

KINO LORBER

BUOYANCY

Written & Directed by Rodd Rathjen

Produced by Samantha Jennings, Kristina Ceyton, Rita Walsh

Australia's Submission for Best International Feature for Academy Awards
Winner, Prize of the Ecumenical Jury Panorama, Berlinale

Australia / 2019 / DCP / Color / 2.39:1 / Languages: Khmer & Thai / 1hr 32 mins

www.buoyancyfilm.org
Instagram: buoyancyfilm
Facebook: buoyancythefilm

Publicity Contact:

David Ninh, dninh@kinolorber.com

Distributor Contact:

Chris Wells, cwells@kinolorber.com

Kino Lorber, Inc.
333 West 39th St., Suite 503
New York, NY 10018

SYNOPSIS

This story of a Cambodian teenager sold into forced labor on a Thai fishing boat is a passionate testimony against social injustice and a moving coming-of-age tale about a boy whose humanity is put to the test.

Spirited 14-year-old Chakra works the rice fields with his family. He yearns for independence and seeks out a local broker who can get him paid work in a Thai factory. Without telling his family, Chakra travels to Bangkok to make his fortune. But when he gets there, he and his new friend Kea realise the broker has lied to them. Along with other Cambodians and Burmese, they are sold to a fishing captain as slaves.

Chakra and Kea are trapped at sea, trawling fish 22 hours a day, surviving on just a handful of cold rice a day. The captain quickly weeds out those weakened by the conditions or trying to escape, and throws them overboard. The trawler sells its catch and restocks its supplies without going to land, making escape impossible. As fellow slaves are tortured and murdered around them, Kea begins to lose his mind. When his only ally is killed, Chakra looks to Rom Ran to understand what it will take to be free. With hope and humanity dwindling, Chakra decides to take control of the trawler.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I came across an article a few years back about life on board a Thai Fishing trawler from the point of view of Cambodian workers, and I couldn't believe what I was reading. The more research I did, the more vivid and confronting the world and characters became. The scale of modern slavery and exploitation in Thailand is vast and hard to grasp. I have since interviewed a lot of survivors who have miraculously made it back to Cambodia or ended up in limbo in shelters in Thailand. The stories of survival these brave men shared with me are the inspiration behind this project.

I felt a bit strange at first telling a story about Cambodians; the culture's foreign to anything I've experienced growing up in Australia. It was really important that I did the research properly, collaborated closely with Cambodians and Thais and made the film with them not for them. This issue is complex and I thought a film would be a really effective way of bringing the subject to light. Because nobody else was making a film about this challenging subject matter, and I had the will and later, luckily the support, to be able to do it. In saying that, it was really important to be truthful and fully understand what I was doing.

It was fundamental that we made BUOYANCY as authentic as possible. Chakra and the majority of the cast were first-time actors. I wanted to cast the non-speaking roles of workers on the trawler with actual workers, who have toiled on these boats for years and survived. Their experience of the day-to-day operations gave the film a presence that is painfully real. All the performances had to be raw and utterly compelling, never venturing into melodrama but always remaining, fresh, focused and dangerous. Chakra's character was always the emotive core of the film. His compromised innocence, the gradual dehumanization that plays out through his story, turns conventional character growth on its head. Violence becomes the only answer for Chakra, and the challenge was to ensure the audience continues to empathize with him once he becomes capable of brutality.

One of the most intriguing elements of this world to me was the perspective of the captains who behave so heartlessly to their enslaved crew. They inflict torture and violence almost as if it is a game, due to the unaccountable power they are allowed to exercise on their isolated trawlers. The only way to comprehend a character such as Ram Ron is to understand that he has experienced the same level of torture and violence in his own rise to power. The audience needs to see that Chakra's youth and resilience offer just the right degree of impressionability to potentially turn him into one of these captains. Through Chakra, the audience should be given uncomfortable insight into how these captains become so devastating in their disregard for human life.

Chakra is unmade as a human being, and once you're unmade you can only struggle to return to what you once were. The actor playing Chakra needed to have the emotional capacity to be

clearly just clinging to a sense of humanity, yet continue to interact in the world with some degree of empathy, despite the unhinging experience of the trawler.

