

BFI presents

A CHROMOSOM FILM PRODUCTION in association with
THIRD FILMS, ECHOTANGO, VARIOUS FILMS and GABRIELLE BRADY
in co-production with WDR

ISLAND OF THE HUNGRY GHOSTS

A film by Gabrielle Brady

94 min. | Germany, UK, Australia | 2018

Theatrical Distribution:

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SHORT SYNOPSIS

On an isolated island in the Indian Ocean, land crabs migrate in their millions from the jungle to the sea. The same jungle hides a high-security Australian detention centre where thousands of asylum seekers have been locked away indefinitely. Their only connection to the outside world is trauma counsellor Poh Lin Lee.

LONG SYNOPSIS

Located off the coast of Indonesia, the Australian territory of Christmas Island is inhabited by migratory crabs travelling in their millions from the jungle towards the ocean, in a movement that has been provoked by the full moon for hundreds of thousands of years.

Poh Lin Lee is a “trauma therapist” who lives with her family in this seemingly idyllic paradise. Every day, she talks with the asylum seekers held indefinitely in a high-security detention centre hidden in the island’s core, attempting to support them in a situation that is as unbearable as its outcome is uncertain.

As Poh Lin and her family explore the island’s beautiful yet threatening landscape, the local islanders carry out their “hungry ghost” rituals for the spirits of those who died on the island without a burial. They make offerings to appease the lost souls who are said to be wandering the jungles at night looking for home.

In the intimacy of her therapy sessions, as Poh Lin listens to the growing sense of despair of the people she counsels, she begins to feel the creeping dystopia reverberate through her own life.

ISLAND OF THE HUNGRY GHOSTS is a hybrid documentary that moves between the natural migration and the chaotic and tragic migration of the humans, which is in constant metamorphoses by the unseen decision-making structures.



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

As I write this, there are people I met years ago on Christmas Island, who are still being detained in one of Australia's three offshore immigration detention centres – with no way of knowing when, or if, they will ever be released. Under the country's border force law, it is illegal to arrive by boat to Australia and ask for refugee status. Those who attempt the journey are either intercepted at sea by the Navy and towed back to the country they arrived from, or they're taken to one of these three remote islands and detained indefinitely.

The oldest and largest of these detention centres is on the Australian territory of Christmas Island.

During the years my good friend Poh Lin worked on Christmas Island as a trauma therapist with the people being detained, I would listen to her increasingly distressing stories of what she was experiencing. Poh Lin witnessed the changes from a time where families stayed together in the centres and were able to leave for day trips to see the island. After some months, eventually leaving for the mainland ready to begin their new lives.

But over the years, families were increasingly separated and taken to different centres. The day trips around the island stopped and eventually no one was allowed to leave the detention centre. What was once a few months on the island became years. Many of the people being held in the Christmas Island facility were transferred to other camps on Nauru or Papua New Guinea and exposed to worse conditions with no hope of ever making it to Australia. Poh Lin's work as a therapist had morphed – she was now working with people who were inside of a new void, a new kind of nightmare. For the first time in her work, Poh Lin was witnessing her clients mentally deteriorating.

The process of making this film took over four years. And with the trust of Poh Lin, the people seeking asylum and the locals of Christmas Island, we have reflected back on what has happened on this remote island at a time when no one was watching.

Island of the Hungry Ghosts is also a story about Christmas Island itself; one of the last discovered places on earth. A land with no original inhabitants. Where the ancient natural migrations are a reminder of a long past and an imagined future. A place where the deep and untamed jungles are populated with hungry ghosts, wandering at night, searching for home.

– Gabrielle Brady



INTERVIEW WITH GABRIELLE BRADY AND POH LIN LEE

Filmmaker Gabrielle Brady and therapist Poh Lin Lee have been close friends since 2007. They met while both were living in Mongolia where they worked: Gabrielle was directing a TV series for teenagers and Poh Lin was working as a social worker with a domestic violence NGO. Over ten years they have both travelled and lived on opposite sides of the world, but always remained in close contact. In 2010, Gabrielle travelled to Benin, West Africa for the birth of Poh's first daughter, and Gabrielle's god-daughter, Poppy, who is also featured in the film. Gabrielle was living in Jakarta working on a film when Poh invited her across to Christmas Island for a holiday and to catch up. This was the beginnings of their collaboration on ISLAND OF THE HUNGRY GHOSTS.

