

PANEL THREE: ILLUMINATING THE DARKNESS: SHINING A LIGHT ON FORGOTTEN HISTORY THROUGH FILM

The Furnace is a film that illuminates the forgotten history of Australia's 'Ghan' cameleers, predominantly Muslim and Sikh men from India, Afghanistan and Persia, who opened up the Nation's desert interior, and formed unique bonds with local Aboriginal people. It shines a light on a crucial yet little known chapter of Australia's history, celebrating the cultural diversity of early pioneers.

We convened a special screening and conversation about the importance of shining a light and giving visibility to the multiple and diverse histories of the Australian landscape.

PARTICIPANTS

Roderick MacKay is a writer/director from Perth, Western Australia. With a formal training in visual arts, Roderick is a highly visual storyteller. In 2020, Roderick's debut feature film, *The Furnace*, premiered as part of the official selection for the 77th Venice Film Festival. Roderick's short films include *Trigger* and *Factory 293*.

Affy Bhatti is passionate about bringing positive change to Australian communities and is a Board member of several not-for-profit organisations, supporting causes such as providing scholarships to refugees, the preservation of Islamic art, and making Australia's most recognised leaders more accessible to professionals. Affy has previously held advisory roles for the Australia Day Council of WA, celebrating the extraordinary contributions of Australians to society and for the WA Minister for Citizenship and Multicultural Interests Multicultural Advisory Committee. Affy provides trusted advice to private and public organisations assisting with strategic and complex initiatives, navigating uncertainty to achieve their objectives successfully.

Rosie Sitorus is an emerging writer based in Western Australia. She has an established creative practice in spoken word performance, music and comedy, and works as a linguist with rural, regional and remote Aboriginal communities. Much of Rosie's writing reflects on her relationship with her late mother, a great influence on her love of language, as well as her search, as a 'third culture kid', for place and belonging in contemporary Australia.

Gary Bonney is an educator and storyteller and has undertaken a number of roles in the Kimberley and the Kalgoorlie/Boulder area that directly relate to working with government and non-government sectors in regional and remote areas of Western Australia. Gary's experience has included work in secondary education, with at risk youth, young people in residential settings and with Indigenous people in the Goldfields and Kimberley regions of Western Australia. Gary has a passion for working in community with marginalised people, and educating others to increase awareness, access, social equity and understanding. Gary is an early career screenwriter and works with Revelation Film Festival and was Associate Producer for *The Furnace*.

Harjit Singh is one of the founders of the Australian Sikh Heritage Association which documents and shares history on the early contribution of Sikhs in Australia. ASHA recently completed a first of its kind 'Australian Sikh Heritage Trail' that serves to mark an early Sikh cremation site within a public park and create a meeting place for diverse communities. Harjit is also one of the founders of Turbans and Trust, which has generated over 10,000 one on one conversations between strangers to build an understanding of respect and equality. Harjit's passion for civil rights has driven him to work on close to a hundred civil rights matters across Australia, building understanding without confrontation wherever possible. Harjit has delivered speeches on his view of Australia's

multiculturalism at various forums and conferences. Passionate about turbans and his faith, Harjit's goal is to make Australia the most Sikh aware country in the world. Harjit wants the turban to be recognised as being just as Australian as the Akubra! Harjit recently worked as the primary Sikh Consultant on the film, The Furnace that involved him consulting on the aspect of the film including the script, names of characters, cultural appropriateness and period costume.

EDITED TRANSCRIPT

Affy: My name is Affy Bhatti. I'm a Muslim born in England to Pakistani parents, and I've been living here for about 19 years. When the cricket is on, I get really confused. This movie means a lot to me. It quietly highlights that minorities, Muslim Sikhs, Hindus, as well as obviously the Indigenous people of this land have been in Australia for a long time, and some of these minorities have been here for 150 years and integrated with the traditional owners of this land and as well as other Australians. These communities made significant contributions, enabling critical infrastructure to be developed and major economic change, as well as social benefits to this country.

