributors, but also calls for funding agencies to more 'fiercely' engage with online monetised, low-cost, direct-to-audience business models, thus negating intermediaries and returning financial power to producers. Perhaps in response to this challenge, building on their previous initiatives such as the P&A Plus Program, Screen Australia's direct-to-digital pilot scheme, the Enterprise Industry Program may have provided an alternative route for a certain number of screen projects. Under this initiative, Screen Australia was to provide A\$3.2 million in funding to 10 production companies to fund the direct-to-digital release of up to four low-budget films over two years (Groves 2015b). While Screen Australia was to fund the marketing costs, the releases of the films were to include each film having event screenings at selected cinemas and being released the same day on iTunes and all other electronic platforms. The event screenings, which may include four-walling cinemas, in effect guarantee that these projects qualify for the 40 per cent rebate while those that do not

seek a cinema release, such as TV and online content, would receive the 20 per cent offset (Groves 2015b).

As at the time of doctoral submission (May 2021), I was unable to find sufficient data regarding the success of the direct-to-digital pilot scheme except that the Screen Australia Enterprise initiative was reviewed in 2018 and reimagined in 2019, where the aim was to foster sustainable business models and careers (Screen Australia 2019b). Whether the direct-to-digital methodology provides answers remains to be seen, as a lack of data and information regarding the viability of online and other alternative distribution platforms for Australian films remains a hindrance to Australian feature filmmakers wishing to employ other non-traditional distribution methods. Maslin (2020, 1) agrees that, to date, no viable business models have emerged for small to medium-sized producers on digital platforms in an environment that is still largely unregulated. This lack of data transparency was also acknowledged by Screen Australia in its 2015 *Issues in Feature Film Distribution* report, and was perceived as a major restraint to filmmakers being able to strategically and successfully release and market their films online. The report noted that:

without a common measurement such as box office takings or television ratings that provide a guide to audience engagement, the industry as a whole will remain in the dark about the reality of online release (Screen Australia 2015c, 9).

This issue of a lack of data was also publicly discussed by critically acclaimed Australian filmmaker Andrea Buck, producer of *The Jammed* (McLachlan 2007) and *10 Terrorists* (McLachlan 2012). Buck (2015) promoted the idea of data transparency in the Australian film industry, with a desire to empower independent filmmakers, through a scheme to be modelled on the US Sundance Transparency project – a not-for-profit US initiative in which nearly 100 films, all budgeted below US\$7 million and released from 2012 onwards,

submitted data to the Transparency Project website (Groves 2015a). Similar to the direct-to-digital scheme, as of 2019 the success of the Australian interpretation of the Sundance data transparency project is unknown and, in general, a lack of data collection and analysis – mostly due to confidentiality concerns – continues to be an ongoing hindrance for new Australian feature filmmakers wishing to implement an effective non-traditional financing and distribution model.

Finding solutions through other paths

While my research focuses on how best to prepare when pitching to and engaging with domestic distributors, there are myriad ways to finance an independent Australian feature film should a filmmaker choose to adopt a funding model that negates the use of the producer offset. Potential options include, but are not limited to, private investment, deferral agreements, corporate sponsorship, international presales, television presales, crowd funding and post-production equity deals. Should a filmmaker finance their films without the 40 per cent producer offset rebate, they eliminate the need to attach a domestic distributor and/or the need to demonstrate a bona fide intention to theatrically release their films domestically. However, as part of their distribution strategy, they may still elect to use an event-style cinema release to boost marketing and publicity before targeting digital platforms, television and other ancillary markets.

Alternatively, a new director may choose to avoid feature filmmaking and look to advance their directing career through web and television series and/or other digital platforms. Whichever path or combination of approaches a director, as part of a filmmaking team, chooses, having knowledge of how their product will connect with a substantial paying audience remains a valuable survival tool. Fundamentally, their careers and businesses will benefit from understanding how domestic distributors think.

Why emerging directors need to understand how domestic distributors think

A domestic distributor's business relies on the domestic distributor and their team knowing how best to define, connect with and sell to a target audience. Feature film directors' careers and livelihoods also depend on a similar approach. In order to get an independent film financed, a director must learn to sell to a variety of people. These can include producers, agents, cast, financiers, funding bodies, crew, sales agents and domestic distributors. This section therefore builds on the argument that, in order to become a valuable member of the director, producer, distributor team, a new director needs to understand how domestic distributors think.

Acclaimed veteran producer Vincent Sheehan, whose credits include *Jasper Jones* (Perkins 2017), *The Kettering Incident* (television series 2016) and *The Rover* (Michod 2014), recognises the importance of thinking like a distributor. In 2009, Sheehan produced a white paper titled *Why Producers Should Think More Like Distributors*, which was commissioned by the Australian Film, Television and Radio School's (AFTRS) Centre for Screen Business. The aim of the paper was to consider the challenges faced by screen content producers in developing and maintaining sustainable models. In it, Sheehan raises the question 'Why are domestic distribution companies more lucrative than production companies?' His answers are succinct. Domestic distributors can lessen their business risk by being able to choose from a multitude of product that they have not necessarily spent years developing. Unlike other industries, where the entity who puts up 'the earliest and riskiest money is paid back first', in the film industry this entity is the production company, and they are in the difficult position of being paid back last, whereas

the distributor who has put in the least risky money on a feature film and pays most of it only when the film is completed, is able to take first dollars from all

income. They recoup their total exposure, their advances, print and advertising costs and their commissions, all before a single dollar is paid out to the producer and investors. (Sheehan 2009, 5)

The other advantage that distributors have over producers is what Sheehan describes as the distributor's privileged first position in the flow of information:

They are in constant, frank communication with the retailers of content. And they all go to the markets year in, year out. All of this combines to create an information advantage that neither producers, nor significantly, the funding agencies are able to offset. (Sheehan 2009, 5)

Sheehan's final argument is that 'some models of government support have exaggerated this natural advantage of the distributors'. He refers to the Film Finance Corporation's use of distributor commitments as a signal of marketplace support, or commerciality and says 'that it's hard to argue with someone whose support, however modest, is going to be the trigger for much larger investments' (Sheehan 2009, 6). Note, as discussed previously, that this was replaced by the producer offset rebate.

Sheehan's comment reinforces the considerable power of the domestic distributor and, inspired by Sheehan's explanation regarding how he identifies and utilises the challenges and assets in a feature film to estimate possible income by making allowances for what he describes as a film's 'critical elements', which he views as being a film's positive and negative values (Sheehan 2009, 8), I argue in Chapters 4 and 5 that a similar analysis can be adopted successfully by emerging feature film directors to enhance their vision while minimising domestic distributor risk via strategic preparation and tonal proof.

Conclusion

With some of the most generous screen incentives in the world, many Australian feature films employ a mainstream finance model in which up to 75 per cent of the budget can be funded through the 40 per cent producer offset rebate and Screen Australia equity investment alone. Through decades of shifting government policy, a limited number of domestic distributors have found themselves in an unusual position of power where their commitment to a feature film project has dictated whether a project is able to access the 40 per cent producer offset rebate. This highly competitive funding environment has created substantial challenges for aspiring Australian feature film directors (and their teams) wishing to attach a domestic distributor.

At a time of digital disruption, and content and viewing platform abundance, this linking of government finance with a domestic theatrical release has generated issues for projects whose target demographic is not a natural fit for the cinema space and, due to a lack of data transparency, the success of other models of digital distribution (outside selling all rights to the SVODS such as Netflix and Stan) remains largely unknown. While other models of raising finance that do not require the attachment of an appropriate domestic distributor are available to new filmmakers, these practitioners are still reliant on marketing and distribution skills, so understanding how domestic distributors think remains critical knowledge. My research contributes to this knowledge by (1) discussing domestic distributor expectations and how they evaluate a first-time director's pitch and project; and (2) providing emerging directors' insights into how domestic distributors think (to be discussed in Chapters 3 and 4).

The next chapter provides context to these findings by first discussing previous scholarship with respect to Australian feature film domestic distribution and then by discussing the particular challenges facing Australian feature film distribution, thereby informing new directors as to why they may be perceived as a risky proposition by domestic distributors and other investors.

2

Literature review: A challenging landscape

Introduction

While Chapter 1 examined the critical and powerful role of the domestic distributor should a filmmaking team choose to finance their feature film using a producer offset-dependent funding model and introduced the importance of new directors understanding how domestic distributors think, the first part of this chapter discusses previous scholarship with respect to the Australian feature film domestic distribution while the second part focuses on the particular challenges facing Australian feature film distribution, thus contextualising the landscape within which my research is situated. As Screen Australia (2015c, 3) presaged in its report, *Issues in Feature Film Distribution*, ‘we cannot, however, unilaterally direct change. Any substantial changes must be developed collaboratively across industry’. Carroll Harris (2017a, 96) deduces that, ‘This marks a shift in policymaker’s attitudes from “leave it to distributors” to “we must work with distributors to find new solutions to industry wide changes”. This belief is also held by producers such as Sue Maslin (2019, 13), who explains that the challenge in a crowded screen content market is not only to learn how to connect and monetise screen experiences on platforms driven by micropayments, but also to ‘integrate screen story-telling skills with business, communication and marketing skills so that our films have a chance of connecting with audiences and rising above the noise’. Maslin (2019, 13) cautions that this is a time when ‘this engagement with the market cannot be left up to third party distributors’. Creatives need to ‘give this equal weight alongside development and production’. The second part of the chapter therefore contributes to this call to action by providing an understanding of the complex environment in which the Australian feature film

industry operates, thereby informing new directors as to why they may be perceived as a risky proposition by domestic distributors and other investors.

Previous scholarship

As noted in the Introduction, the most recent and relevant scholarship pertaining to the challenges facing Australian feature film domestic distribution belongs to writer, artist, academic and broadcast critic Lauren Carroll Harris, who has contributed extensively to the discourse in her PhD thesis (Carroll Harris 2017a), ‘Theorising the Cultural Impacts of Film Distribution in the Cinema and Beyond’, as well as in various articles, ‘Film Festivals as Distributors and Investigating the Post Festival Distribution of Australian Film’ (Carroll Harris 2017b), ‘Film Distribution as Policy: Current Standards and Alternatives’ (Carroll Harris 2018) and ‘Window of Opportunity: The Future of Film Distribution in Australia’ (Carroll Harris 2014), and the report *Not at a Cinema Near You: Australia’s Film Distribution Problem* (Carroll Harris 2013). Her work shares a context with studies such as Ramon Lobato’s (2012) *Shadow Economies of Cinema: Mapping Informal Distribution*, which examines informal systems of film circulation and seeks to examine what happens when these systems are centralised as our models of film reception and consumption thus revealing how they shape social consequences and inform public culture; Barbara Klinger’s *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies and the Home* (2006), which analyses the home as a key forum of movie viewing and discusses its impact on viewers, media technology and film culture; and Maher, Silver and Kerrigan’s *Australian Feature Films and Distribution: Industry or Cottage Industry?* (2016), which argues for a more sustainable screen culture lead by forthright business analysis informed by distribution practices. Carroll Harris’s PhD research follows a qualitative trajectory, which subjects distribution to qualitative, cultural and textural analysis. Her discourse examines film distribution in industrial and formal circuits as well as distribution’s film-cultural and digital dimensions. Within this inquiry, she poses the following research questions:

What is the nature of the space, circuit or technology at hand as a distribution platform, and where does it sit in the broader distribution landscape? What distributive logistics are at play? What are the flows and relations between the distribution circuit and filmmakers, audiences and other sectors in the distribution process? How does the circuit relate to the concept of disintermediation elaborated by scholar Dina Iordanova (2012) as the process whereby middlemen as retailers and distributors in media industries are made redundant by new technologies? (Carroll Harris 2017a, 16)

These questions form the spine of her examination in several key areas, including an industrial analysis of the distribution landscape in Australia, ‘using a political-economy conceptualisation of film distribution’ and revealing the uses and limits of that conceptualisation. It is an overarching evaluation of the Australian distribution and exhibition landscape to analyse national film policy framework’s orientation and contextualisation within the methods used by other countries to align their film policies with those of the distribution sector. From global analysis to grassroots independent distribution case studies, Carroll Harris’s scholarship also examines the Australian film festival circuit’s distributive logic relationship to ‘other parts of the distribution sector and role in disseminating local films’ (Carroll Harris 2017a, 16) as well as focusing on under-researched distribution practices that disrupt multiplex film culture, such as cinema on demand, non-piratical modes of peer-to-peer file-sharing and self-facilitated screenings by filmmakers and film festivals. Building on ‘sectoral industry analysis by Wasko 2002; Klinger 2008 [and] Drake 2008’, Carroll Harris’s (2017a, 14) research project’s innovation lends itself to her examination of the nature of relationships between distribution and national cinema, distribution and exhibition, and distribution and production. Although her research is less concerned with the financial viability of new distribution models ‘such as cinema-on-demand and monetised file

sharing and more to do with how to conceptualise them in relation to existing theories of digitisation' (2017a, 15), Carroll Harris contends that her interest is in the film-cultural effects of distribution, maintaining that 'the distribution circuit can be more important than the film text as the impetus for audience's textural choices and film cultures' sustenance' (2017, 15).

My research is situated within the macro Australian distribution landscape that Carrol Harris's research so rigorously and eloquently examines and contributes to what the author proposes as being 'a more productive way of thinking of film distribution policy, one that considers the ways local film distribution is promoted instead of how Hollywood imports are restricted or opened' (Carroll Harris 2017a, 99) To this end, my research is from the perspective of a professional screen writer/director and practitioner who seeks to work alongside their producers and domestic distributors as a valuable contributor in a collective effort to effectively connect Australian films with their intended demographic. Much of my research therefore focuses on how emerging Australian feature film directors can build successful relationships with domestic distributors through shared and understood goals and processes.

My research project does not advocate for the director to act as a distributor, although there is useful knowledge to be gained from studying the plethora of readily available direct distribution texts from authors and digital marketing experts such as Jon Reiss, Sheri Candler and Wendy Bernfeld, whose books include *Think Outside the Box Office: The Ultimate Guide to Film Distribution and Marketing for the Digital era* (Reiss 2013), *Selling Your Film Without Selling Your Soul: Case Studies in Hybrid, DIY and P2P Independent Film Distribution* (Ravid et al. 2011) and *Selling Your Film Outside the US* (Ravid et al. 2014) as well as academics such as Ana Victoria Falcon Araujo, author of *Digital Marketing Strategies For Next-Generation Film Distribution* (2018) and Jon M. Garon, author of *Digital Hollywood 2.0: Reimagining Film, Music, Television and Publishing Distribution as*

a Global Artist Collaborative (2013). While Aroujo's research uses a survey and case study methodology to explore how screen content producers are employing digital marketing strategies for product made for and distributed online, and Garon's analysis examines legal strategies and business models employed by new content producers to engage social networks and build communities during screen product inception, production and distribution, my research project is nationally focused and film practitioner centric in that it goes direct to domestic distributors – those whose Australian based businesses depend on fundamental practical film distribution and marketing knowledge. It asks, from the perspective of an emerging director, 'What do I need to know before I pitch to you and how can I be of most use to the process of marketing and distribution?' I therefore highlight the importance of understanding how domestic distributors think. Inspired by Vincent's Sheehan's (2009, 8) explanation of how he identifies and utilises the challenges and assets in a feature film to estimate possible income by making allowances for what he describes as a film's 'critical elements', I argue in Chapters 4 and 5 that a similar analysis can be adopted successfully by a new director to enhance their vision and minimise domestic distributor risk via strategic preparation and tonal proof – thereby reconfiguring Sheehan's analysis from the perspective of a producer to the perspective of a director.

The federal screen funding body Screen Australia has also contributed to the discourse in relation to the challenges facing the Australian feature film industry. Issues include increasing competition for federal government screen funding, competition from the rise of subscription heavyweights such as Netflix, falling physical video revenues, shrinking theatrical windows and the effects of piracy, under-performing online revenues, declining international sales and upfront financial commitments from domestic distributors and international sales agents, tightening cinema 'shelf space', and the need to cater to the tastes of both international and domestic audiences as well as an ageing Australian cinema-going

population (discussed below). These challenges have been examined in various Screen Australia reports, such as: *Staying Power: The Enduring Footprint of Australian Film* (2012), which explored five indicators of success and longer term impact based on an analysis of a selection of films released between 1997 and 2001; *Beyond the Box Office: Understanding Audiences in a Multi-Screen World* (2011), which analyses patterns of screen media consumption in Australia and provides insight into media penetration shifts including the uptake of DVD/Blu-Ray and online video; *What to Watch: Audience Motivation in a Multi-Screen World* (2012b), which builds on the audience motivation trends identified in the above report with a focus on long form content such as feature films, television drama and documentary; and *Issues in Feature Film Distribution* (2015), together with Screen Australia's producer offset evaluation report titled *The Producer Offset – Skin in the Game 10 Years On* (2017). The federal government's *Report on the Inquiry into the Australian Film and Television Industry* (2017) has also contributed to the analysis of the national screen landscape by outlining issues surrounding screen production tax incentives, which include the producer offset and television content quotas, as well as other challenges including direct government funding, international co-productions and the mental health of Australian screen practitioners. Still relevant, but with a focus on platform expenditure, production and national cinema box office trends rather than specific distribution and exhibition challenges, Screen Australia's annual *Drama Reports* and *Cinema Industry Trends: Gross Box Office and Admissions* reports all contribute to the tensions reflected in the more in-depth analysis noted in the reports cited above. Moreover, in 2020 Screen Australia released a series of podcasts to assist filmmakers in their understanding of the world of domestic film distribution. These include *Distribution 101* (2020b), with distribution manager Anthony Grundy, and an in-depth interview with domestic distributor Andrew Mackie of Transmission Films (2020c).

While I am not the first to value the contribution to knowledge that domestic distributors offer the Australian feature film industry, I believe my niche research fills a gap in in this particular field of expertise via a focused and systematic approach to gathering domestic distributor information and insights, and that, combined with the reflective action outcomes derived from my own creative practice, allows emerging directors a greater chance of collaboratively working with producers and domestic distributors to connect and monetise their films via a target demographic.

The challenges facing Australian feature film distribution

To further focus and contextualise my research, and to presage emerging directors regarding why they may be perceived as a risky proposition by domestic distributors and other investors, this section discusses the key challenges facing the Australian feature film industry up to 2020. It is worth noting that the challenges referenced above and discussed below, which were comprehensively covered in Screen Australia's 2015 report, *Issues in Feature Film Distribution*, were closely reflected in 2019 in a two-part article by Australian screen industry journal *Independent Film* titled 'Outlook: The Challenges and Opportunities Facing Feature Filmmaking' (Groves 2019a). In short, most of the challenges that existed five years ago still persisted in 2019. As Maslin (2020, 2) points out in her article 'Embracing Uncertainty: Preparing for a Future at the Intersection of Creativity, Business and Screen Technologies', predominantly for the same reasons – namely the collapse of revenue derived from traditional or heritage media – the largely viable global screen economy that was thriving as recently as seven years ago no longer exists.

Key industry practitioners are still calling for the industry as whole to rise to the challenge by:

- offering unique cinematic experiences that demand to be seen on the big screen and challenge the massive success of television
- continuing to have informed conversations between industry players to address the challenges facing the Australian screen industry as a whole
- advocating that government allow contracts with streaming services as an alternative to the requirement of a theatrical release to trigger the producer offset
- developing projects with a central powerful idea that is potent enough to engage prestigious creative talent, which in turn triggers the finance for production and a campaign that attracts a substantial audience (Groves 2019a).

The challenges noted above may indeed be enough to cause emerging directors to either reconsider their career choices or, at the very least, understand why they may be perceived as a risky proposition by domestic distributors and other investors. It is my aim, that by providing a framework of strategic choices enabling new directors to efficiently collaborate with producers and distributors alike, that they will rise to the challenge and address these perceived risks through analysis, preparation and tonal proof (to be discussed in Chapters 3, 4 and 5).

The rise of digital disruption and the Australian feature film landscape

For the most part, the challenges facing the Australian feature film industry that I discuss below are a result of ‘the uncoupling of revenue from viewings [and are] symptomatic of digital content consumption and the online phenomenon of dis-economies of scale that sees costs escalate as audiences grow and analogue dollars get replaced by digital cents’ (Maher, Silver, Kerrigan 2016, 120). In his 2014 address to Currency House, Graeme Mason, the CEO of Screen Australia, succinctly summarised the challenges facing the Australian screen

content sector in general. They included the increasing difficulty of raising finance here and abroad; rising costs; less direct government funding; an increasingly complex yet shrinking market for independent production; competition from an over-supply of screen content with a new generation less inclined to pay for it; and reduced revenues due to piracy and a proliferation of content providers, making the possibility of one distributor getting enough viewers more and more difficult (Mason 2014, 3).

In his previous comments, Mason was referring to the Australian screen sector as a whole. More specifically, further challenges face the Australian feature film industry. In 2015, at the MIFF 37^o South Market – a co-financing market set in the Melbourne International Film Festival environment, which enables Australian producers with market-ready feature-length projects to meet with key international film co-financiers – Mason effectively summarised the profound structural transformation being experienced by the Australian feature film industry:

Blockbusters dominate an increasingly crowded theatrical environment while the traditional DVD market is in sharp decline. Newer ancillaries, like VOD (video on demand) platforms, are yet to deliver back recoupment dollars into the ecosystem. It is becoming harder for independent films to find their audiences amidst an avalanche of content, and it is harder for them to attract marketplace finance. (Groves 2015c)

The challenge of how to connect and monetise feature films in a time of content and viewing platform abundance is not limited to independent Australian filmmakers. Today's audiences are not only spoilt for choice – they are drowning in a glut of content. As Reiss (2015) notes, US producer Ted Hope and Brian Newman (founder of Sub-Genre, a consulting company focusing on developing and implementing new business models for film and new media)

estimate that 50,000 new feature films enter the festival circuit every year looking for some form of distribution, while 400 hours' worth of content is being uploaded to You Tube every minute (Hale 2019).

The question of how to find, connect with and monetise a target audience is one with which independent filmmakers around the globe have been grappling. Alongside the previously cited filmmakers, distribution and marketing educators, other institutions such as the US-based Sundance Creative Distribution Fellowship initiative (2017) have been proactive in the direct-to-fan and hybrid distribution arena, exploring solutions to the current challenge of how best to monetise distribution. The Creative Distribution Fellowship is described as:

an immersive, rigorous program for entrepreneurial producers and directors seeking new ways to build and reach audiences with their finished work ... that includes grant funds, access to premium pre-negotiated distribution deals, and connections to experienced industry mentors with the Institute's Creative Distribution team playing a strategic advisory role. (Sundance Institute 2018)

From a national perspective, in an effort to encourage industry collaborative engagement and generate potential solutions, Screen Australia (2015) released a clear and comprehensive report, *Issues in Feature Film Distribution*, which summarised the key challenges affecting the Australian feature film distribution landscape as well as developments benefiting the broader industry. In the theatrical space, they include: cinema on demand; selling the cinematic experience and event screenings; and working with the theatrical release window in conjunction with other platforms. In the home entertainment space, the opportunities include: an elevated digital premiere; integrating a 'premium VOD (video on demand)' platform with a theatrical release ('ultra-VOD') platform; platform exclusivity; and direct-to-

fan VOD distribution. Following is a summary of the key challenges affecting the Australian feature film distribution landscape.

Financing and distribution challenges

Challenges to exclusivity

Cinema's weapon of exclusivity is being challenged by shrinking theatrical windows, while at the same time audience expectations that screen content will be instantly and easily available are contributing to Australia's piracy problem.

The exhibitors' major selling tool of exclusivity – of cinema being the only way a film can be experienced during its first release in the market – is being challenged by experimentation with the shrinking of the theatrical window from 120 days to 90 days (Screen Australia 2015c, 7). While exhibitors see maintaining windows as being important for business, the long wait between the marketing of the theatrical release and being able to attract buyers on home entertainment platforms for films with a limited scale of release may be hindering those films' potential to connect with their widest paying audience. In the United States, theatrical windows are rapidly collapsing, with Paramount Pictures films decreasing their theatrical window from 90 days to 45 days, which will be shortened to 30 days for smaller films before heading to ViacomCBS's new SVOD (subscriber video on demand) platform Paramount+. Similarly, Warner Bros. films will launch 'simultaneously in theatres (where allowed) and on streaming service HBO Max while New Universal films can stream as early as 17 days after they hit theaters, or 31 days if the film earns more than \$50 million in its opening weekend, under a new pact with AMC and Cinemark theaters' (Baysinger 2021).

It will be interesting to note how these recent US changes will impact Australia. As domestic distributor-partner of Transmission Films Andrew Mackie (2021, 31:11) explains,

the future of Australian theatrical windows won't be determined until the streamers and the exhibitors in the United States can agree on a suitable theatrical window. However, Mackie also predicts that a reduction to Australian theatrical windows is likely, and thus will enable more opportunities for independent films and independent distributors.

At the same time as content is becoming easier to access overall, viewers are growing steadily more impatient about waiting for films to be released at the cinema or to move down the distribution chain, resulting in a high level of piracy and a significant loss of revenue to content producers and rights holders (Screen Australia 2015c, 22). In 2014, 29 per cent of Australian adults admitted to being active pirates, up from 25 per cent in 2013 (Screen Australia 2015c, 9). This statistic is closely reflected by Creative Content Australia's 2019 research, which found that 21 per cent of Australians aged 18+ continue to pirate movie and TV shows despite the increasing amount of legally available content (Ausfilm 2020).

One factor that can affect a film being pirated is the film already having been released on a digital platform, but not yet locally available; in this situation, audiences wanting to see the film may be more tempted to view it illegally. For example, approximately 1.5 million people watched Academy Award®-winning Australian film *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller 2015) in Australian cinemas while the film was illegally downloaded 1.2 million times in Australia alone (Creative Content Australia 2019).

Challenges to ability to secure finance

A film's ability to secure finance has been challenged further by the halving of up-front commitments (guarantees) from international sales agents and domestic distributors. Over the last decade, the contraction of international and national ancillary markets such as DVD and television has negatively affected foreign marketplace sales and the national home entertainment market, which has led to upfront commitments from distributors and sales agents to the production budgets of Australian films typically being halved. This challenge

has meant that producers now need to raise production budgets with smaller up-front contributions from the local and international marketplace (Screen Australia 2015c, 10).

Access to cinema audiences

Access to cinema audiences has grown more competitive as the market for independent Australian feature films has become increasingly crowded. Ten years ago, an average of 300 films were released into Australian cinemas each year (annual average 2005–06). That number has increased by a third to an average of 398 films each year (2012–14) (Screen Australia 2015c, 15). At the same time, films from the five major Hollywood studios (Warner Bros Pictures, Waltz Disney Pictures, Paramount Pictures, Universal Pictures, Columbia Pictures), with ever-wider releases, have increased their box office domination, commanding the lion's share of the Australian box office. In 2014, the studio companies took 88 per cent of the box office while the 'independent' distributors (eOne, Transmission, Dendy/Icon, Palace, Madman, Studio Canal and others, including Sharmill Films, Umbrella Entertainment, Pinnacle) shared just 12 per cent of the box office. In 2019, this figure remains largely unchanged as the larger studios, including Roadshow/Warner Bros, Paramount, Fox, Universal, Sony and Waltz Disney, commanded 86 per cent of the Australian box office with only 14 per cent market share going to the other distributors (Screen Australia 2019).

As Carroll Harris (2013, 8) explains, Australian films have been progressively squeezed out of domestic cinemas by American product since 1918, when 'Hollywood distribution arms forced cinemas to book entire slates of Hollywood films and squeezed the ability of Australian producers to book screen time', creating an oligopoly where, 'in 1923, 94 per cent of the films screened in Australia were American in origin, a statistic that remains largely unchanged today' (2013, 8). This glut of US-dominated titles also comes equipped

with significant advertising campaigns which smaller Australian titles find increasingly difficult to compete with. (Carroll Harris 2014, 100). As Carroll Harris (2014, 100) explains:

Hollywood films seem to need either a US\$10–15 million budget (as in *Jackass Presents: Bad Grandpa*, Jeff Tremaine, 2013) or a budget of over US\$200 million (the strata of films like Marc Forster's 2013 *World War Z* and the *Hobbit* and *Avatar* franchises) to perform well. Unlike Australian films, however, even a *Jackass*-style US film has a marketing budget at least equal in value to its production costs – a factor that ensures these titles' success but further disadvantages Australian titles.

Seph McKenna, then head of production at Roadshow Films, agreed that Hollywood's marketing machine far outstrips that of most Australian films. McKenna explained that for Australian films to generate any worthwhile 'cut through', a minimum P & A (prints and advertising) spend of A\$1 million dollars is required (McKenna, pers. comm. 2013). This growing disparity places enormous pressure on Australian films to perform with limited screen availability, as it is difficult – if not impossible – for a film released on fewer than 20 screens (as the majority of Australian films are) to achieve a significant box office result when faced with competition from films released on 200 to 400 or more screens (Screen Australia 2015c, 17).

Fall in video revenue

Analogue dollars are being traded for digital cents – online revenues are not increasing fast enough to make up for the fall in physical video revenue. (Screen Australia 2015c, 4)

In the past, many films have relied on the ancillary markets of home entertainment and television to break even, but newer viewing platforms such as video on demand (VOD), while creating new

pathways to an audience, have also created more competition for audience attention and directly or indirectly contributed to the erosion of viewing on traditional screens. Fifteen years ago, it was possible for DVD sales to be the main source of revenue for some films. In 2015, revenue from analogue sources continued to decline as audiences turned to online alternatives; and while online revenues were increasing, they were not increasing fast enough to make up for the fall in physical video revenue (Screen Australia 2015c, 10).

Changing television market

The changing television market – both subscription and free-to-air – along with the introduction of subscription video on demand (SVOD) services – has limited television revenue for many films and put further pressure on cinemas to offer a more enticing experience.

With reality television and television drama dominating prime-time schedules, Australian feature films are being scheduled in later and less popular times slots or on multi channels, and as a result are generating less advertising revenue for broadcasters, in turn leading to lower licence fees (Screen Australia 2015c, 10). Over the last decade, the free to air networks have also lost significant advertising revenue to online alternatives and advertising spend continues to contract by around 4.5 per cent per year (Maslin 2019, 3), while ‘Australia’s public broadcasters face diminished government subsidy’ – the ABC and SBS have ‘lost in excess of \$60m dollars over the past three years and remain under sustained attack by the government for its perceived bias’ (Maslin 2019, 3).

The subscription television sector, which includes but is not limited to Netflix, Stan, and Amazon, is generally offering lower licence fees for film as it prioritises securing other types of programming. In 2019, Netflix alone had an estimated 4.9 million subscribers in Australia, and while other countries such as South Korea, France and the nations of the

European Union protect their screen industries with quota and subsidy systems, Australia has no system in place to ensure the SVODS will invest in, or screen, any local production (Maslin 2019, 4) (Broinowski 2018). As Maslin (2019, 5) explains, less than 1.5 per cent of content on Australian Netflix is locally produced and, as of 2019, only five original series had been commissioned from Australia. Similarly, only two were commissioned by Amazon.

The Screen Producers Association of Australia (SPA) has argued for 10 per cent of Netflix's Australian revenue to be funnelled into home-grown content, in line with the regulations that have seen Foxtel produce the popular Australian series *Wentworth* (Watson and Radulovich 2013–21) and *A Place to Call Home* (Lee 2013–18). Applying the 10 per cent rule to Netflix could inject A\$80 million – or eight new drama series – into the Australian industry each year. But Netflix CEO Reed Hastings has announced that the US\$130 billion SVOD sector should not have to comply with Australian quotas, as 'regulations often backfire' (Broinowski 2018). Since then, in response to a consultation process between government and industry and the release of the *Supporting Australian Stories on our Screens* report, the government has announced that along with injecting \$53 million for the development and production of local content as part of the 2020–21 federal budget, it will be modernising content regulations; the revised regulations were scheduled to come into effect in January 2021.

These include:

- For the free to air commercial broadcasters – simplifying and providing greater flexibility for commercial broadcasters to show Australian drama, children's and documentary content which means that networks such as Seven, Nine and Ten will no longer be bound by the requirement to air at least 260 hours of children's programs and 130 hours of pre-school programs annually but rather 55% of the programs

broadcast between 6am and midnight will remain local content which can be a mix of drama, children's content, or documentary.

- For subscription broadcasters such as Foxtel– halving the content expenditure obligations on subscription broadcasters for new drama programming from 10 per cent to five per cent of eligible drama spending
- For video streaming services such as Netflix and Stan – no content expenditure has been set, but they have been requested to report on their level of investment in Australian content to the 'industry watch dog', the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA). The government has promised to continue to assess whether an Australian content spend obligation should be placed on larger streaming services in the local market (Australian Government 2020) (Rigby 2020).

In summary, children's content for commercial TV has been reduced, subscription television providers such as Foxtel have had their obligations halved and, although 'Netflix rakes in up to \$500 million annually in subscription revenue from Australia alone, Netflix pays no tax on this revenue and is not obliged to meet any content quota's or minimum spend on local content' (Maslin 2019, 4). The result is that our national screen industry is unable to 'siphon the flow of revenue generated by Australian audiences back into the Australian screen sector' (Maslin 2019, 4). This issue is compounded by the fact that streaming services are not obligated to share their data. This is leaving producers and distributors who once accessed box office figures, ratings and information about who was watching their content unable to analyse viewership (Maslin 2019, 4). In essence, the struggle for Australian feature films to compete in an overcrowded chiefly non-quota compliant television space has put the Australian feature film industry under increasing pressure to remain viable.

Australia's ageing cinema-going population

In 2014, 68 per cent of Australians aged 14 years and over went to the cinema and, while cinema attendance was most popular among younger people (aged 14–24), the overall trend for this age group was downwards, with the three remaining age groups trending upwards. The age group experiencing the greatest overall increase comprised those aged 50-plus (Screen Australia 2015c, 14). This finding was mirrored in a survey conducted by Jock Given, Rosemary Curtis and Marion McCutcheon (2013) at Swinburne University of Technology, with the results published in their book *Cinema in Australia: An Industry Profile*. The survey results revealed that ‘cinema going among older people has grown steadily and continuously’, rising from a low point at which just one-third of Australians aged over 50 visited the cinema in 1984, and those who did saw just two films a year, to 56 per cent of over-50s visiting the cinema in 2011, on average seven times each (Given, Curtis and McCutcheon 2013, 28). Over the same period, younger viewers – those aged 14 to 24 – became slightly more likely to visit the cinema (up from 82 per cent to 86 per cent) but did so less frequently (down from 10 visits to 9.2 per year) (Given, Curtis and McCutcheon 2013, 27). In 2019, an ageing cinema-going population persists. While cinema attendance was most popular among people aged 14–24 in 2017, the overall trend for this age group was downwards, and the only age group with an overall upwards trend was the 50-plus demographic (Screen Australia 2019).

Both Peter Cody (2013), then general manager of film and entertainment at AHL (owner of the Event Cinema chain), and Tony Zrna, then national sales manager for Palace Films, recognised the financial benefits of providing for a growing older audience (Given, Curtis and McCutcheon 2013, 28). Zrna explained that there is a loyal 45-plus female-skewed demographic that accounts for the majority of Palace Cinema’s day trade:

They [that era] were brought up with cinema. They don't tend to download from the internet ... They have a wide group of friends ... they all go along and meet up and see films quite regularly (at least once or twice a month). (Zryna 2012)

Both Zryna and Cody used *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (Madden 2011) as a prime example of a film that successfully connected with an older female demographic by playing at over 100 screens nationally and grossing over \$20 million (Zryna 2012). Another successful Australian film that leveraged the loyalty of an older audience was *Red Dog* (Stenders 2011). Based on the book by Louis de Bernieres, and starring Josh Lucas and Rachael Taylor, the film tells the story of how a loveable red kelpie dog united a disparate outback Australian community in search of his long-lost master. *Red Dog* made A\$20 million at the Australian box office after 11 weeks of release (Schembri 2011). Brady and McKenna reveal why the release of *Red Dog* was a huge risk and how appealing to an older audience negated this risk:

First, due to there being no arthouse circuit for children's films, it was released on over 200 screens. Second, the financial cost of releasing on 250 mainstream screens is enormous ... and third you are competing with the major distributors – the Studios, or branches of the major studios. And so you've got very few options because Sony, Fox, Universal, Paramount, they're not going to be interested in kids' films, because they've already got their kids' films for the school holidays from their studio parents. So why would they compete with their Pixar movie or their Fox Animation movie in the first place? (Brady, pers. comm. 2011)

McKenna (then a senior executive at Roadshow Films, which was the domestic distributor for the film) explains why *Red Dog* (Stenders 2011), which wasn't originally conceived as a family film, succeeded despite competing with the studio subsidiary films:

Older audiences want something authentic. They want something that speaks to them. They want something different, and they want something generally geared older. And for that audience when they walk into the multiplex, there's usually maybe nothing or only one film at any particular time. When those films are good enough that they achieve a good critical reaction (critics are still important to the script as an older audience still read newspapers and are still influenced by those things), then those movies can succeed very, very well. *Red Dog* was an example of that. It worked for the same reasons that *The King's Speech* (Hooper 2010) worked and also because it was a local movie. The universal appeal of the dog was extraordinarily helpful, and [so was] the fact that when older audiences liked the film so much that they told their adult children with children to go and see the film. (McKenna, pers. comm. 2013)

Here McKenna acknowledges the three-way generation appeal, where the primary focus was an older audience who, through word of mouth, generated strong secondary and tertiary audiences.

International audience

While Australian stories are valued both here and abroad, Australian theatrical films that do well domestically may not appeal to overseas audiences (Swift 2013). However, 'Australian storytelling is a highly valued part of our media diet. Next to the Hollywood blockbusters and US television crime shows, Australians want to see their own stories on screen' (Harley 2013, 3). McKenna from Roadshow shares similar views, believing that Australians are interested in stories about identity that explore cultural touchstones; conversely, these same 'touchstones' may make it difficult for an international audience to relate to Australian films:

Australians are interested in stories about Australia that Hollywood is never going to give you. So, when we look back at the last few years and say, 'Well, what's

worked?’ In original concept land what has worked is *The Sapphires* (Blair 2012), which is a story about an Aboriginal singing group from the Vietnam War era. Hollywood is never going to give you that story because Hollywood didn’t have *The Sapphires* and *The Sapphires* had unique elements of Stolen Generation issues and white-Aboriginal relationship issues. There’s all sorts of cultural touchstones going on in *The Sapphires* that are of Australia. It did \$14.7 million in business at the box office. It’s doing very well on DVD. But it didn’t work overseas. (McKenna, pers. comm. 2013)

McKenna’s reference to an Australian film performing well domestically but not so well internationally is further highlighted in the 2017 paper *94 Films: A Commercial Analysis*, where authors Sandy George and Bernadette Rheinberger (2017) analysed 94 Australian films that were made publicly available before 14 February 2017 and benefited from Screen Australia investment and/or the producer offset. The analysis revealed which top 10 films were the most commercially successful (Table 2.1), where commercial success was defined as a ‘percentage of recoupment to budget. This is the amount of net revenue earned by the film as a proportion of production costs’ (George and Rheinberger 2017, 2). The truth was that, as of 14 March 2017, not one of the 94 films had returned its production costs and gone into profit, and of those 94 films the top 10 commercially successful films were not always the films that garnered the most publicity, which tends to be more Australian box office result or star cast focused (George and Rheinberger 2017, 6).

Table 2.1. The top 10 commercially successful Australian films in descending order supplied by George and Rheinberger (2017)

<i>Red Hill</i> (2010 Hughes)
<i>The Babadook</i> (2014 Kent)
<i>Red Dog</i> (2011 Stenders)
<i>The Sapphires</i> (2012 Blair)
<i>Predestination</i> (2014 The Spierig Brothers)
<i>The Rover</i> (2014 Michod)
<i>The Railway Man</i> (2013 Teplitsky)
<i>The Dressmaker</i> (2015 Moorhouse)
<i>Animal Kingdom</i> (2010 Michod)
<i>Tracks</i> (2013 Curran)

When assessing commonalities among these top performers, George and Rheinberger (2017) highlight the need for a film to win critical acclaim and suggest that international rather than domestic returns had a greater impact on the bottom line whereby,

of all the recoupment attracted by all 94 films in the sample so far, 27 per cent came from Australia and New Zealand (ANZ) and 73 per cent came from the rest of the world (ROW) – due more to the volume of international sales rather than sale prices. (George and Rheinberger 2017, 23)

The commercial need to favour and service an international audience over a domestic audience was of concern to acclaimed producer Sue Milliken (2019), known for films such as *Ladies in Black* (Beresford 2018), *My Brother Jack* (Cameron 2001) and *Black Robe* (Beresford 1991). She explained that even though she was heartened that SVOD services were commissioning more content from Australian producers, her fear was that ‘the kind of

material being greenlit may become largely international in theme, at the expense of stories that comment on or are embedded in our society' (Groves 2019a).

Cinema as primary release avenue

Cinema remains an important primary release outlet for most Australian films. While a film's financial returns may be more reliant on international sales rather than domestic box office success, and Screen Australia acknowledges that not all films warrant the expense of a cinema run but rather require a release strategy that is appropriate for each film, its *Issues in Feature Film Distribution* report (2015) also highlights that, for most films, a primary cinema release continues to be appropriate and important to their overall success. The initial release period, along with the marketing and advertising campaign that accompanies it and the response from both critics and audiences, will often greatly influence the value of the feature on other platforms and in other territories around the world (Screen Australia 2015c, 13). This was also historically reinforced by Screen Australia's previous findings, presented in *Staying Power: The Enduring Footprint of Australian Film* (2012) where, based on an analysis of a selection of Australian films released 24 to 29 years ago, the concept of success and longer-term engagement was explored via five indicators. These were:

- Primary release: the breadth of domestic and international release
- Revenues: earnings across all platforms for all territories
- Ongoing access: continued availability across platforms over time
- Acclaim: festival screenings and awards won
- Wider impact: new iterations and cultural awareness of the original form.

(Screen Australia 2012a, 2).

This finding is also supported by academics Maher, Silver and Kerrigan (2016, 121), as discussed in the Introduction.

Selling the experience

Due to the increasingly limited cinema space for Australian films and a changing television market (as previously discussed), the challenge to lure audiences off the couch and into the cinema has led some filmmakers to turn towards the concept of selling cinema as an experience – or event-style cinema. Cinema-as-an-event is best described by Kennedy and Atkinson (2015):

Film screenings are augmented by synchronous live performance, site-specific locations, technological interventions, social media engagement, and all manner of simultaneous interaction including singing, dancing, eating, drinking, even smelling. (Atkinson and Kennedy 2015)

It is a phenomenon that Gubbins and Buckingham from Sampo Media (2013) believe may hold the key to cinematic success for filmmakers and producers, who are able to utilise more non-traditional approaches to exhibition through new technologies, cheaper distribution, the efficiency of social and mobile networks' ability to gather crowds at events such as secret cinema, pop-up cinema events, film festivals and films at music festivals, whereby organisers are able to sell tickets at premium prices to a substantial audience (Gubbins and Buckingham 2013).

Producer, director and distributor Robert Connolly is one such filmmaker who has successfully used the event-cinema concept to reach paying audiences. Connolly's event-style cinema projects include *The Turning* (2014) and *Underground: The Julian Assange Story* (Connolly 2017). It is a distribution tactic that Carroll Harris (2017a, 64) refers to as 'event style distribution'; she suggests that it is becoming more normalised as film professionals seek to intervene in a formal 'distribution market designed to exploit inequity'.

The Turning (2014): An event cinema case study

The Turning is an omnibus feature adaptation of Tim Winton's short story collection of the same name. Producer Robert Connolly selected high-profile Australian filmmakers to adapt each of the 17 stories, and released the film through Footprint Films, the company he then owned with John Maynard (Johnson 2013).

The film had a two-week run of official event screenings from 26 September 2012. It opened on 14 screens and reached 37 screens at its widest point of release. Tickets for the event screenings attracted a premium price of \$25 and included all 17 chapters of the film with a running time of three hours, an interval and a 40-page colour booklet. There was one session each night as well as matinee sessions in some cinemas. Over its cinema run, *The Turning* grossed \$1.3 million at the box office (Screen Australia 2015c, 24).

The Turning was broadcast by ABC TV on 23 February 2013, attracting an audience of 490,000. Connolly worked with the ABC to shape the multiplatform release. Eight chapters were broadcast on ABC1 as a single episode, with another nine chapters premiering the same evening on ABC Arts Online and iView, along with additional exclusive content including interviews with key creatives. The DVD was released in the same week as the broadcast, and the film was also available through transactional video on demand (TVOD) platforms (Screen Australia 2015c, 24).

Directly related to the concept of cinema-as-an-event is the notion of a 'communal experience'. McKenna from Village Roadshow believes that audience desire for a communal experience will keep cinema alive:

It's equivalent to why you'd go see a sporting event at the stadium rather than watching it on television. You're going to get a certain catharsis out of being there with other people, and our best Australian filmmaking, which are stories that are

somehow about Australia and Australians and Australian identity, they're amplified because of that communal experience ... There's a place for that, and there always will be or should be, or it would be nice that if there was. (McKenna 2013)

Shuyler Moore (2104) predicts that, in order to remain viable and compete with collapsing cinema windows and high-definition surround-sound entertainment systems, cinemas will have to offer a more immersive experience:

A big part of this is going to be 4D seats, which move to match the film (where you feel like you are flying when a jet is onscreen), and 3D sound, which seems to come from different angles at different times around you, like raindrops falling near you. (Moore 2014, 1)

Although the challenges are significant and the ways in which these challenges are being addressed are still being explored, the encouraging news for emerging directors is that Australian screen stories are still valued by Australian audiences. According to a report commissioned by Screen Australia (2016) and conducted by Olsberg SPI, *Measuring the Cultural Value of Australia's Screen Sector* (the Olsberg report), the report found that Australians value Australian screen content highly: of the 1049 people surveyed about their viewing habits and the way they value Australian content 64 per cent said local content accounted for 'up to half of their "media diet"', and 22 per cent reported that 'most or all of their viewing was Australian' (Olsberg 2016, 1, 4). The Deloitte report, *What are Our Stories Worth? Measuring the Economic and Cultural Value of Australia's Screen Sector* (Deloitte Access Economics 2016) also found that the Australian screen industry contributes \$3072 million in value to the Australian economy as well as 25,304 full time equivalent (FTE) jobs' and that in 2014–15 core Australian content generated \$252 million in export earnings.

Conclusion

Most Australian films still rely on success at the domestic box office to influence the value of the feature film on other platforms and in other territories around the world. Yet, with added competition from subscription heavyweights such as Netflix, falling physical video revenues, under-performing online revenues, declining international sales, tightening cinema ‘shelf space’ and an ageing Australian cinema-going population, an important question looms:

Once the baby boomer generation passes on, will independent Australian cinema survive?

And if the future of Australian cinema relies on it effectively selling ‘the experience’, it may be prudent for directors, producers and distributors to collectively ask: What experiences can we offer? And how can we connect a sustainable paying audience to those experiences? As Carroll Harris (2018) argues, the industry requires a collective approach to addressing an over-supply of Australian films with an under-supply of circulation outlets by developing a cultural policy framework that is predicated on establishing:

- a voluntary industry fund to aid distribution and exhibition support
- concrete guidelines that distinguish ‘specialised cinema’ – to recognise films that need assistance to boost their availability and their commercial results. This would take into account films that are to be released on a small number of prints, experimental in nature and/or by an early-career director (Carroll Harris 2018, 248–49).

Carroll Harris’s research speaks to a number of possible solutions, including support for distributors and exhibitors by way of a tax offset for distribution and marketing expenditure; the establishment of a separate wing of Screen Australia for international distribution of Australian films; the provision of cash grants to cinemas that screen Australian films; and assistance from the Screen Australia distribution manager to secure co-distribution with media organisations, non-profits and community organisations whose work meshes with the content of specific feature films and documentaries. Carroll Harris also advocates for minimum three-week runs for local

films in cinemas, with the aim of increasing ticket sales, to benefit both distributors and exhibitors, as well as proposing a number of practical suggestions for audience development through distribution and exhibition support (Carroll Harris 2018, 248–50).

While this style of ‘big picture’ analysis lies beyond the scope of my research, the question of how to prevent ‘analogue dollars being traded for digital cents’ (Maher, Silver and Kerrigan 2016, 120) is what domestic distributors do on a regular basis; therefore, the current and new generation of Australian filmmakers learning from domestic distributors may significantly contribute to the survival of Australian cinema (Screen Australia 2015c, 4). Maslin (pers. comm. 2021) explains that part of the reason why directors have not been heavily involved can be attributed to the industry’s traditional hierarchical approach where, in the past, filmmakers – including the producer – have often been kept separate from the strategies developed by distributors and exhibitors for the release of any given film.

A contributing factor revolves around the long-understood fundamental role of the director as being to tell the story to the best of their creative abilities and to the best of their vision – and that often that vision is profound and deeply entrenched: ‘So when it comes to marketing and the creation of the trailer it is really difficult for the director to put those years of [vision] manifestation aside and ignore what all their hopes and wishes and desires were, to let go of what has been left on the cutting room floor and to simply see what is in front of the audience in its completed form’ (Maslin, pers. comm. 2021). It is a tradition that Maslin believes has outstayed its welcome, and that the Australian feature film industry would be better served by asking: How can we define a role for the director that sits outside purely talent? Chapter 3 contributes to this challenge by explaining how domestic distributors evaluate a first-time director’s pitch and project, while Chapters 4 and 5 discuss how my own creative practice synthesised the domestic distributor findings and sought to minimise domestic distributor risk while enhancing an original vision.

3

Inside the domestic distributor challenge

Introduction

‘Risk’ and ‘creativity’: in the arts, these words suggest a symbiotic relationship. One cannot flourish without the other. As the esteemed Francis Ford Coppola, famous for *The Godfather* trilogy, states, ‘An essential element of any art is risk. If you don’t take a risk then how are you going to make something really beautiful that hasn’t been seen before’ (Coppola, in Anderson 2014).

For a domestic distributor, a first-time feature film director – a largely unknown and untested creative artist and practitioner – can be perceived as a risky proposition. The question of whether a first-time director and their surrounding team can deliver a proposed feature film on time, on budget and in the style and tone pitched, and work collaboratively in producing, promoting and marketing the film to a specific audience, is a significant one. Indeed, the success of a first-time director and their team securing a commitment from a domestic distributor relies on them proving that they are able to address that question.

A question I formulated for myself while preparing to pitch to distributors and other investors was, ‘What are all the components of this project and team that present risk and how can we prove that we are able to address, overcome or minimise those risks while strengthening our creative vision?’ Or, to pay homage to Coppola, ‘How can I minimise investor risk while still taking creative risks in pursuit of an original vision?’

Determining one satisfying definition for creativity is virtually impossible, as the creative process is unique to each individual. Words such as ‘original’, ‘new’, ‘fresh’, ‘alternative’, ‘inspired’, ‘resonant’, ‘surprising’, ‘novel’, ‘spontaneous’, ‘strange’, ‘elusive’,

‘problem-solving’, ‘self-aware’, ‘intentionality’, ‘introspection’, ‘inquiry’, ‘spiritual’, ‘emotional’, ‘interesting’, ‘discovery’, ‘revelation’, ‘intuition’, ‘inventive’, ‘innovative’, ‘mysterious’, ‘clarity’, ‘integrity’, ‘unpredictable’, ‘paradoxical’, ‘exploding’, ‘passion’ and ‘risk-taking’ all pertain to the creative process. In his book *Human Motivation*, Franken (1982, 396) simply states:

In order to be creative, you need to be able to view things in new ways or from a different perspective. Among other things, you need to be able to generate new possibilities or new alternatives.

Franken offers three reasons for people’s motivation to be creative: (1) the need for novel, varied and complex stimulation; (2) the need to communicate ideas and values; and (3) the need to solve problems (Franken 1982, 396). A director’s creative process can encompass all of the above and more – or less.

Screenwriters also have a creative process and personal vision for their work. Their personal vision is often referred to as their ‘voice’. Academy Award-nominated screenwriter Hanif Kureishi, known for *Le Weekend* (Michell 2013), *Venus* (Michell 2006) and *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Frears 1985), refers to the process of finding your voice as a discovery: ‘Your point of view, which is your voice, your person, isn’t something you have to get. It’s something you uncover’ (Dannenbaum, Hodge and Mayer 2003, 17). Similarly, how a director interprets a screenplay is a process of exploration, discovery, analysis, interpretation, testing and execution. The final result is often referred to as their ‘vision’. It is at this juncture that I draw inspiration from three professors from the renowned University of Southern California School of Cinema-Television, Dannenbaum, Hodge and Mayer’s (2003) description of the films that attract them:

We are drawn to films that feel fresh, multi-layered and authentic, that bear the distinct imprints of the people who made them, and that have a strong impact on the audiences who see them. (Dannenbaum, Hodge, and Mayer 2003, xiii)

Taking this into consideration, this chapter discusses how domestic distributors evaluate an emerging Australian feature film director's pitch and project.

Minimising domestic distributor risk while strengthening an original vision

As discussed in the Introduction, the process of determining how to minimise investor risk while strengthening my creative vision was the result of synthesising reflective creative practice with the key findings from the questionnaire and formal interview process with domestic distributors (see Appendix 5 for a list of the participating domestic distributors, Appendix 6 for a copy of the domestic distributor questionnaire and Appendix 9 for a summary of the initial 2011 Australian Domestic Distributor survey results). As noted in the methodology, the original domestic distributor interview process, motivated by my first unsuccessful attempt at a tonal proof of concept short film – *Tidal Marks* (2009) – was undertaken between 2009 and 2013. After the production of *The Butterfly Tree* (2017), I returned to the interview process between 2019 and 2021. The years linking these two timeframes was dominated by a period of reflective action learning, where I drew upon my research-led methodology and created what can be regarded as a tonal proof of concept short film titled *Beetlefeeders* (2012) to support the feature film *The Butterfly Tree* (then in financing). This tool, plus others (to be discussed in Chapter 4) was then used to acquire the commitment of both a domestic distributor and an international sales agent, which in turn triggered access to the 40 per cent producer offset rebate and made way for the pursuit of the remaining finance. The film went into production in 2016 and, from its release in 2017, *The Butterfly Tree* went on to screen at key national and international film festivals. To

honour my directorial obligations, I spent much of 2017 attending publicity events. The film sold internationally to territories including the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, China, Pan Asia and Bulgaria, with Amazon taking the rights for Rest of World territories excluding festivals and theatrical as well as all rights in Australia/New Zealand. A full festival and awards list can be found in Appendix 2. By 2017, following the production of the feature as well as the tonal proof of concept short films, *Tidal Marks* (2009) and *Beetlefeeders* (2012), I had effectively answered my own research question – I had successfully investigated how domestic distributors evaluated an emerging feature film director’s pitch and project and, using creative praxis and practice, had created a successful tonal proof of concept short film that minimised perceived domestic distributor risk while enhancing my creative vision.

The aim of the domestic distributor questionnaire and formal interview process was to determine how domestic distributors evaluate each element of a first-time director’s pitch and project. These elements include: the script; the cast; the key creative team surrounding the director; short film and feature film festivals; awards and events that are held in high regard with respect to domestic distributors; what to include on a director’s show reel and other pitch materials; a responsible budget; an appropriate marketing spend; and building a positive reputation and industry presence.

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part discusses the elements of a first-time director’s pitch that are usually considered earlier in the financing process. These include:

- selling the concept – connecting with a target audience and defining their core experience
- understanding the business of distribution
- the script

- screenwriting awards
- a cohesive core creative team
- tonal proof
- other elements of the pitch package.

The second part discusses the elements that are considered once the project has benefited from the early pitch development process. These include:

- creating a reputation – one step closer to commercial and/or critical success
- a responsible budget and managing investor expectations
- a ‘bankable’ cast
- self-promotion
- the value of key international film festivals and awards.

Chapters 4 and 5 continue to build on the domestic distributor findings. Chapter 4 discusses how the research informed my creative practice up until the production of *The Butterfly Tree* as well as examining the tonal short film methodology in detail. Chapter 5 continues the discourse by examining my own experience of the distribution process, synthesising it with former research (before production of *The Butterfly Tree*) and later research (after production of *The Butterfly Tree*). At the end of Chapter 5, in table form, I provide a framework of creative and strategic considerations designed to enhance a director’s vision while minimising domestic distributor risk. This table correlates domestic distributor concerns alongside emerging director concerns and offers possible creative solutions.

Early pitch development

Selling the concept, connecting with a target audience and defining their core experience(s)

The birth of a film can be a long and protracted process, spanning many years. It begins with an idea and moves through the development loop of writing, critical feedback and rewriting until a market-ready script (collectively considered developed enough to pitch to investors as part of the financing process) emerges. By this time, the director or writer/director will have spent considerable time nurturing the project to a stage where the completed film is already imagined. More than likely, they will have already formulated detailed plans for how they will execute the film. This was my experience.

During the development of *The Butterfly Tree*, I spent over five years writing, imagining and practising the art and craft of writing and directing. As part of the preparation process, I attended various writing and directing workshops as well as producing the previously cited tonal short film *Beetlefeeders* (2012). All this, and more, was undertaken before the film was pitched to distributors and financiers. At the end of this process, the producer and I, and our creative team, were well and truly ready to make the feature. We were bursting with preparedness and a burning desire to ‘just do it’. In essence, we – like many other new filmmaking teams – were in virtual production mode.

While seeing a well-developed script as being vitally important, domestic distributors approach the script from a different perspective. Their primary line of inquiry, after they have read the script and deemed it to be ‘good’, is generally to ask themselves: Is there an audience for this story and, if so, can the story can be sold to its target demographic (often with limited marketing spend)? Their other consideration is how they can sell this concept to the exhibitors (Brady pers. comm. 2011, McKenna pers. comm. 2013).

The challenge for new filmmakers is therefore to ‘step back’ from the ‘how to make this film’ and explore and understand who constitutes their target demographic and what core experiences their story offers this demographic. To explain this concept of defining a target demographic, domestic distributor Tait Brady of Label Distribution used the example of a feature film set in 1985 about two university students, which could be interpreted as a coming of age film:

You could be misguided into thinking its target audience is 18–25-year olds, but it’s not, because the film is set in 1985. There’s two types of coming of age movies – there’s one about a 16-year-old character aimed at 16-year-olds and then there’s one about a 16-year-old character that is aimed at a 45-plus audience. In this case, the audience is 45 to 70. Once it’s really clear to the art house distributors that that’s the kind of coming-of-age movie it is, they’re interested. They know that (type of) audience – the 40, 45 to 80-year-old audience – and they know that audience will go to the movies. If I said it was for 20-somethings, we wouldn’t be able to get a distributor at all. They’ve just given up on them. (Brady, pers. comm. 2011)

However before determining the target audience, in order to clarify the concept or the essence of what the team is selling, Brady recommends filmmakers start by strengthening their ‘one-liner’ (a one-line selling synopsis) or a two- to three-line pitch describing what the film is about in a way that captures the audience’s attention. Brady cited his favourite high-concept Hollywood examples as the Danny De Vito and Arnold Schwarzenegger film *Twins* (Reitman 1988) and Jim Carrey’s *Liar, Liar* (Shadyak 1997), about a man who can’t tell a lie. He also explained that, as a result of Australian films often being drawn from naturalism, it was rare to see inventive, high-concept one-liners being pitched for Australian films (Brady, pers. comm. 2011). To define your target audience, domestic distributor Andrew Mackie

(pers. comm. 2021), Joint Managing Director of Transmission Films with Richard Payten, recommends that filmmakers employ the following pitch-preparation tool: describe your audience in terms of how old are they, where they live and what other movies they enjoy.

While this advice partly addresses the refining and selling of the story concept and defining the core audience, the other mode of inquiry that new filmmakers may employ is determining the target audience's core experiences, which is vital in terms of embedding the audience in the film's journey. For example, on a simplistic level, a comedy promises the experience of fun and laughter; a thriller promises the experience of tension, thrills and a rollercoaster of fear; a horror film promises the experience of tension, thrills, a rollercoaster of fear and maybe some gross-out moments or laughs, depending on its sub-genre. A drama can be more difficult to define because it may encompass many experiences – in under two hours, a drama can take its audience on the emotional rollercoaster of life. The challenge with drama, therefore, is to define which of those experiences will have the greatest impact on the target audience and ask how they can be elevated or 'sold' when pitching the concept to investors.

Seph McKenna (pers. comm. 2013), then head of production at Roadshow Films, agrees that even though the business of distribution uses prediction modelling based on a film's 'bankable' elements (to be discussed later in this chapter), he also believes that being able to understand and define the emotional experience that a film offers is difficult yet fundamental to the process of pitching, creating and producing a successful film.

This is mirrored in former eOne and Hopscotch Features' executive Rachel Okine's comments (in George 2013), where Okine points out that the films that tend to flounder are not very defined in terms of the emotional response they are trying to elicit. To address this challenge, Okine urges filmmakers to interrogate what makes a successful Australian film.

After conducting their own inquiry, in which the Hopscotch team analysed the top 100 Australian films of all times, Okine found that what excited cinematic audiences were films that held a certain ‘scale of ambition in terms of the scope of the themes that they were exploring and the emotional response they were trying to elicit from their audience’(Okine, in George 2013). They also saw that these stories repeatedly had ‘a big heart and an element of exuberance’ (Okine, in George 2013). The distributor also drew attention to the high number of true stories on the list, including true crime, films adapted from well-known source material – whether a television series or a book – particularly when that material tugs at the heart strings, such as by featuring a wedding or because of a character such as a dog. Here Okine not only highlights the importance of defining an audience’s core emotional response, but also speaks to the advantage of adaptation, where adapting a film from popular pre-existing source material derives its power not only from having a large pre-existing easily targeted fan base but also benefits from the source material’s core emotional drivers having already been tested.