We always made sure the camera had a fierce concentration on each image, an unflinching attention to how everything looked and felt. In some ways we wanted the film to be an endurance test of stark immediacy and primitive regression. The claustrophobic proximity with which the confrontations play out on the trawler gives the audience an acute sensory experience. The shooting style is observational, the psychological tension between characters constantly unnerving.

The absence of dialogue was intended to encourage the audience to experience the working rhythm on board the trawler. I want them to hear the voices of these characters to understand how they are dealing with their deprivations. But the power of this film must primarily lie in silence.

The workers are enslaved silhouettes out in the darkness of space where nobody can hear or help them. This opens up the psychological torment where land and reality at times cease to exist. After a period of time at sea, the audience may begin to question if the film is a kind of allegorical nightmare, but the horror of this world is that it's shockingly real and still happening today.

BUOYANCY was shot to reflect the inner battle Chakra endures, as he tries to hold onto his sanity and focus, tries to hold onto himself, amidst chaos and violence. Chakra's point of view is often composed of small, almost incidental moments that help to punctuate his psychological perspective.

I wanted to shoot the quieter moments on the trawler at early morning and dusk wherever possible. The warm colours and soft texture during these transitions exude a tranquillity that provides an awkward respite between raw acts of violence. Chakra manages to hold onto hope for a long time, and the transitions of day into night and night into day provide small periods of calm from the harshness of day, the blackness of night and the terror of what lies ahead.

It was important that the confronting violence was captured in a nonchalant way. The value of life out on the water is almost less than nothing. It was critical not to become too dramatic at these points. I wanted the audience to feel the detachment and dispassion to murder. These scenes aren't overplayed and coverage is simple. In this way the audience will experience the devastating, emotionless milieu that becomes Chakra's reality. Beatings are not graphic or gory, and largely happen off screen. When Chakra also turns to violence it is shown with a mundane directness, echoing the desensitization that has grown with his experience.

BUOYANCY aims to not only express the primitive need to survive the life and death world of the trawlers, but also to suggest the complexity of trying to return from it. Even if he does survive, Chakra will forever battle against the weight of the trauma he has experienced. I want

the audience to be left wondering if this young man will ever be able to retain his sense of humanity.

PRODUCTION NOTES OVERVIEW

BUOYANCY commenced principal photography in Cambodia in April 2018 and is the debut feature of Director Rodd Rathjen, who also wrote the screenplay.

The lead role of Cambodian teenager Chakra is played by newcomer Sarm Heng, and the captain of the fishing trawler Rom Ran is played by Thai actor and director Thanuwut Kasro.

The film had its World Premiere at the Berlin International Film Festival in the Panorama program where it won the Ecumenical Jury Prize.

The film was selected as Australia's entry for the Best International Feature Film at the 92nd Academy Awards.

GENESIS OF THE FILM

BUOYANCY is a cinematic arthouse drama that employs social thriller techniques. It is an elegantly simple story that seeds and grows emotional suspense. While very much a personal director-driven film, it is given extra weight by the fact that it draws on real life accounts of victims of modern slavery, in particular survivors who had been trapped on boats in the South China Sea for many years at a time with little chance of survival. This is a common practice within the multi-billion-dollar Thai fishing industry that supplies seafood to willing buyers throughout the entire world.

Rodd recalls "The inspiration for BUOYANCY began with me coming across an article about modern slavery and exploitation in the Thai Fishing industry, a few years ago. I couldn't quite believe what I was reading; the level of exploitation, torture, murder that was happening. So I then started to do more research and gradually I could see a cinematic narrative around this world. Through my naivety I thought that a great way to bring this story to the public would be through film. There's been some documentaries made on the subject but getting access to the world is quite challenging, so I thought I'd try and frame a cinematic narrative around the characters, the world, that expresses the cost of exploitation going on."

Producers Samantha Jennings and Kristina Ceyton of Causeway Films had seen Rodd's short film TAU SERU at Critics Week and wanted to work with him. "We met Rodd when we first saw his short at Critics Week in Cannes. We loved the short and had been tracking his journey ever since. He sent us the script of BUOYANCY and it was such a uniquely distilled vision of this horrific story, so simply and beautifully told, that we were on board straight away."

