

The Sydney Morning Herald

## Del Kathryn Barton to start *Puff, the Magic Dragon* film 'by end of year'

Despite the industry-wide shutdown, the *Puff, the Magic Dragon*-inspired feature film debut of Del Kathryn Barton will start shooting before the end of the year, the dual Archibald Prize-winning artist says.

Barton made the prediction as Screen Australia announced it had granted her film *Puff* production investment as part of its latest funding round.



Artist Del Kathryn Barton aims to start shooting her first feature film by December. LOUISE KENNERLEY

"It's already been three years of toil and collaboration to get to this point," said Barton. "And yes, of course these uncertain, challenging events we're all facing

Quinn, Karl. "Del Kathryn Barton to start *Puff, the Magic Dragon* film 'by end of year,'" Sydney Morning Herald. April 20, 2020.

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have impacted to some extent. But we are at this stage confident we'll be shooting by the end of the year, which is great."

*Puff* is inspired by her massive painting *sing blood-wings sing*, a five-panel, 12-metre wide work unveiled in 2017 as part of her *The Highway is a Disco* show at the National Gallery of Victoria.

That painting was, in turn, inspired by Peter, Paul and Mary's 1963 song *Puff, the Magic Dragon*, about the friendship between a little boy and a dragon and the dragon's retreat into isolation when the boy stops believing in him. But the "hybrid" film, featuring stop-animation, live action and visual effects, is far from a kids' picture, despite having a yet-to-be-cast 12-year-old as its lead. It is, rather, "a fairytale for adults," Barton said.

According to Screen Australia, *Puff* "centres on a young girl who, after witnessing a violent sexual assault, is left catatonic with shock and struggles to make sense of what she saw. She retreats into her imagination where Puff, the shimmering magic dragon who has been her childhood companion, allows her to express her rage and ultimately find renewal."



The film is inspired by Barton's painting *sing blood-wings sing*, which was inspired by 1963 song *Puff, the Magic Dragon*.

Barton said the film draws on the "warning" contained in the song, that "as we transition from childhood to adulthood we have to be careful that our own dragons don't crawl into their caves and lose their fearless roars. I fear that does happen if we lose connection with our child selves – it comes at great cost to ourselves, and to society."

If Barton does meet her self-imposed year-end deadline, that may count as a fairytale result itself. Right now, there's very little film or TV being made locally, with [Screen Producers Australia last week reporting that 119 productions](#), with a combined value of almost half a billion dollars, had been delayed or suspended indefinitely as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

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That figure did not include Marvel's big-budget film *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* or Baz



"It's incredibly detailed and thorough and endless – and I love it," says Barton of the filmmaking process. *CREDIT: LOUISE KENNERLEY*

Luhrmann's untitled Elvis Presley project.

That mostly means visual effects work for projects that had completed filming before the shutdown, and script development for those yet to begin production.

Screen Australia CEO [Graeme Mason](#) last week committed his [organisation](#) to continuing "to provide production funding, with the knowledge some shoots will be delayed".

To that end [the agency on Monday allocated \\$8.5 million of production investment to 10 projects](#) – three features, four TV series, a children's series, and two online projects – even though there is no timeline for the resumption of production activity yet.

Mr Mason said last week the agency's "intervention is unashamedly about making sure people have jobs to come back to".

Privately, some industry figures concede there's a chance that a greater, if enforced, focus on development may result in better quality Australian film and television. But for Barton, the distinction between pre-production and production is blurry anyway.

"It's a living, breathing process, and given this is a new experience for me I don't have a lot of clarity around that myself," she said. "It's just an endless juicy list at this stage – storyboarding, which I've never done before, attaching talent, talking to musicians, working with my puppet maker and sound design and my production designer.

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"I'm not hot-desking, I'm furnace desking," she added. "It's incredibly detailed and thorough and endless – and I love it."

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