Interviewer: *So Gabrielle, you first went to the Christmas Island as a tourist to visit Poh?*

Gabrielle: I was living in Jakarta at the time, so it was a short flight across. And I was thrown in to the beautiful paradise parts of Christmas Island. Poh was on holidays at the time and so didn't want to talk much about what was going on with her. But at the very end of my trip was a bit of a turning point. At that time asylum seekers were still allowed out of the centre for short afternoon trips around the island—usually just once every six months or so. And on one of these trips I went along and was able to meet three young guys from Afghanistan. There was immense relief that they were out of the centre for the afternoon and they were in high spirits. They shared jokes and songs. They were actually seeing the island for the first time—even though they had been there for over a year. When they were taken back to the centre there was just a very deep and heavy silence. It was so hard to let them go and not be able to do anything about it. After this Poh took me to one of the remote jungles. We cut our way through the growth. And at the look out, down below, for the first time, I could see the enormous high security detention centre. Imagining these young guys I had just met back in this anonymous and looming place was terrifying. I was lost for words. The stark contrast of the beauty I had experienced on the island and then this kind of horror I saw in front of me really marked me, along with the atmosphere and strangeness of the island. This planted a seed for the beginnings of the film idea.

Poh, were you aware from the beginning that your experience on the island could be a film?

Poh: When Gab first arrived to the island I was really in the grips of helplessness in terms of what we could or could not do as a counselling agency. The authorities were really starting to close the shutters in terms of information sharing. I had a feeling of relief that Gab, someone I'm so close to, was finally seeing my reality a little bit. But as much as I wanted to take action, I also felt a fear surround it. Literally everything we did was being monitored and we even thought that our emails were being monitored. So I was less open to any possibility of a film. But there was a turning point for me when they cancelled our plans to celebrate Refugee week. It was all shut down. This was such an explicit use of power and up until then I just hoped that maybe it would lessen at some point and that things would resume. And at that point I realised it wasn't going to get better, it would only get worse and I had to think about what that meant for the people I was working with, myself and my family. So I felt a sense of urgency to work with Gab to create some kind of platform for those people seeking asylum that wanted to be a part of creating a record of what was happening on the island in this moment of time.

Gabrielle: I had said to Poh from the beginning that I am not interested in any image that has already been shown of the island in the media. So even down to the scene where we do see the detention camps, that the way we arrive at it in the film it's not like anything people have seen before. And Poh totally agreed. So we had this intention together. We wanted to avoid anything that was shown in the media before. In the film the detention centre has more of a

psychological presence. The film explores the feeling of threat the place has—as a kind of pulsating force that emanates from the jungle.

So the island was a really big part of it for you?

Gabrielle: Yes. The island is the film.

Poh: The Island is also the intrigue...

Gabrielle: Definitely. The context of this specific island is so relevant to the overall film. Even the allegorical nature of an island itself. The history of Christmas Island is that there are no native people that have lived on that island. It's just the crabs. So everyone that lives there has immigrated by choice or by force at some point in recent history. My first impressions of the island was that it is like a paradise in many ways: the beautiful waters, the whales... I was even swimming with the dolphins on my first trip there. But then it's also incredibly wild and rugged and you really do get the sense that no one ever should have arrived there. Because there's not even a real landing point and it's got jagged rocks around the whole island. You feel the roughness and you feel very small in comparison to the movement of nature there. Even the waters are in constant movement between flat, idyllic and safe, and then a raging swell can bring 5 metre waves and be big enough to sweep cars out to sea. The island has a kind of double face that was a really interesting contrast for me. The idea of beauty and horror being so present in this one tiny island was a huge reason why I started digging deeper in the first place.

How did you both know that Poh should also be in the film?

Gabrielle: We were in discussion about Poh's role on the island and what she was witnessing for a long time. And in these discussions Poh would have a way of looking at it that was very unique—a kind of mix between philosophical, poetic, and reflective ideas around displacement. So it wasn't just her position as a therapist in the middle of this difficult situation, it was also the way Poh had of grasping what was happening and the way of engaging with it—this is what touched me deeply. Just as a philosophical approach or a poetic approach doesn't try to put in your face these message-driven ideas, but instead helps you to step back and see it in a much wider context of human themes. So for me it was pretty clear early on that we would enter in the world of the island through Poh's eyes.

