

PRESS KIT

A film by Ivan Sen

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Short synopsis:

a brutal crime, a rookie cop out of his depth stands alone between two worlds, where the mystery lies just below the surface Mystery Road ...

One paragraph synopsis:

Indigenous cowboy detective Jay Swan returns to his outback home town, to solve the murder of a teenage girl, whose body is found under the highway trucking route out of town.

Alienated from both the white dominated police force and his own community, including his teenage daughter, who he discovers is connected with the murdered girl, Jay stands alone in his determination to fight back for his town and his people.

Mystery Road Synopsis:

Jay Swan has recently returned to his outback hometown to take up his posting as a Detective with the local police force. Jay is assigned his first major case, to investigate the brutal murder of a teenage Aboriginal girl, Julie Mason. Her body is discovered in a drainpipe under the main trucking highway out of town.

Jay's early investigations are hampered by a lack of trust from the Aboriginal community. He grew up as a local Aboriginal lad, but he left and went to the city to become a Detective. He has recently returned to his troubled hometown with worthy intentions to help his people. However as a Cop, he finds himself ostracized from the community as he struggles to follow the trail left by the victim. Jay's search for clues is also hindered when he questions some of the local White people about the crime. He is a cop caught between two worlds.

Jay's enquiries soon lead him to his own teenage daughter, Crystal. She lives in town with his exEwife, Mary. Crystal is starting to mix with the wrong crowd and is getting into drugs. Jay feels guilty for losing touch with her and is concerned about her wellbeing. Even his estranged daughter doesn't trust him and won't reveal what she knows about the dead girl.

Jay's investigations lead him to uncover a major drug lab operation out of town. But he runs into Constable Roberts and Johnno of the Drug Squad, who have the lab under surveillance. Johnno warns Jay not to interfere with their investigation.

Jay's boss, the local Police Sergeant, encourages him to close the case and move on. But Jay cannot let it rest. He checks the missing persons file and finds another teenage girl, Nellie Dargon has been reported missing. He follows her trail and soon develops a possible connection with the murdered girl.

The stakes are raised when Jay suddenly stumbles across another girl's battered body, Tarni Williams. She was previously question by Jay and was a close friend of Jay's daughter. Jay feels his daughter is in increasing danger and is under enormous personal pressure to solve the case fast.

He finds out from a drug dealer informant, that a shipment of drugs, worth millions of dollars has gone missing after a bungled car theft in town.

Jay is threatened by Johnno and realises he is in much deeper than he thought and feels he cannot trust anyone, including the police.

Following a hunch that pays off, Jay decides it is time to fight back for his town and his people at a rendezvous out on the rugged plain at Slaughter Hill.

When it is all over and guns are silent, Jay now understands who Johnno really is and he returns to his town and his family, his journey has just begun....

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Mystery Road's seed was sewn in 2006 when I began developing an idea about an Indigenous cop, who was caught in the middle of the police establishment and the Indigenous community. And from that early time I had Aaron Pedersen in mind to play the role. But instead of the outback, the story was set in the inner city of Sydney. I remember bumping into Aaron one night and I mentioned the idea to him. But after that moment, I went onto a different project and it got pushed aside until I picked it up again in late 2011.

I've always been interested in the fringes of cultures, and especially drawn to the historical role of the "Turncoat". In Australia he was the Indigenous Black Tracker or the Native Policeman, and in America was known as the Native American Scout. He was a man employed to track, disperse, and even slaughter his fellow people.

Even though they were often engaged in areas of opposing tribal groups, the internal pressures of such an occupation must have been hard to comprehend, at times possibly being the ultimate identity crisis. This struggle of cultural identity is something I personally dealt with while growing up in a small country town, and have continued to explore it through Mystery Road.

Jay Swan is not just a modern day Turncoat. He is an empowered Detective, but the power still remains with the establishment, through his colleagues and superior. Unlike many of the past Native Police, Jay is not a stranger to the town in Mystery Road, although he sometimes feels that way.