Writer and director Roderick McKay has honoured these communities by weaving these important but forgotten histories of the cameleers as a central theme, and for that, I thank him. I also helped to raise some investment in this movie for those reasons, because this story was important to me. And these hidden stories need to be told.

I'd like to invite the other panel members to introduce themselves. Roderick, Gary, Harjit, Rosie, come on, join us.

Roderick: I'm Roderick McKay. I'm the writer, director and one of the Executive Producers on The Furnace. I'm Perth born and bred, and this film has been the last six years of my life. I devoted those six years to this project for all the reasons that Affy has very articulately taken us through: that this is important history that needed to have a spotlight shone on it.

It always struck me as a huge historic omission that it was not widely known. It seemed like very rich terrain for a story in that it always felt inherently cinematic. As a filmmaker, I was really excited by delving into that world.

Gary: My name is Gary Bonney, and I'm the Associate Producer. I'm originally from the Goldfields, so when Roderick told me about the story, I knew a fair bit about it. It was pretty easy for me to come on board. And it was an amazing experience. We've grown up knowing all the stories about the cameleers and not really from a research perspective, just stories that families have told us, so we are pretty proud of what we came up with.

Rosie: My name is Rosie Sitorus. I'm the coordinator at the Irra Wangga Language Centre in Geraldton. It seemed like such an immense undertaking to do a film like this, and carry these stories, they're in all of our families. I should clarify that I'm not Aboriginal, I often appear that way. And I work in that space. I'm Dutch and Indonesian heritage, and my Dad, who is Indonesian, has stories of our family working on boats and coming down to Australia, that had been passed down through the generations. Those stories are really common around this whole region.

I think it's really important that we're talking about invisible history, I talk a lot about invisible history at the Language Centre... these kinds of films illuminate that history. And despite the fact that I'm here, almost, I feel like talking on behalf of the community, which I would never ever seek to do, it is an immense privilege to be an advocate and stand alongside the community.

I also want to acknowledge Mr Ollie George, who if you saw the end of the credits, was so kindly acknowledged by Roderick and the filmmakers, for the language documentation work he did.

Harjit: My name is Harjit Singh. I'm the primary Sikh consultant on this film. I've spent my last 10 years trying to get people to buy into an idea which is turbans are just as Australian as an Akubra. It brings a little tear to my eye every time because there is this authenticity. And that for me was my role.

Affy: My first question is going to go to you, Gary, you know, it's coming - the red dirt to the red carpet. Tell us about, you know, how it felt like to get to the prestigious Venice Film Festival. And did you meet anyone more famous than Roderick?

Gary: Last year The Furnace was accepted into the Venice International Film Festival. And we were lucky enough to go across to Venice during a global pandemic. It was a bit of a bizarre experience because I've never been on the red carpet before. It was a crazy experience having massive television cameras just come straight up to you. The first thing is just trying to settle the nerves. After that was, it was fine. But um, yeah, we were standing up next to Cate Blanchett.

Affy: Roderick, why did you care about making a movie like this?

Roderick: I've grown up in Australia. And even as a blond haired, blue eyed white guy, I haven't always felt in sync with the conventional prevailing ideas of what it is to be Australian and in my own minute way have grappled with that. And I think about how that experience must be for people that don't look like me. And it obviously is immensely amplified.

And so, it leads me to talk about how I stumbled upon this history, which I was actually researching for another story set in the Gold Rush, which I thought was a pretty fertile terrain historically for stories. I wasn't actually looking for history on the cameleers, because of course, I'd never heard about it before.

I just had no idea; it wasn't taught in high school or university. And it was in a book by emeritus professor of history, Geoffrey Bolton, who had actually given acknowledgement to these men, and I turned the page and there was this fella in traditional garb, flanked by camels, but in the otherwise very familiar, somewhat tired, colonial outback setting, and I had no idea what I was looking at. But I was instantly very excited by this image, because it was so fresh and striking and unique. And upon researching deeper into who this fellow was, and how many there were in Australia at the peak of the cameleer population. And the role that they played in nation building. And the special relationship they shared with our First Nations peoples, you know, my brain just sort of broke that I hadn't heard of this. It was really just that sense of a huge historic omission that needed to be corrected.