Samantha adds "Rodd's vision was completely clear on the page. It had an almost minimal quality to it whilst being really dramatic – full of emotional dread and suspense - bold without

ever resorting to contrivance... I actually didn't know anything about slavery on fishing boats before reading this script. I didn't know that slavery globally is rapidly increasing. It has been quite an eye-opening experience." She adds "At the same time, while BUOYANCY is about a wider global tragedy and disaster, this is a deeply personal story."

Producer Rita Walsh, who joined the Causeway team during financing, articulates the story as "a kind of nightmarish coming of age. Chakra is only 14-years-old and he is hopeful and optimistic about what he can do with his life and learns in the most horrible way possible what humans are capable of."

For Rodd, the style of the film evolved organically from its subject matter. He explains "BUOYANCY feels pretty unique but I referenced films such as HUNGER by Steve McQueen, SNOWTOWN by Justin Kurzel and ANIMAL KINGDOM by David Michod, a narrative of a young boy being exposed to an incredibly violent world, and his only way out is to actually become violent himself. Those films are really visceral as well, which I hope BUOYANCY is. We wanted to try and keep it raw on the trawler, very claustrophobic and congested, so the audience really feels that sense of isolation and no escape out there on the ocean, both physically and emotionally."

Cinematographer Michael Latham shot Rodd's previous short film SWEAT as well as recent festival hits CASTING JONBENET, STRANGE COLOURS and ISLAND OF THE HUNGRY GHOSTS. Having collaborated with Rodd since they both studied at VCA (Victorian College of the Arts), Michael understood Rodd's aesthetic immediately and what the film was about: "The story is engaging as it not only deals with the intense reality of human trafficking but also explores the loss of childhood." Samantha adds "Loss of innocence is universal. We all have to grow up and understand tragedy and injustice, but sadly for some people, just because of where they are in the world, that can be a much more violent process."

BACKGROUND TO SLAVERY IN THE FISHING INDUSTRY

BUOYANCY is the first fictional feature film about the horrific real-life phenomenon of slavery on Thai fishing boats. Kristina explains "There have been some documentaries, but this is the first feature film that's been made around this subject matter. For us, it was hugely important to bring this story to light."

Thailand's fishing sector returned export earnings of \$5.5 billion in 2017, with half the estimated 600,000 men working in the industry from countries such as Myanmar and Cambodia, according to the United Nations. They are trafficked and forcibly set to work on commercial fishing boats throughout the region, supplying seafood products to global consumers. Every day approximately 60 boys leave Cambodia for Thailand thinking they are going to work in a factory and send money home to their parents. Less than 8% of them return. Human Rights Watch conducted interviews with 248 current and former Burmese and Cambodian fishermen as well as Thai officials, boat owners, local activists and United Nations agency staff over a two-year

period in all of Thailand's major fishing ports. They reported that "Forced labour is routine. The workers we interviewed described being trafficked onto ships, trapped in jobs they couldn't leave, physical abuse, lack of food, long hours and awful working conditions. The worst thing for many of them was not being paid – the psychological harm and final indignity was the hardest to bear." Workers said they were subject to debt bondage and witnessed captains physically abusing and murdering crew. Despite government pledges to stamp out slavery in its fishing industry, the Thai seafood industry remains plagued by human rights abuses, including forced labour and widespread human trafficking, according to research by Human Rights Watch.

The quote included in the end credits of the film is taken from a transcript of an interview the filmmakers conducted with a 20-year-old man who had been trapped on trawlers for 7 years. He said "Torture is every day and killing about every second day. You are afraid of people, even of daylight. No one can hear you out there. You have no papers, nobody knows you exist. I want to tell people about our nightmares."

RESEARCH & CONSULTATION

As Samantha explains "We were aware from the beginning that this was a story about people in Cambodia and around South East Asia and it was extremely important to us that it had authenticity and truth and that we did rigorous consultation with not just survivors, but also former captains on boats, NGOs, families, communities, different points of view. We really collaborated and consulted with a lot of people to ensure the veracity of the story. Of course, this is a fictional character and a fictional experience, told from a very personal point of view so we don't want to represent it as a factual account. It's intended to work on an allegorical level, to be a small artful story that speaks to much bigger concerns. But we never for a moment lost sight of our responsibility to the truth."