Jay Swan makes Mystery Road more than just a mystery thriller. He provides a fresh and thought provoking perspective that is a struggle at every turn, and on many levels. He has moved out of the local public housing estate, and found himself a big house on the other side of town. But it has come at a cost. He has lost touch with his exEwife, his teenage daughter, and the community, which he is trying to make a better place. But perhaps only Jay believes it can be a better place. He is a loner, an archetypal cowboy, and a victim of his own wishful thinking.

There's a lot of thematic detail in Mystery Road, which I find difficult to articulate outside of the film. The film is full of my childhood and adulthood experiences. From the murdered young girl found under the highway, to the gunplay of the cowboys. The elements are largely drawn from my own country life experience. A few years ago, a distant cousin of my mother was found dead under a roadway in northern NSW. She had been stripped and brutally murdered. The police have seemingly done very little to bring her killer to justice and this has brought resentment from the local Indigenous community. I have also wanted a chance to express the gun culture from my childhood. In the country, people rarely go into nature purely for the nature

experience. There's usually always a reason for it. I grew up surrounded by a hunting culture. Although I didn't enjoy the kill, the most enjoyable part was the chance to connect with nature, to see and feel something beautiful, outside the harshness of the town.

Mystery Road is essentially a Murder Mystery thriller. It's a genre which doesn't get used so much these days in the cinema, though it is commonplace on television in many different forms. The challenge was to make it cinematic in every filmic detail.

We were incredibly blessed to have the involvement of many of Australia's finest and most talent actors. All of whom came on board with a love for a project they felt very strongly about. All of the actors were incredibly generous and supportive, as was every single crew member, for that matter. I involved Aaron Pedersen from the scripting stage, and that was the early beginning of our journey together.

In early preEproduction, the two of us travelled together on a location scout to Moree and then to outback Queensland. Aaron got a chance to see where his character came from, and to feel the dirt under his feet. It was a very important part of our preparation, and something an actor rarely gets to do. We agreed we were both in this thing together, and we couldn't do it without each other. We both believed strongly in the story and felt like our ancestors were watching over us as we made this film. So there was a very strong bond between the film, and us and that bond would get us through any of the more difficult parts of the shoot later on.

From the writing stage, I wanted Mystery Road to have a timeless, classical feel. A feel that was reminiscent of Hollywood films of the 60s and 70s which were more dialogue based and relied little on music and trickery. I wanted this film to have a quiet, almost trance like atmosphere, where the music became the words spoken from the characters.

In conversations with Aaron Pedersen, we constantly used the word precision. We were conscious that we weren't experimenting with this project. We wanted to be very precise in every aspect of making this film. I have made several experimental films over the last few years. This time it was about finding intricate beauty in every frame, every camera move being for the right reason, every word to be clear and convincing. I wanted to put the audience into the driver's seat, and allow them to enjoy every second of the ride. Mystery Road is a Murder Mystery film, but it is one with undercurrents, which can swirl around the feet of the audience, and enhance the generic experience.

PRODUCTION BACKGROUND

Ivan Sen's body of work marks him as one of the preEeminent voices in Australian cinema. His award winning films, such as *Beneath* Clouds and *Toomelah*, each with a powerful personal vision, have played at Berlin, Sundance and Cannes. He is, above all, a director, but also shoots, composes and edits his film.

Mystery Road marks a departure for Ivan and recent Australian films by other Indigenous filmmakers. It is boldly a genre film – a Murder Mystery, in the style of a Western, set in the magnificent landscape around Winton, outback Queensland.

Beyond the suspense and mystery, it also tells the personal emotional journey of Aboriginal Detective Jay Swan, as he grapples with what action he must take in order to decide the future of his town and his community.

Mystery Road offers a stunning cinematic vision as it follows the story of Detective Swan, played by Aaron Pedersen, assigned to his first case after his return to his hometown. Jay must investigate the brutal murder of a young Aboriginal teenager, whose body is found in a drainpipe with her throat cut.

"We consciously sat down together – me, the producers, the actors E and talked what we were going to do with this film," Ivan says. "We weren't trying to experiment. We were clear we wanted to do a very precise, thoughtEprovoking Murder Mystery film."

Aaron Pedersen says: "When the body of a young Aboriginal girl turns up, a story of mystery and intrigue, of politics and family, begins to unfold."

