

Stunning Wannon backdrop for

MARK RABICH

GRIEF is a subject many people avoid, but for Australian writer/director Ben Pfeiffer, his own journey through dealing with and facing the loss of a parent, and seeing his three older siblings each deal with it differently, has become the inspiration for his first feature-length film, 'The Returned'. Winding up 18 days of filming in and around Wannon last weekend, the narrative follows two brothers and their sister coming to terms with the anticipation of their mother's death, having been diagnosed with mesothelioma, the cancer of the lining of internal organs that manifests itself up to several decades following exposure to asbestos.

With his own close experience with the subject matter, Ben said he felt able "to find a story that's relatable and accessible because grief touches everyone in some way" and wanted to affirm the different ways people respond.

"Whether it's grief of a home loss to a fire, a divorce; loss of a parent, a loved one, a child; loss of a relationship, a pet – it's wholly universal," he said.

"For me, the origin was the experience of my father passing away (and) my observations of the various coping mechanisms that my siblings had – the defaults that they leaned into. Everyone does process grief differently and that's the message of the film, that there's no one way to grieve."

Ben said he wanted the story to explore the lesser-told perspective of the emotion – before the moment of inevitable loss transpired.

"What I wanted to do with this ... (typically) a lot of grief films focus on the core events, so the actual grief once the person has been lost – whereas this is like anticipatory grief," he said.

"It's the kind of grief you experience when you know someone's going to pass away and how you try to prepare for that, but you can't necessarily do that."

"The father within the family dies of a heart attack very suddenly and then the mother dies of mesothelioma, which is also what my dad passed away from."

A unique part of making the film was that Ben cast himself into the role of the middle child, with him admitting "I definitely wrote his trajectory with a lot of reflection on the role that I played within my family".

He said the script was broken down into three "chapters" with the circumstances playing out from the three different perspectives.

"The first perspective is an expression of healthy grief, where there's closure - all the things are expressed, all the tears are shared, and you move through it as best you can, and stay present with it," Ben said.

"The second one is absent grief or denial. So, (it's) more guarded, (there's) more avoidance, more walls, more focus on (the) pragmatic approaches



WRITER/director of 'The Returned', Ben Pfeiffer on location at Wannon with producer, Josephine Croft. Photo: GLENN GUY.

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to logically managing someone's death.

"And then the third one is complex grief, which is super layered."

Asked whether he had drawn any inspiration from the work of psychiatrist, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and the model of the stages of grief – shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, testing, and acceptance – Ben said, "they definitely play into it but how that manifests for each character is really interesting".

So after an initial week of filming in the south-east of Melbourne, the small cast and crew of 19 moved the production to Wannon, embedding themselves into the landscape and finding significant inspiration from the location.

Producer, Amanda LaBonte said the Airbnb discovery of Park Hill, the very-suitable cottage owned by Bill and Carol Bailey on Falkenbergs Road where much of the filming takes place, was further enhanced by the welcoming nature of locals, including the convenient proximity to accommodation and catering at the recently-

opened The Outside Inn.

"The locals have just opened their arms and hearts to us," she said.

"We have 12 locals joining us in varying roles, whether it's (a) makeup and hair artist, we have local runners - so people just coming and helping us, running people to and from accommodation and giving us their local knowledge and helping you set up tents and the lights or we've got guys helping us on assisting with cameras and lighting. It's been really wonderful."

The Outside Inn co-owner, Josh Bell said he was thrilled to get such a unique cohort of people in and finding what he could offer was adaptable to the cast and crew.

"It's probably worked really well for them because it's a cheap alternative," he said.

"We've really enjoyed having them here, it'll be sad to see them go."

Carol said it was wonderful to have the filming on their property and had "never experienced anything like that before" from the initial contact

to having about 30 people running around for a couple of weeks.

"It was unreal," she said.

"It was good that they involved some of the local people."

"They got in contact with me and said the cottage was what they were looking for. I said, 'maybe you should come down and have a look'."

"They came down in August."

Carol said the crew were extremely collaborative from start to finish and she was definitely looking forward to the premiere to see how their property and the local landscape would turn out on the big screen.

Cinematographer, Stu Mannion was very pleased with what the area offered for him to capture through the lens, including gorgeous sunset vistas featuring fields with sheep, and the nearby Wannon Falls.

"We went and shot a scene there – it was really beautiful, and kind of amazing," he said.

He said the majority of the filming inside the building had gone to schedule and had been an enjoyable experience too.

"It's been going really well," Stu said.

"It's been really fun to stay in this beautiful location in this tiny little house ... we're just shooting it from every angle and finding all these beautiful ways to do it. We've got a great team of people working really hard."

"I'm really looking forward to seeing how it's going to turn out once it's cut together."

