

▶▶ You have to go all the way back to before **Hugh Jackman** went all jazz-hands musical theatre to find anything that could be described as an 'Inner West movie.' But when it rains, it pours and 13 years after the release of *Erskineville Kings*, Inner Westies will soon be presented with two films that hold a mirror up to their community. *Not Suitable for Children* is about a slacker Newtownian (played by *True Blood*'s **Ryan Kwanten**) on a mission to impregnate someone before radiation treatment renders him infertile. *Being Venice* follows the travails of an Inner West woman breaking up with a lover, having an affair with her (spoken for) best friend and dealing with her father moving in. We asked **Miro Bilbrough** (*Being Venice*'s writer-director), **Michael Lucas** and **Sarah Snook** (the screenwriter and leading lady of *Not Suitable for Children*) to tell us what they love about the Inner West, what their films hope to capture about it, and what advice they have for Inner Westies hoping to follow in their footsteps.

#1 Michael Lucas

Based: **Surry Hills** Occupation: **Screenwriter**

Not Suitable for Children is autobiographical. I'm 33 and now live in Surry Hills but I spent a good portion of my twenties living in Inner West share houses and throwing lots of parties with my housemates. The house in the film is **The Nunnery**. It's in Forbes Street, Newtown, and was once a nunnery, then a **hippy commune**. There were still hippies living there when we took it over to shoot. I never went to one there myself, but it's an infamous party house and has been for decades. No doubt it will, like the neighbouring houses, be renovated and gentrified. The lead character has inherited the house but, realistically, it is now not the kind of place you would expect a guy like that to be living in, so maybe the film is capturing a **dying world**.

The Inner West has that culture of people in their twenties who **aren't quite settled** into a life choice yet so it was the appropriate terrain for the story. And, visually, the Inner West has a beautiful shabby chic texture. A lot of American romantic comedies are set in impossibly wealthy, clean and gleaming environments whereas the Inner West has texture – a bit of grit, a lot of colour and so much vibrancy.

When I go to American cities that have been so beautifully captured on film I often think that what we have in Australia is a lot more exciting. So why aren't we capturing it in the same way? We certainly capture the outback, and we've well and truly captured the suburbs, but for some reason we haven't really captured the **inner urban areas**.

I hope Inner Westies will feel the film is **authentic**. A lot of the extras were Inner Westies and two of the three main actors in it live in the Inner West. I hope people look at it and recognise part of their own lives. Not just places that they know, but the kind of relationships they have and a world that rings true for them.

The Inner West is an inspiring environment. The cafes are filled with young, hungry, creative people and you feed off that energy. Every morning, when I write, I like to go to a café and sit there with my laptop; there is something about that environment that switches on your creative instincts.

