

ABC NEWS LOCAL

Tropfest: Festival cancellation leaves 'huge hole' for emerging Australian filmmakers

By [Megan Mackander](#)

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Australia's emerging filmmaking industry is being dealt a blow with the cancellation of Tropfest Sydney, less than one month out from the prestigious event.

Billed as the world's largest festival of its kind, Tropfest attracts hundreds of short film entries and was due to take place on December 6 at Sydney's Centennial Park.

Tropfest first started as an organised screening at Sydney's Tropicana cafe in 1993 and within 15 years it had attracted crowds of 150,000, catering for the film market between amateur and professional.

Founder John Polson's event has since expanded to North America, the Middle East, New Zealand and South-East Asia.

Tropfest fast facts

- Started as organised screenings at Sydney's Tropicana cafe in 1993.
- The festival was known as Tropicana Short Film Festival and was started by John Polson
- Tropfest has since expanded to North America, the Middle East, New Zealand and South-East Asia
- Tropfest has grown into the world's largest short film festival
- Each year up to 150,000 people attend Tropfest in Sydney
- The festival has a theme each year or a Tropfest signature item
- Past judges have included Naomi Watts, Baz Luhrmann, Toni Colette, Geoffrey Rush and Nicole Kidman

Now many fear the festival could be over for good in Australia after Mr Polson [announced Wednesday night this year's event would be cancelled due to "terrible mismanagement" of funds.](#)

University of Sydney senior film lecturer Dr Bruce Isaacs said Tropfest had moved up the ranks from being a novelty, to a full-fledged leap into the film industry that was crucial to the Australian film industry landscape.

His students often strived to create entries for the festival, which has been regarded as the ultimate stage to showcase film work.

"My students do view this as a point of genuine contact with the film industry," Dr Isaacs said.

"I've had friends over the years receive a phone call the next day from agents, who do notice what is happening at Tropfest... who are looking to develop Tropfest films into large scale productions.

"Tropfest is still accessible to independent film makers in that short films can require very little funding to make... you can even make a film on a smartphone.

"Australia is always in the process of wanting to build a larger industry and provide more access for local filmmakers, so a forum like Tropfest is necessary and a fundamental platform for filmmakers to have access to those production companies.

"You can put a film on YouTube and see what happens, but it is Tropfest that brings that tier of distribution."

Screen Queensland CEO Tracey Vieira said a groundswell of support looked set to resurrect Tropfest for next year.

"Tropfest has always been a launching pad for young talent," she said.

"It's a great festival that brings a lot of people together and gets people really engaged with the screen industry which is important.

"It's so close to the festival so it's disappointing the finalists will not be able to showcase their work on that stage, but Tropfest will live on, there's already moves on social media to rescue it for next year."

Five-time Tropfest finalist laments cancellation

Five-time Tropfest finalist Michael Noonan said the benefits of Tropfest spread further than just one night of film screening.



PHOTO: [Award-winning Australian filmmaker Michael Noonan. Studied at Queensland University of Technology, five-time Tropfest film festival finalist.](#) (Supplied)

The award-winning film maker has written, directed and produced more than 20 films and credits part of his success to friendships, connections, recognition and exposure he received from Tropfest.

"I've made a lot of short films and I am moving up and making that next step, but I definitely would never had advanced my writing and my craft without the springboard of Tropfest," Mr Noonan said.

"I imagine if Tropfest is cancelled for good, there would be a huge hole in the Australian film industry.

"But Tropfest is such a big brand and there's so much support publicity and within the screen community that I think government agencies and investors will be able to back this event.

"If Tropfest were to go away, Australian film makers would be severely disadvantaged."

Mr Noonan was a finalist in 2014 for his horror film *Evil Mexican Child*, 2013 for the thriller *Remote* and 2012 for thriller film *Photo Booth*.

[Tropfest supporters unite](#)



[Short film festival Tropfest has been cancelled after 23 years after "terrible mismanagement" of funds, according to founder John Polson. Supporters quickly took to social media with an outpouring of dismay across Twitter and Facebook.](#)

His PhD in film and television production which explored comedy in films and the disabled caused international controversy as he explored the complex line between "laughing at" and "with".

The Queensland University of Technology graduate said the freedom to explore untouched film territory subjects was part of the appeal of Tropfest.

"I had five rejections from Tropfest before I finally got in and I quickly learnt what judges and audiences were looking for," Mr Noonan said.

"Tropfest has always been a bit edgy, and while some people may sometimes find some of its content a bit confronting, the festival has never bowed to censorship.

"The festival has integrity. When you have the attention of people like Nicole Kidman, Geoffrey Rush and Cate Blanchett for those five to seven minutes right there watching your film, it's pretty amazing."

What next for Tropfest Australia?

The screening of the 16 finalist entries— which had already been chosen before the cancellation announcement— has been brought into question.

Film critic Giles Hardie told ABC this year's short films could be tied up in legal matters.

Mr Polson has started legal action against a company he has declined to name that has been managing Tropfest.



PHOTO: Actor

[Nicole Kidman arrives at Tropfest short film festival in Sydney on Sunday, Feb. 19, 2012. Tropfest is the world's largest short film festival.](#) (AAP: April Fonti)

"I feel sorry for the 16 finalists," Mr Hardie said.

"This is where we hope it doesn't get tied up in litigation too much. The finalists and everyone who enters their films has signed a contract saying that Tropfest has the rights to the film, to the first run and to various other obligations.

"Ideally what you want is Tropfest to release the films for someone to hold a bootleg festival....but who knows how it might be done.

"But there will be a problem if the administrators or someone coming in insists on having the rights to everything strictly held, because at that point I have a horrible feeling, like many great works in the past, it will be lost to the lawyers."

The Tropfest demise came after it was announced on Wednesday night Metro Screen would close its doors from next month.

The flagship New South Wales screen resource organisation has provided support for emerging industry professionals.

Metro Screen launched its final contribution this week — a study into the Federal Government's commitment to funding talent regeneration into the screen industry.

The research showed that since 2007 Federal Government support to the screen industry had increased by 90 per cent to \$419 million per year, yet targeted funds for emerging screen practitioners is said to reduce by 80 per cent to \$2 million next year.

"We are deeply disappointed that Metro Screen won't be here into the future, but the real concern is whether the screen industry is committed to

ensuring that new diverse voices are given opportunities to shape our vision of Australia in the way that previous generations have had," Metro Screen CEO Christina Alvarez said.

"We simply don't accept that all new talent can develop with crowd funding and Youtube."