



FORGED FROM FIRE

THE MAKING OF THE BLACKSMITHS' TREE

A FILM BY ANDREW GARTON



SYNOPSIS

On Black Saturday, 7 February 2009, townships north-east of Melbourne were engulfed by fire-storms. Considered our worst ever natural disaster, these fires resulted in the highest loss of life peacetime Australia has ever known. After the horror of immediate losses, people embarked on various journeys of repair and recovery. The Blacksmiths' Tree was one of them.

Designer and metal artist Amanda Gibson gathered a team of seasoned blacksmiths from around the world to create a life-size stainless steel and copper gum tree. This happened within a community traumatised by the Black Saturday Fires. The Blacksmiths' Tree would not be without its challenges, but what it became for the people involved is something no one could have imagined.

The Blacksmiths' Tree was an instinctive response to the devastating effects of loss and the inspired flourishing of life that followed. *Forged from Fire* charts the valleys and peaks of this heart-warming project. It documents the remarkable social history of a tragic but important moment for Australia and its people.

VISION

As The Blacksmiths' Tree neared completion it was evident it was having an effect on the wider community, among fire affected individuals and families, that revealed a deeper story, a story where the impossible became possible.

The Tree grew to be a symbol for healing that gave many people the courage to overcome their grief, allowing this unique stainless steel and copper sculpture to connect them to each other, irrespective of the differences that may have existed prior to Black Saturday. This is the story we are telling in *Forged from Fire*.

KEY POINTS

- *Forged from Fire* is a 58 minute non-fiction film created with footage shot by both amateur and professional filmmakers. It is has been a community effort to document the making of the Blacksmiths' Tree.
- Almost the entire crew, including composers and musicians, is comprised of film production professionals who live in Black Saturday fire affected communities.
- The film has received a total of \$75,600 AUD of in-kind support throughout the nine and a-half years it has taken to produce.
- As of 18 January 2019 the film has received a total of \$8,467 AUD in financial support through individual donors, fund-raising events and the support of Regional Arts Victoria.
- Screenings of the film are accompanied by a trauma-informed Screening Guide prepared in collaboration with the School of Health Sciences, Swinburne University.

AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

A comprehensive audience engagement campaign is underway. To coincide with Black Saturday 10 year memorial events screenings of *Forged from Fire* are community led. Libraries, community centres, local government venues, schools and rural community halls are just some of the venues the film will be seen at.

From 2012 to 2015 short-form versions of *Forged from Fire* and a three channel video installation were screened to audiences within fire-affected communities in Victoria. At each screening we found these works would trigger memories of trauma if not trauma itself. At each of these screenings at least one person would share their Black Saturday story triggering an emotional ripple effect within the audience. Some of these people had not shared such stories before.

These screenings had created a safe space for so many people in which their stories could be told, stories that too reflected what the Blacksmiths' Tree meant to them. So often everything came back to the Tree. Many would say focusing on the making of the Blacksmiths' Tree gave them something tangible to look forward to.

Forged from Fire is a film that will unite audiences across regional Australia. It will bring people from fire-affected communities and those who bore witness to the terrible events of Black Saturday and its aftermath together.



ABOUT THE FILM

In the aftermath of the Black Saturday fires Amanda Gibson and her team of seasoned blacksmiths begin forging gum leaves little knowing that 5 years on they will have created a 3 tonne, 9.8 metre tall stainless steel and copper gum tree. With a canopy comprised of over 3500 leaves forged in 20 different countries Amanda would find the Blacksmiths Tree become one of the most challenging public sculptures and memorials to be created in Australia. Forged From Fire tells the touching and intimate story of the women and men who shaped a tree out of their own fires and the traumatised communities that would rally around them.

Forged from Fire tells the story of how an Australian and international community of blacksmiths, welders, artists and volunteers responded to the devastating Black Saturday bush-fires by creating perhaps the most ambitious public artwork and memorial in Australia - a three tonne, 9.8 meter tall stainless steel and copper gum tree – The Blacksmiths Tree. *Forged from Fire* is a documentary about the personal journeys of these artisans and volunteers and how their creative processes united fire affected individuals and families.

Leading the Blacksmiths Tree project is young graphic designer Amanda Gibson. Teaming up with seasoned blacksmiths she not only navigates the emotional contours of communities in grief, she must draw on skills and capacities she had not known were available to her. Amanda faces technical and logistical challenges whilst handling the increasing aspirations of all who have joined her, from the women who learn to weld and help to complete the project to the thousands of people who contributed financial and voluntary support, many whose testimonials are stamped into the 3500 leaves that comprise the canopy.

Forged from Fire builds on a 10 minute pilot that describes the creative and personal stories that led to the inaugural public unveiling of The Blacksmiths Tree. With the addition of liberal access to the final stages of creation - dramatic scenes of industrial welding and the critical skills involved in its install – *Forged from Fire* attempts to unpack the motivations and post-traumatic growth experienced by the many people both involved with, and who have subsequently come into contact with The Blacksmiths Tree.

