





## THE SONG KEEPERS

### ONE LINE SYNOPSIS

**The Song Keepers** is the funny and poignant story of an Aboriginal women's choir and their historic tour to Germany.

### ONE PARAGRAPH SYNOPSIS

An Aboriginal women's choir goes on a historic journey to take back the hymns that were given to their ancestors by the German missionaries but in their own ancient languages. Come on an adventure as the unlikeliest band on earth goes on tour... to the other side of the world!

### ONE PAGE SYNOPSIS

In the obscure churches of remote Central Australia, a 140-year musical legacy of ancient Aboriginal languages, German sacred poetry and baroque music is being preserved by four generations of song women. **The Song Keepers** tells the unknown story of the choral heritage of remote Aboriginal communities in Central Australia past and present, through the women that make up the **Central Australian Aboriginal Women's Choir**. Their music is the perfect manifestation of how they hold their strong traditional culture and modern faith in perfect balance, unabashedly and unapologetically.

**As the 32 strong choir embarks on a three week historical tour of Germany**, to take back the hymns that were given to their great grandparents by German missionaries, but in their own Western Arrarnta and Pitjantjatjara languages, we celebrate these women and their extraordinary relationship with South American born **Morris Stuart**, their charismatic conductor and musical director. Morris has worked with the women for almost a decade to revive the dying practice of choral singing at a time when it was almost extinct. Against all odds, together they take their music and stories of cultural survival, identity and cross-cultural collaboration to the world.

Through their music, never seen before archival material and intimate interviews we explore this incredible musical legacy and the complex, unspoken duality of central desert identity that goes with it.

The bigger questions the film poses are layered through the joyous journey of this remarkable group of women who take us through their world and navigate a new one with incredible humour, cheekiness, honesty and great care and trust in each other.

The events of preparing and rehearsing for the Germany tour and the tour itself form an important narrative and structural device, through which the history of this choral practice as well as the personal stories of triumph and tragedy of the main characters are woven through and juxtaposed.

At its heart, **The Song Keepers** is a celebration of hope and the humanity of universal personal experiences that brings the unlikeliest of people together to achieve great things. It is ultimately a story of courage and dignity against the odds and the power of the human spirit and voice. Literally.



## MAIN CHARACTERS

**Morris Stuart:** Early 70s, charismatic choir conductor. Born in Guyana, South America, ‘a descendant of African slaves’ he has an innate understanding of cultural loss, survival, colonisation, and racial discrimination that he and the women share.

**Daphne Puntjina** ‘The boss’, 70s, leader and oldest member of the choir. She has been leading the Areyonga Choir since 1966. Cultural custodian. Strong, cheeky, incredible sense of humour.

**Marion Swift:** 40s, a main member of the Ntaria (Hermannsburg) Choir and strong facilitator/translator between Morris and the women. A strong leader in her community and passionate about Indigenous rights.

**Nicholas Williams:** 20s, is one of only two male members of the choir and Marion’s son. Outspoken and constantly entertains the older ladies and makes them laugh. The choir ‘joker’.

**Theresa Nipper:** Early 60s, very dry, cheeky sense of humour. She and Daphne are very close. Strong advocate of keeping traditional culture strong. Theresa originally found Morris and asked him to come work with the choir and has a very special relationship with him.

**Heather:** 24, youngest member of the choir, contemporary artist. Her and a few other younger members of the choir are making choral singing ‘cool’ again for the younger generation, more of whom want to join the choir now.



## THE CENTRAL AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL WOMEN'S CHOIR

The Central Australian Aboriginal Women's Choir (CAAWC) has become a musical 'Tour de Force' across Australia since performing in Germany in 2015, with recent tours to Tasmania, Western Australia and Darwin.

The CAAWC contains 32 core members. The ladies (and 2 men) come from six remote communities, within a thousand kilometre radius throughout central Australia: Hermannsburg, Areyonga, Titjikala, Mutitjulu, Docker River, and Alice Springs. The choir was formed as an amalgamation of various individual community choirs, including the renowned choirs from Ntaria (Hermannsburg), Areyonga and Ernabella.

