

Five Indigenous Australian Films (and one TV series) Everyone Should See



A scene from “Toomelah. Screen Australia

Damien Cave Aug. 8, 2018

The Indigenous Department at Screen Australia, the government agency charged with supporting Australian film and television production, is celebrating its 25th year and rather than send a cake, we figured we’d seek out some guidance on what to watch.

Penny Smallacombe heads up the department. A member of the Maramanindji people from the Northern Territory, she sent us her five top movies, plus her favorite television series — all of which are must-see creations from Australia’s Indigenous communities.

“This is the tip of the iceberg in terms of what we’ve been funding over the years but these were game changers,” she said in an interview. “They broke through with audiences and had a strong Indigenous point of view.”

I asked her to choose productions that we could all access one way or another. That meant leaving out her favorite film, “Samson and Delilah,” which she raved about, and which she hopes will become more widely available soon.

In the meantime, here are her picks and why she chose them.

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“Sweet Country” (2018) *Directed by Warwick Thornton*

A period western set in 1929 on the Northern Territory frontier where justice itself is put on trial. It won the Special Jury Prize at the Venice Film Festival and the Platform award at the Toronto International Film Festival.

The cast includes Sam Neill, Bryan Brown, Hamilton Morris, Ewen Leslie and Thomas M. Wright.

Penny’s Take: “‘Sweet Country’ is one of the most important and exquisite films to come out of this country, from acclaimed director Warwick Thornton, who is recognised around the world. It offers a vital and rich Indigenous perspective of how Aboriginal people have been treated historically.”

Watch on iTunes, Google Play, FetchTV.

“Mystery Road” (2013) *Directed by Ivan Sen*

An Indigenous cowboy detective, Jay Swan, returns to his outback hometown, to solve the murder of a teenage girl. Alienated from both the white-dominated police force and his own community, Jay stands alone in his determination to fight back for his town and his people.

The cast includes Aaron Pedersen, Hugo Weaving and Jack Thompson.

Penny’s Take: “Director Ivan Sen is one of Australia’s most talented filmmakers. All of his films raise important questions of identity, race and belonging. The strong characters in this film and the intrigue built around them, combined with the incredible West Australian landscape, has allowed for this story to continue beyond this first feature film. The follow-up feature “Goldstone” also received critical acclaim.

Watch on iTunes, Google Play, FetchTV for free on ABC iview until 30 August.

“Spear” (2016) *Directed by Stephen Page*

“Spear” is a contemporary Aboriginal story, told through movement and dance, of a young man, Djali, as he journeys through his community to understand what it means to be a man with ancient traditions in a modern world. Spanning from the outback of Australia to the gritty city streets of Sydney, it is a poignant reflection of the continuing cultural connection of Indigenous people.

The cast includes Hunter Page-Lochard (the director’s son) and Aaron Pedersen.

Penny’s Take: “‘Spear’ provided an opportunity for the first-time film director and current artistic director of the Bangarra Dance Theatre, Stephen Page, to cross art forms from dance and into film. This film is stunning cinematically, but also significant because of its ability to bring ancient and contemporary stories about Indigenous life in Australia to the screen. Hunter Page-Lochard, director Stephen Page’s son, and Aaron Pedersen deliver exceptional performances.”

Watch on iTunes, Google Play, FetchTV

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“The Sapphires” (2012) *Directed by Wayne Blair*

Gail, Cynthia, Julie and Kay are sexy, black, young and talented — and they’ve never set foot outside Australia. Until, in the chaos of 1968, they’re plucked from the obscurity of a remote Aboriginal mission, promoted as Australia’s answer to The Supremes and — grasping the chance of a lifetime — dropped into the jungles of Vietnam to entertain the troops.

The cast includes Deborah Mailman, Jessica Mauboy, Shari Sebbens, Miranda Tapsell and Chris O’Dowd.

Penny’s Take: “Director Wayne Blair is an incredibly talented filmmaker and the Indigenous Department is proud to have played a key role in supporting his career development. ‘The Sapphires’ told a uniquely Australian story and helped launch the screen careers of some of Australia’s most accomplished Indigenous actors, including Miranda Tapsell, Shari Sebbens and Jessica Mauboy. This feel-good film also has great music!

Watch on Google Play, FetchTV, iTunes, Netflix.

“Toomelah” (2011) *Directed by Ivan Sen*

In a remote Aboriginal community, 10-year-old Daniel yearns to be a “gangster” like the male role models in his life. Skipping school and running drugs for Linden, who runs the main gang in town, Daniel is well on his way, when a rival drug dealer, Bruce, returns from prison and a violent showdown ensues. Daniel is suddenly alone and forced to make a choice for a better future.

Penny’s Take: “‘Toomelah’ is a powerful film that provides a raw insight into a young boys’ life on an mission as he is exposed to the violence, drugs, and alcoholism taking place around him. Selected to play at the Cannes International Film Festival in Un Certain Regard, it showed a side of Indigenous Australia that had rarely been seen.

Watch on iTunes

“Redfern Now” (TV Series, 2012 — 2014) *Directed by Rachel Perkins, Wayne Blair, Leah Purcell, and Catriona McKenzie*

“Redfern Now” explores contemporary inner-city Indigenous life. These powerful, moving, funny, bittersweet stories focus on a diverse group of individuals exploring their strength, flaws and resilience. It is a series about extraordinary events in ordinary lives.

Penny’s Take: “‘Redfern Now’ was a pivotal moment in Australian television. Written and directed by both emerging and established Indigenous filmmakers, the series enriched Australian television screens with authentic contemporary Indigenous stories being told by a collection of our nation’s best storytellers. The string of awards the series won is testament to its well-crafted development.”