

Putuparri and the Rainmakers

Q&A



Putuparri and the Rainmakers is one of five [MIFF Premiere Fund](#)-supported films for 2015.

We sat down with director Nicole Ma to ask her a few questions about the making of her film.

You have been documenting the life of Indigenous Australians living in Fitzroy Crossing for more than 10 years. Where did your interest in Aboriginal culture stem from?

My interest in Aboriginal culture began when I met Spider, Dolly and Tom Lawford in Fitzroy Crossing in 2001. They took me to their country, Kurtal, a waterhole in the Great Sandy Desert. On that first trip I saw things that were outside my urban life experience. I didn't understand what was going on and I was curious. As fate would have it, they invited me back and it precipitated a ten-year journey to learning and understanding a worldview that is connected to land and spirit.

What were the main difficulties you faced during this project?

It was a difficult project to get funded. In hindsight I was writing funding applications before I had a clear idea of where the story was going. I was running into obstacles within the different story structures I was exploring. The notion of whose story was I telling and who could give permission was very complex. One of the principles of Aboriginal culture is you can't visit someone's country without permission and this applies to their songs, dances and stories. I had to find my way through this process and it took many years of working with the community and establishing long-term relationships.

You raised \$20,000 for this project through crowd funding. Did this affect the way you worked on your documentary?

I had been working on the project for years and financing it myself. It was expensive because of the remoteness of the location. I knew that I had to make something happen or it would never get made and so I turned to crowd funding. The supporters were so enthusiastic in their response that it gave the project the energy to move forward. The money was used to edit an assembly and from then on things started to fall into place. I found my producer, John Moore, and he began the process of raising the finance.

In *Putuparri and the Rainmakers*, Tom struggles with the deep chasm between his western upbringing and his Indigenous background. Throughout your career you have been focusing on the complex relationship between traditional and modern worlds. Why?

I'm fascinated by the complex relationship between traditional and modern worlds. Coming from an old culture (Chinese) and living in Australia I feel ambivalent about where I belong; I feel culturally disconnected. When I look at traditional societies, their connection to their 'country' is embedded deep within their being. The responsibility for looking after their 'home' is passed on from generation to generation. It's a reciprocal relationship: I look after you and you look after me. When that connection is lost, as it is for many in modern society, the individual's needs become the primary driving force and we lose that sense of reciprocity with the natural world. I see in traditional societies a knowledge that is rapidly being lost and for me *Putuparri and the Rainmakers* raises the question "if we no longer honour our elders and their knowledge where are we headed?"

In the film, you are focusing on the journey of Tom 'Putuparri' Lawford, from alcoholic to community leader. What was his reaction when he watched the documentary?

Tom and I made an agreement in the very beginning that I would not include anything in the film that he thought was unsuitable. He was privy to every stage of the editing process, assembly, roughcut, finecut. I was nervous about including the 'violent act' section, but because it was told from the point of view of his daughter and sister it made it acceptable. He showed it to his family and there were unanimous in saying "that's the truth".

Regarding Tom's reaction to his trajectory from alcoholic to community leader, I think he has a very sophisticated grasp of story and film. He understood that that part of his life was an integral part of his transition to becoming an elder.

What message about Aboriginal communities are you hoping to convey with the film?

I hope that the film can speak to the audience on many different levels. I did set out to make a film about hope because that's what I witnessed working with Tom's community. There is a lot of bad press about remote communities. And, while there's no denying there are serious problems, there is also an amazing culture that is alive and fighting for survival and that has been greatly under appreciated.