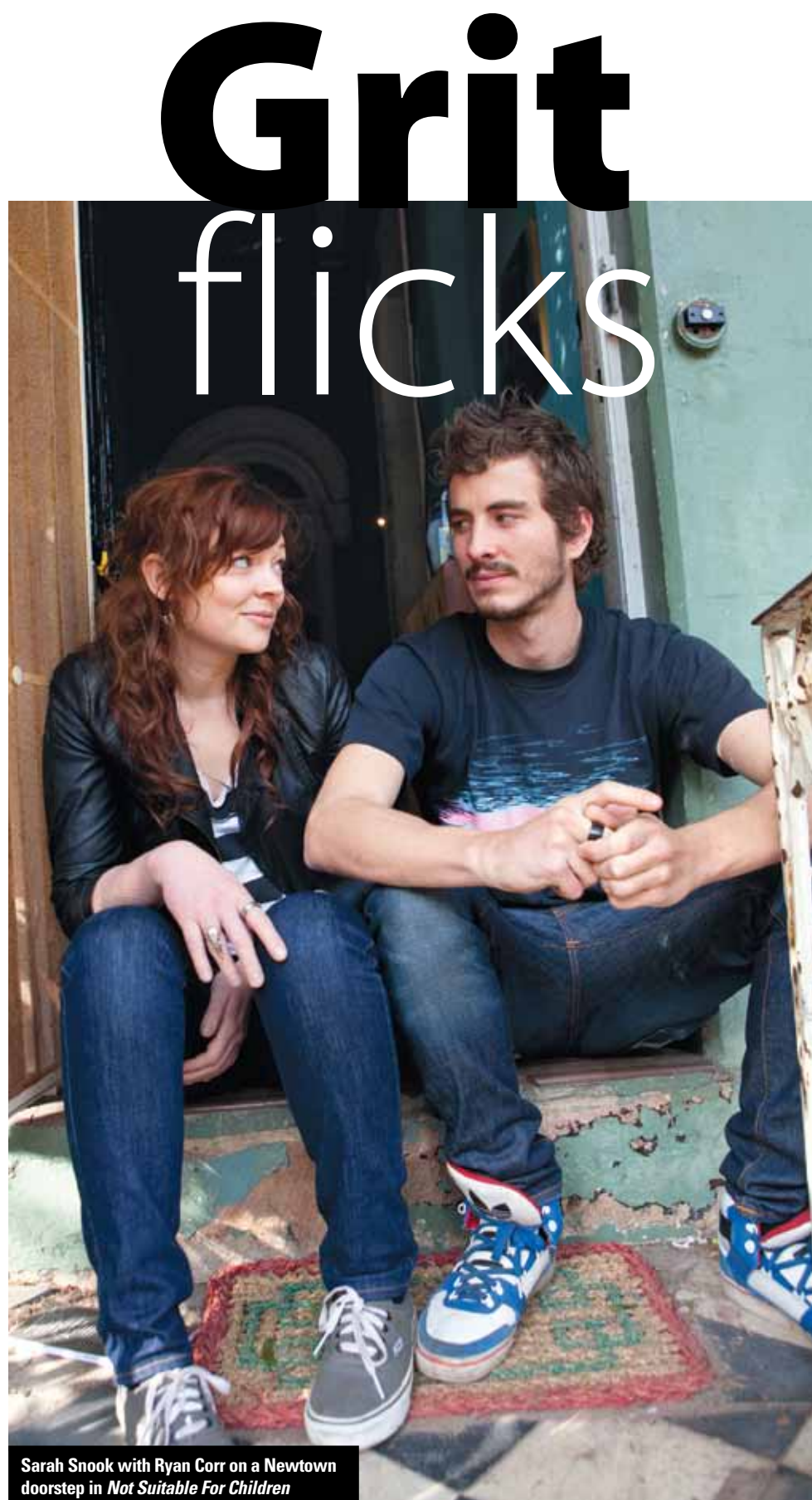
My advice to aspiring screenwriters in the Inner West is to realise that although writing is a solitary activity, filmmaking is an intensely collaborative one. You can be a brilliant writer, but if you can't learn to work with legions of other people, you're going to find it difficult.

#2 Sarah Snook

Based: **Redfern** Occupation: **Actress**

When I came from Adelaide to Sydney to study at NIDA I moved into what was pretty much The Block, near Redfern station. That was my introduction to Sydney and I fell in love with it. I've moved around since then, including stints in Coogee and Randwick but now I've ended up back living in Redfern. A lot of my friends are in **Stanmore** and **Newtown**, so I spend a lot of time in those suburbs as well.

I missed the light – which seems different in the Inner West – when I was living in Coogee. You can see the sunrise in Coogee, if you get up early enough, but you



Sarah Snook with Ryan Corr on a Newtown doorstep in *Not Suitable For Children*

Despite being home to a gazillion actual and aspiring directors, screenwriters and actors, the **Inner West** doesn't loom large in the nation's cinematic consciousness. But, in the chilly shadow of creeping gentrification, a number of local talents have now sought to immortalise on film the **bohemian underbelly** of their much-loved neighbourhood.

don't get to see the sun set because you're in a valley down near the beach. I really love the aesthetic of the Inner West – the **terrace houses**, the **fig trees**, the **parks and gardens**. I think that kind of environment appeals to a lot of artistic people. And it's close to the city. I prefer not to use a car and like to be within walking distance of things. Here I can ride my bike around everywhere. I've done some guest roles on shows like *Packed to the Rafters* and *All Saints* and had a semi-regular role on a **Channel W** show called *Spirited* but I don't get recognised here, not yet anyway. That's good, it means I get to keep my anonymity.

