

ACUTE MISFORTUNE

A Film by Thomas M. Wright

Based on Acute Misfortune: The Life and Death of Adam Cullen by Erik Jensen



"Endurance is more important than truth."

ONE LINE SYNOPSIS

The film adaptation of Erik Jensen's award-winning biography of Adam Cullen is the story of the biographer and his subject, as it descends into a dependent and abusive relationship.

OUTLINE

The film adaptation of Erik Jensen's award-winning biography of Adam Cullen is a true story, taking place in Sydney and the Blue Mountains between 2008 to 2012.

Erik Jensen was an ambitious nineteen year-old journalist at the Sydney Morning Herald when he was commissioned to write a profile of the painter Adam Cullen, who at forty two was the subject of a career retrospective at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

After reading the article, Cullen invited Jensen to write his biography for Thames and Hudson.

Acute Misfortune is the story of the biographer and his subject, told inside the years Jensen spent on and off with the painter. It is the story of their increasingly claustrophobic relationship.

The Cullen that Jensen met was an iconic figure. His quotes were reported across the press. But he was also violent and unpredictable. In turn, Jensen was both ruthless and naive - and in Cullen he found a subject he could not hope to understand. He was overwhelmed by him, desperate to know him and trapped by his own hubris.

Cullen lied to Jensen. He shot him in the leg with a shotgun. He threw him from a motorbike. In time, it became clear that the publishing deal itself was a lie. There was no contract with Thames and Hudson. Yet Jensen continued researching and writing the book, for four years. The question of why is a central one of the film.

His health failing, Cullen was arrested in possession of multiple illegal firearms and faced a sentence of fifteen years. Spared jail under the mental health act, he had one final interview with his biographer.

These are true events, told almost entirely in real dialogue taken from Erik's shorthand notebooks and Adam's own writing and recorded interviews. *Acute Misfortune* is not a traditional film biography of an artist, but a questioning of that biography and of the circumstances that led to its writing. It is a closely researched film that reveals an iconic artist and an acclaimed journalist in unsparing detail.

It is a film about theft and the commerce of theft, the instability of lies and the consequences of a flawed contract; and about coming through a relationship to find meaning in its wake.

TECHNICAL INFO

Production Year: 2018
Country of Origin: Australia
Duration: 90 mins
Shot On: Arri Alexa XT
Aspect Ratio: Academy - 1.37:1
Sound Format: Dolby Atmos
Format: DCP

PRODUCED WITH THE SUPPORT OF

Screen Australia
Melbourne International Film Festival Premiere Fund
Film Victoria
Create NSW
Soundfirm

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Acute Misfortune is the first feature of writer / director Thomas M. Wright, an acclaimed film actor and award-winning theatre maker. The film was co-written with Jensen, a Walkley-award winning journalist and the founder and editor of The Saturday Paper.

The film features AACTA award winner Daniel Henshall (*Snowtown, Babadook*) as Adam Cullen and Toby Wallace (*Romper Stomper, The Turning*) as Erik Jensen. The supporting cast includes Genevieve Lemon (*Sweetie, Top of the Lake*), Gillian Jones (*The Rover*) and Max Cullen (*Sunday Too Far Away*), portraying his own cousin, Adam's father, Kevin Cullen.

Acute Misfortune is an intense, intimate and bold narrative cinematic work set against a backdrop of actual events, with two profound lead performances at its core.

Filmed in late 2017 and early 2018, over seven weeks, on a budget of under 1.4 million dollars, *Acute Misfortune* was produced by Arenamedia, Plot Media and Blackheath Film with major production investment and development support from Screen Australia, in association with Melbourne International Film Festival Premiere Fund, Film Victoria and Create NSW.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT – THOMAS M. WRIGHT

Acute Misfortune is the story of a relationship - a relationship of warmth, respect and intensity - and of control, tension and violence. Researching, writing and making this film, over four years, has been a consuming and endlessly revealing process.

The book on which it is based is a shattered biography, a work of journalism that is precise and unrelenting. It was our task to unravel it into a narrative feature, though *Acute Misfortune* is not a film about repeating the conclusions of the book on which it is based. The film questions those conclusions, reframes them, situates the biography itself as a product of the relationship and not - as the lining of the book says - *a story told without judgement*.

It is a film about theft and the commerce of theft. Adam steals Erik's investment and his work. Erik steals Adam's narrative. In a larger frame, Adam's art is a form of theft - appropriating images, styles and themes. Journalism is theft, or at least a trespass. And of course this form of cinema, biographical cinema, is theft.

I did not want to fall into the pattern of a traditional biography of an artist - and allow easy conclusions or resolutions in the film. I wanted the audience to be drawn in and hurtled forward by the ideas and contradictions of the characters - as the film falls toward its inevitable conclusion: the death of Adam Cullen at the age of 46.

I wanted to address the difficult relationship between these men and the shifting definition of what it is to be a man in this country - a place that was, and a place that is becoming - a culture that is restlessly redefining itself.

Adam was a distinctly Australian artist and for a time his work was incisive, associative, breathtaking in its insights into this country and its culture. Through the rights holders of the Cullen estate we have had unprecedented access to his archives, work, journals, private photographs and personal materials - many of which appear in the film.

