



QSB PRODUCTIONS PRESENTS

THE FORT

A movie by Jess & Carly Anne Kenneally



Australia, 2021, digital/colour/ 1.78:1, Dolby 5.1, 72 min.

WRITTEN BY

Jess Kenneally

DIRECTED BY

Jess Kenneally & Carly Anne Kenneally

CAST

Kitty Eliza Charley
Graham Jess Kenneally
Tom Dean Bills
Mary Liza Dennis
Will Liam Smith

KEY CREW

Executive Producer: Shayna Blaze

Executive Producer: Mitu Bhowmick Lange

Produced by: Neva Morrissy, Carly Anne Kenneally,
Jess Kenneally, Leanne Tonkes

First Assistant Director, Line Producer: Melanie Killingsworth

Cinematography: Greg Kung, Matt Bronger, Nigel Rungen

Production Designer: Shayna Blaze

Visual Effects: Chroma

Editor: Carly Anne Kenneally

Costume Designer: Sorj Tanewha

Composer: Dorian West

Sound Design: Original Score



TAGLINE

What does a mother do when she doesn't want her son to become his father?

LOGLINE

Faced with the harrowing reality of family violence, a mother and her young son discover the fantasy world that provides them sanctuary can't protect them forever.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

Where do you go... who do you turn to... when home is where the harm is?

Living with family violence, young mother Kitty and her son Tom create a fort that transports them to a series of fantasy worlds that provide an escape from the hostilities they face at home. But, when reality overtakes fantasy, what does a mother do when she doesn't want her son to become his father?

SYNOPSIS

Where do you go... who do you turn to... when home is where the harm is?

Set in 1990s regional Victoria, *The Fort* tells the story of one woman's battle to escape her abusive marriage while attempting to shelter her son from the grim realities of family violence.

Kitty is a stay-at-home mum married to Graham whose suppression of a traumatic childhood sees him choosing to repeat abusive patterns of behaviour he and his mother experienced from his own father. Becoming increasingly aware of the dangers of her situation, Kitty begins to fear the impact her volatile marriage is having on 10-year-old Tom, and the long-term effects her turbulent home life might have on her son.

Kitty builds Tom a fort in his bedroom; a safe space where they can retreat when the hostilities they face at home become overwhelming. *The Fort* transports Tom and Kitty to a series of fantasy worlds, that give Kitty a taste of freedom, from the fear and control that dominates her home life, fortifying her to plan their escape.

Kitty starts an abuse journal, where she documents the violence she suffers at Graham's hands, while gradually amassing an escape fund taken from Graham's wallet.

Following a particularly nasty encounter, Kitty musters the resilience to kick Graham out of the family home. Mother and son begin to find their feet, re-establishing their relationship with Kitty's sister Mary. But, when reality overtakes fantasy, they quickly discover that the make-believe world that has provided them sanctuary, can't protect them forever.

What does a mother do when she doesn't want her son to become his father?

The Fort explores the cycle of family violence through generations, and examines the mental, physical and emotional impacts born of abusive relationships, addressing wide-ranging themes including financial abuse, coercive control, patriarchal masculinity, coping mechanisms, survival tactics and shame.

VOICE OF CHANGE

AMPLIFYING THE IMPACT

On average, **one Australian woman a week is murdered** by her current or former partner. **One in three Australian women has experienced physical violence** since the age of 15.

The Fort explores the cycle of family violence through generations, and examines the emotional, physical and emotional impacts born of living with an abuser, addressing themes including financial abuse, coercive control, patriarchal masculinity, coping mechanisms, survival tactics and shame.

The movie's subject matter had a significant impact on the cast and crew, who found that *The Fort's* closed set provided a safe environment in which some felt comfortable to reveal their own experiences with family violence, and to share emotional – and at times confronting – conversations in what was a nurturing, supportive and healing environment.

Producing *The Fort* highlighted the therapeutic power of the arts, and left many involved with the film determined to communicate *The Fort's* message beyond the screen. They founded *Voice of Change* to stand in solidarity with the growing

collective of voices decrying family violence in Australia, and as a means of continuing to use the arts to champion meaningful education about – and action against – family violence.

Voice of Change is not a crisis response service, nor an early intervention service, it is a primary prevention organisation that aims to change the attitudes, social conditions and cultural attitudes that underpin family violence.

To achieve this *Voice of Change* supports arts projects inspired by people with lived experience of family violence that highlight abusive behaviours, address patriarchal masculinity and promote behavioural change. *Voice of Change* also connects people to other recognised primary prevention organisations that offer specialised services, programs and educational resources that aim to prevent family violence. This primary prevention approach may include disrupting the stereotypes and attitudes that lead to gender inequalities and disrespect, helping people recognise abusive behaviour and speak up against it, and inviting men into the change journey as a way of interrupting the cycle of violence.





