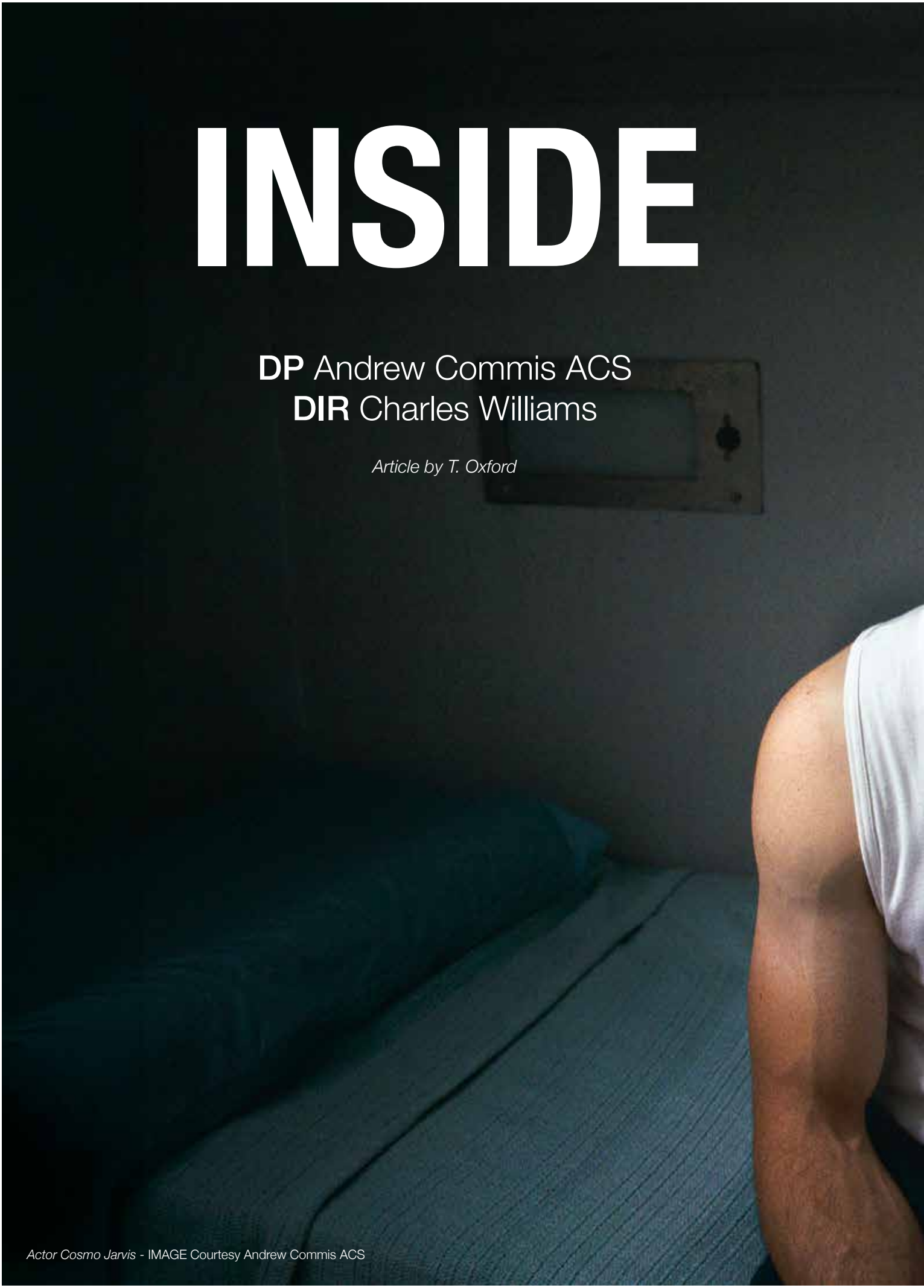
INSIDE

DP Andrew Commis ACS
DIR Charles Williams

Article by T. Oxford



Actor Cosmo Jarvis - IMAGE Courtesy Andrew Commis ACS





BTS Inside Key Grip Peter Mac Donnell, DP Andrew Commis ACS - IMAGE Courtesy Andrew Commis ACS

Inside is a delicate film to provide a synopsis. The film is not so much a coming-of-age story but rather one of arrested development and the possibility of moving beyond, of transcending the strictures brought about by the uncertain circumstances of one's birth and the crushing weight of experiencing the formative moments of life from within a correctional institution. Appropriately, the film begins with home video footage of a wedding: a pregnant bride in lilac against drab walls, guests eating cake on stiff waiting room chairs, correctional officers scattered amongst the attendees, as we hear from a narrator: ***"my mum said I got made in prison … so maybe it was always going to go this way."*** Our first glimpse of our narrator is also from deep inside – an ultrasound on a screen, the child in utero, visible in profile before turning away.

