

The Australian

Clear-eyed lens gives complex stories focus

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- From: The Australian
- November 23, 2011 12:00AM



Cameron Doomadgee's sister Valmae Aplin interviewed in *The Tall Man* at the Palm Island cemetery.
Source: Supplied

LOCAL production company Blackfella Films has come to expect a certain amount of angst following the release of its acclaimed films.

This week, it is reaction to the film about a death in custody on Palm Island, *The Tall Man*. Before that, the focus was on its studious history of indigenous culture, *First Australians*. But last month, when production on the telemovie *Mabo* was halted and the crew was moved off Murray Island, controversy had come early to Darren Dale and Rachel Perkins's burgeoning production company.

"Other people would shoot this film on the Gold Coast," Perkins says. "But that's the thing about Blackfella Films. We try and bring a sort of cultural integrity to our work and we try and engage the community."

In the case of *Mabo*, that included using actual locations, casting locals as themselves and the involvement of many members of Eddie Mabo's family in telling the tale of the man who led a High Court challenge to recognise native title.

"But we encountered some violence towards the crew and we felt that was unacceptable," Perkins says. "So even though we worked with the community for about three years leading up to the project and had sign-off from them, you cannot cover off everybody.

"There are troublemakers in every community and this guy was fuelled by a bit of grog and we drew a line and said we're not going to put up with it, basically."

Such are the occasional travails of filmmaking in regional Australia. Dale and Perkins sigh at rumours circulating out of Townsville that *The Tall Man* "did the wrong thing on Palm Island", although viewers of *The Tall Man* could only marvel at Blackfella and director Tony Krawitz's balanced take on this volatile story. Similarly, Perkins laments how one actor called their series *First Australians* propaganda.

"People do love gossip and being negative but we feel like, in the process of making stories that go out to millions of people, we overcome that," she says. "We just try and focus on the outcome and so far it's paid off."

Dale says the company's consultation with local communities can be "really intense" but adds: "One thing is we're really clear and honest about what we want to do."

"I don't think people are under any illusions about the approach we're taking to the film. And that transparency allows us to tell the stories we want to tell."

Those stories have incredible resonance. The SBS series *First Australians* is one of the top-selling local DVDs for the past two years and remains the highest earning local film through lending copyright organisation Screenrights. *Mabo* will be a key title for ABC1's schedule next year, as will *Redfern Now*, Blackfella Films' six-part indigenous drama series co-developed with Cracker's creator Jimmy McGovern.

The public broadcaster is already looking at a second series.

But as they are indigenous stories, do their projects have vested interests pressuring them to tell stories in particular ways? Perkins, also the director of *Bran Nue Dae*, accepts that people feel ownership of these stories.

"The thing we do is try and go for truth," she says. "We tell the *Mabo* story in its complexity, and the complexity is he wasn't the most popular guy around and he came in for a lot of criticism from his people."

"And that's that, but we want to tackle that complexity because otherwise we're making just boring, boring stories. It's the complexity that makes it interesting."

The stresses of telling these stories is more than outweighed by the "privilege and responsibility of doing a story we feel absolutely compelled to make", Perkins says of *Mabo*.

Blackfella Films' output has focused on indigenous films for reasons beyond their cultural heritage. "There may be other stories we feel similarly about but no one has been telling these stories, so we feel we've got a lot of ground to catch up," Perkins says.

The Tall Man, adapted from Chloe Hooper's award-winning book of the same name, is a telling primer on a sorry chapter in Queensland history.

It moves the story beyond the sterile confines of accusatory or defensive press conferences, the prism through which most people viewed the tale of Cameron Doomadgee's death.

It can be a dispiriting film to watch in the way it highlights the shortcomings of not only the justice and political systems but also the self-governance of a community such as Palm Island.

Dale spent three months on Palm Island during the course of a year. "It is an incredible, beautiful place but there's incredible tragedy there, high rates of suicide, of violence and high rates of alcohol abuse," he says.

"But, on a positive note, people were so engaged and open and willing to engage and share this story. The great thing about the film is you really felt the indigenous people got more of a go and understand some of the complexity of their lives and that is the thing for me that makes the film incredibly powerful."

Unfortunately, the Queensland police reneged on their participation two weeks into filming. Dale and Perkins agree it was a shame as the difficulties of policing on remote communities are valid issues. "We wanted to show how terrified those officers must have felt," Perkins says. "I thought back to the torment on Murray Island, our crew was scared, but that was nothing compared to 150 blackfellas turning on police when there's only four police stationed on the island."

That said, Perkins adds, the police couldn't have been more supportive during their Murray Island troubles shooting Mabo. "So it is a complex situation."

Dale says Blackfella Films doesn't have a credo as such, but there are "a couple of things we all agree on. "We want to make things of extremely high quality," he says. "We want to reach the widest possible audience. We really do want to reach a lot of people with these films."

Perkins says feeling challenged is key. "Is it more challenging than the last project?" she says.

"And do you want to have dinner with the people you'll be working with?" Dale adds.

"That's actually top of the list," Perkins says with a laugh.

The Tall Man is in cinemas now. Mabo and Redfern Now will screen on ABC1 next year.