The CAAWC is unique. Nowhere else in the world does such a Choir exist, singing 4<sup>th</sup> century European hymns, translated into the oldest Indigenous languages in existence. It is unique to the Northern Territory and, indeed, unique to central Australia. The Choir is born from the history of their families, from the German Luthern missionaries who gave their ancestors the songs, and from their struggle and resilience in keeping the choral movement alive in their communities and in their hearts.

Their performances include German baroque and Early Romantic hymns, now sung in traditional Aboriginal languages from the central desert. The show incorporates cultural elements and language components which bring a wealth of understanding to the audience experience.

The choir is multi-generational, with members ranging from their twenties to their eighties. Mothers, daughters (and a son) hear their ancestors' voices as they sing. The majority of their members are elderly, who have been singing since childhood and are well-practiced in their craft; they are skilled artists.

Since their formation, CAAWC has collaborated with local and visiting Australian and international choirs including the world-renowned Soweto Gospel Choir. The performances showcase the Choir's artistic capacity, its unique tonality, multilingual choral skills and musicianship.

The CAAWC will be performing twice in August 2017:

- at the esteemed Melbourne Recital Centre, where they will perform the Victorian premiere of the full show *Arrkanala Lyilhitjika*, their signature performance as taken on the historic and acclaimed 2015 tour of Germany,
- at the premiere of the documentary **The Song Keepers**, when the film launches at the Melbourne International Film Festival

It is a testament to the Choir and to their conductor, Morris Stuart, that they have come this far, to top Australian stages. Their hard work and dedication to their craft has led them to these invitations to perform at the two biggest events of their Australian careers: to be on the stage at the MRC, one of Australia's premiere music venues, and to perform at the opening of the film about their lives, their music. This is an opportunity they have waited many years for.

## PRODUCTION NOTES

*They are resplendent in their handcrafted silk batik gowns – which, incredibly, were whipped up a mere three weeks ago – and their voices are even more glorious... This is Aboriginal singing, but not as you've heard it before. In a tradition with a 135-year history, the choir perform German baroque hymns, translated into the traditional Arrarnta language...On Monday afternoon, the choir sounded note-perfect, in spite of limited rehearsals. The five communities are spread out across around 1000 km, making it hard for the entire choir to get together on a regular basis. Sydney Morning Herald - May 25, 2015*

**The Song Keepers** is a charming, heart-warming, funny and inspiring film. It's a story about survival: survival of people, culture and music. It's about dreaming big, against the odds. Ultimately, it's a surprising film that marries Central Desert Aboriginal culture with mainstream white German music and history. The resulting mix is culturally rich and offers fascinating insights.

Naina Sen, writer, director and producer of *The Song Keepers*, knows this mix well. She has been working with the choir over the past 3 years creating this film, including travelling with them on their historic tour to Germany and has been developing and filming the story since early 2014. Naina spent months with Morris and the ladies and established a wonderful rapport with them all, which is displayed in the film. The ladies trust Naina and gave her unfettered access into their lives and stories.

In late 2015, after gathering over 50 hours of footage and writing a detailed treatment, Naina invited Rachel Clements and Trisha Morton-Thomas of Brindle Films, to come on board, to take the film to the next level. Rachel and Trish have successfully produced over 80 hours of television together and, in 2015, Brindle was awarded SPA's Breakthrough Business of the Year, and Screen Australia Enterprise funding. Together, the team brought a varied and broad range of skills, knowledge and experience to the project and we were committed to creating a film that celebrates the courage, resilience and achievements of these remarkable women.

We had to work with a large canvas – there are countless stories that could have been included, and numerous elements of the history and tradition to contain. It was tricky and painful to choose the people who appear in the final film, and we carefully debated about which stories to include.

There is an immense unseen collection of archival material of the arrival of the Lutheran missionaries in Central Australia from the early 1900s that is held at the Finke River Mission in Alice Springs, Hermannsburg and Areyonga. This material was available for us to use in the film and provides a stunning illustration of the historical elements of the film.