Shot by Andrew Commis ACS, *Inside* marks the debut feature of director Charles Williams, following his Short Film *Palme d'Or* winning *All These Creatures* (2018). We encounter Mel (Vincent Miller), an inmate making the transition from a juvenile center to an adult prison, finding himself at first paired with the notorious murderer Mark Shepherd (Cosmo Jarvis) and then Warren Murfett (Guy Pearce), a seasoned convict approaching the end of his term. These two older men, each both virtuous and flawed in their own ways, mark two extremities that the naïve and unformed Mel is caught between, his life roiled by the deep trauma caused by the sins of his own father.

Describing the initial process of encountering the project, Commis remarks that after his initial reading of the screenplay he had been struck by how ***"obviously it had come from a deep place. It wasn't sensationalist at all and it was an incredibly fascinating exploration, not just of prison systems in Australia, but of humans and human conditioning. How things affect you at an early stage of your life that maybe you can't shake, and even if you wanted to shake them, you're bound by them. Then in the context of a prison scenario, it was unique because ultimately most prison films are about how you escape. And, no one here really wants to escape - being on the outside is probably scarier than being on the inside because of that conditioning."***

Initially, Inside's production schedule did not align with Commis' schedule, but this reaction to the material found him reaching out to Williams directly after a period of time to check in on how the project was unfolding. For once a production delay proved to be fortunate with the project having shifted slightly from the initial timeframe so that it became feasible for Commis to potentially become involved. This began what he describes as ***"a bunch of very casual coffee dates"*** over a month or two, getting to know each other and discussing both the film specifically and filmmaking in general, ultimately leading to an invitation to shoot the film.

Remarking on his own approach and how that complemented Williams' vision, Commis noted that ***"I was bringing ideas to the table but I was really wanting to make Charles' film, and it became a fantastic collaboration".*** Commis praises the strength of Williams' vision, stating that along with a visual document used in pitching and fundraising, Williams shared a list of close to forty films that resonated with him, emphasising not only cinematography but elements of the broader film, such as characterisation or world-building. ***"Not all [were] feature films, and some of them were relatively obscure, but because we had this kind of extended unofficial pre-production, I managed to watch them all. Some went back to the 1940s, some were Film Australia documentaries from the 1980s and some more recent works. It built not just a visual language, but a bigger language of the world."*** This organic pre-production process created a rapport and a common frame of reference: ***"as we went through the whole process, we sort of instantly knew when things were in the right direction***

Toby Oliver ACS and Matt Dobson SOC on the set of Apple Cider Vinegar for Netflix



Scene from 'Inside' -IMAGE Courtesy Andrew Commis ACS

or weren't in the right direction."

Amongst the concepts that emerged from this extended pre-production were two key guiding lights, the first being a sense of discordance throughout the film: ***"the characters are broken, the world is broken. That was another thing we were looking for visually – those moments of brokenness."*** The second ***"was looking for the spiritual in the world, which is quite an abstract concept to discover visually, but all three characters had their own version of where they're finding their solace, their reason for being. So I was looking for ways to articulate that in a film cinematographically without being literal or didactic."***

This intangible factor became a lodestar for developing the look, beginning with the selection of the camera and lens combination. Even in the earliest stages of his visual documents, Williams had a hunch that the Panavision C-Series Anamorphics might be the option. Commis noted that he tested ***"for quite a number of days with camera assistant and ally Finn O'Neill at Panavision, and came full circle back to the lenses that Charles had always imagined!"*** He observes that the C-Series had an ***"elusive quality"*** that for this particular film became ***"the conduit that helped unify a lot of these [conceptual] ideas."***

Despite testing a number of other camera systems, Commis returned to the Panavision Millennium DXL2, marking his third feature in a row on the system. Although highlighting specific qualities such as the wide compatibility with lens choices and the colour science, the DXL2 provided a similar intangible quality, ***"a distinctiveness that I really enjoy … it had the right feel."***

