

Jub Clerc about SWEET AS

“Highlighting the generational trauma of my people”

Jub Clerc is a Nyulnyul and Yawuru film director and screenwriter from Australia. This year, her feature film debut SWEET AS won the Crystal Bear for Best Film in the Generation KPlus section at the Berlinale. *“A film that touched us by virtue of the personal stories of the characters and its impressive backdrops. You can see how various characters grow together”, according to the jury’s citations.*

SWEET AS tells about 15 year old Murra (Shantae Barnes-Cowan) who - thanks to the connections of her uncle - takes part in a photo excursion for at-risk-kids, run by Mitch (Tasma Walton) and Fernando (Carlos Santos Jr.), through her Aboriginal homeland, which turns out a life-changing experience. Murra starts to grow a passion for photography and realises that she must tell her own story in an ever-changing world. Just like director Jub Clerc did. *“My people never had a written language. We danced, painted and sung all our stories from the first sunrise, so I guess storytelling is in my blood.”*

How did you find this particular story?

Jub Clerc: Liz Kearney and I were constantly chatting about our first feature together. After we’d done THE TURNING (anthology drama film based on a collection of short stories by Tim Winton, which premiered at the Melbourne Int’l Film Festival in August 2013) we were like... *“what’s next?”* The next few years we banded around ideas until one night I got a call from Lizzy: *“What about that photo safari story you told me years ago?”* It was like a lightning bolt going off in my head. I burst out laughing and said: *“Omg, of course, that is the story!”*

Was your initial motivation to show the breath-taking beauty of the landscape in the ancestral territory of the first-nation people in Western Australia?

Clerc: My initial motivation was to highlight the generational trauma of my people and the disparities of people from low socio-economic backgrounds. We were simply so lucky that the story originated from all through



the incredible Pilbara country.

Are all the main characters except Fernando, Kylie and Sean part of the first-nation people?

Clerc: Yes, Murra, Elvis, Mitch, Uncle Ian and Grace are all first-nation. And so am I. I am Nyul Nyul and Yawuru from the Kimberley in Western Australia.

Which helped you to find and gather these great actors?

Clerc: I personally know most of the actors, I am even related to some of them, but the rest of the amazing cast we found through a tricky Covid-19 restricted process on zoom, ha!

Also the film’s soundtrack strongly refers to your first-nation background.

Clerc: In the music selection process Indigenous artists were a priority. It was so hard finding the right songs because the film has a kind of mind





of its own! It really felt like that. We'd lay song after song over scenes and the film would throw them back at us in a kind of tantrum! It was pretty brutal choosing songs up until almost the picture lock moment, but they are amazing and it was worth the care of finding the right tunes. I LOVE our soundtrack!

Who is Sylvia, to whom you dedicated your first feature film?

Clerc: Sylvia is my most beloved mum, who has passed away. Contrary to Murra in the film, I had a profoundly amazing relationship with her.

SWEET AS won the Innovation Award at the Melbourne Int'l Film

Festival, the NETPAC Award for Best Film from the Asia/Pacific region at the Toronto Int'l Film Festival and was nominated for an Asia Pacific Screen Award for Best Youth Film. How do you explain that your film was not only understood and appreciated in Australia, but also worldwide, even by young people in Berlin?

Clerc: This is something I can't explain. I was so amazed how well the film translated to such diverse audiences. Could it be the universal story of hope and resilience? Maybe that's what has connected the audiences.

With this Crystal Bear as ultimate recognition.



Clerc: Winning the Crystal Bear was absolutely mind blowing; I couldn't quite believe what was happening! The Berlinale is such a prestigious festival and winning the Bear seemed to shift the conversations around projects being offered to me. It's a bit overwhelming, in a good way.

The comment under Murra's last picture, which she took of the farewell to the participants at the end of the trip, was "Mabu Liyan". What does that mean?

Clerc: Good well-being is the actual translation, but *Liyan* encompasses everything that makes up your soul, spirit, heart, emotional and physical well-being.

Have you already started working on a new project?

Clerc: I'm about to go into pre-production on the political drama TOTAL CONTROL, starring Deb Mailman and Rachel Griffiths for Blackfella Films. Very exciting

—
Uta Beth