

OFF COUNTRY

1 x 96min - feature doc

Directed by John Harvey & Rhian Skirving



LETTERBOX FILMS



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OFF COUNTRY

One line synopsis

OFF COUNTRY follows the lives of seven Indigenous students as they leave home to spend a year boarding at one of the oldest and most elite boarding schools in the country, Geelong Grammar School.



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One paragraph synopsis

OFF COUNTRY follows the lives of seven Indigenous students as they leave home to spend a year boarding at one of the most elite boarding schools in the country, Geelong Grammar School. Wrestling with their conflicting identities as students move between boarding life and home life, **OFF COUNTRY** creates a historic record of one of Australia's key Indigenous education pathways and a complex portrait of what it is to be an Indigenous child in Australia today.





Sunny Handy - Year 12
School Captain

Chloe King - Year 7

Tahlia See - Year 10

Xyz King - Year 9

Jaycee Sellings - Year 12

Marley McNamara - Year 10

Zoe Walters - Year 12

Introducing the characters

OFF COUNTRY

Synopsis, 1 pager

Every year over three thousand Indigenous children leave their families to attend boarding schools around the country. Children as young as twelve spend up to six years away from home returning only for school holidays. Supported through partnerships between scholarship organisations, private schools and the government, competition for these scholarship places is tough and many families consider being granted a place like winning the lottery.

OFF COUNTRY follows the lives of seven Indigenous students as they leave home to spend a year boarding at Geelong Grammar School in Victoria. Among the most prestigious schools in the country Geelong Grammar taught the likes of Prince Charles, Malcolm Fraser, Dame Elisabeth Murdoch, Kerry Packer and Helen Garner, to name a few.

Capturing life from inside the boarding house, on the sports field and in the classroom **OFF COUNTRY** follows the 2020 school year as the pandemic throws boarding school life into chaos. Forcing students home for much of the year, the long lockdown brings the sacrifices required to complete a boarding school education into sharp focus.

Our students grapple with family tragedy, mental health struggles and identity issues as they move back and forth between boarding life and home life. In candid interviews they share their views on racism, stereotypes, the national anthem, Australia Day and Captain Cook. A voice of youth rarely heard these young Indigenous students offer a fresh and revealing perspective into their Indigeneity.

OFF COUNTRY combines personal observational storytelling and set interviews to canvas a broad range of issues. Driven by the students' stories and told entirely in their own words **OFF COUNTRY** creates a historic record of one of Australia's key Indigenous education pathways and a complex portrait of what it is to be an Indigenous child in Australia today.

OFF COUNTRY

Directors' Statement

John Harvey and Rhian Skirving

As an Indigenous filmmaker I am passionate about sharing Indigenous stories that reflect the diversity of experiences we have as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

When we speak about our future, we often look to our Elders to see the path that they have created for us to follow and for our young people to maintain the legacy to keep home fires burning into the future.

When Rhian Skirving and I initially started talking about this concept we were hesitant in thinking the film may appear to promote elite boarding schools as the only solution to transforming Indigenous education. It didn't help that the school was the country's most prestigious private school - Geelong Grammar School. But initial assumptions and personal biases can lead us astray.

It's not a film intended to incite debate about public versus private education. Or even whether or not sending kids away to boarding school is the right or wrong thing. There is no data that can conclusively speak to that. Our intention was simply to capture the experience of these particular young Indigenous people as accurately as possible, knowing that this is only one school and one school system under the microscope.

Our focus was very straightforward, what is the experience like for these kids and their families? The more we spoke and the more we listened, we realised that in fact this would be a film about the hopes, aspirations, fears and challenges of a diverse group of Indigenous families.

As adults and parents we often talk about the needs of our young people, but rarely do we get to sit in their world and really listen to them. Rhian and I spoke a lot about the film creating a space for the young people to tell us how it is for them, in their own words. As we began researching, meeting the students and their families, it became clear that they not only walked proud in the path set out by their Elders, but were also navigating the impacts of colonial policies across generations. Each family story highlighted the impact of one or more government policy, be it stolen generation, forced removal from country, the mission system and intergenerational trauma. The impacts from these policies are present in the childrens' lives before they enter the school gate, and, as we discovered in the making of the film, for many it ultimately affects their ability to make the most of the education opportunity before them.