As for the look he was going for, Stu said he had a preference of "using a lot of natural light", but sometimes it meant needing to "have that flexibility to find the right angle in the moment because the sun's always moving, the angles are always different".

"We schedule our shots around where the sun is, every time we're outdoors," he said.

"So we're always finding ... this place will be beautiful in the morning at this hour, and then you have places that are better in the afternoon ... and sometimes we can't do that and we have to control the light; we put up huge sheets of black and other sheets of white to bounce the light."

"The spectrum of natural light is richer than any other light, so it's always going to look a little bit better if you can make the natural light work."

Producer, Josephine Croft said it was a revelation to her how a location could impact a film and shape it so profoundly.

"I've heard other people talk about how the landscape in the country is a character within the film," she said.

"And I (thought), 'oh, that's interesting', but it's not until I got here and I saw how much it informed performances and informed direction and informed the camera that you do realise it's so influential on the story and the way that it looks ... this would be a very different film if it was all



DIRECTOR of photography, Stu Mannion said the location work at Wannon has "been a surprisingly community-based fun experience". Photo: GLENN GUY.

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film exploring dealing with loss



WITH some stunning landscapes to work with, 'The Returned' is set to reflect the Western District brilliantly. Photo: SAM KASPERS.

filmed in Melbourne. Very different."

Ben agreed, enthusiastically chiming in to add how its ability to "create metaphor and symbolism around the landscape of grief has been really special".

"It's the vastness," he said.

"The unpredictability, the variation – because you don't have the interference of the manmade. If we were shooting in Melbourne we would have the hectic nature of the city, whereas (here you have) the natural movement within nature itself..."

"...and the space to breathe," Josephine added.

"Yeah," Ben said, "The way the dust spins up and the way the sun catches everything."

He said he considered the script "a meditation on grief" and the visual component was vital to the theme.

"The country forces you to stop and take check," he said.

Now with the completion of production, Ben said he was satisfied with his oversight matching his vision of the film, but he could see how decisions with editing would make a huge difference to get to the final version.

"They always say, you end up making three films," he said.

"The film that you write, the film that you shoot and the film that you edit."

"I feel like at the moment, we've got so much variety within all the content that we've created, we could make multiple versions of the film – so it's actually just a matter of arriving at the one that feels right."

With various post-production talent lined up such as editor, colourist and sound design, Josephine was thrilled with the composer they had also secured.

"We got a really lovely guy called Dingo Spender," she said.

"He's going to compose it and he's an amazing artist whose worked with a whole bunch of well-known Australian artists and he's got a really beautiful kind of acoustic sound."

"And a storytime sensitivity," Ben said.

With the film being made on a shoestring 'microbudget', Amanda said the hope was to raise some more funding to ideally get the film completed "in the next three to four months" but acknowledged that "we might have to push that out to the end of the year".

"The best-case scenario is, someone writes us a

lovely cheque in the next three to four weeks, and we go in to full time editing for 10 weeks," she said.

"So you get a beautiful, fine, rough cut, get it off to our distributors and sales agents and pitch it for a Director's Cut for Cannes in March of next year."

"I mean, if you really want to shoot for the stars, that would be incredible."

"Then you're also looking at even just getting into MIFF, the Melbourne International Film Festival for next year."

"Worst case is that it takes us longer to get the funds, so it takes us longer to do the edits – things just take longer."

"It'll all still happen, particularly now, we've just seen it come to fruition. It will have a life, it will just depend on how quickly we can make that happen."

Ben was positive about the outlook for the film's future impact, given the cohesion and passion for the project among the cast.

"One of the loveliest things about this project is that we have had the same actors on board playing those roles for the last 12 months," he said.

"As the script has developed, I've been able to develop with actors who I've known from the industry, and those characters have been able to evolve and mold to their kind of characteristics ... things that interested them in the landscape of grief."

He felt similarly in terms of having audiences "find one character that they resonate with" and lighten the burden of their own grief by sharing with others.

"The hope is that it will just be a platform for conversation," Ben said.

"Grief isn't something that has to be done in private or behind closed doors ... it's an absolutely normal and natural part of life."

Alongside Ben, 'The Returned' will feature Edwina Wren, Dushan Philips and Louise Siversen in the role of Vianne, the quintessential mother and family matriarch.

The film has already received five international screenwriting awards and the aim is for it to have a cinema release, visit national and global film festivals and live on in a variety of streaming services.



DEALING with grief, the story was written by Ben Pfeiffer to challenge audiences to consider the emotion as "an absolutely normal and natural part of life". Pictured is actor, Dushan Philips. Photo: GLENN GUY.



MUCH of the interior filming took place at Falkenbergs Road, Wannon at Park Hill, owned by Bill and Carol Bailey. Photo: GLENN GUY.



A VETERAN of film, theatre and television for over 40 years, Louise Siversen plays the role of the mother dying of mesothelioma. Photo: SAM KASPERS.