

The Witch hunt

The death of her daughter at Uluru left Lindy Chamberlain's name scarred indelibly by suspicion and myth. Now, after 24 years, an official pardon, a film, a docudrama and an opera, will a TV miniseries based on her autobiography finally give the nation closure? **Graeme Blundell** was there as the cameras rolled

I JUST find it astonishing to believe a dingo could have done it," I am saying in the guise of retired botanist Rex Kuchel. I'm glad to have the line that most of Australia had on its tongue 24 years ago, even though it's only acting and I feel great sadness each time I say it, given the tragic events that followed.

We're recreating, for the telemovie *Through My Eyes*, the forensic examination of crime scene exhibits in the case of the death of baby Azaria Chamberlain in 1980. Along with Barry Otto and Jerome Ehlers, I am playing one of a group of three scientists attempting to determine whether the police might be correct in assuming a Seventh Day Adventist, a woman called Lindy Chamberlain, had murdered her child in her small yellow sedan at the edge of a camping ground at Uluru in the bigoted heart of Australia.

Dressed in lab coats over polyester trousers, short-sleeved shirts and ties, we stand in a replica of an old-fashioned dental laboratory, examining a baby's jumpsuit. A voice-over, according to the script, will say in the finished film: "These men were responsible for starting forensic science in South Australia."

Ehlers, who plays odontologist Ken Brown, is theatrically biting a nappy, trying to pierce the fabric in what he thinks is an imitation of a dingo; none of us wears surgical gloves and the edgy Otto, so immersed in his character as Sergeant Frank Cocks of the South Australian Police Laboratory as to be unrecognisable close up, is already certain that plant material has been rubbed into the clothing. We are looking for evidence of what the police believe to be foul play.

"Doesn't add up, in my book," I whisper as Kuchel. "How could a dingo put the clothes in a neat bundle like that?"

It's a cold Brisbane night in early June of this year and we are locked up with director Di Drew and a film crew in a laboratory somewhere in the University of Queensland campus, surrounded by test tubes, microscopes and crime scene photographs as we work on the scene in which our characters becoming increasingly convinced that the incisions in the baby's jumpsuit, found 5km from the campsite a few days after her disappearance, were made by a sharp, pointy instrument such as a bullet, an electric screwdriver or maybe a knitting needle.

The level of verisimilitude on set is eerily exact. Some of the photographs are actual pieces of evidence from the Chamberlain inquests, and we don't dare ask how the producers obtained them. Steely silence surrounds aspects of the production and eyes glaze over if you raise certain subjects with the crew.

"We've been searching for Azaria's real story for over four years," says Simone North. She's co-writer and producer of the telemovie with husband Tony Cavanaugh, the pair better known as the production



The unforgiven: Miranda Otto as Lindy Chamberlain in *Through My Eyes*, main picture; and other scenes from the film, including with Blundell, centre, as one of the forensic scientists; Lindy Chamberlain-Creighton on set, opposite page



company Liberty Films. "Azaria's story has become a tale about Lindy Chamberlain and Australia, about superstition, prejudice and fear of the unknown. And a story about the media. Somewhere along the way, this little child has become completely lost."

MOST Australians of a certain age know at least the bare facts. Chamberlain was jailed for life in October 1982 for her daughter's murder on August 17, 1980, during a family camping trip. She spent more than three years in prison, despite arguing vehemently that a dingo had taken Azaria. This suggestion was ridiculed by the prosecution, which inflamed public prejudice against her. Her husband Michael, a pious, curiously blank man to observers, was sentenced to 18 months' jail as an accessory, suspended in the interests of their remaining children, Aidan and Regan. (When she went to jail, Lindy was seven months pregnant with Kahlia, her fourth child.)

When the matinee jacket Azaria had been wearing over the jumpsuit was discovered (the prosecution had maintained the jacket — a missing but vital piece of evidence for the defence — was a fiction) at the base of Uluru on February 2, 1986, the controversy was reignited. Five days later, Lindy was released. She was officially exonerated in 1987 after a narrowly constituted royal commission found there was not enough evidence to have convicted her.

