

# Blackbird

Short Film Press Kit







## Tagline

A story inspired by the little-known history of Australia's sugar slaves.

## Logline

Forced to work on a sugar plantation in Queensland, Australia in the late 1800s, Kiko, a spirited young Solomon Islander, journeys into adulthood. Amidst severe oppression and loss, must find his will to survive.

## Short Synopsis

BLACKBIRD follows the story of Solomon Islander siblings, Kiko (16) & Rosa (24), who were kidnapped from their Pacific island home and forced to work on a sugar cane plantation in Queensland, Australia in the late 1800s. In a world where exploitation of Pacific Islanders for cheap labour is legislated and conditions for Islanders are akin to slavery, Rosa struggles to keep an eye on her spirited young brother as he journeys into adulthood. Kiko, faced with unimaginable loss in a place far from his homelands, must find his will to survive. This narrative short film sheds light on a little known part of history - Australia's sugar slaves.





## The Story

'Blackbird' is a short narrative drama set in the late 1800s about Solomon Islander siblings Kiko (16) and Rosa (24) who were kidnapped from their homelands and brought to work on a sugar cane plantation in Mackay, Queensland, Australia. Kiko and Rosa are entangled in a world driven by commercial gain - where exploitation of Pacific Islanders for cheap labour is legislated and conditions for Islanders are akin to slavery.

One year after their arrival, Rosa is working 16-hour days planting and cutting cane and struggles to survive all the while keeping a watchful eye on her spirited young brother. The sights and sounds of the ocean are a distant memory and they both long to return home after their '39 moons' (3 year stay), but their future is uncertain.

As Kiko begins to question his place, he finds himself coming head to head with the Overseer, Mr Douglas - a stubborn and harsh man who doesn't mind using force to discipline his 'Kanakas' (workers). At the centre of their conflict is a bicycle owned by the Douglas family which becomes the object of Kiko's attention, distracting him from his daily duties.

Rosa becomes ill and is torn between staying quiet, silently withstanding her situation and protecting her brother from the threat of the ill-tempered Mr Douglas. Amidst despair, oppression and violence, Rosa and Kiko desperately try to hold onto their culture, their identity and any glint of hope that remains. Kiko is faced with an unimaginable loss and is forced to step into manhood, in a foreign place far from his island homelands.

'Blackbird' is shot entirely on location in Mackay, Australia where the history that this story is based on, took place - bringing the story of Australia's sugar slaves to life. Spoken in Solomon Islands Pijin and augmented with traditional Solomon Islands lullabies, elements of Islander culture, and set against the backdrop of expansive tropical cane fields, this film immerses audiences in a little known part of Australian history.

Through the eyes of two siblings Rosa and Kiko, 'Blackbird' explores elements of the human spirit - how, amongst severe loss and despair, we can survive.





Photo: Mark Morris



## Background Information

This film shines a light on a little known and dark part of Australia's history and gives recognition to the approximately 60 000 Pacific Islanders who were brought to Australia, often by coercion and kidnapping, between 1863 and 1904 to work on sugar cane farms of Queensland.

"When the first Islanders were brought to Queensland in the early 1860s, there were no laws or labour contracts to protect them from the most extreme kinds of exploitation by their employers. Many were abducted then paid nothing for their labour and were effectively treated as slaves. Later in the 1860s, a law was passed to regulate labour trafficking into Queensland and establish an indentured (contract) labour system. Under this system, Islanders signed three year contracts and were paid a meagre wage. Even under the indentured labour system Islanders continued to be exploited," Australian Human Rights Commission (<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/erace-archives-australian-south-sea-islanders>).



GROUP of S. Sea ISLANDERS (CAIRNS) 1890

The descendants of these Islanders who now live in Australia are known as Australian South Sea Islanders (ASSI) and this community continues to struggle for recognition. The 'Blackbird' script was developed from extensive research of ASSI historical archival photographs and documents as well as time spent with ASSI communities in Queensland where the Director, Amie Batalibasi, was able to hear oral histories and stories about the atrocities of the blackbirding era in Australia. The subsequent short film's story centres around the journey of Solomon Islander siblings and their experiences, but evokes the history and politics of an entire chapter of history that has largely been swept under the carpet.

Whilst several documentaries have depicted ASSI history, 'Blackbird' will be one of the first times that this history has been dramatized in a narrative short. This story will be new to many audiences in Australia and around the world.

Archival Images: Left: Australian South Sea Islander cane cutters on a sugar cane plantation in Queensland. Above: Group of South Sea Islanders, Cairns, Queensland, Australia.

Source: State Library of Queensland.





