



Q&A with *Ella* Director Douglas Watkins

One of six **MIFF Premiere Fund** films for 2016, *Ella* will have its world premiere at this year's festival. Written and directed by Douglas Watkin, the film follows the journey of Ella Havelka, the first Indigenous dancer with The Australian Ballet!

We sat down with Douglas and producer Veronica Fury, and asked them a few questions.



You have directed many stories about indigenous people's lives – from community leaders to air force soldiers, artists, sportsmen and women, life savers and now a ballerina. How do you choose your stories?

Douglas: Often the people and stories choose me. Being connected to Mob, or the wider community, means I come across all sorts of fascinating people. Every person has a story to tell. The best part of being a documentary maker is finding and telling people's stories. I like to make stories that make a difference, that take Indigenous culture forwards.

Ella Havelka comes across as a private and gentle-natured person. How did you approach her with the idea of the project, and win her trust?

Douglas: We had to go through the Australian Ballet first to pitch the idea and arrange a meeting, although the final say was with Ella. I met with her a couple of times while she was on tour, to just have a yarn so she could get an idea of who I am and my direction with the film, especially the importance of including her family and background as an essential part of her story as a dancer. I think we both agreed that a story about Indigenous success isn't one dimensional, that community, history and family are inherent in everything. It took nearly for a year for the project to get off the ground.

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The film shows Ella's journey both professionally as a dancer, on her way to the Australian Ballet, and personally as an indigenous woman – at what point did you realise how emotional the journey would be?

Douglas: From the very beginning. The ballet world is very intense and requires a lot of passion to succeed. We knew the journey would be emotionally charged.

Veronica: as a producer I was initially worried that we didn't have enough practical ,so called 'drama' to drive the story, but I soon realised we had an amazing, moving, personal, emotional journey that was much deeper and more rewarding – and one that everyone could relate to.



What are you working on next?

Douglas: I have a few balloons in the air, including a possible project about my own family's history. I would like to keep working on projects like *Ella*, that have such positive impact on Indigenous contribution to Australian culture.

Veronica: As always I am working across a large slate of projects – see wildbear.tv – but one in particular is with Lawrence Johnson (*Neon, Night, Eternity*): we are currently financing an evocative feature documentary about Australia's infamous holiday hot spot, Surfers Paradise.

***Ella* world premieres at MIFF on Sunday 7 August, at 4pm. There will be a second screening on Wednesday 10 August at 6.30pm. Douglas Watkin and Ella Havelka will be at both screenings to participate in Q&A sessions.**