BIOGRAPHIES

Jess Kenneally

WRITER, CO-DIRECTOR, LEAD ACTOR (GRAHAM)



Jess Kenneally is a writer, director, producer and actor working across film, television and theatre. He briefly studied Arts/ Journalism, then outdoor studies, before attending *NIDA Open* in 2013 to study acting. Throughout his acting career Jess has strived to tell stories that cross demographics playing key roles in a number of short films such as *Hirani* (2015) and *The Escape Hatch* (2016), both of which enjoyed success on the festival circuit. Working on both sides of the camera, Jess has produced stage productions including the Australian Theatre debut of *Good Egg*, a play that tackled mental health themes, in which he also played one of the lead roles. He has worked in the audio department at Endemol, Shine Australia, Eureka Productions and the Nine Network on productions including *LEGO Masters*, *Survivor*, *Gogglebox Australia* and *The Block*. *The Fort* is Jess' first produced screenplay.

Eliza Charley

LEAD ACTOR (KITTY)



Eliza Charley is an actor, writer and producer whose career spans film, theatre and television. She enjoyed her first taste of theatrical life in 1998 when, at the tender age of 11, she wrote, co-produced, designed, costumed and starred in an adaptation of the legend of King Arthur. She has since gone on to work on popular TV shows *Neighbours*, *Secret City*, *Buying Blind*, and *Deadline Design*, feature films *Time Apart* (Amazon Prime, 2020), *Oddball* (2015), and *The Fort* (2021). A graduate of the *NIDA Open Studio* and *Advance Studio* programs in Australia, and the *Summer Conservatory* program at *The Neighborhood Playhouse* in New York, U.S.A, and Eliza is a former faculty member at *Meisner Melbourne* where she taught acting technique. Eliza has collected awards and scholarships from institutions as varied as L'Alliance Française, and the Australian Olympic Committee. In 2019, she won the Women in Film and Television (WIFT) Scholarship to study Creative Leadership: with Sue Maslin (*The Dressmaker*) at Compton School for business, technology and creativity. A passionate advocate for women in the industry, Eliza Charley is an inaugural member of the Victorian Chapter of female producers Screen Vixens, and a member of Women In Film & Television Australia.

Carly Anne Kenneally

CO-DIRECTOR, EDITOR



Carly Anne is a director, producer and editor working in narrative, documentary and television, with a focus on storytelling. From 2012 to 2016 Carly Anne was production manager for radio show *All the Best*, which was made by FBi Radio in Sydney and broadcast nationally via the CBAA. During that time she earned a Cert III scholarship in live TV with Metro Screen (2014), and studied Cert IV in film and TV at Metro screen in Sydney (2015). Carly Anne was a Union Docs collaborative fellow from 2015 to 2016, specialising in experimental documentary and non-fiction media in New York, and the Production Manager for SXSW Audience Favourite award winner and New York Times acclaimed film *The Light of The Moon* in 2016. Carly Anne won the ASE Edit Royale 2020, where she edited a complete music video from unseen media in only two hours, Carly Anne was formerly an assistant editor at *The Butchery*, and now freelances for The Editors, ARC, and for renowned senior editors.

Liza Dennis

SUPPORTING ACTOR (MARY)



Known for her work on *The Very Excellent Mr Dundee* (2020), *Five Bedrooms* (2019), *You Can Say Vagina* (2018) & *Plague* (2015), Liza Dennis is a Melbourne/Adelaide based actor and voice over artist who has worked across film, television and theatre, for more than 20 years. She is a recipient of both the Joan Harris AM Graduate Award from the National Theatre, and the Besen Family Foundation Artist Program. Away from the spotlight Liza is an experienced casting associate, script researcher/editor who has moved increasingly towards writing and directing in recent years. Most recently she was awarded Best First Time Director at the Prague International Film Festival and Finalist for Best Director & Original Story at the Sweden Film Festival & Hollywood Gold Festival. Since graduating from RMIT's Advanced Diploma of Screenwriting in 2018, Liza has worked as an independent script editor, while continuing to work on her own scripts. Liza recently wrapped on Apple TV series *Shantaram* as script researcher and is currently casting co-ordinator on NBC's Series 1 of *La Brea*. A multi-faceted artist who is passionate about story, connection and giving voice to those who are unable to self-advocate, Liza is co-chair of the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance Wellness Committee, and is a member of the Australian Writers Guild.