"Research for BUOYANCY" Rodd recalls, "began with a lot of reading. I read many, many articles and survivors' interviews about what they had experienced and what had happened. Eventually I went over to Thailand and Cambodia and interviewed a lot of survivors myself. I got a much clearer understanding of the level of exploitation, and the extent of the torture and murder that is going on over there. For me it was really important to intensely research Cambodia as a culture more generally too – to understand life for teenagers now, the desperation that leads to migrating to Thailand for work. The main challenge with developing the script for me was just getting as comprehensive an understanding as possible of Cambodia. Everything from understanding the desire to migrate to Thailand for work, to the way trafficking works between Cambodia and Thailand, to the dynamic on board the trawler and the challenges that you face out on open water, where you are completely helpless. So I did a lot of homestays in Cambodia. A lot of trips, a lot of interviews, just to give myself a fuller picture of the issue culturally and socially and the economics behind it as well. It was fairly elaborate, the research process. We interviewed about 50-60 survivors who had been trafficked onto fishing trawlers and undergone all sorts of torture, including being exposed to murder. Initially when I wrote earlier versions of the script, I thought I was writing an extreme version of events, but actually it

turned out it was quite mild, the more interviews we did. It was really important to make sure that the narrative was really close to what's happening over there.”

Rodd continues “With the help of a few different organisations and NGOs, we interviewed survivors in Thailand and Cambodia, mainly Burmese and Cambodians and there was a couple of Thais as well. They were pretty devastating stories most of the time. The film that we created doesn't even come close to the kind of trauma that some of these survivors actually experienced; sometimes they had up to 15 years on one of these trawlers with torture and murder daily. The interview process was very confronting at times and it was absolutely critical that we made it right so that we could create a sense of their lives out on the water and the kind of trauma that they experienced.”

Samantha adds “A lot of the people we interviewed implored us to tell this story. Because very few people know what's happening to these guys, and they are given no voice. Most never make it home, even their own families have no idea what has happened to them. And it's a story that no one else was telling so it was something that we felt an urgency and responsibility to tell and we were instilled with a widespread feeling that someone has to put this out there. This story needed to be made in collaboration with people directly affected by this tragedy in South East Asia, and with an informed perspective. There are no Western characters in this film and it's not about a white person saving the day.”

In this sense, collaboration with the right Cambodian partners became crucial to maintain the integrity of production. Rita says “For us it was so important that this story was told in collaboration and in conjunction with the communities in South East Asia. Sam and Rodd spoke to many survivors of slavery and were heartbroken by their stories and many of the survivors spoke to us on the condition of anonymity and we know that they want this story to be out there. We felt very lucky to work in close collaboration with Anupheap Productions in Phnom Penh who brought so much creatively, technically to the power of this story. The film wouldn't have authenticity or the truth to it without their input.”

Once a rigorous process of research and consultation was in place, “The script development process itself” Kristina recalls, “was a relatively smooth one, we received development investment from Screen Australia which was an incredible support early on. We brought on a script consultant called Paul Mezey, the Producer of films such as MARIA FULL OF GRACE and BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD, who really brought a lot to the script, to the story, to the characters and from then on it was mainly doing research trips that fed back into the script and location surveys that helped build around that as well.”

Rodd's focus was on the emotional spine of the story, the ability to build empathy and connection with the main character even as he loses his humanity and hope. “From a very early point it was critical to me that the film encompass the kind of emotional challenges these guys face. They think they are going to work in Thailand, and end up being exploited and marooned out in the ocean with no power whatsoever, no identity, and a lot of their families don't know

where they are or what's happened to them; they think they're dead. I needed to create a sense of that emotional trauma. A lot of the vulnerable areas where these boys and men live, their families are expecting them to go away and send money back home. So when they go away and their families don't hear from them, they have no idea what's happened and there is no money coming back either, so it almost creates a level of shame for those guys if they do make it back somehow. The level of emotional devastation that these guys experience is unbelievably traumatic, so we tried to express that without being overblown or sentimentalized."