Jay Swan follows the trail throughout the town and it's outskirts, which eventually leads him to the awful truth.

"It's a story about a man protecting his community... it's about him standing up for his community," Aaron says, "Jay takes it on, and he accepts that responsibility."

Jay was a character created by Ivan Sen especially for Aaron Pedersen. Ivan first approached Aaron about making a film together more than eight years ago. His initial idea was to have Aaron play a cityEbased detective negotiating the attitudes of the predominantly white police force while trying to solve a murder.

But the idea evolved into a story about young girls in a country town, inspired by the unsolved murder of one of Ivan's teenage relatives, a distant cousin.

The film is set in a town evocative of Moree, in the outback, where Ivan spent much of his youth.

"This kind of town has lots of untapped stories. They are a melting pot because you've got Indigenous people from different areas all coming together into a community, mixing with the local white people as well as the local Indigenous people. So you've got all kinds of conflicts coming out of that," Ivan says.

"And then, in Moree, you've got the highway which runs through the town and plays a major role in the life of the town, including in drug distribution and prostitution. A town like this is big enough for people to hide and to get away with things you couldn't get away with in a smaller town. These towns are also very territorial. You get a series of microEcommunities where people might not leave a particular street or area for days. So people don't necessary know what's going on the other side of town."

It's this landmine of conflict and secrets that Detective Jay Swan must navigate in *Mystery Road*, along with the racism experienced by Aboriginal Australians and contempt of his own community towards the police.

"As Jack Thompson said to me, racism isn't confined to country towns in Australia, it's in the city too. And it is definitely inherent in the script because you have an Indigenous detective dealing with a white police force. It' not something I really highlighted, it's just something that's part of the subtext of this world, part of the dayEtoEday struggle of someone like Jay who works in a white bureaucracy," Ivan says.

"The black tracker is someone I've always been intrigued by and I guess I've always had a feeling for what they went through because I've always had to deal with the white world and the Aboriginal world together.

"As an Aboriginal detective, Jay is today's equivalent of the black tracker and it is such a conflicted role. You have to work within a white world and also a black world, but you're a kind of enemy to both. Everyone wants you to be on their side, but the reality is that someone like Jay is forever stuck in the middle."

In returning to the town as a Detective, this is a burden Jay fully comprehends. We see him as an outsider – living alone, separate from his police colleagues at a convivial dinner and viewed with suspicion by the Aboriginal community.

He's also a larger than life persona, with the filmmakers developing the iconography of a classic Western to flesh out the character of Jay and to bring a particular visual style to the film, as evidenced in wardrobe, location and production design.

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"Mystery Road is a Cowboy Western film, and that evolved through determining the look and the attitude of the lead character," says Jowsey. "Aaron was always going to be the lead in the film... and Ivan wanted Aaron looking like a cowboy. He wears a cowboy hat, he slings a pistol and he's wearing cowboy boots. Once that was established the film itself became a Western."

Mystery Road was shot in the small country town Winton, which is almost 1500km inland in western Queensland, and has a population of less than 1000. Winton is famous for being the town where Australia's most famous song, Waltzing Matilda, was written by Australia's most famous early poet, Banjo Patterson.

The landscape surrounding the town is extraordinary E bold and diverse.

"We went to Winton because of the beautiful landscape. From a purely aesthetic point of view, it is a place that has a lot of contrast in the scenery," Ivan says. "There are mountains, sand dunes and very flat fields, and you also don't have to go very far to travel from wide expanses with no trees, to mountains covered in trees, to towering blood red cliffs."

True Blood star Ryan Kwanten travelled home to Australia to take on the role of the roo shooter Pete.

"It was my first time out in that part of the country," says Ryan Kwanten. "I don't know what it was, but I felt very much at home there. I had a climb around the landscape and got in touch with the land. I felt a very strong affinity towards it."

Ryan is part of a commanding cast that combines local Indigenous talent and a "who's who of Australian acting." The allEstar line up also boasts such names as Hugo Weaving, Jack Thompson, Tony Barry, Tasma Walton, Damian WalsheEHowling, Robert Mammone and Samara Weaving.

