Playing in the Shadows

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Below the city, below the poverty line, the kids of Woolloomooloo become All Stars.
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ABC  AUSTRALIAN FILM COMMISSION  triple j TV

playing in the shadows
One Liner

Below the city, below the poverty line, the kids of Woolloomooloo become All Stars.

One Paragraph

A group of kids growing up in Woolloomooloo, a notorious public housing estate in the shadow of Sydney’s famous skyline, find inspiration after dark when they form a basketball squad to compete in a citywide tournament for underprivileged youth.
Ever since his older brother was locked up for a local murder, 11 year old Jaidyn has been going off the rails. Scootering and skateboarding around the streets of his home turf, Woolloomooloo, a notorious public housing estate in the shadow of the city’s skyscrapers, he takes out his frustration by vandalising and causing havoc. He’s perpetually in trouble with local police, the teachers at school and his devoted mum, Norma, who tries to keep him on a tight leash. But there’s something new coming to the neighbourhood that might just pique his interest.

An after-dark basketball competition targeting young people living in public housing across Sydney is about to take the kids of Woolloomooloo by storm. Run by the dedicated coach Bassi, an ex-pro basketballer with extensive experience working with difficult kids, this basketball squad is far more than just a sporting event.

For 9 year old Celine who lives with her many sisters and brothers in the centre of Woolloomooloo, it is a chance to get sweaty, inspired and let off a lot of anger. Celine’s mum died on her sixth birthday, and it is a struggle growing up in a big family with many mouths to feed when your dad only has one leg.

The team means a lot to Jerry too. At 6ft 3 and 105kgs he is the gentle giant of the neighbourhood but he has a disability which means he often bears the brunt of communal teasing and ridicule. Everyone has a chance to prove themselves on the basketball court though, and Jerry is game. He cherishes being part of an event the whole neighbourhood is buzzing over.

With his strapping physique and athletic prowess 15-year-old Ainslie is en route to being the star player of the team. He takes the game seriously, and can be found training alone, long after all the other kids have gone home. Ainslie’s diligence extends to his schoolwork, and he is determined to succeed both in sport and academics, despite the poor scholastic statistics of the general community. For him, the chance to compete only motivates him more.

This observational documentary follows the local kids and their team, The Woolloomooloo All Stars as they train towards a climactic final showdown against their geographic rivals, the youth from the neighbouring housing estate in Redfern. The film also builds a portrait of the unique village of Woolloomooloo, Sydney’s oldest suburb which is being rapidly gentrified due to its coveted location on the waterfront of Sydney’s stunning harbour.

The emotional heart of the film however, lies with the young people, Jaidyn, Celine, Jerry and Ainslie, as they struggle to pursue their aspirations while avoiding the dangers and disadvantages of growing up in this little forgotten pocket of public housing.
Inspired by the launch of an after-dark basketball competition set up for underprivileged kids in central Sydney, this film follows the ascent of the Woolloomooloo Allstars, a raggle taggle bunch of unlikely champions hailing from one of the city’s most notorious housing estates.

Woolloomooloo, once a slum, and converted to a public housing estate in 1973, hosts a small, tight-knit yet troubled community riddled with the typical ills of low socio-economic areas. Yet the area, which is bordered by Sydney’s glittering harbour is now surrounded by multimillion dollar real estate. The local kids grow up in the shadow of the city’s skyscrapers, in a tiny pocket of poverty adrift in affluence. Despite the gentrification around them, their little world is rife with crime and drugs leaving them extremely vulnerable to bad influence.

These kids, as young as 5, roaming the streets of their little village at all hours of the day and night are already leading precarious lives. Without proper guidance and role models they could easily be sucked into the generational cycle of poverty, handout mentality and dysfunctionality which has already wrecked their families. The basketball initiative, specifically run at night, was designed to keep them off the streets and get them involved in something constructive.

Though it was the basketball that first attracted us to Woolloomooloo, we soon realised the colourful local characters and this unique neighbourhood were fascinating beyond the scope of a mere sporting event. So while the competition became a main narrative thread of Playing in the Shadows, we ultimately hoped to create intimate character portraits set against the dramatic backdrop of this tiny old world village in the heart of the big 21st century city. Working as a two person team on camera and sound, shooting in an observational style over the period of a year we were able to capture an intimacy impossible with a larger crew.

