

ABC
COMMERCIAL

A
CLASH
OF
CULTURE,
FAITH
AND
FOOTBALL

FO LAU



‘An excellent film that does what journalists at the time could not, which is bring to the fore the experience of rugby’s sizeable Pacific Islander playing community.’

– Sydney Morning Herald

This explosive two-part documentary from In Films (*Firestarter: The Story of Bangarra, Revelation*) is the story of one of Australia’s most gifted and controversial athletes – **Israel Folau** – and how a social media post landed him at the heart of culture wars, derailing careers in the process.

For the first time, Folau’s story is examined in all its multilayered complexity, featuring crucial Pasifika voices and exploring the nexus between freedom of religion and speech, protection from discrimination for the LGBTQIA+ community, and how far the workplace can reasonably go to balance the two.

Tracking Israel’s story from his record-setting rise through three football codes to his dismissal by Rugby Australia after posting bible verses widely perceived as homophobic, *Folau* is at once the story of a migrant family struggling to make good, a story of faith, colonialism, money and power. It is also about who, in modern day society, gets a microphone when issues get thorny.

Shot over two years in Fiji, New Zealand, Australia and Japan, the series features a unique line up of interviewees, including rugby superstar **Samu Kerevi**, Tonga coach **Toutai Kefu**, the Folau family’s former Mormon bishop **Salesi Tupou**, former Wallabies coach **Michael Cheika** as well as Israel’s lawyer **George Haros**.

LGBTQI voices include former Wallaby prop forward **Dan Palmer**, actor **Magda Szubanski**, artist **Telly Tuita**, former pastor and human rights worker **Andre Afamasaga** and director/actor **Taofia Pelesasa**.

**2 x 60’
In Films**

Episode Synopses

Episode One

This episode traces Israel Folau's upbringing in the devout Christian traditions of the Pasifika community, whose other 'religion' is rugby. It follows his meteoric and record setting rise through three football codes, culminating in 73 appearances for the Australian national rugby union team, the Wallabies. While initially grappling with the pitfalls of fame and fortune, when his father Eni experiences a major health scare, Folau re-evaluates his choices, setting him on a path that will alter the course of his career and life forever.

Episode Two

Folau posts an internet meme that rocks the nation and sees him sacked by Rugby Australia. With insider accounts, this episode unpicks what happens in the hours, days and weeks that follow and shows the impact it had on the Pasifika community – straight and queer. As he fights his former employer in the courts of justice and public opinion, he finds an ally in the Australian Christian Lobby – becoming a voice in Australia's political cycle and galvanising forces debating the impact of a proposed religious discrimination bill.



Producer Ivan O'Mahoney

Ivan is the co-founder of In Films. After an earlier career in law and the army, he studied journalism at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism in New York. Following positions at CNN in Atlanta and BBC in London he moved to Australia in 2008, initially working on productions for the ABC (*Four Corners*) and SBS (*Go Back To Where You Came From*).

In 2013 he founded In Films with Nial Fulton, and much of their work is human rights focused. Ivan's work has won two Australian Director Guild Awards, three Rose d'Or Awards, three AACTA Awards, three Walkley Awards, a Screen Producers Award and a Logie Award.

Ivan's credits include *Firestarter: The Story of Bangarra* (Producer), *Revelation* (Executive Producer), *Hitting Home* (Director/Producer), *Matilda & Me* (Producer), *The Queen & Zak Grieve* (Director/Producer) and the HBO documentary *Baghdad High* (Director/Producer).



Director Nel Minchin

Nel Minchin is a director, producer and writer with a reputation for making highly engaging, smart, thought-provoking documentaries. Nel directed (with Wayne Blair) and co-produced *Firestarter: The Story of Bangarra*. The feature documentary played at over 100 Australian screens and at over 35 national and international film festivals, opening Sydney, Byron Bay, Revelation Perth and closing Brisbane. It won Best Documentary at the Adelaide Film Festival and at Danny Glover's Pan-African Film Festival in LA, and the Rose D'Or for Arts Programming. In Australia, it won the AACTA, Walkley, Screen Producers and the Australian Directors Guild Awards.

Nel has also directed many prime-time TV documentaries including *Capturing Cricket: Steve Waugh in India* for ABC and *The Truth About Anxiety with Celia Pacquola* for SBS. *Folau* is Nel's fourth documentary with In Films following *Firestarter*, *Making Muriel* and the AACTA-nominated and ATOM-winning *Matilda & Me*.