I am indebted to them and to the former partners, fellow artists and associates, medical professionals and family members who shared their thoughts of these men during this time.

ABOUT THE BOOK

'Acute Misfortune - The Life and Death of Adam Cullen' - was named among the Best Books of 2014 by The Australian, The Australian Financial Review, The Guardian, The Sydney Morning Herald, The Sunday Mail, The New Daily and The Age. It won the Nib Prize for Literature and was shortlisted for the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards and the Walkley Book Award. The book was described as "fierce and spellbinding" by David Marr. Helen Garner said of the book 'The painter's rush to self destruction is matched all the way by the writer's calm mastery of his story', and Christos Tsiolkas described it as "a teasing and complex ode to a man who defied attempts to categorise him or to understand him. Jensen's portrait dares to be both beautiful and ugly - that is, he is both tender and forensic"

"A marvellous, propulsive, intelligent read"

— **CHRISTOS TSIOLKAS**

"The terrible force of the painter's rush to self-destruction is matched all the way by the writer's calm mastery of his story"

— **HELEN GARNER**

ABOUT ERIK JENSEN

Erik Jensen is the founding editor of The Saturday Paper. He is the author of *Acute Misfortune: The Life and Death of Adam Cullen*, which won the Nib Prize for Literature and was shortlisted for the Walkley Book Award and the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards. The book is based on his experiences living on and off with the artist Adam Cullen. Erik's journalism has been widely published, in the Monthly and New Statesman and elsewhere, and has won the Walkley Award for Young Print Journalist of the year and the UNAA's Media Peace Award. He has worked as a writer and editor at The Sydney Morning Herald. Erik has written for the sitcom *Please Like Me* and a forthcoming stage play for Malthouse Theatre, adapted from Maxine Beneba Clarke's memoir, *The Hate Race*. He is directing a song cycle based on the poems of Kate Jennings for the 2018 Melbourne Festival, and is the author of a short biography of Jennings to be released in October.

DANIEL HENSHALL as Adam Cullen

Alongside Thomas M Wright's feature *Acute Misfortune* Daniel Henshall will next be seen in *Skin* alongside Jamie Bell and Vera Farmiga, and in the Foxtel mini series *Lambs of God* opposite Ann Dowd and Essie Davis.

He recently appeared in Bong Joon-ho's *Okja* with Tilda Swinton and Jake Gyllenhaal, which premiered in official competition at the 2017 Cannes Film Festival, and opposite Scarlett Johansson in Rupert Sanders' *Ghost in the Shell*.

Daniel is best known for his work in Justin Kurzel's critically acclaimed, award winning feature *The Snowtown Murders*. His performance, among other honours, earned him the AACTA Award for Best Actor.

His other film work includes Jennifer Kent's psychological horror *The Babadook* (New York Film Critics Circle Award for Best First Feature) Kasimir Burgess's debut feature *Fell*, the apocalyptic thriller *These Final Hours*, and the romantic comedies *Not Suitable For Children* and *Any Questions From Ben?* For the past four years Daniel was a lead in AMC's drama *Turn: Washington Spies*, his other television work includes the critically acclaimed drama *The Beautiful Lie*, *Rake* and *Devil's Dust* among others.

TOBY WALLACE as Erik Jensen

Toby played the lead role of Kane in Stan's miniseries *Romper Stomper*, based on the hit film by writer-director Geoffrey Wright and will soon appear in virtual reality short film *Dream Channel*, from Cobbstar Productions.

In 2016, he played the lead in Nicholas Verso's coming-of-age feature *Boys in the Trees*, which premiered at both the Venice and Toronto International Film Festivals. Other film credits include the adaptation of Tim Winton's book *The Turning: Cockleshell* (directed by Tony Ayres), *Galore*, from director Rhys Graham, which premiered at the Berlin International Film Festival, and *Return to Nim's Island*, opposite Bindi Irwin.

In his professional debut in Kriv Stenders' *Lucky Country* (aka *Dark Frontier*), Toby was honoured with an Australian Film Institute Award Nomination for Best Young Actor, at only 13 years old. Other credits include the young Michael Hutchence in the INXS miniseries *Never Tear Us Apart*, *Surviving Georgia*, *It's A Date*, *The Man that Got Away*, and several short films including *The Last Time I Saw Richard*, which was one of the Dendy Short Film Finalists in 2013.

Originally from the UK, Toby emigrated to Australia as a child. His professional stage debut was in Opera Australia's production of *I Capuletti* and in 2016 he performed in the Melbourne Theatre Company's production of *Skylight*.

ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

THOMAS M WRIGHT

Thomas M. Wright is an award-winning director, producer, writer and production designer and the co-founder and director of The Black Lung Theatre and Whaling Firm.

As an actor he featured in the Australian films *Sweet Country*, *Balibo* and *Van Diemen's Land* - and in Jane Campion's series *Top of the Lake*, for which he was nominated for Best Supporting Actor at the US Critics Choice Awards. He also featured in the Universal / Working Title feature *Everest* based on the 1996 'Into Thin Air' tragedy; and *HHhH* - the adaptation of the 2008 Priz De Goncourt winning novel.

