

## **The School is out for Byron's busiest production company**

Byron Shire is home to one of Australia's busiest film production companies – Bronte Pictures, whose dark supernatural drama *The School* is set to give the audience thrills and chills at this year's Byron Bay Film Festival.

Bronte was formed in 2014 by Blake Northfield, who was born in Wollongong but grew up in the shire, attending Xavier and Woodlawn secondary schools and being a regular at the YAC's Thursday night hard-core but straight-edge concerts.

After a stint in Sydney, the 28-year-old former *Home and Away* actor moved back to Byron, where he lives with his partner, the artist Niah McLeod, and their two young children.

"This is our home, so it suits us to be based from here and still work one day a week from the office in Sydney. The area is second to none for landscape and community," Blake says.

An enthusiastic advocate for the area, he is a believer in bringing on local talent and developing a system in which everyone helps each other – partly in response to what he sees as a decline in the Bay's co-operative spirit, and as a reaction to the "who-you-know" closed system of the film industry.

Another two locals, Tom Byrnes and Peter Flannery, are producers with the company. They are both SAE graduates and Bronte has a partnership arrangement with SAE offering work placement to its students.

It's part of Bronte's commitment to retaining experienced filmmakers and pairing them with emerging talents to ensure the future of Australian film is in safe hands, Blake says.

"Young emerging filmmakers have to fight to get their foot in the door in this industry. We want to break that mould and offer opportunities every chance we can."

Another Byron Shire company, Cumulus, handles all The School's visual effects – and they are stunning. Offering more opportunities in the coming year – job opps with a film they have coming up called Streamline.

Bronte also has offices in Los Angeles and London, and production investors in China and Russia.

What drives Blake is quite simply the desire "to tell good stories and provide opportunities for people, young and old", and Bronte prides itself on its diverse slate, with films across all genres being shot in the coming year.

The School is their latest release. The supernatural thriller follows the story of Amy (Megan Drury), a mother and doctor as she descends into an eerie dark fairy-tale realm inhabited by monsters and lost children under the tyrannical rule of a young maniac Zac (Will McDonald).

The School is not a horror film but "a complete dark fantasy", says Blake. These kids are stuck in purgatory because their parents never let them go.

"We have a doctor whose son is on life support in hospital (working alongside the sinister Dr Wang, played by veteran actor Nicholas Hope (Bad Boy Bubby) who has to break into this world to find a way to let him go."

When writer/director Storm Ashwood showed Blake the script while filming *Out of the Shadows* in the Byron Hinterland for last year, he says "it blew me away".

Bronte is interested in taking risks, he says, and *The School* fits the bill. "You need to mix it up, be creative, do films that are interesting and make you think."

The School was shot at the abandoned Gladesville Mental Hospital, formerly the Tarban Creek Lunatic Asylum a notorious institution where hundreds of people died – an ideal setting for this eerie, otherworldly story.

**The School screens at the Byron Bay Film Festival at 7.00pm on Sunday, October 14 at the Byron Community Centre. Tickets at [BBFF.com.au](http://BBFF.com.au)**