Poh: And for me, during the early parts of the process of working with Gab, I had this kind of realisation that I needed to step up and be in front of the camera, that I couldn't just be in the film as the therapist. With the asylum seekers and the locals and other people's stories, they are being really generous in their intimacy. If I only stayed as the therapist, this would be taking up a kind of privilege and position regularly used in my profession. I also understood that the implications for me in sharing my story were minimal in comparison to the people seeking asylum. Their decision to participate in the film propelled me forward and across that line to show myself as a mother, a partner, a woman, with all the bumps and complexities, rather than comfortably hiding behind just my professional identity.

Gabrielle: For me, it was also the way that Poh would speak to her daughter Poppy about it. She never tried to sugar-coat what was happening. Of course she also wasn't ever filling dark images in her head. But Poh and her partner Art were always treading this fine line and it was just captivating to watch those conversations. And in this very honest interaction I could almost see the situation for the first time. When Poppy was like, "That doesn't make any sense. That is completely unfair. Why are they there if they haven't done anything wrong? Why can't they come and out see the island?" I was like, yeah, this doesn't make any sense at all.

So Gabrielle, this helped you to find a perspective for the film?

Gabrielle: Yes it did. I think in a lot of really good films, it's not about showing something, or revealing something for the first time. It's just seeing the familiar in a new way that can then lead you to feel shocked or disturbed. We already knew a lot of what was going on—it was reported extensively within Australia. But suddenly in these conversations between Poh and Poppy the familiar became really disturbing. Because I was faced with the questions of how did we get here? I became completely disturbed by the situation.

How did you arrive at filming the therapy scenes?

Poh: Initially during the conversations with Gabrielle about how we might film with people—and what kind of scenes would be filmed—I had two things I was considering. I was thinking that Interviewing someone, without a therapeutic framework could run the risk of inviting a linear, factual telling of one's story, similar to what is required by the immigration system in determining if someone is a "genuine refugee". So I was worried that if Gab did do this kind of testimony interviews, that in a way it might reinforce the very ideas we were questioning. My second concern was ensuring that people did not experience re-traumatisation. In thinking through how to record people's stories in ways that were similar to what I was witnessing in therapy—multi-storied and honouring of both effects and resistance—we started to look at the possibility of filming some therapy sessions.

Gabrielle: I was always really curious about Poh's work as a therapist in this kind of environment and was fascinated by the idea of what it would be like sitting in on a therapy session. To me that's the epitome of an intimate space. So when you have that against the vastness of the island—this presented a very interesting contrast to me. It was also a counter reaction to the media representation at the time. The policies themselves are all about distancing. Creating people seeking asylum at such a distance. So I was asking myself: what is the closest space we can be with someone. I was also really curious about filming in this space that is unknown—for all of the people in there. Including the person telling the story. So everyone is discovering. This creates a really interesting starting point for filming.

So in the therapy sessions you also witnessed something that people get to know about themselves and their lives that they didn't know previously? Which doesn't always happen in straight interviews.

Gabrielle: Exactly. To me this is far more interesting than a director's interview to somebody speaking directly in a testimony style about parts of their life they already know.

Poh: And I wanted to invite people to participate in a two way process and for them not to walk away feeling like they had yet again given away a part of themselves. I had a hunch that the filming process could be developed to be in itself therapeutic.



FILMMAKER BIOGRAPHIES

GABRIELLE BRADY – Director, Writer and Producer

Gabrielle Brady is an Australian filmmaker who makes documentary and hybrid films. Gabrielle studied direction at the Cuban International Film School (EICTV), where she lived and made films for three years. Gabrielle has lived nomadically for the past ten years, traveling between Cuba, Mongolia, Indonesia, the Australian central desert and Europe. Her short film *Island* was commissioned as part of the Guardian documentary series and premiered at the 2017 Sheffield festival. *Island Of The Hungry Ghosts* is her first feature-length film.

