

Landmark ABC drama Fires is a story of loss and heroism

By **Debi Enker**

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The roar of the fire is terrifying as embers fly through the air and flames rise around the truck. Queensland volunteer firefighters Tash (Eliza Scanlen) and Mott (Hunter Page-Lochard) are trapped inside as the blaze envelops their stranded vehicle.

The heart-stopping sequence from the first episode of the six-part drama Fires is being staged in April in a warehouse in Melbourne’s inner-north, where the new technology of the Dreamscreen is in action with its three curved walls of interlocking LED panels. The sequence isn’t relying exclusively on the magic of the Dreamscreen to evoke the horror of being trapped in an inferno. An ember machine sprays sparks and the flames rising from the floor have been created by a special-effects team. In a nicely primitive touch amid the high-tech display, two crew members jiggle poles to rock the cabin.

But the Dreamscreen is the star of the show. Towering over the truck, the images on its screens are being fed from the “Brain Bar”, rows of desks housing more than a dozen computers controlling the panels. The Coburg warehouse weirdly resembles mission control during a rocket launch.

As Fires co-creator and executive producer Tony Ayres observes, the Dreamscreen is “the future of filmmaking”, the kind of pioneering technology that changes the way the medium works. It’s the sort of innovation generally trialled by big-budget Hollywood productions, as it was in this case by *The Mandalorian*.

For this ABC production, where funds don’t flow as freely as they do at Disney, the producers initially considered the technology, rejected it as too costly, examined other options and then returned to it because what it



offered couldn't be achieved elsewhere. Even though the fires are only seen in a couple of episodes, establishing their ferocity was crucial for the drama.

Unlike much special-effects and green-screen work, where actors perform in studios in front of blank screens with tennis balls to guide their eyelines, with the Dreamscreens, they're able to perform in a virtual environment. And while special effects are customarily incorporated during post-production, here, when Scanlen and Page-Lochard have completed their scenes to the satisfaction of set-up director Michael Rymer, everyone can leave the warehouse with much of what they need captured on camera. And speed is important because *Fires* was made with a tight turnaround time: the ABC wanted it on air before we faced another fire season.

The idea for the series came from Ayres early in January 2020, with the country in the grip of wildfires that had already caused extensive damage. He was taking a Christmas break from work on the thriller *Clickbait* and, like the rest of the nation, was glued to the news. He quickly did an "elevator pitch" to ABC drama chief Sally Riley and the national broadcaster was on board.

Ayres then turned to Belinda Chayko to join the project. She was interested and available: her plans to go to the US to accept an International Emmy for

the SBS drama *Safe Harbour* had been shelved due to the fire threat near her NSW Northern Rivers home. Friends from film school, the pair have worked together on several productions (*Saved*, *Barracuda*, *Old School*, *Stateless*) and Ayres says, “I have immense respect for her talent and ability. We have complementary skill sets and great shorthand.”

Work began fast, with researchers travelling the country, gathering stories that would be fictionalised for the drama. Reflecting on the speed with which the production came together, Ayres says, “It’s a no-brainer for the ABC: this is a national interest topic and the way that Belinda has created the show captures a whole range of Australian experiences, particularly rural Australia.”



Chayko, who became *Fires*’ co-creator, writer and showrunner, recalls, “We had six scripts in good condition in under nine months,” to which Ayres adds that it was “because Belinda worked seven days a week for a year”.

From early on, the ideal format was seen to be an anthology with serialised elements. “We wanted the freedom to be able to fictionalise, to combine many stories and capture different parts of the population,” explains executive producer Liz Watts. “The characters are quite diverse: we have dairy farmers, we have someone in a unit in a coastal town, and holiday-makers.”

As ideas for the series developed, executive producer Andrea Denholm says the aim was to depict the scale and scope of the fires but also to create an intimate and immersive character-based drama. “This is an enormous story in our nation’s history, so it needs to be representative,” she explains. “We couldn’t put it in one small town, or focus on one family. That wouldn’t do justice to what people went through.”

The magnitude of the threat is established in that first-episode sequence. Then, Denholm says, the fires become like a monster in a horror film: “It’s like a character, growing and evolving, and it’s the enemy.” Once the danger it poses and its destructive power have been established, the drama’s focus shifts.

“We couldn’t tell a story about a fire every episode because you’d be telling the same story six times,” explains Chayko. “We had to think about the whole experience of going through a fire. It might start with having to make the decision about, ‘Do I stay or do I go?’ It might be being on the road and not knowing if there’s fire around.” As Denholm notes, “Fires don’t happen when you’re ready for them. They happen in the middle of relationship break-ups or family disputes. They interrupt ordinary life.”

With that in mind, Ayres says, “Part of the aim was to show the human response to catastrophe and trauma, that people can band together. Crisis brings out the best and worst in people, and we probably lean towards the best. But we see the worst as well. There’s light and shade in the show, which Belinda captures beautifully. She shows human resilience and people being able to support and love each other through difficult times.”

When it came to casting, the pandemic meant that a number of actors who work frequently overseas – including Anna Torv, Miranda Otto, Richard



Roxburgh and Sam Worthington – had sought the relative safety of Australia. And for all the cast – which also features Dan Spielman, Kate Box, Helana Sawires, Daniel Henshall, Noni Hazlehurst and Mark Leonard Winter – there were changing interstate travel restrictions and quarantine regulations. Watts says that schedules were like “shifting sands” and the producers laugh that co-ordination was akin to a game of Tetris.

They’re all hoping that the series will be a compelling drama that captures an historic period, noting that there’s been little time for affected communities to grieve properly about their loss and trauma. A 10-year drought was followed by a black spring-summer that destroyed lives, homes and businesses. Then COVID rapidly consumed national and international attention.

“Fires is a reminder of the loss and the heroism of the people who went through those experiences,” says Ayres, “because the fires had barely gone out before we were locked down.”