

## Shari Sebbens looks at 'the horrible side' of the country in Australia Day

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Shari Sebbens is no fan of Australia Day. A Bardi Jabirr Jabirr woman who grew up in Darwin, the *Sapphires* star thinks of it as Invasion Day and prefers to take time to reflect with her "mob" – family and friends – rather than celebrate.

So Sebbens was surprised to hear she had been invited to audition for a new film called *Australia Day*.



Shari Sebbens: "Why would I want to audition for a film called *Australia Day*?" Photo: Nic Walker

"I laughed," she says. "I said 'why would I want to audition for a film called *Australia Day*?' As an Aboriginal woman, it conjures up that it's going to be some bogan Cronulla riots type thing."

But when she read the script, Sebbens was delighted to see the provocative territory the drama was covering – a potent examination of race and identity.

"It's taking a look at the horrible side to Australia that people don't like to acknowledge exists, especially on nice summer days when you can just pop on the Hottest 100 and enjoy a tinnie," she says.

Sebbens plays an Aboriginal police officer, Senior Constable Sonya Mackenzie, who is caught up in interwoven dramas as three teenagers run away on the national day: a 14-

year-old Indigenous girl fleeing a car crash, a 17-year-old Iranian boy running from a crime scene and a 19-year-old Chinese girl escaping sexual slavery.

Directed by Kriv Stenders with a cast that includes Bryan Brown, Matthew Le Nevez, Isabelle Cornish and such newcomers as Miah Madden, Elias Anton and Jenny Wu, the topical drama has its world premiere at Sydney Film Festival this month.

It continues a strong upward trajectory for Sebbens that includes acclaim for her stage performances in *The Bleeding Tree* and, currently, Nakkiah Lui's *Black is the New White* for Sydney Theatre Company.



*Sebbens and Miah Madden in Australia Day.* Photo: Vince Valitutti

She grew up in Darwin with three brothers and two sisters – "a bit of nerd and a bookworm" – and fell in love with acting when she saw the stage musical *Bran Nue Dae*. "All my cousins were in it," she says. "That's where it must have struck – being eight years old and seeing people that were my family up on stage singing and dancing and acting."



*Big break: Deborah Mailman, Jessica Mauboy, Miranda Tapsell and Shari Sebbens in The Sapphires.*

Having decided to be an actor herself at 13, Sebbens first studied Aboriginal theatre at the West Australian Academy of Performing Arts then went to NIDA in Sydney.

*The Sapphires*, Wayne Blair's hit musical in 2012, was her big break after drama school. She had to audition five times over eight months to win the role of one of four women who form an Indigenous singing group that heads to the Vietnam War to sing for the troops.

"I guess to get the four girls together, the chemistry was as important as *Romeo and Juliet*," she says. "It was hard and fast – a six-week shoot. And it was the most fun I've had in my life and may ever have."

The film's success launched her career.

"I have faith that I would have carved out a place in the industry for myself at some stage but *The Sapphires* definitely gave me the opportunity to tell the stories I never thought I'd get to tell," Sebbens says.

"Because I'm fair-skinned, I often thought I'd be playing the white character in Aboriginal stories. But I came out at this amazing time where *The Sapphires* was offering up a part of our history and a part of our now, which is that Aboriginal people come in all shades. It's about your connection to your culture, not the colour of your skin."

She has since worked in film on *The Darkside* and *Teenage Kicks* and, in television, on *Redfern Now* – winning a Logie for outstanding new talent – *The Gods Of Wheat Street*, *8MMM Aboriginal Radio* and *Black Comedy*.

Sebbens sees it as a positive that Aboriginal stories are no longer being told "somewhat through a white lens" with white writers and directors.

"Now black writers are writing for black people," she says. "That's the reason things like *Redfern Now* have been such great successes on screen.

"The more you honestly write for yourself, the more universal it becomes for other people. And that's what's happening with Aboriginal theatre – the narratives are really honest to who we are."

Stenders, the *Red Dog* director who also has the world premiere of *The Go Betweens: Right Here* at Sydney Film Festival, says the title of *Australia Day* is deliberately provocative.

"We're trying to use the title as a way to perhaps open up a debate about that day and what Australia has become," he says. "It's a very complex and richly varied country. The film tries to look at that complexity in a compelling way."

Written by Stephen Irwin and made by Hoodlum Entertainment for Foxtel Originals, *Australia Day* is a new model for Australian film.

"This kind of film, it has a niche audience," Stenders says. "It's going to get a small theatrical release but the Foxtel berth will be where we'll finally end up."

"But under the normal theatrical model that exists, this kind of film wouldn't get made any more. Now that you have subscriber-based entities like Foxtel – and hopefully Netflix and Stan – the idea that feature films can be made in a different way through these platforms is very exciting."