As the young people in the film remind audiences, there is a common misconception that all Indigenous people live in the remote outback and look and live a particular way. The reality is, the highest Indigenous population lives in

Western Sydney. And most Indigenous people today live in urban and rural areas around the country. Our students represent this reality. It became clear that not only did OFF COUNTRY refer to their leaving home to attend boarding school far away, but also to their connection to their homeland and culture. The desire to be on country was different for each child but important to them all.

In capturing their experience, Covid certainly threw our production model into complete chaos. Having set out to capture a year inside a boarding school we were shut down weeks into filming and all our characters were sent home. Not only were we not free to visit them, we did not know when they would return to school, if at all. There were many sleepless nights during this period, how would we ever capture the experience of these wonderful kids, if we couldn't get to them? We were locked out of their home states, unable to enter Missions, the school was empty, and gates were shut, at times the film seemed all but lost.

But 2020 finally threw us some tiny morsels.

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Directors' Statement - cont.

We were slowly able to get to our characters' homes one by one. I am based in Queensland and could eventually visit our Qld and NT families. Rhian in Victoria could visit the others, grabbing opportunities between regional and city lockdowns. But even when we had the joyous news Victorian schools could reopen, half our characters could not return due to quarantine rules.

But Covid created opportunity too. The long Victorian lockdown gave the students longer at home, some enrolling in local schools and all having extra time with their families. This change in their routine allowed families to reflect and the sacrifices many were making to complete this education were brought into sharp focus. Such is the life of an observational documentary.

The master interviews, done in a studio, were a way to see our kids' faces and hear their voices uninterrupted. Many of the questions came from conversations had with students throughout filming. Conversations in which they told us their opinions on issues, or stories of what they face as Indigenous kids in Australia today. We

realised it is rare to hear the inner thoughts of Indigenous young people, especially articulated so clearly and with such wit, and that they had a LOT to say.

What became clear to us during our time spent with these incredible young people, is that yes, they want to seize the opportunities that have been hard fought for and carved out by their Elders. But also, it seems they want what schools and universities can't provide. They want connection to their culture, their people and their country.



OFF COUNTRY

Press Ideas and Contacts

Talent

Sandra Brogden

Geelong Grammar Indigenous Consultant

Sandra can provide a national context for discussions of Indigenous education and provide a context for the work being done at GGS and its approach to Indigenous education. Sandra has done the Reconciliation Action Plan for GGS and works at a policy and strategy level with the school and on a grassroots level with the teaching staff. She is outspoken, informed and has vast experience across all aspects of Indigenous education and policy.

Charlie Scudamore

Vice Principal of GGS, now retired.

Charlie has been in charge of the Indigenous program at Geelong Grammar for many years and has a lot to say about what is needed for a program to succeed. Not all programs are alike. He is open about the challenges, funding, and what he calls 'the education of the whole school' ie the non-Indigenous cohort. Charlie is a great talker and public speaker, full of passion and enthusiasm, highly entertaining. He can speak about the film, the kids, the program.



Charlie Scudamore

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Press Ideas and Contacts - cont.

Zoe Walters

Zoe has left school now and is enrolled in an Acting Degree at Queensland University of Technology. This was always her dream, as seen in the documentary. Zoe is very willing to be interviewed and would be excellent on radio or television. Zoe is from Alice Springs and her family still lives there. She can talk about life in Alice Springs, how difficult it was being so far away from home attending GGS as well as the opportunities opened up to her through attending GGS. Zoe is also very articulate and informed on bigger issues around Indigenous rights etc.

Jaycee Sellings

Jaycee is studying to become a primary school teacher in Melbourne and is happy to be interviewed. She also would be good across print, radio or television. She is a delightful young woman. Her family story at Lake Tyers Mission could be explored further. The history of Lake Tyers is not well known to Victorians and is one of the only missions in Australia handed back to the residents who were given freehold title to run it as a self managed trust.

Directors

John Harvey

E john@browncabs.com

PH 0406 687 919

Rhian Skirving

E rhian@letterboxfilms.com.au

PH 0416 011 105



Jaycee Sellings



OFF COUNTRY

The Team



Rhian Skirving

Director, Writer and Producer

Rhian is an experienced writer and director with a highly diverse body of work. Together with Lizzette Atkins, she produced the feature documentary **MY MOTHER'S LOST CHILDREN** (2017) for ABC and BBC Storyville, which premiered at Adelaide Film Festival 2017 and made the Walkley Best Documentary Longlist for 2018. Also with Lizzette she produced **OUTBACK RABBIS** (2018) for SBS's **UNTOLD AUSTRALIA**.