Although Michael wrote the film based on what he

experienced a decade ago, I think that [share houses and partying] scene is still around. Both [the director] **Peter Templeman** and Michael wanted to make sure the film had an **authenticity** to it. We worked pretty hard at that and hopefully we've achieved it. I think when people who live in the Inner West see the film they'll be excited to see locations they know but hopefully what they'll also recognise is an authentic portrayal of the Inner West lifestyle – doing your own thing and not caring too much about it, **taking life as it comes**.

I'm 24, I live in a share house and I went to a great party at my neighbours' house on the weekend. In that way, my life is very similar to that of the character I play in the

film. It's the lifestyle you have in your twenties when you don't have the adult responsibilities like kids and a mortgage.

I guess it is possible that creative people are being **priced out** of the Inner West, in terms of buying anything at least, but I'm happy to rent, as are a lot of my friends in the arts. You have your friends around and you can create your own community. Great art can come out of collaboration and having similar people nearby certainly helps. I would love to own a house in the Inner West – hopefully I'll keep getting employed and be able to afford it one day.

The only advice I would have for other actors living locally is to pass on one of the most important things a drama teacher ever told me: it is **a marathon not a race** and everyone has their own individual journey.

■ **Not Suitable For Children** opens July 12

#3 Miro Bilbrough

Based: **Dulwich Hill** Occupation: **Writer-Director**



Miro Bilbrough (centre) near the Summer Hill Flour Mill – on the set of *Being Venice*, with actors Garry McDonald and Alice McConnell

I lived in Dulwich Hill after I moved to Sydney from New Zealand two decades ago. I've lived in other places but come full circle and ended up back here. I love Dulwich Hill's quietness, its unfashionableness, its incredibly eclectic citizenry. It is quite a soulful place.

The Inner West is, or at least used to be, **more affordable** and it has a **less commercial feel**. The upwardly mobile thing is not hugely attractive to artists because, one, they can't afford it and, two, it doesn't reflect their values.

I would hate to project a future in which the Inner West was emptied of artists. It does happen to areas, most famously Soho in New York in the '80s. So often the areas artists move into are the areas where **fashion and money follows**. I can't predict what is going to happen but I think artists are immensely resourceful; we always find the cracks in the system and that is where we thrive. **You need to be a multitasker** – I teach and script edit as well as pursuing my own projects.

There's something **Edward Hopperesque** about the Inner West, in Rozelle and particularly Balmain, something about the main streets of the area and the slightly dilapidated buildings with their deep-shadowed awnings and wide upstairs verandahs. Cinematographer **Bonnie Elliott**, production designer **Alex Holmes** and I sought out this architectural vernacular for the film. We were also interested in the railway lines: how the suburbs cluster around them, their noisy democracy and restless presence, the random characters you meet.

I wanted to capture the less iconic Sydney in *Being Venice*, its slightly scrappy beauty and sensuality. And I wanted to show the lesser-seen people as well as the places. I don't think we often see the **downwardly mobile artistic milieu** of this town up on screen.

There are quite a few marginal characters who wander through the film and I wanted to show those forgotten people. The Sydney in the film is not the flashy Sydney, the glamorous, glossy, market-driven city seen in so much media.

I'd advise Inner Westies wanting to get into film to be true to their vision. Also, you have to be **creative in how you live your life**, not just in what you put on the page. And you have to be incredibly resilient, it is a long road and, often, a long time between drinks – I began work on *Being Venice* in 2004. Don't do it for money or glamour because there is very little of either. But there is an immense amount of joy and the privilege of doing this kind of creative work.

■ **Being Venice** opens in October

■ Words: **Nigel Bowen**.