"Expressing Chakra's emotional trauma was the priority" Rodd continues. "For me the irony of the story is that he gets what he wants in the beginning, he achieves what he wants, which is independence - but not in any way he expected. A lot of the NGO's that we worked with often said that there should be a film made about survivors coming home and being repatriated because that was almost the most challenging part. Being integrated back into their families and communities after the post-traumatic stress they've experienced. That's why the ending was particularly important to me. "

Kristina observes "Added to that, the film is about a more global view on what happens; what the governments, what companies, what the individuals can do by being aware of where the products that they buy come from, when something has been created through slave work. I think we need transparency in that and this is one step in helping to open up the dialogue and make change." An experienced Australian-based Impact Producer is currently preparing an international outreach and education campaign on slavery in the fishing industry and modern slavery more generally along with Echo Studio in France, who are committed to films that inspire social change. A host of anti-slavery advocates and experts are also behind the film and the impact strategy it will launch.

CASTING THE CHARACTERS

Rodd recalls "The casting process started really early. We worked with a wonderful Thai Casting Director Non Jungmeier, who is hugely experienced in South East Asia. Non started looking for Chakra even before I got to Thailand and started sending back videos and auditions. The language barrier was a challenge with actors but we were still able to cast the film really well. I worked closely with Non for months and it was really elaborate, staying true to all the research that we'd done, and making sure to cast it right. I couldn't be happier with the cast we got, it was not easy to find some of them."

Rodd was already prepared for a lot of his cast to have never acted before. "Most of the cast is made up of first-time actors, in keeping with that level of authenticity. You don't have to go far in Cambodia to talk to somebody who knows somebody or has a family member who has migrated to Thailand for work and been exploited. So everybody was committed to that sense of the believability of the world. For example, Dam (Thanuwat Kasro, Dam is colloquial) who plays the captain Rom Ran actually worked on a fishing trawler for a number of years when he was 11, 12 and 13. His family was involved in the fishing industry down in the south of Thailand so he had

first-hand exposure and experience to what life was like on a trawler. It was the same with Saichia who plays one of Dam's assistants, he worked on a trawler for a few months as well."

Rodd insisted that the Burmese slaves on the boat were Burmese men who had actually experienced life as forced labour on fishing trawlers, which was not easy to find. "The Burmese non-actors were incredible in the way they brought so much texture and nuance to what life was like on board the fishing trawlers. And even though they didn't necessarily have any acting experience, it was incredible how quickly and seamlessly they worked in front of camera."

Rodd explains further "The Burmese workers, they were all trawler workers. The actors that played the Burmese slaves, Babu, Chancy, Ko Ko, they all worked on trawlers in Thailand. I think Chancy worked on a trawler for seven years, and Babu for a couple of years and Ko Ko at least one year. So again coming back to that authenticity, it was really important to me to cast first-time actors in those roles, so that they could inform what life is really like on these boats."

INTRODUCING SARM HENG – as CHAKRA

Of course, finding the right Chakra was the crucial first step around which the film would revolve, and the search was intense. Samantha explains "The Casting Director and Rodd eventually found Sarm at a place called the Green Gecko Project in Siem Reap. It's a NGO run by an Australian woman called Tania Palmer and her Cambodian husband Rem that takes in over 100 children who are at high risk and on the streets at a very young age. They feed them, educate them, love and support them and essentially raise them as their own. It's a wonderful organization and Tania and Rem were incredible contributors to the filmmaking process, partly because they too have had loved ones go missing on fishing trawlers."

Cambodian-born Sarm Heng has character beyond his years. Being a natural entertainer since he was a toddler, Sarm has had a ready-made audience at his fingertips. From the age of two, Sarm and his family have been a part of the Green Gecko Project. Although Sarm lost his mother at the age of one and his father 11 years later, Sarm and his siblings have the warmth and love of his big Green Gecko family; "If not for this family, I wouldn't stand here". It was through the creative programs at Green Gecko, that Sarm's artistic spirit and desire to make people laugh and be happy, was encouraged. A joker, a musician, martial artist and an amateur magician, are just some of the many personas he loves to play. He also loves football, delving into photography and making a short movie or two, in between his school and study times. Sarm's introduction to the big screen was made in 2015 as part of the stunt team for *FIRST THEY KILLED MY FATHER*, a Netflix feature directed by Angelina Jolie, which recounts the horrors of the Khmer Rouge regime through a child's eye. Sarm was just 14 when he landed the lead role of Chakra in *BUOYANCY*. Part of the reason he tried out was that the film highlights the cruelty of human trafficking and the pitfalls of illegal migrant work. These are themes close to Sarm's heart so it was impossible for him to say no to such an important film. Sarm had a very clear motivation to audition for *BUOYANCY* "My reason for acting in this movie is to help children of the next generations. Young people might think that going to Thailand could be fun