Rhian was co-writer/director of the AACTA nominated **MATILDA AND ME** (ABC 2016), story producer on the fixed rig series **KEBAB KINGS** (SBS 2015) and writer/co-director for SBS's **CHANGE MY RACE** (2013).

In 2012 Rhian developed and was series producer of the 5 x 1hr series **OUTBACK TRUCKERS** for Discovery/7Mate and developed and field produced AACTA nominated **THE MAN WHO JUMPED** (SBS) the story of Woomera Detention Centre.

Rhian produced and directed the intimate theatrical documentary **ROCK N ROLL NERD** (2008) charting Tim

Minchin's meteoric rise to comic superstar. She wrote and directed **THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS** (ABC 2007) exploring the science of altruism and compassion, winning the Eureka Prize for Science Journalism.

Other writer/director credits include archaeology series **SHIP-WRECK DETECTIVES** (ABC/Discovery), **THE SNAKEBUSTER** (Animal Planet) and **SHIPWRECK DETECTIVES II** (ABC/Nat Geo).



John Harvey

Director, Writer and Producer

John is a writer, director and producer across screen and stage and is the Creative Director of BROWN CABS.

In film, John wrote and directed the short drama **WATER** (ABC, MIFF, Adelaide FF, ImagineNative - Toronto). His second short drama **OUT OF RANGE** (SBS / Film Victoria) has screened at Melbourne International Film Festival, Tampere Film Festival (Finland), and St Kilda Film Festival, winning Best Indigenous Short Film. John is the director and co-producer of online series **KUTCHA'S CARPOOL KOORIOKE**. John directed half hour

documentaries **LIGHT FROM THE SHADOWS** (ABC Artscape) and **MENNY & THE BUNDAROOS** (ABC) and several short form documentaries for NITV.

John produced Stephen Page's (Bangarra Dance Theatre) ground breaking feature film **SPEAR** (Toronto International Film Festival & Adelaide Film Festival). He was a producer on the ABC TV series **THE WARRIORS** (Arenamedia). He produced the chapter SAND for the omnibus feature film **THE TURNING** (Berlinale, MIFF) and has produced 6 Indigenous short films for screening at international film festivals and broadcast.

In theatre, John wrote and produced the highly acclaimed premiere season of **HEART IS A WASTELAND** (Brown Cabs / Malthouse Theatre). The work most recently being reimaged by Rachael Maza (Ilbijerri Theatre) for Rising Festival (Melbourne) and touring nationally. John co-wrote 2020 Sydney Festival hit **BLACK TIES** (Ilbijerri Theatre / Te Rēhia) with the work selling out in Sydney, Melbourne, Perth and Auckland. John is writing **THE RETURN** for Malthouse Theatre. John directed **A LITTLE PIECE OF HEAVEN** (Orana Arts / Brown Cabs) for 2019 Yirramboi Indigenous Arts Festival (Melbourne). John produced **MY LOVERS BONES** (Brown Cabs / Footscray Arts Centre) for 2014 Melbourne Festival and numerous works for Ilbijerri Theatre as the General Manager.

John was commissioned to create a multi-channel installation work, **CANOPY** for the Australian Centre for Moving Image (ACMI), Melbourne. He created a large 40m mural with images from CANOPY for Swanston St, Melbourne for Metro Tunnel. John collaborated with Torres Strait Islander visual artist, Ricardo Idagi creating the video element of Idagi's 2011 New Media Telstra Award Winning work.



Charlotte Wheaton

Producer

Charlotte started her career in the UK and over the course of a fifteen year career worked with BBC, History, Discovery, National Geographic and PBS and has Produced and Line Produced both series and one-offs.

Since relocating to Australia she has worked as a Producer and Production Executive delivering to all major channels and Melbourne International Film Festival, including **BODY-LINE: THE ULTIMATE TEST** (ABC) and **COLLINGWOOD: FROM THE INSIDE OUT** (MiFF/ABC) Charlotte oversees the Factual slate at GoodThing Productions and has two films and a limited series completing in 2021.

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The Team - cont.