And being incredibly excited about delving into this little-known world and using it as a bit of an experience for me to go on a journey of discovery personally. My Dad's worked in Iran; he's lived in Iran. We had an Iranian woman living with us for months, when I was quite young, and my folks have worked in South East Asia extensively. And so, I've brushed up against that world just enough, to have that other layer of empathy. So, when I did stumble upon this, it really did resonate.

Affy: Rosie, I've got a question for you. The movie featured the Badimaya language. And I understand that the last true speaker of this language passed away before production started. I know that yourself and Godfrey played a role with this language in helping the actors learn this to

some extent, extinct language. And Roderick, you've helped them preserve that forever on film. Rosie, tell us more. Why is it important to preserve indigenous language?

Rosie: How long have you got? Where to start with that. I worked with Mr George, that's how I refer to him out of respect since I started working with him back in 2012, when I was a young student studying at Uni and knew nothing, was an absolute blow in. And he was so giving of his knowledge. And I was kind of like, how can someone who's lived an incredibly diverse and difficult life, he was a Stockman for many years, he then raised his six children, and was also one of the last carriers of his language. Having someone like that be so giving and generous with someone like me, I've just come up from Uni, and I don't know anything about this language, please tell me the word for you.

That kind of generosity of spirit and knowledge really resonated with me and with other people, whoever interacted with this old man, you meet those few people in your life who really make an impact on you and an impact on the world around them. And you can see that he was one of those people.

And once I heard about film, I thought there's no better language. Actually, there was a Badimaya man up here on this stage last night. And I was like, how cool. You know, Badimaya taking over the museum. And because this old man, he'd always talked about wanting to share his language with the world. Well, I said someone wants to put your language in a place over in New York. Where's New York, you know? Oh, it's overseas. All right, far away. Let him put up there. That sounds really good. Yeah, yeah. All right. Let's put it there.

And I think it was really fitting that this was the language that was shared. Godfrey Simpson, he's really the star of this show. He was the one who did all the training with everybody and coached and sought guidance from his elders and made sure he was doing the right thing. He led the consultation with the community. And Godfrey is only what, 45 or something like that. And he is a leader amongst men.

And I think he's just an incredible person. He was a real link between the old man and this process, and both he and I went and saw the film preview, and we both felt that that old man was there, seeing this film.

When we went to the viewing in Mount Magnet there were so many kids there, so many families there. We were sitting with these old ladies who know this language, we call it sleeping, we don't want to use you know, harsh language like extinct, but a lot of people will use that and that's what happens - but sleeping, now you've all learned something else. We call languages sleeping because they are just at rest and they will come back, and they are coming back, and they're on that screen. And heard in Venice now.

And these are ladies are sitting there and Trevor said something, and I just heard one of these ladies go like real loud, kind of cackle and afterwards I said, "what are you laughing at" and she just said, "I just couldn't believe that I was hearing this fella talking my language on that screen".

And I was like, that's it you know? I don't need to say anything else.

(video plays)

Affy: Harjit, you had a really hands on role with this movie scripting and styling turbans, as you give some insight into earlier, as well as the names of some of the characters. Now one of my favourite characters in this movie was Jundah, and it broke my heart. I've seen the movie five, six times, it

broke my heart what happened to him. But can you tell us a little bit about how Jundah's name was picked? And what it means? What the name means? And a little bit about the real-life Jundah?

Harjit: Yeah, sure, absolutely. It's Jundah. And that's the main thing in the film they call him Jundah, you know, and that's just Aussie's butchering names, because that's what we do. Let's come back to the original point, which is, you know, I'm known as Harjit. And my name isn't Harjit, it's actually 'Harjeet'. But, you know, Aussie's butchered it so much that I call myself Harjit. It's crazy, right?