but it comes with great hardships as well. Before going we need to talk to our family and friends. Most elderly people have some understanding or experience of this, so before doing anything, we need to work out if it is a good or bad thing to do. I just want to say that making decisions like this isn't easy. We need to think about good and bad consequences and understand the dangers. If we need to go to work, we still have to think about what we might gain and lose, especially its impact on our family, and whether it might put our lives in danger."

Sarm adds "I think this movie is important because it portrays the real lives of Cambodians. Something like this happens to most Cambodian's relatives who go to work fishing in Thailand. Some people die and some live with great hardship. This is the reason that I decided to act in this movie. It shows the truth." Sarm cannot wait to share this movie with his fellow Cambodians, "so that other boys and girls don't get tricked or trapped and have to suffer like Chakra did".

Rodd recalls: "I pretty much knew from an early point that Sarm was our Chakra. Initially I thought we were going to cast someone older, who had a bit more life experience, but Sarm was so instinctive and natural. Sarm is just an incredible kid. He is so wise beyond his years. He was 14-years-old when we shot this film. His instinct and intuition and his approach to the film and to life, he's like a little brother to me. He wasn't daunted by the task of working in front of the camera, having all this attention on him, he just went with it in a totally uninhibited way and he is just an amazing kid."

THANAWUT KASRO – as ROM RAN

Thanawut "Dam" Ketsaro is an actor and director in Thailand, who is also experienced in stunts. Securing his first feature film role in 2010, Thanawut appeared in THE PRINCE & ME: THE ELEPHANT ADVENTURE (as Thanawut Katesaroe). He was Khaam in Japanese Director Nopporn Watin's YAMADA: SAMURAI OF AYOTHAYA (2010) and a prisoner in Tom Waller's THE LAST EXECUTIONER. In 2015, Thanawut landed two screen roles in feature films SIAM YOUTH: THE DAWN OF THE KINGDOM (2015) and NO ESCAPE (2015). Just after BUOYANCY, Thanawut went onto play the lead role in MESSIAHS OF GODS ARMY (2018). He is currently in production on his next feature film as director.

MONY ROS – as KEA

Mony Ros is one of Cambodia's leading talents, an acclaimed actor in many films as well as a highly accomplished singer and dancer. His feature film debut was in the Australian production WISH YOU WERE HERE (2010) directed by Kieran Darcy-Smith, which then lead to him being cast in the lead role of Phirun in Amiel Courtin Willson's award-winning feature film RUIN (2011), which premiered at the Venice International Film Festival. His subsequent film credits include Sok Visal's DIAMOND (2012), major roles in Quentin Clausin and Sok Visal's KROAB PICH (2014) and award-winning THE LAST REEL by Sothea Kulika. He secured five further feature film roles throughout 2014, before being cast in Angelina Jolie's FIRST THEY KILLED MY FATHER the following year. In 2016, Mony appeared in Jimmy Handerson 's hit movie JAIL BREAK as well as Amit Dubey's feature film MIND CAGE and the TV series NEW LAND. 2018

saw Mony play three more screen roles in Cambodian feature films THE PREY (working again with Jimmy Handerson), BLOOD by Long Sarorn, and Kea in Rodd Rathjen's BUOYANCY.

Mony would also love to see the world engage with the important and little-known subject matter of the film "This movie is really important as it shows the true story of Cambodian people. There are many people who have immigrated to work in Thailand and then disappeared forever. I really hope that when this film is released, there will be a lot of supporters, a lot of audience, and the world will know that it is a true story of what happens in Cambodia."