"I think once word got out that the script was good, there was a real sense that people wanted to come and support Ivan," producer David Jowsey says. "It's absolutely lovely that major actors in Australia came out of their way, literally into the middle of the outback, to support our film."

"We're all part of the Australian film industry, we're all part of the Australian film making community," says Jack Thompson, "but what I really feel, is that we all want to be a part of this film."

THE CAST

Aaron Pedersen as JAY

Starring as Jay is Aaron Pedersen, who has had a significant presence in Australian film and television for more than a decade. Aaron originally studied journalist before he transitioned his career to his acting passion.

Aaron's television credits include *Jack Irish: Black Tide, Jack Irish: Bad Debts, City Homicide, East West 101, The Secret Life of Us, Water Rats, MDA, Grass Roots, BlackJack: Dead Memory* and, significantly, *The Circuit*, where he became one of the country's first Aborginal leads on television.

Aaron has appeared in the feature films *Australia*, *Bad Karma*, *Darklovestory J* for which he won a Melbourne Underground Film Festival Award for Best Actor E *Queen of Hearts*, *Saturday Night* and *Dead Heart*.

He has also directed his own short documentary, *My Brother Vinnie*, for which he received the Best Short Documentary award at the Melbourne International Film Festival.

Hugo Weaving as JOHNNO

Hugo Weaving joins the cast of *Mystery Road* as one Australia's most acclaimed screen actors. His impressive list of credits include the Australian and international feature films *Proof, Little Fish, The Matrix, V for Vendetta, The Lord of the Rings Trilogy, The Adventures of Pricilla, Queen of the Desert, The Hobbit Trilogy, Cloud Atlas and Happy Feet. He has won four AFI/ACCTA Awards for his performances and received another four nominations. Hugo has also been named an IF Award Living Legend and, with fellow cast members, won the Outstanding Performance by a Cast in a Motion Picture for The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King (2003).*

THE CAST

Jack Thompson as MR. MURRAY

Jack Thompson has been a mainstay on the Australian screen for over 30 years, with the accomplished actor considered one of our greatest ever. Jack's recent feature film credits include the Australian and international films *Mao's Last Dancer*, *Australia*, *December Boys*, *The Assassination of Richard Nixon*, *Yolngu Boy* and *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. Jack was at the forefront of the renaissance of Australian cinema in the 1970s with starring roles in such classics as *Sunday Too Far Away*, *The Man From Snowy River*, *Caddie*, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* and *Breaker Morant*. He won Cannes and AFI acting awards for the latter film. He has also received the IF Living Legend Award, the AFI (now AACTA) Raymond Longford Award and has been inducted into the Logies Hall of Fame.

Ryan Kwanten as PETE

Ryan Kwanten is one of Australia's bestEknown young actors on the international stage. After an early career break on television's *Home and Away*, Ryan was cast in the US series *Law & Order SVU*, *Summerland*, *New Girl* and, famously, *True Blood*. Ryan has also starred in the Australian feature films *Griff the Invisible*, *Not Suitable for Children* and *Red Hill*.

Tony Barry as SERGEANT

Tony Barry has been a regular in film and television as well as on stage for over 35 years. His recent credits include the television series *Rake*, *Paper Giants: The Birth of Cleo, Dirt Game* and *All Saints*. Tony's feature films include *Australia, Rest for the Wicked, Road to Nhill Home By Christmas* and *The Crop*.

David Field as MR. BAILEY

David Field has developed his reputation as one of Australia's top character actors over more than two decades. He has featured in films such as *Chopper*, *Two Hands*, \$9.99, The Oyster Farmer, The Nothing Men, Getting' Square, West and the upcoming The Rover. His television credits are many, including recent series such as Rake, City Homicide, The Circuit and Wilfred and his memorable performance in the acclaimed telemovie My Husband, My Killer for which he won the AFI Best Actor Award. David was awarded the Australian Centenary Medal in the 2001 Queen's New Years Honors List for his services to Australian society and Australian film production.

THE CAST

Damian Walshe]Howling as WAYNE

Damian WalsheEHowling has appeared in several feature films including *He Died with a Felafel in His Hand, The Reef, Ned Kelly, Macbeth* and *Kenny*. His television credits include *Bikie Wars: Brothers in Arms, Wilfred, Underbelly, Terra Nova, Panic at Rock Island, The Secret Life of Us* and *Satisfaction*.