A long tradition exists in documentary, of turning the lens on the underprivileged, but we wanted to take this film far beyond a mere voyeuristic glimpse inside a housing estate, or a feel-good story of troubled kids overcoming their traumas. We really strived to get a kid’s-eye view of the world of Woolloomooloo and find out what it is like to grow up battling adversity in such a distinctive area.
What are the dreams of these young people? Can the opportunities and distractions provided by the basketball competition help stop them from succumbing to self-destructive habits or following in the footsteps of bad role models? Can the cycle of family and community dysfunctionality be broken by addressing a new generation?

It was a fine line capturing the reality of the kids’ lives in the darkness and danger of the housing estate, whilst also celebrating their youthful idealism, and the spark and charisma which will lead to brighter futures. We believe exposure to the tougher life many Australians still face in the so-called ‘Lucky Country’ will be both eye-opening for individual viewers and crucial to maintaining social conscience within the wider community. It is also important to show that productive inspiring things do emerge from situations commonly perceived as unredeemable. We are documentary makers committed to giving the marginalized a voice and challenging stereotypical notions of what it is to belong to Sydney’s urban underclass.

Thus despite some uneasy subject matter, generated by community issues and the individual life challenges many young people portrayed are facing, the overall perspective of this film is one of creative vision and unique achievement in the face of deprivation and adversity. Ultimately we hoped to be able to document the positive impact programs like night basketball competition had on the kids’ lives, and definitely to encourage funding for more.

Throughout filming, the greatest inspiration was the irrepressible spirit of the young people who socialise together regardless of their wildly different ages and backgrounds. We fell in with a crowd of kids stretching from 8 – 18, of Turkish, Chinese, Aboriginal and Anglo heritage who, having grown up together, run around the streets skating, blading scootering and raising chaos, oblivious to their differences.

To capture these kids and their lives, against the dramatic backdrop of Woolloomooloo with all its natural beauty and social problems made for a complex and insightful experience.
Our first glimpses into the world of Woolloomooloo revealed a small, animated, close-knit yet troubled community living in the shadow of all Sydney’s architectural icons. Despite the affluence of the surrounding real estate and encroaching gentrification, the housing commission estate has bred the stereotypical outcome of crime and drugs. With our camera in tow we were initially looked upon warily as this area has often been misrepresented and defamed in the media. Convincing people we were not just another ‘current affairs’ crew was our first major challenge.

Since we aspired from the outset to create an observational-style film, our aim was to immerse ourselves in the community as deeply as possible, getting to know the kids and their families in order to gain insight into real life in this forgotten village. From coaching players on the basketball court, to babysitting and attending local barbeques, we enmeshed ourselves in local daily existence and were soon welcomed into family homes and embraced by the young people.

The kids endlessly fascinated us and we knew they would be the heart of our story. There were myriad charismatic young people to follow, but Jaidyn, Jerry and Celine were immediate favourites. Celine with her striking face and bubbly chatter, Jerry with his dramatic size and gentle nature, Jaidyn the consummate troublemaker with his exhaustive energy - we warmed to these kids immediately. After a few weeks cruising around the streets together the camera was barely an issue.

The beauty of the setting is that the housing estate is like a massive playground. The Council blocked vehicular traffic through much of Woolloomooloo years ago, and although this has facilitated a culture of drug dealing and crime, it has also made the place heaven for the kids. Day and night they can run wild in this protected, insular zone without the intrusion or threat of cars. Every time we headed down kids were out, playing footy, shooting hoops and riding their scooters. We really felt like we were traveling back in time to an old world where little urchins still ran around outside in their pyjamas after dinner. Mostly young locals were completely oblivious to the menace around them, and this provided us a rich platform for filming and interviewing.
Interviewing kids is always a challenge - short attention spans and rambling trains of thought can spiral into confusion and frustration, thereby derailing even the best intentions. We aimed to keep interviews short and just go with the flow filming each character as he or she moved around the neighbourhood at will. Given free reign, the kids were able to relax and we were always amazed by their distinctive perspectives and the stories they would divulge.

Our interviews with Jaidyn and Celine were filmed at the very early stages of production and we knew immediately we had captured the opening scenes of the film. Often we walked away from filming musing how a screenwriter could labour over dialogue for years and not come up with such killer lines!

Jerry, also came to the forefront very early on - you couldn’t miss him really! He was always the first to greet us when we wandered into the housing estate, standing ready with an update of all the latest gossip. We dubbed him the BFG (big, friendly, giant) and knew he was one of kind - there was obviously more to him than his designated role as the ‘village idiot’.