Cameras in the hands of welders, engineers, blacksmiths, volunteers, the general public, videographers and a handful of film-makers captured key moments in the creation of The Blacksmiths Tree. Complimented with interviews, observational, aerial and time-lapse footage, exceptional cinematography and underscored by music written by musicians who survived the fires, a tender and far reaching story is told of perseverance, resilience and transformation.

Commencing with the idea of forging a few copper leaves and a tree no taller than a meter, Amanda and her team spend five years creating a unique sculpture that not only grew in size and weight, they faced innumerable obstacles and challenges. Spurred on by the communities who rallied around them they would find The Blacksmiths Tree testing their innumerable skills whilst drawing on ever increasing reserves of determination.







FEEDBACK

In response to *Forged from Fire* preview screenings, teasers and exhibitions.

Seeing that tree all together was very affecting for me...like a community put back together after unthinkable devastation.

- JEANNETTE DAVISON (Warrandyte, Australia)

Forged from fire is a beautiful film. So much of passion in the the making of the tree. The film really brought that out well. lovely shots of the tree..the end especially was so perfect..it left me wanting more...just like when I reach the last page of a book I enjoyed. Difficult to explain. It's those shots of the tree at the end.

- GAYATRI HANDIQUE (Assam, India)

I'm pushing to think of a memorial more beautiful in the world, most are rigid, solid blocks of stone with plaques attached. This one is delicate, every inch an inscription of compassion from people around the world and beautifully put together as a "humanity" tree. Time will tell, but I hope Strathewen will be able to contain this wonderful memorial.

- KERRY CROSS (Warrandyte, Australia)

I thought that the tree with all its leaves was stunning and it was hard to walk away from it. The love, attention, compassion, and positive energy from many people who contributed to creating it was almost tangible! I keep thinking of the tree and its beauty - It incredibly sad, and incredibly uplifting at the same time.. such a mixed bag of emotions all the best with the Documentary - I look forward to seeing it in its completion :-)

- CAROLYN CHALTON (Whittlesea, Australia)

*Oh Andrew!!! *sigh**

*I have just seen your vimeo movie on FB [Facebook]. *sigh**

AMAZing!!! I cried, each of the 3 times I watched it back to back. Your amazing work is yet another heartfelt creative genius that makes 'The Tree' so so special! And I am thrilled, delighted, humbled, embarassed, excited, proud and touched that two of my photos are included such a powerful expereince beyond words!

- LEANNE DAVEY (Melbourne, Australia)

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

In February 2009 I had returned from Europe to commence an artists' residency at Clifton Pugh's Dunmoochin in Cottles Bridge, north-east of Melbourne. The day after I arrived in Melbourne the entire north-east was devastated by fire-storms of a magnitude never seen before. With the impact of the fires so severe it would be seven months before I made the move. The Black Saturday Fires had impacted profoundly on the people with whom I would come to know as neighbours and friends.

During the residency I met Amanda Gibson, the courageous and compassionate project lead behind The Blacksmiths' Tree. I would hear talk of the complexities of manufacture, the massive stainless steel taper that would engage the largest forge in the country, the call outs for volunteers and the women who would learn to weld and join the blacksmiths in their quest to complete their work – the multifaceted human story that would pound the Blacksmiths' Tree into shape. Myth was talked up every day and the Tree became something mystical.

By late 2013 The Blacksmiths' Tree was nearing completion. Numerous amateur and professional film-makers had had a go at documenting its creation. I chipped in to bring some continuity to a growing archive of video and stills. With so much footage available I looked into the possibility of pooling this material into a single documentary with a view to completing it with The Tree Project team and the communities that had gathered to support them. I grew to become part of that team, trusted to shoot at both the momentous and intimate closing stages of our project. It would prove to be an enriching, illuminating and emotional undertaking.

On 30 November 2013 The Blacksmiths' Tree was unveiled at a public event on the Whittlesea Showgrounds. Thousands of people saw the Tree for the first time. It would also be the last time they would view up-close its canopy of 3500 leaves; poems, testimonials, well wishes and the names of those who perished in the fires stamped onto them.

On that day I filmed the complex move from the factory in which it was assembled and the public's reaction to it. I collected photos and video clips the public had taken and with announcements throughout the day, I met a good many people who not only shared their photos, but told me harrowing stories of escape, loss and grieving – and many did so whilst touching the stainless steel trunk. I'd observed countless people seeking to touch the Blacksmiths' Tree, reaching out across safety fences to place their hands onto it.

There is a real urge to relate to The Blacksmiths' Tree. Volunteers found themselves dedicated to seeing the Tree completed and those following its progress on social media found a means to elevate their hopes beyond grief, beyond suffering, beyond the personal losses so many had, and continue, to endure.