MICHAEL LATHAM – Cinematographer

A graduate of VCA school of Film and Television, Michael Latham began working in film between documentary and narrative films. With key collaborators he has garnered success locally and internationally. Michael's debut documentary feature, *Ukraine Is Not A Brothel*, was his first collaboration with director Kitty Green. Premiering at the Venice Film Festival, the film went on to be nominated for 7 AACTA awards, winning Best Documentary. Their next project, *The Face of Ukraine: Casting Oksana Baiul*, won Sundance's prize for the Best Short Documentary. More recently, the Netflix Original *Casting JonBenet* also premiered at Sundance. Michael's other collaborations include Luci Schroder's Sundance short *Slapper* and Rodd Rathjen's Cannes short *Tau Seru*. Both projects went on to win best Australian short awards.

KATHARINA FIEDLER – Editor

Katharina Fiedler has worked as an editor since 2007. Her films have earned accolades worldwide, including at the Berlinale, IDFA, Los Angeles and Hong Kong film festivals, and many others. Her thesis film *A Letter From Germany* (director: Sebastian Mez) screened widely and won the Prix George Foundation 2011 at Visions du Réel in Nyon. *Metamorphosen* (director: Sebastian Mez) had its world premiere at the Berlinale in 2013 and was nominated for the First Steps Award. Her film *My Name Is Salt* (director: Farida Pacha) won the IDFA Award for First Appearance in Amsterdam and over 30 other international awards and was nominated for the Deutscher Kamerapreis in editing. She was recognized for Berlinale Talents and lives and works in Berlin.

LEO DOLGAN – Sound Designer

Leo Dolgan studied sound engineering in Huesca (Spain) and he specialized in sound for cinema at the EICTV (International Film & TV School) in Cuba. He has been in charge of the sound for more than 15 professional feature films, including *Island Of The Hungry Ghosts*, *Mi Querida Cofradía* and *One*. After having worked overseas for six years, he currently lives in Barcelona, where he combines his work as a sound mixer with sound post production and teaching. He is the sound manager at the post production company Moonlight Barcelona and he teaches sound for cinema at the Catalonia Film School and Barcelona Activa.

AARON CUPPLES – Composer

Aaron Cupples is an Australian-born, London-based composer and record producer, working internationally with alternative and experimental artists such as Blanck Mass, Spiritualized, The Drones, and his own project, Civil Civic. *Island Of The Hungry Ghosts* is his first feature-length score as a film composer, which was created almost entirely with oversized, stretched and augmented wire instrumentation. The bespoke wire instruments were tuned, bowed and electromagnetically oscillated, resulting in rich and haunting layers of resonance to give voice to themes of isolation, migration and incarceration set amongst the ancient landscapes of the island and the intangible, enduring nature of human conviction.

POH LIN LEE – Narrative Practice Consultant

Poh Lin Lee is an Australian social worker who has been providing narrative therapy to individuals, families and communities for the 12 years across a number of countries and contexts. Poh Lin is dedicated to creatively co-researching alternative practices in response to trauma, injustice and the operations of power that render people, families and communities limited in their possibilities for practices of life and expressions that reflect their values and commitments. Poh Lin is a member of the international teaching faculty of Dulwich Centre and is on the teaching faculty for the Masters in Narrative Therapy and Community work at Melbourne University.

ALEXANDER WADOUH – Lead Producer

Alexander Wadouh has been working in the film industry since 1999. He completed his studies in film production at the DFFB in 2006. He then went on to work for the Berlin-based production company Essential Film GmbH on numerous international art-house movies, as well as for the French World Sales Coproduction Office. In 2006, Alexander founded the film production company Chromosom Film with the goal to develop and produce national and international projects for all distribution channels. His films have won multiple awards (German Film Prizes, European Film Award, Bronze Lion, etc.) and have been screened in festivals and cinemas around the world.

SAMM HAILLAY – UK Co-Producer

As lead producer at Third Films, Samm Hailay has eight feature credits to his name, including coproductions with Sweden, Germany and Australia. He is a member of BAFTA, EAVE and ACE. Samm sat on the Short Film Jury in Berlin 2010 to award the Golden Bear. He is a group leader for EAVE, Feature Expanded and the Venice College Cinema. He also delivers training for Creative England, Film London and FACT. Samm has been a patron or board member at several film festivals and is also a film academic.