Nick Batzias

Producer

Award winning producer Nick Batzias has almost twenty years' experience in the film industry having worked across acquisition, distribution and production. In 2018 he founded GoodThing Productions after over 15 years at Madman Entertainment and as Head of Madman Production Company. GoodThing focuses on the production of Narrative and Factual projects for screens big and small. Recent projects include AACTA award winning **THE AUSTRALIAN DREAM, BELOW** and **2040**.

In addition to **NITRAM**, 2021 will see the release of narrative feature **NUDE TUESDAY**. And feature documentary **OFF COUNTRY**.



Virginia Whitwell

Executive Producer

Over a 25-year career, Virginia has become a highly experienced producer of factual and scripted content. Hailing from the UK, she has worked on numerous productions all over the world. Her extensive production experience includes projects for Warner Bros, HBO, Lucasfilm, EON, 20th Century Fox and Universal. She is the Head of Production and Partner at GoodThing Productions and has produced many projects including AACTA winning documentary **THE AUSTRALIAN DREAM, 2040, ALL FOR ONE** and **BELOW**. She is currently producing feature comedy **NUDE TUESDAY**, an official NZ-Australian co-production with Firefly Films and the Justin Kurzel feature **NITRAM**.



Tom Zubrycki

Executive Producer

Tom Zubrycki is an Australian filmmaker whose award-winning documentaries have for the past 40 years mapped the nation's social and political landscape. He has written and directed 14 features, the most prominent include **KEMIRA – DIARY OF A STRIKE** (1984), a blow by blow account of an underground strike by 31 miners during the height of the economic recession, **HOMELANDS** (1992) the story of a refugee family torn apart by their conflicting desire to return to their homeland, **BILLAL** (1995) which traces the impact on the life of Lebanese family disrupted by a racially motivated attack, **THE DIPLOMAT** (2000) following freedom fighter Jose Ramos Horta in the final tumultuous year of his long battle to secure independence for East Timor, **MOLLY & MOBARAK** (2003) a story about the complicated friendship between an Afghan asylum-seeker and a young woman in a country town, and **THE HUNGRY TIDE** (2011) about Kiribati woman Maria Tiimon alerting to world to the plight of her sinking Pacific homeland.

Besides writing and directing his own films Tom has produced another 21 documentaries with mainly early career directors. These include **EXILE IN SARAJEVO** (1996) which won an International Emmy, **STOLEN GENERATIONS** (2000), **MAD MORRO** (2009), **THE SUNNYBOY** (2015), **DOGS OF DEMOCRACY** (2017), **UNDERMINED – TALES OF THE KIMBERLEY** (2019, EP), and **THE WEATHER DIARIES** (2020)

In 2009 Tom was presented with The Cecil Holmes Award for his ongoing career support for directors. A year later he received the Stanley Hawes Award in recognition of outstanding contribution to documentary filmmaking in Australia.

Tom taught documentary for 8 years at UTS, and has ran regular master-classes at the Australian Film, TV and Radio School. In 2019 Currency House commissioned him to write a Platform Paper about the state of documentary in Australia. His monograph **THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF AUSTRALIAN DOCUMENTARY** called for increased government funding and strict quotas for Australian content of online streaming platforms.

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The Team - cont.



Dale Cochrane

Director of Photography & Drone photography

Dale Cochrane is a documentary cinematographer based in Melbourne, Australia. His career has taken him across the globe, from the jungles of Borneo to the halls of Cambridge to the majestic landscapes of Antarctica.

His credits include the feature documentary **THE LEADERSHIP**, filmed across five continents over four years, a film exploring the systemic bias and challenges facing women in science. Directed by Ili Barè, Dale won a silver tripod award for the film at the 2020 Australian Cinematography Society awards.

Dale's television DoP credits include **CATALYST** (ABC), **OUTBACK RABBIS** (SBS), **DATE MY RACE** (SBS), **CODE OF SILENCE** (ABC, Walkley Award winner) and **WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE** (SBS).

Dale is also director and chief pilot at drone company Raven Air, with more than eight years' experience and credits including Netflix, National Geographic, BBC, MIFF, CBS and all Australian networks.