Taking the concept of defining the core emotional experience further, another approach directors may use is to ask: ‘Which core emotions within the film will most powerfully connect with its target audience?’ According to research conducted by Aurier Philippe and Guergana Guintcheva (2015, 6), where via qualitative inquiry they ‘investigated the dynamics of experiential emotions felt while attending a movie in a theatre’, the authors observed that

consumers expect more than to feel emotions while watching a movie, they expect and value certain emotion patterns and certain second order emotions ... [and that] producers should not limit their objective to prototypical emotion but should think in terms of emotion patterns and emotion combinations (Philippe and Guintcheva 2015, 6).

The authors identified the three emotion patterns as being ‘calm before the storm’, ‘crescendo of emotions’ and ‘sad happy endings’ (Philippe and Guintcheva 2015, 12, 13). As part of the process, they discovered that, in contrast to dominant literature that ‘considers ambivalence of feelings and mixed emotions as having a negative impact on evaluative judgments’ (Larsen, McGraw and Cacioppo, 2001; Lau-Gesk, 2005; Nowlis, Kahn and Dhar, 2002; Olsen, Wilcox and Olsson, 2005 in Philippe and Guintcheva 2015, 14), alternating emotions of opposite valence (an intrinsic felt value/experience attributed to an object, event or situation), opposite intensity and differing durations has a positive impact on the overall experience of the movie (consumer satisfaction) (Philippe and Guintcheva 2015, 13).

Creating opposing valence involves the use of prototypical or simple first-order emotions, which are described as happiness, joy, hope, surprise and excitement (positive) and sadness, anger, fear, contempt and disgust (negative), as well as complex second-order emotions, which are described as (but not limited to) romanticism, malaise, calmness, serenity, anxiety, melancholy, nostalgia, compassion, tenderness, frustration, vulnerability and embarrassment. The research discovered that respondents found second-order emotions were a result of prototypical emotions and that second-order emotions were more impactful, memorable and personal than simple first-order emotions, as well as ‘second-order emotions being more anticipated and appreciated by both expert and regular moviegoers’ (Philippe and Guintcheva 2015, 11). The respondents felt that prototypical emotions were best experienced with others, while second order emotions were best felt alone (Philippe and Guintcheva 2015, 11).

This concept of complex second-order emotions acting as powerful contributors to an audience’s eudaimonic wellbeing is also supported by media academic Professor Anne Bartsch (2012, 34), who identifies three factors that reflect rewarding experiences for film and television audiences. They are fun, thrill and empathetic sadness. Within this context,

Bartsch argues that media entertainment provides a low-risk opportunity that satisfies an audience's cognitive and social needs by providing: (1) contemplative emotional experiences; (2) emotional engagement with characters; (3) social sharing of emotions; and (4) vicarious release of emotions. For example, 'character engagement can foster a sense of relatedness without the risk of social rejection. Similarly, thinking or talking about a movie character can offer a face-saving opportunity to think or talk about the self' and 'contemplative entertainment experiences can be interpreted in terms of individuals' search for self-acceptance, purpose in life, and personal growth' (Bartsch 2012, 34). In part, Bartsch's overarching findings include

that social and cognitive gratifications are far more salient in individuals' introspective account of entertainment experience than they have been in entertainment research. For example, contemplative experiences and social sharing were rated among the most salient gratifications across gender, age groups, and educational levels (with somewhat higher levels of contemplativeness in older adults). (Bartsch 2012, 34)

Philippe and Guintcheva's research not only emphasises the value of opposing valence in the entire emotional arc of screen stories as well as in trailers, but also the value of opposing valences through a directorial lens where, 'Aesthetics bring positive feelings but do not inhibit the dramatic emotional build-up, which provides the negative emotions – they only make them more tolerable' (Philippe and Guintcheva 2015, 13). Perhaps this use of opposing aesthetic and emotional valence was what David Michod drew on when he made his two tonal proof of concept short films, *Crossbow* (2007) and *Netherland Dwarf* (2008) to support his vision for the feature film *Animal Kingdom* (2010), which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Closely related to Bartsch’s findings regarding the vicarious release factor – for example, the benefit of this experience not being related to the experience of anger but rather ‘correlated to a set of “weak” or “vulnerable” emotions including sadness, fear, disgust, fascination and poignancy’, thus reflecting ‘individuals owning up to vulnerabilities that they avoid admitting in everyday life’ (Bartsch 2012, 29) – is the concept of embracing vulnerability. Brene Brown (2012) defines vulnerability as ‘uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure’, but says that ‘it sounds like truth and feels like courage’. She goes on to explain the crux of the struggle with vulnerability that we all share: ‘I want to experience your vulnerability but I don’t want to be vulnerable. Vulnerability is courage in you and inadequacy in me. I am drawn to your vulnerability but repelled by mine’ (Brown 2016, 41).

Inspired by Brown, and growing in my belief that it is only by being courageous enough to allow vulnerability to be both present and felt in my writing, which in turn creates onscreen vulnerability and draws on the power of opposing valence to act as a tool of deep connection, catharsis and possible empathetic healing for an audience, I am now learning how to lean into the discomfort of articulating and defending those risks in development, production and post-production. How I unconsciously embraced part of this concept during script development and failed to honour it during post-production and how this, in turn, affected my relationship with the domestic distributor will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Understanding the business of domestic distribution

While domestic distributors do not expect first-time directors to be marketing and distribution experts, the distributors interviewed saw it as important that filmmakers understood the business of domestic distribution. As Brady (pers. comm. 2011) explained, a filmmaker who comes in and pitches to a distributor their ‘take’ on the exhibition and distribution business and how to sell their project will cause the distributor to lose confidence in the project if it is

at odds with the distributor's own perspective. Mackie (pers. comm. 2021) agreed that the best pitches were those where the filmmakers demonstrated that they understood the distributor's point of view – that the filmmakers had asked themselves the question: 'As a distributor, why would I *not* want to do this?' and then were able to articulate, process and address these concerns. To comprehend and find solutions to the question, 'Why, as a domestic distributor, would I *not* want to do this film?', a filmmaker would first need to understand the financial risk that domestic distributors aim to offset against potential returns. A new director may be inclined to assign this challenge to the producer but, as Jeff Harrison, Managing Director of Umbrella Entertainment, states, 'the most successful people in any business understand the whole business' (J. Harrison, pers. comm. 2021). The rigour needed to explain a domestic distributor's business model lies beyond the scope of my research; however, below I have provided a simplified explanation of an Australian theatrical recoupment waterfall, which provides insight into the difficulty associated with generating theatrical returns (Screen Australia, 2020d).

Theatrical recoupment waterfall example (Screen Australia 2020d)

Let's use as our example a fictional \$10 million feature film called *An Ambitious Adventure*.

In this case, the fictional distributor, which we've called *Biggest Aussie Distributor*, has put in \$750,000 as an advance to secure the rights to represent *An Ambitious Adventure* in Australia and New Zealand. This is where exhibitors (think Hoyts, Palace, Event, Dendy, etc.) come in. In this instance, we'll call the exhibitor *Cinema Chain*. *Biggest Aussie Distributor* and *Cinema Chain* have negotiated an agreed percentage split of the box office revenue. This is based on a revenue-sharing model. Usually the

cinema's share will increase throughout the theatrical run, to encourage the cinema to keep the film on screens.

In the lead-up to the film's opening weekend, Biggest Aussie Distributor spent \$1 million driving the marketing campaign of *An Ambitious Adventure*, using advertising and PR strategies to create audience awareness. This spend is called P&A, or Prints & Advertising. So if the \$10 million film earns \$12 million at the Australian box office, in very simple terms this is what happens:

1. Audiences buy tickets to watch the film at Cinema Chain.
2. Cinema Chain will report box office takings (less GST) and pay Biggest Aussie Distributor their agreed share on the net amount, which would have been negotiated earlier. In Australia, the exhibitor's share is often between 60 and 65 per cent of the gross box office.
3. Biggest Aussie Distributor sends regular invoices to Cinema Chain over the film's theatrical release, charging the exhibitor a percentage of the net box office. The percentage rate changes depending how long the film is in cinemas, but the exhibitor will always keep the majority of the box office takings.
4. The money that Biggest Aussie Distributor receives from the box office is called film rental. From that, they will then deduct their commission. Commissions are higher when the distributor has paid an advance (otherwise known as a distribution guarantee) and lower when they have not paid an advance. But in this case, since they paid an advance of 7.5 per cent, let's assume their commission is 50 per cent (Madison 2019). As well as the commission, domestic distributors recover the expenses they spent marketing the film (that \$1 million P&A) and their advance – the upfront \$750,000 they gave the producer to make the movie.

5. After marketplace contributors are repaid, the equity investors will start to earn back their money. That usually also includes the producer. Remember that the box office is likely to only be one form of income for An Ambitious Adventure – the film may well be earning income for decades to come due to home entertainment (e.g. DVDs, electronic sell through), free-to-air broadcast sales, streamer sales, merchandise and so on.

**It is worth noting that the above example is for 'ANZ' – Australia and New Zealand (which are almost always grouped together). Marketplace contributors can only earn from the territory they have paid for the rights to represent, so Biggest Aussie Distributor can only earn from Australia and New Zealand, not from the United States, Germany or elsewhere.*

Given the high percentage of gross theatrical return lost to the exhibitors, as well as the amount (P&A costs and potential advance already paid to the producer) that domestic distributors need to recoup before they can claim their commission, it is not difficult to appreciate that after a domestic distributor hears a pitch, their first response is to ask themselves a series of business-oriented questions, such as:

- What would the film 'do' at the box office?
- How would we release it?
- How much is in it for TV and VOD (video on demand)?
- What's the budget and how much would we need to pay as an advance to acquire the film?
- How much would we need to spend on P&A (prints and advertising)? (Mackie, pers. comm. 2021)

After making calculated estimates based on their knowledge of past results, domestic distributors will then determine a profit and loss estimate and if they ‘feel there’s potential for the film to outperform expectation, then [they] might make an offer (advance/distribution guarantee)’ (Mackie, pers. comm. 2021). With respect to Transmission, the overarching question is, ‘Is this something that can go into a cinema and stand its own ground against much bigger movies?’ (Mackie, pers. comm. 2021).

As discussed previously, given that domestic distributors support the concept of a theatrical release creating value for the film down the line, Mackie also recommends that filmmakers learn to refine their skills at ‘thinking like an exhibitor and distributor’ by embracing the habit of analysing the Australian box office data every week in terms of the box office gross, the daily gross, the weekend gross and the number of screens and screen averages. He suggests that filmmakers approach it as a stockbroker approaches the stock market, whereby a filmmaker upskills at predicting box office results and understands the ramifications of the market – ‘to be able to tell the health of a certain genre or type of film and what they can do’ (Mackie, pers. comm. 2020).

Thinking like a theatrical returns stockbroker and being a part of the strategic planning of the release of *The Butterfly Tree* during production or post-production was not something I was asked to be engaged in, nor – at the time – something I requested to be engaged in (to be discussed further in Chapter 5). And perhaps this is considered among domestic distributors and producers alike to be more the role of the producer, as it simplifies the lines of communication, which are constant between the producer and domestic distributor during the release of a film. However, both Harrison and Mackie (pers. comm. 2021) believe that ‘ideas are the cornerstone of good creative marketing materials’, and that being across key marketing and release decisions and understanding what will and won’t

work theatrically is crucial ‘so that expectations around finance raising and budget are realistic before projects are committed to’ (Mackie 2021).

Similarly, Maslin (pers. comm. 2021) advocates for a system that engages producers, directors and distributors in a discourse at each stage of a film’s life-cycle, thus allowing all those with a stake in the project to benefit from shared intelligence. Like Carroll Harris (2017a), Maslin not only recommends that exhibitors be incentivised to raise the performance of Australian films, but to acquire a degree of ownership by becoming equity investors – thus balancing an inversely proportionate value chain that currently is inversely proportional to risk, where those who invest early and take the highest level of risk receive the least recoupment, while those at the end of the chain – the exhibitors – who take the least risk receive 60 to 65 per cent from first position.

Mackie explains that the best pitches are those where the members of the filmmaking team not only demonstrate that they have a very specific passionate vision – ‘that the film is in you and you have to make it’ (Mackie 2020), but that the filmmakers have properly realised what the film is going to be and how to make it for the proposed budget. The question Transmission then asks, if it likes the project and it satisfies their company agenda (which focuses on quality drama centric projects targeting an older female demographic), is: ‘Does the filmmaking team have the experience and the connections to actually make this happen?’ (Mackie 2020). Mackie draws attention to one of Transmission’s more recent successful collaborations, *Ride Like a Girl* (Griffiths 2019), which had an approximate budget of A\$18 million, was the directorial debut of acclaimed Australian actress Rachel Griffiths and follows the story of Michelle Payne, the first female jockey to win the Melbourne Cup. According to Mackie, the film ‘ticked many of the boxes – it was a true story, a bio pic with a strong female lead and, in Australia, the film had the potential to attract a certain level of editorial’ (Mackie 2020, pers. comm. 2021).

Once a domestic distributor has committed to a project, and assuming the film successfully goes into production, Mackie explains that the relationship between the filmmakers and the domestic distributor is built on trust and advises filmmakers to respect the point at which the ‘domestic distributor takes over and to follow their lead’ (Mackie 2020). In the case of *Transmission*, the company prefers to engage the filmmakers in a round-table discussion and share their campaign plan three months prior to the theatrical release. This provides the filmmakers with an opportunity to air their concerns and, if their interests are not in alignment with the perceived interests of the distributor, then this is considered the ‘time to put it on the table and talk about it’ (Mackie 2020). The members of the *Transmission* team not only pride themselves on making sure that the filmmakers are satisfied with the creation of the film’s marketing materials; they also believe it is important to draw on their long-standing relationships with the exhibitors and engage them in a consultation process prior to the completion of the film. In the case of *Ride Like a Girl* (Griffith 2019), *Transmission* screened a cut of the film to the exhibitors and explained, ‘We want your buy in. We want you to feel as excited as we do and we want you to participate in setting a (release) date with us’ (Mackie, pers. comm. 2020). *Transmission* Film’s collaborative relationship with the exhibitors served the film well and according to Mackie (pers. comm. 2021), *Ride Like a Girl* was released on 270 screens, building to 400 locations with a prints and advertising spend of approximately A\$2.5 million. Despite the challenges of a perennially crowded Australian theatrical space, *Transmission* was able to secure a theatrical release in the September school holidays, just ahead of the Melbourne Cup, and *Ride Like a Girl* became the highest Australian box office grossing film of 2019, earning A\$5.3 million in less than two weeks of release (Mackie, pers. comm. 2021).

Unfortunately, the *Ride Like a Girl* distribution experience was not mine; as noted earlier, my own distribution experience will be discussed in Chapter 5. Given the formidable

task that is marketing and distributing an independent Australian feature film in what is an extremely challenging environment, coupled with the lack of resources available to filmmakers on lower budget films such as *The Butterfly Tree*, the question ‘How could a director be involved in the marketing and distribution of their film in a way that makes best use the talent, skill set and resources available?’ is well worth considering. Producers Bridget Callow-Wright and Sue Maslin offer a range of suggestions:

- The director should ensure they are available for all publicity and marketing opportunities.
- The director should act as a positive, engaging and authentic spokesperson for the film.
- Where appropriate, and where time permits, the director should lend their creative skills to maintaining a consistent vision across all the marketing and social media assets. This can include: the creation of a memorable and catchy title; the film’s core marketing message/s – one that is consistent with the film’s vision; the film’s impact statement (if desired social change is core to the film); cause-related alliance marketing campaign ideas; authentic behind-the-scenes material; an electronic press kit (EPK); stills and poster material; flyer and trailer material; a cinema ‘call to arms’ pre-film screener – for example, a clever reminder for the audience to turn off their phone as well as material for the creation of social media assets.

Both Maslin and Callow-Wright warned, however, that this input should not distract the director from their focus, which is to direct and deliver the film (Callow-Wright, pers. comm. 2021). If time is limited and the director needs to focus on their primary directorial obligations, Callow-Wright suggests engaging a trustworthy creative practitioner combined with a social media marketing strategist who is capable of inhabiting the director’s vision to accrue the necessary marketing and social media assets (Callow-Wright, pers. comm. 2021).

Mackie (pers. comm. 2020) agrees that a director's commitment to the press campaign is crucial and partly attributes the marketing success of *Ride Like a Girl* not only to Griffiths' high public profile but also to her dedication to honouring her nationwide marketing and publicity commitments during an exhausting three-week publicity campaign – a campaign that other talent may not have been prepared to, or been able to, afford to commit to (Mackie, pers. comm. 2020).

Brady (pers. comm. 2021), is concerned, however, that the distribution sector's increasingly risk adverse environment is making it extremely difficult for smaller distributors such as FilmInk, Umbrella, Label, Antidote and to some extent Madman to be able to afford to hire a publicist and tour the director across the country to fulfil their publicity obligations. 'Today, distributors are offering half the amount of money to publicists than what they were getting 15 years ago and publicists are less inclined to want to take the project on considering the amount of work they have to do' (Brady, pers. comm. 2021). This growing difficulty of a film being able to sufficiently finance its marketing and publicity campaign further strengthens my belief that a production that makes the best use of the talent available to it, including the director, will have a stronger chance of succeeding in the marketplace.

Script

The domestic distributor responses revealed that all participating distributors agreed that having a 'good' script was fundamental to securing their support. Even though distributors like to see a script that has been well developed, in terms of being assessed by third parties and edited by professional script editors or script consultants, their process of script analysis differs from the type of script analysis that the filmmaking team may have undertaken as part of their development process.

Distributors use two streams of script analysis, whereby they have to balance questions such as, ‘Does this story work? Does this story move me? Is it a good emotional story?’ with ‘How can we get people to see this story? What are the marketplace elements attached to the story? How can we sell this?’ As McKenna (pers. comm. 2011) explains, ‘It is applying both the “How does this make me feel?”, which is very right-brained, and “How can I sell this?”, which is very left-brained.’ Smaller distributors such as Umbrella Entertainment also take into account the personal appeal of the story and whether the project warrants the company investing three or more years of its time in it:

As a small company (there are only 10 of us) we have the opportunity to move forward on the films that we like not only because we see there is benefit in releasing them and that we want to support the filmmakers but that we have a genuine interest in the core material. For example, Jeff Harrison (the Managing Director) and I have no interest in rugby – so if someone were to come to us and pitch a rugby documentary, even though we may see there is a market opportunity to target a national rugby audience, we will still decline the rugby documentary. (J. Harrison, pers. comm. 2021)

With respect to the domestic market, McKenna (pers. comm. 2011), cautioned against filmmakers giving too much credence to international readers’ reports (a description of the story’s strengths and weaknesses, and further development notes) – those originating outside the market for which the film is intended, where the overseas reader hasn’t understood the considerable and nuanced ways in which the Australian marketplace differs from others, such as North America. Conversely, because a significant number of Australian films require an international sales agent, there is the additional challenge of testing the translatability of the cultural and social nuances embedded in the script in other marketplaces. To partly address this challenge, the producer and I not only pitched *The Butterfly Tree* at various international

marketplaces (such as the Berlinale Talent Project market, the European Film Market and the Melbourne International Film Festival 37 South market); we also sent the script out to international story consultants for readers' reports. This will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

Screenwriting awards

Having won two national feature film screenwriting awards – the previously mentioned Australian Writers Guild (AWG) Monte Miller Award and the Adelaide Film Festival and AWG Insite Award – I was surprised to learn that national screenwriting awards did not greatly influence a domestic distributor's assessment of the project. All participants cited that they were more influenced by their personal opinion than by previous screenwriting awards. However, Jonathan Page, director of domestic distribution company Bonsai Films, did say that awards provide a certain legitimacy as people are generally influenced by what other people think (Page, pers. comm. 2021).

A cohesive core creative team

After the script, domestic distributors rated having a director and experienced producer attached as being of the next greatest importance, followed by the attachment of cast. Where 'name' cast had not yet been secured, a realistic 'wish list' was expected (Mackie, Harrison, Page, pers. comm. 2021). As Jeff Harrison (pers. comm. 2021) stated, 'It's the first thing that every exhibitor and platform is going to ask you – who is the cast and who is the director?'. Both Harrison (pers. comm. 2021) and Brady (pers. comm. 2011) acknowledged the difficulty of securing a high-level cast considered bankable in Australia versus those considered bankable in the international marketplace; and suggested it was wise for producers to invite their domestic distributor to discuss these decisions and offer their opinion before securing key cast. The issue of 'bankable' cast will be further discussed later in the chapter.

After the script, the director, an experienced producer and bankable cast, an experienced director of photography (DOP) was deemed to be of most importance, followed by the editor and production designer. The assurance that the director was surrounded by experienced creative heads of department minimised the risk of the film failing to meet investor expectations – in terms of it being delivered on time and within budget in the tone and style promised. John L. Simpson (pers. comm. 2011), the CEO of Titan View, succinctly summed up these findings:

You've got to shoot it first. The sound designer and composer can try to help us and save us from what's happened in the shoot, or add to the result, but if we don't get the shoot right, we haven't got anything.

It would therefore be understandable for new directors to ask: 'How can emerging filmmakers successfully transition into feature filmmaking if having a core creative team of emerging practitioners (who lack proof via previous work that they can deliver the vision for the film on time and within budget) is potentially perceived as a hindrance to securing the trust and commitment of a domestic distributor?' While the complete answer lies beyond the scope of my research, I draw on my own creative practice to offer possible solutions in Chapter 4.

Tonal proof

A new director may have multiple options when deciding what to put on their 'sizzle' reel to support a feature film in development. These can include: a combination of short films or calling card/proof of concept short films; low/no-budget feature/s; television episodes or webisodes; interactive media or a collection of film clips or television commercials. Lucy Hill, then head of acquisitions for eOne Australia, speaking at Sydney's Flickerfest 2018, stated that having a 'proof of concept' reel and being able to provide three comparisons

(recent successful tonally similar feature films, often referred to as ‘comps’) were considered extremely valuable when assessing a new project. A proof of concept work can essentially be described as a short form visual demonstration that efficiently speaks to the longer form project in terms of style, tone, genre, concept, story, theme, world-building and approach to character, or a combination of these (Screen Australia 2018e; Screen Queensland 2019a).

For an emerging director, the creation and production of one or a combination of these possible options demands time, creative and physical energy, resources and finances. From the perspective of domestic distributors, of the many visual story-selling tools available, which are the most effective? As noted in Chapter 2, domestic distributors responded to this question by way of formal interview process and/or via the domestic distributor questionnaire (see Appendix 6). The collective domestic distributor responses demonstrated that domestic distributors prefer to see a tonal proof of concept work on the pitch reel that has been shot and created specifically to support the feature in development, but that tonal proof need not be limited to a complete narrative that is able to be experienced as a standalone work. All domestic distributor participants agreed that there was more than one option available to filmmakers wishing to demonstrate tonal proof. While Harrison, Page and Mackie (pers. comm. 2021) said they preferred to see tonal proof demonstrated via the creation of key scenes from the feature, they also acknowledged the cost associated with shooting specific scenes that demonstrate the world of the film, character approaches and the ability to overcome key execution challenges in a way that does not compromise the overall vision. As an example, Harrison (2021) pointed to the black comedy thriller *Come to Daddy* (Timpson 2016), where Timpson had created an excerpt from the long-form screenplay that demonstrated his vision so it didn’t just serve as an excellent selling tool but became almost a mirror of the scenes that ended up in the final film.

All three distributors (Harrison, Page, Mackie, pers. comm. 2021) were also open to a ‘tonal mash-up’ whereby the director creates a sizzle reel using samples from other practitioners’ works to create the overall look and feel of their film. This approach was also supported by Simpson (pers. comm. 2011), who employed the term ‘stealomatic’ to describe the method of creating a montage or sequence edited together from other art forms – for example, film, television, music, fine art, photography and dance – to create a mood piece that is tonally representative of the feature film in financing.

Another tonal proof option was shared by McKenna (pers. comm. 2013), where the director demonstrates tonal proof using a combination of excerpts from the director’s existing work. As an example, McKenna referenced director Kriv Stenders. Stenders’ television commercials, which starred ‘dancey’ animals, combined with his history of darker toned lower-budget features (*Boxing Day* 2007, *Blacktown* 2005, *The Illustrated Family Doctor* 2005), which were enough to convince Village Films that Stenders was capable of directing the feature film *Red Dog* (Stenders 2011) (McKenna, pers. comm. 2013). As McKenna recounted:

His movies said one thing, and that one thing his movies said was – dark, deep. That was (initially) ruling him out to direct *Red Dog*, but then he had this alternative body of work that you could look at. His fun, dancey beer commercials with animals that said, look at that – he is capable. (McKenna 2013)

Brady (pers. comm. 2011), however, was sceptical about using the television commercial option over the tonal short film option to sell a director’s first feature because ‘at the very least they’re going to have to explain to me what the connection is’ between the television commercials and the feature film they are now pitching’. Brady also cautioned new filmmakers against choosing the low-budget feature option, which is under-resourced and

under-funded, where the filmmaker risks being unable to fulfil the potential of the feature in the style and tone promised. The distributor also indicated that unless the low budget feature ‘is very, very good, investors will not be influenced by how little the filmmaker produced the film for’ (Brady, pers. comm. 2011). He suggested that the short film option had a better chance of fulfilling its potential by demonstrating the team’s creative ability and the director’s vision. His reasoning was that a filmmaker is seen as being ‘more valuable’ at short film stage where they may still be perceived as ‘a budding little ball of potential and possibility and talent’ rather than after having made a feature that risks failing to live up to investor expectations (Brady, pers. comm. 2011). As examples, Brady cited two multi-award-winning Australian filmmakers who successfully utilised the short film approach to transition into feature film writing and directing: Elissa Down, who wrote and directed *Black Balloon* (2008), and David Michod, who wrote and directed *Animal Kingdom* (2010). David Michod made two very deliberate tonal short films, *Crossbow* (2007) and *Netherland Dwarf* (2008), to support his feature film *Animal Kingdom* (2010), while it was Down’s sheer dedication and number of short films (10 to 12) that proved to Brady (who was then the evaluation manager at the Film Finance Corporation) that she was ready to successfully deliver the material embedded in her first feature:

I remember when we had to decide whether to support *The Black Balloon* ... because Elissa Down hadn’t made a feature, but she’d made a series of shorts ... they gave me confidence because she was absolutely dedicated to the task and you could see in a number of her shorts, many of which were self-funded, the evidence of the same themes (that were in the feature), and her, as a filmmaker, developing how to work with that material. They were little unofficial try-outs for *The Black Balloon*. (Brady, pers. comm. 2011)

While the Down example demonstrates a persistence of vision, exploration of theme and dedication to the task of preparing to direct a feature, the Michod example demonstrates how the tonal short film model can be used to strategically minimise investor risk. In its simplest form, the importance of tonal proof can best be illustrated by Simpson's comment:

The bottom line is, if someone's pitching me a feature film and here is something that's tonally bang on – then yes, I get this genre, I get this style, that's great. But if they're sending me something that has got nothing to do with it [the feature project] but it's a great film, I'll go, 'Great, you can make a film, but how are you going to handle this material?' So, if one's a comedy and the other's a serious drama, or if one's a serious drama and the other's a zombie film, I'd go, 'Well, I think I'd rather see something in context that really works. Because I want to start imagining them [the director and their team] in that space. (Simpson, pers. comm. 2011)

As selling tools for *The Butterfly Tree*, I used excerpts from the tonal short film *Beetlefeeders* (2012) to represent the different 'worlds' within the feature, and created a separate 'stealomatic' to represent the specific look and feel of particular scenes. How the *Beetlefeeders* excerpts were used to tonally represent the other specific worlds within the feature is discussed in Chapter 4.

Other elements of the pitch package

Usually, during pitch-meetings with domestic distributors, filmmakers are able to draw on a number of tools to sell their film and their team. These can include flyers, a pitch book (which may be referred to as a pitch 'deck', mood book or director's bible), a sizzle reel and the verbal pitch. To help new directors best prepare when meeting with and pitching to

domestic distributors, in terms of their presentation and verbal pitch, participating domestic distributors were asked to evaluate the importance of the following elements:

- the director's ability to communicate their passion and a clear vision as well as their ability to effectively engage with and work with the domestic distributor
- the director's ability to communicate the story in under a minute
- the director's ability to express the film's theme in one sentence
- The use of other visual presentation materials such as the director's bible or 'deck'.

Overall domestic distributors assigned the highest value to vision, passion and the director's ability to connect with and work effectively with the domestic distributor. In this instance, vision and passion encompassed the director's ability to clearly express their vision as well as their ability to communicate why they were the most appropriate person to tell the story and how they intended to bring the story to life. As Ari Harrison (pers. comm. 2021) stated, 'We want to meet the director and understand their perspective in terms of how they see the story coming to life and make sure it aligns with how we interpreted the script and saw it coming to life.' To lend context to this requirement, Harrison (pers. comm. 2021) gave an example of how crucial it is for distributors to meet with and have a conversation with the director. He recounted an experience where a filmmaking team had come to Umbrella Entertainment with what Harrison, after reading the script, had imagined to be a thriller, but upon speaking with the director he realised that the director had envisioned the film from a drama perspective. Harrison believes that this innocent misaligned interpretation could have had serious consequences for the production if Umbrella had not been able to meet with the director. He also noted that meeting with the director often held greater value over simply watching examples of their previous work – as an example Harrison referred to the award-winning director Jennifer Kent's pitch to Umbrella with respect to her first feature film, *The*

Babbadook (2014). During the pitch, Kent was able to clearly communicate her vision for her feature not only through her supporting pitch material, such as the tonal proof of concept short film *Monster* (2005), but also via her verbal pitch to Jeff Harrison. In the pitch, Kent and Harrison immediately connected over a shared passion for comparable horror films that had inspired the vision for *The Babbadook*:

So there was history there through these comparisons and understanding the visual style of these films as well as a demonstration of the research and knowledge that had contributed to the creation of the story and the vision (A. Harrison, pers. comm. 2021)

After the director's ability to connect and clearly communicate their vision and passion, and notwithstanding a fully developed script, log line and a tonal proof of concept sizzle reel, domestic distributors expected to see the following elements as part of the director's pitch:

- the ability to verbally pitch the story in under five minutes and make it sound fascinating and engaging.
- and rather than pitch all the beats in the story, speak to the following:
 - the inspiration for the story
 - why or what attracted you to this material or story and why it should be you to tell/make this story
 - how the project has come together
 - the target audience for the film
 - the elements within the film that its target audience will most strongly connect with
 - what is exciting and different about the film

(Callow-Wright, A. Harrison, J. Harrison, Page, Mackie, pers. comm. 2021)

- the pitch ‘deck’, which domestic distributors described as a 10- to 15-page PDF booklet that contains, but is not limited to, the following:
 - the log line or one-line synopsis
 - the one paragraph synopsis
 - the director’s statement
 - the producer’s statement
 - a list of key cast already attached or indicative comparative cast that the filmmaking team can realistically hope to attach
 - biographies of key head of departments already attached or that they can realistically hope to attach
 - visual mood boards to demonstrate the tone and style of the world or worlds within the film
 - links to any relevant previous work to support the pitch

(A. Harrison, J. Harrison, Page, Mackie, pers. comm. 2021)

Both Mackie and Harrison (pers. comm. 2021) cautioned that, like the sizzle reel, the pitch ‘deck’ should be of high quality and said filmmakers needed to consider the resources required to produce a quality sizzle reel and pitch deck.

In conjunction with being able to communicate their vision and passion for a project, distributors valued working with directors who could engender trust and who possessed the ability to discuss and address any domestic distributor concerns. As Page stated, ‘Sure I want to like them [the director and producer] and I want to buy into their vision as well as have them understand the distributor’s needs as we are the ones who are going to be representing

their work’ (Page, pers. comm. 2021). Harrison and Mackie (pers. comm. 2021) both said they ‘wanted to like the people they were working with as they were going to be working with them for at least one to two years’.

As part of the verbal pitch, self-confidence and reputation were assigned the second highest value, where self-confidence was described as the director’s ability to communicate clearly and lead a filmmaking team, while reputation was described as what the distributors had seen, heard or read about the director. This finding was succinctly summarised by Mackie: ‘Aside from the pitch materials, which will get you most of the way there, we are relying on you [the director] to be the CEO of the production’ (Mackie, pers. comm. 2021). Harrison (pers. comm. 2021), however, cautioned against placing too much emphasis on reputation, as what a director had made in the past may not be indicative of what they were capable of now; he therefore valued a face-to-face pitch meeting with the director over what he knew of their reputation.

While this part has investigated the early-stage development of the pitching process when preparing to engage with domestic distributors, the next part discusses those elements that could be interpreted as later stage pitch considerations. This is not to say that the elements below cannot be considered simultaneously with those above; I simply found it logical and practical to divide the pitch-preparation process into two sections, where I allowed myself the space to evaluate the discoveries from the first part of the chapter before deciding how they could be used to inform the elements in the second part.

Pitch preparation

This part discusses the elements of a director’s pitch that are best considered after those discussed above have been investigated and addressed.

Managing investor expectations: A responsible budget, ‘bankable’ cast and appropriate marketing spend

As noted previously, a domestic distributor’s priority is to stay in business. It is therefore not surprising that, while the two are not mutually exclusive, domestic distributors favour commercial over critical success.

This focus on commercial success challenges the growth of new Australian filmmaking talent. As McKenna explains, the struggle is that while making a commercially successful film can offer the filmmaker the opportunity to make another film, the allowance for failure as part of the creative process and developing as a practitioner, in order to become a great filmmaker, is lacking in the Australian industry compared with Hollywood (McKenna, pers. comm. 2013). Yet, despite the difficulty of determining the true commercial success of Australian films due to a lack of data transparency, there are other areas where filmmakers can minimise domestic distributor and other investor risk, and enhance the possibility of commercial success. These include a responsible budget, an appropriate marketing spend and a ‘bankable’ cast.

A responsible budget, an appropriate marketing spend and a ‘bankable’ cast

New filmmakers may think a lower budget range equates to less risk, so they should be aiming to make their first features for as little money as possible. While this may be true for certain projects, most distributors agree that a feature film’s budget level needs to be considered and aligned with the film’s market potential. Their views coincide with those of Vincent Sheehan (2009, 10), which is to let the film’s budget be guided by the film’s possible returns (which can be approximated via market estimates), rather than led solely by the expectations of the script, director and producer.

The other consideration is a film's marketing spend. As noted in Chapter 2, McKenna warns that it is difficult for distributors to take a risk on low-budget features because of the belief that,

to get any kind of cut through, for people to realise your film is there, you've got to spend around A\$1.5 million. The question is then if you've got a low budget film with a budget of under A\$2 million, how do you justify spending \$1 million releasing it? (McKenna, pers. comm. 2013)

Similarly, Sheehan (2009, 14) raises the question, 'Is your marketing spend commensurate with your film's potential returns? Could you change your approach to better suit the realities of the distribution marketplace?' While Sheehan's (2009) methodology of matching a project's delivery and marketing activities so the delivery requirements for film and video elements and marketing materials are directly related to the financing and profitability of the project provides part of the answer, Sheehan also believes that, for the most part, Australian films either over-deliver or completely under-deliver on their delivery and marketing requirements, and instead advocates for either:

- a model for very low-budget films, which do not have a distributor at the time of finance, where the film can be delivered territory by territory, item by item as the film demonstrates its worth in the marketplace: 'Producers with the production budgets of between \$500,000 to \$1,000,000 can take a film to fine cut, then be in a position to deliver only what the markets for the film require' (Sheehan 2009, 14).
- a model whereby, if a film is being co-financed with a funding agency, the funding agency equity should cover the non-deductibles (Sheehan 2009, 14).

Comparably, domestic distributors (Mackie, Brady, pers. comm. 2021) concur that a film's P&A spend is dependent on the style of film and its own specialised requirements, and is

reverse engineered from the projected box office revenue whereby the company considers the expenditure necessary to get the film into the market and make it visible against their profit and loss position. Brady (pers. comm. 2021) adds that when they are performing this calculation, distributors consider the cost of promotion and publicity, which is not just advertising and marketing but also includes travel. They also take into account the value of the film over its entire life across the other rights. ‘Distributors ask themselves, ‘Will spending now on the theatrical help build that value later for Pay TV etc?’ (Brady, pers. comm. 2021). In addition, Harrison (pers. comm. 2021) acknowledges that a film’s P&A spend also takes into consideration the amount of competition in the theatrical market space from films of a similar genre at the time of release. As stated by McKenna in the previous chapter, Harrison agrees that it is hard to justify spending large amounts on P&A when ‘even though you might be going out on a similar number of screens to huge international (often American) block busters an Australian film will simply not have the comparable marketing spend to compete’ (Harrison, pers. comm. 2021). As an example of the luxury afforded by less theatrical competition, Harrison referred to the domestic theatrical distribution of the horror film *Wrong Turn* (Nelson 2021), where at the time of the film’s release, the domestic distributor, Rialto Distribution, faced little competition from films of a similar genre targeting the same demographic and was therefore able to spend less on P&A. As an indication, *Wrong Turn* earned over \$600,000 at the Australian box office in its opening week.

From the perspective of a larger mainstream domestic distributor such as Village Roadshow, Colm O’Murchu (2017), quoting CEO of Village Roadshow Joel Perlman, states that for Village Roadshow in Australia, the P&A costs per movie released in the cinema are as follows (including advertising in all media and online):

- low = \$400,000 to \$500,000 (considered not very effective, and films usually do not break through on this amount)

- mid = \$1 million to \$1.5 million (considered much more effective)
- high = \$3 million (for big movies and considered very effective in Australia).

However, from the perspective of smaller to medium-sized distribution companies such as Bonsai Films, Label Distribution and Transmission Films, due to a decade-long weakening of the theatrical market, an appropriate P&A spend could range from as little as \$30,000 to an average of \$150,000 for most small releases (Page, Brady, pers. comm. 2021). In a higher bracket, even though Mackie (pers. comm. 2021) considered \$500,000 to be a ‘hefty’ spend, the distributor drew attention to films such as *Calvary* (McDonagh 2014), *Their Finest* (Scherfig 2016) and *Viceroy’s House* (Chadha 2017) that, even at this level of P&A, had still turned a substantial profit for Transmission Films. Even so Mackie (pers. comm. 2021) admitted that Transmission Films still relied on the support of word of mouth, critical acclaim and awards to drive audiences to see these films.

A ‘bankable’ cast

The term ‘bankable’ refers to the actors’ ability to sell the film nationally and internationally. From a producer’s point of view, the struggle to attach a bankable cast is dualistic – they are looking to attach cast who are considered bankable domestically as well as internationally. From a domestic distributor’s point of view, the need to attach a bankable cast is driven by national exhibitor or platform expectations and, as previously noted by Harrison (pers. comm. 2021), often the exhibitor’s first question is ‘Who’s the cast and who’s the director?’ Brady (pers. comm. 2021) also stated that the complexity is now compounded by who is considered bankable in the theatrical space versus who is considered bankable in the streaming space. According to the participating distributors, cast considered bankable in the theatrical space in 2011 included:

- Cate Blanchett
- Russell Crowe
- Guy Pearce
- Geoffrey Rush
- Hugh Jackman
- Nicole Kidman
- Naomi Watts
- Hugo Weaving
- Tony Collette.

(*Note:* In 2021 that list will have changed, with the inclusion of high-profile Australian acting talent such as the Hemsworth brothers and Margot Robbie, among others.)

In general, distributors acknowledged that managing investor expectations when casting was a challenging balancing act, whereby a cast's bankability, while important for the domestic market, is of greater importance to international sales agents (who are responsible for selling the film in the international marketplace) – as Brady (pers. comm. 2011) explained, 'that's the only currency they have'. Due to the associated costs that come with sales agents' expectations to see star cast not just in the leading roles but also in the secondary roles, this need to attract cast with international bankability was seen as problematic for films with low to medium budgets (Brady, pers. comm. 2011). Like Brady, well-known producer, marketing, distribution and digital platform consultant Peter Castaldi (2011) questioned the relevance of having bankable cast attached to films with a small release strategy (approximately 10 screens).

To address the challenge of determining who is considered bankable, McKenna (pers. comm. 2013) described an informal point value system that he assigns to a project

when assessing its cast's bankability. (He noted that this system was not at all a reflection of the actor's talent, but rather a reflection of their ability to be bankable, so should not be misinterpreted.)

Let's say you've got Joel Edgerton, who's a fabulous actor in his own right, he's got three points' worth of bankability, but I want to get to 10 points, because I think if I can get to 10 points, I've seen enough results (domestic returns from other films) where 10 points worth of bankable cast brings in an Australian audience ... Take *Animal Kingdom* (Michod 2010), for example, you say okay, Joel Edgerton's in that – three points. Guy Pearce is in that – let's say he's also three points. Let's say that Jacki Weaver at the time was two points. Oh, but we also have Ben Mendelsohn, who's two points. And oh, we have Shane Jacobsen, who's two points. All of a sudden, you're at ten points ... and that is enough credibility to communicate through your poster and your marketing materials to give Australian audiences comfort that this film is a quality enough production that they should spend their \$19. (McKenna 2013)

The informal system described by McKenna could also be utilised by producers and directors if they were able to track the net returns for Australian films – which, as highlighted earlier, is problematic due to a lack of industry data transparency. At the very least, understanding whether your film will perform better domestically or internationally may help when choosing 'bankable' cast and may assist to balance the expectations of a domestic distributor and international sales agent. How I addressed the need to attach bankable cast will be discussed in the following chapter.

Self-promotion

The challenge of being able to ‘rise above the noise’ at a time of platform and viewing abundance, and connect a film with a substantial paying audience, has become a recurring theme throughout this thesis. The purpose of the question ‘How important is it for the filmmaker to have a presence in the media and how important is it for them to promote themselves?’ was to ascertain the value of a director’s reputation when pitching to domestic distributors.

While John L. Simpson (pers. comm. 2011) saw it as being crucial that a director has a presence in the media – particularly online – and that endorsement from other entities is important, Castaldi’s (pers. comm. 2011) comment best sums up the results. He stated that he didn’t know how important it was that a director had a presence in the media, just that it was valuable. He advised directors to be diligent and proactive by joining industry databases and appropriate guilds, and attending relevant federal and state screen agency events and functions. He also noted that directors should be ‘using every possible online platform to keep their name out there’ (Castaldi 2011). The considerable value of having a substantial social media fanbase was also acknowledged by Mackie (2021) when he referenced the marketing leverage that *Ride Like a Girl* (Griffiths 2019) gained by having a famous actress – Rachel Griffiths – attached as the director, together with the fact that she was very invested in raising the film’s profile in the Australian public’s psyche. Another example of a director with the ability to make his presence and talent widely known in the industry is filmmaker Warwick Thornton (*Sampson and Delilah* 2009). Simpson used Thornton as an example of someone who, even though they lived in an isolated part of the country – Alice Springs – had a presence at industry functions: ‘I think you can live anywhere, but if you make your presence known in the filmmaking community, I think that’s really important’ (Simpson, pers. comm. 2011). Conversely, Brady (pers. comm. 2011) was less inclined to rate the

importance of a director having a media presence via self-promotion. He commented that, ‘Australians are not too concerned with who the director is unless it is someone who has a high profile in film, like maybe Paul Hogan’ (Brady, pers. comm. 2011).

However, both Brady and Castaldi agreed, with respect to marketing a film, that in order to embed a film in its target audience’s psyche, the filmmakers need to be approaching, engaging and nurturing their audience at least 12 months prior to the film’s release. As part of this strategy, Castaldi highlighted the need for filmmakers to create marketing assets earlier in the process. He noted that, compared with the Americans, Australian filmmakers were generally not producing their marketing collateral early enough to be truly effective. He saw the primary reason for this as being a lack of focus on maintaining the producer–distributor relationship (Castaldi, pers. comm. 2011). Brady (pers. comm. 2011) agreed that releasing a trailer in the cinema four weeks before the film’s release was ‘incredibly outdated’. He said that people were more likely to see a trailer online rather than at the cinema, so a filmmaker – even though they may not be able to produce a completed trailer so far in advance – needed a variety of tools to intrigue, entertain and tease people six months prior to the release of the film. He also warned that there was little value in building an online presence before the producers knew the film was ‘going into production’. Considering that a feature film generally takes a year from pre-production to release, Brady considered it a reasonable approach to commence an online campaign once the film was fully financed. He also felt that people over-estimated the reach and significance of social media when it was used over shorter timeframes, and warned that it could take more than 12 months to build ‘enough followers to have any value in social media’ (Brady, pers. comm. 2011). Maslin (pers. comm. 2021) concurred that being able to harness the power of social media at least from the start of preproduction was critical to the ongoing marketing success of the film. In the case of *The Dressmaker* (Moorhouse 2015), Maslin and her team began engaging a pre-existing fan base

(primarily those who had read the book) and building online followers at the beginning of pre-production. As part of this process, which Maslin (pers. comm. 2021) views as a ‘conversation, a space where community can become involved as opposed to a space where an audience is being sold to’, Maslin worked with a social media strategist to create a number of key social media assets. These included auditioning authentic country people as extras and BTS (behind the scenes) videos that offered a bird’s eye view of what was taking place on the set – for example, what was being served for lunch, what the make-up and wardrobe departments had prepared before the arrival of the actors. The creation of social media assets also extended to post-production, where Maslin’s team recorded the live creation of the film’s musical score with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. While these, along with a two-month pre-release call to action via female-centric community groups (to gather your friends, frock up and come enjoy a glass of champagne to celebrate the launch of the film) all helped to build 10,000 online followers up until the domestic distributor took over the Facebook account (from which point the online followers quickly grew to 80,000), Maslin cautioned that the continued creation and launch of social media assets needs to keep escalating impact to illicit a sense of anticipation.

The value of key international film festivals and awards

My experience as a film school educator has led me to believe that for many emerging filmmakers, the decision about which national and international film festivals to premiere their short film at is often a naive affair – ‘I’ll just send it to them all, hope it gets into one and take it from there’. In the distant past, I have been guilty of the same approach, which lacks strategy regarding how best to use the event to leverage a one’s career, let alone an understanding of which of these events and festivals holds value in the eyes of the domestic distributors. The purpose of this section is to determine which film festivals, awards and

events are most valued by domestic distributors. The discourse investigates short films as well as feature films.

Short film festivals and awards that are most valued by domestic distributors

There are literally thousands of film festivals, situated around the globe, available to short filmmakers, but which are the most suitable when it comes to strategically making the leap from short film to feature film? Castaldi succinctly sums up the domestic distributor findings:

In terms of recognition of talent – you can win awards at every short film festival in the world and that’s great, that will say that you are a regarded short filmmaker. But if you want to take that win and turn it into a marketable item, Cannes’ Palme d’Or or an Academy Award[®] – those are the two that count. (Castaldi, pers. comm. 2011)

After the Cannes Film Festival and the Academy Awards[®], domestic distributors cited the following festivals as having ‘weight’ or influence within the Australian film industry:

- the Berlinale
- the Sundance Film Festival
- the Venice International Film Festival
- the Toronto International Film Festival.

Brady (pers. comm. 2011) explained that these key international film festivals are important for short filmmakers because sales agents are ‘very impressed if you’ve won major praise at a major film festival’. They are motivated first by cast and second by festivals, as these are the two major marketing tools they use to sell their films. Conversely, Brady explained that domestic distributors, unlike international sales agents, are not so beholden to awards at key international festivals for short films because of the lack of impact that international awards

for short films have on the Australian public (Brady pers. comm. 2011). However, because the competition to be selected for a key international film festival is so fierce – for example, in 2020, of the 10,397 short films submitted to the Sundance Film Festival, only 74 were selected from 27 different countries (sundance.org 2019), most distributors agreed that while getting ‘the nod’ from one of these festivals may make them pay more attention to a filmmaker’s work, it doesn’t mean that awards outweigh their personal opinion. As Simpson (pers. comm. 2011) noted:

I do think if you don’t know the filmmaker, and you don’t know the film at all, and somebody says to you, ‘Look, it’s won all these awards’, well, you’re going to put that ahead of the pile when you watch it. (Simpson, pers. comm. 2011)

As my research progressed and I became more aware of the highly competitive nature of the key international film festivals, I decided to make a short film with the primary function of providing a tonal proof of concept to future investors so that, in the highly likely event that the tonal short did not get selected for official competition in any of the key international film festivals, it could still be used as an impressive selling tool. This methodology presented its own challenges. The primary challenge was the split focus – the need to provide tonal proof regarding the vision and challenges inherent in the feature film while at the same time creating a powerful stand-alone short film. This process will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Feature film festivals, event and awards that are most valued by domestic distributors

In her article ‘Theorising Film Festivals as Distributors and Investigating the Post-festival Distribution of Australian Films’, Lauren Carroll Harris (2017, 46) offers the Sydney Film Festival as a case study to explore the following questions: ‘What is the distributive function and nature of film festivals for Australian films? What happens to local titles following their festival runs? How can we explain the gap between Australian films’ continued popularity at

film festivals and their continued under-performance in the rest of the marketplace?' To establish context, Carrol Harris draws on the findings of Peranson (2008), who classifies film festivals as audience festivals or business festivals:

The business model 'comprises the largest and most powerful festivals such as Cannes, Berlin, Toronto, Busan, Venice, which have a fund for the production of new films and/or a film market (at which proposed or completed films are made available to prospective investors, distributors and sales agents)' while the audience model includes major cities' and national festivals that involve lower budgets, less premieres and more limited staff, retrospectives, corporate sponsorship and connection to the Hollywood studios. (Peranson 2008, 27, in Carrol Harris 2017, 49)

According to Carrol Harris (2017, 49), at business festivals stake holders such as distributors and sales agents tend to have the most power while at audience festivals it is the likes of government funders, sponsors and audience who hold sway.

From her findings, over a four-year period (2011–14), Carroll Harris effectively argues that within the context of Australian film festivals:

Despite the ongoing popularity of Australian films at festivals, there is no evidence to support a link between inclusion in or success at festivals and the generation of future audiences in other circuits for Australian films, nor is there correlating rise in festivals as a source of financial recoupment for local films. (Carrol Harris 2017b, 56)

However, Carroll Harris's research also acknowledges that 'a large portion of Australian films do indeed amass a degree of what scholar Liz Czach has named 'critical capital', which Czach characterises as 'the value that a film accrues through its success in the festival circuit.

Through approval of the taste-makers – festival programmers and critics – the film attains a level of distinction above its unselected peers’ (Czach 2004, 82, in Carrol Harris 2017b, 51). What is negated from the discourse – understandably so, as it is far more difficult to quantify – are holistic success measures that are not limited to commercial or critical success, such as career development, talent recognition, a sense of cultural pride and eudaimonic wellbeing among filmmakers and festival goers. The difficulty of quantifying success can also be witnessed in Screen Australia’s *Staying Power: The Enduring Footprint of Australian Film* (2012), a report that explores the concept of success and longer-term engagement based on an analysis of selected Australian feature films released 15–20 years ago. The report states that the benefit derived from acceptance into major festivals is probably best felt by films that are considered to be more challenging to audiences, citing Jane Campion’s seminal *The Piano* (1993) as an example (Screen Australia 2012a, 4). *The Piano* won the Palm d’Or and the Best Actress award at the Cannes Film Festival as well as three Oscars® at the 1994 Academy Awards®. As Screen Australia states, ‘It is hard to imagine that this acclaim did not significantly contribute to the film’s commercial success’ (Screen Australia 2012a, 4).

From a domestic distributor point of view, while a domestic distributor’s business is able to survive without key international film festivals serving as part of their finance plan, these events provide a number of critical functions. First, they operate as acquisition markets where domestic distributors source new content to distribute (either completed films or at script stage); second, they provide networking opportunities for film sellers, buyers and producers; and third, they serve as launch pads for films, placing them in a film-centric environment where they are reviewed, sold and create a critical capital that can give domestic distributors a sense of audience and critical perception, as well as creating PR (public relations) and awareness (Mackie, pers. comm. 2021). In accordance with the Screen Australia report cited earlier, Brady (pers. comm. 2021) stated that often the types of films

that benefit most from the critical and industry recognition generated at these events are ‘quality’ or art house films – those smaller, unknown films without obvious selling points whose audiences are more attuned to and aware of international film festivals and influenced by those laurels or awards’. By way of example, Brady explained that films such as some broad Australian comedies as well as films similar to *Chopper* (Dominik 2000) and *The Dry* (Connolly 2021), both of which starred Eric Bana and feature strong in-built domestic appeal, do not need the critical recognition and international kudos created by key international film festivals to create a successful launch. Despite this, given the aforementioned strategic benefits that key international film festivals offer to domestic distributors, which film festivals do domestic distributors value?

The domestic distributors’ list of key international film festivals and awards that they perceive as possessing influence within the Australian film industry follows a similar pattern to the short films noted earlier. Table 3.1 shows the key international film festivals and awards listed by domestic distributors in order of perceived importance.

Table 3.1. Domestic distributors’ festivals and awards list

Festivals	Awards
Cannes Film Festival	Cannes Film Festival – in official competition awards
Berlinale	Academy Awards®
Toronto International Film Festival	BAFTA Awards
Sundance Film Festival	Toronto International Film Festival Awards
Venice Film Festival	Sundance Film Festival – in official competition awards
	Venice Film Festival – in official competition awards

Under Screen Australia’s Festivals, Events and Awards International Marketing Support initiative, the funding body (2021) lists eligible festivals and events to which it may contribute a film or television series or short film’s promotional budget (generally up to \$20,000 for feature films and television series and \$10,000 for short films). These eligible festivals and awards are shown in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2. Screen Australia’s eligible festivals and awards

Eligible festivals	Eligible awards
Berlin International Film Festival	Academy Awards®
Busan International Film Festival	British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) Awards
Cannes International Film Festival	Emmy Awards®
Clermont-Ferrand Short Film Festival	
Critics Week, Cannes	
Directors’ Fortnight, Cannes	
Hot Docs International Documentary Festival, Toronto	
IDFA, Amsterdam	
Sitges International Fantastic Film Festival	
Sundance Film Festival	
SxSW, Austin	
Toronto International Film Festival	
Venice International Film Festival	

While most of the festivals and awards listed by Screen Australia for feature films are the same as those cited by the domestic distributors, there are some instances where film festivals

listed on the Screen Australia list are not repeated in the domestic distributor list. It is also worth noting that no key Australian film festivals such as the Sydney International Film Festival or Melbourne International Film Feature are cited on the domestic distributor list. The reasons for these anomalies are beyond the scope of my research; however, both Mackie and Brady (pers. comm. 2021) note that while international film festivals such as the Tribeca Film Festival and SXSW Film Festival (South by South West) hold credibility, unless it is a very SXSW-friendly documentary or genre movie, a film selected for those festivals had been ‘passed on by the other big four’ (Mackie, pers. comm. 2021) With regard to key Australian film festivals, Brady (pers. comm. 2021) indicated that distributors are often eager to have their films screen at two of these festivals, such as the Sydney International Film Festival and the Melbourne International Film Festival, as a way of building audience awareness. In the case of smaller films, the screening fees paid by these festivals can act as a significant income stream. For smaller domestic festivals where audience numbers are lower, Brady (pers. comm. 2021) considered the impact to be negligible.

On an international stage, the reasons why official awards from the Cannes Film Festival and the Academy Awards® are perceived to hold the greatest value also lie beyond the scope of my research – and perhaps, from a practical point of view, it is not necessary for emerging filmmakers to understand. During my creative practice, I have learnt that the decision about where best to strategically premiere a film in the international marketplace is best made in conjunction with someone whose business depends on their knowledge of the global film market. Sales agents and distributors understand the machinations of the prestige and publicity surrounding certain awards, festivals and film events, and how these influence publicity and international sales. My experience regarding the presence of *The Butterfly Tree* at international film festivals will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Conclusion

While the above findings are both insightful and practical, and speak to the amount of preparation that needs to be done before a new director can effectively pitch to a domestic distributor and other investors, I would like to acknowledge that it is perfectly normal for a new director to feel overwhelmed and/or intimidated by the process. I therefore offer the same words of advice that comforted me during this phase of my journey. The advice comes from Martin Rabbarts (2010), former artistic director of the Binger Institute. Rabbarts reminded me and my fellow directors that the relationship between investors and filmmakers is a ‘two-way street’ – they (the investor) need us (the filmmaker) as much as we need them (Rabbarts 2010). The domestic distributor and sales agents need product to sell, while the filmmaker needs their commitment to access finance, and to market and distribute the film. This recognition of the balance of needs prevents filmmakers from entering a pitching scenario feeling desperate, and as if they are asking (or, in the worst-case scenario, begging) for support from an all-powerful entity. Chapter 4 discusses how the findings covered in this chapter informed my creative practice during the development, financing and production of *The Butterfly Tree*. A significant way I chose to engage with the domestic distributor research was via the creation of tonal proof. Therefore, the following chapter begins with my tonal proof of concept short film methodology.

4

Meeting the domestic distributor challenge

While Chapter 3 focused on the key findings from the domestic distributor survey and formal interview process, which highlighted the importance of using tonal proof to strengthen a director's vision and minimise domestic distributor risk, the first part of this chapter examines my tonal proof of concept methodology. It discusses my own process of identifying the key challenges within the feature *The Butterfly Tree* (2017) and how I went about proving that I was up to meeting them via the tonal proof of concept short film *Beetlefeeders* (2012). In addition, it discusses what is meant by tonal proof, using successful international and national tonal short films as examples, and investigates why a director might choose a tonal short film over other formats.

This tonal proof process was simultaneously interwoven with the other necessary pitch-preparation elements during the development and financing of *The Butterfly Tree* (2017). Therefore, the second part of the chapter discusses how the findings reported in Chapter 3 informed these elements during the development, financing and actual production process (the filming) of *The Butterfly Tree*. These include how I engaged (or failed to engage) with selling the experience, connecting with a target demographic and defining their core experience/s; embracing opposing valance and vulnerability; script development; creating a cohesive core team; and managing investor expectations via a responsible budget and an appropriate marketing spend.

Tonal proof of concept methodology

Before I discuss how my research informed my creative practice, I would like to briefly share the experience of my initial attempt to achieve tonal proof. As noted in the Introduction, my

first foray into creating tonal proof was the short film *Tidal Marks*, which was made to support the feature film *The Breathing Sea*. *Tidal Marks* commenced production before I had experienced the benefit of my doctoral research informing my creative practice. This lack of knowledge, combined with under-developed directorial choices, contributed to its failure. Yet it was also this failure that initiated my quest to investigate what would secure the project a commitment from a domestic distributor.

In hindsight, *Tidal Marks* felt like a film I was compelled to make as a way of processing unresolved grief surrounding the loss of one of my children. I rammed headlong into the logistics of getting the film produced rather than evaluating the tonal vision and inherent challenges that needed to be addressed in the feature film *The Breathing Sea*. These challenges included the ability to direct raw and intimate moments between older actors as well as teenage actors, the use of landscape to represent a character's inner world or mood, the use of landscape as a third character within a scene, a look and style that is poetic – elegant and fluid – and a soundscape that combined instrumental wind music with natural seascape sounds to heighten the purpose of each scene. While *Tidal Marks* did attempt to use the natural landscape as a purveyor of mood, its execution was hampered by a lack of financial resources, human resources, directorial experience, sub-par equipment options and inexperienced film practitioners who were unable to deliver satisfactory footage. The result was that the ambition far outweighed the resources or skill set available, so the film was unable to fulfil its potential. Completing the background and primary research for this doctorate meant I was much better equipped the next time I approached the task of making a short film as 'tonal proof' of my ability to direct a feature.

Creating tonal proof: A director's experience

Making the transition from short-form to long-form narrative has been an ongoing challenge for Australian screen funding bodies and filmmakers alike. Over the years, Screen Australia and other state screen agencies have developed, and continue to develop, initiatives designed to assist filmmakers to transition from short-form storytelling to long-form film storytelling. These include Screen Australia's Talent Escalator Programs: The Springboard initiative, established in 2009 (Screen Australia 2009); the Hot Shots short fiction funding program, established in 2014, and the Hot Shots Plus short fiction funding program, established in 2017 (Screen Australia 2017d); and the Talent Development Program's Director's Acclaim Fund, which operated between 2013 and 2015 (Screen Australia 2017a). More recently, in 2019, Screen Australia provided funding for 'Proof of Concepts – such as short films, a first episode, teasers, test scenes, etc. which “speak to” a longer form project such as feature film, web series, TV series, VR project, etc.' (Screen Australia 2018e) through its Generate and Premium Screen story-development fund initiatives. According to Screen Australia's Story Development Premium Fund, examples of successful proof of concept works are:

- a pilot episode for a series e.g. *Over and Out* (Vuko, Van Vuuren 2019)
- a short film that speaks to a feature film – for example, Jennifer Kent's *Monster* (Kent 2005) to *The Babadook* (Kent 2014)
- a comedy sketch for an online series – for example, *Bondi Hipsters* (Boshier and Van Vuuren 2011) to *Soul Mates* (Boshier, Van Vuuren and Van Vuuren 2014–16)
- a sizzle reel that features a montage, clips or segments that clearly and efficiently outline the concept and tone of the project. (Screen Australia 2020a)

Like Australia's federal screen agency, Australian state screen agencies have also trialled various incentives to assist emerging directors to navigate the transition from short film to

feature film. These have included the likes of Screen Queensland's Proof of Concept Initiative, established in 2019 (Screen Queensland 2019a). While the Screen Australia initiative would consider a proof of concept to be a sizzle reel that featured montage, clips or segments, the Screen Queensland Proof of Concept Initiative (which would fund up \$100,000 to produce a proof of concept for features, television series or digital series and demonstrate pathways to audience) required the production of a short-form work that had a complete narrative and was able to be experienced as a standalone work (Screen Queensland 2019a).