He played lead roles in the US Sony/WGN Series *Outsiders* and in the Peabody Award-Winning FX series *The Bridge*. His performances were acclaimed across the press and cited as the standout of both series by *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter*.

Wright created The Black Lung Theatre and Whaling Firm in 2006 at the age of twenty two. The company was the inaugural resident company at Malthouse Theatre the following year and were at the forefront of a changing of the guard in Australian theatre, receiving multiple awards and critical acclaim. They were named one of the most influential independent companies of the past decade.

He has directed and co-directed productions for many of Australia's main-stage companies and State Festivals and was the producer, production designer and director of *Doku Rai*, a large scale Major Festival Initiative / Australia Council production created over four years, with a three- month rehearsal process on the remote island of Atauro off the coast of East Timor.

Doku Rai came about after Wright formed a close relationship with the chief military advisor to the President after filming *Balibo*. The government facilitated him flying in and out of the country over a number of years, at the end of which *Doku Rai* was created with a group of Timorese artists, a number of them former resistance fighters.

Doku Rai played to resounding public and critical acclaim over a two year period. It was named one of the productions of the year by *The Age*, *Time Out*, *The Australian*, and *The Monthly Magazine*, and was nominated for production of the year at the Green Room Awards. The film sequences in the production were co-directed by Wright with acclaimed film director Amiel Courtin-Wilson.

Acute Misfortune is his first feature film.

ABOUT THE PRODUCERS

ARENAMEDIA

LIZ KEARNEY AND ROBERT CONNOLLY

Helmed by acclaimed Producer / Director Robert Connolly and supported by a dedicated team of inspired practitioners, Arenamedia is an innovative Australian screen business that creates and markets Australian content with a social and political focus across a variety of platforms.

With over 20 years experience, Arenamedia's credits include the award-winning feature films *The Boys*, *The Bank*, *Three Dollars*, *Romulus My Father*, *Balibo*, *The Turning* and *Spear*. Their 2015 production, *Paper Planes* starring Ed Oxenbould and Sam Worthington, screened at the Toronto, Busan, London and Berlin Film Festivals and reached over \$9 Million at the Australian box office.

Following *Spear*, the company has just completed David Wenham's directorial debut *Ellipsis*, the second feature film to come out of *The Turning's* compendium of short films, and a new Indigenous TV series *The Warriors* for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC).

PLOT MEDIA
JAMIE HOUGE AND VIRGINIA KAY

Plot Media are known for producing diverse works that span multiple formats and collaboration across disciplines, injecting a unique voice into the Australian arts and media landscape.

Producers Jamie Houge and Virginia Kay have over 15 years experience in producing feature film, documentary, commercials, websites, interactive, digital and online media.

They have produced four narrative feature films within the \$1-3mil budget range, across the US and Australia, including *Sugar Mountain* (2016), *The Lookalike* (2014), *Blinder* (2013) and *Mine Games* (2012). Virginia also line-produced feature films *CrawlSpace* (2012), *Hail* (2011) and *Summer Coda* (2010). Previously, their short film *If I Dance Will It Keep Me Warm* (2011) premiered as an Accelerator short at the Melbourne International Film Festival.

Recently they collaborated with Australian director Nicholas Verso (*Boys in the Trees*), and The Woolshed, on the respective film components of *The Westbury Faery* (2017). *The Westbury Faery* won the international Shorty Award for Best Use of Augmented Reality in 2017. It was a digital experience creatively directed and designed by Plot Media, which was awarded production funding through the Canada-Australia Interactive Digital Media Incentive—a Canada Media Fund and Screen Australia initiative, with additional support from Film Victoria.

Plot Media were awarded a place at the esteemed London Production Finance Market at BFI London Film Fest 2016 (supported by Film Victoria, BFI, and the MIFF 37° South Market), for feature film, *Switchblade Electric* with Jesse O'Brien. Currently they are also developing feature documentary, *The Mighty Apollo*, with director Nick Barkla, with the support of Screen Australia and Film Victoria.

CREDITS

CREW

Director THOMAS M. WRIGHT
Writers ERIK JENSEN AND THOMAS M. WRIGHT
Producers JAMIE HOUGE, VIRGINIA KAY, LIZ KEARNEY, THOMAS M. WRIGHT

Directors of Photography GERMAIN McMICKING and STEFAN DUSCIO
Production Designer LEAH POPPLE
Costume Designer SOPHIE FLETCHER
Hair and Makeup Designer HOLLY ANDERSON
Sound Recordist STEVEN BOND
Sound Designer CHRIS GOODES, CAS, MPSE
Composer EVELYN IDA MORRIS
Editor LUCA CAPPELLI
Casting by JANE NORRIS

CAST

Adam Cullen DANIEL HENSHALL
Erik Jensen TOBY WALLACE
Kevin Cullen MAX CULLEN
Carmel Cullen GENEVIEVE LEMON
Ruth GILLIAN JONES
Photographer STEVE MOUZAKIS
Gareth Jones HENRY BECKETT
Ben JAMES BELL