## Specifications

**Title:** Blackbird

**Running Time:** 13:20 mins

**Shooting Format:** Red Epic 5K

**Screening Format:** DCP / High Res Quicktime

**Aspect Ratio:** 16:9 (2.39:1 Letterbox)

**Sound:** Stereo / 5.1 Surround Sound

**Country of Production:** Australia

**Year:** 2015

**Language:** English and Solomon Islands Pijin

**Subtitles:** English Subtitles

**Website:** [www.amiebatalibasi.com/blackbird](http://www.amiebatalibasi.com/blackbird)

[www.facebook.com/blackbirdfilmproject](https://www.facebook.com/blackbirdfilmproject)

**Production Company/ Distribution/ Sales:**

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Web: [www.vcam.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.vcam.unimelb.edu.au)

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## Cast and Crew Credits

**Writer/Director/Editor:** Amie Batalibasi

**Associate Producers:** John Harvey & Lia Pa'apa'a

**Supervising Producer:** Sandra Sciberras

**Community Consultant:** Elizabeth Warren

**Director of Photography:** Mark Morris

**1st Assistant Director:** Naomi Ball

**Production Manager:** Jacob Richards

**Production Assistant:** Jesse Hatter

**Kiko:** Jeremy Bobby

**Rosa:** Regina Lepping

**The Overseer:** Putu Winchester

## Director's Bio:

### Amie Batalibasi

Amie Batalibasi is an Australian Solomon Islander (Feralimae/Kosi) writer, director and producer. Her filmmaking practice is driven by a passion to collaborate with diverse people and communities at a grassroots level, to unearth stories that have the possibility to spark empowerment and create change.

Amie was the 2017 recipient of the Sundance Institute Native and Indigenous Film Program's Merata Mita Fellowship and a Berlineale Talents 2018 participant.

Her award winning short films have screened around Australia and internationally. Over the last ten years, as mentor and media trainer, Batalibasi has produced dozens of short films by first-time filmmakers through collaborative community projects with children and young people, new migrant groups, remote Indigenous communities, and culturally and linguistically diverse communities in and around Melbourne, interstate Australia and in the Solomon Islands.

Batalibasi's current project is a feature adaptation of her award-winning short film, BLACKBIRD. The story explores the little-known history of Australia's sugar slaves by shining a light on the dark history of "blackbirding," where from 1863-1904 approximately 60,000 Pacific Islanders were taken, often by kidnapping and coercion, to labor on the country's sugar cane and cotton farms. Set in the decades preceding the "White Australia Policy," the story follows Suana, a spirited young Solomon Islander who is brutally snatched from his island home and forced to work on a Queensland cane farm. Stripped of his culture, identity and entrapped within a world of exploitation, it's his fight for survival that ultimately seals his fate.

Batalibasi graduated with honors from Melbourne University Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) in a Graduate Diploma of Film and TV (Documentary) in 2007 and a Master of Film and TV (Narrative) in 2015. Her films have screened throughout Australia and internationally.

More information: [www.amiebatalibasi.com](http://www.amiebatalibasi.com)











## Director's Statement

I have dedicated this film to three of my ancestors who were blackbirded (kidnapped) from the Solomon Islands to work on the cane fields and were never seen or heard from again. This story was inspired by thinking about what might have happened to my them. Furthermore, knowing that the history of Australia's 'Sugar Slaves' is not taught in Australian schools and that it remains largely unknown throughout the world, gave me the passion and determination to embark on an interstate and international collaborative film project.

The community collaborative filmmaking approach was of paramount importance and was key to a successful shoot and maintaining relationships with Australian South Sea Islander (ASSI) communities who are descendants of those 60 000 Islanders who were blackbirded. Community consultation was vital and we drew on the local ASSI community for local knowledge, support and to appear as extras in the film. In this way we were able to link the actual history, to the telling of this narrative by directly involving the ancestors of those Islanders whom the film depicts. The main roles of Kiko and Rosa were sought in the Solomon Islander community with a young aspiring filmmaker travelling from the Solomon Islands to be in the film. I also drew on my own Solomon Islander family for support and consultation. We really fostered a collaborative environment during the making of this film with students, professionals and community working together. We came away feeling nourished and even changed by the experience.

Stylistically I wanted to juxtapose the beauty of the rainforest, beach and canefields with the harshness of the story's reality - the life of the protagonists as slaves, stolen from their homeland. I wanted to captivate audiences with this interplay of location and characters, with elements of dream sequences and Islander culture, accompanied by a very contemporary soundtrack for this period film set in the late 1800s. By telling the story of one young man and his loss, I hoped to evoke the darkness and the tragedy behind this period of Australian history.

