



BACKYARD ASHES

AUSSIE VS POMS
In the greatest game of backyard cricket ever!



Backyard blitz to hit cinema for six

Story by Estella Pigot, Regional Arts NSW

MARK Grentell has long been part of the creative fabric of Wagga Wagga.

He has spent his whole life in the area, and in 2005 he was named Young Wagga Citizen of the Year for his contributions to theatre and youth in his community.

A NIDA graduate, he went on to direct musicals, recently as Assistant Director on the new musical *Doctor Zhivago* and Resident Director of the Australian production of the musical, *Rock of Ages*.

In 2008, he began writing a script for a film with Peter Cox, another Wagga resident, about an ill-fated backyard cricket match that sees a stray ball knocking a

prize-winning cat into the neighbour's roaring barbecue, incinerating the feline.

The ashes are gathered in a Vegemite jar and neighbourly animosity reaches fever pitch as the neighbours – one Australian, one British – agree to battle it out for the ashes in the greatest game of backyard cricket ever.

"We wanted to make a quirky Australian comedy," said Mark.

"Not the grim, gritty 'bodies in a barrel' true crime that has been made here these last few years. Something more light-hearted and more representative of the Australia we knew." What followed was a whirlwind experience that saw them raise

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Backyard Ashes Director Mark Grentell with the film's co-writer and co-director Peter Cox in Wagga last week ahead of the Premiere at the Forum 6 Cinema next Wednesday.



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Actor John Wood and Producer Anne Robinson at the Director's parents' home in Dobbs St, Wagga.



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We would like to congratulate everyone involved in the making of this outstanding production and we wish them international success!



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independent funding, and shoot the whole feature film for less than \$350,000.

The film had some close moments but, for a long time, funding to realise their script was always just out of the duo's reach.

"We almost got it up a couple of times," recalls Mark, "but then we came upon the idea that maybe we should just shoot it Wagga instead of waiting around for funding."

They called upon the help of their many local creative friends and hosted a fundraising

event called *The Let's Make A Movie Concert*.

Locals rallied for the cause and were generous in their donations of money, time and resources.

They also hosted a Pitch Night which resulted in all available shares in the film being sold, swelling the budget.

"We went to our community and asked them, and raised quarter of a million from residents," says Mark.

Wagga Wagga City Council got behind the project also, offering them a grant to have it made, then later

assisted with a budget to promote it, seeing its obvious value as a tourist attraction.

With money to start, producer Anne Robinson (West) sent the script to Damian Wyvill (he filmed the Baz Luhrmann directed, Chanel advert starting Nicole Kidman).

"He told us that when he read it, he was kind of hoping it would be s**t so he could say no," says Mark.

What happened was quite the opposite. The high-demand cinematographer came on-board immediately, joined the crew fresh

from shooting *The Great Gatsby*, and accepted his usual weekly fee for a month of shooting in Wagga.

They attracted a high calibre of acting talent with Felix Williamson (*The Great Gatsby*), Andrew S. Gilbert (*The Dish*), comedian Damian Callinan (*Spicks & Specks*, *Skithouse*) and John Wood (*Blue Heelers*, *Offspring*) all signing on.

Serendipity was often on their side ... and the bush telegraph.

Peter mentioned the idea for the film to the manager of a local video store, who knew of a guy living outside Wagga who, several years before, had made his own feature film.

That "guy" was Corey Lazzarotto, who had recently co-produced *Broken Sun* in the regional town of Henty.

He was able to advise them on the regional film making experience and became an Associate Producer of *Backyard Ashes*.

Then, there was the matter of location. The script demanded connecting backyards and a vantage point where the "sticky-beak" spectators could watch the events unfold.

Completely out of ideas, sitting in Mark's parents' backyard, they were suddenly struck with the idea that they

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BACKYARD ASHES



AUSSIE Vs POMS



The Director Mark Grentell during filming at his parents' place in Dobbs St Last November.

From Page 42 were in the perfect set!

His parents live in the property next to his grandmothers, with an adjoining fence and overlooked by a 3-storey block of units.

It had either been subconsciously written in to the script, or written in the stars.

"Coxy is a local drama teacher and theatre creator who seems to know everyone within 100km radius of town and is loved by them all. Mark is an equally revered, multi-talented local boy who is now a Sydney based director," says Callinan of the creators.

"This is a project they've been cooking up for years and it simply would have been foolish to shoot it anywhere but Wagga.

November 11, 2012 cast and crew assembled in Wagga to begin shooting the following day.

The high-anticipation was so nerve-wrecking for the director, that he was dry-retching in the shower the morning before the shoot.

"I would be lying if I said I wasn't nervous on the morning of the first day of shooting," says Director, Mark Grentell.

Peter "Coxy" Cox is 30 years Grentell's senior.

"I remember standing in the backyard of Grandma's house, with Mark, on the first day of shooting watching what seemed like a million creative ants prepare for making our film.

We both nervously panned across at all this activity and one of us may have commented, "Bloody hell, it looks like we are making a real film!"

Sustained by their unwavering faith in their dream, and Grandma's freshly-baked, caramel slice, they delivered 700 hours of shooting and put together, *Backyard Ashes*.

The film received funding after it was shot, from Screen Australia and Screen NSW, to assist with post-production and LevelK has acquired the film's international sales rights.

"Because we're a little Aussie battler of a film, alongside *Hunger Games 2* and *Thor* coming out [this summer], we were lucky to get domestic distribution and already have international sales."

Hundreds of people are attending the

opening night at the Forum 6 Cinemas in Wagga On Wednesday, November 6, and there are rumours that the team are going to be choppered into the red carpet event.

The comedy will open in other regional towns: Orange and Albury.

Local support at these openings is critical to ensure the ongoing success of the endeavour, and to

guarantee further regional touring of the film.

But for Grentell and Cox, they are already writing their next film, an AFL tale that keeps the sports theme going.

"When you grow up in Wagga you play sport your whole life," says Mark.

"I guess Baz Luhrmann had his Red Curtain Trilogy, so I'm going for the White Line Fever trilogy," he jokes.

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