Anyway, so Jundah is actually Jundah, actually flag bearer. I gave a bunch of names to Roderick because he had all these characters, and he had all these names, which are really names that have appeared in the last 10-20 years. I said let's try to get something back in the day, and he chose Jundah. And I was like, that's incredible. And when I started reading the script, once again, it was quite moving.

Jundah was a real-life cameleer, he had the largest camel train, or camel cart in Australia at the time, it was pulled by 18 camels, it was essentially a semi-trailer. And this camel cart exists. If you want to go see it, it's real, I'm not just making this stuff up, you can go to Wiluna. And this cart is there, just past Meekatharra. And he was here from 1890s to the 1920s. He operated this camel cart. And unfortunately, when cars started appearing on the road, there was no need for camels. And these camels that had basically pulled generations and opened up the outback were no longer needed, and Jundah was actually found with a shotgun in his mouth. And he cut all his camels and let them go. And so, the reality is a really sad story. And for me to see Jundah and his legacy live on in such a positive way, rather than the negative way that we see, you know, things like suicide, was just very moving.

It was one of many very serendipitous moments that we did have over the course of the shoot, I think that coincidence of choosing the name, Jundah, and what it meant, without knowing.

Affy: Just on visuals now, I've lived in the Pilbara for a number of years in the past and I know how many flies can be there. I don't know if you were able to see Jay Ryan towards the end, you know, in the last scenes. But he had a tonne of flies in his eyes. My question to you Roderick is, were they real, or was it CGI?

Roderick: You must think this film had a really big budget if you think we have a CGI fly department! I can assure you they were very much real. Jay Ryan does deserve all the credit for just taking all of those flies right in the eye. There was a bit of unspoken competition among the cast for who could sort of just endure the most flies and just drink it in and just, you know, throw it back out as performance. I think Jay won. Yeah. It genuinely does make that moment more impactful that he's just this man possessed. Staring into the eyes of this stranger and looking for answers after his son's been killed and not finding them. And, yeah, the flies really do add to it. So that was definitely one of the instances where we weren't cursing the flies over the course of the six weeks shoot out there.

Affy: Gary, a question for you. You're also a teacher. And I know that a school study guide has been developed. My question to you is, do you think hidden histories like this one should be incorporated into our national curriculum?

Gary: Yes, absolutely. For sure. It touches on topics like Australia's national identity, who is who, and who comes from where, and what it means to be Australian. So, absolutely. We always teach our kids our history, and it's been passed on to me from my parents. And working in schools. There's a big yearning for more knowledge about who we are and where we're from, and all the people who make up our country.

It makes things a bit clearer, I guess. The true part of our history, because, you know, we always start with that history in general, but we always start with Aboriginal perspectives. And, and then it flows on from there. It's really important because our kids, our identity is attached to our land, and in our language. Tell them our history and then tell them the stories of everyone who came after, it just builds a bigger picture of Australia as a whole.

Affy: Roderick, this one's for you. This movie clearly shows those hidden histories that we've mentioned, from obviously very different perspectives. Many of the audience won't know that the movie's IMDb page was attacked by trolls. Can you tell us a little bit about this?

Roderick: I guess it's not really all too much to say, or really worth dwelling on. We did get sort of an onslaught of very low scores within an impossible amount of time. It was a bot system. It was clearly nefarious.

And we did end up putting the case forward to IMDb and getting them to correct it. But it just speaks to how much this film or any, you know, illuminating of this kind of stuff does just challenge the conventional idea of how Australia was formed. And by who, and if anything, it means we're getting somewhere, stirring the pot, so we elicit that response. It's a little bit of a badge of honour, but mentioning this draws to mind an amazing experience that we had.

We had a Q&A screening in Melbourne and present at the Q&A we had Osamah Sami, who plays Balochi cameleer Majid and what was remarkable at the end was a woman in a hijab stood up and just said, I don't have any questions, I just want to talk about how much this film means to my family.