The progression of these screen initiatives demonstrates the development of connecting short-form tonal proof with longer-form projects and building on market acclaim opportunities. While these initiatives continue to recognise the importance of proof of concept, which is closely aligned to tonal proof, there is little evidence to suggest that, within the context of these initiatives, a methodology to identify a long-form project's inherent strengths and weaknesses and address them via rigorous tonal proof analysis and creative practice exists. This process of identification, analysis and creative practice is discussed below. But first – what is tonal proof?

Show me tonal proof – the tonal short film option

As explained in the previous chapter, the calling card or proof of concept short film is designed specifically to convince investors that the director and/or the filmmaking team has the ability and vision to responsibly produce and deliver the feature film or longer form project that the short form proof of concept is designed to tonally represent. Mike Jones, writer, script producer and story editor, explained that its purpose is to convince investors of the filmmaker's worthiness to make a longer project:

The theory is that a good short film is a large flag to wave in the air saying – this is what I can do in 10 minutes of screen time and no money, just imagine what I could do with 100 minutes and a ton of cash! (Jones, pers. comm. 2010)

As discussed in Chapter 3, the tonal short film approach was perceived as an effective tool to minimise domestic distributor risk. But what does tonally reflective mean? As previously cited, on a simplistic level it refers to having previous work – which can include short films – that represents the feature or long-form project via style and tone (the way it looks and sounds), type or genre, and the way the director’s vision is realised on screen. In essence, it means the work is proof that the director and their creative team have the ability to both achieve the creative vision and address the challenges that are inherent in the long-form project on time and within budget.

Identifying the creative vision and challenges within a feature film and proving them via a tonal short film – a director’s experience

Vincent Sheehan (2009, 8) explains how he identifies and uses the challenges and assets in a feature film to estimate possible income by making allowances for what he describes as a film’s ‘critical elements’ – its positive and negative values. According to Sheehan, an example of a positive value could be star cast member/s and a negative value could be racial themes. In other words, one could be a ‘turn on’ for a potential audience (equals more viewers) and the other a ‘turn off’ (spreads negative press, which results in smaller viewership). Hence a producer may adjust their estimates up or down depending on the number of negative and positive critical elements they identify within the project.

While a producer may identify a film’s negative and positive elements and adjust their estimated returns accordingly, my tonal proof methodology advocates that emerging directors identify the positive and negative elements within their feature film projects. Having

achieved this, the next step is for them to find ways to eliminate or minimise what could be perceived as negative values, and elevate or sell what could be perceived as positive values through the use of a tonal proof.

Critically acclaimed Australian director David Michod (*The Rover* 2014, *Animal Kingdom* 2010) is a successful example of a (then emerging) feature film director who utilised this approach. As noted earlier, during the financing phase of his first feature, *Animal Kingdom*, David was very specific about identifying his vision and the inherent challenges within his screenplay:

Certainly *Crossbow* was a film I made to demonstrate a style and tone I hoped would reflect my intentions for my feature. In pitch meetings for *Animal Kingdom*, I became aware of the fact that people weren't entirely sure what I meant when I said I wanted to make a violent and dark crime drama that was also poetic and beautiful. (Michod 2010)

Here, Michod highlights both his vision and the challenges inherent in the feature – a violent and dark crime story portrayed in a poetic and beautiful way. His first attempt to address this example of opposing valance was in a short film, *Crossbow* (2007), which was made for A\$35,000. In 2007 *Crossbow* screened at the Venice Film Festival and the Sundance Film Festival, and won an AFI award, now known as an Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts award, for Best Short Screenplay as well as Best Australian Short Film at the Melbourne International Film Festival and an award for Best Direction at Flickerfest (popular Sydney-based short film festival). Yet, despite *Crossbow*'s critical acclaim, Michod felt he had not yet achieved his goal of tonally representing *Animal Kingdom*. He went on to make a second short film titled *Netherland Dwarf* with a budget of A\$80,000. In 2008, *Netherland Dwarf* screened at the Berlinale and the Sundance Film Festival and garnered positive reviews. As discussed previously, Michod explained:

Netherland Dwarf felt like a necessary extension of the *Animal Kingdom* pitch. Where *Crossbow* was very voiceover and vignette driven, I hoped *Netherland Dwarf* would more accurately demonstrate my ability to direct straighter, character and performance based narrative drama. (Michod 2010)

Australian writer/directors Zak Hilditch and Christopher Weekes are not too dissimilar from Michod. After making low-budget features, they returned to the tonal short film methodology to prove their vision for their next feature film project. Roadshow Films committed to Zak Hilditch's first feature film, *These Final Hours* (2013), based on Hilditch's previous low-budget features, *The Actress* (2005), *Plum Role* (2007) and *The Toll* (2010/11), and a 'calling card' short film, *Transmission* (2012). According to McKenna (pers. comm. 2013), Zak's very low-budget features enabled him to be selected for Screen Australia's Springboard program, which in turn funded the 'calling card' short film *Transmission* (2012). He was then able to use *Transmission* as tonal proof to secure a commitment from Roadshow Films and other investors, resulting in the financing of the feature film *These Final Hours* (2014) (McKenna, pers. comm. 2013). *These Final Hours* made its international premiere in the Directors' Fortnight section of the 2014 Cannes Film Festival.

Like Hilditch, award-winning filmmakers Ben Howling and Yolanda Ramke used their 2013 Tropfest finalist and YouTube hit *Cargo* to tonally expand their short film story into a feature film of the same name starring Martin Freeman (Quinn 2016). Writer/director Christopher Weekes also leveraged tonal proof in his short film *Martha and the Monster* (2017) in an effort to finance his second feature, *Pest Control*, as writer/director. Although Weekes' first feature film – the low-budget feature *Bitter and Twisted* (2008), launched Weekes' career as a screenwriter in Los Angeles, he still struggled to convince investors that he was capable of directing his second feature, *Pest Control*, which was different in tone and style to *Bitter and Twisted*. In 2014, he returned to Australia to participate in the Screen

Australia Springboard initiative to make a ‘calling card’ short film to support his second feature film as writer/director (Weekes 2014). Weekes explained that, apart from reflecting the tone, style and genre of his feature *Pest Control*, the other key elements he set out to prove were the short film’s ability to connect with an audience (outweighing its ability to get programmed at a film festival), originality and staying true to the creator’s voice, as well as his talents as a visual effects artist:

I am hoping to integrate more of myself as an effects artist into my directing work. It was important for me to have a calling card that really pushes the limits of what I can achieve, VFX (visual effects) wise, on a budget. I found when I was working at Sony on *Me and My Monster*, I had no trouble getting work WRITING for these kinds of low-budget genre films, but without a reel that clearly showed I had the ability to execute them as well, no one believed I could stay on as the director for them. (Weekes 2014)

In 2021, the production status of *Pest Control* remains unknown. Michod, Yowling, Ramke, Weekes and Hilditch are not the only directors to recognise the benefits of making a tonal short film to support a feature film in development. It is a practice that many national and international filmmakers have had success employing. An international example is the multi-award-winning, autobiographically inspired feature film *Whiplash* (2014) by writer/director Damien Chazelle. Among a raft of other high-profile international awards, *Whiplash* won the 2015 Academy Awards for Best Achievement in Editing, Best Achievement in Sound Design and Best Performance by an Actor in a Supporting Role. Two years earlier, in 2013, Chazelle made a tonal short film of the same name. The short began as a scene from the feature after his producers, Helen Estabrook and Jason Blum, suggested he make it as a proof of concept tool for investors (Chazelle 2014). Despite Chazelle’s expectation that the short film would be used as a selling tool rather than being submitted to festivals, the short *Whiplash*

premiered at the 2013 Sundance Film Festival, where it won the Jury Award for Best Short Film. The following year, the producers submitted the feature *Whiplash* to Sundance, where it won the Audience Award and the Grand Jury Prize (Smith 2014). In a contentious twist, the feature *Whiplash* was ineligible for an Oscar nomination for Best Original Screenplay because it was based on something previously published or produced, even though the short film was based on only one scene from the feature film screenplay (Hammond 2015).

While these examples speak to the effectiveness of using tonal proof to leverage a long-form project, they do not speak to the filmmakers' methodology behind their choices to achieve tonal proof. The following section examines the methodology I used to identify and address the tonal proof challenges in *The Butterfly Tree*.

Addressing the challenge of tonal proof: Enhancing the director's vision and identifying key challenges

For a director, clarifying their vision can be a long and involved process, which may not feel complete until the film is finally screened. For the purposes of this thesis, I therefore focus on how I analysed the strengths and weaknesses within the long-form project; how I chose which challenges and assets to address according to the resources available; and how I determined a format and run time that served the viewing needs of potential investors. This methodology involved examining the following elements via a series of questions. With regard to analysing the assets and challenges within *The Butterfly Tree*, the first series of elements included genre, story type, key themes, target audience, dominant audience experience/s, characters, dialogue, key creative team, cinematography, setting/s, editing, soundtrack design, music, production design and post-production. The second series of elements included making best use of my own passion and talents, available resources, audience and investor viewing timeframes and format, and key collaborator expectations.

Outlined below is the first series of elements and the questions I formulated to help me analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the long-form project before choosing which challenges to address and which assets to enhance or elevate in a short-form project.

- *Identifying genre.* What is the genre or sub-genre of my film? For example, is it an action, musical, adventure, romance, animation, rom com, biography, teen movie, comedy, crime, documentary, period drama, modern day drama, horror, family, sci-fi or fantasy? Is it a straightforward genre or a combination of genres, and how will I demonstrate that I understand the tropes and constructs of my chosen genre or sub-genre or a combination of genres?
- *Identifying story type.* What type of story is it? For example, is it a modern-day ‘Cinderella’? What other films is it like in terms of story or combinations of story? Is my story type difficult to explain? If so, is this something that could be identified as a challenge – something that potential investors won’t comprehend unless they see it?
- *Identifying the key theme(s).* At its core, what is my story about? What is its core thematic statement? What core message does the film impart to the viewer? What are the embedded social messages? What are the key messages that I want my audience to take away when they leave the cinema? What do I want the audience to think about when they leave the cinema? Am I going to be able to make this message clear in my verbal pitch to potential investors or do I need to be able to demonstrate or support this via other material?
- *Identifying the target audience.* Who will this film resonate with the most? As discussed earlier, how would I describe a core audience member as an individual? What other successful films have appealed to this target audience? Do I need to make a short that speaks directly to that audience? Do I need to demonstrate that I am capable of making a film that can speak to and connect with that specific audience?

How will I reach my target audience – in what format and on what platform? And in this format and on that platform, how can I prove to investors that a substantial paying audience exists for this style/type of screen story? In other words, how will I prove that the filmmaking team is capable of monetising a target demographic on a specific platform/s?

- *Identifying core audience experiences.* What do I want my audience to feel/experience while watching the film? Do I want them to laugh, cry, feel terror/horror/increasing unease, feel nostalgic or reflective about a time past, feel positive and uplifted, feel depressed and angry, be motivated to incite change? How do I want them to behave? What do I want my audience to do? Do I want them to stand up and sing and dance? Do I want them to feel so impassioned that they will change their perceptions and behaviour towards their own lives and the lives of others? What do I want them to feel during the experience? What do I want them to reflect on and discuss after the experience? Do I need to prove that I can elicit these experiences and/or generate a change in people's behaviour in a short-form format?
- *Characters.* Who are my characters and what are the potential challenges I could face with both casting and directing truthful and spontaneous performances to honour and bring these characters to life? For example, are my characters fragile and/or vulnerable in a unique way or do they have a particularly special attribute? For example, are they very young, very old, mentally or physically challenged or characters that can only be played by non-actors? Does one character have an incredibly difficult/challenging/confronting role to play? What are the difficulties within this role, and how can I demonstrate that I am able to responsibly direct an actor, enabling them to embrace and conquer these difficulties – for example, the need for a character to journey through a complex emotional arc in a short space of time or the need for a

character to perform explicit sex or violence? Do I need to demonstrate that I am able to respectfully and responsibly create this in a short form?

- *Dialogue.* What sort of dialogue is in the feature? What style is it? For example, is it sparse, fast, witty, humorous? Is it unusual? In Warwick Thornton's *Samson and Delilah* (2009), for example, dialogue was non-existent.
- *The key creative team.* Who are the desired key creatives for the feature? How can I and my team demonstrate that we are able to efficiently collaborate and create something special, on time and on budget, that demonstrates tonal proof?
- *The look – cinematography.* What are the style, tone and mood and visceral experience of the film? How will this be created and how will it best be represented in a short form?
- *The settings.* Are the locations unusual and/or an integral part of the story? Do I need to show how they will influence the story? For example, if a particular setting is treated as a character in the film or strongly dictates the mood or the feel of the film, how can I best represent this in a short-form format?
- *Editing.* What is the pacing and rhythm of the film? What is its ebb and flow? What is the dominant audience experience or a particular audience experience that will be created via the edit process – for example, a tension building sequence eliciting rising fear that dramatically shifts into comedy? Do I have any particularly challenging scenes or sequences that require certain experimental editing techniques, not usually seen, that need to be demonstrated?
- *Sound track design and music.* What is the soundscape of the film? Is it special or unusual? Is there a particular piece of music or soundscape that I feel is essential to support the world/s of the film? Do these need to be experienced in conjunction with

certain visuals for a potential investor to fully grasp the world of, or the worlds within, my film?

- *Production design.* What is the overall design of the film? What are the specific worlds within the film? What are the challenging production design elements within the film? For example, are there certain sets or set pieces that need to be realised at a certain budget level? Are there specialised stunts, specialised props, animatronics, puppets and so on that need to be demonstrated?
- *Post-production.* What are the specific post-production elements that need to be realised at a certain budget level – for example; animation and visual effects or specialised grading requirements? Are there certain visual effects artist/s with whom I need to collaborate to create particular components within the film? How can I demonstrate these in a short-form format?

In summary, analysing my directorial approach to the screenplay element by element not only allowed me to identify the primary challenges, but also helped me to enhance my vision for the feature film, which in turn reinforced the script and provided for an expanded directorial approach. As a result of this exercise, I was able to identify and prioritise the primary challenges within *The Butterfly Tree* that needed to be proven in tonal short form.

My primary focus in the short film *Beetlefeeders* was therefore to demonstrate the following:

- 1 To show that I could direct truthful spontaneous performances using experienced actors, young actors, less experienced actors and non-actors.
- 2 To tell a story that contained key dramatic scenes with no dialogue – that were entirely vision and sound dependent.

- 3 To test a visual style that was poetic, beautiful, visceral, sensual, tactile and immersive, where the audience is able to feel what the protagonist is physically experiencing.
- 4 To test a soundtrack that was guided by the inner emotions of the main character while evoking a world dominated by insects.
- 5 To show that I could responsibly direct delicate subject matter such as a boy on the cusp of adulthood demonstrating emotional and sexual affections for an older woman.
- 6 To show that I could gain the trust of and sensitively direct young performers as well as less experienced actors and non-actors.
- 7 To test an animation style that I had rarely seen, which was a combination of paint on glass, 3D CGI and live action imagery.
- 8 To make the animated fantasies tactile and sensual, so that the viewer could experience the butterflies licking their skin. To show that these fantasies were connected to the boy's loss of his mother – that the butterflies were a substitute for the tactile, intimate relationship the child once shared with his mother.
- 9 To find a team of co-creatives who would exceed my vision and expectations and collectively bring something original and exciting to the screen.

Before I was able to commit to making a short film, I needed to assess other formats to determine which were most suitable for me and the project. Below is the second series of elements I used to determine a format and run time that best served the needs of developing my vision as well as the needs of potential investors.

Considerations when choosing a tonal proof format

A short-form project that tonally reflects a long-form project can take many forms, and deciding which form is best suited to both the project and the needs of the filmmaker can depend on many variables.

What am I passionate about and where do my talents lie?

For example, if a filmmaker's passion lies in the world of web series and online interactivity, then their creative abilities may be better served in an area where they can display these talents and more readily generate an audience. I chose to make a short film because the immersive tropical world of insects demanded a large-screen format to be fully appreciated. I also wanted to be able to test the tactile 'immerse-ability' of the film on a big screen. I also understood the value of being selected for key international film festivals and how this would elevate the project from the perspective of domestic distributors and state and federal funding agencies.

What resources are affordable and available to me?

If a filmmaker has to self-fund, then they are limited by the money, favours and resources available to them. I chose to do a 15-minute short film exceptionally well rather than being forced to sacrifice production value on a longer-form product. The budget for *Beetlefeeders* for a five-day shoot was \$30,000 and, due to the unworkable wait periods required when one applies for screen agency funding and needing to produce a suitable pitching tool within a set timeframe, I chose to self-finance. This figure and timeframe would have been much greater had I chosen a longer format to demonstrate tonal proof.

What are the expectations of other key collaborators?

If a filmmaker is utilising professional actors and crew, what are their expectations? If they are going to work for free, then there may be an expectation that the final product will be something from which they can gain exposure and publicity. From the beginning, I was clear with my key collaborators that the short film was to be made as a tonal selling tool to support the feature and that I would be submitting the short to certain key international film festivals. If it was selected in competition for any of these festivals, then this would be considered a welcome bonus, as opposed to an expectation. I also communicated that the short film was a way of trialling creative partnerships with a view to working together on the feature. The incentive for the cast and crew was to work towards a shared goal of creating something special that had the potential to create future work.

Who is the tonal product designed for? What timeframe will they have available to view it and on what format will they be most likely watch it?

If the tonal short form is designed to screen to distributors, sales agents and financiers, then the question arises: Where is the most likely place that they will view product? Is it at a film market on a laptop or iPad? Is it in their office as a Vimeo link? Is it at a film festival screening? Is it a combination of the above? How much quality time do these people have available to watch my product? If their attention span or availability is short, then what are the most important experiences or elements that I want them to be affected by and remember? Therefore, which format and platform will best serve this?

Capturing the short attention span of Hollywood players is one of the reasons Chris Weekes chose to make a tonal short film:

There's material overload with scripts and treatments and credit card features and digital SLR shorts literally raining from the sky on producers and investors.

A calling card short stands a far better chance of standing out from the pack than most, as it takes five minutes of someone's time on a Friday afternoon while they download over a bottle of wine. (Weekes 2014)

Being aware that my producer and I would be pitching at multiple markets with the use of a laptop, in screen agency offices with the use of large television screens as well as sending the 'tonal proof reel' out on Vimeo links, I decided that I needed to create certain sections within the short film to demonstrate the particular worlds or styles that existed within the feature.

In the feature *The Butterfly Tree*, I chose to focus on five worlds. These worlds are treated differently in terms of colour and tone according to where Fin feels most safe. For these I imagined a pyramid structure, where the most beautiful fantastical world (representative of Fin's safety) presided at the top; next was his world with Evelyn in the shop; the next tier down was his mother's shrine in the forest; followed by his butterfly aviary; and finally his bedroom (I termed the latter two 'transitional worlds'). These worlds contrast with the blandness of the real world, which includes Fin's house (outside his bedroom), the hospital and the chemist.

In *Beetlefeeders*, I chose to focus on recreating four of the five worlds: Fin's insect fantasy world (because it required, as previously noted, a specific animation technique rarely seen combined with live action before), the world of Fin's shrine and forest, the world of his bedroom, and the world of his house where his father is most dominant. The reason I chose not to create the world of Evelyn's florist shop and glasshouse was that it would have been too costly and I knew I could not do that world justice with the limited resources I had available to me. By creating sub-sections within the short film, I was able to extract sequences from each section to demonstrate these worlds within the feature. This approach proved incredibly potent when pitching, as I was able to interweave directorial discussion

with bite-sized tonal proof. This dissection of the short film proved necessary as most of the pitch meetings the producer and I undertook were no more than seven minutes in length and therefore the short film was never screened to investors in its entire form.

I would ask the reader to now view the following *Beetlefeeders* excerpts that speak to these worlds.

WORLD 1 – Fin’s Butterfly Fantasy and Shrine

<https://vimeo.com/user99957484/review/343561380/bc752fc8ff>

password: beetlefeeders

WORLD 2 – Fin’s Forest

<https://vimeo.com/user99957484/review/343561446/844b037724>

password: beetlefeeders

WORLD 3 – Fin’s Bedroom

<https://vimeo.com/user99957484/review/343561405/8213d78dab>

password: beetlefeeders

WORLD 4 – Fin’s House

<https://vimeo.com/user99957484/review/343561417/209857bd5f>

password: beetlefeeders

The reasons why I chose a tonal short film format over other formats can be summarised as follows:

- 1 A short film is potentially cheaper than a low-budget feature.
- 2 A short film can be screened theatrically at key international film festivals where sales agents, distributors and financiers are looking for promising emerging talent. The

prestige of a being selected to screen or win awards at key international film festivals may deem a filmmaker ‘trackable’, meaning financiers, sales agents and distributors may find their work interesting enough to want to be kept up to date with their future projects. Short films have the potential to garner international awards and acclaim in key film festivals that financiers and distributors hold in high regard. In addition, when a short film does well at festivals, it does well for everyone involved. Other creatives benefit and are able to share in its success. Lastly, if the short film does not get selected for official competition in key international film festivals, a filmmaker’s efforts and resources will not have been wasted, as they will still have a set of powerful selling tools that can be used to demonstrate tonal proof.

- 3 If a filmmaker’s short film is selected to screen at key international film festivals, it provides the filmmaker with an opportunity to develop a relationship with these festivals and become ‘trackable talent’ or festival ‘alumni’, and later return to these festivals with a greater probability that these same festivals will also screen their first feature.
- 4 A short film can take less time and resources to make than longer-form projects.
- 5 If the long-form project option – for example, a low-budget feature – doesn’t fulfil its potential, then a filmmaker has not unwittingly sacrificed a valuable period of their life, thousands of dollars and substantial industry favours.
- 6 Similar to the experience of the Cannes 2013 Camera D’Or winner Anthony Chen (pers. comm. 2013), a filmmaker can keep making shorts until they get it ‘right or until they feel they have the skills and experience necessary to confidently embrace the making of a feature film’.
- 7 A filmmaker can use the opportunity to test their creative relationships and establish creative teams with whom they can grow into their next project with.

- 8 A filmmaker can use the opportunity to trial and fine-tune techniques and creative practice methodologies before taking on the responsibility at a much higher budget level.
- 9 A filmmaker may not need to go through the sometimes tedious and soul-destroying government film agency assessment rounds in search of funding. Instead, they can make a short film for whatever they can generate through private funding in a timeframe that suits the needs of the filmmaking team and longer form project.

Competition from the web and the rise of prestige television

While I chose to embrace the tonal short film methodology with positive outcomes, I acknowledge that this approach may not suit all directors. There are others within the industry who believe that calling card or proof of concept shorts are diminishing in power, and that there are other, more effective paths that directors can embrace to help them transition from short-form to long-form filmmaking.

In 2010, veteran Hollywood producer Douglas Wick, responsible for mega-hits such as *Gladiator* (2000), supported the calling card short film approach when he stated that, ‘Studios and financiers have always said they’d like to see as much of the movie as they can, figuratively, before they develop it’ (Zeitchik 2010). A decade has passed since then. The previously cited Mike Jones, like Seph McKenna, believes that this model of moving from short film to feature filmmaking is losing its effectiveness. Jones argues that a more effective model for moving into long form drama – be it feature film or television, and particularly if a filmmaker is lacking in resources – is to make a web series:

A short film, regardless of how good it is, can’t effectively demonstrate that you can sustain character arcs and it doesn’t show you understand narrative structure. A short film doesn’t prove you know how to develop story over time

or construct consistent dramatic tension and release. A short film doesn't demonstrate you understand audiences and genre and know how to attract an audience. Without these things there is no real evidence you could effectively make a viable feature or long-form drama. (Jones 2010, 05:20)

Jones' methodology may suit those filmmakers who either accidentally or deliberately achieve tonal proof within a web series, which in turn can be expanded upon to support a longer form project. His argument, however, neglects to examine how filmmakers could use a web series to enhance the positive and/or minimise the negative values inherent in the longer form project in development and thus achieve tonal proof.

Although McKenna believes there is no one answer to the question 'How can first time Australian feature film directors get their first feature across the line?', he believes that the system of first-time directors coming from a background of making a 'handful of short films' has begun to fray and, with the rise of prestige television and audience appreciation of it, directors may now be better served if they have come from a television background – more specifically, 'if their background is consistent with the material that they want to do as a feature' (McKenna, pers. comm. 2013). McKenna highlighted the producers of *Upper Middle Bogan* (2013–16) and *The Librarians* (2007–10), Wayne Hope and Robyn Butler, as an example:

They had a feature comedy that was in the same vein as what they did in television and we supported that project as Wayne's first feature film directorial debut. (McKenna, pers. comm. 2013)

It is worth noting that not only was it important that the feature Hope and Butler pitched to Village Films was tonally reflected in their previous television content, but also that they

were able to attach bankable talent, such as actress Portia De Rossi (*Scandal* 2014–15, *Arrested Development* 2003–13) (McKenna, pers. comm. 2013).

While the answer to the question ‘Is the tonal short film, calling card or proof of concept short film better served by other formats?’ lies beyond the scope of my research, it is clear that the ability to create quality pitching tools to tonally reflect the feature film in development is both powerful and effective in terms of assisting emerging directors’ transition from short filmmaking to feature filmmaking.

In summary, with regard to providing tonal proof in a short-form format to minimise perceived domestic distributor risk, my findings recommend that emerging directors consider the following suggestions:

- Analyse the long form project’s strengths and weaknesses in terms of what can be regarded as an asset to be elevated or a negative property to be minimised or negated, and aim to achieve both via tonal proof.
- Identify the most compelling, unique and/or exciting aspect/s of the film and analyse the challenges inherent in bringing these specific elements or world/s to the screen in terms of available budget, resources and personnel.
- Determine the key execution-dependent challenges, be they of a tonal nature or of a practical nature, that cannot be demonstrated using previous examples of a director’s work.
- Determine the key expectations and/or successful tropes of the genre and determine how the characters will be pitched within that genre or genre combinations.
- Research comparable successful films in terms of tonal approach and genre, as well as identifying key selling elements or approaches that can then be drawn upon in the creation of a tonal proof of concept.

- Determine which tonal aspects are too expensive to demonstrate or risk being underserved due to limited available resources that instead can be demonstrated via a tonal ‘mash up’.
- Taking the above into consideration, determine which of the following is the most suitable option in terms of achieving the tonal goals with available resources: (1) the production of a scene or sequence from the film or (2) the production of a complete narrative that can be experienced as a stand-alone work.
- Having made the above decision seek to speak to the remaining tonal proof challenges by way of a tonal ‘mash up’ or ‘stealomatic’, which may include the works of other practitioners as well as the director’s previous work.

Impact of research findings on the development, financing, pre-production and production of *The Butterfly Tree* – a director’s experience

Taking the domestic distributor findings from the previous chapter into consideration, the second part of this chapter discusses the process and ramifications of how I engaged with or failed to engage with the following pitch-preparation elements during the development, financing and the pre-production and production process (the filming) of *The Butterfly Tree*. They include selling the experience; connecting with a target demographic and defining their core experience/s; embracing opposing valance and vulnerability; script development; creating a cohesive core team and managing investor expectations via a responsible budget and an appropriate marketing spend.

Selling the concept, connecting with a target audience and defining their core experience(s) – a director’s experience

As discussed in the previous chapter, domestic distributors considered the following important considerations when selling the concept, connecting with a target audience and defining their core experiences.

- Refining and strengthening the log line and the short form pitch in a way that captures the audience’s attention as a way of clarifying the essence of the story as well as what makes it compelling.
- Defining the target audience in terms of gender, age range, what other films they like, occupation, where they live and how they like to spend their entertainment dollars.
- Determining which core emotional experiences will have the greatest impact on the target audience and asking how they can be elevated or ‘sold’ when pitching the concept to investors.
- Defining the primary first order emotional experiences such as; happiness, joy, hope, surprise and excitement (positive) and sadness, anger, fear, contempt and disgust (negative).
- Determining how to create insight, meaning and interpersonal closeness through the use of opposing valence and second order emotions either from the position of a screenwriter or the position of a director.
- Adapting from popular pre-existing source material as a way of capitalising on a large pre-existing fan base.

After the production of *Beetlefeeders*, and while preparing to pitch *The Butterfly Tree*, in order to define which story and experiential elements within the film would connect with its

the target audience (45-plus female skewing), I employed a stream of consciousness approach. Below is an excerpt from that exercise:

Our audience likes to talk about life and death, about getting back up again in the face of adversity and tragedy and healing and ENJOYING LIFE.

It is about a woman who, while living with breast cancer (yes one in five women will get it – and those who don't will most certainly know someone who has) makes the choice to LIVE HER LIFE TO THE FULL. Through her determination to make the most of the time she has left she helps to heal a damaged relationship between a teenage boy and his father ...

It's ABOUT RENEWAL and APPRECIATING YOURSELF DIFFERENTLY.

Through Al and Fin, Evelyn is able to let go of her old self and see herself as someone sexy and desirable without her 'war paint' and fabulous dresses. This also taps into the fear that older women have of GETTING OLD and LOSING THEIR LOOKS. The Butterfly Tree reaffirms that if we look deep enough, we will discover a beauty and strength that goes way beyond our epidermis ... and that others will see and appreciate this too. It's also about discovering the FREEDOM we gain when we no longer care about what others may think of us. We can just be who we are with confidence and live with passion and vibrancy.

It's ABOUT INTIMACY, SENSUALITY and BEAUTY. *The Butterfly Tree* teams with all these things and everyone wants these in their lives, whether they are able to articulate it or not.

So how would I sell the film ...

THE BUTTERFLY TREE is a beautiful film that CELEBRATES all the STUFF THAT MATTERS IN LIFE – THE STUFF WE LIKE TO TALK ABOUT – of

life and death, of family and parenting, of growing up and second chances, of freedom and renewal and being REWARDED FOR SIMPLY GIVING LIFE EVERYTHING YOU'VE GOT.

The experience of writing this, rather than stifling my creative urge, broke open new discoveries within the script. I was able to delve further into the character of Evelyn and realise that there were elements I had written in the above exercise that were not being explored in the screenplay. I was then able to identify them and find ways to build these experiences into the script. Two examples follow.

The first example was the need for Evelyn to be able to experience freedom – the freedom to forget her illness and mortality, the freedom to play, to return to a childlike state and truly live in the moment. Fin offers her this in the roller-skating scene, where the age gap between them disappears and they become akin to two best friends – betting, daring each other, setting up roller skating jumps and teasing each other.

The second example is renewal and appreciating yourself differently. This experience was more challenging to create on the page, as I had to show Evelyn not being so reliant on her looks and costuming while at the same time not sacrificing her love of fashion and beauty. The solution I found was to not only have Fin offer her his own butterfly fantasy of touch and nurturing as well as his personal collection of candid photographs that he had taken of her, but for her, after her mastectomy, to choose to live confidently as a burlesque queen. The final solution I decided upon resided in the final scene where Evelyn swaps her wig for a fabulous painted scalp. Unfortunately, due to time restrictions and production problems on the day, this creative choice was not shot and therefore never realised.

An additional outcome from this exercise was that I was able to clarify for myself how I was going to verbally pitch the film. I used snippets from the above target audience

exercise in the verbal pitch as well as in the pitch documents. This tool could also be used as an exercise to determine what Sue Maslin (pers. comm. 2021) refers to as defining the film's core message – one that is consistent with the director's vision. It is interesting to note that, not long after I had completed this exercise, our domestic distributor sent the producer an exercise that they had undertaken where they described the core target audience as an individual – for example, how old they are, what they do for a living, how they like to dress, how they take care of themselves, how many children they have, whether they are married or unmarried, how they choose to socialise and what they spend their entertainment dollars on. What was comforting to me was that our domestic distributor described exactly the woman I had written about in the above exercise. In addition to other elements, this small gesture signalled to the producer and I that we were thinking as a producer, director, distributor team. It is a tool with which I will most certainly engage in the future. It is also a tool that the producer, Bridget Callow-Wright (pers. comm. 2021), now employs with regard to her current film and television projects. Below is an example of specific primary audience description that the producer prepared for *The Butterfly Tree*. This sample, along with another that Callow-Wright prepared for secondary audience members, was pitched to investors as part of *The Butterfly Tree*'s marketing strategy.

Primary target audience: 35 years-plus strong female skew

Key audience traits:

Social, smart, savvy, arts focused, cultured

Digitally engaged – frequent users of all social media platforms

Engaged in social issues and community minded

Keen to participate in female-centric group activities

Likes to have fun but often snubs commercial offerings

Content viewing habits – strong supporters of quality theatrical offerings

Also consumes large quantities of a variety of quality female-focused TV drama series such as *Offspring*, *The Good Wife* and *The Fall*.

Drawn in by critical reviews, known cast and social recommendations by peer network.

Specific audience member description example

Kate is 39 years old and a busy mother of two kids. She lives in a well-heeled suburb of a big city and works part time in an office in the city centre. She is university educated and environmentally aware, eating organic and fresh food where possible. She's very time poor, tries to get to a yoga class once a week and goes to the movies with friends as an escape. She only goes to see films that allow her to be part of the conversation and feel like she's ahead of the curve and able to give recommendations to people, despite being pretty mainstream and following others. For example, she loved watching *The Slap* on primetime TV. She's more likely to catch up on info on websites or via social networks, particularly Facebook, since she never has the time to sit down and read a magazine cover to cover. She goes on a date night with her husband once a month, usually for dinner at a new local restaurant she's read good reviews about, occasionally adding a movie into the mix of her choice but only when she feels it will be something they can both enjoy. (Callow-Wright, pers. comm. 2016).

While the exercises above help to define core audience members and how they prefer to engage with selected social and entertainment activities, as well as what story and

experiential elements may appeal to them, there are other tools that directors can employ to further define a target audience's core emotional experience.

Defining core emotional experiences, embracing opposing valance and vulnerability – a director's experience

Another tool that the producer and I used to define our target audience's core emotional experience/s was a 'scripts out loud' process. To test the domestic audience response to *The Butterfly Tree* in 2015, the story underwent a process (made possible via a Screen Victoria and Cinema Nova initiative) whereby the script was read to a public audience using a narrator to read the 'big print' and actors to read the character roles. After the reading, audience members responded to a list of questions devised by myself and the producer. The responses were then collated, analysed and thoroughly considered before the next draft was written.

One of the many advantages of a 'scripts out loud' process is that the members of the core filmmaking team get to experience the film in front of an audience without spending a cent on production. The writer, director and producer are able to experience the emotional journey of the audience by closely observing when they are engaged or disengaged. This process is also a way for the team to clarify which key emotional experiences will have the greatest impact, thereby enabling the filmmaking team to choose which experiences to elevate, minimise or cull in further drafts.

The Butterfly Tree also underwent a domestic test audience screening during the post-production process in 2016. The results collated from verbal and written responses to the film's screening via a questionnaire and focus group discussions were used to make stronger edit choices. It is interesting to note that the positive core feedback we received during the 'scripts out loud' process was reflected in the feedback from the test audience screening, which further highlighted the validity of the 'scripts out loud' process. However, I would encourage emerging

filmmakers to keep this process private and only to use it to serve the project's agenda rather than for public entertainment purposes, as a film experience is not a radio play experience and should therefore not be judged or interpreted as such.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the concept of embracing opposing valance and the power of vulnerability. Did I fully understand or embrace the power of the binding and cathartic effect of the vulnerability concept when I wrote *The Butterfly Tree*? No, consciously I did not. However, unconsciously in the writing, I did draw on the power on vulnerability – through a young boy bereft of his mother who is alienated from his only remaining caregiver; through a woman who has staked her identity and vocation on the aesthetic qualities of her body, who must now not only face losing a breast but potentially her life; through a father who, unable to overcome the loss of his wife, is making self-isolating, self-destructive choices in the form of an affair with one of his students. Essentially, each of the main characters is vulnerable, and for me the pivotal sequence that demonstrates the height of their vulnerability is where they are all sleeping alone and the sequence match cuts between all three clutching an object to their chest – all of them isolated by their vulnerabilities. This unconscious theme of vulnerability in *The Butterfly Tree* is further strengthened by the fact that most of the characters in the film are viewed in isolation or in isolated environments – they do not engage with friends or family, and are not seen in crowded or highly social environments. I admit that this was more a conscious choice aligned with the nature of the characters, which enabled us to work within a low budget range rather than to create further vulnerability. Could I have drawn on the foundation of vulnerability more? Yes, in hindsight I believe so. I believe many opportunities were negated in the edit as that is the moment of choice – that internal struggle associated with making difficult choices where true vulnerability lies. I believe the film would have been better served had I been more conscious of cutting to let more of these moments of hard choice resonate on the screen rather than push the story forward for the sake of driving the plot. Often, I felt the story was being cut because of a

fear of loss of pacing. This lack of vulnerability revealed itself around the time of the first fine cut where I screened the film to a well-known and highly regarded director for feedback. His response was not unwarranted when he said, ‘The bad news is I didn’t feel anything’ and ‘The boy’s reactions are not being earned’ (name withheld, personal communication 2016). His advice was to lean into the power of the soundtrack, which I did by making the decision to score most of the film. Yet, despite composer Caitlyn Yeo creating an award-winning soundtrack, the film’s struggle to make the characters’ emotional journeys deeply resonate on an experiential level returned in the final sound mix. It was the second last day of the final sound mix when I was notified that the domestic distributor had insisted I return to the edit and remove part of one of the film’s final sequences. Due to the domestic distributor having the power to refuse final delivery of the film (the domestic distributor accepting the completed film is part of the process that releases the final certificate enabling the producer to receive the offset and pay off the loan that bank rolls the offset throughout production), and even though I was the greater financial investor in the film (my equity investment in the film was a third more than the domestic distributor’s distribution guarantee) and I had the support of the other investors, I found myself in a difficult situation. As the director, I did not receive edit feedback from the domestic distributor in any face-to-face session. Two rounds of notes were provided via the producer during the edit after fine cut stage and my understanding is that this is not uncommon. Not wanting to stall production with ill-will and legal battles, I chose to acquiesce. It was a brutal experience but one that has taught me to honour those vulnerable moments in the edit, as I firmly believe that had these moments been more present, I would have had less interference from the domestic distributor at such a late and problematic stage during post-production.

Could I have been more engaged with the concept of opposing valence from a directorial perspective? Absolutely. In lay terms, even though I have always referred to opposing valence as contrast as energy or the power of the unexpected, and although I have often written

from this perspective, I believe I could have made better use of opposing valence by juxtaposing aesthetic, aural and emotional elements such as image versus sound, production design versus shot choice, emotional intensity of the scene versus soundscape or fluidity of imagery.

Similarly concerning the use of emotional valence in the screenplay, I believe I could have tested for the prevalence of second-order emotions and opposing valence in a ‘scripts out loud’ process. When this process was used during development of *The Butterfly Tree* (see above), it mostly contained questions that revolved around story and plot logic, character motivation and the overall story experience – questions such as: Who was your favourite character and why? Were there any parts of the story that you did not follow/understand and if so, why? Which character did you feel less engaged with and why? What did the overall film leave you thinking or feeling? Now, understanding the power of opposing valence, I would also include questions that identify the prevalence (or lack) of opposing valence and second-order emotions such as romanticism, malaise, calmness, serenity, anxiety, melancholy, nostalgia, compassion, tenderness, frustration, vulnerability and embarrassment – for example: When do you think the (main character/s) were the most vulnerable and how were they vulnerable? Where in the story did you feel the most compassion for (main character/s) and what made you feel compassion for them? How were the (main character/s) tender and what made them tender? Where in the story did you feel frustrated and why? Where in the story did you feel anxious and why? What were you left feeling after the film? And if you were to describe this film to a friend in terms of an emotional journey, what would be your dominant three emotions?

In summary, with regards to selling the concept, connecting with a target audience and defining their core experience(s), to minimise perceived domestic distributor risk my findings recommend that emerging directors consider the following questions:

- How can I refine and strengthen the log line and the short form pitch in a way that captures the audience's attention as a way of clarifying the essence or core of the story?
- How can I define the film's target audience in terms of gender, age range, other films they like, occupation, where they live and how they like to spend their entertainment dollars?
- How can I define which core emotional experiences will have the greatest impact on the target audience and how they can be elevated or 'sold' when pitching the concept to investors?
- How can I adapt a story based on a product with a large pre-existing fan base, such as a popular Australian novel or play? For original stories, the challenge during the scriptwriting process may be to find authentic ways to link the story to a large pre-existing fan base through either a cause – such as an environmental or humanist cause – or a shared passion or experience.
- How can I define the primary first-order emotional experiences, such as happiness, joy, hope, surprise and excitement (positive) and sadness, anger, fear, contempt and disgust (negative)?
- How can I create insight, meaning and interpersonal closeness through the use of opposing valence and second order emotions – first from the position of a screenwriter and second from the position of a director?
- How can I write, direct and protect (especially in the edit) space for vulnerability, particularly in those infinitesimal moments where characters must make a difficult choice?

- How can I test story logic, character credibility, an audience’s core emotional experience and second-order emotional experience via a tailored ‘scripts out loud’ process and adjust the script accordingly to elevate the positive connections and minimise or negate the negative audience experiences?

The script – a director’s experience

As discussed in the previous chapter, a domestic distributor’s process of script analysis differs from that of a filmmaker. While filmmakers, depending on their role, rigorously consider constructs such as story logic, character motivation, world-building, the power of subtext, style and tone, pacing, humour, core themes and social messages, as well as how to keep the reader engaged on an emotional, visceral and intellectual level, domestic distributors are asking themselves questions that are more audience and exhibition orientated – for example: Is this a good story? Does it work? How does it make me feel? Does it move me? Is this a story I want to invest my time in? These are considered in conjunction with market-driven questions, such as: How can we get people to see this story? What are the marketplace elements attached to the story and how can we sell this?

Between 2009 and 2015, *The Butterfly Tree* underwent rigorous script development processes. These included working with international script editor and screenwriting author Linda Aronson and acclaimed American screenwriter and director Robin Swicord, as well as other international and national screen writing coaches during the Binger Lab. The script was further refined, and as part of the financing phase, notes from key investors – including the domestic distributor – were analysed and integrated into the final drafts. By this stage, I had considered the core target demographic for the film and had asked the questions ‘What are the elements in the script that can be elevated to appeal to this demographic?’ and ‘What are the negative elements that may have an unfavourable impact on the core demographic’s

experience and how can they be minimised?’ However, I admit that I never asked myself the question – on a strictly practical level – ‘How can I sell this film?’ The dominant concern I found myself having to address with financiers and the domestic distributor revolved around how I was going to responsibly and sensitively portray a young boy’s affection for an older woman and vice versa. It was a concern that could not be addressed through rewriting alone, and I had to formulate ways to prove my responsible handling of such material via tonal proof (to be discussed later in this chapter).

As discussed in the previous chapter, given that the producer and I were both aware of the financial necessity to sell to North American and other global markets, there was the challenge of testing the translatability of the cultural and social nuances embedded in the script in other markets. To partly address this challenge, the producer and I not only pitched *The Butterfly Tree* at various international marketplaces, such as the Berlinale Talent Project market, the European Film Market and the Melbourne International Film Festival 37 South market; we also sent the script out to international story consultants for readers’ reports. This was a transformational process for the script, as we found that American and European readers’ responses to the material were much more positive than the Australian script feedback. This simple choice strengthened our belief that there was a stronger American and European audience for this film. It is worth noting that the film was picked up for a theatrical release in both the United Kingdom and North America.

In summary, with regard to story and script analysis and screenwriting awards, to minimise perceived domestic distributor risk my findings recommend that emerging directors consider the following questions:

- How can I not only present a well-developed script that has undergone a rigorous script editing process but also have researched which distributors are engaging in what type of product?

- How can I elevate particular elements in the script that appeal to the domestic distributor's target demographic and/or their personal interests as well as reducing the elements that may be seen as too negative, confrontational or confusing and/or uncategorisable for the target demographic?
- How can I use a 'scripts out loud' process to refine the target demographic as well as identifying the script's strengths and weaknesses?
- How can I either rewrite the script (as writer/director) or encourage further drafts (as director only) to elevate the project's strengths while minimising negative influences?
- As part of the rewriting process, how can I ensure due diligence with respect to the use of opposing valance in certain highlight scenes and/or moments, being aware that they could be used as key trailer moments down the track?
- How can I use a 'scripts out loud' process to determine and refine the film's core message/s or impact statement, which could then be used to focus the film's pitch materials in both the financing and marketing stages?
- How can I utilise trusted readers' reports from key international marketplaces to provide insight into which story nuances are being lost to cultural differences and, if deemed necessary, rewrite to prevent the negation of moments that rely on important subtext?
- As a screenwriter, how can I balance my desire for my work to be recognised and validated with the time, energy and money required to enter screenwriting competitions, knowing that even the most favourable result will have very little impact on a domestic distributor's decision-making process?

Creating a cohesive core filmmaking team – a director’s experience

As discussed in the previous chapter, after the script, domestic distributors deemed having a director, an experienced producer, bankable cast and an experienced DOP attached as being of importance. This, in turn, raised the question: How can emerging filmmakers successfully transition from short form storytelling to feature filmmaking if having an emerging core creative team (who lack previous work to prove that they can deliver the style and tone of the film on budget) is perceived as a potential hindrance to securing the trust and commitment of a domestic distributor?

In choosing the DOP for the tonal short film *Beetlefeeders* (2012), I was seeking someone who not only had the talent to deliver a vision for the feature, but also someone who possessed the creative skills necessary to collaboratively address key aesthetic challenges on a very low budget. At the time of making *Beetlefeeders*, Jason Hargreaves, the DOP for *The Butterfly Tree*, had not yet shot a feature film; however, his numerous successful and acclaimed short works, including short films, music videos and television commercials, all demonstrated that he had the creative talent and skill to both deliver the tone and style of the film, and collaboratively provide solutions to the aesthetic challenges presented by *The Butterfly Tree* on a low budget. The outcome from making the tonal short film *Beetlefeeders* was that the members of the core creative team (the DOP, the producer and the composer), who later went on to collaborate on *The Butterfly Tree*, were able to prove, in a short form, that they could deliver the tone and style of the feature using a low-budget methodology.

Following is an excerpt from a statement I wrote for an Australian screen funding agency, which highlighted how the making of the short film negated some of the perceived risks in the feature through developing and testing creative solutions with the DOP and other key creatives:

The making of *Beetlefeeders* has allowed me to test drive creative working relationships with key creatives with whom I am proposing to work on the feature.

For example, the cinematographer and I now have a shorthand language in which we can discuss the look, tone, emotional and visceral experience of each scene. We have already tested and chosen the look and style of three of the five worlds within the film.

We are now the fortunate position of being able to spend the pre-production phase of the feature film more economically. This allows us to test other techniques and styles that may have been negated if we had not laid much of the foundation in the short film. The same can be said for the production design as well as the music and soundtrack design. The production designer and the composer and I are now able to build upon an existing creative base. Many creative decisions have already been trialled, and we have developed a creative shorthand language from which we can grow.

Even beyond the completion of *Beetlefeeders*, the relationship created between the cinematographer and I has inspired and allowed us to trial other cinematic techniques, which will be used in the feature.

For example, we will be using the light graffiti painting technique, which involves a long exposure with the subject standing still while a light source or sources moves around the subject. We have experimented with both the moving of subject and the light source, and we intend to use this technique in the scene where Evelyn shows off her roller-skating prowess to Fin.

On a practical level, along with props and dressings, many locations have already been sourced. Again, this will save valuable time and money when it comes to pre-production on the feature film. (Screen Queensland, pers. comm. 2016).

The result was that we lessened the risk to investors by utilising tonal proof to prove the collaborative creative ability of the core team (regardless of long-form narrative experience).

In summary, with respect to proving the creative ability and experience of a core creative team to minimise perceived domestic distributor risk, my findings recommend that emerging directors consider the following questions:

- How can I attach an experienced producer, or at least a producer who has successfully delivered a feature film in a similar budget range to the feature currently being pitched, followed by an experienced DOP?
- How can I develop ways to elevate the creative ‘hooks’ in the pitch package – be it an award-winning cinematographer with a unique ability that suits this style of project, or a composer or production designer with a specialist talent that can be utilised in the production?
- How can I create a proof of concept that demonstrates the world/s of the film while bringing all these unique creative ‘hooks’ together? As Callow-Wright (2021) advises, the best pitch material is where the filmmaker has created an original pitch reel that demonstrates the world of the film and the director’s approach to character, as well as demonstrating the team’s ability to execute a few key challenging production techniques.

- If it is not possible to collaborate with the creative head of departments to create a tonal proof of concept, can I incorporate their existing work into a tonal ‘mash up’ that represents the world/s of the film?

Managing investor expectations: A ‘bankable’ cast – a director’s experience

As noted previously, the term ‘bankable’ relates to the cast’s ability to sell the film both nationally and internationally. The struggle to achieve this is complex, as someone who may be considered ‘bankable’ in the theatrical space may not be considered in the same way in the streaming space, and likewise for the international market versus the domestic market.

During my creative practice, I found assessing an actor’s bankability, talent and being ‘right’ for the part to be an incredibly difficult balancing act. For the producer and I, it highlighted the fact that we were competing with not only Australian producers but producers from all around the world for a very small pool of name Australian talent. This challenge magnified my need, as writer/director, to make the script as emotionally and visually compelling and intriguing as possible, in order to attract the attention of a name cast who could be offered considerably more money to work elsewhere. To this end, I wrote characters I hoped would entice, excite and challenge potential cast while allowing them to remain truthful and grounded in the logic of the world and the story.

In the case of Evelyn, played by Melissa George, I created a beautiful, complex, vibrant woman who, facing her own mortality, strives to make the most of the time she has left on earth. Her vitality attracts the attentions of a father and his 13-year-old son and, as they compete for her affections, tensions between them escalate. The challenge of creating a 40-something woman who courts the attentions of a 13-year-old boy was to show what Fin, the boy, offers Evelyn, the woman. I needed the audience to understand her need to be

courted by him. Finding the answer lay not only in the character itself, but also in my awareness of Melissa's background. I had learnt that, in her youth, George was a national roller-skating champion. To meet both challenges – to further entice Melissa and allow the audience to understand the character's motivations for permitting the attentions of a 13-year-old boy – I wrote the scene where Evelyn offers to teach Fin to roller-skate and Fin dares her to show him her best tricks, which lead into their shared roller-skating in the rain fantasy. Today, these scenes are some of the most visually beautiful in the film, and the imagery from these scenes was favoured in the press. Following is an excerpt from a document I wrote to explain the script revisions to a funding agency:

Evelyn's need for Fin (or Fin's gift to Evelyn) has been further developed and clarified. Through seeing what it is that Evelyn is struggling with in her current life (her illness, her ex-husband and the messiness of her recent divorce) when Fin offers her the chance to play, to simply be a kid again, he not only offers her the purity of living in the moment, but he also allows her a blessed escape from the weight of her adult life. He helps her to live her goal of making the most of the time she has left. By allowing us to see and understand more of Evelyn's problems, not only have we made her more relatable to our target audience, but we have also deepened our empathetic response to her and given our audience further reason to care and understand why she needs Al and Fin in her life.

(Submission to Screen Queensland, 2016)

I hoped that this approach of deepening audience empathy for the character and using George's natural talent (over and above acting) had an impact on her decision to accept the role. In an interview during production, George commented that the visual fantasy aspect was one of the reasons she had committed to the project: 'I just fell in love with it, just the fantasy side of it. I could see it very clearly, how it was going to look visually' (Eaton 2016).

In a comedic turn of events, later George admitted that, rather than her roller-skating days being remembered with joy and pleasure, they also carried with them pain and trauma; in that moment, I made a mental note to never again assume that an actor's previous or other passions are always imbued with positive recall. After we had secured Melissa George, George's profile lent the project further credibility and the rest of the casting process proved relatively straightforward. While Ewen Leslie was offered the role and fortunately accepted, Ed Oxenbould agreed to audition and was cast soon after.

In summary, with respect to attaching 'bankable' cast to minimise perceived domestic distributor risk, my findings recommend that emerging directors consider the following questions:

- What do I need to do to conduct my own research into the current bankability of cast and how can I include potential sales agents and distributors in early discussions to ascertain the viability of my potential list? Creating a list of bankable cast that can realistically be attached to the project is often something done in conjunction with the producer/s.
- As a screenwriter, how can I create a role for a certain name actor that I think will excite them, push their boundaries, and challenge them as an artist to encourage them to take the risk and work with a first-time feature film director for potentially less than their normal fee? As a director, the question is: How can I pitch this story to them with the same intention?

Other elements of the pitch package – a director's experience

As discussed in Chapter 3, domestic distributors consider a number of factors to be of value when preparing to pitch to distributors. One is the director's ability to clearly communicate and demonstrate their passion and vision for the film. This includes the ability of the director

to speak to why they are the best person to tell the story. It is also expected that they will be versed in being able to identify the target audience and determine which specific elements in the film will most strongly resonate and connect with that specific audience. The use of a well-developed and designed pitch book, as well as the ability to verbally pitch the story in such a way that addresses inspiration, the project's background, target audience and what makes the project exciting and unique, are also considered important.

To communicate the look and feel of the key creative elements within *The Butterfly Tree*, a pitch book was used during the pitching process. Its aim was to illustrate those remaining aspects of the script that were difficult and costly to tonally demonstrate in the short film format. These included the look and feel of the glass house, Evelyn's bedroom, Evelyn's costumes, the roller-skating sequence, Evelyn's burlesque performances and the street locations. This combination of tools – excerpts from the tonal short *Beetlefeeders*, a 'stealomatic' and the pitch book – invited potential investors into the world of the film, where they were able to inhabit the spaces and gain a sense of creative ownership. My hope was that if they felt a sense of creative ownership, they would be more likely to want to share in the collective vision for the film by investing.

Another benefit of utilising a pitch book was that it helped me, as the director, to speak to the work rather than feel as if I was an individual creative practitioner on display. Being an introvert, I have always found this 'on display' aspect of pitching difficult. Over the years, I have learnt that being well prepared by way of the verbal pitch and having the appropriate pitching tools, as noted above, has allowed me to speak comfortably with passion to the work. As part of the verbal pitch, I employed a method that broke the telling of the story into five key beats, as well as speaking to the core theme and how it connects with the target audience. This enabled me to clearly communicate the story in a compelling way in under four minutes when involved in seven-minute pitch meetings.

In summary, with respect to preparing the other elements of the pitch package to minimise perceived domestic distributor risk, my findings recommend that emerging directors consider the following:

- Request a meeting with the domestic distributors in person and prepare a verbal pitch that addresses the elements as noted in the previous chapter, as well as preparing a pitch book that has had the due diligence, time and resources invested in its creation. The pitch book is not only an aesthetic document that reflects the director's vision for the film, but also a potential indication of the director's attitude and work ethic towards the project. As Ari Harrison (pers. comm. 2021) cautioned, 'a pitch deck that looks like it's been pulled together in a few minutes may make us question the director's intent and capability when they have a substantial budget at their disposal'.
- Within the pitch book, include not only visual representation of the world/s of the film that exist in a video format but also create visual mood boards for the remaining world/s of the film that are unable to be demonstrated in a video format.
- Research and speak to successful comparable films during the pitch process.
- Communicate where the director has drawn inspiration from in terms of what tropes or aspects of a genre the director is intending to exploit, adapt or experiment with.
- Research the style and types of films that domestic distributors are currently investing in or looking to invest in, as well as what has been successful for them in the recent past. Upon determining which films are tonally similar to the project being pitched and/or that share the same target demographic, design a pitch that draws inspiration from the successful comparable films' key selling tools, such as the film's core message, impact statement, hook line, poster and trailer.

To conclude, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, it is at this juncture that one could say I had effectively answered my own research question: I had successfully investigated how

domestic distributors evaluate a first-time director's pitch and project and, using creative praxis and practice, created a tonal proof of concept short film that enhanced my creative vision while minimising domestic distributor risk. This tool, together with others (as previously discussed), was then used to pitch to appropriate domestic distributors and other investors. Prior to this, the film had been through several development labs: the previously noted Binger Film Institute in Amsterdam in 2010, the Australian Film Commission's funded SP*RK program in 2009 and Screen Queensland's low-budget feature initiative in 2011. These labs involved processes that not only analysed and strengthened the screenplay, but also aimed to improve participants' skills in the pitching process. During these labs, questions arose about the value of the insect fantasy scenes and their purpose in the film, as well as how I, as the director, was going to interpret these fantasies to reflect the main character's need to reconnect with his dead mother's touch as part of his grieving process. Another query, concerning my directorial ability, revolved around how I was going to create a magical realist world that demanded a rich and textured production design on a low budget. The concern about there also being nothing tonally relevant on my director's reel was also raised on multiple occasions.

These two driving needs, plus the fact that the producer and I intended to formally pitch to both Screen Australia and Screen Queensland for production investment, cemented the impetus for the producer and I to create a tonal short that could address these concerns. Prior to the production of the tonal short *Beetlefeeders*, the producer and I had an informal conversation with a smaller independent distributor, a New Zealand-based distributor called Vendetta Films, which had read a draft of the film. During this conversation, the then acquisitions officer raised concerns about how I was going to sensitively direct a 13-year-old boy in terms of partial nakedness (the insect fantasies involved Fin wearing only short pants, allowing the touch of the insects to be felt on his bare skin) and his desire for and interactions

with an older woman. Vendetta's comments, coupled with the previously noted concerns raised in the development workshops, meant that we elevated the importance of addressing these elements as part of the tonal short's development process and hence *Beetlefeeders* was deliberately produced to operate as a series of pitching tools before officially pitching the feature to potential cast, domestic distributors and other investors. Therefore, *The Butterfly Tree* was never pitched to investors without the tonal short excerpts as support material. As discussed in Chapter 4, as I was aware of the limited timeframes (approx. seven minutes) available in pitch meetings for *The Butterfly Tree*, I chose to represent four of the five worlds inherent in the feature film in the short film *Beetlefeeders*. Therefore, *Beetlefeeders* was never screened as a standalone film, but rather used as a proof-of-concept tool where four three-minute sequences were used to speak to my directorial approach.

In 2014, the feature film was pitched at the previously cited MIFF 37^o South Market, the London Production Film Market and the Berlinale Marketplace to approximately 15 international sales agents, four domestic distributors (which included eOne, Umbrella Entertainment, Village Roadshow and Studio Canal) and a couple of gap financiers. eOne committed to read the script but passed on the project, while Village Roadshow, Studio Canal and Umbrella Entertainment passed on the project at verbal pitch stage and therefore did not read the script, citing that the project was 'not a fit for their company' (Callow-Wright, pers. comm. 2021). Prior to the pitch sessions, the support materials – which included the film's one-line and one-paragraph synopsis as well as a one-page story outline – were sent to the desired potential investors. Meeting times were then booked between the investor and producer. These pitch sessions, not unlike speed dating, ran on average seven minutes, and involved the producer and myself introducing the project and the cast (already attached as well as not yet attached desired cast), and pitching the story as well as screening specific excerpts from the tonal short *Beetlefeeders* on an iPad equipped

with headphones. These excerpts not only represented the key worlds of the film, but also addressed the previously cited concerns – hence the earlier questions were never raised during the pitching process and there were no further questions revolving around my ability, as a first-time director, to direct the film.

At the end of the meetings, the sales agent or domestic distributor would then either request to be sent the script or further story material (such as a treatment) or say that the film was not something to which they could commit. Occasionally, they would be forthcoming with a reason, the most common ones being that this film was not something that was in their ‘wheelhouse’, meaning it was not the genre or style of film that they felt they could effectively on-sell or that they had secured other films that covered similar territory. The follow-up process involved the producer emailing the interested parties the requested materials and re-engaging approximately two weeks after the market to ascertain the potential investor’s response. This follow-up response was not a process in which I was engaged, so I am unaware of the communications between the producer and the domestic distributors at this stage of the pitch process. The producer would simply pass on information about whether the company had passed after they read the script or further discussions would be held regarding the package in more detail.

In the closing days of the Berlinale Marketplace, the producer and I pitched to an international sales agent who had a particular interest in Melissa George and Sophie Lowe (who were already attached at that stage). This particular sales agent committed to the project not long after the market closed, which meant that the producer and I now only needed to secure a domestic distributor before pitching to the state and federal screen funding bodies for production investment, as well as applying for the producer offset. Indeed, after pitching to Screen Australia, the federal screen project officers commented that our pitch materials were the most beautiful and thorough they had seen in recent years (Callow-Wright, pers.

comm. 2016). This was common feedback regarding our pitch materials – how beautiful the pitch book and tonal short excerpts looked, which gave us assurance that we had done our due diligence as my initial goal, among others, was to make a visually beautiful film.

During this phase, the film was also pitched to the larger independent domestic distributors, such as Transmission Films and Madman Entertainment, which had not attended the markets named above. Both Transmission Films and Madman Entertainment committed to read the script, but ultimately passed on the project. It is worth noting that I was not involved in these pitches and therefore detailed explanations as to why these distributors passed on the project remain unknown to me. The lack of a detailed debrief with the director as to why a domestic distributor or international sales agent passed on a project is not unusual, and is not considered an expected industry protocol. Likewise, it is common for producers to pitch a slate of projects (several screen projects considered to be market ready) without the attendance of the director/s (Callow-Wright, pers. comm. 2021). I was fortunate to be involved in the pitching process at the above-mentioned markets; however, I was not involved in subsequent pitches that the producer made to other domestic distributors. The film was also pitched to smaller independent distributors and eventually found a home with the previously cited Vendetta Films. After three years of intermittent pitching (2013–16), the film acquired commitment (in the form of a distribution guarantee) from both a domestic distributor (Vendetta Films) and an international sales agent (a Danish sales agent called Level K), which in turn triggered the 40 per cent producer offset rebate and led to the film securing the remaining finance required. The film went into production in 2016 and was released in 2017; however, it was the marketing and distribution experience of *The Butterfly Tree* that informed the later research (between 2019 and 2021). Chapter 5 examines the synthesis that arose from these two undertakings.

