

Imogen Thomas about EMU RUNNER

“Emus have a curious nature, which worked to our advantage”

Nine-year-old Gem Daniels lives in a remote Australian town. As she copes with her mother's death, Gem finds solace in the company of a wild emu. This heart-warming story plays out against the challenges that come from living in a small and isolated community. *“It was a privilege to share these people's lives. I think that is a gift for all of us”* says director Imogen Thomas.

This year's Zlin Film Festival 'Discover and Explore' section paid particular attention to films about cultural minorities, with EMU RUNNER as a perfect example. A film made with the local community in an isolated Australian outback town named Brewarrina.

Imogen Thomas: Brewarrina is a solid 10-hour drive from Sydney. A bus goes there only a few times a week. From my very first visit in 2003 I felt a strong sense of 'community' about the people that lived there. It is a place of incredible natural beauty and a place of significant First Nation

Culture. It is also a place where there is great poverty and social disadvantage. EMU RUNNER was made with and for the Brewarrina community. The process of making the film has been equally important as the end result. It was a platform to bring people together, to tell a story that reflected their lives near the banks of the Barwon River, and the rich culture of First Nations People.

Is this community a geographical thing or does it go beyond geography?

Thomas: It is the traditional land where tribes came together to partake in ceremonies as well as to enjoy the abundance that the river had to offer. Sadly, due to a savage drought and poor government management, the river is in very bad shape. This has a huge impact, as without water these people's very existence is at risk.

You found advisors to help you with the script?

Thomas: The script was developed in close consultation with members of



the Brewarrina Indigenous community, in particular Frayne Barker, the Director of the Indigenous Preschool. It was through her encouragement that I set upon telling the story from a child's perspective. We both felt it would be the most compelling entry point to examine the impact of loss and grief. We wanted a story that showed the depth of a child's sorrow as well incorporated the rich cultural connections to a country, as that is where solace and healing happens.

The film surprises the audience with introspective moments, often close-ups of objects of nature: a flower, a

tree, a feather, a cloud...

Thomas: The whole story rests on the natural world. It was important to not only explore the hardships faced by Gem but to also celebrate the beauty of her world. In many ways the country, with all its elements, is a character too. It has a voice, such as the bird song, the cricket's pulsating hum and the babbling sounds of the river. The lessons Gem takes from nature help her to carry on after her mother's death. I hope that instilling a love for nature might be a way to engage audiences to be more open to the wisdom of our First Nations people who have been far more successful as protec-

tors of the natural world.

The landscape is often so dry that it hurts the eye.

Thomas: I began principal photography of EMU RUNNER in August and September of 2017, the Australian winter. Brewarrina was in drought at that time and it still is today. In the middle of the day the temperatures reached 48 degrees - it was crippling heat. This meant we could only work with the young cast in the early hours of the morning, for a limited time. Even with such harsh climatic conditions I was amazed at how the natural world revealed its strength and resilience.

What is the reason behind Gem's fascination for emus?

Thomas: The emu is Gem's totem animal. An indigenous person's totem animal is passed down from their mother. It also means they have a responsibility to watch over the animal. The first time I saw an emu I was completely mesmerised. Flightless these birds may be, but ultimately, they are a symbol of speed and grace. They are always moving forward, as Gem must. It is the male emu that is responsible for raising the young, just as Gem's father finds himself responsible for his children.

How did you work with the emus on set?

Thomas: We shot at an emu farm. Emus are very unpredictable, but they do have a curious nature, which worked to our advantage. We did not work with just one emu, rather we worked in a fenced paddock where there were hundreds of birds. Trying to keep just one bird in our frame was always a challenge.

How realistic is the picture of failing governmental institutions that you paint?

Thomas: EMU RUNNER is a fiction film. I have made dramatic choices that I hope will inspire discussions about how governmental institutions can work better with Indigenous communities. I am fully aware that Australia has a long way to go, but I believe it was important that EMU RUNNER delivered audiences at the end of the film to a place that offers hope and the potential for change.

There is a lot of running to be done for Gem. Was it physically challenging for young actress Rhæ-Kye Waites?

Thomas: Rhæ-Kye is naturally athletic. Even so, filmmaking requires doing several takes of a particular action, and in some instances, we were limit-



ed, as Rhæ-Kye would get very tired. This was the case for the final race so this meant the crew had to be on top of their game. EMU RUNNER was made with a micro-budget and a small crew. It demanded of all the crew a greater level of inventiveness due to the limited resources we had at our disposal. We were very fortunate that Rhæ-Kye had an incredibly supportive family.

Over the years cinema has been utterly important to carry out the stories of Indigenous people in Australia.

Thomas: I would like to believe cinema has the ability to affect real social change. What cinema can do extremely well is be the launching

pad for a conversation about ideas. Hopefully that conversation will lead to something positive and constructive. Watching EMU RUNNER, I hope audiences come to understand the adversities which arise from living in a remote community as well as marvel in the richness of our First Nation's Culture. What we hope to deliver for the community, ultimately, is bringing the story back to them, so that they can see themselves reflected up on the screen.

—
Gert Hermans