## HISTORY AND BACKGROUND NOTES

Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, remote Aboriginal communities in Central Australia have enjoyed a strong heritage of choral practice. Church choirs, men's choirs, mixed choirs, eisteddfods, interstate choral tours, choir festivals, and an iconic national performance have been among the ingredients of this significant story.

June 2017 will mark 140 years since the first German missionaries arrived in Hermannsburg, and the launch of **The Song Keepers** marks the anniversary of 140 years of choral practice in remote central Australia.

This choral movement has produced an impressive and unique archive of sacred music comprising original hymnody in the Western Arrarnta chanting tradition, and translations into the Western Arrarnta and Pitjantjatjara languages of sacred poetry that dates back to 4<sup>th</sup> Century Greek.

This history of 'song' and chant in ceremony in Western Arrarnta and Pitjantjatjara societies represented a comfortable fit with the new choral tradition introduced by the German Lutheran Mission, whose insistence on the retention and codification of languages resulted in these new sacred songs being translated and sung in language.

The story of the heritage of choral practice in remote communities in Central Australia is embedded in their cultural 'DNA'. It is inseparable from the complex and contradictory experience of identification with country and culture, of displacement, resettlement, colonization, missionizing, deculturation, and cultural survival.

The choral practice in these communities has made a considerable contribution to the preservation of language, the propagation of literacy and a cohesion that has contributed to retaining and enhancing a sense of identity. At its peak, from the 40s to the 70s, community choirs were thriving all across Aboriginal communities in Central Australia. However, over the last 50 years, this choral practice has gradually diminished with the ageing and deaths of those who had carried the tradition, with the increased popularity of modern music, and with the growing knowledge of the problematic history of the Christian missionaries throughout Australia. By 2006, only a remnant of this choral practice was in place.

Since then, a choral skill-building project conducted by Morris Stuart, at the invitation of the women 'to make us good again', has been steadily reviving the choral tradition and up-skilling its participants. The result has been the formation of The Central Australian Aboriginal Women's Choir; a 32 strong women's choir made up of women from over 6 remote communities that sing in ancient Indigenous languages, to 16<sup>th</sup> century baroque musical arrangements, that have become a part of their cultural practice of telling stories through song. The Choir is multi-lingual and predominantly sing in Western Arrarnta and Pitjantjara but also in Zulu, English and German.



## CREW

Writer/Director	Naina Sen
Producers	Rachel Clements, Naina Sen, Trisha Morton-Thomas
Editor	Bergen O'Brien & Naina Sen
Director of Photography	Chris Phillips, Naina Sen
Sound Recordist	Francis Diatschenko
Sound Design & Mix	Doron Kipen & Brenden Croxon
Original Music	Erkki Veltheim

## BIOGRAPHIES

### **NAINA SEN – WRITER/DIRECTOR/PRODUCER/EDITOR**

Born New Delhi, India, 25/12/1980. Naina Sen is a documentary filmmaker who has lived and worked in Australia since completing her Masters in Media Studies in 2003. From 2008 to 2011, Naina created and operated visual stage projections for renowned Indigenous musician Gurrumul, touring with him nationally and internationally. In 2010 she directed *Stories Through Song*, a half-hour documentary for PBS featuring Gurrumul and was also the associate producer and cinematographer of his ABC Australian Story profile, *You're The Voice*.

In 2013, Naina produced a multi-screen installation 'Wanarn Is Our Home' for the acclaimed Land and Body art exhibition that toured across 14 museums in China and won the prestigious Arts in Asia Award, Indigenous Category. She also produced 8 short films for the Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre, Melbourne Museum's internationally award-winning First Peoples exhibition. In 2015 Naina co-wrote and edited *Bulun Milkarri*, for the Songlines to Screen initiative. It premiered at the Sydney International Film Festival and won Best Language Production at the ImagiNative Film Festival, Toronto.

