



Documentary 'Guilty' shot at Docklands Studios for six of its 13 day shoot.

## SHOOTING SMALL

While shooting in a studio may seem out of reach to smaller productions, Docklands has recently hosted several projects with modest budgets. Jackie Keast reports.

**M**elbourne's Docklands Studios has been in demand of late. HBO's *The Leftovers* used the studio to shoot last year, and the last couple of months have also seen high profile local films like the Spierig Bros' *Winchester* like Leigh Whannell's *Stem* grace its sound stages. Yet the ebb and flow of the industry means that Docklands doesn't always have its sights set on the big end of town, and smaller projects can be accommodated.

However, CEO Rod Allan says that lower budget or independent productions often believe the studio is out of their reach – a notion he's keen to combat. He tells IF that the facility is trying to cater to "all colours"; from music videos through to international projects like *The Leftovers*.

"We're always trying to make sure we keep our eye on the international horizon and bigger productions to see when they're going to fall and how much of our resources they need to use," says. "At the next level, we're looking at trying to position more mainstream broadcast television, domestic feature films and so forth, like *Winchester*. Then at the next level, you're trying to

see where there are opportunities to position other productions that might want to use the facilities."

Dockland Studios has been wholly owned by the Victorian government since 2008, and Allan says that in this way, supporting the local industry and emerging filmmakers is a key part of its remit.

"If you accept the fact that more independent films are likely to be budget challenged, and you can find a way around that and reach an agreement, then it's so much better [for them]," he says. "They then get the opportunity to work in an optimum environment, which gives their project the absolute best chance that it can be successful as possible."

Earlier this year, Docklands had three small budget productions on the lot around the same time as *Winchester*: sci-fi *The Wheel*, documentary *Guilty*, and gritty indie *Choir Girl*.

As *The Wheel* is a sci-fi, the film's producers Veronica Sive and Silvio Salom knew from the outset that they would need to build sets. Initially they had a location scout look at warehouses. However, Sive says there were multiple issues with this – they couldn't find one the right height, power was an issue, as was air conditioning and parking. There were also issues

with soundproofing which would likely lead to costs in ADR.

Sive says overall, a studio ended up the most cost effective option. "I do believe that there's a misunderstanding about the rental you pay. But the truth is you never hear a plane, you never hear the rain, you never have a problem if it's hot or cold."

A studio also offers the advantage of efficient pre-production – everything can be pre-lit, for example – and allows for true 10-hour days during the shoot, says Sive.

"You can up your page count. I think for independent producers that's a big thing. So your shoot period can actually be shorter because you're not spending any time wasted in a day, making it like an eight or seven hour day because you've had to allow for travel to

locations or you've had to allow for people to wrap," she says.

Salom says the studio reduces a lot of the complexity and stress for crew, which means they can focus on the creative. Both producers are keen to bring a second film to Docklands later this year, with Sive calling it an "industry friendly facility".

"The people running it, they totally understand the industry and that makes a huge difference," she says.

Allan says Docklands' approach is to try and provide a personalised service and as much support as possible. "Once a client's here, whichever client it is, whether it be someone making something on a really low budget, or our big clients, the attitude is the same. That's something we try very hard to do."

The studio's support appealed to *Guilty* producer Maggie Miles. A hybrid documentary, *Guilty* explores the final days of convicted drug smuggler Myuran Sukumaran, who became an

'The Wheel' director Dee McLachlan with DOP Garry Richards. 1st AD Rick Beecroft and star Jackson Gallagher on set at Docklands.



accomplished artist before he was executed in Indonesia in April 2015.

As well as archive and documentary footage, the film involves what Miles calls "artist's impressions" of Sukumaran's last 72 hours. They needed a studio to shoot the scenes in the cell where he was held up until his final days.

"I personally didn't think that we would be able to afford to film in Docklands Studios because my presumption was that it would be out of our price range," says Miles.

"Myself and the production manager Darren McFarlane met with Rod Allan at Docklands and had the most incredible discussion about death row films and the death penalty... Rod, he's a cinefile I'd say, who had a vast knowledge of really important interesting documentary films on this subject.

"He along with the rest of the team at Docklands enabled us to slot into a little window that they had there, worked in with us within our budget and our timeframe, and actually made it possible for us to film there. We like to think [that was] because they wanted to support this film in particular because it is, we feel, a film about a really important subject matter."

The last six days of *Guilty's* 13 day shoot were spent at Docklands. After being on location Miles says it was "invaluable" to shoot comfortably with place to park trucks, and to have make-up, wardrobe and production offices on site. The shoot also involved several of Sukumaran's real paintings, and Miles says Docklands allowed them a secure locked area to store the artworks outside of the sound stage.

Like Miles, *Choir Girl* producer Ivan Malekin was initially hesitant that Docklands would be able to work for the film's budget.

"Once we started talking to Rod, they were very accommodating - they wanted us there and they wanted to make it work. It was a surprise," he says.

*Choir Girl* features multiple locations, which on a small budget was always going to be a challenge. Shooting at Docklands allowed the team to reduce those locations; they not only built sets in the sound stage, but also filmed in Docklands' production offices and in the loading dock.

Not every film needs to build a set, but Docklands also hires out its production offices to projects; *Sibling Rivalry* recently used Docklands' offices for pre-production before heading out on location, while *Lion* used the studio as its production base during filming in Melbourne and Tasmania.

For Allan that isn't simply about revenue, but also about supporting the industry and building relationships; a producer who uses the offices for one film, might come back to shoot in the studio for their next.

As for Docklands' future, Allan says its "no secret" it would like another sound stage built on the lot.

"We've discussed this with the government in the past. So it's on their radar. Ultimately, it's their call. If we had another sound stage we'd be more competitive for international productions. So that's something we would certainly like to see eventually."



Indie feature 'Choir Girl' not only used a sound stage but also Docklands' production offices to shoot.

Photo credit: Raphael Chan



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