

A film by Angie Abdilla

wanja

The spirit of the Block's
Aboriginal community

Wanja will premiere at the Sydney Film Festival on Wed
18th June, 6.30pm George Street cinema.
Wanja will also be part of the Message Sticks film festival at
the Sydney Opera House on Sunday 6th July, 3.15pm.



Synopsis

Wanja is a documentary about 'the Block', through the eyes of Auntie Barb and the life of Wanja her blue heeler dog, recently deceased. The community on the Block's many and varied stories of Wanja reflect on the issues affecting this indigenous community in the heart of Sydney.

Auntie Barb is an elder of Redfern's community, who lived on the Block for twenty years with her family and dog, Wanja. Wanja was an integral part of the community, known to all for her ability to sniff out the police – in uniform and undercover – "the Block's guardian angel".

Through Wanja, Auntie Barb and the community's memories of this tenacious, loyal, smart and loving dog tell of the early days on the Block when there were elders and families, good housing and a strong sense of community.

The stories of Wanja tell us how the tension between the community and police escalated, why the housing has continued to deteriorate and largely been demolished, and why the strength of the community - it's elders, moved on. Auntie Barb was one of the last elders forced off the Block. In spite of this, Auntie Barb continues to call the Block her community and home.

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Director's Biography

Angie Abdilla is a Tasmanian Aboriginal descendant, writer and director. Angie's documentary Wanja is her directorial debut since finishing studies at the AFTRS. Angie's work, Wanja #1, a single channel video installation, combining the concepts of documentary and video art was Angie's first exhibition this year. She has worked as an attachment to writer/director Rachel Perkins on the documentary series, The First Australians. Angie's short film Chickboxer, screened at the Guringai Festival 2005 and 2006. She has curated and co-coordinated the Short Black Films festival and has taught film workshops in and around Sydney. Angie studied as an undergraduate Media Arts and Production at the University of Technology Sydney and documentary at the Australian Film Television and Radio School.

Screening Dates and Times

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Director's Statement

My intention on the outset was to make a film that illustrates the humanity within this particular community in Sydney who struggles against desperate odds. The stories of Wanja – “the dog that sensed and attacked coppers” – became the vehicle for creating an accessible film about the Block. These stories explore the deeper issues of strained relations between the police and the Block's community and illustrate a community whose kinship and sense of spirit lives on within what could be mistaken as a war zone.

For the wider community ‘the Block’ has become known as Australia's ghetto, drug den and crime haven from the years of media misrepresentation. This documentary offers a candid insight to the complexities of the community and police harassment.

This is Auntie Barb's story. She is one of the Block's few remaining elders. Auntie Barb takes us on a journey from her early childhood, being stolen and growing up in a girls home, to finding a sense of place in the Block's staunch Aboriginal community; “it was good in the past, there were lots of families, no drugs, just alcohol. No problems with the police... Bit of problem now and again, but not as bad as it is now”. Auntie Barb goes on to illustrate the demise of the community through the arrival of drugs, the persistent harassment and violence of police and continued mismanagement and dilapidation of the housing. Beneath Auntie Barb's deep and husky voice we hear her despondency and start to understand the crippling feeling of government neglect.

The community's memories reveal a deeper, layered narrative and expose a unique perspective of the confrontational and difficult stories of police violence, abuse and harassment. Michelle laughs as she tells of when Wanja, trying to protect a young lad from being thrown into a cop car head first - jumped in the car herself and ferociously refused to let the cops in. She reveals that young boy was the late TJ Hickey, “that little boy passed on now – they ended up getting him. I still say to this day they killed that boy, I don't care what the police say.”

The police's perspective is granted here only through the visualisation of their CCTV surveillance control room. Here we see through their eyes a community going about their daily business, but begin to understand the pervasiveness of their surveillance cameras - and, through their monitoring - their constant presence by foot and car patrols.

These stories combined work to create a highly nuanced and critical understanding of the community: the people, the place, the spirit of the Block.

Developed and produced in association with the Indigenous Branch of the Australian Film Commission

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