Tasma Walton as MARY

Tasma Walton has featured in Australian television and feature film productions as well as on stage and in radio. Her credits include the television series *City Homicide*, *Sea Patrol*, *The Secret Life of Us*, *McLeod's Daughters* and *White Collar Blue*. Tasma has also appeared in *Safety in Numbers*, *Subterano*, *Dreamland* and *Blessed*. She returned from her home in the US to appear in *Mystery Road*.

Robert Mammone as CONSTABLE ROBERTS

Robert Mammone is known for his appearances in both Australian and international film and television. His first major film was *The Crossing*, with Russell Crowe, and subsequent film credits include *The Matrix*, *The Condemned*, *The Dragon Pearl* and *Arctic Blast*. On television he appeared in *Home and Away*, *East West 101*, *Satisfaction*, *Carla Carmetti PD*, *Underbelly* and *The Alice*.

Samara Weaving as PEGGY

Samara Weaving is an up and coming actress who is known for her roles in *Home* and Away and the BBC production Out of the Blue. Samara has also featured in the short feature film Steps, which she also wrote and directed, and Sprung. The niece of coEstar Hugo Weaving, Mystery Road is Samara's feature film debut.

THE CAST

Jack Charles as OLD BOY

Jack Charles is an Australian Aboriginal actor, musician, potter, elder and "national treasure" and a member of the "Stolen Generation" being raised at the Box Hill boys home. Jack Charles was involved in establishing Indigenous theatre in Australia In 1971. His screen credits include the landmark Australian film *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978), *Bedevil* (1993), *Blackfellas* (1993) and *Tom White* (2004).

Daniel Robert as MACCA

Daniel Roberts has been performing in Australian film, television and on stage for over 30 years. Daniel's film credits include *Killer Elite*, *Dreamland*, *Mission Impossible II, Walking On Water* and *Blackwater Trail*. He also has an extensive list of credits in Australian television series, including *Water Rats*, *All Saints*, *Blue Heelers*, *Underbelly II: A Tale of Two Cities* and *Underbelly III: The Golden Mile*.

Bruce Spence as JIM

Bruce Spence is a New Zealand actor having spent most of his career performing in Australia. Spence is a highly experienced actor, most known for his roles as the Gyro Captain in *Mad Max 2*, as Jedediah the pilot in *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* and as "Zedd" in *Legend of the Seeker*. He also performed the voice of Chum in *Finding Nemo*, the Mouth of Sauron in The *Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*, the Trainman in the *Matrix Revolutions*, and Tion Medon in the *Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith*E the only actor to appear in all three final films of three major trilogies.

and

Roy Billing as MICK

Rounding out a stellar cast full of experience is Roy Billing, one Australia's most loved actors. Roy has featured in acclaimed features *RabbitJProof Fence*, *The Dish*, *The Bet*, \$9.99, *Unfinished Sky* and *A Heartbeat Away*. Roy's television credits are many and he has featured in, among others, *Underbelly*, *Rake*, *Hounds*, *Packed to the Rafters Blue Heelers* and *Water Rats*. Roy's many awards and nominations include the AFI Award for Best Lead Actor in a Television Drama in 2009 for *Underbelly*.

THE CREW

Ivan Sen – WRITER, DIRECTOR, DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND EDITOR

Throughout the late 1990s Sen worked on numerous short films, before making his feature film debut with <u>Beneath Clouds</u> in 2002. The film follows two teenagers, Lena (Dannielle Hall) and Vaughn (Damian Pitt) who hitchEhike together to Sydney on a tragic journey. It won Sen global acclaim, winning a Silver Bear at the 2002 Berlin Film Festival, Best Director at the 2002 Australian Film Institute Awards and screened at the 2003 Sundance Film Festival

Sen has subsquently written and directed a number of award winning documentaries. His documentary *Yellow Fella* screened in Un Certain Regard at the Cannes Film Festival in 2005.