5

The domestic distribution experience

While the previous chapter examined how the key domestic distributor findings informed and shaped my creative practice during the development, financing and the actual production process (the filming) of *The Butterfly Tree* (2017), this chapter discusses my own experience of the film's post-production and distribution process, synthesising it with both former research (before production of *The Butterfly Tree*) and later research (after production of *The Butterfly Tree*). In the latter half of this chapter, I combine the findings discussed in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 in a 10-point decision-making compendium in the form of a table of strategic and creative considerations, which include domestic distributor concerns versus emerging director concerns while offering creative solutions with respect to an emerging feature film director's pitch and project. This compendium has served the original intention of the thesis, which was to assist emerging Australian feature film directors to transition effectively from short-form filmmaking to feature directing while minimising domestic distributor risk and strengthening an original vision, thus becoming a valuable member of the producer, director, distributor team. This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part discusses my own experience of the film's post-production and distribution process, while the second part offers emerging directors a 10-point decision making compendium in the form of a table of strategic and creative considerations.

Understanding the business of domestic distribution – a director's experience

From my own experience, like most aspects of the filmmaking process, understanding the complexities of marketing and distribution is a never-ending journey. As an artist and creative practitioner, there are days when I feel as though I have destroyed any connection

with instinct and creativity, and my first reaction is to want to un-know what I now know and continue to create in a blissful state of denial. As the witch Baba Yagga tells the young girl Vasalisa in an old Russian tale, ‘remember too much knowledge can make a person old too soon’ (Estes 1992, 81). Being constantly reminded of the high improbability and incredible difficulty associated with successfully financing, producing and connecting a film with a substantial paying audience has often made me feel too old too soon, and to be less inclined to want to push forward with blind passion and faith. Now that I am not so blind, I remind myself that while passion and belief are fundamental, passion alone in the absence of knowledge and strategy can cost a filmmaker the most precious resource they have: their time.

As discussed in Chapter 3, in terms of understanding the business of domestic distribution, domestic distributors highlighted the importance of directors embracing marketing and distribution by learning to inhabit the mindset of distributors. To paraphrase domestic distributor Andrew Mackie (2021), they need to ask themselves: What are all the reasons I would not want to do this film? Once they have analysed the risk factors, they then need to formulate ways to prove they and their team have the available resources and ability to minimise these risks. As mentioned previously, one way Mackie (2021) recommended that directors refine their skills at ‘thinking like a distributor’ was by embracing the habit of analysing the Australian box office data every week.

While I have never tracked box office as a stockbroker would the stock market, in my early filmmaking years I did co-produce and co-direct a no-budget feature film, and from this experience gained a basic knowledge of feature film finance plans, recoupment waterfalls and the extreme difficulty of generating investor returns. I also understood the importance of achieving significant box office results and the benefit of being selected for key national and international film festivals (to be discussed later in this chapter). Drawing on this knowledge,

in the early stages of script development on *The Butterfly Tree* I pitched to my producer two ideas to support the film's theatrical release. The first was a cross-promotional event launch where the launch event was conceived as a space where a selection of art forms could be performed or exhibited together for a period of time (one to three weeks, for example – enough time to generate word of mouth) to explore a similar theme or support the same cause. For example, in the case of *The Butterfly Tree*, a cross-promotional launch event could have focused on 'thriving after breast cancer' and included performance, dance, music, art and photography that celebrated or spoke to that experience. The motivation behind this concept was twofold (1) to draw on the pre-existing fan bases of a number of art forms and cross promote; and (2) to create an event that would rival other event experiences – for example, live music, theatre/performance, art galleries, other exhibitions – available to our target audiences at the time of release.

The second idea drew inspiration from my previous 'grass roots' distribution experience where, incensed by the injustice inflicted upon landholders by coal seam gas exploration companies in Queensland, I created a campaign that involved screening the Oscar-nominated documentary *Gasland* (Fox 2010) in 22 locations (city and regional) across Queensland. The aim of the campaign was to encourage rural communities to engage in a discourse with the intention of educating, sharing information and empowering them to embrace their rights with a view to either prevent coal seam gas companies from drilling on private land or negotiating more equitable deals. Although the experience was exhausting and consumed two years of my life, I witnessed, first-hand, the power of women who were part of community organisations, to drive local marketing and motivate people to assemble together to instigate change. Inspired by this knowledge, and also being aware of a similar method employed by Robert Connolly that involved a marketing partnership between the not-for-profit organisation Mission Australia and his feature film *Three Dollars* (Connolly 2005), the

idea I pitched to my producer was a cause-related alliance campaign to be run in conjunction with a national breast cancer organisation. The producer responded well to both ideas, and both concepts were developed by the producing team during the film's financing phase. In due course, these concepts became part of the official marketing strategy that was pitched to investors. In this document, the two concepts described above were expanded and transformed into the following iterations.

First, the cross-promotional concept became an All Arts Festival Alliance, which involved 360-degree immersive cinema events. The concept was pitched as follows:

We are exploring opportunities to promote our film through leading arts festivals. We will do this by creatively exploiting the film's unique visual elements to produce a 'full dome immersive' pop-up cinema experience that allows cross-platform marketing with other artforms. We are looking at options to create specialised one-off events in conjunction with key brand and sponsorship partners and major leading arts festivals ... These events would feature: spectacular 360 degrees wall projections using existing film elements such as fantasy scenes, light graffiti and other key moments integrated with thematically relevant work from leading Australasian visual artists ... The events are to be housed in a geodesic dome tent reminiscent of Evelyn's geodesic glasshouse featured in the film ... The events are to include pre-drinks to view work, short live performance to introduce the screening of the film, with a Q&A session to follow. (Callow-Wright, pers. comm. 2016)

The cause-related alliance approach was transformed and pitched in the following manner:

Rather than shying away from the film's breast cancer subplot we intend to promote it to our advantage ... We have established a formal co-beneficial

partnership with the National Breast Cancer Foundation to work with us as a marketing partner. Through events such as gala screenings and ticketed donations, and by also attaching ourselves to their major (positively focused) multi-million dollar annual campaigns, we can turn watching this film into an event for celebrating life while dealing with breast cancer; a shared social experience that speaks to our audience in a more meaningful way than traditional advertising ... Such strategic philanthropy is based on the premise that consumers will be more likely to support a product if they in turn support a cause. For us, this is a socially responsible opportunity that can help drive people to the cinema. (Callow-Wright, pers. comm. 2016)

Unfortunately, as discussed in Chapter 3, the previously mentioned *Ride Like a Girl* distribution experience was not mine, and once official pre-production began I was not asked to be, and due to an intensive directorial preparation process nor did I request to be, involved in any of the marketing and distribution plans for the film. When *The Butterfly Tree* was ready to launch domestically, reality defied the team's well-developed best intentions. The domestic distributor calculated that the resources necessary to see the arts alliance concept fulfil its potential was too great a risk, so declined to invest in the event while the producing team lacked the financial and human resources needed to execute the campaign independently. Meanwhile, the cause-related alliance, while continuing to build strong traction throughout production, lost viability just prior to films release when the National Breast Cancer Foundation withdrew its support. The reason for this will never be known. As Callow-Wright states, 'it could have been due to the press surrounding key cast at the time or it could have been related to the film's mixed reviews' (Callow-Wright, pers. comm. 2021). Reading the full marketing strategy now, I am struck by the amount of effort, goodwill, creative planning and research that went into creating a campaign that I still believe could

have been highly successful had it been able to access the necessary resources and financial support. In the end, *The Butterfly Tree*'s domestic marketing campaign took a very limited traditional path, which included targeting key international and national film festivals as well as a domestic (Australia and New Zealand) 20- to 15-screen theatrical release with the intention of expanding to smaller regional screens (Callow-Wright, pers. comm. 2021). Not surprisingly, in an already challenged theatrical space, the film performed poorly. The film opened with a small P&A spend of \$40,000 on 10 screens, which in turn created doubt for other programmers, and the film was dropped by exhibitors after three weeks. Callow-Wright (pers. comm. 2021) explains that a film's domestic theatrical failure, excluding the other previously discussed well-known hurdles such as a lack of cinema space and the extraordinary amount of advertising spend needed to generate 'cut-through', can be attributed to a number of factors: (1) the combination of a small independent film being coupled with a small, newer distributor, whereby the theatrical booker was relatively inexperienced and lacked developed relationships with the exhibitors; (2) an inexperienced publicist who lacked the desired relationships and was not able to garner the film enough reviews, which contributed to the third factor; (3) mixed reviews – 'some reviewers loved it while others slammed it and because it received limited reviews those few slamming reviews skewed its Rotten Tomatoes and IMDb ratings – and most cinema goers are savvy enough to make decisions based on Rotten Tomatoes and IMDb ratings' (Callow-Wright, pers. comm. 2021). Yet, while the film may have suffered in the domestic theatrical space, it performed well in the non-theatrical space, selling to Qantas and Channel 9, and screening at domestic film festivals such as the Cinefestoz Film Festival in Western Australia.

In hindsight, Callow-Wright (pers. comm. 2021) warns new producers that the marketing and distribution aspects of a film are as big as the production of the film, and that the planning and resources necessary for this component of a film's life-cycle need to be

accounted for well ahead of production. She also recommends working closely with an experienced marketing and publicity strategist during pre-production on a film and hiring an experienced in-house publicist who can create more ‘buzz’ around the film during production as well as during the launch and release of the film. She advises new filmmakers to:

create a library of digital assets during production that are going to be guided by understanding your target audience, what their preferred social media and online platforms are and what marketing assets are best suited to these platforms (Callow-Wright, pers. comm. 2021).

Maslin (pers. comm. 2021) also supports the concept of directors taking a more active role in the strategic planning concerning the marketing and distribution of their film. She recommends that directors have an involvement in the development and creation of the following: a catchy title, key stills, posters and flyers, core marketing message/s, social media assets and, if appropriate, the film’s impact statement. Maslin, however, does not support the practice of involving the director or the editor in the creation of the film’s trailer, ‘because they bring so much knowledge and so much assumed knowledge to the actual story that they don’t necessarily realise the gaps for somebody who’s never seen the film before and therefore what that person will take away from the trailer’ (Maslin, pers. comm. 2021). Although neither I nor the editor was involved in the actual cutting of the trailer for *The Butterfly Tree*, I was invited to offer two rounds of feedback during the production of the trailer. This was extremely useful, as I was able to communicate the core messages or core experiences of the film, as well as identify what I thought were the key emotional impact sequences that spoke to these core messages in a way that honed the trailer’s creation.

In summary, with regard to understanding the business of distribution to minimise perceived domestic distributor risk, my findings recommend that emerging directors consider the following questions:

- How can I define the vision for the film through a short form tonal proof of concept (under 10 minutes) as well as via the use of visuals in a pitch book?
- During the pitch presentation and within the pitch materials, how can I speak to why the members of the filmmaking team are the right collaborators to make this project?
- How can I demonstrate that ‘the film is in me’ and why I have to make it?
- How can I reframe my approach regarding the distribution and marketing of this feature film by thinking like a distributor and asking the following question: ‘What are all the reasons I would NOT want to do this film?’
- Once having analysed the above risk factors, how can I formulate ways to prove I have the ability and resources to offset these risks?

Below are some examples of perceived risks and possible solutions.

- *Perceived risk:* The members of the filmmaking team are relatively unknown to the domestic distributor and have not collaborated before, or are new and untested talent, and the distributor has doubts that this team can deliver the film in the style and tone as pitched for the proposed budget.
- *Possible solution:* Gather the film’s heads of department and make a tonal proof of concept that addresses the perceived long-form execution-dependent challenges and risks at an appropriate budget level.
- *Perceived risk:* The film may not naturally suit the domestic distributor’s preferred target demographic.

- *Possible solution:* First, define the project's target audience by examining the demographic on an individual level, such as their age, where they live, what they like to watch and what movies they prefer to see. Second, reconstruct the pitch presentation and materials so they demonstrate how this film could be marketed to the distributor's preferred target demographic.
- *Perceived risk:* The level of P&A spend needed to generate 'cut through' is not viable against the style/type of film.
- *Possible solution:* Design a domestic marketing campaign, which demonstrates that the members of the filmmaking team have the ability and resources to work together to create an effective campaign for a less expensive P&A spend appropriate for the style and budget of the film (to be discussed below).
- *Perceived risk:* The distributor is concerned that the film will not be able to compete against bigger films in a crowded theatrical space (Mackie 2020).
- *Possible solution:* Become a box office stockbroker and draw on the likeness and appeal factor of other box office successes that are tonally similar to the film currently being pitched. Determine which key elements are connecting and resonating with the pre-existing film's demographic and elevate those aspects in the pitch presentation for the film in financing.

The following are also useful suggestions:

- Directors could request to be present at marketing and distribution strategy meetings prior to official pre-production and offer creative marketing ideas where appropriate (to be discussed below).
- Directors could offer their creative skillset to collaborate with others and help create the necessary marketing and social media assets.

- Directors could request to be present for exhibitor screenings prior to the release of the film and lend their skills to make adjustments or changes to minimise perceived risks, where deemed both necessary and appropriate.
- As discussed in Chapter 3, directors should recognise and respect the point in time at which the domestic distributor takes responsibility for the national release of the film.

Managing investor expectations: A responsible budget and an appropriate marketing spend – a director’s experience

As discussed in Chapter 4, domestic distributors shared the view that a responsible budget was one that not only aligned with the film’s market potential but also took into consideration an effective risk evaluated P&A spend based on predicted box office returns.

As noted previously, excluding my publicity obligations, which included radio and online interviews as well as attending national and international film festivals, I was not involved in the marketing or distribution of *The Butterfly Tree* and, as previously discussed, the budget and P&A spend for *The Butterfly Tree* were considered low. My focus, in terms of managing domestic distributor and investor expectations, solely resided in attracting a bankable cast and committed crew who had the capacity to honour the vision for the film on a low budget. To this end, I embraced a phrase I had often heard in relation to the economy of screenwriting: less is more.

Being able to create and realise a director’s vision with fewer resources is not an uncommon obstacle for many filmmakers; indeed, the ability to perceive restrictions or challenges as creative opportunities has been utilised by some of the world’s most successful directors. The iconic Steven Spielberg, famous for creating the modern-day blockbuster *Jaws* (1975), among many others, explains that as a result of his ‘first thoughts’ being thwarted or not working properly, he is forced to rethink and often his second thoughts are better than the

first; therefore, he always ‘covers his second thoughts’ (Spielberg talking to James Lipton in *Inside the Actor’s Studio* 1999).

During pre-production on *The Butterfly Tree*, in order to find creative ways to address budget deficits, I reflected on multi-award-winning screenwriter, screenwriting educator and author Linda Aronson’s (2009) teachings regarding finding ‘the spark’ of the story (Aronson 2009). Aronson had been my script consultant on an earlier draft, and to identify ‘the spark’, Aronson used a series of probing questions and exercises, including:

What lights up in other people’s eyes when they talk about it? What is new or strikingly original about your film? List what people will enjoy about it. Why are people going to go out on a wet Monday night to see it? What is its selling point? (Aronson 2009)

Closely related to finding ‘the spark’ was identifying what excited me about this particular work over all others. During this process, Aronson asked, ‘What would you kill to keep?’ Later, when I was asked to sacrifice elements of the script to reduce the budget, I was able to return to my ‘kill to keep’ mental list.

Most of the elements on the list included the major insect fantasy sequences, as at the time I believed they elevated the film beyond simply another coming of age story played out in a domestic setting. Today, I still find them beautiful and original, and I am glad I found a way, through the making of the tonal short *Beetlefeeders* (2012), to clarify for investors the need for their existence. The fantasy imagery of Evelyn as a golden monarch butterfly not only became the key publicity image for the film, but was also highlighted in the creation of the film’s trailer.

During this exercise in reduction, I was able to retain most of my ‘kill to keep’ moments by finding creative in-camera solutions to the fantasy sequences, such as the roller

skating the in the rain sequence, the *Beetlefeeders* sequence and the sequence where Fin and Evelyn levitate with butterflies. This process of bringing the creative problem-solving back into the physical hands-on space enabled me to find more exciting creative solutions for other scenes that I had previously not envisaged as carrying so much visual potential. For example, during beat two within the climax of *The Butterfly Tree*, Fin rushes through the forest to his mother's shrine in the midst of a gathering tropical storm. He is buffeted by wind and the insect world is in chaos. On the page, the scene reads simply as:

Fin tears through the forest towards the shrine. The SOUND OF INSECTS GOING WILD as the wind grows stronger and stronger. Palm fronds are sent flying and INSECTS BATTER FIN as they are flung across his path.

The scene sits on the cusp of Fin's real-world colliding with his insect fantasy world turned nightmare. The directing challenge was how to visualise this transition in such a short scene. Prior to having to rethink some of my fantasy sequence methods due to budgetary constraints, my first line of inquiry had been basic. I thought, 'Okay, it'll be kind of dark, with flashes of lightning. We'll get a big wind machine, lots of bags of leaves, use a hand-held approach crashing through foliage, throw insects in front of the camera and at the boy and see what happens. Done! Next!' The reductions to the budget forced me to be more creative with what I could do in the physical world. I then reimagined my directorial approach for the above scene to include giant freaky bugs or parts of bugs to be flashed across Fin and his path by projecting images onto net screens, which could travel via a dolly rig or flying fox rig, or perhaps the screens could be made so the boy and camera were able to crash through them. The end result was that we projected the insect imagery onto trees. This small but exciting addition to what was originally imagined as a straightforward scene, requiring seemingly simple execution, allowed me to revisit other more straightforward scenes and ask, 'How can I elevate their purpose with the unexpected?'

In summary, with regard to a responsible budget and appropriate marketing spend to minimise perceived domestic distributor risk, my findings recommend that emerging directors consider the following questions.

A responsible budget

- How can I engage with a ‘less in more’ methodology and make this film with fewer resources without sacrificing my ‘kill to keep’ moments?
- How can I minimise the more expensive sequences by engaging in more creative hands-on, in-camera solutions while still elevating the purpose of every scene with the unexpected?
- How can I engage with creating vulnerability by socially distancing my characters and therefore avoiding extra cast costs?

An appropriate marketing spend

- How can I assist in designing a domestic marketing campaign that demonstrates that the filmmaking team have the ability and resources to work together to create an effective campaign for a less expensive P&A spend (appropriate for the style and budget of the film)?

This could include doing the following:

- Requesting to be present at marketing and distribution strategy meetings prior to pre-production and offer creative marketing ideas where appropriate.
- Offering your creative skillset to collaborate with others and help create the necessary digital and other marketing assets, such as a memorable and catchy title, the film’s core marketing message that aligns with the film’s vision; the film’s impact statement (if desired social change is core to the film); cause-related alliance marketing

campaign ideas; authentic behind-the-scenes material; electronic press kit (EPK) material; stills and poster material; flyer and trailer material; a cinema ‘call to arms’ pre-film screener – for example, a clever reminder for the audience to turn off their phone as well as material for the creation of social media assets. If time is limited and the director needs to focus on their primary directorial obligations, consider engaging a trustworthy creative practitioner combined with a social media marketing strategist who is also capable of inhabiting the director’s vision to accrue the necessary material.

- Researching and drawing on the skillset of those who have successfully self-distributed to source other ways of effectively contributing to the marketing and publicity campaign for the film.
- Taking into consideration that, where possible, these social media assets need to be available to engage and nurture an online audience as soon as the film is greenlit for production, so it is prudent to formulate ways to finance them ahead of the marketing budget becoming available.
- Making sure you and your cast are available for the necessary publicity campaign obligations.
- Becoming a positive spokesperson for the film at all engagements.
- Involving the cast and crew in a social media marketing workshop where they are invited to collaborate to widen the social media reach of the film.

Self-promotion – a director’s experience

As discussed in the previous chapter, domestic distributors shared the view that although it was of benefit for a director to have a presence in the media (both online and other), greater importance was attributed to the filmmaking team engaging and nurturing their target

audience (including via social media) a year out from the film's release or from the point where the project has been greenlit for production.

As a self-confessed introvert who has a strong aversion to industry networking and social media in general, this is an area in which I spectacularly fail as a director. Apart from being available and willing to create marketing and social media assets such as behind-the-scenes interviews and production stills, as well as the expected marketing obligations such as publicity interviews and post-screening Q&A sessions, I was happily not involved in the social marketing aspect of *The Butterfly Tree*. This task was taken up by the producers and my knowledge of what was trialled or enacted is limited. What is known is that a social media plan that involved the use of three main platforms – Facebook, Instagram and the film's website – was developed five months prior to the film's release in October 2017; however, the success (or lack of it) of these platforms remains unknown to me.

In summary, with regard to using self-promotion to minimise perceived domestic distributor risk, my findings recommend that emerging directors consider becoming involved as industry networkers. If networking is not part of the director's natural skill set, then they need to look at how they can attach a producer and other collaborators to the project who are more skilled at self-promotion. With regard to online self-promotion, the question may be how the filmmakers can employ or engage the appropriate skilled personnel to address this gap.

The value of key international film festivals and awards – a director's experience

While Chapter 4 determined which film festivals and awards domestic distributors perceived as having influence within the Australian film industry, this section reflects upon my own experience in relation to *The Butterfly Tree's* international launch. During the financing phase

of *The Butterfly Tree*, while pitching at the 2014 Berlinale, my lack of comprehension regarding the complexities surrounding the international feature film marketplace became evident. During a conversation with a sales agent about a particular New Zealand film that screened in the Berlinale's 'Generation 14 plus' section (a section of the Berlinale devoted to children and young people), my thought was how prestigious and fantastic it was that the film got into that particular section. The international sales agent (name withheld, pers. comm. 2014) was quick to correct me when he explained that the films that screened in the Generation 14 plus section of Berlinale 'didn't mean much when it came to international sales and that films screening in this section weren't necessarily on the buyers must see list'. Another conversation highlighted that the Berlinale, rather than Toronto, may be a better fit for a particular project, as Toronto was 'too crowded' (name withheld, international sales agent, pers. comm. 2014). Cameron Bailey, the artistic director of the International Toronto Film Festival, opposed this opinion in *Screen Daily* (2013), citing that size provides the opportunity for a greater diversity of films to be screened. He also noted comparisons between Toronto and some of the other major festivals in terms of the number of feature films on offer and industry delegates in attendance:

The [2012] ... Berlin Film Festival showed 296 feature films. Toronto showed 288. The industry delegates at Berlin's European Film Market numbered 8,091, much more than the 4,743 we have in Toronto ... The selection at the Sundance Film Festival is smaller: only 120 feature films ... Cannes and Venice are significantly smaller festivals, with 109 and 113 feature films respectively this year in their various sections, including classics (Bailey 2013).

Whether the Toronto International Film Festival is too crowded is debateable, and as a director the decision of where to position *The Butterfly Tree* in the international marketplace was left entirely to the international sales agent and the producer's discretion. As highlighted

above, given the intense competition to be selected for competition in one of the key international film festivals, after being short listed for the Director's Fortnight in Cannes but narrowly missing out on final selection, it was extremely fortunate that *The Butterfly Tree* was one of the 26 feature films selected out of the 5,693 submitted to screen at the 2017 Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF 2017). The process of how the sales agent and producers then leveraged this opportunity to sell the film internationally was not something I was asked to be involved in; nor did I request such involvement. In hindsight, it is a process that I believe is best left to those whose business it is to know. As noted in Appendix 2, the film sold well internationally to territories that included the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, Russia, China, Pan Asia and Bulgaria, with Amazon taking the rights for Rest of World territories excluding festivals and theatrical (and all rights in Australia/New Zealand). During the international launch of the film at Toronto, aside from my publicity obligations, I used the opportunity to take pitch meetings regarding future projects and work. The Toronto experience gained me representation in the United States, and after attending Toronto I spent two weeks travelling to New York and Los Angeles to meet with fellow filmmakers, producers and studio acquisition personnel. The outcome of all of this, in terms of projects being greenlit for production, remains a work in progress.

In summary, with regard to understanding the value of key international film festivals to minimise perceived domestic distributor risk, my findings recommend that emerging directors consider the following questions:

- How can I develop an understanding of which types /style of films are being selected for those film festivals that domestic distributors and federal funding agencies hold in high regard?
- How can I determine which of these festival/s is best suited to premiering my film?

- How can I leverage the international opportunity to meet with other producers, talent agents, filmmakers, distributors, sales agents, other financiers and production company personnel, not only to pitch myself as a director for hire but also to pitch future screen projects? To this end, how can I come prepared with all the relevant pitch material?

Conclusion

The results from the domestic distributor survey and formal interview process synthesised with my own creative practice indicate that an emerging director and their team can minimise domestic distributor risk while strengthening their original vision. An approach that strengthened my own creative vision and proved successful when developing the pitch, script and vision for *The Butterfly Tree* was to analyse each requirement of the pitching process by interrogating each element as a series of questions and then using the resulting discoveries to creatively and strategically reimagine and rework the pitch and project before approaching domestic distributors and other investors.

A 10-point decision-making compendium for emerging Australian feature film directors

The 10-point decision-making compendium in Table 5.1 not only serves as a reminder to myself to apply due diligence to each new project, but it also addresses a gap in knowledge by providing emerging directors with creative solutions to minimise domestic distributor risk while simultaneously strengthening an original vision. It has been designed to be read as a stand-alone document.

Table 5.1. A 10-point decision-making compendium

Pitch element: Selling the story – defining the target audience and their core experience/s

Domestic distributor considerations	Director considerations	Creative solution to minimise risk
<p>Is there an audience for this story?</p> <p>What is the story about?</p> <p>What is the essential narrative idea that the domestic distributor can pitch to the film’s target demographic?</p> <p>Who is the target demographic?</p> <p>How can a domestic distributor sell this story to the film’s target audience and the exhibitors with often limited marketing resources?</p> <p>What are the successful comparable films (comps)?</p> <p>What business did they do?</p> <p>What does the domestic distributor predict this film to achieve at the Australian box office and therefore how much can they afford to spend on prints and advertising (P&A)?</p>	<p>How can a director protect what they perceive to be unique, original and exciting about the story while maintaining the integrity of the overall vision?</p> <p>Simultaneously, how can a director accommodate the needs of the domestic distributors as well as the audience and other investors?</p>	<p>Refine and strengthen the log line and the short-form pitch in a way that captures the audience’s attention as a way of clarifying the essence or core of the story.</p> <p>Determine the film’s target audience in terms of gender, age range, what other films they like, occupation, where they live and how they like to spend their entertainment dollars.</p> <p>Define which core emotional experiences will have the greatest impact on the target audience and how they can be elevated or ‘sold’ when pitching the concept to investors.</p> <p>Consider adapting a story based on a product with a large pre-existing fan base, such as a popular Australian novel or play. For original stories, the challenge during the scriptwriting process may be to find authentic ways to link the story to a large pre-existing fan base, through either a cause, such as an environmental or humanist cause, or a shared passion or experience.</p> <p>Define the primary first-order emotional experiences, such as happiness, joy, hope, surprise and excitement (positive) and sadness, anger, fear, contempt and disgust (negative).</p> <p>Create insight, meaning and interpersonal closeness through the use of opposing valence and second order emotions, depending on your role – either from the position of a screenwriter or the position of a director.</p> <p>Seek to write, direct and protect (especially in the edit) space for vulnerability, particularly in those infinitesimal moments where</p>

		<p>characters must make a difficult choice.</p> <p>Test story logic, character credibility, an audience’s core emotional experience and second-order emotion experience via a tailored ‘scripts out loud’ process, and adjust the script accordingly to elevate the positive connections and minimise or negate the negative audience experiences.</p>
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Pitch element: Understanding the business of domestic distribution

Domestic distributor considerations	Director considerations	Creative solution to minimise risk
<p>Does the filmmaking team understand the business of domestic distribution?</p> <p>How would the domestic distributor release the film?</p> <p>What would the film do at the Australian box office and what is the domestic distributor’s net return after the exhibitor’s fee plus the distributor’s potential P&A spend?</p> <p>How much can the domestic distributor expect to make from TV and VOD?</p> <p>How much is the film’s budget and what would a domestic distributor need to pay as an advance to acquire the film?</p> <p>Is the film capable of ‘standing its ground’ in the theatrical space against much bigger movies?</p> <p>Are the members of the filmmaking team communicative, diplomatic, trustworthy collaborators capable of delivering the film in the tone and style pitched, on time and on budget, as well as understanding the domestic distributor’s needs?</p> <p>Is the filmmaking team relatively unknown to the domestic distributor and have members not collaborated before? Or are they</p>	<p>How can a director think like a domestic distributor and address all the reasons why a distributor may not want to sell this film?</p> <p>How can a director collaborate in symbiotic way with domestic distributors to best serve the needs of the project and everyone involved?</p>	<p>Define the vision for the film through a short-form tonal proof of concept (under 10 minutes) as well as via the use of visuals in a pitch book.</p> <p>During the pitch presentation and within the pitch materials, speak to why the members of the filmmaking team are the right collaborators to make this project.</p> <p>From the position of the director, demonstrate how the film ‘is in them’ and why they have to make it.</p> <p>Reframe the director’s approach regarding the distribution and marketing of the feature film by thinking like a distributor and asking ‘What are all the reasons why I would NOT want to sell this film?’</p> <p>Having analysed the above risk factors, formulate ways to prove that the members of the filmmaking team have the ability and resources to offset these risks.</p> <p>Gather the film’s creative heads of department and make a tonal proof of concept that addresses the perceived long-form execution-dependent</p>

<p>new untested talent, so the distributor has doubts that they can deliver the film in the style and tone pitched for the proposed budget?</p> <p>The film may not naturally suit the domestic distributor's preferred target demographic.</p> <p>The level of P&A spend needed to generate 'cut-through' is not viable against the style/type of film.</p> <p>The distributor is concerned that the film will not be able to compete against bigger films in a crowded theatrical space.</p>		<p>challenges and risks at an appropriate budget level.</p> <p>First, define the project's target audience by examining the demographic as an individual, which includes their age, where they live, what they like to watch and what movies they prefer to see. Second, reconstruct the pitch presentation and materials so they demonstrate how this film could be marketed to the distributor's preferred target demographic.</p> <p>Design a domestic marketing campaign that demonstrates that the filmmaking team has the ability and resources to work together to create an effective campaign for a less expensive P&A spend appropriate to the style and budget of the film (to be discussed under the managing investor risk section).</p> <p>Become a box office stockbroker and draw on the likeness and appeal factor of other box office successes that are tonally similar to the film currently being pitched.</p> <p>Determine which key elements are connecting and resonating with the pre-existing film's demographic and elevate those aspects in the pitch presentation for the film in financing.</p> <p>Request to be present at marketing and distribution strategy meetings prior to official pre-production, and offer creative marketing ideas where appropriate (to be discussed below).</p> <p>Directors could offer their creative skillset to collaborate with others and help create the necessary marketing and social media assets.</p> <p>Directors could request to be present for exhibitor screenings prior to the release of the film and lend their skills to make adjustments or changes to minimise perceived risks, where this is deemed both necessary and appropriate.</p> <p>As discussed in Chapter 3, directors should recognise and respect the point in time at which the domestic distributor</p>
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		takes responsibility for the national release of the film.
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Pitch element: Script and screenwriting awards

Domestic distributor considerations	Director considerations	Creative solution to minimise risk
<p>How can a domestic distributor balance the following questions:</p> <p>Does this story work?</p> <p>Does this story move me?</p> <p>Is it a good emotional story?</p> <p>with:</p> <p>How can we get people to see this story?</p> <p>What are the market elements attached to this story?</p> <p>How can we sell this story to its target demographic?</p>	<p>How can the director protect what they perceive to be unique, original and exciting about the story while maintaining the integrity of the overall vision?</p> <p>Simultaneously, with regard to the script, how can the screenwriter accommodate the needs of the domestic distributors as well as the audience and other investors?</p>	<p>Present not only a well-developed script that has undergone a rigorous script editing process, but also have researched which distributors are engaging in what type of product.</p> <p>Elevate specific elements in the script that appeal to the domestic distributor’s target demographic and/or their personal interests as well as reducing the elements that may be seen as too negative, confrontational or confusing and/or uncategorisable for the target demographic.</p> <p>Utilise a ‘scripts out loud’ process to refine the target demographic as well as identifying the script’s strengths and weaknesses.</p> <p>Refine and rewrite the script (as writer/director) or encourage further drafts (as director only) to elevate the project’s strengths while minimising negative influences.</p> <p>As part of the rewriting process, how can I ensure due diligence with respect to the use of opposing valance in certain highlight scenes and/or moments, being aware that they could be used as key trailer moments down the track?</p> <p>How can I use a ‘scripts out loud’ process to determine and refine the film’s core message/s or impact statement, which could then be used to focus the film’s pitch materials in both the financing and marketing stages?</p> <p>How can I utilise trusted readers’ reports from key international marketplaces to provide insight into which story nuances are being lost to cultural differences and, if deemed necessary, rewrite to prevent the</p>

		<p>negation of moments that rely on important subtext?</p> <p>As a screenwriter, how can I balance my desire for my work to be recognised and validated against the time, energy and money required to enter screenwriting competitions, knowing that even the most favourable result will have very little impact on a domestic distributor's decision-making process?</p>
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Pitch element: A cohesive core creative team

Domestic distributor considerations	Director considerations	Creative solution to minimise risk
<p>Does the project have the appropriate team attached that can deliver the look and style of the film as pitched, on time and within budget?</p>	<p>How can the director prove to the domestic distributor and other investors that the filmmaking team has the talent and capacity to deliver the film on time and within budget in the style and tone pitched?</p>	<p>Attach an experienced producer or at least a producer who has successfully delivered a feature film in a similar budget range to the feature currently being pitched, followed by an experienced DOP.</p> <p>Develop ways to elevate the creative 'hooks' in the pitch package – be it an award-winning cinematographer with a unique ability that suits this style of project, or a composer or production designer with a specialist talent that can be utilised in the production.</p> <p>Create a proof of concept that demonstrates the world/s of the film while bringing all the unique creative 'hooks' together – one that demonstrates the world of the film, the director's approach to character and the team's ability to execute a few key challenging production techniques.</p> <p>If it is not possible to collaborate with the creative head of departments to create a tonal proof of concept, incorporate their existing work into a tonal 'mash up' that represents the world/s of the film.</p>

Pitch element: Tonal proof

Domestic distributor considerations	Director considerations	Creative solution to minimise risk
<p>Has the filmmaking team provided evidence that it can deliver the look and style of the film on time and within budget?</p>	<p>How can the director provide evidence to the domestic distributor and other investors that the filmmaking team has the talent and capacity to deliver the film on time and within budget in the style and tone pitched?</p>	<p>Analyse the strengths and weaknesses within the long-form project before choosing which challenges and assets to address in tonal short form according to the resources available.</p> <p>With regard to analysing the assets and challenges within the feature, consider what needs to be demonstrated via tonal proof with respect to the following attributes: genre, story type, key themes, target audience, dominant audience experience/s, characters, dialogue, key creative team, cinematography, setting/s, editing, soundtrack design, music, production design and post-production, best use of a filmmaker’s passion and talents, available resources, audience and investor viewing timeframes and format, as well as key collaborator expectations.</p> <p>Identify and prioritise the primary challenges within the long-form project that need to be proven in tonal short form.</p> <p>Identify the most compelling, unique and/or exciting aspect/s of the film and analyse the challenges inherent in bringing these specific elements or world/s to the screen in terms of available budget, resources and personnel.</p> <p>Determine the key execution-dependent challenges – whether of a tonal nature or a practical nature – that cannot be demonstrated using previous examples of a director’s work.</p> <p>Determine the key expectations and/or successful tropes of the genre and determine how the characters will be pitched within that genre or genre combinations.</p> <p>Research comparable successful films in terms of tonal approach and genre and identify key selling elements or</p>

		<p>approaches that can then be drawn upon in the creation of a tonal proof of concept.</p> <p>Determine which tonal aspects are too expensive to demonstrate or that risk being under-served due to limited available resources that instead can be demonstrated via a tonal ‘mash up’.</p> <p>Taking the above into consideration, determine which of the following is the most suitable option in terms of achieving the tonal goals with available resources: (1) the production of a scene or sequence from the film; or (2) the production of a complete narrative that can be experienced as a stand-alone work.</p> <p>Having made the above decision, seek to speak to the remaining tonal proof challenges by way of a tonal ‘mash up’ or ‘stealomatic’, which may include the works of other practitioners as well as the director’s previous work.</p> <p>Consider which form of tonal proof is best suited to both the project and the needs of the filmmaker.</p> <p>For example:</p> <p>Consider where the filmmaker’s passion and natural skillset is best suited – online web series, interactive media, short film, etc.</p> <p>Determine a format and run time that best serve the viewing needs of potential investors.</p> <p>Determine the resources that are both affordable and available to the filmmaking team.</p> <p>Determine the expectations of other key collaborators and communicate the project’s shared goals and expectations.</p>
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Pitch element: Managing investor expectations – a ‘bankable’ cast

Domestic distributor considerations	Director considerations	Creative solution to minimise risk
Does the cast have enough public critical capital to successfully sell the film domestically?	How can the director attach a name cast that has the ability to sell the film nationally as well as internationally?	<p>Conduct research into the current bankability of cast and include potential sales agents and distributors in early discussions to ascertain the viability of the filmmaking team’s potential list.</p> <p>Create a list of bankable cast that can realistically be attached in conjunction with the producer/s.</p> <p>If you are the screenwriter, determine how you can create a role for a certain name actor that will excite them, push their boundaries and challenge them as an artist –essentially encouraging them to take the risk and work with a first-time feature film director for potentially less than their normal fee.</p> <p>From the position of a director, the question is the same: How can I pitch this story to name cast with the same intention?</p>

Pitch element: Managing investor expectations – a responsible budget

Domestic distributor considerations	Director considerations	Creative solution to minimise risk
Does the films budget align with its market potential?	How can the director enhance the film’s original vision while simultaneously respecting the film’s budget with regard to its market potential?	<p>Engage with a ‘less is more’ methodology and make the film with fewer resources without sacrificing the filmmaker’s ‘kill to keep’ moments.</p> <p>Minimise the more expensive sequences by engaging in more creative or in-camera solutions while still elevating the purpose of every scene with the unexpected.</p> <p>Where appropriate, embrace the concept of creating vulnerability by either isolating or socially distancing characters and therefore avoid extra cast costs.</p>

Pitch element: Managing investor expectations – an appropriate marketing spend

Domestic distributor considerations	Director considerations	Creative solution to minimise risk
<p>Is the film’s marketing spend commensurate with its estimated domestic box returns as well as projected ancillary sales?</p> <p>Is the marketing spend enough to create visibility for the target demographic while also taking into consideration associated publicity costs, including travel?</p> <p>How will the marketing costs need to be adjusted depending on the amount of competition in the theatrical space at the time of the film’s intended release?</p>	<p>How can the director assist the producer and the distributor to enable the film to achieve ‘cut-through’ with regard to its target demographic?</p>	<p>Collaborate in designing a domestic marketing campaign demonstrating that the filmmaking team has the ability and resources to work together to create an effective campaign for a less expensive P&A spend (appropriate for the style and budget of the film). This could include:</p> <p>Requesting to be present at marketing and distribution strategy meetings prior to pre-production and offering creative marketing ideas where appropriate.</p> <p>Offering your creative skillset to collaborate with others and help create the necessary digital and other marketing assets, such as a memorable and catchy title, the film’s core marketing message that aligns with the film’s vision; the film’s impact statement (if desired social change is core to the film); cause-related alliance marketing campaign ideas; authentic behind-the-scenes material; EPK material; stills and poster material; flyer and trailer material; a cinema ‘call to arms’ pre-film screener – for example, a clever reminder for the audience to turn off their phone as well as material for the creation of social media assets. If time is limited and the director needs to focus on their primary directorial obligations, consider engaging a trustworthy creative practitioner combined with a social media marketing strategist who is also capable of inhabiting the director’s vision to accrue the necessary material.</p> <p>Research and employ the skillset of those who have successfully self-distributed to source other ways to effectively contribute to the marketing and publicity campaign for the film.</p> <p>Take into consideration that for social media to be properly effective, it is best if social media assets are used to engage and nurture an online audience as soon as the film is green lit for production. Therefore, a filmmaking team needs to consider how they can finance the necessary social media assets ahead of production.</p>

		<p>Make sure you and your cast are available for the necessary publicity campaign obligations.</p> <p>Become a positive spokesperson for the film at all engagements.</p> <p>Involve the cast and crew in a social media marketing workshop where they are invited to collaborate to widen the social media reach for the film.</p>
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Pitch element: Self-promotion

Domestic distributor considerations	Director considerations	Creative solution to minimise risk
Does the director have a public and/or social media profile that can assist with the marketing of the film?	How can the director raise their industry profile and public/social media following with respect to capitalising on a public profile and social media following to market the film?	<p>Become an involved industry networker. If networking is not part of the director's natural skill-set, then look at how to attach a producer and/or other collaborators to the project who are better suited to self-promotion.</p> <p>With regard to self-promotion via social media, employ or engage the appropriate social media strategists/personnel to address the gap.</p>

Pitch element: The value of key international film festivals and awards

Domestic distributor considerations	Director considerations	Creative solution to minimise risk
If the film is part of the domestic distributor's slate, how can the domestic distributor leverage the film's critical capital created via key international film festivals and events with respect to marketing the film in Australia?	How can the director leverage the critical capital acquired at these events to not only create further publicity and awareness surrounding the film, but also develop future career opportunities?	<p>Develop an understanding of which types/styles of films are being selected for which key film festivals, particularly those that domestic distributors and federal funding agencies hold in high regard.</p> <p>Determine which of these key festival/s is best suited to premiere the film.</p> <p>Leverage the international opportunity to meet with other producers, talent agents, filmmakers, distributors, sales agents, financiers and production company personnel, not only to pitch yourself as a director for hire but also to pitch future screen projects. To this end, come prepared with all the relevant pitch material, as previously discussed.</p>

On completion of this compendium, I am reminded of a quote from award-winning journalist, screenwriter and author Helen Garner. She reflected in her non-fiction book *True Stories* (1996) on what her working life as a writer had taught her:

You write a novel, and you think, good, right, now I know how to write a novel.

WRONG. You found out how to write that novel; but what you nussed out for that one is not going to help you write the next. Each new bout of work demands a new approach. You have to teach yourself something afresh, every single time, and then when you've learnt that, you have to teach yourself a whole lot more.

(Garner 1996, 140)

So, in the spirit of Garner's working life lesson, the above framework offers a step-by step guide not just for me, but for all aspiring Australian feature film directors wishing to become valuable and collaborative members of the director, producer, distributor team. As Garner reminds us, with each new project we must start anew, apply due diligence and never assume that we already know enough.

6

Conclusion

While I still believe passion, persistence and risk-taking are fundamental to the creative process, as part of the extensive reflective practice and praxis undertaken during this doctoral journey, I have learnt that it is impossible to make strong creative and strategic choices without enough prior knowledge of the business of the feature film industry – the business of financing, production, marketing and distribution. It was this combination – creativity, passion, risk, persistence, dedication, knowledge and strategy – that allowed me to successfully write and direct *The Butterfly Tree* (2017). The doctoral journey outlined in this thesis has not only addressed the research question, but exceeded my expectations by providing me with the tools and experience necessary to successfully write and direct a feature film that competed at the highest level on both the national and the international stage. To the best of my knowledge, it has also enabled me to become the first doctoral candidate in Australia to have written and directed a fiction feature film produced through mainstream funding mechanisms that has been both locally and internationally distributed.

My niche research has built on previous scholarship attributable to the domestic distribution of Australian feature films, such as the work of previously cited academics such as Lauren Carroll Harris and Silver, Maher and Kerrigan, as well as professional screen practitioners and government agencies such as Vincent Sheehan, Sue Maslin AO and Screen Australia. It has used a bricoleur mixed-methods approach to fill a gap in in this particular field of expertise via a focused and systematic approach to gathering domestic distributor information and insights. The intention of this thesis is to offer emerging Australian feature film directors a greater chance of working collaboratively with producers and domestic distributors in a sustained effort to connect and monetise their films via a target demographic. My research project was both nationally

focused and film practitioner centric in that it went directly to domestic distributors and, from the perspective of an emerging director, asked ‘What do I need to know before I pitch to you, and how can I be of most use to the process of marketing and distribution?’ Hence, I emphasised the importance of emerging directors creating the time and space to understand how domestic distributors think. My research project has contributed to three fundamental areas of the Australian feature filmmaking process:

1. It provides a framework of creative and strategic choices, thus enabling emerging Australian feature film directors a greater chance of securing the commitment of a domestic distributor and triggering finance in the form of the producer offset rebate.
2. It discusses the value of emerging Australian feature film directors embracing marketing and distribution as a collective challenge.
3. It provides a process by which emerging directors can address the strengths and weaknesses in their long-form projects via a tonal short form proof of concept, thus enhancing their creative vision while minimising domestic distributor risk.

By providing emerging and future Australian feature film directors with a 10-point decision-making compendium in the form of a table of strategic and creative considerations, which include domestic distributor concerns versus emerging director concerns, while offering creative solutions, I have addressed the following research question:

How might an aspiring Australian feature film director efficiently transition from short filmmaking to feature film directing by minimising domestic distributor risk while simultaneously strengthening their creative vision?

Having originally anticipated submitting the doctorate prior to producing the film, in the end it was submitted after production and domestic distribution. As discussed in Chapter 5, this raised a number of challenges not foreseen at the time of framing my question. It is perhaps

notable that I have not answered for myself or for others the question of how best to choose a domestic distributor that not only secures the requisite distribution guarantee but also does the best possible job of assisting a filmmaker's work to reach the maximum possible audience. In my view, this is not only beyond the scope of this doctorate but arguably beyond the scope of the current system.

At the time of writing this conclusion (May 2021), domestic distributors continue to play a crucial role within the context of the Australian feature film environment – a challenging and rapidly evolving landscape. As noted in the Introduction, it must be acknowledged on 20 September 2020, 'the Australian government announced proposed changes to the Producer Offset, which will come into effect for productions commencing principal photography on or after 1 July 2021' (Screen Australia 2021). These include:

- The Producer Offset will be a 30 per cent rebate for all eligible formats.
- The minimum qualifying Australian production expenditure (QAPE) threshold will be increased to \$1 million for feature-length content.
- The '*Gallipoli* clause', which allows some costs incurred outside of Australia to be claimed as QAPE, will be removed.
- The 65 commercial hour cap will be removed for drama productions.
- The above-the-line (ATL) QAPE cap will be extended to non-feature documentaries.
- The level of Australian held copyright that can be claimed will be capped at 30 per cent of total production expenditure.
- Overheads will no longer be eligible to be claimed as QAPE.

On 11 April 2021, the government made a further announcement that feature films will retain the 40 per cent rebate (Screen Australia 2021).

Prior to intense lobbying to government undertaken by industry professionals for the producer offset rebate for feature films to be retained at 40 per cent, in personal communication with Screen Australia's production offset and co-production department, I queried how these proposed changes may affect the Screen Australia directive regarding the requirement to attach a domestic distributor and an international sales agent, and therefore what future role domestic distributors would play if a theatrical release was no longer required to access the 30 per cent offset. In response, Screen Australia advised that

Feature film productions that commence principal photography on, or after 1 July 2021 will no longer require a theatrical release to receive the producer offset of 30 per cent. Therefore, it will no longer be a requirement of the producer offset for a distributor to be attached for these productions and that whilst the reform has been announced by the Minister Paul Fletcher, new legislation is yet to be drafted and Screen Australia presumes that applicants will not require an international sales agent given that all formats will receive the same offset value, however until the legislation is amended Screen Australia cannot be prescriptive regarding what will be required. (Screen Australia, pers. comm. 2021)

The question of whether the attachment of a domestic distributor and an international sales agent will now be required as means to prove pathways to audiences, given that the 40 per cent rebate has been reinstated, remains unknown. However, many domestic distributors predict that their role and relationship with independent filmmakers will remain largely unchanged; that films will still need to prove pathways to audiences to access the producer offset and that, depending on a distributor's focus – whether that be cinema centric or other platform focused – their knowledge and relationships within these sectors will remain critical (Brady, Mackie, Page, Harrison, pers. comm. 2021).

For example, Transmission Films intends to sustain its focus on facilitating theatrical marketing and sales, and managing all rights as well as putting up advances that form part of the finance plan (Mackie, pers. comm. 2021). However, with regard to raising private finance under the new system, Mackie and Maslin (pers. comm. 2021) warn that independent producers financing through a model that relies on a presale to a streamer such as Netflix or Stan negates the potential for super profits (often referred to in the industry as ‘blue sky’) provided by the old model, and that while these profits are unlikely, this promise is what has drawn a lot of investment to independent Australian films in the past. Mackie (pers. comm. 2021) stated that in Transmission’s recent experience, some investors are less excited about part financing a streamer project as there is no avenue to make money beyond the streaming sale as the streamers take all rights:

This is an important distinction. I also think, like the studios, that streamers are highly globalised and that the opportunity for indies [independent films] has been in the projects these multinationals overlook at a local level. We’ve built a business on films that the studios have rejected, and I see streamers not being that different in terms of being, to a large extent, US centric. I also feel there is a class of film – upscale/arthouse for example – that streamers won’t be interested in. Would a streamer have invested upfront in *Babyteeth* (Murphy 2019)? It doesn’t feel that way. However, that film worked locally and launched multiple careers. We cannot dismiss the value of that in sustaining a local film industry.

(Mackie, pers. comm. 2021)

At a 2021 Senate Estimates hearing, Screen Australia’s CEO Graeme Mason acknowledged that the government’s proposed media reforms may result in fewer theatrical features, ‘but said the organisation remained committed to supporting projects for which cinemas were the perfect home’ (Mason, in Slatter 2021). During the hearing, the box office success of Australian films

such as *The Dry* (Connolly 2020) and *Penguin Bloom* (Ivin 2020) were used to discuss how the above proposals, such as the lowering of the producer offset for feature films to 30 per cent, would impact the industry. The ironic COVID-19 created twist is that, due to the pandemic-induced restrictions that negatively affected US theatrical exports to Australia, which domestic distributors (Brady, Mackie, A. Harrison, Page 2021) predicted would lessen from July 2021, recent Australian feature films have monetised a substantial theatrical audience. Such films include *High Ground* (Johnson 2020), which (according to Box Office Mojo as at 25 April 2021) took \$2431,106 at the domestic box office, *Penguin Bloom* (Ivin 2020), which grossed \$5,771,249 (as at 25 April 2021) and Connolly's *The Dry* (2020), which as of March 2021 had earned A\$20 million at the box office (to become the 15th highest grossing film of all time at the national box office) (Jansen, Box Office Mojo 2021). Joel Pearlman, CEO of *The Dry*'s distributor, Roadshow Films, considers *The Dry*'s financial success proof 'that there will always be an appetite for quality Australian productions which can without a doubt rival their Hollywood counterparts at the box office' (Pearlman, in Jansen 2021).

Rather than attaching the issue of lack of connection and monetisation of a target audience to the creation and production of Australian feature films, these results support the notion that there is indeed an eager Australian audience for Australian feature films when the appropriate films have been sufficiently supported in terms of marketing apparatus and the audience is given a real opportunity to view those films in a less US-dominated, competitive theatrical environment. It is a notion that has been discussed extensively and examined by the previously cited academics, filmmakers, domestic distributors and screen funding agencies. As Carroll Harris (2018, 248–50) argues, the industry requires a collective approach to addressing an over-supply of Australian films with an under-supply of circulation outlets by developing a cultural policy framework that is predicated on establishing:

- a voluntary industry fund to aid distribution and exhibition support
- concrete guidelines that distinguish ‘specialised cinema’ – to recognise films that need assistance to boost their availability and their commercial results.

This would take into account films that are to be released on a small number of prints, experimental in nature and/or by an early-career director. (Carroll Harris 2018, 248–50). As previously discussed, Carroll Harris’s (2018) research speaks to a number of possible solutions, including support for distributors and exhibitors by way of a tax offset for distribution and marketing expenditure; the establishment of a separate wing of Screen Australia for international distribution of Australian films; the provision of cash grants to cinemas that screen Australian films; and assistance from the Screen Australia distribution manager to secure co-distribution with media organisations, non-profits and community organisations, whose work meshes with the content of specific feature films and documentaries. She also advocates for minimum three-week runs for local films in cinemas, with the aim of increasing ticket sales to benefit both distributors and exhibitors, as well as a number of practical suggestions for audience development through distribution and exhibition support (Carroll Harris 2018, 248–50).

This is the kind of support endorsed by Maslin. However, rather than subsidising exhibitors, she advocates for exhibitors to be incentivised to raise the performance of Australian films. Maslin (pers. comm. 2021) recommends that exhibitors consider a degree of ‘buy-in’, such as contributing to the project’s greenlighting process, advancing recoupable marketing funds, committing to in-cinema promotions up front and equity investment. This would go some way towards balancing an inversely proportional value chain in relation to financial risk – a value chain in which those who invest early and take the highest degree of risk receive the least reward via recoupment while those at the end of the chain, the exhibitors who take the least risk, receive 60–65 per cent of gross box office returns from first position.

The domination of our screen sector by US interests also affects other mainstream platforms available in Australia, where Australian audiences pay to access Australian films. These include the likes of streaming giants such as Netflix and Stan, which – as previously discussed – are not currently obliged, under any content quota system or minimum spend requirements on local content, to screen Australian product, while at the same time not being required to share their viewership data. They are also not taxed on the \$500 million in revenue they derive from their 4.9 million Australian subscribers. (Maslin 2019, 4). Meanwhile, the national free-to-air TV platforms for Australian content, our national broadcasters such as the ABC and SBS, have ‘lost in excess of \$60 million dollars over the past three years and remain under sustained attack by the government for their perceived bias’ (Maslin 2019, 3).

Mackie (pers. comm. 2021), while believing that independent Australian producers are better served to include the streamers as part of their business model, also warns that to build an entire business around the streaming giants, without equity investment from them in the producer’s own production company, is extremely risky:

Firstly, we find it very difficult to second-guess the preferences of the streamers (in some cases it’s driven partially by algorithms). Secondly, I don’t think the streaming landscape is as stable as some think. Yes, they will be a permanent feature of the landscape, but there is an explosion of investment right now and at some stage I suspect there will be consolidation. The indie world offers multiple paths to financing. Relying on streaming alone tends to remove the word ‘independent’ from the term ‘independent producer’. (Mackie, pers. comm. 2021)

Although being able to sell a film direct to a streamer, and negate the theatrical experience, does offer producers more options, Page (pers. comm. 2021) doubts that

‘the price of losing 10 per cent of the offset for theatrical films is worth it’. Maslin (pers. comm. 2021) is also cautious, and predicts that seeking finance via the streaming model will create huge barriers to entry to a significant number of production companies, where the streamers will only want to engage with a small number of bigger companies with which they have previously fostered favourable relationships:

They are going to be almost like citadels ... those companies will Hoover up talent and have a big slate which is great for them and great for the filmmakers that get those opportunities. But for everybody else who sits outside the citadel gate, which is the innovative and emerging talent, it’s going to be very difficult for them to cut through going forward. (Maslin, pers. comm. 2021)

Arguably, this concentration down to a few independent production companies is exactly what has happened to the world of series television, for both drama and documentary.

Whether these issues can collectively be addressed is not only dependent on screen practitioners, exhibitors and distributors rising to the challenge, but also on how state and federal funding agencies choose to engage with and allocate their funding towards finding solutions – particularly at a time when, rather than systemically supporting Australian feature film distribution, Screen Australia has gradually wound back its marketing division and reduced the agency’s international film festival presence by closing its offices at key international film festivals (Maslin, pers. comm. 2021).

Regarding the recent changes to the offset, at the recent Senate Estimate hearings, Mason (in Slatter 2021) presaged, ‘You will probably see some fewer films made for cinema, but I don’t think that’s necessarily as bad as it sounds on the tin, as long as we are able to support those that really stand up that should be in the cinema.’ The changes to the offset that

have raised the minimum QAPE threshold from \$500,000 to \$1 million for feature length content have no doubt contributed to this prediction, as this means filmmakers operating in the low budget ranges will be unable to access the offset.

Acknowledging that current research still supports cinema as a necessary loss leader that positively impacts the value of the film in other future markets (regardless of platform), the question is: Who gets to determine which future films will ‘stand up’ in the theatrical space? Under the old producer offset model, as discussed, domestic distributors played a vital role in determining which films would screen in the theatrical space and it was possible to finance a feature film without the critical engagement of Screen Australia. Under the new model, if a domestic distributor and international sales agent are no longer required to access the offset, then the concern is that this decision-making process may largely reside with Screen Australia and how it decides to define and administer the future requirements to access the new producer offset rebate (Maslin, Brady, pers. comm. 2021). Recently, in an effort to support the production of Australian drama, documentary and children’s film and television content, the government announced \$30 million in funding for Screen Australia across two years to coincide with the proposed start date of the producer offset reform in July (Slatter 2021). My research findings support the recommendations previously made by the likes of Carroll Harris (2017a) and other screen practitioners, and I would urge Screen Australia to direct an appropriate portion of its funding towards supporting Australian feature films not only with respect to appropriate marketing apparatus, but also in terms of securing Australian films enough domestic theatrical space where they are able to connect with a target demographic and exhaust their cultural and fiscal potential.

Future research

With respect to financial sustainability, I acknowledge that, as a screen practitioner, I operate in an industry severely hampered by current and historical policy that has embraced certain aspects of globalisation to detrimental effect. In short, as discussed previously, Australia has directly and indirectly sold its most financially viable screen assets (the theatrical and SVOD space) to chiefly US interests. Apart from investigating and/or enacting the previously cited recommendations with respect to supporting the financial viability and cultural impact of Australian feature films via sustainable distribution methods, I conclude by asking for further research to be conducted in the following areas:

- To examine not only how Australia can prevent further loss of its most viable screen assets to overseas interests, but also determine how the industry can win back and/or create more sustainable Australian-owned and controlled theatrical and non-theatrical platforms.
- To work towards industry data transparency to determine financially viable online distribution models for Australian feature films.
- To investigate what streamers such as Stan and Netflix want in terms of Australian content as well as data transparency regarding SVOD viewership.
- To investigate what exhibitors want in terms of Australian films and data transparency regarding theatrical viewership. This line of questioning could include what preferred demographics are watching which films, why certain demographics choose one type of film over another, and what is influencing each of these demographics' choices?
- To investigate creating a safe space with exhibitors enabling filmmakers to dialogue with exhibitors to test the theatrical viability of their projects at an early stage of development (Maslin, pers. comm. 2021).

- To provide marketing and financial audience data transparency, with data shared between exhibitors, distributors and filmmakers in a collective effort to determine not only which films are likely to succeed on which platforms, but also what forms of collective marketing apparatus can systematically be employed through all stages of production and release to connect with and monetise relevant target demographics.
- To research the concept of a sustainable theatrical collective where the creation of cinema space is supported through state and/or federal funding agencies and/or councils while being curated by filmmakers and/or distributors, thus cutting out the exhibitor fee and serving as a more viable loss leader for Australian feature films. These could include non-traditional theatrical spaces with the potential to draw on the cross-promotional aspects of sharing a space and audience with other entertainment forms in a way that can rival other event economies.

While I support future collaborative research, analysis and action to address the challenges discussed in my thesis, my specific contribution to this collective cultural, industrial and political challenge represents that of a professional screen writer and director. This research has interrogated the ways in which emerging feature film directors can collaborate with their producer/s and domestic distributor to effectively engage with and monetise a substantial target audience. I also acknowledge that the framework of creative and strategic considerations at which I arrived may not suit all aspiring Australian feature film directors; however, the lessons I have learnt as part of this decade-long journey have changed the way I live, create and work. I would therefore like to summarise those lessons that have been the most transformative.

I now make both creative and strategic choices to nurture my art and craft, and take full responsibility for protecting my time and space to explore and create. I take seriously the task of creating time in my day to pursue my passions while juggling other life demands by

finding fewer solutions to satisfy multiple needs. I try to live more simply, with less clutter – material, intellectual and emotional. I serve my creative self and set boundaries to stop always putting the needs of others first. I set boundaries and communicate my expectations regarding how I am to be treated as a partner, parent, friend, family member, colleague and creative spirit. I accept that I can't be all things to all people. I am learning to negate or minimise the impact of people with unhealthy behaviours – those who take more than they give. I honour my health – physical, emotional, spiritual and financial – as best I can, as I am keenly aware that this is the most fundamental creative tool I have.

I accept that my time on earth is limited, and I try to make choices that honour my priority passions, whether they be family, partners, friends or a particular project/s. I allow time to play, to be adventurous and to sit still – to contemplate the truth of the agendas that lie behind any choice/s I am about to make. I also acknowledge that this choice to honour myself as a curious and creative spirit and practitioner comes with sacrifices that can sometimes be difficult to navigate and/or accept. When I need help to make peace with the results or circumstances that these choices create, I have learnt to be courageous enough to seek wise counsel and/or professional help.

I make time to expand my knowledge of the industry and I try to stay abreast of the rapidly changing screen landscape. Within this rapidly changing landscape, with each new project, I assess how I can upskill or assess what I need to provide to demonstrate that I have what it takes to be a valued and collaborative member of the director, producer, distributor team. I make an effort to understand, from the producer's and distributor's perspective, how the project will be pitched, marketed, distributed and sold, and assess how I can creatively and practically enhance this process.

In the early stages of the creative process – which for me often begins with writing – I allow space for exploration, adventure and playfulness before I engage in any critical

analysis. I give myself permission to write an ‘if I were to die tomorrow’ draft or a ‘no marketplace/financing hoops to jump through’ draft, and I try to be as fearless as possible. When I hear the little voice in my head that says, ‘You can’t write that – what will people think?’, I force myself to write it anyway. I tell the inner critic that, ‘Now is my time and that you will have plenty of time later when I am able to inhabit a more critical script editor mindset.’ When I write, as well as applying my creative intuition and my knowledge of the craft of screenwriting, I think forward to the actors and imagine them reading the draft. I ask myself, ‘How would they love to play?’, where the word ‘play’ suggests the experience of exploration and discovery. If I were them, what would engage me as a powerful creative and vulnerable talent? I write to challenge, inspire and engage them. They are my kin. I also acknowledge that it is also only when I give myself permission to truly expose the characters’ vulnerabilities and take risks, both in the creative development process and during production, that I discover anything new or original or authentic that will invariably become a big part of what will help the final film compete at the highest level on the world stage.