Shaynna Blaze

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, SET DESIGNER



Shaynna is an award winning interior and set designer who has created stunning residential and commercial spaces internationally for more than 20 years. Shaynna has been a judge on Nine Network's *The Block* for 12 years, was interior designer on *Selling Houses Australia* (Lifestyle Channel) for 13 years, and anchored TV shows *Deadline Design* (Lifestyle Channel, 2016) and *Buying Blind* (Nine Network, 2018). Shaynna's TV work has garnered her several awards, including back-to-back ASTRAs for 'Favourite Female Personality' in 2013 and 2014. Off-screen Shaynna chairs family violence charity *Voice of Change* which she co-founded, runs her successful interior design business *Blank Canvas Interiors*, and has been a guest speaker and MC at a number of events including the *Safe Steps' Candlelight Vigil* in 2017 and 2018.

Dean Bills

SUPPORTING ACTOR (TOM)



Dean Bills is a 14-year-old Melbourne-based actor who has amassed impressive experience over the course of his relatively short career. He played the lead roles in Victorian College of the Arts' Masters short film *There's Always One*, University of Melbourne's 2018 production of *Boys Will Be Boys*, and has also featured in short films *John Morton's Funeral* (2019), *Raul: Younger* (2018), and *Deakin University's Eastbound* (2018). Dean's stage credits include the National Theatre St Kilda's *Goodies Baddies* and *All That Jazz: Moana and Pete's Dragon* (2017) and *Hooray for Hollywood* (2017). In 2018 Dean travelled to Los Angeles with his family to take part in a series of The Celebrity Experience (TCE) workshops spanning scene study, improv, cold reading, monologues, auditions and commercials, going on to play the lead role in the TCE Showcase. When he's not acting Dean enjoys gaming, skateboarding and playing AFL football. *The Fort* is Dean's first starring role in a full-length feature.

WRITER/DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I wrote the original concept for *The Fort* back in 2015. I'd always been interested in the influence parents' behaviour can have over their children's personalities, and the tendency for that behaviour to repeat itself through generations, and wanted to explore those themes more deeply.

I adapted the idea into the rough draft for a movie called *Cycle* and submitted it to a script writing competition that year, where it was unsuccessful. So, I tucked the idea to the back of my mind where it remained, rarely contemplated, until 2017.

On May 3, 2017, I attended the annual *Safe Steps Family Violence Candlelight Vigil* at Fed Square. We heard people with lived experience of family violence share their stories, and there was a roll call of lives lost to family violence over the preceding 12 months.

The sheer number of people whose lives were touched by family violence in Australia struck a deep chord with me. It wasn't only adults affected, there were tiny children memorialised as well. The Safe Steps vigil was real, and raw and heartbreaking and I left Fed Square that night asking myself how filmmakers and storytellers could use their privileged voices to raise awareness of the brutal – and unacceptable – prevalence of family violence in this country.

As I talked to my sister Carly Anne (Kenneally) about the experience the next day, the script for *Cycle* sprang back into focus. We spoke to

our Mum Shayna (Blaze), who'd MC'd the vigil, and we all felt strongly that we needed to get the movie made. I rewrote the script, focusing on the dual themes of family violence and the perpetuation of the abuse cycle through generations, and retitled it *The Fort*.

On set we all felt a tremendous responsibility to both tell Kitty, Tom and Graham's story authentically, and to ensure the wellbeing of our cast and crew; a confronting number of whom had their own experiences of family violence or saw echoes of our story in the lives of their family and friends. Already our little movie was having a big impact on the people touched by it, sparking recognition, starting conversations and instigating activism.

The Fort is both a memorial to the lives lost to, and impacted by, family violence each year in Australia, and a call to action to Australians to find their voices and start to speak up against the cultural attitudes that see disrespectful behaviour, discrimination, misogyny, and patriarchal masculinity all too often shrugged off with little or no challenge.

Jess Kenneally, 2021.





DIRECTOR/EDITOR'S STATEMENT

I'm drawn to storytelling as a vehicle for driving change. It has the power to get key issues on the radar, get people thinking about things differently, and ultimately to impact cultural norms.

The desire to take action and bring about change was our impetus when we embarked on making *The Fort*.

I'm an editor by trade, so taking on a directing role for *The Fort* was a challenge. I soon worked out that my reluctance around directing was born purely out of insecurity and the more I worked out what I was doing, the more my love for directing grew!

To me, conveying a character's truth through fantasy is an engaging storytelling device. *Pan's Labyrinth* and *The Fall* were both inspirations for *The Fort*. Their use of fantasy as an escape mechanism in the central character's journey, is a way of engaging the audience with their torment, without overexplaining.