Art, of course, followed tragedy. Author John Bryson followed the brightly illuminated saga and in 1985 wrote *Evil Angels*, a masterly journalistic account that was adapted into a controversial 1988 film starring Meryl Streep as Lindy and Sam Neill as Michael. A Channel Ten in-house docudrama, Kevin Hitchcock's *A Question of Evidence*, was aired in 1984, and in 2002 an opera called *Lindy*, written by composer Moya Henderson, was staged. The productions fuelled speculation about what really happened and fed what were already urban myths about a woman imprinted on the Australian psyche.

Through My Eyes takes a different approach to dramatising this most theatrical of events. The story North and Cavanaugh are telling, after writing more



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than 40 drafts of their script and speaking to hundreds of witnesses (many of whom were at the campsite but never interviewed by police) over more than three years, is about a ghost in the desert who died at the hands of a lie, about a curse upon the land — and about a woman with a coveted body in a short dress, a woman who did not present herself like a pastor's wife and talked back to police when she should have been crushed.

"The aim is really to shock the viewer with the actual circumstances of the tragedy," script editor Peter Herbert tells me. "Our memories are dimmed — maybe it happened or maybe it didn't. Looking back, we never really understood what the police did to Lindy, the level of vindictiveness and the kind of sexist need for subjugation. Why, despite the facts of a dingo attack, were they determined to find corroborating evidence of infanticide?"

Cavanaugh is blunt. "She wouldn't shut up. She was a smart-arse to them — so they tried to badger her into thinking they could control her." In court the reporters used to say she was "sexy as", adds North.

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IN Brisbane, on the afternoon before I become Kuchel for the first time, I sit with North and Cavanaugh in their research library. We're surrounded by huge white pinboards and large tables covered with the results of the pair's investigations, gruesome particulars such as replica matinee jackets and child's booties, and plastic

envelopes of evidence from the trials (some of it real), three inquests and the royal commission. One display board bears photographs of all the people in the Chamberlain story: policemen, scientists, barristers, judges, even people who were at a barbecue only metres from the place where Azaria disappeared.

"It's been a long four years," says Cavanaugh, a small, cerebral man with an emphatic laugh, his eyes rimmed with red. North is taller and dead smart, short blonde hair, a small diamond in her nose. "The Tom and Nicole of Brisbane," Cavanaugh used to call them, but this day he's too exhausted for the jokes that usually flow when he and North are working. They are halfway through a punishing nine-week shooting schedule. Everyone involved appears embattled but stoic. "I think it's reasonable to say we're difficult producers," he says with a sigh. "We demand a lot."

Script editor Herbert, a television veteran, has teamed up with them many times: "They might not be the easiest producers in the world, but I love them for the passion and absolute commitment they bring to a project," he says.

"They can be prickly, but I've enjoyed working with them over the past decade, beginning with the Channel 7 series *Fire*, in which I played a depressed fire chief on the verge of a breakdown, hallucinating amid explosions and falling buildings. Then I was Dr Hary Edwards in their drama series *Medivac* for the Ten network. I missed out on a role in their miniseries about the Granville rail disaster, *The Day of the Roses*, and still go deaf when they mention its AFI and Logie award-winning success.

The pair began Liberty Films in Brisbane in 1991 and have produced almost 90 screen hours of Queensland-based TV, much of it hard-edged and occasionally rather operatic. "I've grown out of the notion that television is like a warm friend," Cavanaugh says. He likes half-finished conversations in his scripts, interior monologues, the ironic and sceptical and the appearance of randomness. At times he works in a pared-down American vernacular style, hammering out fast-moving plots punctuated by violence, shocks and the Elmore Leonard-like appearance of the slapdash.

But there is nothing slapdash about *Through My Eyes*. The dialogue is entirely drawn from new interviews (conducted in what Cavanaugh calls, with a sense of exhaustion, "our research journey") and court documents, all of it shrouded in secrecy and confidentiality clauses. The production office is grimly intent with purpose, the producers seldom still, the logistics of production almost impossible — "643 scenes, 156 actors, 40 major characters, two sets of children, multiple dingo attacks, and then the dingoes themselves," director Di Drew later recalls.