As a director, as well as continuing to practise and upskill my craft, I have learnt to surround myself with key creative forces who are more talented and/or more experienced than I am. I have learnt to honour and nurture each creative team player and allow them space in the collaborative creative process that is filmmaking. I acknowledge that every crew contribution is valuable and have learnt to encourage those contributions and show gratitude. I have learnt when it is okay to say ‘I don’t know’ and to ask for help. I have also learnt to know when to fight for the story and the vision – that ego, with its fear-based agendas, should never take precedence over what is the best choice for the film as an entity unto itself. If possible, before pre-production begins, I allow space to explore creative processes with other key creative heads of department, as I have found this to be an extremely efficient and valuable use of time and energy, rather than

trying to make all the necessary creative and logic-based decisions under the time and financial pressures that exist during the production process.

Finally, it has only been via the transformative process of this doctorate that I have been able to define the creative experience to which I aspire, both in life and in my creative practice. In an attempt to communicate this, I draw inspiration from a popular quote taken from President Theodore Roosevelt's speech titled 'Citizenship in a Republic', given at the Sorbonne in April 1910:

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat. (Roosevelt 1910)

Last but not least, I acknowledge that the filmmaking journey is one of infinite learning and growth, of ever-evolving connection with self and others, a highly addictive undertaking that thrives on creativity, passion, risk, adversity, struggle, courage, persistence, endurance, tenacity, patience, strategy and a little bit of zeitgeist magic. I wish all those who choose to engage in such a wild and wonderful mission the strength, stamina, courage, faith, resilience, grace and humility that they not only deserve, but will need to enjoy the journey.

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- Bitter and Twisted*. 2008. Christopher Weekes. Australia. Distributor: Odin's Eye Entertainment
- Black Robe*. 1991. Bruce Beresford Australia/Canada. Distributor: Hoyts Distribution
- Bondi Hipsters*. 2011. Nick Boshier, Christian Van Vuuren. Australia. Distributor: self-distributed
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- Cargo* – short film. 2013. Ben Howling and Yolanda Ramke. Australia. Distributor: self-distributed
- Cargo* – feature film. 2017. Ben Howling and Yolanda Ramke. Australia. Distributor: Netflix
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- Crossbow*. 2007. David Michod. Australia. Distributor: self-distributed
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Gasland. 2010. Josh Fox. USA. Australian Distributor: Palace Films

Gayby Baby. 2015. Maya Newell. Australia. Distributor: Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Harvie Krumpet. 2013. Adam Elliot. Australia. Distributor: Melodrama Pictures Pty Ltd

Hunt Angels. 2006. Alec Morgan. Australia. Distributor: Film Art Media

I Am Eleven. 2011. Genevieve Bailey. Australia. Distributor: self-distributed

Jackass Presents: Bad Grandpa. 2013. Jeff Tremaine. USA. Distributor: Paramount Pictures

Japanese Story. 2003. Sue Brooks, Australia. Distributor: Palace Films

Jasper Jones. 2017. Rachel. Australia. Distributor: Madman Entertainment

Ladies in Black. 2018. Bruce Beresford. Australia. Distributor: Sony Pictures Releasing

Mad Max: Fury Road. 2015. George Miller. Australia. Distributor: Village Roadshow Pictures

Mary and Max. 2009. Adam Elliot. Australia. Distributor: Icon Productions

Monster – short film. 2005. Jennifer Kent. Australia. Distributor: self-distributed

Mrs Carey's Concert. 2011. Bob Connolly, Sophie Raymond. Australia. Distributor: self-distributed

My Brother Jack. 2001. Ken Cameron Australia. Distributor: Granada Media International

Netherland Dwarf. 2008. David Michod. Australia. Distributor: self-distributed

Over and Out. 2019. Adele Vuko, Christian Van Vuren. Australia. Distributor: You Tube

Paper Planes. 2014. Robert Connolly. Australia. Distributor: Village Roadshow

Plum Role. 2007. Zak Hilditch. Australia. Distributor: international sales – Rogue Arts

Predestination. 2014. Peter Spierig. Michael Spierig Australia. Distributor: Pinnacle Films

Rams. 2020. Jeremy Sims. Australia. Distributor: Roadshow Films

Red Dog. 2011. Kriv Stenders. Australia. Distributor: Village Roadshow Film Distributors

Red Hill. 2010. Patrick Hughes. Australia. Distributor: Sony Releasing

Rise of the Eco Warriors. 2013. Cathy Henkel. Australia. Distributor: Titan View

Road to Nhill. 1997. Sue Brooks. Australia. Distributor: Ronin Films

Romulus My Father. 2007. Robert Connolly. Australia. Distributor: Footprint Films

Soul Mates. 2014–16. Nick Boshier, Christian Van Vuuren, Connor Van Vuuren. Australia. Distributor: ABC Commercial

The Actress. 2005. Zak Hilditch. Australia. Distributor: Quagmire Productions

The Babadook. 2014. Jennifer Kent. Australia. Distributor: Umbrella Entertainment

The Bank. 2001. Robert Connolly. Australia. Distributor: Madman Entertainment

The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel. 2011. Australia. Distributor: 20th Century Fox

The Boys. 1998. Rowan Woods. Australia. Distributor: Globe Films

The Butterfly Tree. 2017. Priscilla Cameron. Australia. Distributor: Vendetta Films

The Death and Life of Otto Bloom. 2016. Cris Jones. Australia. Distributor: Bonsai Films

The Dressmaker. 2015. Jocelyn Moorhouse. Australia. Distributor: Universal Pictures International Australasia

The Dry. 2020. Robert Connolly. Australia. Distributor: Roadshow Films

The Kettering Incident - television series. Rowan Woods, Tony Krawitz. Australia.
Distributor: Jetty Distribution

The King's Speech. 2010. Tom Hooper. Australia. Distributor: Transmission Films

The Monkey's Mask. 2000. Samantha Lang. Australia. Distributor: Footprint Films

The Railway Man. 2013. Jonathan Teplitsky. Australia. Distributor: Transmission Films

The Rover. 2014. David Michod. Australia. Distributor: Village Roadshow Pictures

The Sapphires. 2012. Wayne Blair. Australia. Distributor: Entertainment One/Hopscotch
Films

The Show Must Go On. 2019. Ben Steel. Australia. Distributor: Film Art Media

The Toll. 2010. Zak Hilditch. Australia. Distributor: unknown

The Turning, segment *Aquifer*. 2013. Robert Connolly. Australia. Distributor: Footprint Films

These Final Hours. 2013. Zak Hilditch. Australia. Distributor: Footprint Films

Three Dollars. 2005. Robert Connolly. Australia. Distributor: Arena Film

Tracks. 2013. John Curran Australia. Distributor: Transmission Films

Transmission. 2012. Zak Hilditch. Australia. Distributor: self-distributed

Underground: The Julian Assange Story. 2012. Robert Connolly. Australia. Distributor:
Network Ten

Wentworth. 2013–21. Reg Watson, Lara Radulovich and David Hannam. Fremantle Media.
Australia. Distributor: Foxtel

Whiplash. 2014. Damien Chazelle. USA. Distributor: Sony Pictures Classics

World War Z. 2013. Marc Forster. USA. 2013. Distributor: Paramount Pictures

Appendices

Appendix 1: *The Butterfly Tree* – cast biography

Melissa George, known for *The Slap* (TV series 2015), *Heartbeat* (TV series 2016) and *Bad Mothers* (TV series 2019)

Ed Oxenbould, known for *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*, starring opposite Steve Carell (Arteta 2014), *Paper Planes* (Connolly 2014) and *Wildlife* (Dano 2018), starring opposite Jake Gyllenhaal and Cary Mulligan.

Ewen Leslie, known for *The Daughter* (Stone 2015), *Top of the Lake* (Campion 2013–17) and *The Cry* (2018)

Sophie Lowe, whose recent credits include, *Waiting for the Miracle to Come*, starring opposite Charlotte Rampling and Willie Nelson (Lunson 2018) and in the TV series *Romper Stomper* (Wright 2018).

Appendix 2: *The Butterfly Tree* – festivals and awards list

In late 2017, *The Butterfly Tree* premiered domestically at the prestigious Australian Melbourne International Film Festival (MIFF) and internationally at the Canadian Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF). TIFF is one of the largest film festivals in the world. In 2016, 26 international feature films were selected to screen out of the 5,693 submitted (Toronto International Film Festival 2017).

In the same year, *The Butterfly Tree* was nominated for three Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts Awards (AACTAA) for best original screenplay (for Priscilla Cameron), best actor (for Ewen Leslie) and best original score (for Caitlyn Yeo), and was nominated for five Ozflix Australian Independent Screen Awards, including Best Film under \$5 million, Best Production Design, Best Costume Design, Best Female Performance and Best Visual Effects (which it won).

The film also won the best actress award and excellence in feature film award at the China Australia International Film Festival (CAIFF) as well as the Jury Prize for Best Actress at the San Antonio Film Festival (2018). Ed Oxenbould was also nominated for best actor in a supporting role at the Film Critics Circle of Australia Awards (2018) and composer Caitlyn Yeo won Best Sound Track Album and Best Feature Film Score at Australia's Screen Music Awards (2018).

In 2019 the film won Best Feature Film at the Brazil Cinefest film festival. It has sold internationally to territories that include the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, Russia, China, Pan Asia and Bulgaria, with Amazon taking the rights for Rest of World territories excluding festivals and theatrical (and all rights in Australia/New Zealand). *The Butterfly Tree* was released domestically in cinemas in November 2017.

Appendix 3: *Tidal Marks* synopsis

Lauren, a 40-something woman, is desperate for a baby. After advertising online she strikes up an email relationship with a man supposedly in his late thirties who agrees to be a ‘no strings attached’ father. They arrange to meet for the weekend on a secluded island. At the ferry, Lauren waits for his arrival, but instead is greeted by 17-year-old Julian, the donor’s younger brother, who has faked his identity in the hope of an adventure and getting lucky.

Appendix 4: *Beetle Feeders* flyer and synopsis



beetle feeders (noun)
Definition:
1. A man's nipples; good for feeding beetles.

beetle feeders
Written and Directed by Priscilla Cameron

After the loss of his mother, 13-year-old Alby seeks refuge from his volatile father in a world of erotic insect fantasies. One day while hunting for the elusive Ulysses butterfly, he discovers a dead body in a shallow grave. Enchanted with the corpse's androgynous beauty, a tender encounter brings him closer to the truth.

Contact:
Executive Producer: Priscilla Cameron
Produced by Beetle Pictures and Mosquito Films
p. +61 7 3268 7580, e. beetlefeeders@gmail.com
Running Time: 15 min
Aspect Ratio: 2.35:1 16:9
Language: English Origin: Australia

BETLEPICTURES and MOSQUITO FILMS
presents BEETLE FEEDERS starring DYLAN MCLEAN
music by: CAITLIN YEO sound design SAM PETTY
production design JANE CULVERHOUSE editor CHARLOTTE CUTTING
director of photography JASON HARGREAVES
produced by BRIDGET CALLOW and HEATHER PHILLIPS
written and directed by PRISCILLA CAMERON

Synopsis

Beetlefeeders – by definition, A man’s nipples: good for feeding beetles.

After the loss of his mother, 13-year-old Alby seeks refuge from his volatile father in a world of erotic insect fantasies. One day while hunting for the elusive Ulysses butterfly, he discovers a dead body in a shallow grave. Enchanted by the corpse’s androgynous beauty, a tender encounter brings him closer to the truth.

Appendix 5: List of domestic distributors who participated in the research

Distributor	Interviewee	Position
1. Transmission Films	ANDREW MACKIE	Managing Director with Richard Payten
2. Hopscotch Films	LUCY HILL	Acquisitions Manager
3. Icon Film Distribution	GREG DENNING	General Manager
4. Mushroom Pictures	MARTIN FABYINI	CEO of Mushroom Pictures
5. Umbrella Entertainment	PETER CASTALDI	Distribution Consultant to Umbrella Entertainment
6. Titan View	JOHN L SIMPSON	CEO of Titan View
7. Sharmill Films	KATHERINE THORNTON	National Sales and Distribution Manager
8. Jump Street	JAMIE BAILKOWER	Company Director
9. Palace Films	TONY ZRNA	National Sales Manager for Palace Cinemas
10. Village Roadshow	SEPH MCKENNA	Head of Production, Roadshow Films – Australia
11. Label Distribution	TAIT BRADY	Director/Founder
12. Umbrella Entertainment	JEFF HARRISON	Managing Director
13. Umbrella Entertainment	ARI HARRISON	Head of Sales and Acquisitions
14. Bonsai Films	JONATHAN PAGE	Director

Appendix 6: Questionnaire completed by domestic distributors

1. THE WHOLE PACKAGE

When you are making a decision to collaborate with, invest in and or distribute a first-time feature film director's first feature film.

Although it is a given that all are important, please rank the following elements in order of importance on a scale of 1–5, where 1 is the highest and 5 is the lowest.

THE PRODUCER

THE SCRIPT

THE WRITER

THE CAST – the lead characters

THE SURROUNDING TEAM – the key HODS (Head of Departments)

THE DIRECTORS REEL – what they have already made

THE PITCH – the ability of the director to clearly communicate their vision

THE DIRECTOR AS A PERSON – their personality and your first impressions

THE BUDGET – the likelihood of a return

OTHER INVESTORS – Who else has committed to the project.

Now let's look at each element in more detail

2. THE SCRIPT

When you are making a decision to either invest in and or distribute a first-time feature film directors first feature film.

Please rank the following elements in order of importance on a scale from 1–5, where 1 is the highest and 5 is the lowest.

The strength of the script – you personally enjoyed the read and thought it was something special.

The script has won major national awards

The script has won international awards

Name TWO national awards and TWO international awards, which carry the greatest weight.

3. THE CAST

On a scale from 1–5, where 1 is the highest and 5 is the lowest, please circle or bold the number that reflects the importance of having an actor/actress that carries international weight.

1 2 3 4 5

Please list ONE TO THREE Australian actors/actresses that you believe carry weight internationally.

4. THE TEAM SURROUNDING THE DIRECTOR – Which main players do you expect to see attached to the project, in order of importance?

Please rank the following HODs in order of importance on a scale from 1–5, where 1 is the highest and 5 is the lowest.

THE WRITER

THE PRODUCER

DOP (Director of Photography)

PRODUCTION DESIGNER

EDITOR

SOUND DESIGNER

COMPOSER

4A. On a scale from 1–5, where 1 is the highest and 5 is the lowest, please circle or bold the number that reflects the importance of the NO 1 and NO 2 HOD having won awards.

1 2 3 4 5

5. AWARDS

Name FIVE awards that you think hold weight within or influence the Australian industry for FEATURES. Please list in order, from 1–5.

6. FILM FESTIVALS FOR FEATURES

Which film festivals do you think hold weight within or influence the Australian industry for FEATURES? Please list in order, from 1–5.

7. FILM FESTIVALS FOR SHORT FILMS

Which film festivals you think hold weight within or influence the Australian industry for SHORT FILMS? Please list in order, from 1–5.

8. SHORT FILM versus LOW or NO BUDGET FEATURE

Which would give you more confidence to invest in the director's next film?

Neither the short nor the feature reflect tonally the project they are pitching. (bold or circle)

A short film that has screened at one of the festivals you listed above.

A low budget feature that had travelled nationally and internationally but not screened at one of the festivals listed above.

9. TONE AND STYLE

How important is it that the filmmaker has on their reel; a trailer, scenes or short film that tonally reflects the feature film they want to make?

On a scale from 1–5, where 1 is the highest and 5 is the lowest, please bold or circle the number that reflects this.

1 2 3 4 5

10. STYLE VERSUS AWARDS

Which would give you more confidence. (bold or circle)

1. A reel with a short that has screened at one of the above festivals that is completely different in tone and style to the feature the filmmaker is pitching?

2. A reel with a short that is closely reflective in term of tone and style of the feature that the filmmaker is pitching that HAS NOT screened at one of the above festivals?

11. THE DIRECTOR'S REEL

Please rank the following elements on a director's reel in order of importance on a scale from 1–5, where 1 is the highest and 5 is the lowest.

They have a SHORT FILM THAT HAS WON INTERNATIONAL AWARD/s in e.g. The Academy Awards, Cannes, Berlin, Sundance, Venice, Tampere, Clermont-Ferrand,

They have a SHORT FILM that has screened at nationally and internationally (but not at the above festivals) and is TONALLY SIMILAR to the feature they are now pitching to you.

They have an ULTRA LOW BUDGET FEATURE that has won a major NATIONAL award e.g. IF Independent spirit award or an AFI

They have award winning COMMERCIALS that has won national and international awards.

They have directed numerous episodes of Australian TELEVISION SERIALS

They have a LONG OR SHORT FILM that hasn't travelled internationally and you PERSONALLY THINK IT'S VERY SPECIAL.

12. TRAILER or SCENE SAMPLE VERSUS SHORT FILM

What would give you more confidence to invest in the film? (bold or circle)

A short film that tonally reflects the film. The film has not travelled to any of the above festivals.

Scenes or trailer that tonally reflects the feature they are currently pitching.

13. THE PERSON – FIRST IMPRESSIONS ASIDE FROM THE REEL

On a scale from 1–5, where 1 is the highest and 5 is the lowest, please rate each of the following

Their reputation – what you have heard about them.

Self-confidence – they look and act like they know what they are doing and can communicate clearly.

Passion – they are dedicated and would give blood sweat and tears to the project.

Personality – they someone you can trust to deliver the film and talk openly with you about your concerns and address them. They are easy to get along with.

Their vision – how clearly they can communicate their vision.

14. PITCH MATERIALS – APART FROM THE REEL

On a scale from 1–5, where 1 is the highest and 5 is the lowest, please rate each of the following:

Their ability to tell you what the story is in less than 1 minute

Their ability to tell you the theme in one sentence

The use of visuals and music – for example a power point presentation

The use of visuals – on paper for example a visual bible.

15. THE BUDGET

What budget range possesses less risk for you to invest in a first-time feature director's first feature film? E.g. under 1 million, 1 to 2 million, 2 to 3 million, etc.

16. OTHER INVESTORS

How important is it that other investors have committed to the project before you will commit?

On a scale to 1–5, where 1 is the highest and 5 is the lowest. Please circle/bold the number that reflects the importance of this.

1 2 3 4 5

If the above is very important, what sort of commitments do you expect to see in place before the team approaches you?

17. MARKETING

On a scale from 1–5, how important is it for the filmmaker to have a presence in the media?

Which media streams do you think are most useful for new filmmakers – for example:

an online presence – website, use of social media etc

a presence at industry functions (if so which ones)

Articles about them or their work in industry mags such as encore and IF magazine.

Articles about them or their work online news letters media releases and announcements

Appendix 7: List of producers and directors who participated in the research

Australian producers interviewed as part of the research

Bridget Callow-Wright

Cathy Henkel

Jamie Bailkower

John L. Simpson

Lee Matthews

Melanie Coombs

Seph McKenna

Sue Maslin AO

Tait Brady

Australian directors interviewed as part of the research

Christopher Weekes (*Martha the Monster* and *Bitter and Twisted*)

David Michod (*Netherland Dwarf* and *Crossbow*)

Appendix 8: Research and creative practice milestones

- 2008 *The Butterfly Tree* (then named *The Insect King*), a feature film screenplay, won the prestigious Australian Writers Guild's Monte Miller Award for Best Unproduced Screenplay by a New Writer.
- 2009 Conversation with Domestic Distributor to pitch *The Breathing Sea*. As noted in earlier this conversation provided the seed for this doctorate.
- 2009 The production and release of *Tidal Marks*, a 15-minute short film made to tonally reflect *The Breathing Sea*. *Tidal Marks* was my first attempt to create a tonal short film. Unfortunately it failed due to a lack of research and poor creative reflective practice.
- 2010 Binger Film Lab Participant. In early 2010, I was selected as one of eight directors from around the world to attend the prestigious five-month Binger Directors' Lab, located in in Amsterdam, to focus on the development of *The Butterfly Tree*. Here I was coached by internationally renowned directing coaches and authors such as Judith Weston and Mark Travis as well as other international screen practitioners and educators.
- 2009–13 Primary research, part one – formal interview and questionnaire process with domestic distributors.
- 2012 The production of *Beetlefeeders*, a 15-minute short film, made to tonally reflect *The Butterfly Tree*. The flyer and synopsis for *Beetlefeeders* can be found in Appendix 4. *Beetlefeeders* succeeded in tonally reflecting the feature and was used as a successful pitching and selling tool. These tonal selling tools (to be discussed) were used during the financing phase of *The Butterfly Tree*, at various national and international markets (listed below).

- 2014 During financing, *The Butterfly Tree* was pitched to domestic distributors, sales agents, gap financiers and screen agencies at the following events: The Melbourne International Film Festival, 37 South Market, the London Production Film Market and the Berlinale Talents project market.
- 2016 The production of *The Butterfly Tree*. *The Butterfly Tree* went into production in August 2016 and was completed in March 2017. It was released nationally and internationally to critical acclaim in August (Melbourne International Film Festival) and September (Toronto International Film Festival) 2017.
- 2016–18 *The Butterfly Tree* – a reflective creative practice analysis. As a result of the evolving symbiotic relationship between my research and creative praxis and practice, I was able to successfully address the research question, a process that culminated in the domestic and international success of *The Butterfly Tree*.
- 2019–21 As noted earlier, to enhance this process, I returned to the formal interview process with domestic distributors and other producers.

Appendix 9: Initial Australian Domestic Distributor Survey – summary of 2011 results

In 2011, I interviewed representatives from 11 domestic distribution companies that then had a track record for providing distribution guarantees to Australian feature films. Following is the summary of results of the survey instrument, which also involved a formal interview process. The answers summarised below are based on correspondence and questionnaire completion by Andrew Mackie of Transmission Films, Lucy Hill of Hopscotch Films, Greg Denning of Icon Film Distribution, Katherine Thornton of Sharmill Films, Martin Fabyini of Mushroom Pictures, Peter Castaldi of Umbrella Entertainment, John L. Simpson of Titan View, Jamie Bailkower of Jump Street Films, Tony Zrna of Palace Films, Seph McKenna of Village Roadshow and Tait Brady of Label Distribution. Six other domestic distributors were also approached but were either unable or chose not to participate in the survey: Madman Entertainment, Rialto Distribution, Australian Films Syndicate, Kojo, Sony Pictures and Arena Media.

Elements of the pitch package that carry the most weight

When making the decision to collaborate with, invest in and/or distribute a first-time feature film director's first feature film, domestic distributors were asked to nominate which elements of the whole package carried the most weight. In order of weighting:

Elements	No. of companies
Script	9
Producer	5
Director	5
Cast	3

Script – domestic distributor personal opinion versus screenwriting awards

When deciding whether to invest in and/or distribute a first-time feature film director's first feature film, domestic distributors were asked to rank the following elements in order of importance on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 was the highest and 5 was the lowest.

- The strength of the script – you personally enjoyed the read and thought it was something special.
- The script has won major national awards.
- The script has won international awards.

In order of weighting.

<u>Elements</u>	<u>No. of companies</u>
Personal opinions	8
International screenwriting award	1

National and international screenwriting awards

Domestic distributors were asked to list two national and two international screenwriting awards that they believed to carry the greatest weight.

One company, Transmission Films, named two national screenwriting awards: the AWGIE (Australian Writers Guild Award) and IF (Independent Film Award). Eight companies declined to comment

The cast

On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 was the highest and 5 was the lowest, domestic distributors were asked to nominate the number that reflects the importance of having an actor/actress who carries international weight. They were also asked to nominate three actors / actresses that they considered to be bankable at the time.

In order of weighting

<u>No of companies</u>	<u>Ranking number</u>
7 companies	3
1 company	1

1 company stated that it was project dependent.

Cast nominated by the domestic distributors as being considered 'bankable'

Cate Blanchett

Russell Crowe

Guy Pearce

Geoffrey Rush

Hugh Jackman

Nicole Kidman

Naomi Watts

The core team surrounding the director

On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 was the highest and 5 was the lowest, domestic distributors were asked to nominate which head of department roles they expected to see attached to the project before being approached by a filmmaking team seeking a commitment (in order of importance).

No of companies	Head of department role nominated at 3 or higher
8	Writer
8	Experienced producer
7	Director of photography
2	Editor
1	Production designer
1	Sound designer

Feature film awards that carry weight within or influence the Australian film industry

Domestic distributors were asked to nominate five feature film awards that they believed held weight or influence within the Australian industry. In order of weighting, these were:

Awards	No. of companies
Cannes Official in Competition Award Cannes and the Academy Awards	4
The Golden Globe awards	3
The BAFTA and Toronto Film Festival awards	2
The Sundance Film Festival awards and the Venice Film Festival awards	1

Film festivals that carry weight within or influence the Australian film industry for feature films

Domestic distributors were asked to nominate film festivals that they believed held weight or influence within the Australian film industry for feature films.

Awards	No. of companies
Cannes Film Festival	6
The Berlinale (Berlin)	5
Toronto International Film Festival	5
Sundance Film Festival	3
Venice Film Festival	3

Film festivals that carry weight within or influence the Australian film industry for short films

Domestic distributors were asked to nominate film festivals that they believed held weight or influence within the Australian film industry for short films.

Festivals	No. of companies
Cannes Film Festival	4
Berlin Film Festival	2
Sundance Film Festival	2
Venice Film Festival	2
Toronto Film Festival	2
Academy Awards	1

Elements that carry the most weight on a first-time feature film director's show reel?

On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 was the highest and 5 was the lowest, domestic distributors were asked to nominate the following elements in order of importance on a first-time director's show reel. The results were:

- A short film tonally reflective of the feature film project that the filmmaker is pitching.
- An ultra-low budget feature that has won a national award such as an AACTA award (Australian Academy Cinema Television Awards)
- A long or short film that has not travelled internationally, but that the domestic distributor thinks is very special
- Numerous episodes of television drama
- National and international award-winning television commercials (TVCs).

What do first time feature film directors need to be aware of before they pitch their film to domestic distributors (aside from their pitch reel). Do first impressions count?

On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 was the highest and 5 was the lowest, domestic distributors were asked to nominate the following elements in order of importance when being pitched to by a first-time director. The results were:

- *Vision* and *personality* had the highest ranking with six out of nine companies rating it at 3 or higher. Personality and vision encompassed the director's ability to clearly communicate their vision as well as the director having an 'easy to get along with' personality that engendered trust and the director being able to demonstrate an ability to discuss and address domestic distributors concerns.

- *Reputation* took second place with five companies nominating it at 2 or higher. Reputation was simply described as what the distributors had seen, heard or read about a director.
- *Self-confidence* – that the director looks and acts like they know what they are doing and can communicate clearly – ranked third highest with four companies rating it at 2 or higher and one company rating it as a no. 4.
- *Passion* – that the director is dedicated and would give ‘blood sweat and tears’ to the project – ranked fourth, with four companies rating it at 2 or higher and one company rating it at 5.

Apart from the director’s reel, what other pitch material considerations should a director consider before the pitch?

On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 was the highest and 5 was the lowest, domestic distributors were asked to nominate the following elements in order of importance when being pitched to by a first-time director. The results were:

- The director’s ability to tell you the story in less than one minute
- The director’s ability to express the theme in one sentence.
- The use of visuals on paper – for example, the use of a visual bible.
- The use of visuals and music –for example, the use of a PowerPoint presentation

Budget range

Domestic distributors were asked to nominate a budget range that possesses less risk for a domestic distributor when they are considering committing to and/or investing in a first-time feature film director’s feature film? The results were:

- Two companies nominated less than A\$1 million.
- Two companies nominated between A\$1 million and A\$2 million.
- Two companies stated that it depended on the film.
- Four companies declined to comment.

Commitment

On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is the highest and 5 is the lowest, domestic distributors were asked to nominate the number that reflects how important it is that other investors have committed before a filmmaker should approach a domestic distributor for a commitment.

No. of companies	Ranking
1	1
3	2
1	3
2	Declined to comment
1	Commented it was not important, but filmmaking team needed a plan.

Presence in the media

On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is the highest and 5 is the lowest, domestic distributors were asked to nominate the number that reflects the importance of promoting themselves in the media.

No. of companies	Ranking
2	1
4	Declined to comment
1	Stated it was most valuable at the time of release
1	4

Which media streams do domestic distributors consider being of the most use for first time directors in terms of creating a reputation?

Four companies declined to comment. The remaining five companies listed: IF, Screen hub, Encore, Screen Australia marketing newsletters, mainstream movie press and all forms of industry media.

Appendix 10: *The Butterfly Tree* script

The Butterfly Tree

By Priscilla Cameron

Winner of Australian Writers Guild
Monte Miller Award

BINGERLab participant

Developed with the assistance of:

Screen Queensland
Screen Australia
Film Victoria

BINGER International
Berlinale Talents

1 OPENING CREDIT SEQUENCE: EVELYN'S BURLESQUE ROUTINE 1

BLACKNESS

A spotlight swells on a GOSSAMER CHRYSALIS.

The sound of an ORCHESTRA OF INSECTS surrounds us as a MOUND OF IRIDESCENT TURQUOISE RHINOCEROS BEETLES peels open to reveal a glimmering cocoon.

Meet EVELYN, a BURLESQUE DANCER, glamorous, mesmerising. Swathes of golden silk flash before us, the patterns of a monarch butterfly swish and swirl. Evelyn floats, glides, semi-naked wearing an ELABORATE BUTTERFLY COSTUME.

On gold ROLLERSKATES, she entices us with her breathtaking routine ... and then there's the crescendo, those gold swirling nipple tassels and Evelyn's face - breathing hard - alive - energised.

The CAT CALLS AND APPLAUSE carry us into WHITENESS.

2 EXT. FIN'S BUTTERFLY TREEHOUSE - DAWN 2

CLOSE ON: FIN - a slightly built boy on the cusp of adolescence - as he watches as a REAL LIFE MONARCH BUTTERFLY unfurls from its chrysalis.

OPENING TITLE: BLOOM

3 EXT. FIN'S BACKYARD - DAWN 3

The backyard is home to a large, roughly built AVIARY to breed butterflies.

Inside is a HUGE, vine-laden TREEHOUSE teeming with GOLDEN MONARCH BUTTERFLIES.

Fin sits in the doorway where the Butterflies flutter around him. He whispers to the newly hatched butterfly.

FLASHBACK: FIN AND HIS MOTHER TOGETHER IN THE AVIARY.

From his perch above, Fin peers down through shifting butterflies to reveal his MOTHER - ROSE - and himself as a 8-YEAR-OLD.

Kneeling on the ground, Rose finishes bending the hooks on the NEW BUTTERFLY FEEDERS. She shows YOUNG FIN how to set and hang them.

While Fin busies himself with the remaining feeders, ROSE returns to her EASEL and painting table to put the finishing touches on a small, detailed picture of a BLUE TIGER BUTTERFLY.

ROSE

I'm done. Come see what you think.

Fin stands beside her and scrutinises the picture.

FIN

I don't think their antenna are that long.

ROSE

Really?

Fin nods.

ROSE (CONT'D)

(squinting at a nearby butterfly) You're right ... by a smidge.

FIN

Told you.

Rose reaches out her hand to Fin. He takes it.

ROSE

Do you know how much I love you?

Still holding her hand, Fin twirls outwards.

FIN AND ROSE

Thiiis much.

Rose twirls him back into her lap, holds him close and kisses the top of his head. Fin snuggles into her.

END FLASHBACK

4

INT. FIN'S WEATHER-BEATEN VERANDAH BEDROOM - DAWN

4

CLOSE ON: TWEEZERS SORTING BUTTERFLY WINGS

The wings are sorted in various small boxes according to size and colour.

Fin takes down another tiny box of butterfly wings continues sorting.

His room is packed with PINNED INSECTS, set on polystyrene boxes or in DISPLAY CASES.

MINIATURE DETAILED INSECT PAINTINGS compete for space on the walls.

CUT TO:

Fin cuts out his MOTHER'S FACE from his parent's wedding photograph.

CUT TO:

Using tweezers, Fin makes a beautiful, GLITTERING HALO OF BLUE ULYSSES BUTTERFLY WINGS AROUND HIS MOTHER'S FACE.

5 EXT. FIN'S BEDROOM - DAY 5

With his backpack and butterfly net, Fin slides out his bedroom window, grabs his bike and is gone.

6 EXT. RAINFOREST - DAY 6

Fin winds his way into the damp heart of the forest, his butterfly net poised.

LATER:

Rounding a corner, he spies a GOLDEN MONARCH BUTTERFLY. With practised stealth, he sneaks up and in one fluid movement, it is his.

LATER:

Fin squeezes between the bulging buttress roots of a giant fig tree into its hollow heart. Here he unearths two OLD TINS.

From the first he removes ONE OF HIS MOTHER'S DRESSES. He holds it to his face before hanging it up on a rusted hook.

From the SECOND TIN he removes some worn PHOTOGRAPHS of himself as a baby and as a child being held by his Mother.

He props up the photographs. Next he fixes some BIRTHDAY CANDLES to bark ledges, followed by his Mother's most personal belongings - a HAIRBRUSH, HER LIPSTICK, HER PURSE, an ART DECO BUTTERFLY BROOCH, a COFFEE MUG and a HALF-SMOKED CIGARETTE and HER MUSIC COLLECTION. He has done this ritual many times before.

Lastly, he unwraps and creates a space for his latest addition - His MOTHER'S PORTRAIT BEJEWELLED WITH BUTTERFLY WINGS.

CUT TO:

Fin lights the HAPPY BIRTHDAY CANDLES, puts on her favourite BIRTHDAY JAUNTY SKAA music and mouths the words happy birthday to his Mother's picture, before giving her a kiss.

He watches the butterfly - its wings leave velvet kisses on the glass as it struggles in its silent tomb.

At the point where its wings stop twitching, he stares into his Mother's fading eyes and is transported...

7 EXT. FIN'S BUTTERFLY FANTASY - DAY 7

Fin lies flat on his back - bare-chested. A swarm of BUTTERFLIES hover above him. Their luminous wings glitter. En masse they lower their bodies onto his. He feels the exquisite sensation of a million fluttering wings and trembling feet on his bare skin. Their tiny feet stroke his skin while their probisci lick his sweat droplets.

The fluttering intensifies and Fin is lifted by a sparkling fuzz. He glides above the forest floor. Luminous green FERN FRONDS brush his delicate skin.

Fin quivers - oh, the sensations - utterly delicious.

A MOTHER'S HAND reaches into frame and caresses his hair, brushing it back from his temple.

FIN and his MOTHER spoon. She kisses the top of his head.

END FANTASY

8 INT. HOLLOW FIG TREE - LATER 8

Fin's eyelids quiver. The candles have gone out. He busies himself dismantling his shrine and reburying the containers.

9 EXT. RAINFOREST TRACK - LATER 9

Fin passes through the shifting shades of the cabbage palm fronds.

10 EXT. TOWN STREETS - LATER 10

Fin cruises through the quiet streets on his way home.

11 EXT. FLORIST SHOP - LATER 11

Out on the footpath, Fin notices SHABBY PIECES OF FURNITURE with a sign saying "FREE, PLEASE TAKE". He spies a broken DISPLAY CASE and dismounts.

CUT TO:

Fin opens the cracked glass front and tests the lock.

CUT TO:

There's a sign on the front door: "NEW OWNER. OPENING SOON". A flash of movement in the window above the shop catches his eye. It's a giant butterfly - no wait - It's EVELYN.

Fin watches, entranced as EVELYN in her GOLDEN MONARCH BURLESQUE COSTUME relives her last performance. Fin hears insect music from his butterfly fantasy and his world slows...his feet levitate and once again he is floating.

She jiggles on the spot until she has her nipple tassels swirling faster and faster. The tassels slow and Evelyn finishes her routine with a seductive flourish.

Fin is transfixed.

He cranes his neck as she disappears from view.

12 INT. EVELYN'S BEDROOM ABOVE HER FLORIST SHOP - CONTINUOUS 12

The room is Boho chic. Glamour shots of her as a burlesque dancer adorn the walls.

On the duchess she has an extensive make-up station, a manicure station and a wig/hair station. A OLDER CAMERA is set on an auto timer on the dresser and continues to click off a series of shots as Evelyn disrobes.

After removing her nipple tassels, she goes to remove her DRAGONFLY NECKLACE - stops and cups her breasts, turning one way and then the other, admiring their fullness.

13 EXT. FLORIST SHOP - CONTINUOUS 13

Fin is standing on a box, trying to catch one last glimpse. He waits, but Evelyn has gone.

14 EXT. STREETS - LATER 14

Fin smiles. The wind in his hair. His skin tingles at the thought of her.

15 EXT. FIN'S AGING WEATHERBOARD HOUSE - LATER 15

Fin rides his bike down the side of his house past his Father's open bedroom window. Noises alert him. He climbs onto the wheelie bin and eavesdrops on AL, his middle aged FATHER - a man with a smooth voice and soulful eyes and SHELLEY, a nubile 23-year-old, with a face too old for her body, as they make out.

16 INT. AL'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

16

Shelley enthusiastically rides Al who loses his mojo half way through. She strokes his chest.

SHELLEY

You OK?

Eyes closed, Al wishes Shelley would disappear.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

Never thought I'd sleep with a guy with bigger boobs than me.

AL

(checking his chest)

They're not bigger than yours.

SHELLEY

They kinda are.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

(Pushing his pecs together.)

See. Cleavage.

Al shushes her.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

Relax. I'm kidding. OK?

Al disentangles himself, pulls on his jocks and quietly exits.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

So uptight.

17 INT. TOILET - MOMENTS LATER

17

Al stands at the basin washing his hands and face. In the mirror he spies a CHOCOLATE TART with its candle burning. He turns. The glowing silhouette of two people behind the shower curtain. He slides the curtain back to reveal YOUNGER AL and YOUNGER ROSE having a romantic bath together.

ROSE

Do you remember? Slow-cooked lamb
shanks with garlic mash.

Al nods. Cupping her hands, he tilts his head back to feel
her hair against his cheek.

ROSE (CONT'D)

(popping the chocolate
birthday tart in her
mouth)

But these were the clincher.

AL

(smiling))

You slept with me for my food?

ROSE

Absolutely. That and your eyes,
the way you held me, your voice,
the way you listened ...

Al stares - the bath now empty. His heart races. He hears the
CLANKING SOUND OF WOOD ON WOOD.

Peering round the doorway, he stares up at the hallway
MANHOLE - its cover is ajar - sounds emanate from the dark
slither.

18 INT. AL'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

18

Shelley is almost dressed but can't find her other diamonte
thong. She hunts under the bed, the side table then the
wardrobe. Something sparkly catches her eye. Flat on her
belly she drags out a SILVER FOIL of BIRTH CONTROL PILLS.

She sits up. The wardrobe door tempts her. She prises it open
- exposing Roses dresses. On the inside of the door are
Fin's yearly height marks and CARDS - love notes he has made
for his mother. Many have been decorated with butterfly
wings.

Al enters and snatches the pills from her. He fingers the
last empty hole - where it says TUESDAY. His face quivers.

THROUGH THE WINDOW - Fin stares at his father as he clutches
the pills to his chest.

AL

What are you doing?

SHELLEY

Trying to find my thong.

AL

I'll buy you another pair.
(beat)
You need to go.

SHELLEY

Yes I am going.

Al opens the door. Shelley stands close.

Instead of kissing her, Al closes his eyes and holds her tight. He holds and holds. She waits, looking a little bemused. Finally he lets go.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

Have you thought about seeing
someone... if you don't know
anyone, I know a wonderful
counsellor. She did amazing things
with Dad after his last divorce...
he was really fucked up.

AL

Bye.

SHELLEY

Bye.

Fin watches as Al closes the bedroom door then the wardrobe door.

19

EXT. BACKYARD - MORNING

19

KA-CHINK, KA-CHINK, KA-CHINK

Al bustles through the back screen door, carrying empty beer bottles, to find Fin puffing and straining, lying on a rusted bench press, LIFTING WEIGHTS far too big for him.

AL

(trying to take the bar
from him)

Here. You need to lighten the
load.

FIN

Leave it alone.

AL

You'll do yourself an injury.

Fin ignores him and pushes harder.

AL (CONT'D)

Well don't come whinging to me when
you strain something.

Nearby is a TOOLSHED that has been converted into a HOME
BREWERY.

Al starts washing out the beer bottles and setting them on a
long line of spikes to drain.

AL (CONT'D)

Hey. Are you going to be home this
afternoon?

FIN

Why?

AL

Thought you could give me a hand
with this.

FIN

You out already?

AL

Yeah. It's been a while. This time
I thought I should try some chilli.

FIN

Why?

AL

Make it last longer.

FIN

Yeah right.

20 INT. FLORIST SHOP - MORNING

20

Evelyn glides down the stairs from her dwelling above the
shop.

She stares at the mail slit in the front door. It haunts her.
She holds her breath as she goes and checks the collection
box underneath the slit. No mail.

KNOCK, KNOCK. She jumps. A face leers in the front door
porthole window. It's the police. Evelyn opens the door.

OFFICER GRANT

Ms Evelyn Gray?

EVELYN

Yes.

OFFICER GRANT

You may remember me - SAM GRANT
from Moggill police station? I
served you with the papers on
behalf of the aggrieved VINCENT
SCOTT.

Evelyn nods.

OFFICER GRANT (CONT'D)
We have received an application to
VARY the protection order taken out
on behalf of the aggrieved.

Officer Grant hands Evelyn the papers.

OFFICER GRANT (CONT'D)
Feel free to read through and ask
any questions.

Evelyn is dumbfounded.

OFFICER GRANT (CONT'D)
I gather from this that you are
reconciling?

EVELYN
This is such a joke - we are NOT
reconciling.

OFFICER GRANT
Procedure dictates that these
papers be served before the matter
can go ahead.

EVELYN
This is bullshit. This whole
process is bullshit. He was never
under any threat from me.

OFFICER GRANT
We are very sorry to inconvenience
you so early in the morning but
this only came to our attention
late last night.

EVELYN
Honest to God! What next?

OFFICER GRANT
You have a good day.

Evelyn watches as Officer Grant leaves.

21 INT. GLASSHOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

21

Evelyn sits at the table and reads the notice.

An ALARM SOUNDS.

She heaves herself up from the table.

She goes to the fridge and takes down an ice-cream container full of PILL BOTTLES. They have different times written on the tops of the lids, eg: AM. half an hour B4 b'fast.

CUT TO:

Evelyn unscrews the lids and doles out a series of pills.

CUT TO:

Evelyn struggles to swallow the pills.

CUT TO:

Evelyn resets the timer and returns the pill bottles to their container.

22 INT. FIN'S BEDROOM. MORNING 22

Al tries to open the door but a build up of insect stuff makes it difficult. Fin is busy putting the LEAF INSECT in a bottle and fitting it in his backpack.

AL

Come on mate. What are you doing?
Breakfast's out.

23 INT. FIN AND AL'S KITCHEN - MORNING 23

Inside, the FEMININE TOUCH HAS FADED.

Dusty recipe books line the walls and once shiny cooking implements hang above the central chopping block.

Al tries to sort a pile up of MAIL while dishing up fried eggs and sausages. Fin enters.

AL

Jesus. Why aren't you dressed?

FIN

(getting a drink)
I don't care. We hardly do anything
on the last day anyway?

AL

Last day already?

FIN

Yes.

AL

Unbelievable. Here you want to take
some lunch. There's leftover chops
in the fridge.

(MORE)

AL (CONT'D)
(pushing a sausage aside
on his plate)
Or take this if you want.

Fin stabs Al's sausage with his fork.

FIN
You had someone over last night?

AL
No.

While ripping open BILLS and stuffing them into his bag, Al spies the time.

AL (CONT'D)
I need you to do me a favour and
call work. Tell them I'm running
late.

FIN
Again?

AL
Yes again. I'll see you later ...
Call them. OK?

FIN
OK.

Al searches for an ice-cream container, up-ends his breakfast into it, thrusts it in his bag, then can't find his keys.

Fin finds them under some paperwork on the table and hands them over.

Al rushes out.

Fin goes to the phone and punches in the numbers, unimpressed.

24 EXT. TOWN STREETS 24

Fin, pedals his bike as fast as he can. His butterfly net flies out behind him like a small sail.

25 EXT. SECONDARY SCHOOL - DAY 25

Outside the school yard, GARY, Fin's school buddy yells out.

GARY
Pump it. Pump it.

Fin skids to a halt, and dumps his bike beside Gary's.

FIN

You catch anything today?

GARY

No. No time. You?

Fin fishes around in his bag and produces a jar with a bright GREEN CICADA inside. Gary takes it for closer inspection.

FIN

It's a male bladder cicada.

Gary and Fin turn to one another with poppy-out eyes and mimic Steve Irwin.

FIN AND GARY

CRIKEY!

They laugh.

Fin whispers in Gary's ear.

FIN

Did I tell you about this dream I had?

GARY

Which one?

FIN

The one about the cicada.

GARY

Don't think so.

FIN

I dreamt I had this cicada on my ... my ...
(gesturing at his crotch)

Gary stares at Fin.

FIN (CONT'D)

It felt good.

Gary remains blank.

FIN (CONT'D)

(Fin mimes the cicada's rhythmic buzzing)

It did, really really good.

Gary tries to stifle his giggles. Fin instantly wishes he could take it back.

At that moment Shelley's MOTHER pulls up with SHELLEY and her sister, CORRINE (13). Shelley sits in the front.

Shelley and Fin clock each other as Corrine gets out.

GARY

Hi.

CORINNE
You guys catch anything?

GARY
No but Fin had this dream.

All eyes on Fin. Fin leaps on Gary.

FIN
Shut up.

Gary tries to squirm free but Fin holds him down.

GARY
(mumbling)
OK OK.

FIN
SHUT IT, OK?

Fin lets him up.

GARY
OK.

Corrine pulls out a very large glass jar containing a MASSIVE STICK INSECT and holds it out to Fin.

CORINNE
Look what I got.

Gary turns to Fin.

GARY
CRIKEY!

But this time Fin is genuinely impressed.

FIN
Whoa! A Titan. He's massive.
Where'd you catch him?

CORINNE
Near the compost.

GARY
Just don't let Fin get hold of him -
you never know where he could end
up.

Fin punches Gary in the arm.

Al passes the FLORIST SHOP. He slows down to check out the DISPLAY CASE on the footpath.

27 EXT. FLORIST SHOP - DAY

27

Al tests the locking mechanism of the display case.

Evelyn appears.

AL

Uh-oh! Sprung! Now you'll think I'm
a scurvy dog, going through your
things.

*

Al grins.

EVELYN

Don't be silly. I want people to
take them. See. There is a sign.

AL

I know someone who might like the
display case. That's all.

EVELYN

Be my guest.

Al struggles to pick up the display case.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

I've got a removalist trolley.
It'll make it easier. Do you want
me to get it.

AL

I think I'll be right ... I like
what you've done with the shop.

*

EVELYN

Thank you ... Bend your knees.
You'll hurt your back.

Al grunts and totters towards the car. Evelyn walks ahead in
case he trips.

AL

Would you mind getting the boot.

Evelyn tries to open it - it's locked. Al realises the
predicament he's in and blushes.

EVELYN

Which pocket?

AL
 (nodding to the left)
 That one.

Evelyn reaches in and fumbles in his pockets. She looks up at him and they lock eyes. Evelyn deliberately prolongs her search, before extracting the keys and dangling them in front of Al. She unlocks the boot for him.

Al juggles the cabinet into position.

AL (CONT'D)
 Thanks for that.

EVELYN
 My pleasure.

She runs her hand along the car's polished chrome, admiring its lines.

AL
 You two look great together. *

EVELYN
 You're alright. You still pull it off.

AL
 You think?

EVELYN
 I've got an imagination. *

AL
 I can feel it coming though ...
 when they say "Check that out.
 Isn't he too old for a midlife
 crisis?" *

EVELYN
 They? *

AL
 My students.

EVELYN
 Maybe you just need to hang out
 more with people your own age.
 There's a retirement village over
 that way. *

Al takes up the challenge.

AL
 I'm still 18. How old are you?

EVELYN
 83.

AL

Perfect.

EVELYN

Harold, everyone has the right to make an arse of themselves. You can't let the world judge you too much.

Al smiles - it's a line from the film HAROLD AND MAUDE.

AL

I like you Maude.

EVELYN

I like you Harold.

Beat

Al and Evelyn are both caught in that awkward moment, thrown by the speed of what just happened.

AL

Are you flirting with me?

EVELYN

No. I just wanna go for a ride in your car.

Al opens the door and gestures for her to get in.

Evelyn looks to the shop.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Oh I can't. Not right now.

AL

I'm already late for work. Trust me, another 15 minutes won't make a difference.

*

EVELYN

Tomorrow?

AL

OK. What time?

EVELYN

I take a break at 11.30. You should come in. Have some cake. You look like a cakey kinda guy.

AL

Is that short for soft in the middle and sweet on top?

EVELYN

No. It is what it is. I just assumed you would like cake. Most people do.

AL

Yes. I like cake. In fact you may not believe me but I have a few 'cakey' tricks of my own.

EVELYN

Cakey tricks?

*

Al mimes juggling three cakes while singing a circus tune. He tosses Evelyn a cake. She joins in and tosses it back.

*

*

Al finishes with a flourish.

*

Evelyn claps.

*

EVELYN (CONT'D)

So I'll see you tomorrow?

AL

Sure.

EVELYN

OK. Bye.

AL

Bye.

Al gets in his car and goes to start the ignition - no keys. He pats his pockets.

Evelyn watches as he ferrets about, searching. She returns to the boot, removes the keys and hands them to Al through his window.

AL (CONT'D)

Thanks.

Evelyn winks.

28

INT. CLASSROOM. TERTIARY COLLEGE - DAY

28

Al sits up the front of the class, staring off into space.

The STUDENTS are scribbling non-stop.

An egg timer rings. The class starts chatting.

AL

OK pens down. Let's hear what you've got.

Al turns to SARAH(18).

AL (CONT'D)

Sarah. Let's share it.

SARAH

Can't think, can't write, stupid plight, dumb night. Night of the vampire, lick my blood, drain my veins and fill with mud. I bite. Feel the pain. Stay with me until the day. The day when I hide away ... And that's all I got to.

AL

Good. Well done. I like that. Drain my veins and fill with mud. Very visceral, Sarah.

Shelley waves. Al searches for someone else, but everyone looks to Shelley.

AL (CONT'D)

Shelley?

SHELLEY

Withered flesh and sagging little breasts. Something about an older man that makes me want to self-combust. Self-destruct. I want to know what it's like to sully oneself with 50-plus lust.

The class titters. Al stares at his hands unable to look up. Shelley enjoys his discomfort.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)
Watery sperm and carefree germs.
Running free on Mr Wrinkleee.

The class erupts.

Shelley keeps her eye on him, hoping he will meet her gaze.
 Al remains focused on his hands.

AL
 Thank you Shelley. OK people. We're
 done for today and remember as
 homework to keep your journalling
 up and for next week bring in a
 image from childhood that resonates
 with you.

Al makes a hurried escape while Shelley lingers.

29 EXT. AL'S OFFICE. DAY

29

Al enters, checks that Shelley has not followed him and locks
 the door. He slumps in his office chair and pulls out a wad
 FINAL NOTICE BILLS from his bag. He picks up the phone and
 dials. He waits the interminable wait as the voice on the
 phone goes through the options.

Al punches in number 5 repeatedly.

AL
 No... No... No... Aaah For
 christsake ...just let me pay it.
 Yes credit card. NO

He scrabbles in his satchel looking for his wallet. Not
 there. He scrabbles in his pockets. Nothing.

CUT TO:

30 INT. AL'S CAR. MOMENTS LATER

30

Al scrummages in his car still searching for his wallet. No
 luck.

AL
 Fuck!

31 EXT. FLORIST SHOP. DAY

31

Al's car pulls up. He goes to the front door and knocks. No
 answer. He peers in the window. No sign of Evelyn.

He makes his way around the side of the house to the glass
 house.

He can see Evelyn inside busy repotting plants - listening to music on her headphones.

He knocks.

She doesn't hear him.

He opens the door.

AL

Hello?

Still no response.

He walks up and stands beside her...watching her - busy, absorbed. He takes a step closer. She spins around surprised.

EVELYN

(removing the headphones) Whoa! You frightened me.

AL

Sorry. I did knock...tried to call out a few times.

EVELYN

And?

AL

Yes. Sorry. I wanted to ask. I didn't leave my wallet behind by any chance? Pretty sure I had it in my pocket. Thought it may have fallen out when we were ...loading the car.

*
*
*

EVELYN

No, don't think so ...but kinda wish you did leave your wallet behind.

*
*

AL

Why?

*

EVELYN

So I could have a good ole stickybeak. Dig up some dirt or surprise, surprise - find you to be squeaky clean.

*
*
*
*

AL

Hah. Pretty hard to get to my age
with a clean slate.

Evelyn takes her gloves off and offers them to Al.

EVELYN

Your turn.

AL

To do what?

EVELYN

Dig up some dirt.

AL

You're funny.

Evelyn stands hands by her side, facing him.

Beat.

Al slides the gloves on.

EVELYN

Off you go.

*

Beat.

AL

Truth or dare?

EVELYN

Truth.

Beat.

AL

Married?

EVELYN

Divorced.

AL

Children?

Evelyn shakes her head.

AL (CONT'D)

Passion?

EVELYN

This.

*

AL

(pointing to each of them)
This?

Long beat.

EVELYN

Fun.

Al slowly removes his gloves and hands them to her. He waits while she puts them on. *

EVELYN (CONT'D) *

Truth or dare?

AL *

Dare.

EVELYN *

I dare you to tell me the truth.

He grins. She's too fast. *

EVELYN (CONT'D)

(pointing to each of them)
This? *

AL

Scary.

EVELYN

Children?

AL

One. A boy.

EVELYN

Married?

AL

I was.

EVELYN

Divorced? *

Al shakes his head and slides the gloves off.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

I'm sorry. *

AL

No. It's OK. I have to get going. *

EVELYN

(pulling his WALLET from
her bra and handing it to
him) *

See you tomorrow? *

AL
Tomorrow.

Al watches as Evelyn runs inside.

32 EXT. SECONDARY SCHOOL - AFTERNOON 32

Gary and Fin exit with other students.

GARY
Catchya, Bladder Boy.

FIN
Yeah. Right.

GARY
I'll call you.

Fin ignores him and while bending down to pick up his bike he notices an ant struggling to carry a leaf four times its size.

Fin pedals off in the opposite direction from his house.

33 EXT. STREETS - AFTERNOON 33

Fin cruises down streets on his bike.

34 EXT. FRONT OF FLORIST SHOP - AFTERNOON 34

He peers through the front door's porthole window into the half-empty shop.

Inside, Evelyn is perched up a ladder painting some mouldings. From Fin's angle, it's quite a sight.

He watches Evelyn glide down the ladder.

35 INT. FLORIST - AFTERNOON 35

The door bell jangles as Fin enters.

Stepping into Evelyn's world of beauty and flowers reminds Fin of his own secret insect fantasy world. Here he is home.

FIN
I thought you were closed.

EVELYN
Yeah it looks like we're closed but come on it.

Fin shuffles over to the buckets of flowers and pretends to deliberate over making a choice.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Are you looking for something in particular?

FIN

Some flowers?

EVELYN

Daisies are cheap but they stink to high heaven after a couple of days. Roses are always safe. Is there a special occasion?

FIN

It's for my Mum.

EVELYN

You're a nice boy, buying flowers for your Mum.

FIN

It's her birthday.

EVELYN

I'm very impressed that you remembered.

Fin nods.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

What colour do you think she'd like?

FIN

(staring at her pink stockings)
Pink probably.

EVELYN

These tulips are a personal favourite of mine.

FIN

My Mum likes tulips.

EVELYN

They always look so pure.

Fin lifts out a PINK perfectly opened TULIP.

Evelyn watches as he rotates it slowly in a shaft of sunlight.

FIN

They're amazing.

She stares at him - a smile lights up her face.

EVELYN

Come. I want to show you something.
I think you'll like it.

Fin follows her through a doorway, into the mossy depths of a
GLASSHOUSE to a collection of EXOTIC FLOWERING ORCHIDS.

She guides him to a stem of CYMBIDIUM ORCHID FLOWERS. They stand very close, almost touching. Fin feels his chest tighten as their eyes meet.

EVELYN (CONT'D)
You've got to really look...
closer.

She lays a hand softly on his back - guiding him.

EVELYN (CONT'D)
The tip of your nose almost has to
touch it.

They raise their heads simultaneously and their eyes connect. Their breath expels in unison. A gush of warmth on each other's skin. The hair framing their faces dances in time.

FIN
I wish I could take a photo.

EVELYN
Stay there. Don't look.

FIN
Why?

EVELYN
Turn around. Go on. Close your
eyes.

Fin obeys as he hears Evelyn click clack away and return.

EVELYN (CONT'D)
Now hold out your hands.

FIN
What is it?

EVELYN
Shhhh. Hold them out. Together.

Evelyn lays the CAMERA in his hands.

Fin opens his eyes.

EVELYN (CONT'D)
It's yours.

FIN
Wow. Really?

EVELYN

Yes. I'm happy to see it go to
someone with a good heart.

Fin blushes.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Have you ever used a camera like
this?

FIN

Not one this old.

EVELYN

Would you like a lesson?

FIN

Yes.

EVELYN

(demonstrates)

It's very simple really. You just
lean in. Use this here. Focus. Then
shoot.

(guiding him closer to the
orchid)

Go on. She won't bite.

CLICK

Full frame - A glorious explosion of intricate detail and
colour.

FIN

Thank you.

EVELYN

That's OK. Now this camera is quite
the dinosaur so you need to wind it
on manually.

She takes it and goes to wind it. CLICK CLICK - It runs out of film.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Lucky last. Here I'll show you.

Fin studies her every move as she removes the roll of film, goes to a nearby drawer and SWAPS THE USED ROLL FOR A NEW ONE.

CUT TO:

Fin takes photos of Evelyn when she isn't looking.

CLICK: Mist hangs in the air as she spritzes the orchids.

CLICK: Loading buckets with fresh daisies.

CLICK: Photographs of Evelyn's lacey underwear on a clothes dryer.

Standing by the counter, Fin checks that Evelyn has her back to him before POCKETING THE USED ROLL OF FILM.

36

INT. CHEMIST - AFTERNOON

36

Shelley and Corinne are in the in the sex and contraception section unpacking new stock. Corinne is doing all the work. Their MOTHER works in the background in the dispensary so they have to whisper.

SHELLEY

(holding up a packet of
HORNY GOATS weed)

Do you think this stuff works?

CORINNE

Hello? I'm barely 13.

SHELLEY

(now with a pack of
SPANISH FLY)

Got any info on this?

CORINNE

Read the back.

SHELLEY

It's not like he can't get it up
... it's more the staying power.

CORINNE

Who?

SHELLEY

No-one you know.

Corinne scrutinises Shelley.

CORINNE
This older man "fucking" Daddy
thing. It's revolting.

SHELLEY
Who said he was older?

Beat

CORINNE
You know just because he's not here
doesn't mean he doesn't love us.

SHELLEY
Oh Puh-lease. Spare me.

Corinne sighs.

CORINNE
You need a cock ring.

SHELLEY
(mocking her)
Why thank you Miss BARELY 13. And
where might I find one of those?

CORINNE
Does this look like a sex shop to
you?

SHELLEY
Can't you order some in, on the
side?

CORINNE
Me? Asking for Mum's credit card?
As if.

Corinne goes to a filing cabinet and produces an information
sheet on ERECTION ENHANCERS.

CORINNE (CONT'D)
(Handing it to Shelley)
Here, take this and go to the
hardware store.

SHELLEY
And do what?

CORINNE
Improvise.

SHELLEY
Right. Thanks. You've been most un-
helpful.

CORINNE

And you've been most an-noying.
Good bye.

SHELLEY

Good bye.

Shelley struts out, deliberately dragging a sign into the open doorway so it constantly beeps.

37

EXT. BACK OF FLORIST SHOP - AFTERNOON

37

Evelyn watches Fin as he hangs his camera around his neck and mounts his bike.

EVELYN

It suits you.

FIN

Thanks.

EVELYN

My pleasure.

Behind them water flows down the wall. Evelyn sighs.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Always something.

FIN

I could have a go.

EVELYN

No. It's OK. I can sort it.

Beat

EVELYN (CONT'D)

I'm Evelyn by the way.

FIN

I'm Fin.

EVELYN

Nice to meet you.

FIN

Nice to meet you too.

Beat

EVELYN

Would you like a job?

FIN

Sure.

EVELYN

Is tomorrow too soon?

FIN

No.

EVELYN

You better check with your Mum first.

FIN

She'll be cool.

Evelyn raises her eyebrows.

FIN (CONT'D)

Yeah. She will. They'll be happy to get rid of me.

EVELYN

You will still ask though won't you?

FIN

Yes.

EVELYN

Done.

Evelyn extends her hand and they shake.

FIN

So shall I come at 8.00 - 8.30?

Evelyn smiles.

EVELYN

I'm sorry. Can we make it more like 11am? I hate mornings.

*

FIN

Sure. OK. See you then.

EVELYN

Bye.

FIN

(waves)

Bye.

Evelyn watches him pedal off at high speed.

On his bike, Fin hurtles round a corner, looks up at the sky and whoops with glee.

Fin parks his bike in an alley way and walks to the chemist front door.

