



HELLO BEN PHELPS

FILMMAKER

Funnily enough, Ben Phelps saw hardly any films when he was growing up in Canberra. His mother encouraged her three children to be creative by sending them to sculpture classes, and upon leaving school Phelps was torn between studying art and law.

He chose arts/law at the Australian National University but soon felt "creatively starved" and took up film studies. He had caught the film bug while selling tickets at an arthouse cinema, entranced by cinema's ability to move and challenge an audience in just two hours, to transplant it to "a different world".

It was this power that motivated Phelps to write, direct and co-produce his first short film, *Checkpoint*, which explores the discrimination against people of Middle Eastern heritage in Australia since September 11.

The 11-minute film, about a Lebanese-Australian family who encounter a group of soldiers in rural Australia, stars Alex Dimitriades, and won the prestigious Jury Prize at the Montreal World Film Festival. It tours nationally with Flickerfest until March 25.

"It's an incredible breakthrough," says Phelps, 31. "You always hope it'll do that but the odds are so unlikely."

It was the strength of his script that won him funding from the Young Filmmakers Fund of the NSW Film & Television Office, and which attracted name actors and professional crew. "I was the most inexperienced person on set. I was just trying to hold my own," he confesses.

The floppy-haired Phelps now has a rich sense of possibility. "Since the win at Montreal I've been approached by producers in Australia and the US - I'm working on one feature script now by myself, and one with someone else."

*Report Anne Lim
Photography Andy Baker*