

Melbourne International Film Festival program accelerates directors' careers

August 8, 2015

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Animal Kingdom director David Michod is just one of the Accelerator alumni. *Photo: Michael Nagle*

What do David Michod, Justin Kurzel and Amiel Courtin-Wilson have in common?

If you guessed that they're all celebrated Australian filmmakers, whose films have been rapturously received at festivals such as Sundance and Cannes, you'd be right.

But you get a bonus point for correctly identifying that they are all alumni of the Melbourne International Film Festival's Accelerator program.



Justin Kurzel went on to make *Snowtown* and *Macbeth*. *Photo: Ben Rushton*

The success of the program – four days of workshops and seminars for directors making the leap from short films to feature films – is both "easy to measure and impossible to measure", says the festival's industry director Mark Woods.

"You can go to our website, press the alumni button, there's Justin Kurzel, there's Taika Waititi, there's Matthew Bate," he says. "You can say, 'Goodness me, isn't that great'.

"But someone can come back and say, 'All those people are so brilliant, they might have done this well without you'."

It's a possibility, but the depth and breadth of talent to have emerged from Accelerator over its 12 – who have gone on to make films such as *Animal Kingdom* (Michod, whose next film is with Brad Pitt) and *Snowtown* (Kurzel, whose *Macbeth* with Marion Cotillard and Michael Fassbender screened at Cannes) – makes it clear why places in the program are so hotly contested.

Rhys Graham, who did Accelerator in 2007, has been part of the program in some way every year since then, and went on to make his first feature film, 2013's *Galore*, with the help of funding from the festival.

As well as hearing from some incredible guest speakers – among them Jason Reitman, director of *Up in the Air*, and celebrated Iranian director Jafar Panahi – Graham formed strong bonds with his Accelerator cohorts.

"One of the most valuable things out of that week was just sharing ambitions and stories and fears and dreams with the other filmmakers," he says.

"Part of the advantage of film festivals is not only going to all the films together but also the long nights drinking booze and talking about things, so we did have some long lasting friendships after that."

The seminars cover everything from getting your film funded to cinematography and from composing to acting.

"You have to mix up the sessions, not everything can be a dry thing about the investors," says Woods.

Graham returned to Accelerator as a guest speaker last year with Maya Stange, an actor who starred in *Galore*.

"Maya spoke very persuasively about what made her work for peanuts on that film and that was about how the director pitched to her, and that's a lesson in and of itself," says Woods.

"She was very instructive on the hideousness of working on a low budget set and yet how the trust she felt in the director sustained her through the journey, so there's a huge relevance in that [for the filmmakers]."

Introductions to industry powerbrokers are another invaluable resource provided by the program, this year formalised with the Talent of Tomorrow function, held last week. The event brought together this year's 22 Accelerator participants with 200 industry practitioners.

"We put them on the stage and say these people are the talent of tomorrow, meet them," says Woods. "You can be the most talented person in the room, but if you don't know anybody and don't know how to do things then obviously your chances of getting out there and getting your feature film commissioned are much less."

Accelerator is funded by the state and federal governments and state partners; the program, including seminars, functions and food and board is free of charge to participants. That makes it a boon for fledgling filmmakers struggling financially, says Olivia Peniston-Bird, one of 13 Accelerator alumni to have feature-length films in the festival this year (the short films of seven alumni also appear in the program).

"A lot of these conferences are very expensive and as an early filmmaker ... you're pretty much financing your own projects and you just don't have those resources," she says.

"Accelerator gives filmmakers who don't have a high income a really carefully considered and well put together overview of all aspects of filmmaking."

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