Andrew Garton



POST-PRODUCTION CREW

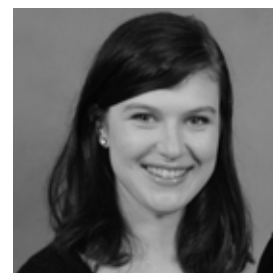
ANDREW GARTON- Producer, Writer, Director

Andrew's work spans the genres of non-fiction film-making, short-format documentary, non-linear radio documentary drama, projected video and sound installations. He is a producer, writer and director at Secession Films and Adjunct Industry Fellow, Communications and Media, Swinburne University. Andrew was the inaugural Program Director at Open Channel and Operations Manager at EngageMedia; former Creative Producer with City of Melbourne and Creative Director and co-founder of Toy Satellite. His most recent film *Ocean in a Drop - broadband impacts on rural India* will be accompanied by his first book, *Right to Know - India's internet avant garde*.



JENNI ALDRED- Associate Producer

Jenni is studying a Bachelor of Film and Television at Swinburne University. She is interested in pursuing a career in film editing and sound, with experience on several student films. Recently she and a friend together created a short documentary film, *It's Something About the Chook*, reflecting on the "chook knitting project" that helped women and children to heal after the Black Saturday bushfires in Strathewen. It is her dream to be involved in the production of large fantasy-epics, but she also loves working on smaller, close-knit productions concerning local issues and achievements.



KATE ADAM - Musical Advisor

Kate is a multi-instrumentalist, performer and composer. She performs with her duo *Invention In Time* and jazz/percussion outfit *The Shala Ensemble*. Kate studied percussion at The Victorian College of The Arts and Jazz/contemporary flute at The Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE.





MIKE WILKINS - DOP, Colourist

Mike is an independent video producer and director of photography with an extensive post-production background. Mike's post-production background includes working on feature films and documentaries and as a post-production supervisor and online editor.



RACHEL LOWE - Community Liaison

Rachel has been living and working a community development life for over 20 years, and has been part of The Blacksmiths' Tree since the beginning. Strong social change and deep collective experiences are the motivations for her work in disability advocacy, philanthropy, project management, facilitation and the arts. Rachel was Montsalvat art centre's first Community Development Worker, and documentary maker of *Wet Feet Walking: The People's History of Greensborough Swimming Pool*. She recently worked with Boomerang Alliance to coordinate the *World Oceans Day Rally* on the steps of the Victorian Parliament to ban plastic bags in Victoria.



SIMON POLINSKI – Post Sound Mix and Mastering

Simon is an Aria award winning producer, engineer and musician with over three decades experience in the music, film and television industry. He has worked with hundreds of great local and international artists including The Church, Paul Kelly, Ollie Olsen, Stephen Cummings, Yothu Yindi, George Telek, David Bridie and Tim Finn.



CREDITS

PRODUCER, WRITER, DIRECTOR Andrew Garton
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY Mike Wilkins
ASSOCIATE PRODUCER Jenni Aldred
VIDEO JOURNALIST Donal Sheil
COLOURIST Mike Wilkins
SOUND MIX Simon Polinski
ADDITIONAL CAMERAS ... Andrew Garton, Warwick Page, Barry Thomas, Donal Sheil

PRODUCTION COORDINATOR Rachel Lowe
INTERVIEWS TRANSCRIPTIONS Lisa Inman, Chris Crowe
COMMUNITY LIASION..... Mahony Kiely
MUSICAL DIRECTOR Kate Adam
CHOIR DIRECTOR Kerry Clarke
MUSIC Invention in Time, Charles Brown, Colin James
TITLING & DESIGN Viola Design
AERIAL FOOTAGE I-Drone, Brett Chilton and Michael Prinzi
ARCHIVAL FOOTAGE Warwick Page, Quentin Fogarty and Quotable Productions
TIMELAPSE FOOTAGE Mike Wilkins, Barry Thomas

COMMUNITY VIDEO & STILLS Courtesy of Carolyn Chalton, The Davey's, Neil Grant, Amanda Gibson, Georgia Munroe, Joji Mori, Kerry Cross, Rachel Cavill, Rob Tarrant, Wendy Gottlieb

BUDGET & FINANCE MANAGEMENT Auspicious Arts

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A PRODUCTION OF Secession Films.



There was a real desire to do something positive and not make this just about destruction, but to make it about creation.

- AMANDA GIBSON, The Tree Project

It's given people a way of being involved. I think that's a big difference, it's a grassroots creation that's come from an idea and thousands of people which to me gives it so much more validity than a static memorial.

- SHANE PUGH, Artist and Tree Project Volunteer

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Images by Amanda Gibson, Mike Wilkins and Neil Grant



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