

Hugo Weaving liked this film so much he stripped naked for it

By [Karl Quinn](#)

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Geraldine Hakewill and Mark Leonard Winter didn't have to travel far while making *The Rooster*, which was just as well given they found out she was pregnant as production was about to begin.

The film was shot on their bush property in the Hepburn district, 90 minutes north-west of Melbourne. But that also meant there was nowhere to hide for the husband-and-wife actors, who stepped behind the camera on a feature for the first time

"I wouldn't necessarily recommend the dynamic of producer-director for every marriage," says Hakewill, who is best known for her starring turn in *Ms Fisher's Modern Murder Mysteries*. "When you have to say no to someone's dreams that can cause tension." "Naivety was our friend," says Winter of the experience. "It was new for both of us. I'd never directed before; Geri had never produced a feature before. For me, it makes it so special that we've shared this, that we have created this together, that we've done it as a family. I'm just really grateful to her."

The Rooster, which has its world premiere at the Melbourne International Film Festival next month, is an impressive debut. The tale of an unlikely friendship between Dan (Phoenix Raei), a country cop grieving the death of a childhood friend, and Mit (Hugo Weaving), an alcoholic hermit who lives in a shack deep in the bush, it is by turns as dark and brooding as the landscape in which it is set, and as full of light and hope as a sun-dappled spring day.

The full MIFF program was launched on Tuesday night. The festival opens on August 3 with *Shayda*, the acclaimed debut feature from Iranian-Australian Noora Niasari that won the Audience Prize at Sundance in January.



Male bonding: Hugo Weaving & Phoenix Raei. / PHOTOS CREDIT: SARAH ENTICKNAP /

Acting husband & wife: Geraldine Hakewill & Mark Leonard-Winter.

Winter was in the thrall of a deep depression when he started work on *The Rooster* screenplay in 2019. There were a number of factors at play in his mental state, he says, but chief among them was the death of his friend Damian Hill, an actor who responded to his frustration at a lack of meaty parts by writing and producing his own work. He died, aged 42, in September 2018, the day before filming was due to start on the modern-day take on Shakespeare's *Measure For Measure* that he and director Paul Ireland had written. Winter, who had originally been cast in a supporting role, stepped into the part Hill had been due to play when the delayed production started a week or so later.

"I was really lost in a mental health battle," Winter says of that period. "It's like time stands still, you're not really you, and you're not really seeing the world the way it is any more. Obviously, a lot of people go through this, and battle with this, and it's an extremely difficult period in someone's life. And I guess what I was trying to do was to create some meaning out of what is, essentially, a meaningless time, when you're so lost in a cloud of chemical imbalance. I was trying to construct something with the film where I could make some peace with that and find some beauty in that, I guess."

Though it comes from a dark place, *The Rooster* is far from grim. The friendship that develops between the men is bursting with life, joy and hope. Weaving – who rages against the world, dances naked to free-form jazz, and flops face first into a muddy lake – has rarely, perhaps never, been better. "I wrote that role for Hugo and very nervously slipped him the first draft," says Winter. "And he was so encouraging and warm and told me to keep going." The couple had each separately worked with Weaving, Winter in four films, Hakewill on stage. "So, it was very much a creative collaboration that was a bit deeper than just a director approaching an actor," says Hakewill. But even with the friendship factor, securing one of the country's most in-demand actors for a low-budget film to be shot in the middle of nowhere in the depths of winter wasn't straightforward. So when Weaving said he had a narrow window between shoots, the couple jumped at it – even though they didn't yet have the money to make it. "That was a blessing in a way because I think we'd still be waiting for funding," says Winter. "We just had to make it, and again I used Dame as a mantra. I just kept saying, 'Dame did it, Dame did it'."

Now, the film is about to play in front of an audience for the first time, and Hakewill and Winter could not be happier.

"I have to say, while it was partially born in a lonely place, the film was just incredible in making connections and lasting friendships," says Winter. "And now we're going to share it, at MIFF, with all these people coming together to experience that. I just think that's so incredible and special."



Managed by **MIFF Industry** with Victorian Government funding since 2007, the MIFF **Premiere Fund** celebrates 15 years supporting the co-commissioning of diverse Australian '*stories that need telling*' into films for MIFF debut—with the first 95 winning almost 200 awards from over 500 nominations and nearly 750 festival selections globally.