ALEX KELLY – Australian Co-Producer

Alex Kelly is a Central Australian based artist and filmmaker. Alex worked for ten years with leading Australian social change arts company Big hART as Creative Producer of *Ngapartji Ngapartji* and was National Producer from 2012-2014. Alex's documentary credits include producing *The Island*, *Nothing Rhymes with Ngapartji* and co-producing *The Namatjira Project*, production managing *Coniston: Telling it True* and directing *Queen of the Desert*. Alex was the Global Impact & Distribution Producer on Avi Lewis and Naomi Klein's *This Changes Everything* project. She has recently joined the team on Maya Newell's forthcoming film *KIDS* (working title) as impact producer. In 2013 Alex was awarded a Churchill Fellowship and explored at models for social change documentary impact and engagement in UK, Canada and USA. Alex is a 2016 Sidney Myer Creative Fellow.

GIZEM ACARLA – German Co-Producer

Gizem Acarla is a Turkish filmmaker and producer based in Cologne, Germany. During her master studies in Film and TV in Istanbul, she worked as production manager and freelance producer in commercials, music video promos and short films. In 2014, she moved to Germany to pursue her postgraduate studies on film at the Academy of Media Arts Cologne. After working for the acclaimed German production company Heimatfilm and participating in three international co-productions, one of which was premiered in Cannes 2015, Gizem founded her own company Various Films in 2015.

CHROMOSOM FILM

Chromosom Film GmbH was founded in 2006 and is based in Berlin. The aim is to develop and to produce national and international cinema features and documentaries with a political position and zeitgeist. The goal is to create a value that goes beyond the story. Good stories need time and space. We value quality, not quantity.

THIRD FILMS

Third Films gives an authentic voice to people who are felt were often stereotyped or marginalised in mainstream cinema and other media platforms. Their first feature film, *Better Things*, premiered in Cannes in 2008.

They have since made eight feature films and numerous other short form works, which premiered in Cannes, Berlin, Venice, Toronto, and Sundance amongst others, and have sold their work all over the world, as well as raised over £3m in budgets from a wide range of public, private and market sources. All of these films have either been generated and/or developed by our core team. We continue to generate projects in house as well as working with some of the most exciting writing and directing talent in the UK and further afield. Third gained MEDIA slate development funding in 2008 and a BFI Vision Award in 2013. Both of these landmarks propelled Third to the next level, allowing two to become four.

The present is an inflection point: a time for Third to capitalize upon its output and experience to build a bigger and broader engine for our own work and the work of current and emergent partners. We want to do this by pushing ourselves to reach a wider audience while retaining the company's spirit of rebellious authenticity and creative ambition. Our transition from features to a combined slate of features and episodic drama is primary driver and objective of that evolution.

ECHOTANGO

echotango is an umbrella for creative projects developed, produced and directed by Central Australian artist, filmmaker and communications strategist, Alex Kelly. echotango focuses on creative responses to environmental and social justice issues with an exploration of narrative interventions and shifts. www.echotango.org

VARIOUS FILMS

Various Films is a film production firm established in Cologne in 2015 and built on the academic and professional background of its founder Gizem Acarla, who has worked as a filmmaker and producer in Turkey. Various Films produces short and feature formats for national and international audiences and currently works on creating a novel platform for financing commercial content production.



CREDITS

Directed and written by

Gabrielle Brady

Cinematographer

Michael Latham

Editor

Katharina Fiedler

Sound Designer

Leo Dolgan

Original Score

Aaron Cupples

Produced by

Alexander Wadouh

Producers

Samm Haillay

Alex Kelly

Gizem Acarla

Gabrielle Brady

Co-Producer

Julia Niethammer

Executive Producers

Lizzie Francke

Sarah Perks

Commissioning Editor

Jutta Krug (WDR)

Featuring

The people seeking asylum who took part in this film

Poh Lin Lee

Arthur Floret

Poppy Floret

Albertine Floret

Christine Cummins

Azmi Yon

Michaelia Francis

Kelvin Kok Bin Lee

Susan Ong

Narrative Practice Consultant

Poh Lin Lee

Script Consultants

Lillah Halla

Francoise Von Roy

Noelia Lacayo

Researchers

Florian Kunert

Gabrielle Brady

First AD

Zena Kells

Field Producer

Dani Yannoulis

Color Grader

Aline Biz

Post Production House

Moonlight, Barcelona

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