With the exception of the fantasy scenes, Kitty never steps foot outside the door of the family

home. We drove those opposing realities home through the use of the two different aspect ratios and contrasting grades. In the reality space we used a 255 ratio bar and muted tones in the grade, emphasising the bleak and claustrophobic life in the house. In the alternate realities we used a full-frame aspect ratio and brighter colours to conjure up the sense of freedom and possibility Kitty only experiences when she loses herself in a world of make believe with her son.

The three fantasy worlds in *The Fort* empower Kitty. The hieroglyphics of the Egyptian scenes inspire her to document Graham's abuse, Tom's comments about travelling through wormholes to find a better life bring the realisation that they need to escape, and the prehistoric scene fortifies her to take on her husband and banish him from their home.

I began editing the film in September 2019 once the house shoot wrapped in Kyneton, dedicating every waking hour that I wasn't doing my day job to fine-tuning the cut. In February 2021 I gave up my day job to commit to *The Fort* project full-time.

One of the things I'm most proud of is the way *The Fort* takes one family's story and uses it to tackle the larger issue of family violence.

When we were making the movie it was always our intention that the film would amplify the family violence discussion with the audience, but we found that even when filming, cast and crew were sharing experiences they'd had with domestic violence, either personally or peripherally. Most people seem to have a story.

We hope *The Fort* prompts questions like: "what constitutes family violence," and "why doesn't Kitty just leave," and "why can't Graham see that he's perpetuating his father's behaviour"? In addressing some of those questions, we hope *The Fort* speaks to the complex and nuanced issue of family violence.

There's a scene in the movie where Kitty lights a candle in memory of her parents. In real life, on set, the candle appeared to have gone out, then seconds later the wick burst into flame again. I've never seen a candle do that before and it has

become a metaphor for Kitty's story. Her flame is constantly flickering in and out. She's getting beaten down and rising back up, and she's using this candle as a way of firing her spirit.

That candle is also a metaphor for the wider cultural issues we're facing in Australia today. The constant battle being waged for equality and respect, and against patriarchal masculinity and misogyny. No matter how hard it seems or how defeated we feel, we have to be like that flame and just keep coming back and trying to change things.

Carly Anne Kenneally, 2021.

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER'S STATEMENT

I'm acutely aware of the horrifying prevalence of family violence in Australia, and I've long been passionate about equality and social justice, supporting organisations like Safe Steps and Kids Under Cover. So, it's apt that a *Safe Steps Family Violence Candlelight Vigil* proved the catalyst for the making of *The Fort*.

I remember leaving the vigil that night in May 2017 overwhelmed by the scale and deadliness of family violence in Australia, and determined to find a way to help bring about change. Jess and Carly felt the same and, when they pitched the idea for *The Fort* to me, they had my attention immediately.

Here was an opportunity to do more. To depict family violence in all its insidious truth. To help people recognise family violence, if not understand it. And, to encourage people to speak up and challenge the societal behaviours that – time and again – have been identified as precursors to family violence.

The Safe Steps Vigil was an awakening. We didn't know how we were going to do it, but we knew we *had* to make this movie.

Watching your kids collaborate on a project that means so much to you as a family, and that has the potential to do so much good, is humbling. From the moment they're born you're their person, the one whose taught them all their lives, and all of a sudden you have to take a step back and trust them. Watching them blossom and take charge of the entire production process was incredible.

Jess has always been a storyteller, but the way he honed the script blew my mind and his

communication skills when he was on-set directing were next level. And *The Fort* wouldn't be anywhere without Carly's passion for the project, and her relentless drive to maintain momentum through the editing and post-production process. It turns out that the work done on set is the easy bit! Carly almost single-handedly fashioned that raw material into the movie we see today, logging literally hundreds of hours in the editing suite and post-production. Between them, Jess and Carly took control of every aspect of the movie. All I could do was stand back and look on in pride.

It feels like the time is right for *The Fort*. There's a growing collective of Australian voices decrying disrespectful and discriminatory behaviour, and calling attention to the scourge of family violence.

Nevertheless, there's still much to be done, and I want to do my part to bring about change by communicating the movie's important messages beyond the duration of its theatrical run.

The movie inspired us to co-found *Voice of Change*; a charity that stands in solidarity with those voices, and which champion meaningful education about – and action against – family violence through arts-based projects.

I know that one movie – and one charity – can't single-handedly transform society. My hope is that *The Fort*, and the *Voice of Change* projects that follow it, wakes people up, helps shake them from their apathy and plays a small part in bringing about the change we dearly need to see in Australia today.

Shaynna Blaze, 2021.