Paired with the DXL2, the anamorphic frame provided by the C-Series would ultimately be cropped and presented in a 1.85:1 aspect ratio. The choice of frame followed a desire to "fill the cinema screen in a way that didn't feel distorted … [so that] it didn't feel like something that was being presented as an 'event'." Commis laughs when remarking that this feature is actually his first in 1.85:1: ***"I've kind of managed to use every other ratio possible except for that one. It was very honest, it felt 100% right."*** Although not a factor that weighed into the selection of the aspect ratio, the cropping of the frame created an effect where the edge softness and character of the C-Series would occur in the upper and lower parts of the image, subtly reinforcing the ethereal nature of the film.

A core part of the film's look derives from the usage of film emulation to create a singular "stock" to use throughout the entirety of the film. Williams' initial intention had been to follow a digital to film to digital post-production pathway, given the difficulties and restrictions on shooting film in Australia for a project of this scope. Testing was carried out with Cinelab in London, with results delivered in both 35mm and 16mm; despite impressive results, the process was ultimately too impractical. However, Commis had ***"really positive experiences with grain emulation software previously. On the last few films I had used LiveGrain, which is excellent."*** But after research and testing, post-production supervisor Christopher Reig suggested trying Filmbox from Video Village: ***"we built the LUT through Filmbox with colourist Jamie Hediger, using a 250D curve and grain pattern. It gave a layer of contrast that wasn't quite happening when we were just 'naked' in digital and it just instantly gave us texture which was so effective for things like brand new prison walls. It gave the world a 'lived-in' quality."*** Commis also cites Filmbox's approach to halation emulation and the flexibility of critically adjusting that setting as a key aspect in defining the "stock" and ***"helping take highlights further in more 'spiritual' ways".***

Although the use of film emulation is traditionally implemented



Actor Vincent Miller - IMAGE Courtesy Andrew Commis ACS

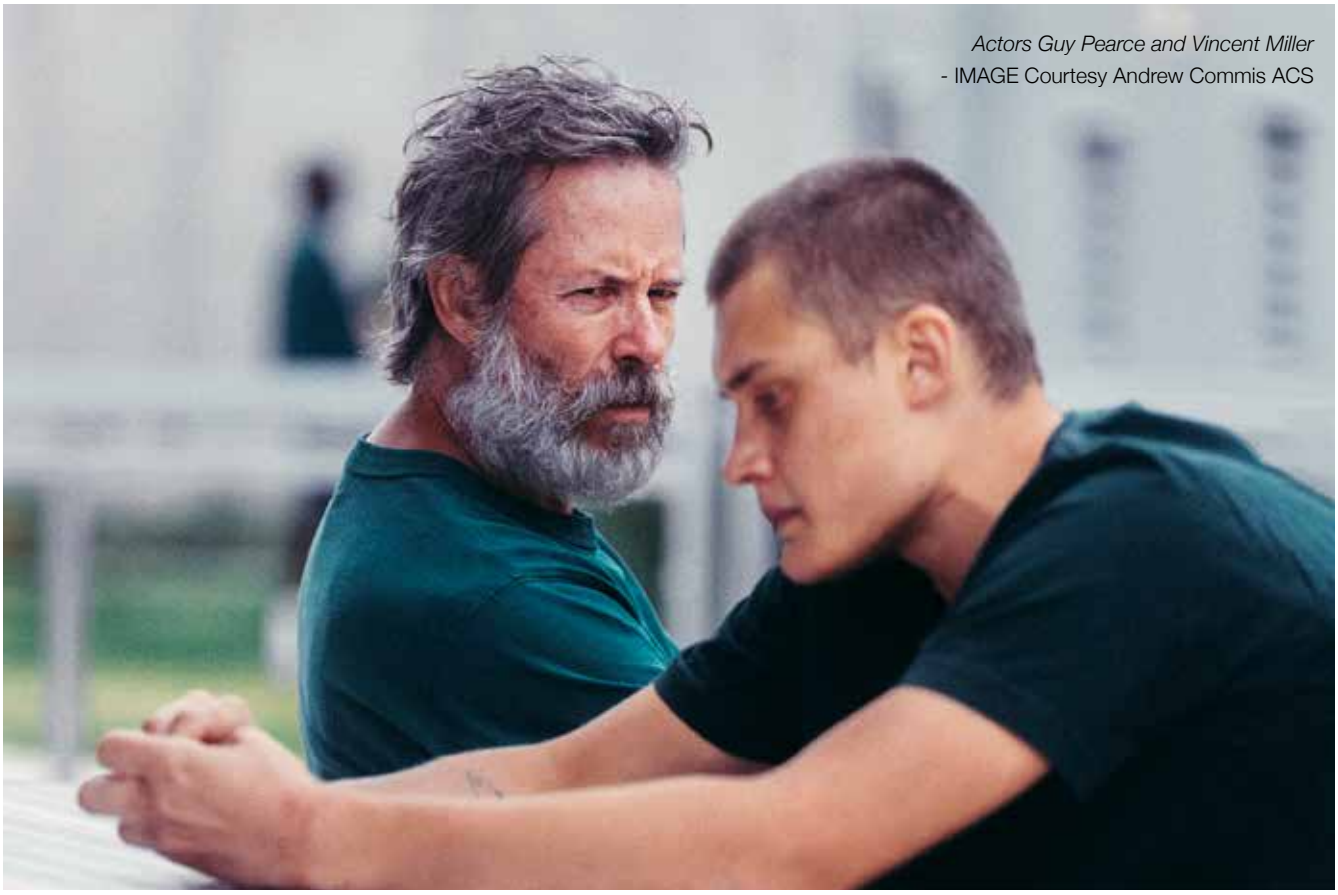
in post-production, using Filmbox allowed Commis to incorporate the grain structure and halation into the LUT during pre-production, which enabled the full effect of the look to be included into dailies processing, remarking that it was ***"very important that we were looking at it, in that form, the whole time."***