## Key Creatives

### Associate Producer: John Harvey

John is an Indigenous Australian of Saibai Island (Torres Strait Islands) and English descent. John and Ryan have collaborated over a number of years over short films and documentaries. John has a background in producing theatre and since moving to film seeks out collaborations with bold and risk taking Indigenous artists. John has produced several short films including: YOU TURN; MAN REAL; UNDER SKIN IN BLOOD; THE OYSTERMAN; THE HUNTER; and THE FARM.

John has written and directed documentaries for ABC TV Australia's National Indigenous Television (NITV) as well as directing music videos. He runs Brown Cab Productions with his sister and co-collaborator, Margaret Harvey. Awarded a Malcolm Robertson Foundation writers residency at Footscray Community Arts Centre, John is collaborating with Margaret to create a new visual theatre work. John is a recipient of the Australian Film, Television and Radio Schools (AFTRS) AV Myer Award for Exceptional Indigenous Talent, and collaborated with Torres Strait Islander artist Ricardo Idargi on his winning work for the 28th Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award (New Media).

John produced his debut feature film SPEAR, directed by Stephen Page.

### Associate Producer: Lia Pa'apa'a

Lia Pa'apa'a is a Samoan/Native American woman who works across Australia community arts worker and creative producer. Lia has spent the many years working on Indigenous and Pacific festivals in urban, regional and remote Australia. These innovative events all have a major element of Cultural Community Development and have allowed Lia to develop her skills as a leading event director of cultural arts festivals and events such as the annual traditional dance festival DanceSite in Borroloola in NT and the Contemporary Pacific Arts Festival in Melbourne. Lia has also co-produced a number of community film and media projects alongside filmmaker Amie Batalibasi including 'Pacific Stories'; 'My Story, My Place - Through the Lens' and 'Pacific Stories - Harmony on the Murray'.



## Key Creatives (Continued)

### Director of Photography: Mark Morris

Mark Morris is a cinematographer from Melbourne, Australia who works in narrative fiction and advertising. Mark has been recognised with ACS Awards for his work on the short films 'Maddy' directed by Elizabeth Taylor and 'Mother's Day' directed by Andrew O'Keefe and Lee Mason. Mark has shot national and international campaigns for brands including Google, BWM and Telstra.

In 2013 Mark shot the feature film 'Crime and Punishment', a modern day adaptation of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's 1866 novel, for director Andrew O'Keefe and producers Tuuli Forward and Steve Jablonski.

<http://markmorris.com.au>

### Introducing Regina Lepping as Rosa:

"Being a part of this project is educational and historical to me. I have ancestors who have worked in sugar cane plantations too so it is also quite personal to me. This project has helped me also as a young film maker in Solomon Islands to think serious and document the events in country's history that are not preserved that are important to us. I am so proud to be part of the Blackbird team and I know this journey is just the beginning of shining a light in our dark past."

### Introducing Jeremy Bobby as Kiko:

"The reason I wanted to be a part of this story is because it was a part of my country, Solomon Island's history. My ancestor's story that honestly growing up here in Australia, I've never been made aware of, nor do I think my peers know about it. During the filming of 'Blackbird', I think the most challenging part for me was trying to reach the emotional side of the role I was playing. Not having much experience in acting, I really had to sort of put myself in the characters shoes and just try to imagine how it would feel being a young, adventurous boy growing up in an oppressive environment."

### Putu Winchester as The Overseer

Putu has starred in Australian television shows such as Home and Away, Water Rats and Heartbreak High.