39 INT/EXT. CHEMIST - AFTERNOON

39

Fin arrives at the chemist door still carrying the tulips. A sign reads CLOSED. Corrine is busy on the inside. Fin knocks.

FIN
Can I come in?

CORINNE
Sorry. We're closed.

FIN
Please.

Corrine eyes the tulips.

FIN (CONT'D)
Please.

CORRINE
OK. I'll meet you round the back.

39A EXT. CHEMIST BACK DOOR - AFTERNOON

39A

CORINNE
Hello you.

FIN
Hey thanks for doing this.

CORINNE
What's up?

FIN
(retrieving the rolls of
film from his pocket)
Could you please do me a HUGE
favour? I need to get this
developed.

CORRINE
What? Now?

FIN
Please. It's important.

CORRINE
We're closed.

FIN
Please.

Corinne eyes the tulips.

CORRINE
OK. But they won't be ready til
8.30 when we open.

*

FIN

You can't do eight? I can come
round the back.

Fin pulls a puppy dog face.

CORINNE

OK. Just knock and I'll let you in.

FIN

(while gathering new rolls
of film)

Great. Thanks.

40 INT. FIN AND AL'S HOUSE - EVENING

40

Fin enters through the front door, down the hallway and into
the kitchen where a huge mess waits him.

Empty beer bottles sit amongst flour and sugar. Melted
chocolate coats the benchtop and bowls.

Fin starts tidying up until he spots a SUGARED VIOLET lying among the debris.

At the end of the table sits a single SUGARED VIOLET CHOCOLATE TART with a birthday candle in it.

Light and music coming from the living room catches his attention. He goes to the doorway and watches as...

FLASHBACK: FIN AGED FOUR

ROSE, as a YOUNG MOTHER, sits on the sofa. Her chocolate birthday tart alight in front of her. She smiles at YOUNG AL as he whizzes FOUR-YEAR-OLD FIN around, dancing on a RUG, to the same JAUNTY SKAA BIRTHDAY MUSIC.

Al dips Fin low next to Rose.

AL
Happy Birthday.
(to Fin)
Give Mumma a kiss.

Fin kisses his Mum followed by Al.

AL (CONT'D)
(to Fin)
Let's help Mumma blow it out?

OLDER FIN purses his lips willing her to blow the candle out.

They all blow together.

OLDER FIN appreciates the moment for what it is - a moment of familial perfection.

END FLASHBACK

Fin peers through the back screen door to see AL, flat on his back, passed out drunk, under the clothesline.

41 EXT. FIN AND AL'S BACKYARD - NIGHT 41

The SCHLICK-SCHLACK of the screen door as Fin exits carrying a can of INSECT REPELLENT.

Fin brushes the mosquitos from Al's face, douses him with insect repellent and throws a towel from the clothes line over him.

42 INT. FIN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT 42

Fin fiddles with his camera and checks the MANUAL before pulling focus on the DEAD MONARCH BUTTERFLY in its bottle.

CUT TO:

He takes the DEAD MONARCH BUTTERFLY from its bottle.

CUT TO:

CRUNCH. A pin pierces the thorax. Fin's steady fingers carefully spread its wings and pins them in place.

CUT TO:

Fin stands back and admires his butterfly hanging on the wall.

CUT TO:

He picks up his camera and points it at the butterfly.

The wings of the butterfly begin to quiver.

CLACK-CLACK, CLACK-CLACK - THE SOUND OF WOOD ON WOOD, as the butterfly beats its wings against the pins.

CRUNCH. CRUNCH. Fin hears someone walking around the side of the house.

Camera in hand, Fin sneaks out of his room.

43 INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS 43

Fin tracks Shelley through the windows of the house as she enters the backyard.

44 INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS 44

Fin watches as Shelley discovers AL lying in the backyard and sits beside him.

45 EXT. BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS 45

Shelley flips the lid off a stubbie and mock cheers him.

SHELLEY
Last drinks? Cheers. Cheers.

Al sleeps.

46 INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS 46

Fin raises his camera and clicks off a SERIES OF PHOTOS as Shelley kisses Al on the lips and lies down beside him.

47 EXT. BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS 47

AL comes to. Mosquitos buzz his head. Shelley brushes them off.

SHELLEY

They'll suck you dry if you stay
out here.

Al glances over at the house - it's too far to walk.

He closes his eyes and exhales.

AL

Shelley. Shelley. Shelley.

Shelley's fingers find the back of Al's neck and trace circles under his hairline and up around his ears. It sends shivers up his spine. He rolls his head slightly, allowing her to stroke him - she's got magic fingers.

SHELLEY

I want the old you back.

Al turns.

Shelley kisses him tenderly on the lips. Al closes his eyes and kisses her back. She's so soft.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

You're going to be OK.

Beat.

Shelley takes his face in his hands and kisses him more deeply.

She moves her hand to his crotch and starts to massage. Al feels the heat building. He breaks the moment by taking her hand.

Shelley brushes his mouth with her lips.

Al sits up, stares at her, and squeezes her hand.

48 INT. FIN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT 48

Fin turns from the back door, as Al scrubs his hair and slowly rises to his feet.

AL
Goodnight Shelley.

Shelley sits alone.

49 INT. AL'S BEDROOM / HALLWAY - NIGHT 49

Fin reebs open the wardrobe and stuffs as many of his Mother's dresses into his backpack as it will hold.

He returns to his own bedroom and closes the door as Al enters through the back door.

Al hears Fin's door slam. He hesitates before heading to the bathroom where he takes a piss.

50 INT. FIN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT 50

Fin carefully wraps his Mother's dresses in a series of plastic bags then presses them into a couple of large ice-cream containers.

51 INT. TREE SHRINE. FOREST - DAWN 51

The wilted yellow and red striated tulips sit in a jar on a new ledge in the shrine.

Fin works hard to bury the two new containers.

52 EXT. DISMAL SHOPPING CENTRE / CHEMIST BACK DOOR - MORNING 52

Fin rides around the back of the chemist. He dismounts and knocks on the Chemist's back door. *

Corinne unlocks and hands over TWO PACKETS OF PHOTOGRAPHS.

FIN
Morning.

CORINNE
Hey you.

She waits as Fin opens the first packet. He catches a glimpse of Evelyn topless during her last burlesque performance and quickly tucks them away.

CORINNE (CONT'D)
(whispering)
Is that your Dad's new girlfriend?

FIN
No. I don't know.

CORINNE
She's sexy.

Beat

CORINNE (CONT'D)
Is he OK?

FIN
Who?

CORINNE
Your Dad.

FIN
I guess.

Corrine sighs.

CORINNE
Yeah. After his last divorce my Dad went a bit crazy there for while.

Beat

FIN
(digging in his pockets
and handing over money)
Thanks for doing this.

Corrine nods.

CORINNE
Wait. I've got something for you.

Fin fiddles with the packet of photographs while he waits for Corinne to return. She hands him a SMALL BOX.

CORINNE (CONT'D)
Just don't do that CRIKEY thing.
It's annoying.

Fin smiles. He lifts the lid to reveal TWO LARGE GLOSSY BLACK RHINOCEROS BEETLES.

CORINNE (CONT'D)
Do you have any of those?

FIN

No. I don't.

CORINNE

I did some research. They like
banana and apple.

FIN

Cool. Thanks.

CORINNE

No problem.

FIN

I gotta go. Thank you.

CORINNE

Ok. Bye.

FIN

Bye.

Fin rides off. Corinne watches him go.

53 OMITTED 53

54 INT. FIN'S BEDROOM - MORNING 54

Fin sits on his bed and whips out the photos. In the first packet the close-ups of the flowers are beautiful and the furtive shots of Evelyn are unusually striking.

In the second packet, he comes across PHOTOGRAPHS OF EVELYN AS A MONARCH BUTTERFLY with the BEETLE DANCERS.

Next are the most recent full frame photos of EVELYN'S PERSONAL STRIP TEASE and NAKED BREASTS taken from the neck down. Resting clearly above the curve of her collar bone, the DRAGON FLY NECKLACE is VISIBLE. He removes these pictures and puts them in his pocket.

CUT TO:

Fin enters carrying TWO PHOTO ALBUMS.

CUT TO:

CLOSE ON: PHOTOGRAPHS of YOUNG AL AND HIS YOUNG WIFE, ROSE, ON THEIR WEDDING DAY POSING ON THE BONNET OF AL'S VINTAGE CAR. NEXT - ROSE AND FIN, AS A BABY, STANDING BESIDE THE CAR AT A BEACH LOOK OUT. Fin is cradled in his MOTHER'S arms.

Fin closes the album and hides it in his cupboard.

The NEXT ALBUM only has a few pictures of the most recent shots of Rose and Fin before she died.

TWO PACKETS OF LOOSE PHOTOGRAPHS fall from the back. Fin flicks through them. They are shots of AL, FIN and AL's VARIOUS GIRLFRIENDS, all attempting to look the happy family. In most of them Fin is off to the side, looking repulsed while Al and his latest cling to each other.

Fin dumps the packets in the bin and carefully removes the few shots of his mother. He then starts the album afresh with the pictures he has taken of EVELYN and HER FLOWERS.

CUT TO:

Fin sets about pinning the MONARCH BUTTERFLY.

Using an old typewriter, he types its scientific name DANAUS PLEXIPPUS.

CUT TO:

He carefully sticks the label below the butterfly, and sets it in special box.

AL
He's a beauty.

Fin turns to see Al standing in the doorway.

FIN
It's a she.

AL
Your Mum would've liked her.

Fin is silent.

AL (CONT'D)
Hey. I got you a present.

Fin turns.

AL (CONT'D)
It's still in the boot. I need a hand to get it out.

FIN
What is it?

AL
Come on.

Fin follows Al.

55

EXT. CAR PORT - MORNING

55

The boot opens to reveal the DISPLAY CASE from Evelyn's shop. Al waits expectantly.

FIN

Where'd you get it?

AL

The flower shop. There's a new owner. I met her yesterday. She seems nice.

Fin eyes him suspiciously.

Al gets one hand under the case and lifts.

AL (CONT'D)

Come on. Grab the other end.

Fin has to bend right over to get on the other end. As he does, the BREAST PHOTOGRAPHS slip from his top pocket and lands on the display case. They both notice. Al snatches up the photos and has a good gander. Fin tries to snatch them back but Al keeps them just out of his reach.

AL (CONT'D)

Where'd you get those?

FIN

Gary.

AL

(holding out his hand)
They're a great set. No doubt about it. But not something I want ending up at school.

FIN

(snatching the photos back)
No way I want you wanking all over them.

*
*

AL

Hey hey! None of that thank you.

Fin heads inside, leaving Al with the case perched on the edge of the car.

Fin locks his door. He takes out the photo album and sticks in the pictures of Evelyn's breasts and kisses them.

57 INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUED 57

Al stands on the other side of Fin's door - listening. He goes to knock, but stops. He exits and returns, dragging the display case. He props it against the wall beside Fin's door.

58 INT. FIN'S ROOM - CONTINUED 58

Fin hides the album and waits for the sounds of his father to disappear up the other end of the house.

CUT TO:

Fin pokes his head out the door. The coast is clear. He drags the display case into his room and lies it on the floor.

CUT TO:

Fin takes the MONARCH butterfly down from the wall.

MONTAGE - Fin carefully wraps the framed butterfly in a special box with the perfect ribbon to match.

59 INT. EVELYN'S BEDROOM ABOVE THE SHOP - MORNING 59

Evelyn is still in bed. She is in pain.

The SOUND OF THE ALARM from downstairs.

She winces. This morning it all seems impossible.

She struggles from the bed and searches through her duchess drawers until she finds a small wooden box. In it are some half-smoked and poorly rolled JOINTS.

She lights up.

STILLNESS. SILENCE.

In a half-unpacked box something GOLD AND SPARKLEY catches her eye.

60 EXT. GLASSHOUSE - MORNING 60

As Fin rides up to the back of the glasshouse, he spies Evelyn gliding past on GOLD SEQUINNED ROLLERSKATES.

He lingers, watching her through the condensation on the glass. Evelyn skids up to a nearby table and attempts to light another JOINT.

Evelyn perseveres until she is off again - skating and puffing away.

61 INT. GLASSHOUSE - MORNING

61

Fin enters with his camera cocked. Evelyn tries to cover up and wave the smoke away. He grins.

FIN

Look at that thing. What are you trying to do? Kill yourself?

She glides over.

CLICK. He snaps a pic.

EVELYN

Stop. Don't take any more. Not like this. They'll put me in jail.

FIN

Why? You look cool?

EVELYN

You think?

FIN

Way cool. Can you do any tricks?

EVELYN

Maybe.

She fast circles around him.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Do you skate?

FIN

No.

EVELYN

(gliding backwards side to side)

Wanna learn? I could teach you.

FIN

Show me some REAL tricks and I'll think about it.

She stops.

EVELYN

I'm not sure I can remember now.

FIN

Come on. Oh really.

Evelyn takes a large hit and hands the joint to Fin.

EVELYN

Here hold this.

Evelyn moonwalks.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

(moonwalking)

OK. Let's see. Here's the moonwalk.
And this my friend is a waltz jump.
(she waltz jumps)

FIN

(camp American accent)

Yeh yah! You go girl!

Evelyn does the SOW COW followed by the MAPE while Fin eggs her on.

FIN (CONT'D)

Really. That was so last century -
what you need is a ramp.

EVELYN

Hey don't you turn me into no
skater dude.

FIN

No way sister. You're the derby
queen.

(gathering wood and making
a jump)

Here you go, girl. Clear those and
I'll give you my ENTIRE life
savings.

(fishing coins from his
pocket)

The grand total of \$8.20.

EVELYN

Double it.

FIN

Like I said Lady. That's it. That's
all I got.

EVELYN

OK then. I'll double it. But here's
the deal. You lie at the end - face
up - eyes open. You blink - you
lose.

FIN
You serious?

Evelyn winks.

EVELYN
I dare you.

Fin grins. He extends his hand.

FIN
Make it a twenty.

EVELYN
OK. A twenty. And NO BLINKING.

They shake.

CUT TO:

Fin lies on his back at the end of the pots.

Evelyn lines up.

Fin forces his eyes wide.

Evelyn pushes off.

Fin's heart pounds as he listens to the SCHLICK SCHLICK
SCHLICK of Evelyn gathering pace.

Foxy Burlesque music kicks in.

Evelyn hits the ramp.

Fin raises his camera.

KABAM - super slo mo - She sails over the top of him as THE
MONARCH BUTTERFLY - wings spread.

CLICK!

The Butterfly lands and wheels round. Evelyn's away ...
reliving her burlesque routine. Captivated, Fin follows her
with his camera. She plays to him in a game of cat and mouse.

As the music builds, WATER SPRAYS down on them from overhead.
The sprinkler system has gone haywire.

SUPER SLO-MO - Like ice crystals, droplets swirl about Evelyn
as she dances on oblivious. Tears fracture on her face. Her
silken reflection swoops by like a fantastic bird. Her eyes
glisten. Rivulets cascade down her cleavage. Her skates
create lava like avalanches in the mirrored pools.

Evelyn holds out her hands to Fin. Tempting him. He takes
them and turns into a BEETLE DANCER. They glide through the
plants together.

61A EXT. GLASS HOUSE. CONTINUOUS 61A
From outside Evelyn and Fin appear and disappear in the cascading glitter.

61B INT. GLASS HOUSE. CONTINUOUS 61B
Back inside the music stops and Evelyn slides to a halt - soaking - breathless but radiant. Through the water dripping from his eyelashes, Fin can see the tantalising outline of her breasts. They look at each other - a moment suspended between droplets.

Evelyn smiles, breaking the moment. She disappears into the shop. The rain stops - only the slow drip, drip, drip. Fin waits.

Evelyn returns from the darkness.

EVELYN
(holding out a \$20 note)
Are you sure you didn't blink?

FIN
(tapping his camera)
I have proof.

EVELYN
(handing him the note)
Lucky I trust you.

Evelyn turns to Fin and starts to dry his hair ... roughly.

FIN
I've got something for you.

EVELYN
For me?

FIN
Yes. It's your turn. Eyes closed.
Palms up. Don't move

Fin runs to his backpack and fishes out the BEETLE BOX. He returns and places it in Evelyn's hands.

Evelyn opens her eyes.

EVELYN
Can I open it?

FIN
Of course.

Evelyn opens the box to reveal the two beetles trying to claw their way out.

EVELYN

Oh my god, Fin. That is way too weird. Now have I got something to show you. Wait here.

She dashes away to the corner of greenhouse and returns with a removalist carton.

EVELYN (CONT'D)
 (fishing in the box)
 As a girl ... well more than a girl. I became obsessed, obsessed with why men had nipples. I mean there had to be some evolutionary purpose, right.

She digs out a childhood SCRAPBOOK and flips to the page containing a variety of NAIVE DRAWINGS OF MEN'S HAIRY NIPPLES WITH RHINOCEROS BEETLES STROKING THEM.

EVELYN (CONT'D)
 See. Beetle feeders.

FIN
 Beetle feeders?

EVELYN
 Yes it's a man's nipple. That's all they're good for really - feeding beetles.

FIN'S RHINO BEETLE FANTASY

Fin imagines himself standing there - dressed in a SAFARI SUIT and a HAIRY MAN'S CHEST with Evelyn attaching beetles to his nipples. Their claws grip firmly in the hair, causing goose bumps to ripple across his bare skin. He grimaces with pain, or is it pleasure?

EVELYN (CONT'D)
 (sexy wildlife narrator voice)
 Ants use their antenna to stroke the aphids to let down their milk. So too are the stag beetles to your nipples. It's called a symbiotic relationship.

The beetle sits between Evelyn's naked breasts. It struggles up the rise on her inner breast. Others follow its path. There are a trail of them from below her belly button up the middle of her stomach. All on a pilgrimage to the pink tipped mountain.

The first beetle makes it to the top. There ahead of it is the nipple - gloriously pink and glistening. He scrapes his claws gently on the circular line where porcelain skin meets the darkness of the aureola.

All the other beetles follow suit until they form a complete circle around the nipple. Each of them stroking until the nipple spurts fine rivulets of milk, creating a fountain.

The beetles happily lap the milk as it rains down on them.

Fin jumps, breaking from his fantasy and takes the beetle from the box.

FIN
(grabbing his camera)
Can I take a picture?

EVELYN
What of?

Fin looks down at her lace clad cleavage and down at the beetle ... Does he dare place it in the dip between her breasts? ... He reaches out to her. Evelyn pulls a face and backs away. Fin taunts her with the beetle. She squeals.

Like children, he chases her with the beetle. She gets the fit of the giggles and he catches up with her.

FIN
Oh come on. Roller derby queen. I can't believe you're scared.

EVELYN
It's their hooky little feet.

Fin places the beetle on his wrist.

FIN
See. Doesn't hurt.

EVELYN
What will you give me if I do it?

FIN
My first born child.

Evelyn laughs.

FIN (CONT'D)
OK. A dollar a second... You could win back that twenty.

Beat

Evelyn offers him her arm. Fin turns her arm over to expose it's tender underside.

EVELYN
Oh not fair!

FIN
A dollar a second.

Fin lowers the beetle. It attaches itself to her tender wrist. They lock eyes.

FIN (CONT'D)
One Mississippi, two Mississippi,
three Mississippi.

The Beetle inches towards the inside of her elbow. Evelyn squirms but endures.

CUT TO:

Evelyn strikes a number of poses with the beetle crawling up her front while Fin clicks away.

She squeals as it crawls up her neck and into her hair.

EVELYN
Aaah. Quick grab him!

Fin goes to her aid and tries to untangle the beetle.

EVELYN (CONT'D)
I think we should start the day
like this, every day.

FIN
Getting wasted ... with beetles ...
on rollerskates?

Evelyn grins.

EVELYN
No. With a secret.

FIN
A secret?

EVELYN
Yeah. Why not.

FIN
A secret now?

EVELYN
I want to get to know the real you.

FIN
There isn't much to tell really.
I'm pretty boring.

EVELYN
I don't think so.

Fin cocks his camera at her as she goes to her kitchenette area.

EVELYN (CONT'D)
Oh. I forgot to tell you. I've
asked someone over for morning tea.

FIN

Sure.

He follows her with his camera as she prepares MORNING TEA.

EVELYN

I'll make it a fair trade. I'll go first.

CLICK.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

As my mother used to say - Evelyn, you have loved well but not wisely.

CLICK.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

She was right. I wasted more than half my life because I kept saying yes to people I didn't really love.

FIN

Why?

EVELYN

With the last one, every day I'd imagine him getting hit by a car. Killed. I wouldn't have to do anything. I'd be innocent. It'd be over and I'd be free... He never did get run over.

FIN

Maybe you just needed to break a few eggs ... That's what Mum used to say ... break a few eggs until you find a good one.

EVELYN

I want to meet your Mum.

Beat

FIN

Actually I don't have a mother.

Evelyn reacts.

FIN (CONT'D)

She killed herself.

EVELYN

Oh Fin, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean
...

FIN

It's OK.

EVELYN

She must have been a good Mum. You
seem like such a lovely boy.

Fin shrugs.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Well then. Your Dad's done a fine
job.

FIN

Yeah him and his girlfriends. They
all had a go.

EVELYN

Maybe your Dad needed the help.

FIN

Yeah. From a shrink maybe.

Beat

FIN (CONT'D)

The last one took off.

EVELYN

She left?

FIN

They all do it. Hang around for a
while until they get sick of us.

EVELYN

Why would anyone get sick of you?

A KNOCK ON THE FRONT DOOR.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

He's here already?

Fin watches as Evelyn darts off through the doorway to the front door of the shop.

Past Evelyn, Fin sees VINCE, EVELYN'S EX HUSBAND appear at the porthole window carrying a bunch of roses and wearing a hang dog expression. Evelyn immediately locks the door.

VINCE

Can I come in?

EVELYN

No you need to leave or I'll call the police. You're violating police orders.

Vince disappears from view and can be heard walking down the side of the shop.

Evelyn returns to the GLASSHOUSE and bolts the door before Vince appears.

VINCE

Babe. I'm sorry. I made a mistake. I got them to revoke it.

EVELYN

Vince, I don't give a shit. DVO or no DVO. We have nothing left to say to each other.

Beat.

VINCE

Evie, I know what's going on. Barbara told me... Come on babe. I want to help you... I don't want to lose you... Not like this.

Evelyn grabs the phone and Fin, and races up the stairs to her bedroom above the shop.

*

*

62 INT. EVELYN'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

62

While Evelyn calls the police, Fin takes in her room - her bed, her burlesque pictures, her duchess full of make-up and hair accessories.

EVELYN

Hello. Yes it's Evelyn Gray. It's an emergency. My ex-husband is here. He's trying to break in. Yes... 11 Esme Street, Spring Creek... He's breaking a DVO ... Yes... Please ... Hurry ... Thanks.

She hangs up and turns to Fin.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Thank god. They're on their way.

FIN

Did ... did he hurt you?

EVELYN

No more than any other prick.

FIN

Will you be alright?

She nods.

FIN (CONT'D)

Are you guys breaking up?

EVELYN

Already broken up - been divorced 18 months. Can you believe it? He get's a DVO taken out on me, now he wants to revoke it.

FIN

What's a DVO?

EVELYN

A domestic violence order.

FIN

Really?

EVELYN

I'm not proud of it but in all the shit fight that is divorce, we got into a bit of a showdown and I told him that if he didn't leave I'd get a knife and stab him. And that's when he called the cops.

Beat.

FIN

And would you have?

Evelyn squeezes his hand as she thinks of the best way to put it.

EVELYN

A part of me wanted to.

63

INT. AL'S OFFICE - DAY

63

Al is doing battle with a stapler. THE CHOCOLATE TARTS sit in a basket on his desk.

KNOCK-KNOCK.

He steels himself.

KNOCK-KNOCK.

LYN

Allan?

Al opens the door, relieved to see LYN, his BOSS, THE HEAD OF SCHOOL at his door. She's a strong 57-year-old with immoveable hair.

AL

Lyn!

LYN

Sorry to bother you. I know you must be busy.

AL

Not at all.

He offers her a tart.

LYN

They look delicious but no thank you.

Al nods.

LYN (CONT'D)

How are you going?

AL

Fine.

LYN

Allan, you know I have your best interests at heart.

Beat

LYN (CONT'D)

There's gossip going around ...
Don't ask how I heard it. That's
not important. What's important is
that I hear the truth from you. If
I know the truth then we can deal
with it ...

Al swallows.

LYN (CONT'D)

Have you been having an affair with
a student here?

AL

Absolutely not.

Beat.

LYN

I am so relieved to hear that. I'm
not good at confrontation,
especially when it involves a
friend.

KNOCK-KNOCK.

AL

Just a moment.

LYN

It's OK. We're finished. Take your
meeting.

As Al opens the door to let Lyn out - Shelley enters.

Shelley gives Lyn a big smile as they brush past each other.
Lyn takes Shelley in.

Al closes the door and turns just in time to see Shelley
scoff a tart.

SHELLEY

Mmmm yummy.

AL

Stop. Don't eat any more.

SHELLEY

She looks scary. Are you in
trouble?

AL

No.

Shelley raises TWO BLACK O-RINGS in front of her eyes to
create a pair of JOHN LENNON-STYLE SPECTACLES.

SHELLEY

(in a bad German accent)

I can tell you've been a very naughty boy and I want you to come wiss me now, before zey shoot you.

AL

What are those?

SHELLEY

Zeez, my dear friend are ... COCK-O-RINGS.

Taking a handful more from her pocket, she lays out a line of the BLACK RUBBER O-RINGS from smallest to largest.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

You have no idea how hard it is to find the real deal in zis town - I had to improvize.

Al closes his eyes - hoping this isn't happening. He opens them again - She's still there, now holding up a large cock-O-ring in front of her mouth.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

(now in a porn star voice)

Come on baby, show us your "O" mouth ... Oh ... Oh ... Ohhhh.

Shelley can't keep it up without laughing.

AL

You can't be serious.

SHELLEY

I am serious. It literally took me hours to come up with these.

AL

Shelley. I can't be doing this. We have to stop.

Shelley drops the accent.

SHELLEY

Jesus. When are you going to lighten up?

Al stares.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

It's OK, I know you're scared. I'd be scared too. Scared that I'll dob you in, scared you'll lose your job, there'll be a public outcry, blah, blah, blah. Don't worry I get it.

(MORE)

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

(Leaning over his desk.)

I promise, that will never happen. You and I ... we can work through this. Even though you've let yourself go - it's cool. I can handle a bit of flab. And the age thing ...

(holding her hands in the air)

Look. I won't even try and kiss you. No pressure. I'm happy to wait.

Shelley taps the second largest O-Ring.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

Try them on. I've got my money on this one. Lucky No 3.

Al remains rigid.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

Oh. What now, Mr Killjoy?

AL

This. It's just ... It's just not ... appropriate.

SHELLEY

Do you have any idea how much I fucking hate that word? APPROPRIATE. It's as bad as the word NICE. It's such a fence sitting, pathetic, nothing little word.

She stands up and leans over his desk.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

We both know what is NOT appropriate - it's a person in your position using it to take advantage.

AL

Are you blackmailing me?

SHELLEY

Call it what you want, Allan. But you started this and it's extremely rude to start something that you can't finish.

Beat.

AL

Shelley. It was never my intention to hurt you.

SHELLEY

Oh Puh-lease! Do you really want to see me vomit? Is that what gets you off?

Al stares at Shelley.

AL

Do you not see what the problem here is?

Using her fingers to prise back her eyelids, Shelley eyeballs Al sarcastically.

AL (CONT'D)

Alright. Let's finish it. It's finished. There you go. Happy now?

Al snatches up his bag and strides out with the tarts.

Shelley hesitates then dashes out after him.

64

INT. EVELYN'S BEDROOM - DAY

64

Evelyn and Fin peer through the window at Vince hunting for a notepad and pen in the glove box of his car. He writes a note, tucks it in the roses and is about to leave them at the front door when... Al's car pulls up. Al gets out carrying the basket of chocolate tarts.

EVELYN

Oh my God. That's the guy I asked round.

FIN

WHAT?

Shelley's car pulls up. She gets out.

FIN (CONT'D)

(pointing at Shelley striding towards Al)
But he's with her.

EVELYN

Are you sure?

FIN

Yep. He's her teacher. Everyone knows.

EVELYN

Are you serious?

FIN

Yes everyone knows.

Evelyn reacts.

They watch as ...

65 EXT. FLORIST SHOP - DAY.

65

Al is about to knock on the front door when Vince steps up behind up and eyes the tarts.

VINCE
You the new bloke?

AL
No.

VINCE
Well, just so you know - I'm still her husband.

AL
Right. OK. Good.

SHELLEY (O.S.)
Don't you dare run away from me ...
you gutless wonder!

Both Al and Vince spin round as Shelley strides towards them. Al hands Vince the tarts.

Al makes a run for it to his car.

Shelley races to her car.

The SOUND OF POLICE SIRENS.

Vince makes a run for it to his car.

The street is empty.

A POSTMAN rides up at pops a LETTER in Evelyn's mailbox.

66 INT. AL'S CAR - DAY

66

Al watches Shelley gain on him in the rear-vision mirror. He floors it.

67 INT. FLORIST SHOP - DAY

67

Evelyn brings the letter, roses and tarts inside. Fin enters, carrying his backpack.

FIN
(trying to make light of it)
Hey it's your lucky day.

Evelyn manages a half smile

EVELYN

I like you Fin. You've got a
...irridescent heart.

Evelyn dumps the roses and tarts and opens the envelope.

Her hands shake.

She sighs as she flicks through a WAD OF HOSPITAL PAPER WORK.

FIN

Actually, I have something I wanted
to give to you.

Fin fishes in his backpack and produces the GIFT BOX.

EVELYN

Really ? Another present?

FIN

Just a thankyou - for the camera.

EVELYN

(taking the box)

Look at this. It's even got a
ribbon. You are such a precious
creature, aren't you.

Fin watches intently as she slides off the lid. It's the
MONARCH BUTTERFLY perfectly set and labelled.

In this moment, her face means everything to him. Evelyn's
face goes blank. Her bottom lip starts to quiver. Fin feels
his chest compress.

Evelyn starts to cry. Her whimpers swell. She suddenly pulls
Fin into her ample bosom. Fin isn't game to move, after a
little while he puts his hands on her waist.

Finally she releases him. He stands there bewildered. She
pulls the wad of tissues from her bra and wipes her tears
from his face.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

I'm so sorry. It's been a bad day,
a bad week, a bad year.

FIN

It's OK.

EVELYN

No. It's not OK.

FIN

But it will be.

Evelyn looks at his pale face, manages a smile and touches
his cheek.

Fin looks down at the stiff blue butterfly, now faded in its cotton wool coffin.

A KNOCK AT THE FRONT DOOR.

It's the two police officers.

EVELYN

I think it best if they don't see you here.

Fin hesitates. He doesn't want to leave her.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Please. I'll be OK.

FIN

You sure?

Evelyn nods. Fin is not convinced but leaves anyway.

68

EXT/INT. AL'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

68

Al's car screeches to a halt in the driveway. He jumps out and runs to the door of his house. Shelley pulls up and races after him.

Al manages to lock the door just in time.

He races down the hallway to the back door.

Through the windows, he sees Shelley run down the side of the house.

KA-BAM--He slams the lock on the back screen door as Shelley appears.

SHELLEY

For fuck sake, Al. I just want to talk.

Al bolts back to his room where he locks his windows.

He waits and waits all is quiet.

Al slumps on the bed ... peace at last.

Then he hears it - a NOISE from Fin's room.

CUT TO: SHELLEY SLIDING IN THROUGH FIN'S OPEN WINDOW.

Al jumps up and hides behind the bedroom door.

He listens as Shelley searches the house - opening and closing doors.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

If there's one thing I can't stand
it's passive-aggressives. People
who run and hide. People who stick
their head in the sand and hope it
will all go away. Men who leave
messages rather than doing it face
to face.

Beat

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

You don't do that to me.

SILENCE

Al waits - his ear to the door.

69 EXT. AL'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

69

On the other side Shelley places her ear to the door. She can
almost hear him breathing.

70 INT. AL'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

70

Al waits and waits, listening.

He hears a soft, scuffling sound.

He backs up.

The door opens.

Shelley enters, completely naked.

Al stares - like a rabbit in the headlights.

Shelley stares at Al and, unable to keep a straight face,
bursts into giggles.

She dives under his bed sheets like a child.

Al looks bewildered.

SHELLEY

(popping her head out)
We could play spider babies.

AL

Spider babies?

SHELLEY

I'm the mummy spider and you can be
my baby.

Beat

SHELLEY (CONT'D)
I'll let you suckle me.

Beat

SHELLEY (CONT'D)
Or you be the Mummy and I'll suckle
you.

Al is worried.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)
Seriously? You fall for it every
time. I'M KIDDING. OK?

Shelley sits up.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)
Oh come on Al. What happened to
you?

AL picks up Shelley's clothes.

AL
A lot. A lot happened, Shelley.
Everything happened. I can't undo
it. I can't fix it and I can't take
it back.

SHELLEY
But there's always been someone
else.

AL
No. Not before. There wasn't.

AL breaks. Shelley watches Al's raw pain in silence - unsure
how to handle it.

SHELLEY
I'm sorry.

Shelley dresses and exits in silence.

Al is left alone.

71 EXT. FIN'S STREET - DAY

71

Fin rides across the street towards his house. Shelley calls
to him from her car.

SHELLEY
Hey!

Fin stops.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

Come here for a sec.

Fin rides over to Shelley's window and clocks her undone shirt and skimpy bra. Shelley riffles through the glove box and hands Fin a BOX OF EDIBLE CONDOMS.

SHELLEY V.O.

(narrator style)

It's sexy being green. Throwing out used rubbers contributes to our...

72 OMITTED 72

73 INT. FIN'S ROOM. CONTINUOUS 73

Fin shoves clothes in his back pack.

SHELLEY V.O

... ever growing landfill problems.
Do your part by using Lollipop
licks edible condoms.

KNOCK-KNOCK

SILENCE

KNOCK-KNOCK

AL

Fin. Can we talk?

Fin slides out his bedroom window.

74 INT. HALLWAY - DAY 74

AL

Fin?

He tries the door again - no luck.

75 EXT. GLASSHOUSE - DAY 75

Fin arrives at the glass house. He peers in and spies Evelyn through the plants taking a BATH. He watches for a moment, unseen.

75A INT. GLASS HOUSE. CONTINUOUS 75A

Fin quietly enters, then knocks.

FIN

Hello.

EVELYN

Fin?

FIN

Yes. It's just me.

EVELYN

Hang on a minute. I'm in the bath.
Stay there. I'll get dressed.

FIN

OK.

Fin steals glances as she dresses. He edges closer to her.

EVELYN

Are you OK? What's up?

FIN

Is it alright if I stay here for a
while?

EVELYN

Really? You sure you're OK? You're
not hurt, are you?

FIN

No.

EVELYN

Has he got a new girlfriend?

FIN

I just need a bit of time to sort a
few things out...Please.

Evelyn joins him, now dressed.

EVELYN

I don't know. Your Father will
worry. He should at least know
where you are. We should call him.

FIN

No.

BRRING-BRING. The phone rings. They look at each other.

Evelyn turns to the phone and back again.

EVELYN

Hang on.

Evelyn takes the call.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Hello ... Yes this is her ... Yes I
did get it, thanks ... No, I didn't
... OK ...

Long pause as Fin tries to listen.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

... Yes ... I think so ... No it's
fine ... I know where to go ...
thank you. Bye.

Her face pales as she hangs up. She turns and exhales - long
and slow. Then she sucks in - long and slow.

They stand in silence.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Do you think I could have a hug?

Fin nods. She pulls him close and holds him tight for a long time.

Fin lets his hands slide to her waist ... then he moves them up ever so slowly to cup her breasts. Evelyn lets him - she looks down at his small hands cupping her porcelain cleavage - they look good on her breasts - small and pale and delicate.

Fin looks down at his hands and watches them rise and fall with her bosom - it's a nice image. They look up simultaneously and their eyes connect - each looking within the other.

Evelyn closes her eyes and turns away.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

I'm sorry, I'm not very well ...
You should go.

76 INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

76

The SOUND of SAUSAGES SIZZLING can be heard from the kitchen.

AL

DINNER!

CUT TO:

Al knocks on Fin's door.

No answer.

AL (CONT'D)

Dinner's up.

No answer.

AL (CONT'D)

Come on.

Al waits then tries to open the door.

77 INT. FIN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

77

Fin has a chair wedged under the door handle, preventing it from opening.

78 INT. KITCHEN - MOMENTS LATER

78

Al eats alone while flicking through the PHONE BOOK UNDER FLORISTS. A foil-covered plate sits in Fin's spot.

Al hears a noise and leans back in his chair to see if Fin has appeared.

AL
Come on Fin. This is getting ridiculous.

No. Only the buzz of cicadas.

AL (CONT'D)
OK. Well. I'll leave your dinner in the microwave and you sort it out yourself.

79 EXT. FRONT OF SHOP - NIGHT 79

Fin tests the doors of EVELYN'S CAR until he finds one unlocked. He climbs in.

80 INT. EVELYN'S CAR - NIGHT 80

Fin settles down for the night and looks across to the Shop. A light flicks on in Evelyn's room above.

He watches Evelyn's silhouette as she goes to her wardrobe and dumps all her burlesque costumes on the floor.

81 INT. EVELYN'S BEDROOM ABOVE THE SHOP - MOMENTS LATER 81

Evelyn stuffs her Burlesque costumes into two large garbage bags. She picks up the GOLDEN MONARCH BUTTERFLY costume but can't bring herself to bag it.

She puts it on one last time.

82 INT. EVELYN'S CAR - NIGHT 82

Fin watches as Evelyn spreads her wings and he hears the music again.

83 INT. AL'S BEDROOM - NIGHT 83

Al lies awake, hugging a pillow to his chest.

84 INT. EVELYN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT 84

Evelyn lies awake, cocooned in her wings - hugging a pillow to her chest.

- 85 INT. EVELYN'S CAR - NIGHT 85
 Fin lies awake, hugging his back pack to his chest.
- 86 INT. AL'S BEDROOM - DAWN 86
 Al wakes in the half light. He checks his watch, groans and rolls over, trying to steal more sleep.
- 87 INT. EVELYN'S BEDROOM - DAWN 87
 Evelyn stands at the window, watching the sunrise. Morning light suddenly illuminates the room. She inhales.
- 88 INT. EVELYN'S CAR - DAWN 88
 While Fin sleeps, Evelyn glides past his window on her rollerskates. She dumps the two garbage bags of costumes into the wheelie bin.
- 89 INT. AL AND FIN'S HOUSE - DAWN 89
 Al pulls on an old track suit and jumper while knocking on Fin's door.
- AL
 Fin?
- He jiggles the door again.
- AL (CONT'D)
 FIN?
- Still no answer. Al heaves against the door. It bursts open. No Fin. Al strides down the corridor and out the back door calling out.
- AL (CONT'D)
 FIN?
- He hurries back and grabs his car keys.
- 90 INT. EVELYN'S CAR - DAY 90
 Fin wakes and stares at Evelyn's bedroom window, searching for movement.
- 91 EXT. STREETS - DAY 91
 SSSHT, SSSHT, SSSHT. Evelyn skates as hard and fast as she can. Wind fills her ears. Her eyes water. She's breathing hard - pushing herself faster and faster.

She comes to a downhill run, shuts her eyes and crouches low ... ZZZZZT ... she spreads her arms to feel the rush.

92 EXT. STREET - EARLY MORNING 92

Al's car cruises by on the hunt for Fin.

93 INT. AL'S CAR - CONTINUOUS 93

Al scans the periphery.

Suddenly Evelyn shoots out across the road in front of him and disappears. He does a double-take.

94 EXT. STREET - CONTINUOUS 94

Evelyn careers on. She stands and dodges some potholes. Up ahead - a T-intersection. She's travelling much too fast and loses it on the bend. KA-BANG! She crashes to the ground and rolls to a stop. OUCH!

Momentarily stunned, she drags herself up into a sitting position in the gutter. She feels for blood on her face and head ... only a bit of bleeding in her hair ... nothing too serious. But then the pain in her ankle kicks in and she yelps as she tries to straighten her leg. It's twisted.

She grits her teeth and tries to remove her skates but it's too painful.

95 INT. AL'S CAR - CONTINUOUS 95

Al turns down the street where he saw Evelyn disappear. He slows down - searching.

96 EXT. GLASSHOUSE - MORNING 96

Fin knocks and waits - no answer.

He knocks again - still no answer.

He forces open a window and climbs in.

97 INT. GLASSHOUSE - CONTINUOUS 97

Inside he listens for signs of life.

FIN

Hello?

Fin stands at the bottom of the stairs that lead up to Evelyn's bedroom above the shop.

FIN (CONT'D)
Hello? Evelyn?

Nothing.

98 INT. EVELYN'S BEDROOM ABOVE THE SHOP - CONTINUOUS 98

Fin surveys Evelyn's private domain.

CUT TO:

He goes to her dresser where he finds a pair of NIPPLE TASSELS. He holds them in front of his eyes and makes monster faces and noises in the mirror.

CUT TO:

On her bed he spies the golden MONARCH COSTUME. He runs his hand through its silken folds.

99 EXT. STREET MORNING 99

Al spots Evelyn sitting in the gutter, pulls up and goes to her. Evelyn gives nothing away. *

AL
Jesus, have you broken something? *

No answer.

AL (CONT'D)
Come on. Let's get you to a doctor. *

EVELYN
Are you fucking your own student? *

AL
Who told you that? *

EVELYN
One of your students. *

Beat. *

AL *
Have I fucked up? Yes.

EVELYN *
You scurvy dog.

AL *
And yes I've made mistakes.

EVELYN *
You serious?

AL *
Huge mistakes.

EVELYN *
Blah blah fucking blah.

AL *
Mistakes I'm trying to undo.

EVELYN *
Any success?

AL *
I think so. I hope so.

EVELYN *
I think. I hope. Doesn't sound too encouraging.

Beat. *

AL *
I met your husband.

EVELYN *
No. You met my Ex husband.

Evelyn tries to right herself to walk but yelps in pain.

AL *
(holding her up)
Come on. You don't have to like me
but at least let me take you to a
doctor.

EVELYN *
I don't want a doctor. I need to
get home.

AL
OK. Well, I'll take you home.

Al helps Evelyn to the car. *

EVELYN
I should have called you Maude. *

AL
I still like you Harold. *

EVELYN
Cute. *

100 INT. EVELYN'S BEDROOM - DAY 100

Fin spreads Evelyn's costume out on the bed and lies on it, face first - inhaling her scent. He rolls himself up in the swathes of golden fabric - cocooning himself in her.

101 INT. AL'S CAR - DAY 101

Al helps Evelyn with her seatbelt.

EVELYN
You don't happen to have any Panadol on you?

Al opens the glovebox and hunts.

AL
Sorry.

Evelyn nods and massages her temples.

AL (CONT'D)
Here. Give me your hand.

He takes her hand and squeezes the fleshy pad between her thumb and forefinger.

EVELYN
Owww.

AL
Breathe. Breathe. That's it. *

Al strokes her arm. She relaxes. *

AL (CONT'D)
I'm Al. *

EVELYN
Evelyn. *

102 EXT. BACK OF GLASSHOUSE - MORNING 102 *

Al and Evelyn pull up in Al's car.

103 INT/EXT. AL'S CAR - CONTINUOUS 103

Evelyn is sweaty and pale.

AL

Wait there 'til I come round and
get you.

He darts around to her side and almost has to carry her from
the car to the glasshouse.

Evelyn hands him the keys to unlock.

104 INT. GLASSHOUSE - MORNING 104

Al pushes inside, carrying Evelyn. His fluffy jumper tickles
her nose.

AL

Sorry about the jumper.

EVELYN

At least it smells nice. I had a
fiance once who smelt like wet dog.

AL

And?

EVELYN

Surprise. Surprise. No wedding.

Al grins and lies her on the sofa.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Thanks.

105 INT. EVELYN'S BEDROOM ABOVE THE SHOP - CONTINUOUS 105

Fin's eyes dart open. He untangles himself from the fabric
and tiptoes to the door.

Below he spies Al and Evelyn in the shop.

His worst nightmare has come true.

106 INT. THE GLASSHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

106

Evelyn tries again to pull the skate off her swollen foot.

EVELYN

Ow, ow, ow.

AL

Please don't do that. We have to get the swelling down.

He goes to the freezer compartment of her fridge, takes out a frozen pack of peas and wraps it in a tea towel.

AL (CONT'D)

(pressing it on her ankle)
Ahah. What would we do without frozen peas?

Evelyn manages a smile.

AL (CONT'D)

(handing her the peas)
Here you hold this. I promise I'll be very gentle.

Al loosens Evelyn's skate and slides it off bit by bit. Evelyn winces but endures.

The skate comes free.

AL (CONT'D)

Sorry.

EVELYN

No, thank you.

He stands.

AL

I know I've blown my chance to eat cake but can I get you a cup of tea?

EVELYN

I'm OK. But would you mind doing me a favour and bring me my pills?

AL

Where are they?

EVELYN

See on top of the fridge - that white container.

Al brings Evelyn her pills and a glass of water.

*

AL
That's a lot of pills.

*

EVELYN
You need a lot of pills when you're
a hypochondriac.

*

Evelyn picks up her NECKLACE and offers it to Al.

EVELYN (CONT'D)
(offering her neck)
Would you mind?

*

Al accepts.

Time slows as Fin watches Al lift her hair - his hands linger
on her neck.

Al strokes her neck the way Shelley did to him. She tilts her
head, offering Al her face.

Al lowers his face to hers.

Fin, bug-eyed, watches as AL AND EVELYN KISS.

CLANK-CLANK-CLANK-CLANK - Fin, carrying his backpack, belts
down the stairs and out the front door. Al and Evelyn watch
in astonishment.

EVELYN AND AL

Fin?

Evelyn turns to AL.

Al is rooted to the spot. THERE ON EVELYN'S NECK IS THE DISTINCTIVE DRAGONFLY NECKLACE. Suddenly she is standing in front of him topless - he recognises Fin's photograph.

Al tries to speak, instead he coughs and races out after Fin.

107 EXT. STREETS - DAY

107

Fin grabs his bike and tries to make a quick getaway but Al catches him just around the corner from the glasshouse. He grabs and yanks the bike sideways. Fin hits the ground and scrambles to his feet.

AL

Those photos. Did you take them?

Fin dusts himself off.

AL (CONT'D)

Jesus Fin. You can't ... you can't ... stay there.

FIN

What are you gonna do about it?

AL

Maybe I should call the cops and they can ask her.

FIN

Go your hardest. And while you're at it, tell them you fuck your students.

AL

It's up to you. You tell me what's going on or I'll go back round and ask her myself.

FIN

My room's free, why not get a couple of them to move in. Give yourself a heart attack ... be the best thing that ever happened.

AL

It's up to you.

Al goes to pass Fin. Fin shunts him back.

FIN

Stay away.

AL
I'm not ...

FIN
STAY AWAY.

Fin loses it. Screaming, he grabs his bike and swings it at Al. He dodges it.

FIN (CONT'D)
STAY AWAY, STAY AWAY!

Fin swings it as hard as he can. It hits Al across the shoulder and knocks him off balance.

Al picks himself up to see Fin riding off down the street.

Al turns back to the shop ... wondering how the hell to handle the situation.

CUT TO:

Al's car revs out of the car park.

108 OMITTED 108

109 EXT. STREET - DAY 109

Fin rides as hard and as fast as he can, careful to check that Al is not around before he turns a corner.

CUT TO:

Al cruises the streets looking for Fin and checks his watch.

110 INT. AL'S CAR. DAY 110

Al taps the steering wheel, muttering. He check's his watch again.

AL
(reefing around the steering wheel)
Fuck!

111 EXT. STREETS. DAY 111

Al's car does a u turn a hoons off up the street.

- 112 EXT. TERTIARY COLLEGE CAR PARK - DAY 112
Fin rides past Al's car in the college car park, being careful not to be seen.
- 113 INT. TERTIARY COLLEGE HALLWAY / AL'S OFFICE - DAY 113
Al runs to his office and unlocks the door as Fin scoots past in the background.
- 114 INT. TERTIARY COLLEGE HALLWAY / CLASSROOM - DAY 114
Fin sneaks down the corridor and finds an empty classroom. He ransacks a drawer until he finds a MARKER PEN.
- CUT TO:
- Fin writes "AL 4 SHELLEY" on a roll of film.
- 115 INT. TERTIARY COLLEGE - OUTSIDE LYN'S OFFICE. DAY 115
Lyn enters her office and closes the door.
Fin scurries up and pops the roll of film in her 'in box' under her sign, LYN GREGORY - HEAD OF SCHOOL.
- 116 INT. TERTIARY COLLEGE. GIRLS TOILET - DAY 116
Head down, Fin enters a toilet cubicle and locks the door.
- 117 INT. AL'S OFFICE - DAY 117
Al looks at EVELYN'S PHONE NUMBER ON HIS WRIST.
He goes to pick up the phone and stops ... unsure.
- 118 EXT. GLASSHOUSE - DAY 118
Fin rides around the back and hides his bike.
He peers through the glass, knocks and waits ... no answer.
He goes to the unlocked window and slides in.
- 119 INT. FLORIST SHOP - DAY 119
Fin calls up the stairs to Evelyn's room.

FIN

Hello?

The PHONE RINGS. Fin goes to pick it up. The answering machine kicks in.

EVELYN'S ANSWERING MACHINE

Hello, Thankyou for calling. Bloom will officially open on the 31st of May. If it is urgent please leave a message.

The caller hangs up.

Among the paperwork by the phone Fin spots a HOSPITAL APPOINTMENT CARD. He picks it up.

He tiptoes up the stairs to Evelyn's room.

120 INT. EVELYN'S BEDROOM ABOVE THE SHOP - DAY 120

Fin enters.

The room is neat and devoid of clutter. The bed has been stripped.

121 EXT. HOSPITAL - DAY 121

Fin pumps his pedals and arrives at the hospital. A flowering cymbidium orchid protrudes from his bike carrier.

122 INT. HOSPITAL RECEPTION AREA - DAY 122

Shaken and breathless, Fin waits his turn at the Enquiries Desk.

HOSPITAL RECEPTIONIST

Yes? Can I help?

FIN

Mrs Evelyn ... Miss Evelyn Gray. Is she here?

The Receptionist eyes him carefully before turning to her computer screen.

HOSPITAL RECEPTIONIST

Yes. She has checked in ... But it's not visiting hours until 3 o'clock, and besides she will most likely not be having visitors today as she's being prepped for surgery.

Fin stares at some LIFELESS PLASTIC FLOWERS TRAPPED IN A PERSPEX BOX. The receptionist notices.

HOSPITAL RECEPTIONIST (CONT'D)

Why don't you try tomorrow.

Fin slouches away.

- 123 INT. TERTIARY COLLEGE FEMALE TOILETS - DAY 123
Shelley enters the toilet, followed closely behind by LYN, the head of school and Al's boss. They exchange tight smiles before scuttling into separate cubicles.
- 124 INT. LYN'S TOILET CUBICLE - CONTINUOUS 124
Lyn sits on the toilet then notices the back of the door is scrawled with graffiti: "ALLAN ROBINSON LEFT ME WOBBLY 4 DAYS" and "ALLAN ROBINSON IS A SEX GOD" and "SHELLEY 4 AL".
She turns to the adjoining cubicle where Shelley tinkles away.
- 125 INT. SHELLEY'S TOILET CUBICLE - CONTINUOUS 125
Shelley sees the same graffiti above the roll holder - "ALLAN ROBINSON IS A SEX GOD" ETC.
Shelley turns to Lyn's cubicle on her left.
She peers under the wall - Lyn is still there. Shelley lifts her feet and perches on the toilet. She waits until LYN has left the toilet before exiting her cubicle.
Shelley checks all the other cubicles - they are all plastered with the same thing. She grabs reams of toilet paper and tries to rub it off without success.
- 126 EXT. CORRIDOR - MOMENTS LATER 126
Shelley runs down the corridor just as Lyn exits her office.
Shelley follows at a safe distance all the way to Al's office.
Defeated, she rests her head on the wall as Lyn knocks.
- 127 INT. AL'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS 127
Al sits at his desk eating dry weet-bix and marking papers.
KNOCK-KNOCK. Al steels himself for Shelley's entry.
AL
Yes.
Lyn enters. Al stands, brushing cereal from his jumper.
AL (CONT'D)
Lyn!

LYN
I'll keep it brief.

She unclenches her fist to reveal a ROLL OF FILM.

LYN (CONT'D)
This was left for me.

She holds it out to Al so he can read what's scrawled on it -
"AL 4 SHELLEY".

LYN (CONT'D)
You tell me. Do I need to get these
developed?

AL
Probably not.

LYN
Then it's best you pack your things
and go quietly. The rest is merely
procedure. I will do my utmost to
keep this all as low-key as
possible - for your sake as well as
ours.

Beat

LYN (CONT'D)
Oh Allan. I did try.

Beat

Lyn exits.

Al takes a long time to sit. He looks around his office - for
the first time he sees it for what it is - a disaster, a
reflection of his recent life, and he knows it.

The door creaks open. Al turns - it's a pale-faced Shelley.

SHELLEY
It wasn't me. I swear.

Al stares.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)
Are you in trouble?

Al nods.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)
Big trouble?

Al nods.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)
Can I do anything to help?

Al nods.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)
What?

AL
Stay away. Stay far, far away.

Shelley nods.

128 INT. FLORIST SHOP - DAY 128

Fin, paintbrush in hand, paints some unfinished mouldings.

The front door bell clangs. Fin glimpses Al through the window and ducks behind the counter.

129 INT. FLORIST SHOP - CONTINUOUS 129

Fin waits for the sound of his car. Nothing. Hearing footsteps approach the glasshouse, he darts behind the other side of the counter just in time to see Al tap on the back door of the glasshouse.

130 EXT. GLASSHOUSE - CONTINUOUS 130

Al walks the length of the glasshouse, spies Fin's bike and knocks on the back door.

AL
Fin. I know you're in there.

131 INT. FLORIST SHOP - CONTINUOUS 131

Fin holds his breath and waits.

132 EXT. GLASSHOUSE - CONTINUOUS 132

AL
Look. I ... I don't want any more trouble. I just want to talk.
That's all. OK?

- 133 INT. FLORIST SHOP - CONTINUOUS 133
The shop is empty.
- 134 EXT. FRONT OF FLORIST SHOP - CONTINUOUS 134
Fin empties a TIN OF BRIGHT PINK PAINT OVER AL'S BEAUTIFUL CLASSIC CAR.
- 135 EXT. GLASSHOUSE - CONTINUOUS 135
AL
Fin? Come on.
BEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP!
Al spins around at the sound of his car horn and heads back around to the front of the shop.
- 136 EXT. FRONT OF FLORIST SHOP - CONTINUOUS 136
Al GASPS as he spots his car DOUSED with BRIGHT PINK PAINT. It's all over the duco and across the cream leather interior.
He opens the door and tries to flick the puddle of paint from his seat out the door.
AL
I need help. BLOODY HELL. FIIINNN!
It's hopeless.
- 137 INT. FLORIST SHOP - CONTINUOUS 137
Fin holds his position behind the counter until he hears the sound of father's car roar to life and disappear.
- 138 EXT. FRONT OF FIN AND AL'S HOUSE/BACKYARD - DAY 138
Al's car screeches to a halt. He runs into the backyard and reels out the hose. It gets stuck on a bush and is not quite long enough. Al tugs at it. The connector breaks. He struggles to reconnect the hose. He turns the tap on and races back to the other end - but now there's a kink in the hose. He races back to find the kink - his rage building.
MONTAGE: AL IN A RAGE TRYING TO CLEAN HIS CAR BUT MAKING IT WORSE
Trying to sponge the paint on the seats, but spilling the bucket of water and soaking the carpet with pink.
Al grabbing towels and scrubbing at the carpet.

139 INT. GARAGE - DAY 139

Al hunts through boxes of car cleaning stuff ... then spies the CHAINSAW.

END MONTAGE

140 EXT. FIN AND AL'S BACKYARD - DAY 140

A curtain of MONARCH BUTTERFLIES rises from the BUTTERFLY TREEHOUSE as a CHAINSAW vibrates in Al's hands. Tree limbs and vines crash to the ground as Al attacks the tree before turning to the support beams of the aviary itself.

Fin's butterfly aviary comes crashing to the ground.

CUT TO:

Filthy, Al kills the chainsaw and sits amongst the debris in the silence.

CUT TO:

TIME-LAPSE MONTAGE

Al sits by the bug zapper - drinking - waiting.

As it grows darker the bug zapper grows brighter.

Insects swarm around him, leaving light trails.

He is obliterated ...

By their tracks

By their incessant buzzing.

Images and SFX haunt him.

AL MONTAGE

The screen door slapping.

Rose's shoes clacking down the hallway.

The clacking of wood on wood.

A rope pulls taught.

A batten jiggling across the manhole.

END MONTAGE

141 INT. EVELYN'S BEDROOM ABOVE HER FLORIST SHOP - NIGHT 141

Fin sleeps in Evelyn's bed. Images and SFX haunt him.

FIN MONTAGE

Pins crunch through silver wings - smash through exoskeletons.

Wings beat against pins.

Evelyn in her Monarch costume pinned like a butterfly.

Her wings beat against the pins.

The clacking of wood on wood.

A batten jiggling across the manhole.

END MONTAGE

142 INT. EVELYN'S HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT 142

From above we see Evelyn, post-operation, flat on her back. She is attached to IVs and has drains running from her chest.

TIME-LAPSE MONTAGE

Evelyn tears CLUMPS OF HER HAIR OUT while doctors and nurses come and go, taking her vitals, checking her chart and swapping whispered exchanges between shifts.

Evelyn is alone in the blackness.

Her eyes pry open.

The air-conditioning duct stares down at her.

Evelyn stares back.

It breathes in time with her. In. Out. In. Out

Except that every time she breathes out, it sucks in - stealing her spirit.

The Duct sucks harder and harder. Ripping, tearing, pulling what's left of EVELYN'S HAIR and her flowers apart. Clumps of hair and petals are whisked upwards into it's steel slits.

END MONTAGE

143 INT. HOSPITAL HALLWAY - MORNING 143

Fin sneaks past silent doorways, listening to whispered groans.

He stops in front of door - 102.

A sign reads: NO VISITORS.

144

INT. EVELYN'S HOSPITAL ROOM - MORNING

144

Fin carefully pushes open the door and enters. There is the silhouette of someone sitting on the edge of the bed, wearing a hospital gown.

FIN

Evelyn?

Evelyn turns. She is bald.

Fin approaches then stops as his eyes adjust.

EVELYN

Hi.

SILENCE.

FIN

Why did you do that?

EVELYN

What?

FIN

Your hair.

She turns away but Fin steps in front of her.

FIN (CONT'D)

Why?

She looks at him strangely.

FIN (CONT'D)

You had nice hair.

EVELYN

Oh Fin. That was a wig.

He shakes his head.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Later on, I can grow it back.

FIN

Not for a million years.

She looks at him now, concerned.

FIN (CONT'D)

Where are your clothes?

EVELYN

But this is what you wear in hospital.

FIN

It's ugly.

EVELYN

Yes but it's practical.

FIN

I hate practical. I liked you the way you were.

Evelyn stares at Fin - verging on tears.

EVELYN

Fin. I can't be the way I was before.

FIN

Why?

EVELYN

I don't feel the same.

FIN

Why?

EVELYN

Because I don't.

Fin steps in front of her.

FIN

You ... are ... the most beautiful woman I have ever met.

She looks up and at that moment he leans in and kisses her full on the lips.

Suddenly she is transported in one of Fin's fantasies.

EVELYN'S BUTTERFLY FANTASY

EVELYN lies semi-naked, flat on her back. A swarm of BUTTERFLIES hover above her. Their luminous wings glitter.

En masse they lower their bodies onto hers. She feels the exquisite sensation of a million fluttering wings and trembling feet against her bare skin.

The fluttering intensifies and Evelyn is lifted by a sparkling fuzz. She glides above the forest floor. Luminous green fern fronds brush her skin.

Evelyn quivers - oh, the sensations - utterly delicious.

FIN'S HAND reaches into frame and caresses her hair, brushing it back from her temple.

Al SPOONS with EVELYN.

END FANTASY

Evelyn breaks the kiss and takes his hand and places it on her butchered flat chest. Fin stiffens and pulls his hand away.

EVELYN

See Fin. I'm hardly a woman and you're only a boy.

They stare at each other, fighting back tears. Evelyn pulls Fin to her the best she can and they cling to each other, afraid to let go.

Evelyn holds him as his mother did and kisses the top of his head. She whispers

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Sssh. It's OK. It's OK. I'm scared too.

They hold each other for a long time.

FIN

Are you going to die?

Long beat.

EVELYN

I'm here now.

Fin can't bring himself to look Evelyn in the face. He flicks away a tear and hurries from the room.

145 EXT. STREETS - MORNING 145

Fin pedals as hard as he can, tears streaming down his face.

146 EXT. FIN'S BACKYARD - MORNING 146

Fin rounds the corner and drops his bike as he spots the devastation - his butterfly aviary and tree torn to the ground.

147 INT. FIN'S VERANDAH BEDROOM - NIGHT 147

Fin grapples with a large suitcase, tossing clothes and belongings into it.

He pulls out the PHOTOGRAPH ALBUM from its hiding place.

Sitting on the bed, he takes a moment to admire his EVELYN PHOTOGRAPHS. He comes across the photos of her NAKED BREASTS and halts.

148 INT. AL'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS 148

Al lies on his bed half-asleep. He hears Fin next door and opens his eyes.

149 INT. FIN'S VERANDAH BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS 149

Fin hears his Father's door opening.

Leaving the album on his bed, he grabs a nearby dumbbell and darts behind the door.