Visually, the film employs a patient and gentle approach, seeming almost bound to Mel and his perspective. At times, the camera drifts and floats as though embodying Mel's shellshocked detachment from the brutal world around him, while at others zooms and tracks are used as we follow his gaze as it homes in on a specific detail. Similarly, this approach combines with the editing and sound design at key points, overlapping as we dip into Mel's interiority for small but devastating glimpses of his childhood on the outside. ***"Charles had this idea that it's almost like a wildlife documentary. You're watching these things that have devolved or become broken and you're watching from either a literal distance or a visual distance. But then contrasting that with a more subjective lens and perspective, going into the character and their psyche, potentially what's inside their head without it becoming specifically literal."***

Commis observes that his approach to the younger timeline ***"wasn't meant to be as simple as 'it's colourful in the flashbacks and desaturated in the present', or anything like that".*** These instances are presented as "not necessarily literal", emphasised by featuring the use of Steadicam, a technique reserved for these sequences and excluded from the world of the prison. One particularly striking image is evoked as Mel is handed a letter from his recently deceased father: as he takes the envelope in his hand, the film cuts to the camera snaking up behind a man in an overgrown yard. As the camera draws closer, the fuchsia splash of a bougainvillea fills an increasingly larger portion of the shallow depth of field, framing the man against it as the sounds of cicadas whirr. Echoing the experience of the inmates, after being deprived of bold hues for such a lengthy period, the colour of the flowers is almost lurid. In tandem with the soundtrack, the act of remembering a memory of a sweltering summer, possibly with added and embellished details, is evoked. These scenes were also shot off-speed, adding to a method that was ***"kind of free-forming a lot of that stuff with the kids. It was signifying moments of memory that may have been true or may have been imagined, and that have almost definitely been distorted."***

Within the broad genre of prison films, whether made for entertainment and exploitation or to decry the penal system, the prison itself always becomes a character, with the aesthetic of each on-screen institution shaping the film. ***"Charles was adamant that it was a contemporary story in a contemporary prison. It wasn't the classic steel bars and brick walls,"*** Commis notes. Accordingly, the facility in Inside feels particularly stark due to the authenticity of the location: ***"the adult prison is actually a brand-new maximum-security prison in Victoria that's yet to be occupied but fully functions like a prison … the security measures are exactly the same. Iris scans to enter and all that sort of thing."***