And she went on quite an amazing monologue, saying this incredibly moving stuff. Because on one side of the family, she was descendent of a Balochi cameleer from this time in history, who operated in Mount Magnet, and on the other side of the family, she was Badimaya. And it was the most remarkable moment for the audience, who even at the end of the film might be a little bit dubious about, well, is this real? How come I've never heard of this before? And then this woman stood up and it was the best affirmation you could possibly ask for, and for Osamah who played this Balochi cameleer, it was incredibly moving for him.

Affy: I want to invite a call to action from each of you, in terms of what the one thing you want people who have now watched this movie and listened to you talk tonight? What's the one thing that you want someone to take away tonight? And to do? And I might start with Harjit?

Harjit: I think there's a t-shirt at the back that I was looking at. And it says something about belonging, right? It says blogging is, and there's a big space for you to fill it in. And for me, this film makes me feel like I belong. And why does that mean so much to me? Because I've spent a childhood growing up in Australia. And unfortunately, many a time being made to feel like I don't belong.

Does that mean that we have to belong to a nation, I'm not saying that either? But it feels nice to belong. Whether it's part of your family, or it's with brothers and sisters that are up on the stage, or whatever clan it might be, it sucks to not belong, there's never a moment, which goes by where I don't think about the worst moments in my life. And that was where those words hurt the most.

And my call to action is, everybody in this room, they don't do that. But we must get out there, we can never stop stopping those words, and the people who do push that feeling of not belonging. And we must stop that.

Affy: Thanks. Thank you. Rosie, what about you?

Rosie: I'd also like one of those shirts. I love free stuff. I've had a lot of conversations about this recently, you know, I'm a woman of colour, who grew up reasonably privileged, or not, I mean, in the scheme of things, single parent, we lived in Homeswest housing, but you know, I'm articulate, and I don't take any shit, you know, and I'm here. And I have an incredible amount of privilege and things that enable me to do and advocate and articulate ideas and concepts and beliefs, that many of the people that I work with, that I live with, that are my friends don't have, be they Aboriginal, be they, you know, non-Aboriginal, whoever they are.

I think that everybody has a platform, every single one of you people here tonight has a platform. And you know, I have like an Instagram account, it's really lame, you know, I have a few friends on there. And the number of them who have engaged with me and asked me questions about things that I thought everyone just knew, about culture, about language about whatever, is really quite astounding.

I think that everybody here needs to be that person for their friends. You know, when I walked in here tonight, I sat down over here with my friends, and I was looking in this cabinet here. And those sticks that you can see there were actually taken from Mount Magnet in the 1890s. And I was like spinning out. I intend to take a photo of that and share that knowledge with my friends, and the coincidence that I'm here talking about this with Roderick in this film and sharing that with those people and those friends and sharing that knowledge.

You know, if you have learned something tonight from any of these panellists from the film, from each other, your job is to go away and be that person who shares that information. I'm sorry, I'm soapboxing. Because if you aren't that person, then who? If not now, then when, you know, you have to not just take up space, but make space. That's it.

Affy: Thank you, Rosie. And Gary?

One of the things when Roderick approached me about the story of the film, is that if anything could come out of this film, it's a discussion. And so, what I would say is have the conversation with family and friends. Tell them about the story and it's good to let people know, I don't think you should underestimate the level of connections of friends that you have. Because I think we're at a point now where we really have to focus on things that bind us rather than divide us. So, if anything, having a discussion with family and friends and spreading the good word.

Roderick: We all did the best job we possibly could in making this film and trying to represent all of these different religious, cultural and ethnic groups. It's quite a big undertaking, and I think we did an okay job. But nonetheless, this film does merely scratch the surface of who the cameleers were, how deep that relationship they have with Aboriginal people ran and still runs today. And so, if this film can do anything, it can be a catalyst for you to go on your own journey of discovery about this history, find out more, get Hanifa Dean's books and read them, and many other fantastic authors who you can get so much more out of than in this film, as to who the cameleers were and what their experience in the colonial frontier was like. So over to you guys.