My week filming in Brisbane coincides with the bizarre appearance in the media of Frank Cole, the 78-year-old Melbourne man who claimed to have found Azaria's body in the jaws of a dingo just after she disappeared, later supposedly burying her corpse in a Melbourne backyard.

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"We talked with the man last year by phone," North says dismissively. "I got a message that some old bloke was on the phone with a confession. We asked him ten million questions. He was vague and inconsistent when we got into the forensic detail, especially in relation to the clothing. There were a number of significant inconsistencies." He told them he liked to read stories of true crime.

The TV project started with production company Beyond International's Mikael Borglund, who had financially partnered Cavanaugh and North on several shows in the 1990s. He emailed the Brisbane producers in March 2000 and mentioned Lindy Chamberlain's autobiography *Through My Eyes*, first published in 1990. "Do you want to do the Lindy Chamberlain story?" he asked them.

"Why would you bother?" Cavanaugh remembers thinking. "The story had been told — there was no compelling reason to tell it again." But at the urging of Borglund they met Lindy Chamberlain-Creighton (she married American businessman Rick in 1992, having divorced Michael in 1991) at the Sydney offices of her agent Harry M. Miller. They sat around a large table, all of them tense. "Lindy told her story and by the end we were all crying," says Cavanaugh. Afterwards they stood in the street outside. "We have to f—ing tell this story," they said almost as one, their words tumbling over each other.

Liberty Beyond Productions (Cavanaugh, North and Borglund) later took up an option on the book but Lindy's story was difficult to sell. It was not until the producers journeyed to Uluru and spoke to the elders of the Anangu people of the Mutjulu community — custodians of the Rock, some of whom were there on the night Azaria vanished — that they gathered a kind of spiritual impetus to tell the story.

The "spirit men" of the community believe Azaria, or her ghostly presence, is still there and that at a certain time of the year she plays in the sandhills around Uluru with young black spirits. And every night the black spirit children are called home by their parents, leaving the white girl behind. She cries; the parents want her to go home.

The story stunned North, already fascinated with the way Lindy went from being a symbol of fertility, perceived by a white male group at the time of her baby's disappearance as a kind of earth mother, vivacious and vibrant, to



Film and fact: Otto and McLachlan in *Through My Eyes*, left, and Lindy and Michael Chamberlain with sons Aidan and Regan in 1980 after Azaria's disappearance

being a kind of witch in the eyes of the public, hated by women in particular.

The producers, having taken the idea to prospective buyers in the US (where executives loved the story, saying they remembered "the dog jokes" from the '80s), finally took the project to the Seven network's head of drama.

John Holmes recalls that at first his eyes had glazed over when Cavanaugh mentioned Lindy Chamberlain at the big pitch meeting. "Oh shit, I thought this was going to be something good," he remembers thinking. Cavanaugh, sensing all was lost, said: "I'm going to tell you what you don't know about the death of Azaria Chamberlain." He took a photograph of a dingo from his briefcase. "This was taken two minutes before she disappeared," he said. "This is the animal that took her."

A nearby camper, Murray Haby, had snapped the photograph as the mean-looking animal appeared at the door of his Kombi van on a black night at Uluru. Minutes later he heard a woman yelling in anguish: "Help, help. I need a torch." The producers picked up the photograph after meeting Haby at Chamberlain-Creighton's house in the Hunter Valley in 2002.

It took two hours for Cavanaugh to complete his story; a deal was done.

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AT the first read-through in March this year, about 40 actors clustered around several tables



at the Observatory Hotel in Sydney's Rocks area, including the vivacious Miranda Otto, who had accepted the role of Lindy, with Craig McLachlan playing her husband. At the end of the reading the actors and Drew apprehensively milled around waiting to meet Chamberlain-Creighton. North had brought her to the door of the room in which the reading had taken place, but she was too nervous to enter.