Ainsley by contrast, was a dark horse. He stayed in the background for the first few months of filming appearing to be just ‘one of the thugs’. In retrospect it is clear he wanted us to perceive him that way, while he was sussing out our intentions. After engaging with him off camera at one of the local barbecues, we realised he was unique. Behind this tough exterior was an insightful, ambitious kid, mature beyond his years. He doesn’t let anyone ruffle his feathers and even though some kids would mock him as we followed him with the camera, he stood firm. He is already familiar with being teased as a ‘nerd’ as a result of his industrious training and studying regime. Ainsley is determined not to let the neighbourhood bring him down and although we came across him late he smoothly fell into place as a central character for the film.

The basketball training was our main narrative thread and the backdrop for this was breathtaking. Kids of all shapes, sizes and nationalities would run amok on the local court after nightfall, as the lit skyscrapers of the city loomed above. Dangerous types and homeless hobos wandered the streets on the periphery.

All this action occurred under the watchful eye of Coach Bassi. We never intended to explore Bassi as a character, despite his charisma and connection with the kids, however his presence eventually became too pervasive to ignore. As a result he became a central part of the basketball through-line and became the outsider’s insight into this neighbourhood.

In order to capture a real kids-eye perspective of the world of Woolloomooloo, we spent many days and nights over 8 months trawling the hood and the streets of the city with our local stars. We shot on a Sony Z1 HDV camera, and were frequently amazed by the colours and textures of the housing estate – grainy yellow street lamps, blue quartz-halogen floodlights all add to the urban flavour. Overall the style of the film mirrors its content: a rough, non-glossy, raw look infused with the naïveté of the young eyes who guided us. Shooting handheld also gives the footage real intimacy and verity.
Our aim with filming was always to balance light and dark, as although the housing estate has chaotic elements, it also has a sleepy, lost-world quality we hoped to capture. The lives of the kids also informed this approach, as despite their tragic family backgrounds, a resilience and childlike innocence shines through them.

As is often the case with observational documentary we cast the net wide in the shoot, from capturing visuals to observing characters. We purposely started editing well before filming had ended to see where the story was going. Neither of us had worked like this before, however this approach allowed us greater flexibility and also strongly guided subsequent shooting. Although the basketball was the spine of our film, we aimed to create engaging character portraits of the kids to substantiate the film. By the end of the edit, we had cut down over 50 hours of footage to a television hour.

The basketball gave the film momentum and energy, but the kids and their fraught lives gave it emotion; even after watching endless cuts we were still moved by some of words that came out their mouths. Celine’s final declaration ultimately sums up our entire experience: ‘I don’t know what’s gonna happen to me in the future…I might get murdered, I might not. You never know!’
These are just some of the characters and the stories which come to life against the dramatic backdrop of Woolloomooloo with all its natural beauty and social problems.

JAIDYN
Cheeky little blonde-haired, blue-eyed Jaidyn, 11, has prided himself on being a menace around the Woolloomooloo neighbourhood since prepubescence. Bright and energetic but out of control, he is perpetually roaming the streets on his scooter or skateboard, climbing fences, smashing windows and looking for action. But his extroverted nature masks some deep troubles which could derail his future. He lives in a housing commission home with his Marilyn Monroe-obsessed mother, Norma, and aspires to be an actor.

CELINE
Nine year old Celine can’t even remember how many sisters and brothers she has – family life is a bit chaotic. She lives with 3 siblings and her dad in a big house in central Forbes street, with her own room on the very top floor. Her mum died on her 6th birthday but she dotes on her father. She enjoys the run of the neighbourhood on her scooter or her bike and has a particularly unique perspective on her little universe of Woolloomooloo, which she calls ‘my world, my place, my town’.

JERRY
Jerry, 18, is the neighbourhood giant. At 6ft 2, 105kgs he towers above his peers and sometimes finds it hard to fit in. His large Turkish family consisting of 3 brothers, aunts, uncles and grandparents all live close together in the neighbourhood. As he was badly burnt at the tender age of 18 months, Jerry can’t work and receives a disability pension. But he loves cooking and strives to fulfill his dream of becoming a chef by running cooking classes for the young kids down at the local youth centre. Unfortunately not many of the kids show up or take him seriously but he pursues his passion nonetheless. He often bears the brunt of jokes because of his disability and unusual appearance.
AINSLEY
Tall, strapping and built like an athlete, Ainsley has a presence far beyond his 15 years. Though he may look like one of the local thugs, he considers himself a cut above. Articulate and studious, he is dedicated both to academic achievement and sporting success. His values and beliefs, taught by his father whom he admires deeply, belie his tender age. Even though he lives in housing commission like everyone else, Ainsley sees far brighter destinations in his future. He loves the neighbourhood, but is determined not to let it bring him down.