Photo: Mark Morris









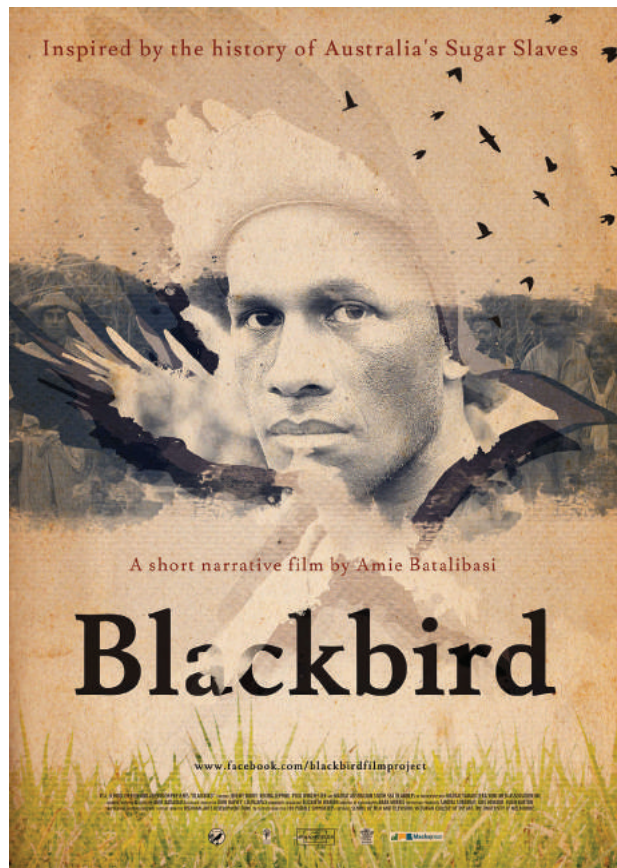
## Awards & Grants

- Sydney Indie Film Festival, 2017. Winner: Best Drama Film, Winner: Best Female Lead. Nominated: Best Male Lead.
- Best of the Fest Award, Pasifika Film Festival, Sydney 2016.
- Moving Clickers 'Kickalong' Award for Postgraduate FTV (Narrative) Production Script Award, VCA School of Film and TV, Melbourne University, 2015.
- Recipient of the 2015 Panavision Script Production Award, VCA School of Film and TV, Melbourne University.
- Recipient of the Margaret Lawrence Social Justice Award 2015, VCA School of Film and TV, Melbourne University.
- Recipient of funding from Regional Arts Development Fund (RADF) - Mackay City Council, Queensland State Government, 2015.

## Media Interviews & Articles

- "Blackbird: an emotional film tells the untold history of Australia's sugar slaves": NITV/ SBS website, Oct 2017. <https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/2017/10/12/blackbird-emotional-film-tells-untold-history-australias-sugar-slaves>
- "Solomon Islanders shine in award-winning historical film", Blackbird: Radio Australia, Oct 2017. <https://www.facebook.com/notes/radio-australia/solomon-islanders-shine-in-award-winning-historical-film-blackbird/1886503784699892/>
- "Young Solomon Islander actor wins prestigious Sydney film award": Solomon Islands Broadcasting Commission Online, Oct 2017. <http://www.sibconline.com.sb/young-solomon-islander-actor-wins-prestigious-sydney-film-award/>
- "Short Film Highlights the History of Blackbirding", ABC Tropical North, Mackay, Qld, 28 July, 2015: <http://www.abc.net.au/local/photos/2015/07/23/4279350.htm>
- Radio New Zealand International, Radio Interview, 7 July 2015 with director Amie Batalibasi: <http://www.radionz.co.nz/international/programmes/datelinepacific/audio/201761262/film-to-explore-blackbirding-of-solomon-islanders>
- "Blackbird Takes Flight", The Star Weekly, Melbourne, 24 June, 2015: <http://www.starweekly.com.au/features/blackbird-takes-flight/>
- "Bittersweet - sugar cane's history exposed by Footscray filmmaker", West Art Now, Blog, 17 June, 2015: <http://www.westartnow.com.au/blog/2015/6/bittersweet-sugarcanes-dark-history-exposed-by-footscray-filmmaker>
- "'Blackbird' the Film", Solomon Star, Honiara, Solomon Islands, 10 June, 2015: <http://www.solomonstarnews.com/news/national/7308-blackbird-the-film>
- "Australian South Sea Islander history to be reflected in short film", ABC Tropical North, Mackay, Queensland, 10 June, 2015: <http://www.abc.net.au/local/photos/2015/06/10/4252329.htm>
- "Filmmaker draws on family history in her documentary", The Daily Mercury, Mackay, Queensland, 6 June, 2015: <http://www.dailymercury.com.au/news/filmmaker-draws-on-family-history-in-her-documenta/2663013/>





## Festival Screenings

- Festival Rochefort Pacifique, France, April, 2018.
- Melbourne Women in Film Festival, Melbourne, Australia, Feb 2018.
- Sydney Indie Film Festival, 2017.
- St Kilda Film Festival, Melbourne, Australia, 2017.
- 14th FIFO International Oceanian Documentary Film Festival, Tahiti, 2017
- Maoriland Film Festival, New Zealand, 2017. Participant: Native Slam project.
- imagineNATIVE Media Arts & Film Festival, Toronto, Canada, 2016. Participant: 2016 imagineNATIVE Story Lab.
- New Zealand International Film Festival, Auckland, New Zealand, 2016
- WINDA Film Festival, Sydney, Australia, 2016
- Skåbmagovat Film Festival, Inari, Finland, 2016
- Pasifika Film Fest, Sydney & Brisbane, Australia, 2016. Winner: Best of the Fest Award
- Wairoa Maori Film Festival, New Zealand, 2016





## Contact Details

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