Director's Statement



The Israel Folau story is a compelling and complicated one. I was instantly attracted to the project as it poses important, complex and fascinating social dilemmas: What happens when our democratic rights and freedoms collide? What is the role of religion in personal lives and what level of protection does it deserve, if any, when it spills into public discourse? How much control should corporations have over individual beliefs and opinions, and how can those corporations be used as social justice tools? What is the tipping point between freedom of speech and hate speech?

Set against the high-stakes backdrop of professional sport and federal politics and playing out in the Wild West of social media, it felt incredibly of the time: an essential story crying out for careful telling. The series felt current when it was commissioned, and it feels current now – the conversation around ‘freedoms’ and the workplace is far from settled.

When the opportunity arose to direct *Folau*, perhaps I was mostly intrigued by the chance to spend a considerable amount of time challenging my own opinions and biases. It would be my own chance to step out of my echo chamber and away from the ever-present outrage.

What surprised me was how the outrage so fiercely remains. Many research calls went cold. In a story that had so polarised the country, there was a lot of mistrust to overcome.

We were told the story was ‘one for the past’ and questioned as to why we thought it necessary to make a film about it at all. But sporting codes were still dealing with situations echoing the issues from the Folau controversy. The more we learned, the more we realised that we had to make the series. It was clear this issue was not in fact, in the past. The Folau story needed to be considered more completely.

As we hit various hurdles in the journey, I was so lucky to be supported by an incredibly powerful editorial team – cultural consultant Sēini F Taumoepeau, senior researcher Sisi’uno Helu, associate director Vanilla Tupu – all of whom were very passionate about the importance of this story. This story was not just about one sports star who lost his job, it was in fact about a much bigger social divide; one that continues to impact many communities across the country. Through the work of this team, we were able to interview an array of voices about this issue. Crucially, we spoke both on and off camera with a multitude of pacific queer voices, who provided the kind of insight and nuance to the story that the country had never heard. I hope these perspectives, alongside the revelations of those embroiled in the controversy at the time, shed new light on the issue.

I hope that maybe, just maybe, the film will give people from all walks of life and ‘sides’ of politics a moment of pause.

– Nel Minchin

Associate Director Vanilla Tupu



Vanilla is of Samoan descent. Having recently graduated with a degree in Communication from the University of Technology, Sydney, majoring in Media Arts Production and Socio-Political Sciences, she has been working with production companies In Films and Entropico to build her skills as a director and producer. Vanilla brings to the team a unique skillset, including the artful eye of a trained photographer, a thorough understanding of Pasifika culture and cultural sensitivities and a network of like-minded Pasifika artists and other professionals on whom the production could call throughout the two years of making *Folau*. Aside from assisting Nel and Ivan in the storytelling, she scouted locations and led the cultural consultation and community engagement of the project through the organisation of project specific ‘Talanoas’ and the appointment of senior Tongan team members.

Senior Researcher Sisi'uno Helu

Senior researcher Sisi'uno Helu is the past director of Tonga's tertiary education Atenisi Institute. A highly respected senior member of the Pasifika community, she has a strong interest in film and the preservation of Tongan knowledge, music, stories and history.

A graduate of the conservatory of music in Brisbane, she was the founding president of the Nuku'alofa International Film Festival and co-producer on the documentary *Leitis in Waiting*, which dealt with the plight of Tonga's 'third gender' people and screened at the 2018 Commonwealth Film Festival in London. Sisi'uno's standing in the community helped secure interviews and community conversations, both on and off the record, that would otherwise have been unachievable. Her insights into Tongan culture and advice throughout the project were second to none.

A photograph of a man from behind, wearing a bright red short-sleeved polo shirt with white piping on the sleeves and hem. The word "TONGA" is printed in large, bold, white capital letters across the back of the shirt. He is standing on a green grassy field. In the background, there are other people, some in athletic wear, and a line of trees under a clear blue sky.

TONGA

Cultural Consultant Sēini F Taumoepeau

Sydney-based Sēini 'SistaNative' Taumoepeau is an Orator and Songwoman with an intersectional Oceania-Pacific lens and First Nations focus. She is an Indigenous woman of the Mōana, a direct descendant of ancient Polynesian celestial navigators with chiefly lineage. From Kingdom of Tonga origins, Sēini is an emerging elder with a career in Australia spanning more than 30 years as a performance artist, presenter/broadcaster and creative industries professional.

She has been commissioned by the Sydney Opera House and the Museum of Contemporary Art. On *Folau*, she provided invaluable guidance on cultural issues to explore, their sensitivities, methods for best practice of cultural engagement and many introductions to interviewees, including those from the queer Pacific community.

