

## **H is for Happiness**

**Following your highly-acclaimed short film *Mrs McCutcheon*, what was it like to embark on your first feature film?**

*It all happened very quickly off the back of my short film **Mrs McCutcheon** which was incredibly exciting but also felt incredibly ambitious at the time so there was a lot of nerves leading up to pre-production. But if there were no nerves or adrenalin pumping I would be worried! The producers and I had also assembled a super talented team of creatives, so I knew I was in very skilled and supportive hands.*

***H is for Happiness* is adapted from a well-loved novel. What about the story resonated so vividly with you?**

*I have always been attracted to scripts which contain a balance of humor and pathos. So when I read the treatment of **H Is for Happiness**, I immediately knew this was a story I wanted to tell. Full of laugh-out-loud moments, heartbreaking aches, endless charm and quirks, **Happiness** encompassed all the elements I needed to create an entertaining cinematic experience. It was 'pitch-perfect' for my feature film debut, feeling akin to my short film **Mrs McCutcheon**, made only 18 months earlier.*

**The imagery is magical, full of saturated color and natural beauty juxtaposed with fantastical elements. Why did you make the decision to apply this treatment to a film that, while joyous in parts, deals with some very heavy subject matter?**

*I have spent many years creating theatre for families and young people and have always enjoyed the challenge of how to tackle tough issues in the story telling, how to make it accessible to a young audience whilst also making them feel safe and allowing them to laugh . . . a lot! I drew on this experience to develop the film's tone in sensing how to strike the right balance between drama and comedy. To grant the audience the space and time to sit-in on the more heartbreaking moments. To not patronise our young audience and trust that they will be able to navigate the emotional ups and downs Candice encounters on her journey. To be able to laugh and celebrate difference and above all be entertained by entering a world that is so visually appealing. Even though **Happiness** is unashamedly a feel-good film, you can't feel good the whole way through. The audience has to believe that they've earned it.*

**There are so many charming performances in this film from established and emerging talent alike. How did you go about assembling such a stellar cast which includes Miriam Margolyes, Emma Booth, Richard Roxburgh, Debra Mailman, Joel Jackson, as well as newcomers Daisy Axon and Wesley Patten.**

*I wrote love letters, many of them including one to Dolly Parton! I talked of my genuine respect and admiration for them as artists and how they and only they could play these roles! I needed actors who could dip into the darker emotional content of the story but then step out and equally embrace the quirky heightened world surrounding them. **Daisy Axon is Candice Phee!** It was clear from the beginning that Daisy possessed all the qualities needed to deliver a heart-warming and hilarious performance, she had also read the book multiple times with Candice Phee being one of her all-time favorite characters. I first cast Wesley Patten when he was just 10 years old as one of the leads in **Mrs McCutcheon**. Unnaturally loaded with charm and sensitivity, Wesley is one of the most instinctive and charismatic young actors I have ever been blessed to work with, so it was a joy to bring him over to his first feature film.*

**Who do you hope will see this film and what do you want them to get out of the experience?**

*I want everyone to see this film! I believe all the themes combined make the story incredibly relatable and instantly accessible to a broad, global audience both young and old. I hope that the audience will recognize a part of them self in any one of the characters, and that we find the ability to laugh at ourselves again, our flaws and celebrate difference. But above all, I want them to be highly entertained!*

**You were a participant in MIFF Accelerator Lab some years ago. Can you tell us about your professional journey, and do you have any advice for aspiring Australian directors?**

*I have been directing theatre and opera for the past 15 years so the shift into film making felt like a natural extension to the skill set. Having said that, there is a completely different vocabulary to film making that you can only really learn on the job. My best advice for aspiring film directors is to just get out there and make the film, anyway you can - no-one else is going to make it for you! Have a strong idea and a clear vision, make sure it is something you are passionate about and is true to who you are as an artist. But above all make sure that your story is accessible and that you know who your audience is.*