DESIGN & VISUAL LANGUAGE

The guiding principle through pre-production remained Rodd's commitment to the natural honesty of the world, which support the truthful performances and create a canvas for his visual style. Production Designer Bethany Ryan explains "Rodd has an incredibly strong directorial voice. It was very clear from both reading the script and through early discussions with Rodd, that we had to take great care to create something that was incredibly authentic. Early on, Rodd stressed the need for thorough research and an eye that could absorb and translate those details. Above all, the design had to serve the story in a way that was both honest and evocative. This meant constructing a believable world that justly portrayed the extreme and confronting nature of the environment. On top of this, we had to subtly bring colour and texture in our considered aesthetic to evoke an atmosphere that would help audiences empathise with the emotional horror. Rodd has an unflinching attention to detail and a relentlessness in his pursuit for authenticity and I really admire him for that. I believe that we are in safe hands with Rodd's direction."

"It was an immense responsibility to sensitively and accurately create environments for our characters that honoured them and the experiences of those who inspired the film. This called for a lot of research, as is so often the responsibility of filmmakers. I watched as many documentaries as I could find, read articles and interviews and familiarised myself through the work of photojournalists. In Cambodia, I visited villages and fishing communities to see for myself the way that people live. I was also able to visit other trawlers which we documented and surveyed to help inform the construction, scenic work and set decoration of our trawler. We were constantly foraging for details to help round out the design."

Bethany built up references through her research, "There were narrative fiction films I referenced which felt to me tonally significant, or a good precedent for textural grit and sparsity in decoration that we were aiming to achieve. Some of these were, BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD, WAR WITCH and INCENDIES. Just as pertinent was finding reference in documentaries. THE GUARDIAN, ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FOUNDATION and AL JAZEERA MEDIA provided resources for educating myself and achieving some fluency in the world. I also looked to the work of many photojournalists including Luc Forsyth, Renée C. Byer, Charlotte L. Pert and Christopher Occhicone and photographer and cinematographer, Jeremy

Snell. These became valuable assets for Rodd, Michael and me to discuss and draw inspiration from.”

The set, or stage, for the majority of the film, was a real fishing trawler of about 20 metres in length and 6 metres in width. Bethany says “The narrative called for a specific type of fishing trawler, so we had to do a lot of fast work to augment and restructure the boat that we had. This required new fishing mechanisms to be built on top of the original structure, to allow for live fishing sequences, as well as a new deck and cockpit on the top level. All of this new construction had to be seamlessly and safely added and then the entire boat had to be painted and aged. We were lucky enough to be able to forage for some secondhand elements and when we fell short, called on the expertise of local boat builders and our own carpenters. Through the whole process, painters and carpenters showed heroic strength battling seasickness and blistering sun.”

Michael Latham DOP had his work cut out for him too, finding inventive ways to shot-list the film. “Filming on the water is also tricky as the backdrop, or in other words the landscape tends to all look the same. That was a challenge, just trying to make the film visually engaging whilst essentially shooting the same backdrop over and over.”

And through the language barriers, a visual language evolved. “During pre-production and production, people of course spoke a lot of different languages without much crossover” Samantha explains “We had Khmer, English, Thai, Vietnamese, Burmese and a lot of people only spoke one language, and the Director didn’t speak the language of either his Thai or his Cambodian actors. We had translators, but we also had to find new ways to communicate, which was positive in some ways.” Bethany attests “Our art department overcame that language barrier by communicating with visuals, pulling up photos, or making sketches to articulate ourselves where words fell short.” The small production office in Phnom Penh boasted a storyboard of the entire film stuck up around each of the four walls, so that at any time, even without shared language, an actor or crew member could refer to a specific point in the film.”

SHOOTING IN CAMBODIA

For Producer Samantha Jennings “Filming in Cambodia in the middle of summer was extremely challenging. It was very hot, most of the filming was on a boat out in the middle of the ocean. We also had a 14-year-old lead so obviously a huge duty of care there. Half the time we were filming in places where we had no electricity, no phone reception, no Wi-Fi, no hot water. So conditions were pretty intense. A lot of Cambodians got seasick, and a lot of Australians got sick adjusting to the conditions in Cambodia, so between us we were all sick a lot of the time! We had a 1stAD Greg Cobain, who had to have surgery during the shoot and an Associate Producer who dislocated an elbow; it was a physically taxing process. There was also the intensity and claustrophobia of being on a small boat for that long, with little communication to land. On the up side, that certainly gave us a sense of camaraderie!”