More recently, Naina produced large-scale stage projections for The Central Australian Aboriginal Women's Choir for their local and international tours and is currently directing and producing a documentary on the choir. *The Song Keepers* is Naina's debut feature documentary.

### **RACHEL CLEMENTS – PRODUCER**

Alice Springs based Rachel Clements and Trisha Morton-Thomas are the founders of Brindle Films, recipients of the 2015 SPA Breakthrough Business Award and Screen Australia Enterprise funding.

Rachel has produced drama projects including *8MMM Aboriginal Radio*, the first Aboriginal narrative comedy series, and *Double Trouble*, the first Aboriginal children's drama series. Rachel has also produced award winning documentaries *Big Name No Blanket*, *Blown Away* and *Ochre and Ink*. She has executive produced documentaries commissioned by ABC and NITV, including *Destiny in Alice* and *Urrpeye (Messenger)*, NITV's launch film. Current projects include *Occupation: Native* for NITV/SBS and *Finke*, a feature documentary for Madman and Screen Australia. Current features in development include the adaptation of Mary Anne Butler's multi award-winning play *Broken*, and *Cloud Money*, awarded development investment under Screen Australia's *Gender Matters* initiative.

## **TRISHA MORTON-THOMAS – PRODUCER**

Trisha is a writer, producer and actor from the Anmatyerr people of central Australia. Straight out of drama school, she landed the lead character Mae in Rachel Perkin's 1997 debut feature film *Radiance*. In more recent years Trisha has appeared as Aunty Mona in the award winning ABC drama series *Redfern Now*, series 1 and 2, and most recently starring as Lola in *8MMM Aboriginal Radio*, the first Aboriginal narrative comedy series which she also wrote and produced.

From 2004, Trisha worked for CAAMA where she produced, directed and wrote documentaries for Imparja TV, ABC and NITV including *Destiny in Alice* and *Finding Place*. In 2007 she joined the newly established National Indigenous Television Services as one of the first Aboriginal Commissioning Editors, eventually working her way up to Senior Commissioning Editor. While at NITV, Trisha oversaw hundreds of television hours including documentaries, dramas, music television and magazine style formats. Trisha is currently writing and directing *Occupation: Native* for NITV/SBS and is creating the feature film *Cloud Money*. In 2016, she received the Bob Plasto Award from the NT Government for her contribution towards the Northern Territory's screen industry.

## **BERGEN O'BRIEN – EDITOR**

Bergen O'Brien is a respected Melbourne based screen editor. Heavily leaning towards documentary, his work includes everything from interstitials to feature films. Because of his belief in work-life-balance he invariably incorporates aspects of his previous edits in his own life. As a consequence he is now part organic garlic farmer; ukulele playing singer; gold prospector; and hodler and promoter of cryptocurrencies.

His work includes *Pacmen* (Toronto HotDocs/SFF 2017); *Polyfaces - A world of choices*; *The Wedding Makers*; *Coniston*; *Art of Australia*; *Halal Mate*; *Black As* and many more serious, exciting and humorous programs. You should definitely get him to cut that amazing feature film you've got in the can that just needs a sensitive and agreeable allrounder to bust it into shape and make it sing.

## **CHRIS PHILLIPS – CINEMATOGRAPHER**

Chris Phillips is a filmmaker and cinematographer with ten years' experience working in social justice and commercial video production. Chris honed his skills working for development organisations creating films in countries such as Ethiopia, Uganda, Niger, Cameroon, East Timor and Cambodia. His self-funded short film *Ita Nudar Ema* won Best Director at the GCOFF Boston and Best Inspirational Film Top Shorts.

Chris is currently working on a feature length documentary in East Timor titled, *This is Reality*, and a short documentary about tribal fighting in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. When not working on social justice projects, Chris runs a nimble production company in Melbourne, delivering campaigns for companies including Nike, Red Bull, and Holden.