In 2008 Sen commenced production on his experimental second feature *Dreamland*, shot on location in Nevada, USA. It screened in the Marche du film at the 2010 Cannes Film Festival, and in the Brisbane and Melbourne Film Festivals and premiered internationally in competition at the 2010 Pusan Film Festival.

In 2011 Sen completed his third feature *Toomelah*, set in the far north, west of New South Wales, where his Aborigional roots and family come from. *Toomelah* was selected in Un Certain Regard at the 2011 Cannes Film Festival and played in Competition at the 2011 Sydney Film Festival and at the 2011 Melbourne Film Festivals. It has won a number of international awards, including the UNESCO Award at the Asia Pacific Screen Awards.

In 2012 Ivan Sen was honoured with the prestigious Byron Kennedy Award at the Australian Film Industry Awards (AACTAS).

THE CREW

David Jowsey - PRODUCER

In 2009 David Jowsey formed BUNYA Productions with award winning filmmaker Ivan Sen. The company is a boutique independent feature film production company based in Sydney. BUNYA Productions' first film was Ivan Sen's ultra low budget digital feature *Dreamland*, which was selected in competition at the 2010 Pusan Film Festival in South Korea. David is also Producer of the 2011 Sundance Film Festival selected feature film *Mad Bastards* directed by Brendan Fletcher. The same year David produced *Toomelah*, which focuses on a 10EyearEold boy growing up in an isolated Aboriginal community, with Sen directing again. The film was selected for the Cannes Film Festival 2011 in Un Certain Regard. David also produced the Toronto Film Festival 2012 selection, *Satellite Boy*, directed by Catriona McKenzie. Satellite Boy received a "Special Mention" at its European Premiere in the Generation section of the 2013 Berlin Film Festival.

David was previously Commissioning Editor of Documentaries at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC TV) in Sydney and prior to this an Executive Producer at ABC TV including heading up the Indigenous programs department. There were many outstanding documentaries among the dozens that went into production under his stewardship, including *A Good Man*, *The Life Series* and *Bastardy*. In his 12 years at ABC TV, David developed and oversaw production of many programs, including live entertainment and special events, magazine series, music programs, drama and a large slate of documentaries which have won awards both in Australia and internationally. Before joining the ABC, David was Executive Producer at CAAMA Productions in Alice Springs. This was preceded by a twoEyear stint as Lecturer in Producing at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School (AFTRS) in Sydney and four years at Television New Zealand in Auckland.

THE CREW

Matt Putland – PRODUCTION DESIGNER

Matt Putland's credits as Production Designer include the television series *SLiDE* and *Strange Calls*, as well as he feature film *Undead*. Matt also worked as Art Director on the acclaimed 2007 film *The Black Balloon*, the 2011 documentary *Singapore 1942* and the feature film *Aguamarine*.

Vanessa Loh] COSTUME DESIGNER

Vanessa Loh is a Brisbane based Costume Designer whose feature film credits include *X* and *Acolytes* and the television series *SLiDE*.

Anita Howell]Lowe – HAIR AND MAKE UP ARTIST

Anita HowellELowe has worked as one of Australia's leading Hair and MakeEUp Artists for more than 15 years. Anita's film credits include *The Great Raid, Under The Radar, Kokoda, The Proposition, The Condemned* and *Beauty and the Beast*. Anita's television credits include *Sea Patrol, Border Patrol* and *The Strip*.

CREDITS

The filmmakers

Ivan Sen	Director
Ivan Sen	Writer
David Jowsey	Producer
Ivan Sen	DOP, Editor, Composer
Matt Putland	Production Designer
Vanessa Loh	Costume Designer
Anita HowellELowe	Hair and Make Up Artist
Reg Rioordink	Stunt Supervisor
Clint Dodd	Special FX
The Cast	
Aaron Pedersen	•
Hugo Weaving	
Jack Thompson	•
Ryan Kwanten	
Tony Barry	•
Tasma Walton	•
Robert Mammone	
David Field	•
Damian WalsheEHowling	•
Jack Charles	•
Samara Weaving	
Daniel Roberts	
Bruce Spence	Jim
Tricia Whitton	•
Roy Billing	
Zoe Carides	•
Hayden Spencer	Truck Driver

Lillian Crombie Mrs Macdonald

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