Rodd says “One of the main challenges was filming on water. A lot of people got seasick whilst filming. We were filming on a remote island, so no internet. The only way you could get internet was going further out on the water. For a lot of people it was quite isolated which initially I thought would be a good thing, but people were starting to go a bit stir crazy by the end of it. We had a 5 week shoot and we had to move quickly, so there wasn’t a hell of a lot of days off. But everybody worked really hard and we were fortunate with our cast and crew, they never complained, just fought their way through it.”

Like all the crew, Bethany was deeply impressed by the level of commitment “The job required a group of people who were willing to almost give themselves to the project, it was such an incredibly demanding project in terms of the conditions, resources and ambitions at play. We had a truly democratic approach, where we all had to get our hands dirty and fully support one another to ultimately serve the film we all wanted to make.”

Samantha adds “Most of the cast and crew knew somebody who had become caught up in slavery, someone close to them. It was a subject that was very close to a lot of people’s hearts, so I think that was partly why there was such a dedication to supporting the story and helping to get it made.”

Michael Latham DOP adds “I really enjoyed working in Cambodia, it’s a tough environment in the heat and humidity but the cast and crew were really professional and supportive and lovely people to be around.”

Rita adds “During the shoot, myself and the co-producer Steven McKinnon were based in Melbourne. We worked Cambodian hours, and mostly it was about how we could communicate with them. They would call us from a boat in the middle of the high seas, sometimes audibly sick, but we needed that communication so much that we just kept talking.”

BIOS

RODD RATHJEN – WRITER/DIRECTOR

Rodd Rathjen is an Australian Writer/Director raised in Colbinabbin, a small country town in central Victoria. Rodd completed a Bachelor of Film and Television with Honours, from the Victorian College of the Arts in 2010. Rodd made the short TAU SERU in India, which had its World Premiere at Cannes as part of Critics Week 2013. The film also won Best Australian Short at MIFF 2013 and has since screened at over 50 International festivals and received a number of awards.

At the beginning of 2014 Rodd received the Directors Acclaim Fund from Screen Australia and also participated in the Berlinale Talent Campus as a Director. He was awarded Hot Shots funding and made the short film SWEAT, featuring Colin Friels (THE TURNING, DARK CITY), which had its World Premiere at MIFF 2015. BUOYANCY is his debut feature film.

MICHAEL LATHAM - CINEMATOGRAPHER

A graduate of VCA school of Film and Television, cinematographer Michael Latham currently works internationally between genres and formats. Michael's debut documentary feature, UKRAINE IS NOT A BROTHEL, was his first collaboration with director Kitty Green. Premiering at Venice Film Festival the film went on to be nominated for 7 AACTA awards (including cinematography), and went on to win Best Documentary. Their next project, THE FACE OF UKRAINE: CASTING OKSANA BAIUL won Sundance's prize for the Best Short Documentary. This was followed by the Netflix Original CASTING JONBENET also premiering at Sundance, which again went on to win the AACTA award for Best Documentary. 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. Most recently Michael's work on Gabrielle Brady's Tribeca award-winning documentary ISLAND OF THE HUNGRY GHOSTS was nominated for an AACTA award for cinematography. Michael continues to work internationally across documentary and narrative mediums alongside music videos and commercials.

About KINO LORBER

With a library of over 2,800 titles, Kino Lorber Inc. has been a leader in independent art house distribution for 35 years, releasing 30 films per year theatrically under its Kino Lorber, Kino Repertory and Alive Mind Cinema banners, garnering seven Academy Award® nominations in nine years. In addition, the company brings over 350 titles yearly to the home entertainment and educational markets through physical and digital media releases. With an expanding family of distributed labels, Kino Lorber handles releases in ancillary media for Zeitgeist Films, Carlotta USA, Adopt Films, Greenwich Entertainment, Raro Video, and others, placing physical titles through all wholesale, retail, and direct to consumer channels, as well as direct digital distribution through over 40 OTT services including all major TVOD and SVOD platforms. In 2019, the company launched its new art house digital channel Kino Now which features over 1000 titles from the acclaimed Kino Lorber library. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Kino Marquee initiative was launched in 2020 pioneering "virtual theatrical" releases of art house films with revenue shares that allows audiences to support almost 400 local independent theaters.