Mark Atkin ASE

Editor Feature Doc

Mark Atkin is an Australian editor and filmmaker. Over the last 30 years he has edited all types of productions including feature films; **ONLY THE BRAVE, MALLBOY, NOWHERE BOYS: BOOK OF SHADOWS, FORCE OF DESTINY TELEMovies, SECRET BRIDESMAID'S BUSINESS** and Saved – television drama series; **SEACHANGE, MDA, THE SLAP, NOWHERE BOYS, MRS BIGGS, GLITCH, SAFE HARBOUR, STATELESS, CLICKBAIT** and **FIRES** – documentaries; **THE EDGE OF THE POSSIBLE, IMMIGRATION NATION, JABBED, FIRST CONTACT, DNA NATION, HARRY SEIDLER: MODERNIST, FILTHY RICH & HOMELESS, ADDICTED AUSTRALIA** and **OFF COUNTRY** - TVC's; most recently for **WORKSAFE** and **GMHBA**.

After graduating from Swinburne's Film and Television School in 1981, Mark worked in many facets of filmmaking; as a sound recordist and sound-editor, camera assistant and operator, script writer, full time lecturer at Swinburne and as a director/producer of music videos and documentaries.

In 1990, editing became the primary focus of his career.

In 2004, Mark was accredited by the Australian Screen Editors Guild. In 2012, he received an Australian Screen Editors award for Best Editing in a Television Drama for **THE SLAP**. In 2014, Mark won an AACTA award for Best Editing in a Television Series for **MRS BIGGS** and again in 2020 for **STATELESS**.



Helena Czajka

Composer

Award-winning composer Helena Czajka blends classical training with sound design and electronic textures to form a distinctive style that can be heard across her TV, film, documentary and commercial projects.

After graduating from the Sydney Conservatorium of Music with First Class Honours in Composition, Helena moved to Tokyo to work as an Orchestrator for renowned film composer Yoshihiro Ike.

Since returning to Australia, she has composed the music for award-winning productions including the Walkley Award-

winning documentary series **REVELATION** (ABC, In Films), the Emmy and AACTA award-winning children's show **BLUEY** (ABC Kids/BBC Studios, Ludo Studio), and the AACTA Award-winning TV series **AUSTRALIAN SURVIVOR** (Network Ten, EndemolShine).

Helena's composing achievements include making history as the first ever children's album to top the ARIA music charts with **BLUEY: THE ALBUM** in 2021, winning Best Original Score at the Florence Film Awards for her score for **REVELATION**, and receiving an APRA Screen Music Award nomination for Best Music in a TV Series for her work on **AUSTRALIAN SURVIVOR**.

The releases in 2021 that Helena composed for include **BLIND AMBITION** (Third Man Films, Madman Entertainment), which receives its premiere at Tribeca Film Festival 2021, in competition in the feature documentary section, the feature documentary **UNSEEN SKIES** (In Films, Participant Media) and drama series **TAILINGS** for SBS. Previous documentary work includes the series **THE QUEEN AND ZAK GRIEVE** (Foxtel's Crime and Investigation Channel, In Films), **MAKING MURIEL** (ABC, In Films) and **LOOK ME IN THE EYE** (SBS, EndemolShine). Her feature film work includes scoring **CHASING COMETS** (Jason Stevens Productions) and the international film festival hit **BEAST** (Third Man Films, Madman Entertainment) in 2015.

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Credit Block

SCREEN AUSTRALIA PRESENTS IN ASSOCIATION WITH NATIONAL INDIGENOUS TELEVISION,
MELBOURNE INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL PREMIERE FUND AND FILM VICTORIA
A BROWN CABS, LETTERBOX FILMS AND GOODTHING PRODUCTIONS FILM
“OFF COUNTRY”

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY DALE COCHRANE, EDITOR MARK ATKIN ASE

ORIGINAL MUSIC HELENA CZAJKA

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS VIRGINIA WHITWELL TOM ZUBRYCKI

PRODUCED BY CHARLOTTE WHEATON NICK BATZIAS JOHN HARVEY RHIAN SKIRVING

DIRECTED AND WRITTEN BY JOHN HARVEY & RHIAN SKIRVING





OFF COUNTRY

Key Investors





LETTERBOX FILMS

goodthing
productions

Production Contact Details

GOODTHING PRODUCTIONS PTY LTD
42 GLASSHOUSE ROAD
COLLINGWOOD, VIC 3066
AUSTRALIA

charlotte@goodthingproductions.com.au
+61 (0)435 425 457

Australian Distributor

MADMAN ENTERTAINMENT
LEVEL 2, 289 WELLINGTON PDE SOUTH
EAST MELBOURNE, VIC 3002
AUSTRALIA

+61 (0)3 9261 9200