COACH BASSI
Coach Bassi is new to the neighbourhood, but excited to have been hired to lead the newly formed Woolloomooloo Allstars. He is combining his extensive experience working with difficult kids and his sporting skills from his days as a professional basketball player for the Comets and it’s a near perfect combination. Having experienced similar disadvantage in his childhood, he relates to his flock and will do whatever it takes to coach these kids to victory over their neighbourhood rivals, Redfern.
CO-PRODUCERS / CO-DIRECTORS

Sascha Ettinger Epstein is a documentary filmmaker and magazine feature writer with a taste for edgy stories. Her first documentary Painting with Light in a Dark World about eccentric visionary Kings Cross street photographer Peter Darren Moyle won many awards including best short documentary at the San Francisco International Film Festival 2003, the AFI for best Direction in a Documentary, an IF Award and an ATOM Award and was a finalist in the 2003 Dendy Awards. Thereafter she completed a Masters in Documentary Direction at AFTRS where she made Sentences, a short documentary about an art program within maximum security at Long Bay Gaol which won an IF Award and played at Flickerfest 2005 and St Kilda Film Festival 2005, and Change of Heart about the mystique of the human heart and heart transplantation which won an ATOM Award and was also a finalist in the Sydney Film Festival Dendy Awards 2005.

Having finished film school she directed a film about the 'Croc Fest' for indigenous youth from remote communities in the Northern Territory and was then selected to represent Oceania in a documentary-making competition in Belgium. She has spent the last three years making The Oasis, a feature-length longitudinal observational film about a youth refuge in inner city Sydney. She also writes features for Studio Magazines and tutors cultural studies at the University of Technology, Sydney.

Marco Ianniello is an independent writer, director and producer. Some recent film credits include The Graeme Bell All Stars Play On, a one hour documentary following the legendary Australian jazz band which screened on the ABC in 2006; and Sentences, a documentary about an inmate art program inside Long Bay Gaol which won the IF Award (2005) for Best Short Documentary. In addition, Marco directed the short documentary Moment (2004) that screened regularly on SBS throughout 2004-06.

Marco holds a Master of Arts in Documentary Production from the Australian Film TV and Radio School (AFTRS). Upon graduation Marco received the SBS Independent Award for his contribution to documentary film making whilst at the AFTRS. Marco also lectures film production and screenwriting at The University of Notre Dame.
2001-2002  
**Painting with Light in a Dark World** (26 mins) Documentary about Sydney Street Photographer Peter Darren Moyle. 
Broadcast on SBS TV November 3, 2002 
Funded by NSW Film and TV Office, AFC and SBS Independent TV. 
Sold to Ovation Channel, NZ, UK, USA 
Winner Best Documentary Direction 2003 AFI Awards 
Winner Best Editing in a Documentary 2003 AFI Awards 
Winner Best Short Documentary 2003 ATOM Awards 
Winner Best Short Documentary 2003 San Francisco International Film Festival 
Winner Best Short Documentary 2003 Lexus IF Awards 
Winner Best Short Documentary 2004 Real Life on Film Festival 
Winner Best Short Documentary 2005 Darwin Film Festival 
Finalist Dendy Awards 2003 Sydney Film Festival 
Brisbane International Film Festival 2003 
Official Selection 2003 Commonwealth Film Festival UK 
Official Selection 2003 BASC Film Festival Byron Bay 

2003  
**Pump Up the Volume** (AFC Development) 
The narcissism and neurosis of muscle culture 

2003  
**Sentences** (17 mins) documentary about an inmate art program in Long Bay Maximum Security Gaol. 
Winner IF Award 2005: Best Short Documentary 
Acquired by ABC. Screening from May 2006. 
Official selection REAL:Life on Film Documentary Film Festival 2006 
Official selection Flickerfest 2005 
Official selection St Kilda Film Festival 2005 
Official selection New Zealand Documentary Festival 
Official Selection 13th Int. Film Festival Art Film Trencianske Teplice -Trencin,2005 Slovakia 
On exhibit Police and Justice Museum Sydney 2004-2005 
Ivan Dougherty Gallery Sydney Convictions exhibition 2005 