150 INT. FIN'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS 150

Al barges in, spots the open album on the bed and spins around to find Fin.

AL

Who the hell do you think you are?

FIN

You're the asshole.

AL

Yeah right. I'm just the asshole that pays for everything. Are you gonna do that too? Now that I've lost my job.

AL (CONT'D)

Whether you like it or not, you do not control my life, and if I want to date a woman or ... or ... anything else, then I will.

FIN

Hey, don't let me stop you. She's perfect for you - only gonna be around for a little while.

AL

What did you say?

FIN

Waste of time if you ask me.

AL

What are you talking about?

FIN

Just like Mum. She's going to DIE - D.I.E ... Get it?

AL

If you have any decency at all you will take that back.

FIN

Why? Can't you handle the truth?

AL

Take it back.

Livid Al launches forward to slap him. Fin instinctively retaliates and, dumbbell in hand, jabs Al in the face. Al stumbles sideways. Fin dumps the weight and hovers, his fists at the ready.

FIN

Come on. Who's the big man now?

Floundering, Al feels his face for blood.

AL

Your Mother did what she did. It was her choice, Fin. Not mine.

FIN

(launching himself at Al like a cannonball)

How would you know. YOU WEREN'T THERE.

Al reels back, trips on display case and comes crashing down. Glass shatters around him as he crashes to the floor.

Fin, in an unstoppable rage, dives on top of him and smacks him across the face.

FIN (CONT'D)

YOU WEREN'T THERE. YOU WEREN'T THERE!

SILENCE

151 INT. FIN'S HOUSE. HALLWAY - DAY

151

FLASHBACK

10-YEAR-OLD FIN

Dad?... DAD?

CLANK, CLANK, CLANK. A wooden batten tied with rope straddles the manhole.

It jiggles as the 10-YEAR-OLD FIN clings to his MOTHER'S LEGS. With all his might, he tries to heave her upwards, to release the tension on the rope around her neck. She gurgles.

10-YEAR-OLD FIN (CONT'D)

DAAAD!

SILENCE

152 EXT. STREET - DAY 152

A YOUNGER, FIT, RUDDY-FACED AL pounds the pavement on his afternoon jog. All he hears is the sound of his own breath, in, out, in, out.

153 INT. HALLWAY, FIN'S HOUSE - DAY 153

10-YEAR-OLD FIN

DAAAAAD!

Fin screams out again for his Father as his strength fades and he is forced to let the rope take his Mother's weight.

THE SOUND OF A VICIOUS WIND starting to blow

154 EXT. STREET. NIGHT 154

The wind is howling. Whipping at the trees, sending eddies of leaves across the bitumen.

Fin stares as AL is loaded into the greenish tomblike innards of the AMBULANCE.

All Fin can hear is the wind roaring through his ears. In one ear, tunneling through his brain, and out the other.

One of the AMBULANCE OFFICERS turn to Fin and gesture for him to get in.

FIN'S FLASHBACK

SUPER SLO MO: Now he is watching his mother being loaded into the same tomb.

There he is - alone - being herded into the ambulance.

END FLASHBACK

SUPER SLO MO: Again the ambulance officer signals for Fin to enter the tomb beside his father.

Fin cannot go there, not again. He turns and races up the street. The wind fighting him.

155 INT. FOREST. NIGHT 155

Fin tears through the forest towards the shrine.

The SOUND OF INSECTS GOING WILD as the wind grows stronger and stronger.

Palm fronds are sent flying and INSECTS BATTER FIN as they are flung across his path.

156 INT. SHRINE. NIGHT 156

Fin, panicked, enters, grabs the picture of his mother and crunches himself into a ball, trying to block the sound of the insects.

But the wind and the insects grow louder and louder...chaos reigns.

Around Fin HUNDRED'S OF GIANT COCKROACHES burst from the earth and scuttle up his body. He tries to flick them off, but they find his ears, his eyes and become a seething mass in his hair.

He screams, tearing at his scalp.

A CLAWING, GRINDING, GRATING SOUND.

GIANT HORNS AND BLACK BULBOUS EYES force their way through the entrance.

Fin is beside himself as a GIANT RHINOCEROUS BEETLE claws its way towards him, its mandibles drooling.

Fin roars as he strikes the giant beetle over and over - smashing his mother's picture.

SILENCE - a moment of calm before the storm

An UNHOLY DOWNPOUR.

Torrents of water swirl down the funnel of the tree.

Obliterating Fin's tears and his shrine.

A small, small boy in the middle of a muddy mess.

He cries.

157 EXT. FOREST. DAWN 157

Fin emerges from his shrine into the sparkling freshness.

- 158 INT. AL'S HOSPITAL ROOM - MORNING 158
- Al sits on the edge of his bed, listening to the many foreign sounds outside his door.
- He goes to the bathroom and takes a leak, then stops to look at himself in the mirror. He doesn't like what he sees - he's aged, tired and there are wrinkles, blotches and broken veins that weren't there before.
- 159 INT. AL AND FIN'S HOUSE - MORNING 159
- Fin enters the silent house.
- 160 INT. HOSPITAL PAY PHONES - MORNING 160
- Al picks up the receiver and dials.
- 161 INT. AL'S ROOM - DAY. 161
- Fin pushes open the doorway to his Father's bedroom. The bed is still unmade.
- The wardrobe doors are still open. He closes them.
- The phone rings and the answering machine picks up.
- ANSWERING MACHINE
Hi. You've called Al and Fin. Leave a message and we'll call you right back.
- 162 INT. FIN'S VERANDAH BEDROOM - DAY 162
- Fin pushes open the door to his room - the scattered glass and mess all still there waiting for him.
- AL ON THE ANSWERING MACHINE
Hello Fin? ... Hello? ... It's OK ... I know you won't pick up ... But if you are there ... There may be some cash under my jocks ... Top drawer ... Order yourself a pizza ... OK bye.
- Fin picks his way over to his bed and gathers up the photo album. He puts it in a plastic bag.
- 163 INT. FIN'S BATHROOM. MORNING 163
- Under the shower Fin washes away the dirt and grime.

164 INT. HOSPITAL CAFETERIA - DAY 164

Fin sits all alone, sipping a soft drink. A small boy in a big, cold plastic room.

165 INT. HOSPITAL HALLWAY - DAY 165

Fin wanders up to a hallway intersection and looks up at the signs - he heads left and finds a lift.

CUT TO:

Fin stops in front of door 102.

166 INT. EVELYN'S HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY 166

Fin peers through the window at Evelyn asleep. She looks exhausted. A drip to administer pethidine hangs close by.

Fin sneaks in, and spots the ORCHID near the window. He sits beside her bed and waits.

He lets his eyes linger on her sleeping face and ride the contours of her body, covered by the sheet.

He notices a LARGE CONTAINER sitting on the table beside the bed.

Peering into the container, he comes face to face with BREAST PROTHESIS OPTIONS. Reeling back, he glances around the room before drawing closer.

He stares at a soft pink rubber mound with its darkened nipple. His eyes widen as his finger prods its softness. It wobbles like jelly.

Sensing a presence, Evelyn wakes and sees Fin.

FIN

Hi.

EVELYN

Hello.

SILENCE

FIN

Why didn't you tell me?

EVELYN

You dear precious thing. There are some things you're better off not knowing.

FIN

Like about you and Dad?

EVELYN

You never said he was your father.

FIN

Yeah well. I wish he wasn't.

Beat

FIN (CONT'D)

Did he ... and you?

Evelyn shakes her head.

EVELYN

Are you OK now?

Fin shrugs.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

(offering her hand)

Come. I want to let you in on a secret ... Come on.

Fin takes Evelyn's hand.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

All you ever really have in this life is time, and how much you get is not up to you. There are only two things that matter. How you spend it and who you spend it with.

Evelyn squeezes his hand.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

I want you to talk to your Father.

Fin pulls his hand away.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Will you promise to do that for me?

They both stare at the orchid sitting on the window sill.

Fin digs in his back pack, hands her the PHOTO ALBUM and exits.

Evelyn opens the album to reveal Fin's many unusual photographs of herself - her breasts and her flowers.

The photographs of her are not of her posing or made up but all those raw, candid shots taken when she wasn't looking - roller skating, wet with tousled hair and smudged eyes, mid-conversation, squealing as the beetle gets tangled in her hair, busy, absorbed in the moment - enjoying her plants and her shop ... and then there are the photos of her breasts.

She turns each page and admires herself through the innocent eyes of youth - having fun - being a kid again - despite everything.

167 INT. AL'S HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

167

Al sits up in bed, having lunch.

Fin enters, carrying a small shopping bag.

AL

Hi.

FIN

(dumping the bag on the
end of the bed)

Brought you some clothes.

AL

Thanks. Did you get my message?

Fin nods.

FIN

What did you tell them?

AL

I told them my son tried to kill
me.

Fin looks away.

AL (CONT'D)

No it's OK. I told them I fell
while changing a light bulb ...
Here.

He moves aside a sausage on his plate.

AL (CONT'D)

You hungry? Have some of this?

FIN

It's hospital food.

AL

(shovelling a portion
aside on a saucer)

It's fine.

He slides the saucer and fork towards Fin.

AL (CONT'D)

Go on.

Fin eats. He is hungry. They eat in silence for a while.

AL (CONT'D)

I don't blame you. I would've clobbered my old man if he'd been anything like me.

AN AWKWARD SILENCE.

Al gets out of bed and gets his pants from a nearby chair. He digs out his wallet and opens it.

From behind a picture of Rose and Fin as a baby he produces a worn tightly FOLDED NOTE. He hands it to Fin. It says "AL".

Fin opens it and reads the note.

ROSE (V.O.)

*I'm afraid, I'm not as in love ...
Not in love. Feel paralysed ...
Nothing excites me, not you, not me. I have no will to be... If I'm no longer connected to you - Am I connected to anyone? What does keep us moving forward in this world? Is it time? Is this all we have?*

A LONG BEAT.

Finally Al wraps Fin in his arms and holds him tight.

AL

I'm sorry. I don't have the answer. I don't think anyone does. It's why we struggle so much.

A stillness.

A father holding his son.

168 INT. EVELYN'S HOSPITAL BEDROOM/BATHROOM - AFTERNOON 168

Evelyn sits in her underwear on the edge of the bed. Her left breast exposed, the right breast, still bandaged.

Sitting quietly, she turns one way then the other - feeling, testing. Finally she stands and hobbles to the bathroom where she stands in front of the mirror - it's the first time since the operation. She lets out a long sigh.

169 EXT. LONG HOSPITAL CORRIDOR - AFTERNOON 169

Al, dressed, with a dressing on his head, and Fin walk the long walk - side by side - they talk but we can't hear what is being said.

Al puts his arm around Fin.

170 EXT. HOSPITAL CORRIDOR OUTSIDE EVELYN'S ROOM - AFTERNOON 170
 Al and Fin approach. Fin stops in front of Room 102. Al waits beside him. Fin indicates for him to enter.

AL
 Aren't you coming in?

Fin shakes his head.

Fin waits at the doorway while Al enters.

He watches Al and Evelyn through a gap in the curtain.

171 INT. EVELYN'S HOSPITAL ROOM - LATE AFTERNOON 171

Evelyn is sitting up in bed, wearing a floral head scarf.

A bunch of PINK TULIPS sit on her food trolley. *

The bed curtain obscures her view of the door. She hears someone enter. *

EVELYN
 Fin?

Al appears. *

AL
 Hey. *

EVELYN
 Did Fin tell you?

Al nods.

AL
 How are you feeling?

EVELYN
 As good as can be expected - let's put it that way.

AL
 I'm sorry. I had no idea.

EVELYN
 No. Why would you.

Beat. *

Al looks to the tulips. *

EVELYN (CONT'D)

They're for Fin.

AL

They're nice.

EVELYN

He's a lovely boy, Al. You've done a fine job.

AL

I don't know if I can take the credit.

EVELYN

Go on. Sometimes we deserve what we get.

AL

And sometimes not.

Evelyn purses her lips to keep it together. Al sits beside her and holds her tight. He kisses the top of her head.

AL (CONT'D)

It's OK. It's OK.

They sit like that for a long time.

172 EXT. LEAN-TO - AFTERNOON

172

Fin is at the table, capping beer bottles. THE BUNCH OF RED AND STRIATED TULIPS sit beside him - THE NOTE STILL ATTACHED.

Al, exits the house and sets down a LARGE SUITCASE beside Fin.

AL

To add to your collection.

Fin looks from the suitcase to Al.

CUT TO:

The CLICK-CLACK, CLICK-CLACK of Al at the sugar dispenser, making ginger beer instead of beer.

FIN

How long will this last?

AL

What?

FIN

(tapping the bottles)
This ginger beer business.

AL

A very long time I hope.

Fin rolls his eyes.

AL (CONT'D)

Thought I might still try the chilli.

FIN

No, don't do that.

AL

Why? Ginger and chilli go together.

FIN

So.

AL

So. It could be really ... Asiany.

FIN

So. It could be really shit.

AL

I tell you what. Next time we see Evelyn. We'll take a vote. She might like my brew.

FIN

Are you seeing her again?

AL

I thought I'd leave that up to you.

Silence.

FIN

Yeah. I don't care.

Fin continues tapping on bottle caps.

173

EXT. FOREST TREE SHRINE. AFTERNOON

173

In front of his tree shrine, Fin has dug a GRAVE. He takes from his pocket the SUICIDE NOTE and places it on top of his Mother's possessions from the shrine.

On the ground lay the open ICE-CREAM CONTAINERS and the SUITCASE full of the last of his Mother's belongings.

One by one he places the folded dresses in the grave.

Beside him stands Corinne.

They watch as a blue tiger butterfly flutters through the golden light and lands on his shoulder.

He lets it be - he knows who it is.

174 INT. EVELYN'S BEDROOM. DAY

174

MONTAGE OF CLOSE UPS

The intricate patterns of a monarch butterfly wing being drawn onto skin.

END MONTAGE

Evelyn sits in front of her duchess mirror while Corinne helps Fin colour in the patterns on Evelyn's bald scalp.

ROLL CREDITS

MONTAGE SEQUENCE - A SERIES OF PHOTOGRAPHS OVER THE JAUNTY SKA MUSIC TRACK

Fin takes a series of shots of the opening night of the florist shop. People dance to jaunty SKA music.

CLICK - Holding his glass in the foreground, Fin clinks glasses with Corinne.

CLICK - Fin clinks glasses with Evelyn, dressed in her Golden Monarch butterfly costume, sporting an even more amazing painted head.

CLICK - Evelyn and Al dance.

CLICK - Evelyn, Al and Fin dance.

The Butterfly Tree

By Priscilla Cameron

Winner of Australian Writers Guild
Monte Miller Award

BINGERLab participant

Developed with the assistance of:

Screen Queensland
Screen Australia
Film Victoria
BINGER International
Berlinale Talents

1 OPENING CREDIT SEQUENCE: EVELYN'S BURLESQUE ROUTINE 1

BLACKNESS

A spotlight swells on a GOSSAMER CHRYSALIS.

The sound of an ORCHESTRA OF INSECTS surrounds us as a MOUND OF IRIDESCENT TURQUOISE RHINOCEROS BEETLES peels open to reveal a glimmering cocoon.

Meet EVELYN, a BURLESQUE DANCER, glamorous, mesmerising. Swathes of golden silk flash before us, the patterns of a monarch butterfly swish and swirl. Evelyn floats, glides, semi-naked wearing an ELABORATE BUTTERFLY COSTUME.

On gold ROLLERSKATES, she entices us with her breathtaking routine ... and then there's the crescendo, those gold swirling nipple tassels and Evelyn's face - breathing hard - alive - energised.

The CAT CALLS AND APPLAUSE carry us into WHITENESS.

2 EXT. FIN'S BUTTERFLY TREEHOUSE - DAWN 2

CLOSE ON: FIN - a slightly built boy on the cusp of adolescence - as he watches as a REAL LIFE MONARCH BUTTERFLY unfurls from its chrysalis.

OPENING TITLE: BLOOM

3 EXT. FIN'S BACKYARD - DAWN 3

The backyard is home to a large, roughly built AVIARY to breed butterflies.

Inside is a HUGE, vine-laden TREEHOUSE teeming with GOLDEN MONARCH BUTTERFLIES.

Fin sits in the doorway where the Butterflies flutter around him. He whispers to the newly hatched butterfly.

FLASHBACK: FIN AND HIS MOTHER TOGETHER IN THE AVIARY.

From his perch above, Fin peers down through shifting butterflies to reveal his MOTHER - ROSE - and himself as a 8-YEAR-OLD.

Kneeling on the ground, Rose finishes bending the hooks on the NEW BUTTERFLY FEEDERS. She shows YOUNG FIN how to set and hang them.

While Fin busies himself with the remaining feeders, ROSE returns to her EASEL and painting table to put the finishing touches on a small, detailed picture of a BLUE TIGER BUTTERFLY.

ROSE

I'm done. Come see what you think.

Fin stands beside her and scrutinises the picture.

FIN

I don't think their antenna are that long.

ROSE

Really?

Fin nods.

ROSE (CONT'D)

(squinting at a nearby butterfly) You're right ... by a smidge.

FIN

Told you.

Rose reaches out her hand to Fin. He takes it.

ROSE

Do you know how much I love you?

Still holding her hand, Fin twirls outwards.

FIN AND ROSE

Thiiis much.

Rose twirls him back into her lap, holds him close and kisses the top of his head. Fin snuggles into her.

END FLASHBACK

4 INT. FIN'S WEATHER-BEATEN VERANDAH BEDROOM - DAWN

4

CLOSE ON: TWEEZERS SORTING BUTTERFLY WINGS

The wings are sorted in various small boxes according to size and colour.

Fin takes down another tiny box of butterfly wings continues sorting.

His room is packed with PINNED INSECTS, set on polystyrene boxes or in DISPLAY CASES.

MINIATURE DETAILED INSECT PAINTINGS compete for space on the walls.

CUT TO:

Fin cuts out his MOTHER'S FACE from his parent's wedding photograph.

CUT TO:

Using tweezers, Fin makes a beautiful, GLITTERING HALO OF BLUE ULYSSES BUTTERFLY WINGS AROUND HIS MOTHER'S FACE.

5 EXT. FIN'S BEDROOM - DAY 5

With his backpack and butterfly net, Fin slides out his bedroom window, grabs his bike and is gone.

6 EXT. RAINFOREST - DAY 6

Fin winds his way into the damp heart of the forest, his butterfly net poised.

LATER:

Rounding a corner, he spies a GOLDEN MONARCH BUTTERFLY. With practised stealth, he sneaks up and in one fluid movement, it is his.

LATER:

Fin squeezes between the bulging buttress roots of a giant fig tree into its hollow heart. Here he unearths two OLD TINS.

From the first he removes ONE OF HIS MOTHER'S DRESSES. He holds it to his face before hanging it up on a rusted hook.

From the SECOND TIN he removes some worn PHOTOGRAPHS of himself as a baby and as a child being held by his Mother.

He props up the photographs. Next he fixes some BIRTHDAY CANDLES to bark ledges, followed by his Mother's most personal belongings - a HAIRBRUSH, HER LIPSTICK, HER PURSE, an ART DECO BUTTERFLY BROOCH, a COFFEE MUG and a HALF-SMOKED CIGARETTE and HER MUSIC COLLECTION. He has done this ritual many times before.

Lastly, he unwraps and creates a space for his latest addition - His MOTHER'S PORTRAIT BEJEWELLED WITH BUTTERFLY WINGS.

CUT TO:

Fin lights the HAPPY BIRTHDAY CANDLES, puts on her favourite BIRTHDAY JAUNTY SKAA music and mouths the words happy birthday to his Mother's picture, before giving her a kiss.

He watches the butterfly - its wings leave velvet kisses on the glass as it struggles in its silent tomb.

At the point where its wings stop twitching, he stares into his Mother's fading eyes and is transported...

7 EXT. FIN'S BUTTERFLY FANTASY - DAY 7

Fin lies flat on his back - bare-chested. A swarm of BUTTERFLIES hover above him. Their luminous wings glitter. En masse they lower their bodies onto his. He feels the exquisite sensation of a million fluttering wings and trembling feet on his bare skin. Their tiny feet stroke his skin while their probisci lick his sweat droplets.

The fluttering intensifies and Fin is lifted by a sparkling fuzz. He glides above the forest floor. Luminous green FERN FRONDS brush his delicate skin.

Fin quivers - oh, the sensations - utterly delicious.

A MOTHER'S HAND reaches into frame and caresses his hair, brushing it back from his temple.

FIN and his MOTHER spoon. She kisses the top of his head.

END FANTASY

8 INT. HOLLOW FIG TREE - LATER 8

Fin's eyelids quiver. The candles have gone out. He busies himself dismantling his shrine and reburying the containers.

9 EXT. RAINFOREST TRACK - LATER 9

Fin passes through the shifting shades of the cabbage palm fronds.

10 EXT. TOWN STREETS - LATER 10

Fin cruises through the quiet streets on his way home.

11 EXT. FLORIST SHOP - LATER 11

Out on the footpath, Fin notices SHABBY PIECES OF FURNITURE with a sign saying "FREE, PLEASE TAKE". He spies a broken DISPLAY CASE and dismounts.

CUT TO:

Fin opens the cracked glass front and tests the lock.

CUT TO:

There's a sign on the front door: "NEW OWNER. OPENING SOON". A flash of movement in the window above the shop catches his eye. It's a giant butterfly - no wait - It's EVELYN.

Fin watches, entranced as EVELYN in her GOLDEN MONARCH BURLESQUE COSTUME relives her last performance. Fin hears insect music from his butterfly fantasy and his world slows...his feet levitate and once again he is floating.

She jiggles on the spot until she has her nipple tassels swirling faster and faster. The tassels slow and Evelyn finishes her routine with a seductive flourish.

Fin is transfixed.

He cranes his neck as she disappears from view.

12 INT. EVELYN'S BEDROOM ABOVE HER FLORIST SHOP - CONTINUOUS 12

The room is Boho chic. Glamour shots of her as a burlesque dancer adorn the walls.

On the duchess she has an extensive make-up station, a manicure station and a wig/hair station. A OLDER CAMERA is set on an auto timer on the dresser and continues to click off a series of shots as Evelyn disrobes.

After removing her nipple tassels, she goes to remove her DRAGONFLY NECKLACE - stops and cups her breasts, turning one way and then the other, admiring their fullness.

13 EXT. FLORIST SHOP - CONTINUOUS 13

Fin is standing on a box, trying to catch one last glimpse. He waits, but Evelyn has gone.

14 EXT. STREETS - LATER 14

Fin smiles. The wind in his hair. His skin tingles at the thought of her.

15 EXT. FIN'S AGING WEATHERBOARD HOUSE - LATER 15

Fin rides his bike down the side of his house past his Father's open bedroom window. Noises alert him. He climbs onto the wheelie bin and eavesdrops on AL, his middle aged FATHER - a man with a smooth voice and soulful eyes and SHELLEY, a nubile 23-year-old, with a face too old for her body, as they make out.

16 INT. AL'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

16

Shelley enthusiastically rides Al who loses his mojo half way through. She strokes his chest.

SHELLEY

You OK?

Eyes closed, Al wishes Shelley would disappear.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

Never thought I'd sleep with a guy with bigger boobs than me.

AL

(checking his chest)

They're not bigger than yours.

SHELLEY

They kinda are.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

(Pushing his pecs together.)

See. Cleavage.

Al shushes her.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

Relax. I'm kidding. OK?

Al disentangles himself, pulls on his jocks and quietly exits.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

So uptight.

17 INT. TOILET - MOMENTS LATER

17

Al stands at the basin washing his hands and face. In the mirror he spies a CHOCOLATE TART with its candle burning. He turns. The glowing silhouette of two people behind the shower curtain. He slides the curtain back to reveal YOUNGER AL and YOUNGER ROSE having a romantic bath together.

ROSE

Do you remember? Slow-cooked lamb
shanks with garlic mash.

Al nods. Cupping her hands, he tilts his head back to feel
her hair against his cheek.

ROSE (CONT'D)

(popping the chocolate
birthday tart in her
mouth)

But these were the clincher.

AL

(smiling))

You slept with me for my food?

ROSE

Absolutely. That and your eyes,
the way you held me, your voice,
the way you listened ...

Al stares - the bath now empty. His heart races. He hears the
CLANKING SOUND OF WOOD ON WOOD.

Peering round the doorway, he stares up at the hallway
MANHOLE - its cover is ajar - sounds emanate from the dark
slither.

18 INT. AL'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

18

Shelley is almost dressed but can't find her other diamante
thong. She hunts under the bed, the side table then the
wardrobe. Something sparkly catches her eye. Flat on her
belly she drags out a SILVER FOIL of BIRTH CONTROL PILLS.

She sits up. The wardrobe door tempts her. She prises it open
- exposing Roses dresses. On the inside of the door are
Fin's yearly height marks and CARDS - love notes he has made
for his mother. Many have been decorated with butterfly
wings.

Al enters and snatches the pills from her. He fingers the
last empty hole - where it says TUESDAY. His face quivers.

THROUGH THE WINDOW - Fin stares at his father as he clutches
the pills to his chest.

AL

What are you doing?

SHELLEY

Trying to find my thong.

AL

I'll buy you another pair.
(beat)
You need to go.

SHELLEY

Yes I am going.

Al opens the door. Shelley stands close.

Instead of kissing her, Al closes his eyes and holds her tight. He holds and holds. She waits, looking a little bemused. Finally he lets go.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

Have you thought about seeing
someone... if you don't know
anyone, I know a wonderful
counsellor. She did amazing things
with Dad after his last divorce...
he was really fucked up.

AL

Bye.

SHELLEY

Bye.

Fin watches as Al closes the bedroom door then the wardrobe door.

19 EXT. BACKYARD - MORNING

19

KA-CHINK, KA-CHINK, KA-CHINK

Al bustles through the back screen door, carrying empty beer bottles, to find Fin puffing and straining, lying on a rusted bench press, LIFTING WEIGHTS far too big for him.

AL

(trying to take the bar
from him)

Here. You need to lighten the
load.

FIN

Leave it alone.

AL

You'll do yourself an injury.

Fin ignores him and pushes harder.

AL (CONT'D)

Well don't come whinging to me when
you strain something.

Nearby is a TOOLSHED that has been converted into a HOME
BREWERY.

Al starts washing out the beer bottles and setting them on a
long line of spikes to drain.

AL (CONT'D)

Hey. Are you going to be home this
afternoon?

FIN

Why?

AL

Thought you could give me a hand
with this.

FIN

You out already?

AL

Yeah. It's been a while. This time
I thought I should try some chilli.

FIN

Why?

AL

Make it last longer.

FIN

Yeah right.

20 INT. FLORIST SHOP - MORNING

20

Evelyn glides down the stairs from her dwelling above the
shop.

She stares at the mail slit in the front door. It haunts her.
She holds her breath as she goes and checks the collection
box underneath the slit. No mail.

KNOCK, KNOCK. She jumps. A face leers in the front door
porthole window. It's the police. Evelyn opens the door.

OFFICER GRANT

Ms Evelyn Gray?

EVELYN

Yes.

OFFICER GRANT

You may remember me - SAM GRANT
from Moggill police station? I
served you with the papers on
behalf of the aggrieved VINCENT
SCOTT.

Evelyn nods.

OFFICER GRANT (CONT'D)
We have received an application to
VARY the protection order taken out
on behalf of the aggrieved.

Officer Grant hands Evelyn the papers.

OFFICER GRANT (CONT'D)
Feel free to read through and ask
any questions.

Evelyn is dumbfounded.

OFFICER GRANT (CONT'D)
I gather from this that you are
reconciling?

EVELYN
This is such a joke - we are NOT
reconciling.

OFFICER GRANT
Procedure dictates that these
papers be served before the matter
can go ahead.

EVELYN
This is bullshit. This whole
process is bullshit. He was never
under any threat from me.

OFFICER GRANT
We are very sorry to inconvenience
you so early in the morning but
this only came to our attention
late last night.

EVELYN
Honest to God! What next?

OFFICER GRANT
You have a good day.

Evelyn watches as Officer Grant leaves.

21 INT. GLASSHOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

21

Evelyn sits at the table and reads the notice.

An ALARM SOUNDS.

She heaves herself up from the table.

She goes to the fridge and takes down an ice-cream container full of PILL BOTTLES. They have different times written on the tops of the lids, eg: AM. half an hour B4 b'fast.

CUT TO:

Evelyn unscrews the lids and doles out a series of pills.

CUT TO:

Evelyn struggles to swallow the pills.

CUT TO:

Evelyn resets the timer and returns the pill bottles to their container.

22 INT. FIN'S BEDROOM. MORNING 22

Al tries to open the door but a build up of insect stuff makes it difficult. Fin is busy putting the LEAF INSECT in a bottle and fitting it in his backpack.

AL

Come on mate. What are you doing?
Breakfast's out.

23 INT. FIN AND AL'S KITCHEN - MORNING 23

Inside, the FEMININE TOUCH HAS FADED.

Dusty recipe books line the walls and once shiny cooking implements hang above the central chopping block.

Al tries to sort a pile up of MAIL while dishing up fried eggs and sausages. Fin enters.

AL

Jesus. Why aren't you dressed?

FIN

(getting a drink)
I don't care. We hardly do anything
on the last day anyway?

AL

Last day already?

FIN

Yes.

AL

Unbelievable. Here you want to take
some lunch. There's leftover chops
in the fridge.

(MORE)

AL (CONT'D)
(pushing a sausage aside
on his plate)
Or take this if you want.

Fin stabs Al's sausage with his fork.

FIN
You had someone over last night?

AL
No.

While ripping open BILLS and stuffing them into his bag, Al spies the time.

AL (CONT'D)
I need you to do me a favour and
call work. Tell them I'm running
late.

FIN
Again?

AL
Yes again. I'll see you later ...
Call them. OK?

FIN
OK.

Al searches for an ice-cream container, up-ends his breakfast into it, thrusts it in his bag, then can't find his keys.

Fin finds them under some paperwork on the table and hands them over.

Al rushes out.

Fin goes to the phone and punches in the numbers, unimpressed.

24 EXT. TOWN STREETS 24

Fin, pedals his bike as fast as he can. His butterfly net flies out behind him like a small sail.

25 EXT. SECONDARY SCHOOL - DAY 25

Outside the school yard, GARY, Fin's school buddy yells out.

GARY
Pump it. Pump it.

Fin skids to a halt, and dumps his bike beside Gary's.

FIN

You catch anything today?

GARY

No. No time. You?

Fin fishes around in his bag and produces a jar with a bright GREEN CICADA inside. Gary takes it for closer inspection.

FIN

It's a male bladder cicada.

Gary and Fin turn to one another with poppy-out eyes and mimic Steve Irwin.

FIN AND GARY

CRIKEY!

They laugh.

Fin whispers in Gary's ear.

FIN

Did I tell you about this dream I had?

GARY

Which one?

FIN

The one about the cicada.

GARY

Don't think so.

FIN

I dreamt I had this cicada on my ... my ...
(gesturing at his crotch)

Gary stares at Fin.

FIN (CONT'D)

It felt good.

Gary remains blank.

FIN (CONT'D)

(Fin mimes the cicada's rhythmic buzzing)

It did, really really good.

Gary tries to stifle his giggles. Fin instantly wishes he could take it back.

At that moment Shelley's MOTHER pulls up with SHELLEY and her sister, CORRINE (13). Shelley sits in the front.

Shelley and Fin clock each other as Corrine gets out.

GARY

Hi.

CORINNE
You guys catch anything?

GARY
No but Fin had this dream.

All eyes on Fin. Fin leaps on Gary.

FIN
Shut up.

Gary tries to squirm free but Fin holds him down.

GARY
(mumbling)
OK OK.

FIN
SHUT IT, OK?

Fin lets him up.

GARY
OK.

Corrine pulls out a very large glass jar containing a MASSIVE STICK INSECT and holds it out to Fin.

CORINNE
Look what I got.

Gary turns to Fin.

GARY
CRIKEY!

But this time Fin is genuinely impressed.

FIN
Whoa! A Titan. He's massive.
Where'd you catch him?

CORINNE
Near the compost.

GARY
Just don't let Fin get hold of him -
you never know where he could end
up.

Fin punches Gary in the arm.

Al passes the FLORIST SHOP. He slows down to check out the DISPLAY CASE on the footpath.

27 EXT. FLORIST SHOP - DAY

27

Al tests the locking mechanism of the display case.

Evelyn appears.

AL

Uh-oh! Sprung! Now you'll think I'm
a scurvy dog, going through your
things.

*

Al grins.

EVELYN

Don't be silly. I want people to
take them. See. There is a sign.

AL

I know someone who might like the
display case. That's all.

EVELYN

Be my guest.

Al struggles to pick up the display case.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

I've got a removalist trolley.
It'll make it easier. Do you want
me to get it.

AL

I think I'll be right ... I like
what you've done with the shop.

*

EVELYN

Thank you ... Bend your knees.
You'll hurt your back.

Al grunts and totters towards the car. Evelyn walks ahead in
case he trips.

AL

Would you mind getting the boot.

Evelyn tries to open it - it's locked. Al realises the
predicament he's in and blushes.

EVELYN

Which pocket?

AL
 (nodding to the left)
 That one.

Evelyn reaches in and fumbles in his pockets. She looks up at him and they lock eyes. Evelyn deliberately prolongs her search, before extracting the keys and dangling them in front of Al. She unlocks the boot for him.

Al juggles the cabinet into position.

AL (CONT'D)
 Thanks for that.

EVELYN
 My pleasure.

She runs her hand along the car's polished chrome, admiring its lines.

AL
 You two look great together. *

EVELYN
 You're alright. You still pull it off.

AL
 You think?

EVELYN
 I've got an imagination. *

AL
 I can feel it coming though ...
 when they say "Check that out.
 Isn't he too old for a midlife
 crisis?" *

EVELYN
 They? *

AL
 My students.

EVELYN
 Maybe you just need to hang out
 more with people your own age.
 There's a retirement village over
 that way. *

Al takes up the challenge.

AL
 I'm still 18. How old are you?

EVELYN
 83.

AL

Perfect.

EVELYN

Harold, everyone has the right to make an arse of themselves. You can't let the world judge you too much.

Al smiles - it's a line from the film HAROLD AND MAUDE.

AL

I like you Maude.

EVELYN

I like you Harold.

Beat

Al and Evelyn are both caught in that awkward moment, thrown by the speed of what just happened.

AL

Are you flirting with me?

EVELYN

No. I just wanna go for a ride in your car.

Al opens the door and gestures for her to get in.

Evelyn looks to the shop.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Oh I can't. Not right now.

AL

I'm already late for work. Trust me, another 15 minutes won't make a difference.

*

EVELYN

Tomorrow?

AL

OK. What time?

EVELYN

I take a break at 11.30. You should come in. Have some cake. You look like a cakey kinda guy.

AL

Is that short for soft in the middle and sweet on top?

EVELYN

No. It is what it is. I just assumed you would like cake. Most people do.

AL

Yes. I like cake. In fact you may not believe me but I have a few 'cakey' tricks of my own.

EVELYN

Cakey tricks?

*

Al mimes juggling three cakes while singing a circus tune. He tosses Evelyn a cake. She joins in and tosses it back.

*

*

Al finishes with a flourish.

*

Evelyn claps.

*

EVELYN (CONT'D)

So I'll see you tomorrow?

AL

Sure.

EVELYN

OK. Bye.

AL

Bye.

Al gets in his car and goes to start the ignition - no keys. He pats his pockets.

Evelyn watches as he ferrets about, searching. She returns to the boot, removes the keys and hands them to Al through his window.

AL (CONT'D)

Thanks.

Evelyn winks.

28

INT. CLASSROOM. TERTIARY COLLEGE - DAY

28

Al sits up the front of the class, staring off into space.

The STUDENTS are scribbling non-stop.

An egg timer rings. The class starts chatting.

AL

OK pens down. Let's hear what you've got.

Al turns to SARAH(18).

AL (CONT'D)

Sarah. Let's share it.

SARAH

Can't think, can't write, stupid plight, dumb night. Night of the vampire, lick my blood, drain my veins and fill with mud. I bite. Feel the pain. Stay with me until the day. The day when I hide away ... And that's all I got to.

AL

Good. Well done. I like that. Drain my veins and fill with mud. Very visceral, Sarah.

Shelley waves. Al searches for someone else, but everyone looks to Shelley.

AL (CONT'D)

Shelley?

SHELLEY

Withered flesh and sagging little breasts. Something about an older man that makes me want to self-combust. Self-destruct. I want to know what it's like to sully oneself with 50-plus lust.

The class titters. Al stares at his hands unable to look up. Shelley enjoys his discomfort.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)
Watery sperm and carefree germs.
Running free on Mr Wrinkleee.

The class erupts.

Shelley keeps her eye on him, hoping he will meet her gaze.
 Al remains focused on his hands.

AL
 Thank you Shelley. OK people. We're
 done for today and remember as
 homework to keep your journalling
 up and for next week bring in a
 image from childhood that resonates
 with you.

Al makes a hurried escape while Shelley lingers.

29 EXT. AL'S OFFICE. DAY

29

Al enters, checks that Shelley has not followed him and locks
 the door. He slumps in his office chair and pulls out a wad
 FINAL NOTICE BILLS from his bag. He picks up the phone and
 dials. He waits the interminable wait as the voice on the
 phone goes through the options.

Al punches in number 5 repeatedly.

AL
 No... No... No... Aaah For
 christsake ...just let me pay it.
 Yes credit card. NO

He scrabbles in his satchel looking for his wallet. Not
 there. He scrabbles in his pockets. Nothing.

CUT TO:

30 INT. AL'S CAR. MOMENTS LATER

30

Al scrummages in his car still searching for his wallet. No
 luck.

AL
 Fuck!

31 EXT. FLORIST SHOP. DAY

31

Al's car pulls up. He goes to the front door and knocks. No
 answer. He peers in the window. No sign of Evelyn.

He makes his way around the side of the house to the glass
 house.

He can see Evelyn inside busy repotting plants - listening to music on her headphones.

He knocks.

She doesn't hear him.

He opens the door.

AL

Hello?

Still no response.

He walks up and stands beside her...watching her - busy, absorbed. He takes a step closer. She spins around surprised.

EVELYN

(removing the headphones) Whoa! You frightened me.

AL

Sorry. I did knock...tried to call out a few times.

EVELYN

And?

AL

Yes. Sorry. I wanted to ask. I didn't leave my wallet behind by any chance? Pretty sure I had it in my pocket. Thought it may have fallen out when we were ...loading the car.

*
*
*

EVELYN

No, don't think so ...but kinda wish you did leave your wallet behind.

*
*

AL

Why?

*

EVELYN

So I could have a good ole stickybeak. Dig up some dirt or surprise, surprise - find you to be squeaky clean.

*
*
*
*

AL

Hah. Pretty hard to get to my age
with a clean slate.

Evelyn takes her gloves off and offers them to Al.

EVELYN

Your turn.

AL

To do what?

EVELYN

Dig up some dirt.

AL

You're funny.

Evelyn stands hands by her side, facing him.

Beat.

Al slides the gloves on.

EVELYN

Off you go.

*

Beat.

AL

Truth or dare?

EVELYN

Truth.

Beat.

AL

Married?

EVELYN

Divorced.

AL

Children?

Evelyn shakes her head.

AL (CONT'D)

Passion?

EVELYN

This.

*

AL

(pointing to each of them)
This?

Long beat.

EVELYN

Fun.

Al slowly removes his gloves and hands them to her. He waits while she puts them on. *

EVELYN (CONT'D) *

Truth or dare?

AL *

Dare.

EVELYN *

I dare you to tell me the truth.

He grins. She's too fast. *

EVELYN (CONT'D)

(pointing to each of them)
This? *

AL

Scary.

EVELYN

Children?

AL

One. A boy.

EVELYN

Married?

AL

I was.

EVELYN

Divorced? *

Al shakes his head and slides the gloves off.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

I'm sorry. *

AL

No. It's OK. I have to get going. *

EVELYN

(pulling his WALLET from
her bra and handing it to
him) *

See you tomorrow? *

AL
Tomorrow.

Al watches as Evelyn runs inside.

32 EXT. SECONDARY SCHOOL - AFTERNOON 32

Gary and Fin exit with other students.

GARY
Catchya, Bladder Boy.

FIN
Yeah. Right.

GARY
I'll call you.

Fin ignores him and while bending down to pick up his bike he notices an ant struggling to carry a leaf four times its size.

Fin pedals off in the opposite direction from his house.

33 EXT. STREETS - AFTERNOON 33

Fin cruises down streets on his bike.

34 EXT. FRONT OF FLORIST SHOP - AFTERNOON 34

He peers through the front door's porthole window into the half-empty shop.

Inside, Evelyn is perched up a ladder painting some mouldings. From Fin's angle, it's quite a sight.

He watches Evelyn glide down the ladder.

35 INT. FLORIST - AFTERNOON 35

The door bell jangles as Fin enters.

Stepping into Evelyn's world of beauty and flowers reminds Fin of his own secret insect fantasy world. Here he is home.

FIN
I thought you were closed.

EVELYN
Yeah it looks like we're closed but come on it.

Fin shuffles over to the buckets of flowers and pretends to deliberate over making a choice.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Are you looking for something in particular?

FIN

Some flowers?

EVELYN

Daisies are cheap but they stink to high heaven after a couple of days. Roses are always safe. Is there a special occasion?

FIN

It's for my Mum.

EVELYN

You're a nice boy, buying flowers for your Mum.

FIN

It's her birthday.

EVELYN

I'm very impressed that you remembered.

Fin nods.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

What colour do you think she'd like?

FIN

(staring at her pink stockings)
Pink probably.

EVELYN

These tulips are a personal favourite of mine.

FIN

My Mum likes tulips.

EVELYN

They always look so pure.

Fin lifts out a PINK perfectly opened TULIP.

Evelyn watches as he rotates it slowly in a shaft of sunlight.

FIN

They're amazing.

She stares at him - a smile lights up her face.

EVELYN

Come. I want to show you something.
I think you'll like it.

Fin follows her through a doorway, into the mossy depths of a
GLASSHOUSE to a collection of EXOTIC FLOWERING ORCHIDS.

She guides him to a stem of CYMBIDIUM ORCHID FLOWERS. They stand very close, almost touching. Fin feels his chest tighten as their eyes meet.

EVELYN (CONT'D)
You've got to really look...
closer.

She lays a hand softly on his back - guiding him.

EVELYN (CONT'D)
The tip of your nose almost has to
touch it.

They raise their heads simultaneously and their eyes connect. Their breath expels in unison. A gush of warmth on each other's skin. The hair framing their faces dances in time.

FIN
I wish I could take a photo.

EVELYN
Stay there. Don't look.

FIN
Why?

EVELYN
Turn around. Go on. Close your
eyes.

Fin obeys as he hears Evelyn click clack away and return.

EVELYN (CONT'D)
Now hold out your hands.

FIN
What is it?

EVELYN
Shhhh. Hold them out. Together.

Evelyn lays the CAMERA in his hands.

Fin opens his eyes.

EVELYN (CONT'D)
It's yours.

FIN
Wow. Really?

EVELYN

Yes. I'm happy to see it go to someone with a good heart.

Fin blushes.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Have you ever used a camera like this?

FIN

Not one this old.

EVELYN

Would you like a lesson?

FIN

Yes.

EVELYN

(demonstrates)

It's very simple really. You just lean in. Use this here. Focus. Then shoot.

(guiding him closer to the orchid)

Go on. She won't bite.

CLICK

Full frame - A glorious explosion of intricate detail and colour.

FIN

Thank you.

EVELYN

That's OK. Now this camera is quite the dinosaur so you need to wind it on manually.

She takes it and goes to wind it. CLICK CLICK - It runs out of film.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Lucky last. Here I'll show you.

Fin studies her every move as she removes the roll of film, goes to a nearby drawer and SWAPS THE USED ROLL FOR A NEW ONE.

CUT TO:

Fin takes photos of Evelyn when she isn't looking.

CLICK: Mist hangs in the air as she spritzes the orchids.

CLICK: Loading buckets with fresh daisies.

CLICK: Photographs of Evelyn's lacey underwear on a clothes dryer.

Standing by the counter, Fin checks that Evelyn has her back to him before POCKETING THE USED ROLL OF FILM.

36

INT. CHEMIST - AFTERNOON

36

Shelley and Corinne are in the in the sex and contraception section unpacking new stock. Corinne is doing all the work. Their MOTHER works in the background in the dispensary so they have to whisper.

SHELLEY

(holding up a packet of
HORNY GOATS weed)

Do you think this stuff works?

CORINNE

Hello? I'm barely 13.

SHELLEY

(now with a pack of
SPANISH FLY)

Got any info on this?

CORINNE

Read the back.

SHELLEY

It's not like he can't get it up
... it's more the staying power.

CORINNE

Who?

SHELLEY

No-one you know.

Corinne scrutinises Shelley.

CORINNE
This older man "fucking" Daddy
thing. It's revolting.

SHELLEY
Who said he was older?

Beat

CORINNE
You know just because he's not here
doesn't mean he doesn't love us.

SHELLEY
Oh Puh-lease. Spare me.

Corinne sighs.

CORINNE
You need a cock ring.

SHELLEY
(mocking her)
Why thank you Miss BARELY 13. And
where might I find one of those?

CORINNE
Does this look like a sex shop to
you?

SHELLEY
Can't you order some in, on the
side?

CORINNE
Me? Asking for Mum's credit card?
As if.

Corinne goes to a filing cabinet and produces an information
sheet on ERECTION ENHANCERS.

CORINNE (CONT'D)
(Handing it to Shelley)
Here, take this and go to the
hardware store.

SHELLEY
And do what?

CORINNE
Improvise.

SHELLEY
Right. Thanks. You've been most un-
helpful.

CORINNE

And you've been most an-noying.
Good bye.

SHELLEY

Good bye.

Shelley struts out, deliberately dragging a sign into the open doorway so it constantly beeps.

37

EXT. BACK OF FLORIST SHOP - AFTERNOON

37

Evelyn watches Fin as he hangs his camera around his neck and mounts his bike.

EVELYN

It suits you.

FIN

Thanks.

EVELYN

My pleasure.

Behind them water flows down the wall. Evelyn sighs.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Always something.

FIN

I could have a go.

EVELYN

No. It's OK. I can sort it.

Beat

EVELYN (CONT'D)

I'm Evelyn by the way.

FIN

I'm Fin.

EVELYN

Nice to meet you.

FIN

Nice to meet you too.

Beat

EVELYN

Would you like a job?

FIN

Sure.

EVELYN

Is tomorrow too soon?

FIN

No.

EVELYN

You better check with your Mum first.

FIN

She'll be cool.

Evelyn raises her eyebrows.

FIN (CONT'D)

Yeah. She will. They'll be happy to get rid of me.

EVELYN

You will still ask though won't you?

FIN

Yes.

EVELYN

Done.

Evelyn extends her hand and they shake.

FIN

So shall I come at 8.00 - 8.30?

Evelyn smiles.

EVELYN

I'm sorry. Can we make it more like 11am? I hate mornings.

*

FIN

Sure. OK. See you then.

EVELYN

Bye.

FIN

(waves)

Bye.

Evelyn watches him pedal off at high speed.

On his bike, Fin hurtles round a corner, looks up at the sky and whoops with glee.

38

EXT. SMALL DISMAL SHOPPING CENTRE - AFTERNOON

38

Fin parks his bike in an alley way and walks to the chemist front door.

39 INT/EXT. CHEMIST - AFTERNOON

39

Fin arrives at the chemist door still carrying the tulips. A sign reads CLOSED. Corrine is busy on the inside. Fin knocks.

FIN
Can I come in?

CORINNE
Sorry. We're closed.

FIN
Please.

Corrine eyes the tulips.

FIN (CONT'D)
Please.

CORRINE
OK. I'll meet you round the back.

39A EXT. CHEMIST BACK DOOR - AFTERNOON

39A

CORINNE
Hello you.

FIN
Hey thanks for doing this.

CORINNE
What's up?

FIN
(retrieving the rolls of
film from his pocket)
Could you please do me a HUGE
favour? I need to get this
developed.

CORRINE
What? Now?

FIN
Please. It's important.

CORRINE
We're closed.

*

FIN
Please.

Corinne eyes the tulips.

CORRINE
OK. But they won't be ready til
8.30 when we open.

FIN

You can't do eight? I can come
round the back.

Fin pulls a puppy dog face.

CORINNE

OK. Just knock and I'll let you in.

FIN

(while gathering new rolls
of film)

Great. Thanks.

40 INT. FIN AND AL'S HOUSE - EVENING

40

Fin enters through the front door, down the hallway and into
the kitchen where a huge mess waits him.

Empty beer bottles sit amongst flour and sugar. Melted
chocolate coats the benchtop and bowls.

Fin starts tidying up until he spots a SUGARED VIOLET lying among the debris.

At the end of the table sits a single SUGARED VIOLET CHOCOLATE TART with a birthday candle in it.

Light and music coming from the living room catches his attention. He goes to the doorway and watches as...

FLASHBACK: FIN AGED FOUR

ROSE, as a YOUNG MOTHER, sits on the sofa. Her chocolate birthday tart alight in front of her. She smiles at YOUNG AL as he whizzes FOUR-YEAR-OLD FIN around, dancing on a RUG, to the same JAUNTY SKAA BIRTHDAY MUSIC.

Al dips Fin low next to Rose.

AL
Happy Birthday.
(to Fin)
Give Mumma a kiss.

Fin kisses his Mum followed by Al.

AL (CONT'D)
(to Fin)
Let's help Mumma blow it out?

OLDER FIN purses his lips willing her to blow the candle out.

They all blow together.

OLDER FIN appreciates the moment for what it is - a moment of familial perfection.

END FLASHBACK

Fin peers through the back screen door to see AL, flat on his back, passed out drunk, under the clothesline.

41 EXT. FIN AND AL'S BACKYARD - NIGHT 41

The SCHLICK-SCHLACK of the screen door as Fin exits carrying a can of INSECT REPELLENT.

Fin brushes the mosquitos from Al's face, douses him with insect repellent and throws a towel from the clothes line over him.

42 INT. FIN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT 42

Fin fiddles with his camera and checks the MANUAL before pulling focus on the DEAD MONARCH BUTTERFLY in its bottle.

CUT TO:

He takes the DEAD MONARCH BUTTERFLY from its bottle.

CUT TO:

CRUNCH. A pin pierces the thorax. Fin's steady fingers carefully spread its wings and pins them in place.

CUT TO:

Fin stands back and admires his butterfly hanging on the wall.

CUT TO:

He picks up his camera and points it at the butterfly.

The wings of the butterfly begin to quiver.

CLACK-CLACK, CLACK-CLACK - THE SOUND OF WOOD ON WOOD, as the butterfly beats its wings against the pins.

CRUNCH. CRUNCH. Fin hears someone walking around the side of the house.

Camera in hand, Fin sneaks out of his room.

43 INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS 43

Fin tracks Shelley through the windows of the house as she enters the backyard.

44 INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS 44

Fin watches as Shelley discovers AL lying in the backyard and sits beside him.

45 EXT. BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS 45

Shelley flips the lid off a stubbie and mock cheers him.

SHELLEY

Last drinks? Cheers. Cheers.

Al sleeps.

46 INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS 46

Fin raises his camera and clicks off a SERIES OF PHOTOS as Shelley kisses Al on the lips and lies down beside him.

47 EXT. BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS 47

AL comes to. Mosquitos buzz his head. Shelley brushes them off.

SHELLEY

They'll suck you dry if you stay
out here.

Al glances over at the house - it's too far to walk.

He closes his eyes and exhales.

AL

Shelley. Shelley. Shelley.

Shelley's fingers find the back of Al's neck and trace circles under his hairline and up around his ears. It sends shivers up his spine. He rolls his head slightly, allowing her to stroke him - she's got magic fingers.

SHELLEY

I want the old you back.

Al turns.

Shelley kisses him tenderly on the lips. Al closes his eyes and kisses her back. She's so soft.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

You're going to be OK.

Beat.

Shelley takes his face in his hands and kisses him more deeply.

She moves her hand to his crotch and starts to massage. Al feels the heat building. He breaks the moment by taking her hand.

Shelley brushes his mouth with her lips.

Al sits up, stares at her, and squeezes her hand.

48 INT. FIN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT 48

Fin turns from the back door, as Al scrubs his hair and slowly rises to his feet.

AL
Goodnight Shelley.

Shelley sits alone.

49 INT. AL'S BEDROOM / HALLWAY - NIGHT 49

Fin reebs open the wardrobe and stuffs as many of his Mother's dresses into his backpack as it will hold.

He returns to his own bedroom and closes the door as Al enters through the back door.

Al hears Fin's door slam. He hesitates before heading to the bathroom where he takes a piss.

50 INT. FIN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT 50

Fin carefully wraps his Mother's dresses in a series of plastic bags then presses them into a couple of large ice-cream containers.

51 INT. TREE SHRINE. FOREST - DAWN 51

The wilted yellow and red striated tulips sit in a jar on a new ledge in the shrine.

Fin works hard to bury the two new containers.

52 EXT. DISMAL SHOPPING CENTRE / CHEMIST BACK DOOR - MORNING 52

Fin rides around the back of the chemist. He dismounts and knocks on the Chemist's back door. *

Corinne unlocks and hands over TWO PACKETS OF PHOTOGRAPHS.

FIN
Morning.

CORINNE
Hey you.

She waits as Fin opens the first packet. He catches a glimpse of Evelyn topless during her last burlesque performance and quickly tucks them away.

CORINNE (CONT'D)
(whispering)
Is that your Dad's new girlfriend?

FIN
No. I don't know.

CORINNE
She's sexy.

Beat

CORINNE (CONT'D)
Is he OK?

FIN
Who?

CORINNE
Your Dad.

FIN
I guess.

Corrine sighs.

CORINNE
Yeah. After his last divorce my Dad went a bit crazy there for while.

Beat

FIN
(digging in his pockets
and handing over money)
Thanks for doing this.

Corrine nods.

CORINNE
Wait. I've got something for you.

Fin fiddles with the packet of photographs while he waits for Corinne to return. She hands him a SMALL BOX.

CORINNE (CONT'D)
Just don't do that CRIKEY thing.
It's annoying.

Fin smiles. He lifts the lid to reveal TWO LARGE GLOSSY BLACK RHINOCEROS BEETLES.

CORINNE (CONT'D)
Do you have any of those?

FIN

No. I don't.

CORINNE

I did some research. They like
banana and apple.

FIN

Cool. Thanks.

CORINNE

No problem.

FIN

I gotta go. Thank you.

CORINNE

Ok. Bye.

FIN

Bye.

Fin rides off. Corinne watches him go.

53 OMITTED 53

54 INT. FIN'S BEDROOM - MORNING 54

Fin sits on his bed and whips out the photos. In the first packet the close-ups of the flowers are beautiful and the furtive shots of Evelyn are unusually striking.

In the second packet, he comes across PHOTOGRAPHS OF EVELYN AS A MONARCH BUTTERFLY with the BEETLE DANCERS.

Next are the most recent full frame photos of EVELYN'S PERSONAL STRIP TEASE and NAKED BREASTS taken from the neck down. Resting clearly above the curve of her collar bone, the DRAGON FLY NECKLACE is VISIBLE. He removes these pictures and puts them in his pocket.

CUT TO:

Fin enters carrying TWO PHOTO ALBUMS.

CUT TO:

CLOSE ON: PHOTOGRAPHS of YOUNG AL AND HIS YOUNG WIFE, ROSE, ON THEIR WEDDING DAY POSING ON THE BONNET OF AL'S VINTAGE CAR. NEXT - ROSE AND FIN, AS A BABY, STANDING BESIDE THE CAR AT A BEACH LOOK OUT. Fin is cradled in his MOTHER'S arms.

Fin closes the album and hides it in his cupboard.

The NEXT ALBUM only has a few pictures of the most recent shots of Rose and Fin before she died.

TWO PACKETS OF LOOSE PHOTOGRAPHS fall from the back. Fin flicks through them. They are shots of AL, FIN and AL's VARIOUS GIRLFRIENDS, all attempting to look the happy family. In most of them Fin is off to the side, looking repulsed while Al and his latest cling to each other.

Fin dumps the packets in the bin and carefully removes the few shots of his mother. He then starts the album afresh with the pictures he has taken of EVELYN and HER FLOWERS.

CUT TO:

Fin sets about pinning the MONARCH BUTTERFLY.

Using an old typewriter, he types its scientific name DANAUS PLEXIPPUS.

CUT TO:

He carefully sticks the label below the butterfly, and sets it in special box.

AL
He's a beauty.

Fin turns to see Al standing in the doorway.

FIN
It's a she.

AL
Your Mum would've liked her.

Fin is silent.

AL (CONT'D)
Hey. I got you a present.

Fin turns.

AL (CONT'D)
It's still in the boot. I need a hand to get it out.

FIN
What is it?

AL
Come on.

Fin follows Al.

55

EXT. CAR PORT - MORNING

55

The boot opens to reveal the DISPLAY CASE from Evelyn's shop. Al waits expectantly.

FIN

Where'd you get it?

AL

The flower shop. There's a new owner. I met her yesterday. She seems nice.

Fin eyes him suspiciously.

Al gets one hand under the case and lifts.

AL (CONT'D)

Come on. Grab the other end.

Fin has to bend right over to get on the other end. As he does, the BREAST PHOTOGRAPHS slip from his top pocket and lands on the display case. They both notice. Al snatches up the photos and has a good gander. Fin tries to snatch them back but Al keeps them just out of his reach.

AL (CONT'D)

Where'd you get those?

FIN

Gary.

AL

(holding out his hand)
They're a great set. No doubt about it. But not something I want ending up at school.

FIN

(snatching the photos back)
No way I want you wanking all over them.

*
*

AL

Hey hey! None of that thank you.

Fin heads inside, leaving Al with the case perched on the edge of the car.

Fin locks his door. He takes out the photo album and sticks in the pictures of Evelyn's breasts and kisses them.

57 INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUED 57

Al stands on the other side of Fin's door - listening. He goes to knock, but stops. He exits and returns, dragging the display case. He props it against the wall beside Fin's door.

58 INT. FIN'S ROOM - CONTINUED 58

Fin hides the album and waits for the sounds of his father to disappear up the other end of the house.

CUT TO:

Fin pokes his head out the door. The coast is clear. He drags the display case into his room and lies it on the floor.

CUT TO:

Fin takes the MONARCH butterfly down from the wall.

MONTAGE - Fin carefully wraps the framed butterfly in a special box with the perfect ribbon to match.

59 INT. EVELYN'S BEDROOM ABOVE THE SHOP - MORNING 59

Evelyn is still in bed. She is in pain.

The SOUND OF THE ALARM from downstairs.

She winces. This morning it all seems impossible.

She struggles from the bed and searches through her duchess drawers until she finds a small wooden box. In it are some half-smoked and poorly rolled JOINTS.

She lights up.

STILLNESS. SILENCE.

In a half-unpacked box something GOLD AND SPARKLEY catches her eye.

60 EXT. GLASSHOUSE - MORNING 60

As Fin rides up to the back of the glasshouse, he spies Evelyn gliding past on GOLD SEQUINNED ROLLERSKATES.

He lingers, watching her through the condensation on the glass. Evelyn skids up to a nearby table and attempts to light another JOINT.

Evelyn perseveres until she is off again - skating and puffing away.

61 INT. GLASSHOUSE - MORNING

61

Fin enters with his camera cocked. Evelyn tries to cover up and wave the smoke away. He grins.

FIN

Look at that thing. What are you trying to do? Kill yourself?

She glides over.

CLICK. He snaps a pic.

EVELYN

Stop. Don't take any more. Not like this. They'll put me in jail.

FIN

Why? You look cool?

EVELYN

You think?

FIN

Way cool. Can you do any tricks?

EVELYN

Maybe.

She fast circles around him.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Do you skate?

FIN

No.

EVELYN

(gliding backwards side to side)

Wanna learn? I could teach you.

FIN

Show me some REAL tricks and I'll think about it.

She stops.

EVELYN

I'm not sure I can remember now.

FIN

Come on. Oh really.

Evelyn takes a large hit and hands the joint to Fin.

EVELYN

Here hold this.

Evelyn moonwalks.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

(moonwalking)

OK. Let's see. Here's the moonwalk.
And this my friend is a waltz jump.
(she waltz jumps)

FIN

(camp American accent)

Yeh yah! You go girl!

Evelyn does the SOW COW followed by the MAPE while Fin eggs her on.

FIN (CONT'D)

Really. That was so last century -
what you need is a ramp.

EVELYN

Hey don't you turn me into no
skater dude.

FIN

No way sister. You're the derby
queen.

(gathering wood and making
a jump)

Here you go, girl. Clear those and
I'll give you my ENTIRE life
savings.

(fishing coins from his
pocket)

The grand total of \$8.20.

EVELYN

Double it.

FIN

Like I said Lady. That's it. That's
all I got.

EVELYN

OK then. I'll double it. But here's
the deal. You lie at the end - face
up - eyes open. You blink - you
lose.

FIN
You serious?

Evelyn winks.

EVELYN
I dare you.

Fin grins. He extends his hand.

FIN
Make it a twenty.

EVELYN
OK. A twenty. And NO BLINKING.

They shake.

CUT TO:

Fin lies on his back at the end of the pots.

Evelyn lines up.

Fin forces his eyes wide.

Evelyn pushes off.

Fin's heart pounds as he listens to the SCHLICK SCHLICK
SCHLICK of Evelyn gathering pace.

Foxy Burlesque music kicks in.

Evelyn hits the ramp.

Fin raises his camera.

KABAM - super slo mo - She sails over the top of him as THE
MONARCH BUTTERFLY - wings spread.

CLICK!

The Butterfly lands and wheels round. Evelyn's away ...
reliving her burlesque routine. Captivated, Fin follows her
with his camera. She plays to him in a game of cat and mouse.