## **ERKKI VELTHEIM – ORIGINAL MUSIC**

Erkki Veltheim (b. 1976 Finland) is an Australian composer, improviser, performer and interdisciplinary artist. Erkki has been commissioned by Adelaide Festival, Vivid Festival, Australian Art Orchestra, Soundstream Collective and New Music Network, and his pieces have been performed by ensembles such as the London Sinfonietta, Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and Sydney Symphony Orchestra. Recent projects include a new audiovisual performance work for Chamber Made Opera, *Another Other*, with collaborators Anthony Pateras, Natasha Anderson and Sabina Maselli, and sound and sculpture installation *Fusion of Tongues*, for Castlemaine live arts organisation Punctum's residency at La Maison Folie, Belgium, as part of *Mons 2015 - European Capital of Culture* program.

Erkki has a long-standing collaboration with the indigenous musician Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu, having composed choral, string quartet and orchestral arrangements for his songs, as well as original works to accompany his traditional music. He has also composed arrangements for artists including Black Arm Band, Tom E Lewis and Zulya, and as an improviser has worked with Australia's leading practitioners, such as Anthony Pateras, Andrea Keller, Jon Rose, Scott Tinkler and Tony Buck. Erkki has also performed with ensembles such as the Australian Art Orchestra, Australian Chamber Orchestra, Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, Elision and Ensemble Modern, and featured as a soloist with the London Sinfonietta, Australian Opera and Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. Erkki is a recipient a 2013 Myer Creative Fellowship, and in 2014 was appointed Artistic Associate of Chamber Made Opera. He holds a Master of Arts, for which he researched the connections between music and ritual.

## **FRANCIS DIATSCHENKO – CONCERT RECORDING AND SOUND RECORDING**

Francis has 15 years of experience in the audio industry, specialising in remote locations and collaborative projects. Sound recordist credits include installation film *First Peoples*, a permanent exhibition at Bunjilaka, Melbourne. These compliment his career as a guitarist; he toured for many years internationally with Gurrumul Yunupingu. Francis is a university lecturer, artistic director and experienced performer, including performances at WOMAD, Sydney Opera Hour, Latitude (UK), the Arias, the Egg (Beijing) and Carnegie Hall.

## **CREDIT LINES**

### **Credit Line for Production**

SCREEN AUSTRALIA and INDIGO PRODUCTIONS and BRINDLE FILMS present, in association with the MELBOURNE INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL PREMIERE FUND, SCREEN TERRITORY, NATIONAL INDIGENOUS TELEVISION and FILM VICTORIA.. Writer/Director NAINA SEN, Producers RACHEL CLEMENTS, NAINA SEN and TRISHA MORTON-THOMAS, Editor BERGEN O'BRIEN and NAINA SEN, Director of Photography CHRIS PHILLIPS, NAINA SEN and RAOUL AMAAR ABBAS, Composer ERKKI VELTHEIM, Sound Design & Mix DORON KIPEN and BRENDAN CROXON, Concert and Sound Recordist FRANCIS DIATSCHENKO, Titles and Graphics KINGDOM OF LUDD.

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## CONTACTS FOR PRESS/PUBLICITY

### PRODUCERS

Rachel Clements  
Naina Sen

0414-484-472, [rachel@brindlefilms.com.au](mailto:rachel@brindlefilms.com.au)  
0421-557-052, [info@nainasen.com.au](mailto:info@nainasen.com.au)

### PRODUCTION COMPANY

Brindle Films Pty Ltd  
PO Box 5188  
Alice Springs NT 0871

Indigo Productions  
312/29 Nicholson Street  
Brunswick East VIC 3057

## INDIGENOUS CULTURAL PROTOCOL

All representation of Indigenous people, music, art, culture and places remain in the control of the appropriate Indigenous people and can not be used for any other purpose outside of **The Song Keepers** without permission from the appropriate people. This includes any interpretations of traditional art, music or culture discussed in the film.

## ONLINE LINKS FOR VIEWING

Trailer: <https://vimeo.com/220146417>

Live Choir Singing Clip: <https://vimeo.com/174609790>