McLachlan, irrepressible and mischievous, suddenly appeared from behind them. He hugged Lindy. "Is this my wife?" he said. North took her by the hand and led her into the room to meet the actors, who all stood and applauded. "It was extraordinarily touching and bizarre at the same time," remembers Herbert. "A few minutes ago many of them had been convincingly acting the men who prosecuted her and sent her to jail, men who gave her so much grief. Now they were shy actors clamouring to ask her what these characters were really like. When you meet her you can't help thinking she has endured so much hurt for almost unfathomable reasons of darkness."

But they found her engaging and gregarious. "She has an earthy laugh and is quite cheeky and quickly becomes the centre of attention," says North. "And she is still sexy now in her early 50s. We wanted to get that across, too, in the script."

I have more time to talk with the director when I return to Brisbane in the middle of August to film Kuchel's appearance in the Alice Springs Magistrate's Court in 1980 during the coronial inquest into Azaria's disappearance. Drew is intellectually steely but personally gentle, a collaborator, able to work inventively from the script's blueprint, leaving her mark in the choice of shots and the authenticity of performances: "Graeme spent too long playing with his tie, gave away too much subtext, and smiled too much, but that's all right because I can use a bit of the close-up," she mutters to herself after I've completed my final scene.

It's a nice moment in the script. Kuchel, the retired botanist on call part-time to the technical services laboratory of the South Australian Police Force, tries to impress the court with his qualifications when it comes to dingo attacks. He has, he points out, been a member of the Adelaide Zoo Council since 1962. "I have an appreciation of animal behaviour," I say in character, eventually getting it right. I find the scenes difficult to play. I'm tongue-tied by the sometimes overly formal dialogue condensed from court transcripts. But I'm not the only one. In breaks from filming, the actors stand alone muttering their lines, sometimes whispering almost violently with their eyes squeezed closed.

"I had to stop actors from playing subtext," Drew says. "The characters had to be of their

time and driven to do what they did... There could be no sense of the consequences of actions that they undertook, or the moral dimensions of their mistakes." Her cast is comprised mainly of seasoned TV actors, including Peter O'Brien as tenacious prosecutor Ian Barker, QC; Andrew McFarlane as urbane trial defence counsel John Phillips, QC; Lucy Bell as a swinging juror; Aaron Blabey as an assistant to Phillips's defence team; and Paul Mercurio as a key witness to earlier dingo attacks.

Like most of the actors, Drew grew up with the story and was captivated by it. "But when you get your hands on a story about a distinctive living person, you become aware that you, too, are affecting cultural history. As a film-maker I was instantly grabbed by the intrigue, the injustice and the ineptitude that surrounded the creation of this piece of our public record."

Finally, in October, I see the end product at a network screening at Sydney's Fox Studios. The collision between fate and destiny — the way in which a life can be defined in a split second — is compellingly realised and *Through My Eyes* holds nothing back in convincing us that the Chamberlains' behaviour after the disappearance of their daughter did not help their case. Their unquestioning Adventist faith is unsettling, but other aspects of the story are horrifying: the actions of a humiliated, aggressive police force and self-interested Uluru park rangers (a startling subplot), poor science and an almost wicked determination by a legal system to ignore any evidence that suggested the couple was innocent. "Poor oppressed humanity, I kept thinking," Herbert said afterwards. "The individual doesn't have a chance."

After watching the screening, Chamberlain-Creighton told me she was concerned that legal restrictions prevented her from being critical of aspects of the production, but she laughed and joked with the actors and posed for press photographs with her daughter Kahlia. The scenes of Kahlia's birth in prison in 1982 and of being parted from her mother after only a short time are brutal and harrowing, and audience members audibly sighed.

At the end of the screening, Kahlia, now a vivacious 22-year-old, leaned across and whispered to her mother: "This is all cuckoo."

While her mother told reporters she no longer needed closure but hoped the series would quell the Australian public's fascination with her life, she didn't seem convinced in the moments I spent with her. "This will dump rumours at the door again," she said, her lips tight. Then she paused.

"If I hadn't been involved," she said, her eyes scanning the crowded room as if looking for words, "I would say it was a good effort."

Through My Eyes, Seven, 8.30pm on Tuesday, concluding at 8.30pm on Wednesday.

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