2003  
**Change of Heart** (26 mins) documentary about the mysticism of the human heart, heart transplantation. 
Finalist Dendy Awards, Sydney Film Festival 
Official Selection St Kilda Film Festival 2005 
Screened at OZDOX 2004 

2004  
**SBS Series: Keeping It Together** 
5 x 2 minute segments, continually screened SBS TV
2005  **Musclebound** (10 mins)  Commissioned by Australian Centre for the Moving Image  Experimental work about bodybuilding and muscle culture.

2004  **The Next Big Thing** (development with ABC/FTO)  Luke Wood, Australia ‘s biggest bodybuilder  Pilot and treatment developed

2004  **Croc Festival Documentary**,  Indigenous Festivals of Australia  Shot on location in Katherine , Northern Territory  Documented the ‘Croc Festival’, a festival for indigenous Aboriginal youth from remote communities, also followed Jilkminggan school.  Broadcast Channel 9 NT, Sat 2nd April 2005

2004  **Dragone Productions**, 5sur5 Festival Belgium  **Les Ames Soeurs** 10mins French. Invited to make a short documentary in Belgium , representing Oceania , chosen as one of 5 filmmakers from around the globe.

2005  **Mr Vain**, 7mins, short drama, SEE Pictures  Mr Vain is hopelessly narcissistic.


2005  **Making Mark** 7mins,  Short observational documentary, AFTRS  Based on local Sydney painter the effusive Mark

2005-2008  **The Oasis** 93mins  Feature-length longitudinal observational documentary about a youth refuge in inner-city Sydney, run by the tireless maverick Salvation Army Captain Paul Moulds.  Broadcast on ABC, April 10, 2008
2005 – 2006

The Graeme Bell All Stars Play On (57 mins) documentary
PRODUCER/DIRECTOR
Following the legendary Australian jazz pioneer: Graeme Bell, who reformed his band at 89 years of age to go back on tour.
Independently Produced. AIRED ABC JUNE 2006

2006

Scrababble (6 mins) documentary
DIRECTOR
In the quiet south coast town of Mollymook, the best of the best players converge of the Ulladulla Scrabble Championships.
Official selection, St Kilda Film Festival 2008

2004

Moment documentary
DIRECTOR
Part of Keeping it Together short documentary series about Domestic Violence
Screened SBS 2004 to 2007

2003

Sentences (17 mins) documentary – PRODUCER
About an inmate art program inside Long Bay Maximum Security Gaol.
Winner IF Award 2005: Best Short Documentary
Acquired by ABC. Screening from May 2006.
Official selection REAL:Life on Film Documentary Film Festival 2006
Official selection Flickerfest 2005
Official selection St Kilda Film Festival 2005
Official selection New Zealand Documentary Festival
Official Selection 13th Int. Film Festival Art Film Trencianske Teplice -Trencin, 2005 Slovakia
On exhibit Police and Justice Museum Sydney 2004-2005
Ivan Dougherty Gallery Sydney Convictions exhibition 2005
Writer/Director: Sascha Ettinger-Epstein.

2003

Street Level (26mins) documentary - PRODUCER
A music documentary following 2 aspiring Hip Hop performers who are trying to move on from living on the streets of Sydney.
Opening night, Australian Hip Hop Film Festival, Sydney & Melbourne 2003
Odyssey Hip Hop Festival, New York 2004
Illawarra Film Festival, NSW 2004
Writer/Director: Madeleine Hetherton

2003

Overture (26mins) documentary – PRODUCER
Following the journey of Screen Composers vision to the screen.
Writer/Director: Rebecca Barry
PRODUCTION COMPANY: SHOOTING FILMS PRODUCTIONS
MARCO IANNIELLO & SASCHA ETTINGER EPSTEIN

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TECHNICAL DETAILS

TAPE TITLE   Playing in the Shadows
DURATION   53 minutes
TAPE AUDIO   1&2 LtRt 3&4 M&E
TEXTLESS   00:56:00:00
SPECs   NS | 16:9 | HD-2 | 1080 | 50i | 25 EBU

HD Cam, Digital Beta Cam, SP Beta Cam screening masters available on request.