As the music builds, WATER SPRAYS down on them from overhead.
The sprinkler system has gone haywire.

SUPER SLO-MO - Like ice crystals, droplets swirl about Evelyn
as she dances on oblivious. Tears fracture on her face. Her
silken reflection swoops by like a fantastic bird. Her eyes
glisten. Rivulets cascade down her cleavage. Her skates
create lava like avalanches in the mirrored pools.

Evelyn holds out her hands to Fin. Tempting him. He takes
them and turns into a BEETLE DANCER. They glide through the
plants together.

61A EXT. GLASS HOUSE. CONTINUOUS 61A
From outside Evelyn and Fin appear and disappear in the cascading glitter.

61B INT. GLASS HOUSE. CONTINUOUS 61B
Back inside the music stops and Evelyn slides to a halt - soaking - breathless but radiant. Through the water dripping from his eyelashes, Fin can see the tantalising outline of her breasts. They look at each other - a moment suspended between droplets.

Evelyn smiles, breaking the moment. She disappears into the shop. The rain stops - only the slow drip, drip, drip. Fin waits.

Evelyn returns from the darkness.

EVELYN
(holding out a \$20 note)
Are you sure you didn't blink?

FIN
(tapping his camera)
I have proof.

EVELYN
(handing him the note)
Lucky I trust you.

Evelyn turns to Fin and starts to dry his hair ... roughly.

FIN
I've got something for you.

EVELYN
For me?

FIN
Yes. It's your turn. Eyes closed.
Palms up. Don't move

Fin runs to his backpack and fishes out the BEETLE BOX. He returns and places it in Evelyn's hands.

Evelyn opens her eyes.

EVELYN
Can I open it?

FIN
Of course.

Evelyn opens the box to reveal the two beetles trying to claw their way out.

EVELYN

Oh my god, Fin. That is way too weird. Now have I got something to show you. Wait here.

She dashes away to the corner of greenhouse and returns with a removalist carton.

EVELYN (CONT'D)
 (fishing in the box)
 As a girl ... well more than a girl. I became obsessed, obsessed with why men had nipples. I mean there had to be some evolutionary purpose, right.

She digs out a childhood SCRAPBOOK and flips to the page containing a variety of NAIVE DRAWINGS OF MEN'S HAIRY NIPPLES WITH RHINOCEROS BEETLES STROKING THEM.

EVELYN (CONT'D)
 See. Beetle feeders.

FIN
 Beetle feeders?

EVELYN
 Yes it's a man's nipple. That's all they're good for really - feeding beetles.

FIN'S RHINO BEETLE FANTASY

Fin imagines himself standing there - dressed in a SAFARI SUIT and a HAIRY MAN'S CHEST with Evelyn attaching beetles to his nipples. Their claws grip firmly in the hair, causing goose bumps to ripple across his bare skin. He grimaces with pain, or is it pleasure?

EVELYN (CONT'D)
 (sexy wildlife narrator voice)
 Ants use their antenna to stroke the aphids to let down their milk. So too are the stag beetles to your nipples. It's called a symbiotic relationship.

The beetle sits between Evelyn's naked breasts. It struggles up the rise on her inner breast. Others follow its path. There are a trail of them from below her belly button up the middle of her stomach. All on a pilgrimage to the pink tipped mountain.

The first beetle makes it to the top. There ahead of it is the nipple - gloriously pink and glistening. He scrapes his claws gently on the circular line where porcelain skin meets the darkness of the aureola.

All the other beetles follow suit until they form a complete circle around the nipple. Each of them stroking until the nipple spurts fine rivulets of milk, creating a fountain.

The beetles happily lap the milk as it rains down on them.

Fin jumps, breaking from his fantasy and takes the beetle from the box.

FIN
(grabbing his camera)
Can I take a picture?

EVELYN
What of?

Fin looks down at her lace clad cleavage and down at the beetle ... Does he dare place it in the dip between her breasts? ... He reaches out to her. Evelyn pulls a face and backs away. Fin taunts her with the beetle. She squeals.

Like children, he chases her with the beetle. She gets the fit of the giggles and he catches up with her.

FIN
Oh come on. Roller derby queen. I can't believe you're scared.

EVELYN
It's their hooky little feet.

Fin places the beetle on his wrist.

FIN
See. Doesn't hurt.

EVELYN
What will you give me if I do it?

FIN
My first born child.

Evelyn laughs.

FIN (CONT'D)
OK. A dollar a second... You could win back that twenty.

Beat

Evelyn offers him her arm. Fin turns her arm over to expose it's tender underside.

EVELYN
Oh not fair!

FIN
A dollar a second.

Fin lowers the beetle. It attaches itself to her tender wrist. They lock eyes.

FIN (CONT'D)
One Mississippi, two Mississippi,
three Mississippi.

The Beetle inches towards the inside of her elbow. Evelyn squirms but endures.

CUT TO:

Evelyn strikes a number of poses with the beetle crawling up her front while Fin clicks away.

She squeals as it crawls up her neck and into her hair.

EVELYN
Aaah. Quick grab him!

Fin goes to her aid and tries to untangle the beetle.

EVELYN (CONT'D)
I think we should start the day
like this, every day.

FIN
Getting wasted ... with beetles ...
on rollerskates?

Evelyn grins.

EVELYN
No. With a secret.

FIN
A secret?

EVELYN
Yeah. Why not.

FIN
A secret now?

EVELYN
I want to get to know the real you.

FIN
There isn't much to tell really.
I'm pretty boring.

EVELYN
I don't think so.

Fin cocks his camera at her as she goes to her kitchenette area.

EVELYN (CONT'D)
Oh. I forgot to tell you. I've
asked someone over for morning tea.

FIN

Sure.

He follows her with his camera as she prepares MORNING TEA.

EVELYN

I'll make it a fair trade. I'll go first.

CLICK.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

As my mother used to say - Evelyn, you have loved well but not wisely.

CLICK.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

She was right. I wasted more than half my life because I kept saying yes to people I didn't really love.

FIN

Why?

EVELYN

With the last one, every day I'd imagine him getting hit by a car. Killed. I wouldn't have to do anything. I'd be innocent. It'd be over and I'd be free... He never did get run over.

FIN

Maybe you just needed to break a few eggs ... That's what Mum used to say ... break a few eggs until you find a good one.

EVELYN

I want to meet your Mum.

Beat

FIN

Actually I don't have a mother.

Evelyn reacts.

FIN (CONT'D)

She killed herself.

EVELYN

Oh Fin, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean
...

FIN

It's OK.

EVELYN

She must have been a good Mum. You
seem like such a lovely boy.

Fin shrugs.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Well then. Your Dad's done a fine
job.

FIN

Yeah him and his girlfriends. They
all had a go.

EVELYN

Maybe your Dad needed the help.

FIN

Yeah. From a shrink maybe.

Beat

FIN (CONT'D)

The last one took off.

EVELYN

She left?

FIN

They all do it. Hang around for a
while until they get sick of us.

EVELYN

Why would anyone get sick of you?

A KNOCK ON THE FRONT DOOR.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

He's here already?

Fin watches as Evelyn darts off through the doorway to the front door of the shop.

Past Evelyn, Fin sees VINCE, EVELYN'S EX HUSBAND appear at the porthole window carrying a bunch of roses and wearing a hang dog expression. Evelyn immediately locks the door.

VINCE

Can I come in?

EVELYN

No you need to leave or I'll call the police. You're violating police orders.

Vince disappears from view and can be heard walking down the side of the shop.

Evelyn returns to the GLASSHOUSE and bolts the door before Vince appears.

VINCE

Babe. I'm sorry. I made a mistake. I got them to revoke it.

EVELYN

Vince, I don't give a shit. DVO or no DVO. We have nothing left to say to each other.

Beat.

VINCE

Evie, I know what's going on. Barbara told me... Come on babe. I want to help you... I don't want to lose you... Not like this.

Evelyn grabs the phone and Fin, and races up the stairs to her bedroom above the shop.

*

*

62 INT. EVELYN'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

62

While Evelyn calls the police, Fin takes in her room - her bed, her burlesque pictures, her duchess full of make-up and hair accessories.

EVELYN

Hello. Yes it's Evelyn Gray. It's an emergency. My ex-husband is here. He's trying to break in. Yes... 11 Esme Street, Spring Creek... He's breaking a DVO ... Yes... Please ... Hurry ... Thanks.

She hangs up and turns to Fin.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Thank god. They're on their way.

FIN

Did ... did he hurt you?

EVELYN

No more than any other prick.

FIN

Will you be alright?

She nods.

FIN (CONT'D)

Are you guys breaking up?

EVELYN

Already broken up - been divorced 18 months. Can you believe it? He get's a DVO taken out on me, now he wants to revoke it.

FIN

What's a DVO?

EVELYN

A domestic violence order.

FIN

Really?

EVELYN

I'm not proud of it but in all the shit fight that is divorce, we got into a bit of a showdown and I told him that if he didn't leave I'd get a knife and stab him. And that's when he called the cops.

Beat.

FIN

And would you have?

Evelyn squeezes his hand as she thinks of the best way to put it.

EVELYN

A part of me wanted to.

63

INT. AL'S OFFICE - DAY

63

Al is doing battle with a stapler. THE CHOCOLATE TARTS sit in a basket on his desk.

KNOCK-KNOCK.

He steels himself.

KNOCK-KNOCK.

LYN

Allan?

Al opens the door, relieved to see LYN, his BOSS, THE HEAD OF SCHOOL at his door. She's a strong 57-year-old with immoveable hair.

AL

Lyn!

LYN

Sorry to bother you. I know you must be busy.

AL

Not at all.

He offers her a tart.

LYN

They look delicious but no thank you.

Al nods.

LYN (CONT'D)

How are you going?

AL

Fine.

LYN

Allan, you know I have your best interests at heart.

Beat

LYN (CONT'D)

There's gossip going around ...
Don't ask how I heard it. That's
not important. What's important is
that I hear the truth from you. If
I know the truth then we can deal
with it ...

Al swallows.

LYN (CONT'D)

Have you been having an affair with
a student here?

AL

Absolutely not.

Beat.

LYN

I am so relieved to hear that. I'm
not good at confrontation,
especially when it involves a
friend.

KNOCK-KNOCK.

AL

Just a moment.

LYN

It's OK. We're finished. Take your
meeting.

As Al opens the door to let Lyn out - Shelley enters.

Shelley gives Lyn a big smile as they brush past each other.
Lyn takes Shelley in.

Al closes the door and turns just in time to see Shelley
scoff a tart.

SHELLEY

Mmmm yummy.

AL

Stop. Don't eat any more.

SHELLEY

She looks scary. Are you in
trouble?

AL

No.

Shelley raises TWO BLACK O-RINGS in front of her eyes to
create a pair of JOHN LENNON-STYLE SPECTACLES.

SHELLEY

(in a bad German accent)

I can tell you've been a very naughty boy and I want you to come wiss me now, before zey shoot you.

AL

What are those?

SHELLEY

Zeez, my dear friend are ... COCK-O-RINGS.

Taking a handful more from her pocket, she lays out a line of the BLACK RUBBER O-RINGS from smallest to largest.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

You have no idea how hard it is to find the real deal in zis town - I had to improvize.

Al closes his eyes - hoping this isn't happening. He opens them again - She's still there, now holding up a large cock-O-ring in front of her mouth.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

(now in a porn star voice)

Come on baby, show us your "O" mouth ... Oh ... Oh ... Ohhhh.

Shelley can't keep it up without laughing.

AL

You can't be serious.

SHELLEY

I am serious. It literally took me hours to come up with these.

AL

Shelley. I can't be doing this. We have to stop.

Shelley drops the accent.

SHELLEY

Jesus. When are you going to lighten up?

Al stares.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

It's OK, I know you're scared. I'd be scared too. Scared that I'll dob you in, scared you'll lose your job, there'll be a public outcry, blah, blah, blah. Don't worry I get it.

(MORE)

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

(Leaning over his desk.)

I promise, that will never happen. You and I ... we can work through this. Even though you've let yourself go - it's cool. I can handle a bit of flab. And the age thing ...

(holding her hands in the air)

Look. I won't even try and kiss you. No pressure. I'm happy to wait.

Shelley taps the second largest O-Ring.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

Try them on. I've got my money on this one. Lucky No 3.

Al remains rigid.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

Oh. What now, Mr Killjoy?

AL

This. It's just ... It's just not ... appropriate.

SHELLEY

Do you have any idea how much I fucking hate that word? APPROPRIATE. It's as bad as the word NICE. It's such a fence sitting, pathetic, nothing little word.

She stands up and leans over his desk.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

We both know what is NOT appropriate - it's a person in your position using it to take advantage.

AL

Are you blackmailing me?

SHELLEY

Call it what you want, Allan. But you started this and it's extremely rude to start something that you can't finish.

Beat.

AL

Shelley. It was never my intention to hurt you.

SHELLEY

Oh Puh-lease! Do you really want to see me vomit? Is that what gets you off?

Al stares at Shelley.

AL

Do you not see what the problem here is?

Using her fingers to prise back her eyelids, Shelley eyeballs Al sarcastically.

AL (CONT'D)

Alright. Let's finish it. It's finished. There you go. Happy now?

Al snatches up his bag and strides out with the tarts.

Shelley hesitates then dashes out after him.

64

INT. EVELYN'S BEDROOM - DAY

64

Evelyn and Fin peer through the window at Vince hunting for a notepad and pen in the glove box of his car. He writes a note, tucks it in the roses and is about to leave them at the front door when... Al's car pulls up. Al gets out carrying the basket of chocolate tarts.

EVELYN

Oh my God. That's the guy I asked round.

FIN

WHAT?

Shelley's car pulls up. She gets out.

FIN (CONT'D)

(pointing at Shelley
striding towards Al)
But he's with her.

EVELYN

Are you sure?

FIN

Yep. He's her teacher. Everyone knows.

EVELYN

Are you serious?

FIN

Yes everyone knows.

Evelyn reacts.

They watch as ...

65 EXT. FLORIST SHOP - DAY.

65

Al is about to knock on the front door when Vince steps up behind up and eyes the tarts.

VINCE
You the new bloke?

AL
No.

VINCE
Well, just so you know - I'm still
her husband.

AL
Right. OK. Good.

SHELLEY (O.S.)
Don't you dare run away from me ...
you gutless wonder!

Both Al and Vince spin round as Shelley strides towards them. Al hands Vince the tarts.

Al makes a run for it to his car.

Shelley races to her car.

The SOUND OF POLICE SIRENS.

Vince makes a run for it to his car.

The street is empty.

A POSTMAN rides up at pops a LETTER in Evelyn's mailbox.

66 INT. AL'S CAR - DAY

66

Al watches Shelley gain on him in the rear-vision mirror. He floors it.

67 INT. FLORIST SHOP - DAY

67

Evelyn brings the letter, roses and tarts inside. Fin enters, carrying his backpack.

FIN
(trying to make light of it)
Hey it's your lucky day.

Evelyn manages a half smile

EVELYN

I like you Fin. You've got a
...irridescent heart.

Evelyn dumps the roses and tarts and opens the envelope.

Her hands shake.

She sighs as she flicks through a WAD OF HOSPITAL PAPER WORK.

FIN

Actually, I have something I wanted
to give to you.

Fin fishes in his backpack and produces the GIFT BOX.

EVELYN

Really ? Another present?

FIN

Just a thankyou - for the camera.

EVELYN

(taking the box)

Look at this. It's even got a
ribbon. You are such a precious
creature, aren't you.

Fin watches intently as she slides off the lid. It's the
MONARCH BUTTERFLY perfectly set and labelled.

In this moment, her face means everything to him. Evelyn's
face goes blank. Her bottom lip starts to quiver. Fin feels
his chest compress.

Evelyn starts to cry. Her whimpers swell. She suddenly pulls
Fin into her ample bosom. Fin isn't game to move, after a
little while he puts his hands on her waist.

Finally she releases him. He stands there bewildered. She
pulls the wad of tissues from her bra and wipes her tears
from his face.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

I'm so sorry. It's been a bad day,
a bad week, a bad year.

FIN

It's OK.

EVELYN

No. It's not OK.

FIN

But it will be.

Evelyn looks at his pale face, manages a smile and touches
his cheek.

Fin looks down at the stiff blue butterfly, now faded in its cotton wool coffin.

A KNOCK AT THE FRONT DOOR.

It's the two police officers.

EVELYN

I think it best if they don't see you here.

Fin hesitates. He doesn't want to leave her.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Please. I'll be OK.

FIN

You sure?

Evelyn nods. Fin is not convinced but leaves anyway.

68

EXT/INT. AL'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

68

Al's car screeches to a halt in the driveway. He jumps out and runs to the door of his house. Shelley pulls up and races after him.

Al manages to lock the door just in time.

He races down the hallway to the back door.

Through the windows, he sees Shelley run down the side of the house.

KA-BAM--He slams the lock on the back screen door as Shelley appears.

SHELLEY

For fuck sake, Al. I just want to talk.

Al bolts back to his room where he locks his windows.

He waits and waits all is quiet.

Al slumps on the bed ... peace at last.

Then he hears it - a NOISE from Fin's room.

CUT TO: SHELLEY SLIDING IN THROUGH FIN'S OPEN WINDOW.

Al jumps up and hides behind the bedroom door.

He listens as Shelley searches the house - opening and closing doors.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

If there's one thing I can't stand
it's passive-aggressives. People
who run and hide. People who stick
their head in the sand and hope it
will all go away. Men who leave
messages rather than doing it face
to face.

Beat

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

You don't do that to me.

SILENCE

Al waits - his ear to the door.

69 EXT. AL'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

69

On the other side Shelley places her ear to the door. She can
almost hear him breathing.

70 INT. AL'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

70

Al waits and waits, listening.

He hears a soft, scuffling sound.

He backs up.

The door opens.

Shelley enters, completely naked.

Al stares - like a rabbit in the headlights.

Shelley stares at Al and, unable to keep a straight face,
bursts into giggles.

She dives under his bed sheets like a child.

Al looks bewildered.

SHELLEY

(popping her head out)
We could play spider babies.

AL

Spider babies?

SHELLEY

I'm the mummy spider and you can be
my baby.

Beat

SHELLEY (CONT'D)
I'll let you suckle me.

Beat

SHELLEY (CONT'D)
Or you be the Mummy and I'll suckle
you.

Al is worried.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)
Seriously? You fall for it every
time. I'M KIDDING. OK?

Shelley sits up.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)
Oh come on Al. What happened to
you?

AL picks up Shelley's clothes.

AL
A lot. A lot happened, Shelley.
Everything happened. I can't undo
it. I can't fix it and I can't take
it back.

SHELLEY
But there's always been someone
else.

AL
No. Not before. There wasn't.

AL breaks. Shelley watches Al's raw pain in silence - unsure
how to handle it.

SHELLEY
I'm sorry.

Shelley dresses and exits in silence.

Al is left alone.

71 EXT. FIN'S STREET - DAY

71

Fin rides across the street towards his house. Shelley calls
to him from her car.

SHELLEY
Hey!

Fin stops.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)

Come here for a sec.

Fin rides over to Shelley's window and clocks her undone shirt and skimpy bra. Shelley riffles through the glove box and hands Fin a BOX OF EDIBLE CONDOMS.

SHELLEY V.O.

(narrator style)

It's sexy being green. Throwing out used rubbers contributes to our...

72 OMITTED 72

73 INT. FIN'S ROOM. CONTINUOUS 73

Fin shoves clothes in his back pack.

SHELLEY V.O

... ever growing landfill problems.
Do your part by using Lollipop
licks edible condoms.

KNOCK-KNOCK

SILENCE

KNOCK-KNOCK

AL

Fin. Can we talk?

Fin slides out his bedroom window.

74 INT. HALLWAY - DAY 74

AL

Fin?

He tries the door again - no luck.

75 EXT. GLASSHOUSE - DAY 75

Fin arrives at the glass house. He peers in and spies Evelyn through the plants taking a BATH. He watches for a moment, unseen.

75A INT. GLASS HOUSE. CONTINUOUS 75A

Fin quietly enters, then knocks.

FIN

Hello.

EVELYN

Fin?

FIN

Yes. It's just me.

EVELYN

Hang on a minute. I'm in the bath.
Stay there. I'll get dressed.

FIN

OK.

Fin steals glances as she dresses. He edges closer to her.

EVELYN

Are you OK? What's up?

FIN

Is it alright if I stay here for a
while?

EVELYN

Really? You sure you're OK? You're
not hurt, are you?

FIN

No.

EVELYN

Has he got a new girlfriend?

FIN

I just need a bit of time to sort a
few things out...Please.

Evelyn joins him, now dressed.

EVELYN

I don't know. Your Father will
worry. He should at least know
where you are. We should call him.

FIN

No.

BRRING-BRING. The phone rings. They look at each other.

Evelyn turns to the phone and back again.

EVELYN

Hang on.

Evelyn takes the call.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Hello ... Yes this is her ... Yes I
did get it, thanks ... No, I didn't
... OK ...

Long pause as Fin tries to listen.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

... Yes ... I think so ... No it's
fine ... I know where to go ...
thank you. Bye.

Her face pales as she hangs up. She turns and exhales - long
and slow. Then she sucks in - long and slow.

They stand in silence.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Do you think I could have a hug?

Fin nods. She pulls him close and holds him tight for a long time.

Fin lets his hands slide to her waist ... then he moves them up ever so slowly to cup her breasts. Evelyn lets him - she looks down at his small hands cupping her porcelain cleavage - they look good on her breasts - small and pale and delicate.

Fin looks down at his hands and watches them rise and fall with her bosom - it's a nice image. They look up simultaneously and their eyes connect - each looking within the other.

Evelyn closes her eyes and turns away.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

I'm sorry, I'm not very well ...
You should go.

76 INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

76

The SOUND of SAUSAGES SIZZLING can be heard from the kitchen.

AL

DINNER!

CUT TO:

Al knocks on Fin's door.

No answer.

AL (CONT'D)

Dinner's up.

No answer.

AL (CONT'D)

Come on.

Al waits then tries to open the door.

77 INT. FIN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

77

Fin has a chair wedged under the door handle, preventing it from opening.

78 INT. KITCHEN - MOMENTS LATER

78

Al eats alone while flicking through the PHONE BOOK UNDER FLORISTS. A foil-covered plate sits in Fin's spot.

Al hears a noise and leans back in his chair to see if Fin has appeared.

AL
Come on Fin. This is getting ridiculous.

No. Only the buzz of cicadas.

AL (CONT'D)
OK. Well. I'll leave your dinner in the microwave and you sort it out yourself.

79 EXT. FRONT OF SHOP - NIGHT 79

Fin tests the doors of EVELYN'S CAR until he finds one unlocked. He climbs in.

80 INT. EVELYN'S CAR - NIGHT 80

Fin settles down for the night and looks across to the Shop. A light flicks on in Evelyn's room above.

He watches Evelyn's silhouette as she goes to her wardrobe and dumps all her burlesque costumes on the floor.

81 INT. EVELYN'S BEDROOM ABOVE THE SHOP - MOMENTS LATER 81

Evelyn stuffs her Burlesque costumes into two large garbage bags. She picks up the GOLDEN MONARCH BUTTERFLY costume but can't bring herself to bag it.

She puts it on one last time.

82 INT. EVELYN'S CAR - NIGHT 82

Fin watches as Evelyn spreads her wings and he hears the music again.

83 INT. AL'S BEDROOM - NIGHT 83

Al lies awake, hugging a pillow to his chest.

84 INT. EVELYN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT 84

Evelyn lies awake, cocooned in her wings - hugging a pillow to her chest.

- 85 INT. EVELYN'S CAR - NIGHT 85
Fin lies awake, hugging his back pack to his chest.
- 86 INT. AL'S BEDROOM - DAWN 86
Al wakes in the half light. He checks his watch, groans and rolls over, trying to steal more sleep.
- 87 INT. EVELYN'S BEDROOM - DAWN 87
Evelyn stands at the window, watching the sunrise. Morning light suddenly illuminates the room. She inhales.
- 88 INT. EVELYN'S CAR - DAWN 88
While Fin sleeps, Evelyn glides past his window on her rollerskates. She dumps the two garbage bags of costumes into the wheelie bin.
- 89 INT. AL AND FIN'S HOUSE - DAWN 89
Al pulls on an old track suit and jumper while knocking on Fin's door.
AL
Fin?
He jiggles the door again.
AL (CONT'D)
FIN?
Still no answer. Al heaves against the door. It bursts open. No Fin. Al strides down the corridor and out the back door calling out.
AL (CONT'D)
FIN?
He hurries back and grabs his car keys.
- 90 INT. EVELYN'S CAR - DAY 90
Fin wakes and stares at Evelyn's bedroom window, searching for movement.
- 91 EXT. STREETS - DAY 91
SSSHT, SSSHT, SSSHT. Evelyn skates as hard and fast as she can. Wind fills her ears. Her eyes water. She's breathing hard - pushing herself faster and faster.

She comes to a downhill run, shuts her eyes and crouches low ... ZZZZZT ... she spreads her arms to feel the rush.

92 EXT. STREET - EARLY MORNING 92

Al's car cruises by on the hunt for Fin.

93 INT. AL'S CAR - CONTINUOUS 93

Al scans the periphery.

Suddenly Evelyn shoots out across the road in front of him and disappears. He does a double-take.

94 EXT. STREET - CONTINUOUS 94

Evelyn careers on. She stands and dodges some potholes. Up ahead - a T-intersection. She's travelling much too fast and loses it on the bend. KA-BANG! She crashes to the ground and rolls to a stop. OUCH!

Momentarily stunned, she drags herself up into a sitting position in the gutter. She feels for blood on her face and head ... only a bit of bleeding in her hair ... nothing too serious. But then the pain in her ankle kicks in and she yelps as she tries to straighten her leg. It's twisted.

She grits her teeth and tries to remove her skates but it's too painful.

95 INT. AL'S CAR - CONTINUOUS 95

Al turns down the street where he saw Evelyn disappear. He slows down - searching.

96 EXT. GLASSHOUSE - MORNING 96

Fin knocks and waits - no answer.

He knocks again - still no answer.

He forces open a window and climbs in.

97 INT. GLASSHOUSE - CONTINUOUS 97

Inside he listens for signs of life.

FIN

Hello?

Fin stands at the bottom of the stairs that lead up to Evelyn's bedroom above the shop.

FIN (CONT'D)
Hello? Evelyn?

Nothing.

98 INT. EVELYN'S BEDROOM ABOVE THE SHOP - CONTINUOUS 98

Fin surveys Evelyn's private domain.

CUT TO:

He goes to her dresser where he finds a pair of NIPPLE TASSELS. He holds them in front of his eyes and makes monster faces and noises in the mirror.

CUT TO:

On her bed he spies the golden MONARCH COSTUME. He runs his hand through its silken folds.

99 EXT. STREET MORNING 99

Al spots Evelyn sitting in the gutter, pulls up and goes to her. Evelyn gives nothing away. *

AL
Jesus, have you broken something? *

No answer.

AL (CONT'D)
Come on. Let's get you to a doctor. *

EVELYN
Are you fucking your own student? *

AL
Who told you that? *

EVELYN
One of your students. *

Beat. *

AL *
Have I fucked up? Yes.

EVELYN *
You scurvy dog.

AL *
And yes I've made mistakes.

EVELYN *
You serious?

AL *
Huge mistakes.

EVELYN *
Blah blah fucking blah.

AL *
Mistakes I'm trying to undo.

EVELYN *
Any success?

AL *
I think so. I hope so.

EVELYN *
I think. I hope. Doesn't sound too encouraging.

Beat. *

AL *
I met your husband.

EVELYN *
No. You met my Ex husband.

Evelyn tries to right herself to walk but yelps in pain.

AL *
(holding her up)
Come on. You don't have to like me
but at least let me take you to a
doctor.

EVELYN *
I don't want a doctor. I need to
get home.

AL

OK. Well, I'll take you home.

Al helps Evelyn to the car.

*

EVELYN

I should have called you Maude.

*

*

AL

I still like you Harold.

*

*

EVELYN

Cute.

*

*

100 INT. EVELYN'S BEDROOM - DAY

100

Fin spreads Evelyn's costume out on the bed and lies on it, face first - inhaling her scent. He rolls himself up in the swathes of golden fabric - cocooning himself in her.

101 INT. AL'S CAR - DAY

101

Al helps Evelyn with her seatbelt.

EVELYN

You don't happen to have any Panadol on you?

Al opens the glovebox and hunts.

AL

Sorry.

Evelyn nods and massages her temples.

AL (CONT'D)

Here. Give me your hand.

He takes her hand and squeezes the fleshy pad between her thumb and forefinger.

EVELYN

Owww.

AL

Breathe. Breathe. That's it.

*

Al strokes her arm. She relaxes.

*

AL (CONT'D)

I'm Al.

*

*

EVELYN

Evelyn.

*

*

102 EXT. BACK OF GLASSHOUSE - MORNING 102 *

Al and Evelyn pull up in Al's car.

103 INT/EXT. AL'S CAR - CONTINUOUS 103

Evelyn is sweaty and pale.

AL

Wait there 'til I come round and
get you.

He darts around to her side and almost has to carry her from
the car to the glasshouse.

Evelyn hands him the keys to unlock.

104 INT. GLASSHOUSE - MORNING 104

Al pushes inside, carrying Evelyn. His fluffy jumper tickles
her nose.

AL

Sorry about the jumper.

EVELYN

At least it smells nice. I had a
fiance once who smelt like wet dog.

AL

And?

EVELYN

Surprise. Surprise. No wedding.

Al grins and lies her on the sofa.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Thanks.

105 INT. EVELYN'S BEDROOM ABOVE THE SHOP - CONTINUOUS 105

Fin's eyes dart open. He untangles himself from the fabric
and tiptoes to the door.

Below he spies Al and Evelyn in the shop.

His worst nightmare has come true.

106 INT. THE GLASSHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

106

Evelyn tries again to pull the skate off her swollen foot.

EVELYN

Ow, ow, ow.

AL

Please don't do that. We have to get the swelling down.

He goes to the freezer compartment of her fridge, takes out a frozen pack of peas and wraps it in a tea towel.

AL (CONT'D)

(pressing it on her ankle)
Ahah. What would we do without frozen peas?

Evelyn manages a smile.

AL (CONT'D)

(handing her the peas)
Here you hold this. I promise I'll be very gentle.

Al loosens Evelyn's skate and slides it off bit by bit. Evelyn winces but endures.

The skate comes free.

AL (CONT'D)

Sorry.

EVELYN

No, thank you.

He stands.

AL

I know I've blown my chance to eat cake but can I get you a cup of tea?

EVELYN

I'm OK. But would you mind doing me a favour and bring me my pills?

AL

Where are they?

EVELYN

See on top of the fridge - that white container.

Al brings Evelyn her pills and a glass of water.

*

AL
That's a lot of pills.

*

EVELYN
You need a lot of pills when you're
a hypochondriac.

*

Evelyn picks up her NECKLACE and offers it to Al.

EVELYN (CONT'D)
(offering her neck)
Would you mind?

*

Al accepts.

Time slows as Fin watches Al lift her hair - his hands linger
on her neck.

Al strokes her neck the way Shelley did to him. She tilts her
head, offering Al her face.

Al lowers his face to hers.

Fin, bug-eyed, watches as AL AND EVELYN KISS.

CLANK-CLANK-CLANK-CLANK - Fin, carrying his backpack, belts
down the stairs and out the front door. Al and Evelyn watch
in astonishment.

EVELYN AND AL

Fin?

Evelyn turns to AL.

Al is rooted to the spot. THERE ON EVELYN'S NECK IS THE DISTINCTIVE DRAGONFLY NECKLACE. Suddenly she is standing in front of him topless - he recognises Fin's photograph.

Al tries to speak, instead he coughs and races out after Fin.

107

EXT. STREETS - DAY

107

Fin grabs his bike and tries to make a quick getaway but Al catches him just around the corner from the glasshouse. He grabs and yanks the bike sideways. Fin hits the ground and scrambles to his feet.

AL

Those photos. Did you take them?

Fin dusts himself off.

AL (CONT'D)

Jesus Fin. You can't ... you can't ... stay there.

FIN

What are you gonna do about it?

AL

Maybe I should call the cops and they can ask her.

FIN

Go your hardest. And while you're at it, tell them you fuck your students.

AL

It's up to you. You tell me what's going on or I'll go back round and ask her myself.

FIN

My room's free, why not get a couple of them to move in. Give yourself a heart attack ... be the best thing that ever happened.

AL

It's up to you.

Al goes to pass Fin. Fin shunts him back.

FIN

Stay away.

AL
I'm not ...

FIN
STAY AWAY.

Fin loses it. Screaming, he grabs his bike and swings it at Al. He dodges it.

FIN (CONT'D)
STAY AWAY, STAY AWAY!

Fin swings it as hard as he can. It hits Al across the shoulder and knocks him off balance.

Al picks himself up to see Fin riding off down the street.

Al turns back to the shop ... wondering how the hell to handle the situation.

CUT TO:

Al's car revs out of the car park.

108 OMITTED 108

109 EXT. STREET - DAY 109

Fin rides as hard and as fast as he can, careful to check that Al is not around before he turns a corner.

CUT TO:

Al cruises the streets looking for Fin and checks his watch.

110 INT. AL'S CAR. DAY 110

Al taps the steering wheel, muttering. He check's his watch again.

AL
(reefing around the steering wheel)
Fuck!

111 EXT. STREETS. DAY 111

Al's car does a u turn a hoons off up the street.

- 112 EXT. TERTIARY COLLEGE CAR PARK - DAY 112
Fin rides past Al's car in the college car park, being careful not to be seen.
- 113 INT. TERTIARY COLLEGE HALLWAY / AL'S OFFICE - DAY 113
Al runs to his office and unlocks the door as Fin scoots past in the background.
- 114 INT. TERTIARY COLLEGE HALLWAY / CLASSROOM - DAY 114
Fin sneaks down the corridor and finds an empty classroom. He ransacks a drawer until he finds a MARKER PEN.
- CUT TO:
- Fin writes "AL 4 SHELLEY" on a roll of film.
- 115 INT. TERTIARY COLLEGE - OUTSIDE LYN'S OFFICE. DAY 115
Lyn enters her office and closes the door.
Fin scurries up and pops the roll of film in her 'in box' under her sign, LYN GREGORY - HEAD OF SCHOOL.
- 116 INT. TERTIARY COLLEGE. GIRLS TOILET - DAY 116
Head down, Fin enters a toilet cubicle and locks the door.
- 117 INT. AL'S OFFICE - DAY 117
Al looks at EVELYN'S PHONE NUMBER ON HIS WRIST.
He goes to pick up the phone and stops ... unsure.
- 118 EXT. GLASSHOUSE - DAY 118
Fin rides around the back and hides his bike.
He peers through the glass, knocks and waits ... no answer.
He goes to the unlocked window and slides in.
- 119 INT. FLORIST SHOP - DAY 119
Fin calls up the stairs to Evelyn's room.

FIN

Hello?

The PHONE RINGS. Fin goes to pick it up. The answering machine kicks in.

EVELYN'S ANSWERING MACHINE

Hello, Thankyou for calling. Bloom will officially open on the 31st of May. If it is urgent please leave a message.

The caller hangs up.

Among the paperwork by the phone Fin spots a HOSPITAL APPOINTMENT CARD. He picks it up.

He tiptoes up the stairs to Evelyn's room.

120 INT. EVELYN'S BEDROOM ABOVE THE SHOP - DAY 120

Fin enters.

The room is neat and devoid of clutter. The bed has been stripped.

121 EXT. HOSPITAL - DAY 121

Fin pumps his pedals and arrives at the hospital. A flowering cymbidium orchid protrudes from his bike carrier.

122 INT. HOSPITAL RECEPTION AREA - DAY 122

Shaken and breathless, Fin waits his turn at the Enquiries Desk.

HOSPITAL RECEPTIONIST

Yes? Can I help?

FIN

Mrs Evelyn ... Miss Evelyn Gray. Is she here?

The Receptionist eyes him carefully before turning to her computer screen.

HOSPITAL RECEPTIONIST

Yes. She has checked in ... But it's not visiting hours until 3 o'clock, and besides she will most likely not be having visitors today as she's being prepped for surgery.

Fin stares at some LIFELESS PLASTIC FLOWERS TRAPPED IN A PERSPEX BOX. The receptionist notices.

HOSPITAL RECEPTIONIST (CONT'D)

Why don't you try tomorrow.

Fin slouches away.

- 123 INT. TERTIARY COLLEGE FEMALE TOILETS - DAY 123
Shelley enters the toilet, followed closely behind by LYN, the head of school and Al's boss. They exchange tight smiles before scuttling into separate cubicles.
- 124 INT. LYN'S TOILET CUBICLE - CONTINUOUS 124
Lyn sits on the toilet then notices the back of the door is scrawled with graffiti: "ALLAN ROBINSON LEFT ME WOBBLY 4 DAYS" and "ALLAN ROBINSON IS A SEX GOD" and "SHELLEY 4 AL".
She turns to the adjoining cubicle where Shelley tinkles away.
- 125 INT. SHELLEY'S TOILET CUBICLE - CONTINUOUS 125
Shelley sees the same graffiti above the roll holder - "ALLAN ROBINSON IS A SEX GOD" ETC.
Shelley turns to Lyn's cubicle on her left.
She peers under the wall - Lyn is still there. Shelley lifts her feet and perches on the toilet. She waits until LYN has left the toilet before exiting her cubicle.
Shelley checks all the other cubicles - they are all plastered with the same thing. She grabs reams of toilet paper and tries to rub it off without success.
- 126 EXT. CORRIDOR - MOMENTS LATER 126
Shelley runs down the corridor just as Lyn exits her office.
Shelley follows at a safe distance all the way to Al's office.
Defeated, she rests her head on the wall as Lyn knocks.
- 127 INT. AL'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS 127
Al sits at his desk eating dry weet-bix and marking papers.
KNOCK-KNOCK. Al steels himself for Shelley's entry.
AL
Yes.
Lyn enters. Al stands, brushing cereal from his jumper.
AL (CONT'D)
Lyn!

LYN
I'll keep it brief.

She unclenches her fist to reveal a ROLL OF FILM.

LYN (CONT'D)
This was left for me.

She holds it out to Al so he can read what's scrawled on it -
"AL 4 SHELLEY".

LYN (CONT'D)
You tell me. Do I need to get these
developed?

AL
Probably not.

LYN
Then it's best you pack your things
and go quietly. The rest is merely
procedure. I will do my utmost to
keep this all as low-key as
possible - for your sake as well as
ours.

Beat

LYN (CONT'D)
Oh Allan. I did try.

Beat

Lyn exits.

Al takes a long time to sit. He looks around his office - for
the first time he sees it for what it is - a disaster, a
reflection of his recent life, and he knows it.

The door creaks open. Al turns - it's a pale-faced Shelley.

SHELLEY
It wasn't me. I swear.

Al stares.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)
Are you in trouble?

Al nods.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)
Big trouble?

Al nods.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)
Can I do anything to help?

Al nods.

SHELLEY (CONT'D)
What?

AL
Stay away. Stay far, far away.

Shelley nods.

128 INT. FLORIST SHOP - DAY 128

Fin, paintbrush in hand, paints some unfinished mouldings.

The front door bell clangs. Fin glimpses Al through the window and ducks behind the counter.

129 INT. FLORIST SHOP - CONTINUOUS 129

Fin waits for the sound of his car. Nothing. Hearing footsteps approach the glasshouse, he darts behind the other side of the counter just in time to see Al tap on the back door of the glasshouse.

130 EXT. GLASSHOUSE - CONTINUOUS 130

Al walks the length of the glasshouse, spies Fin's bike and knocks on the back door.

AL
Fin. I know you're in there.

131 INT. FLORIST SHOP - CONTINUOUS 131

Fin holds his breath and waits.

132 EXT. GLASSHOUSE - CONTINUOUS 132

AL
Look. I ... I don't want any more trouble. I just want to talk.
That's all. OK?

- 133 INT. FLORIST SHOP - CONTINUOUS 133
The shop is empty.
- 134 EXT. FRONT OF FLORIST SHOP - CONTINUOUS 134
Fin empties a TIN OF BRIGHT PINK PAINT OVER AL'S BEAUTIFUL CLASSIC CAR.
- 135 EXT. GLASSHOUSE - CONTINUOUS 135
AL
Fin? Come on.
BEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP!
Al spins around at the sound of his car horn and heads back around to the front of the shop.
- 136 EXT. FRONT OF FLORIST SHOP - CONTINUOUS 136
Al GASPS as he spots his car DOUSED with BRIGHT PINK PAINT. It's all over the duco and across the cream leather interior.
He opens the door and tries to flick the puddle of paint from his seat out the door.
AL
I need help. BLOODY HELL. FIIINNN!
It's hopeless.
- 137 INT. FLORIST SHOP - CONTINUOUS 137
Fin holds his position behind the counter until he hears the sound of father's car roar to life and disappear.
- 138 EXT. FRONT OF FIN AND AL'S HOUSE/BACKYARD - DAY 138
Al's car screeches to a halt. He runs into the backyard and reels out the hose. It gets stuck on a bush and is not quite long enough. Al tugs at it. The connector breaks. He struggles to reconnect the hose. He turns the tap on and races back to the other end - but now there's a kink in the hose. He races back to find the kink - his rage building.
MONTAGE: AL IN A RAGE TRYING TO CLEAN HIS CAR BUT MAKING IT WORSE
Trying to sponge the paint on the seats, but spilling the bucket of water and soaking the carpet with pink.
Al grabbing towels and scrubbing at the carpet.

139 INT. GARAGE - DAY 139

Al hunts through boxes of car cleaning stuff ... then spies the CHAINSAW.

END MONTAGE

140 EXT. FIN AND AL'S BACKYARD - DAY 140

A curtain of MONARCH BUTTERFLIES rises from the BUTTERFLY TREEHOUSE as a CHAINSAW vibrates in Al's hands. Tree limbs and vines crash to the ground as Al attacks the tree before turning to the support beams of the aviary itself.

Fin's butterfly aviary comes crashing to the ground.

CUT TO:

Filthy, Al kills the chainsaw and sits amongst the debris in the silence.

CUT TO:

TIME-LAPSE MONTAGE

Al sits by the bug zapper - drinking - waiting.

As it grows darker the bug zapper grows brighter.

Insects swarm around him, leaving light trails.

He is obliterated ...

By their tracks

By their incessant buzzing.

Images and SFX haunt him.

AL MONTAGE

The screen door slapping.

Rose's shoes clacking down the hallway.

The clacking of wood on wood.

A rope pulls taught.

A batten jiggling across the manhole.

END MONTAGE

141 INT. EVELYN'S BEDROOM ABOVE HER FLORIST SHOP - NIGHT 141

Fin sleeps in Evelyn's bed. Images and SFX haunt him.

FIN MONTAGE

Pins crunch through silver wings - smash through exoskeletons.

Wings beat against pins.

Evelyn in her Monarch costume pinned like a butterfly.

Her wings beat against the pins.

The clacking of wood on wood.

A batten jiggling across the manhole.

END MONTAGE

142 INT. EVELYN'S HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT

142

From above we see Evelyn, post-operation, flat on her back. She is attached to IVs and has drains running from her chest.

TIME-LAPSE MONTAGE

Evelyn tears CLUMPS OF HER HAIR OUT while doctors and nurses come and go, taking her vitals, checking her chart and swapping whispered exchanges between shifts.

Evelyn is alone in the blackness.

Her eyes pry open.

The air-conditioning duct stares down at her.

Evelyn stares back.

It breathes in time with her. In. Out. In. Out

Except that every time she breathes out, it sucks in - stealing her spirit.

The Duct sucks harder and harder. Ripping, tearing, pulling what's left of EVELYN'S HAIR and her flowers apart. Clumps of hair and petals are whisked upwards into it's steel slits.

END MONTAGE

143 INT. HOSPITAL HALLWAY - MORNING

143

Fin sneaks past silent doorways, listening to whispered groans.

He stops in front of door - 102.

A sign reads: NO VISITORS.

144

INT. EVELYN'S HOSPITAL ROOM - MORNING

144

Fin carefully pushes open the door and enters. There is the silhouette of someone sitting on the edge of the bed, wearing a hospital gown.

FIN

Evelyn?

Evelyn turns. She is bald.

Fin approaches then stops as his eyes adjust.

EVELYN

Hi.

SILENCE.

FIN

Why did you do that?

EVELYN

What?

FIN

Your hair.

She turns away but Fin steps in front of her.

FIN (CONT'D)

Why?

She looks at him strangely.

FIN (CONT'D)

You had nice hair.

EVELYN

Oh Fin. That was a wig.

He shakes his head.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Later on, I can grow it back.

FIN

Not for a million years.

She looks at him now, concerned.

FIN (CONT'D)

Where are your clothes?

EVELYN

But this is what you wear in hospital.

FIN

It's ugly.

EVELYN

Yes but it's practical.

FIN

I hate practical. I liked you the way you were.

Evelyn stares at Fin - verging on tears.

EVELYN

Fin. I can't be the way I was before.

FIN

Why?

EVELYN

I don't feel the same.

FIN

Why?

EVELYN

Because I don't.

Fin steps in front of her.

FIN

You ... are ... the most beautiful woman I have ever met.

She looks up and at that moment he leans in and kisses her full on the lips.

Suddenly she is transported in one of Fin's fantasies.

EVELYN'S BUTTERFLY FANTASY

EVELYN lies semi-naked, flat on her back. A swarm of BUTTERFLIES hover above her. Their luminous wings glitter.

En masse they lower their bodies onto hers. She feels the exquisite sensation of a million fluttering wings and trembling feet against her bare skin.

The fluttering intensifies and Evelyn is lifted by a sparkling fuzz. She glides above the forest floor. Luminous green fern fronds brush her skin.

Evelyn quivers - oh, the sensations - utterly delicious.

FIN'S HAND reaches into frame and caresses her hair, brushing it back from her temple.

Al SPOONS with EVELYN.

END FANTASY

Evelyn breaks the kiss and takes his hand and places it on her butchered flat chest. Fin stiffens and pulls his hand away.

EVELYN

See Fin. I'm hardly a woman and you're only a boy.

They stare at each other, fighting back tears. Evelyn pulls Fin to her the best she can and they cling to each other, afraid to let go.

Evelyn holds him as his mother did and kisses the top of his head. She whispers

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Sssh. It's OK. It's OK. I'm scared too.

They hold each other for a long time.

FIN

Are you going to die?

Long beat.

EVELYN

I'm here now.

Fin can't bring himself to look Evelyn in the face. He flicks away a tear and hurries from the room.

145 EXT. STREETS - MORNING 145

Fin pedals as hard as he can, tears streaming down his face.

146 EXT. FIN'S BACKYARD - MORNING 146

Fin rounds the corner and drops his bike as he spots the devastation - his butterfly aviary and tree torn to the ground.

147 INT. FIN'S VERANDAH BEDROOM - NIGHT 147

Fin grapples with a large suitcase, tossing clothes and belongings into it.

He pulls out the PHOTOGRAPH ALBUM from its hiding place.

Sitting on the bed, he takes a moment to admire his EVELYN PHOTOGRAPHS. He comes across the photos of her NAKED BREASTS and halts.

148 INT. AL'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS 148

Al lies on his bed half-asleep. He hears Fin next door and opens his eyes.

149 INT. FIN'S VERANDAH BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS 149

Fin hears his Father's door opening.

Leaving the album on his bed, he grabs a nearby dumbbell and darts behind the door.

150 INT. FIN'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS 150

Al barges in, spots the open album on the bed and spins around to find Fin.

AL

Who the hell do you think you are?

FIN

You're the asshole.

AL

Yeah right. I'm just the asshole that pays for everything. Are you gonna do that too? Now that I've lost my job.

AL (CONT'D)

Whether you like it or not, you do not control my life, and if I want to date a woman or ... or ... anything else, then I will.

FIN

Hey, don't let me stop you. She's perfect for you - only gonna be around for a little while.

AL

What did you say?

FIN

Waste of time if you ask me.

AL

What are you talking about?

FIN

Just like Mum. She's going to DIE - D.I.E ... Get it?

AL

If you have any decency at all you will take that back.

FIN

Why? Can't you handle the truth?

AL

Take it back.

Livid Al launches forward to slap him. Fin instinctively retaliates and, dumbbell in hand, jabs Al in the face. Al stumbles sideways. Fin dumps the weight and hovers, his fists at the ready.

FIN

Come on. Who's the big man now?

Floundering, Al feels his face for blood.

AL

Your Mother did what she did. It was her choice, Fin. Not mine.

FIN

(launching himself at Al like a cannonball)

How would you know. YOU WEREN'T THERE.

Al reels back, trips on display case and comes crashing down. Glass shatters around him as he crashes to the floor.

Fin, in an unstoppable rage, dives on top of him and smacks him across the face.

FIN (CONT'D)

YOU WEREN'T THERE. YOU WEREN'T THERE!

SILENCE

151 INT. FIN'S HOUSE. HALLWAY - DAY

151

FLASHBACK

10-YEAR-OLD FIN

Dad?... DAD?

CLANK, CLANK, CLANK. A wooden batten tied with rope straddles the manhole.

It jiggles as the 10-YEAR-OLD FIN clings to his MOTHER'S LEGS. With all his might, he tries to heave her upwards, to release the tension on the rope around her neck. She gurgles.

10-YEAR-OLD FIN (CONT'D)

DAAAD!

SILENCE

152 EXT. STREET - DAY 152

A YOUNGER, FIT, RUDDY-FACED AL pounds the pavement on his afternoon jog. All he hears is the sound of his own breath, in, out, in, out.

153 INT. HALLWAY, FIN'S HOUSE - DAY 153

10-YEAR-OLD FIN

DAAAAAD!

Fin screams out again for his Father as his strength fades and he is forced to let the rope take his Mother's weight.

THE SOUND OF A VICIOUS WIND starting to blow

154 EXT. STREET. NIGHT 154

The wind is howling. Whipping at the trees, sending eddies of leaves across the bitumen.

Fin stares as AL is loaded into the greenish tombl-like innards of the AMBULANCE.

All Fin can hear is the wind roaring through his ears. In one ear, tunneling through his brain, and out the other.

One of the AMBULANCE OFFICERS turn to Fin and gesture for him to get in.

FIN'S FLASHBACK

SUPER SLO MO: Now he is watching his mother being loaded into the same tomb.

There he is - alone - being herded into the ambulance.

END FLASHBACK

SUPER SLO MO: Again the ambulance officer signals for Fin to enter the tomb beside his father.

Fin cannot go there, not again. He turns and races up the street. The wind fighting him.

155 INT. FOREST. NIGHT 155

Fin tears through the forest towards the shrine.

The SOUND OF INSECTS GOING WILD as the wind grows stronger and stronger.

Palm fronds are sent flying and INSECTS BATTER FIN as they are flung across his path.

156 INT. SHRINE. NIGHT 156

Fin, panicked, enters, grabs the picture of his mother and crunches himself into a ball, trying to block the sound of the insects.

But the wind and the insects grow louder and louder...chaos reigns.

Around Fin HUNDRED'S OF GIANT COCKROACHES burst from the earth and scuttle up his body. He tries to flick them off, but they find his ears, his eyes and become a seething mass in his hair.

He screams, tearing at his scalp.

A CLAWING, GRINDING, GRATING SOUND.

GIANT HORNS AND BLACK BULBOUS EYES force their way through the entrance.

Fin is beside himself as a GIANT RHINOCEROUS BEETLE claws its way towards him, its mandibles drooling.

Fin roars as he strikes the giant beetle over and over - smashing his mother's picture.

SILENCE - a moment of calm before the storm

An UNHOLY DOWNPOUR.

Torrents of water swirl down the funnel of the tree.

Obliterating Fin's tears and his shrine.

A small, small boy in the middle of a muddy mess.

He cries.

157 EXT. FOREST. DAWN 157

Fin emerges from his shrine into the sparkling freshness.

- 158 INT. AL'S HOSPITAL ROOM - MORNING 158
- Al sits on the edge of his bed, listening to the many foreign sounds outside his door.
- He goes to the bathroom and takes a leak, then stops to look at himself in the mirror. He doesn't like what he sees - he's aged, tired and there are wrinkles, blotches and broken veins that weren't there before.
- 159 INT. AL AND FIN'S HOUSE - MORNING 159
- Fin enters the silent house.
- 160 INT. HOSPITAL PAY PHONES - MORNING 160
- Al picks up the receiver and dials.
- 161 INT. AL'S ROOM - DAY. 161
- Fin pushes open the doorway to his Father's bedroom. The bed is still unmade.
- The wardrobe doors are still open. He closes them.
- The phone rings and the answering machine picks up.
- ANSWERING MACHINE
Hi. You've called Al and Fin. Leave a message and we'll call you right back.
- 162 INT. FIN'S VERANDAH BEDROOM - DAY 162
- Fin pushes open the door to his room - the scattered glass and mess all still there waiting for him.
- AL ON THE ANSWERING MACHINE
Hello Fin? ... Hello? ... It's OK ... I know you won't pick up ... But if you are there ... There may be some cash under my jocks ... Top drawer ... Order yourself a pizza ... OK bye.
- Fin picks his way over to his bed and gathers up the photo album. He puts it in a plastic bag.
- 163 INT. FIN'S BATHROOM. MORNING 163
- Under the shower Fin washes away the dirt and grime.

164 INT. HOSPITAL CAFETERIA - DAY 164

Fin sits all alone, sipping a soft drink. A small boy in a big, cold plastic room.

165 INT. HOSPITAL HALLWAY - DAY 165

Fin wanders up to a hallway intersection and looks up at the signs - he heads left and finds a lift.

CUT TO:

Fin stops in front of door 102.

166 INT. EVELYN'S HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY 166

Fin peers through the window at Evelyn asleep. She looks exhausted. A drip to administer pethidine hangs close by.

Fin sneaks in, and spots the ORCHID near the window. He sits beside her bed and waits.

He lets his eyes linger on her sleeping face and ride the contours of her body, covered by the sheet.

He notices a LARGE CONTAINER sitting on the table beside the bed.

Peering into the container, he comes face to face with BREAST PROTHESIS OPTIONS. Reeling back, he glances around the room before drawing closer.

He stares at a soft pink rubber mound with its darkened nipple. His eyes widen as his finger prods its softness. It wobbles like jelly.

Sensing a presence, Evelyn wakes and sees Fin.

FIN

Hi.

EVELYN

Hello.

SILENCE

FIN

Why didn't you tell me?

EVELYN

You dear precious thing. There are some things you're better off not knowing.

FIN

Like about you and Dad?

EVELYN

You never said he was your father.

FIN

Yeah well. I wish he wasn't.

Beat

FIN (CONT'D)

Did he ... and you?

Evelyn shakes her head.

EVELYN

Are you OK now?

Fin shrugs.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

(offering her hand)

Come. I want to let you in on a secret ... Come on.

Fin takes Evelyn's hand.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

All you ever really have in this life is time, and how much you get is not up to you. There are only two things that matter. How you spend it and who you spend it with.

Evelyn squeezes his hand.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

I want you to talk to your Father.

Fin pulls his hand away.

EVELYN (CONT'D)

Will you promise to do that for me?

They both stare at the orchid sitting on the window sill.

Fin digs in his back pack, hands her the PHOTO ALBUM and exits.

Evelyn opens the album to reveal Fin's many unusual photographs of herself - her breasts and her flowers.

The photographs of her are not of her posing or made up but all those raw, candid shots taken when she wasn't looking - roller skating, wet with tousled hair and smudged eyes, mid-conversation, squealing as the beetle gets tangled in her hair, busy, absorbed in the moment - enjoying her plants and her shop ... and then there are the photos of her breasts.

She turns each page and admires herself through the innocent eyes of youth - having fun - being a kid again - despite everything.

167 INT. AL'S HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

167

Al sits up in bed, having lunch.

Fin enters, carrying a small shopping bag.

AL

Hi.

FIN

(dumping the bag on the
end of the bed)

Brought you some clothes.

AL

Thanks. Did you get my message?

Fin nods.

FIN

What did you tell them?

AL

I told them my son tried to kill
me.

Fin looks away.

AL (CONT'D)

No it's OK. I told them I fell
while changing a light bulb ...
Here.

He moves aside a sausage on his plate.

AL (CONT'D)

You hungry? Have some of this?

FIN

It's hospital food.

AL

(shovelling a portion
aside on a saucer)

It's fine.

He slides the saucer and fork towards Fin.

AL (CONT'D)

Go on.

Fin eats. He is hungry. They eat in silence for a while.

AL (CONT'D)

I don't blame you. I would've clobbered my old man if he'd been anything like me.

AN AWKWARD SILENCE.

Al gets out of bed and gets his pants from a nearby chair. He digs out his wallet and opens it.

From behind a picture of Rose and Fin as a baby he produces a worn tightly FOLDED NOTE. He hands it to Fin. It says "AL".

Fin opens it and reads the note.

ROSE (V.O.)

*I'm afraid, I'm not as in love ...
Not in love. Feel paralysed ...
Nothing excites me, not you, not me. I have no will to be... If I'm no longer connected to you - Am I connected to anyone? What does keep us moving forward in this world? Is it time? Is this all we have?*

A LONG BEAT.

Finally Al wraps Fin in his arms and holds him tight.

AL

I'm sorry. I don't have the answer. I don't think anyone does. It's why we struggle so much.

A stillness.

A father holding his son.

168 INT. EVELYN'S HOSPITAL BEDROOM/BATHROOM - AFTERNOON 168

Evelyn sits in her underwear on the edge of the bed. Her left breast exposed, the right breast, still bandaged.

Sitting quietly, she turns one way then the other - feeling, testing. Finally she stands and hobbles to the bathroom where she stands in front of the mirror - it's the first time since the operation. She lets out a long sigh.

169 EXT. LONG HOSPITAL CORRIDOR - AFTERNOON 169

Al, dressed, with a dressing on his head, and Fin walk the long walk - side by side - they talk but we can't hear what is being said.

Al puts his arm around Fin.

170 EXT. HOSPITAL CORRIDOR OUTSIDE EVELYN'S ROOM - AFTERNOON 170
 Al and Fin approach. Fin stops in front of Room 102. Al waits beside him. Fin indicates for him to enter.

AL
 Aren't you coming in?

Fin shakes his head.

Fin waits at the doorway while Al enters.

He watches Al and Evelyn through a gap in the curtain.

171 INT. EVELYN'S HOSPITAL ROOM - LATE AFTERNOON 171

Evelyn is sitting up in bed, wearing a floral head scarf.

A bunch of PINK TULIPS sit on her food trolley. *

The bed curtain obscures her view of the door. She hears someone enter. *

EVELYN
 Fin?

Al appears. *

AL
 Hey. *

EVELYN
 Did Fin tell you?

Al nods.

AL
 How are you feeling?

EVELYN
 As good as can be expected - let's put it that way.

AL
 I'm sorry. I had no idea.

EVELYN
 No. Why would you.

Beat. *

Al looks to the tulips. *

EVELYN (CONT'D)

They're for Fin.

AL

They're nice.

EVELYN

He's a lovely boy, Al. You've done a fine job.

AL

I don't know if I can take the credit.

EVELYN

Go on. Sometimes we deserve what we get.

AL

And sometimes not.

Evelyn purses her lips to keep it together. Al sits beside her and holds her tight. He kisses the top of her head.

AL (CONT'D)

It's OK. It's OK.

They sit like that for a long time.

172 EXT. LEAN-TO - AFTERNOON

172

Fin is at the table, capping beer bottles. THE BUNCH OF RED AND STRIATED TULIPS sit beside him - THE NOTE STILL ATTACHED.

Al, exits the house and sets down a LARGE SUITCASE beside Fin.

AL

To add to your collection.

Fin looks from the suitcase to Al.

CUT TO:

The CLICK-CLACK, CLICK-CLACK of Al at the sugar dispenser, making ginger beer instead of beer.

FIN

How long will this last?

AL

What?

FIN

(tapping the bottles)
This ginger beer business.

AL

A very long time I hope.

Fin rolls his eyes.

AL (CONT'D)

Thought I might still try the chilli.

FIN

No, don't do that.

AL

Why? Ginger and chilli go together.

FIN

So.

AL

So. It could be really ... Asiany.

FIN

So. It could be really shit.

AL

I tell you what. Next time we see Evelyn. We'll take a vote. She might like my brew.

FIN

Are you seeing her again?

AL

I thought I'd leave that up to you.

Silence.

FIN

Yeah. I don't care.

Fin continues tapping on bottle caps.

173

EXT. FOREST TREE SHRINE. AFTERNOON

173

In front of his tree shrine, Fin has dug a GRAVE. He takes from his pocket the SUICIDE NOTE and places it on top of his Mother's possessions from the shrine.

On the ground lay the open ICE-CREAM CONTAINERS and the SUITCASE full of the last of his Mother's belongings.

One by one he places the folded dresses in the grave.

Beside him stands Corinne.

They watch as a blue tiger butterfly flutters through the golden light and lands on his shoulder.

He lets it be - he knows who it is.

174 INT. EVELYN'S BEDROOM. DAY

174

MONTAGE OF CLOSE UPS

The intricate patterns of a monarch butterfly wing being drawn onto skin.

END MONTAGE

Evelyn sits in front of her duchess mirror while Corinne helps Fin colour in the patterns on Evelyn's bald scalp.

ROLL CREDITS

MONTAGE SEQUENCE - A SERIES OF PHOTOGRAPHS OVER THE JAUNTY SKA MUSIC TRACK

Fin takes a series of shots of the opening night of the florist shop. People dance to jaunty SKA music.

CLICK - Holding his glass in the foreground, Fin clinks glasses with Corinne.

CLICK - Fin clinks glasses with Evelyn, dressed in her Golden Monarch butterfly costume, sporting an even more amazing painted head.

CLICK - Evelyn and Al dance.

CLICK - Evelyn, Al and Fin dance.