The majority of the film was shot on location, with the only



Actors Guy Pearce and Vincent Miller
- IMAGE Courtesy Andrew Commis ACS

set build being a prison cell that was able to be altered and dressed into the two different cells that Mel shares: first, a cramped narrow space with Mark and later a wider cell with Warren, this second space notable for practicals built flush into the walls, giving the scenes of Mel and Warren drunkenly bonding a suffocating quality, almost like the glow from a furnace. Commis observes that while there was an abundance of empty cells in an unused prison, the amount of screen time taking place in these spaces and the specifics of the visual approach necessitated the set builds: ***"the actual cells have large picture windows and I wanted to reduce the scale of them. I was wanting to make the window higher and the shape more horizontal, which is what you now see in the film. This helped shape light direction and reduce the extreme front light in one direction and extreme backlight in the reverse direction."*** Production designer, Leah Popple incorporated floating walls, but Commis notes that the walls were never moved with the general approach being that ***"this is the room and the camera is present in the room",*** barring specific moments where this tact would compromise the scene. In these cases, several portholes were built into the set behind features such as the whiteboard to allow for an alternate camera position. Commis points out that ***"Leah and the entire art department went above and beyond. Their work is so impressive, largely invisible and so effective."***

One of the more striking aspects of Inside's visual schema is the colour palette, drawing from blues and deep greens, reflected in the cool tones of the design of the prison and both the inmate and corrections officer uniforms. ***"The colour palette is not grim like it might have been 50 years ago. They're trying to take the oppressive quality out of that world because it is now conclusive that it doesn't make prisoners rehabilitate better by making them continually oppressed."*** Features such as increased natural light, whether in the common areas or the individual cells, and open communal outdoor areas are examples of this concept. Commis remarked that ***"the film never wanted to be monotone in its palette",*** instead favouring a selection of ***"softer colours that don't bash you over the head, which is also more reflective of a contemporary prison. The closest palette reference we actually found was something akin to the films of Roy Andersson, which are quite ethereal and painterly."***

A significant portion of the film takes place in the prison chapel, where Mel finds himself conscripted into musical accompaniment for the lay preaching of his first cellmate, murderer Mark Shepard. In this space, the colour palette shifts to warmer yellowed tones, a mixture of light from fluorescent overheads and various coloured glass blocks and detailing embedded in the walls of the chapel and over doors.

In one exception, which ***"was always designed to be quite extreme",*** this motif of yellow returns in a scene of heightened spirituality depicting Warren at his lowest point while enduring a disastrous day outside the prison walls while on day leave. Bathed in yellow light with his hands pressed against his forehead, a candle flickers in the foreground as he petitions a higher authority to help him. Then a schooner of beer thuds into the foreground and the din of the surrounding bar begins to enter the soundtrack. ***"It's not stained glass but I wanted to give that effect. That's his church … it's his last hurrah***



Prison Cell Set - IMAGE Courtesy Andrew Commis ACS

because he's not going to end up at this bar again or have the so-called freedom to sit there and just have a schooner."

Throughout the film, Commis operated the A camera and rounding out the Inside camera team were Joey Knox (B Camera Operator / Splinter Unit DOP), Rayner Cook (Steadicam Operator), Luke Thomas (1AC A Camera), Karina Davies (1AC B Camera), Sam Newman (2AC), and Nena Shenvi (Video Split Operator). Lighting was by Tommi Hacker (Gaffer) and Peter MacDonnell was Key Grip. Jamie Hediger completed the colour grade, with Commis remarking that the process of developing the look together in pre-production lead to a brisk grade, chuckling that ***"we actually finished ahead of schedule, which I've never done before. We kept it relatively simple – after we settled on our film stock."***

After premiering at Melbourne International Film Festival in the Bright Horizons 2024 competition, *Inside* continued on to Tribeca Festival and then a theatrical release in Australia and the US in 2025. The film has received fresh accolades by appearing in numerous best of 2025 lists, including The Guardian Australia's top 10 Australian films, and reached a further audience with a release on Netflix in Australia. Additionally, Commis' work was recognised with an ACS Gold in the Feature Films – Budget $5M and Over – Cinema category at the 2025 NSW Branch Awards.

Reflecting on the response to the film, Commis remarks that ***"I also think this is a film that maybe I couldn't have shot ten years ago. Technically, I could have but there's a certain refinement of ideas that Charles and I were developing that was we wove into the DNA of the film that was very satisfying."***

Next for Commis is the release of *Extra Geography* (2026, dir. Molly Manners), which premiered at Sundance Film Festival in January, and then *It's All Going Very Well No Problems At All* (2026, dir. Tilda Cobham-Hervey). Behind the camera, his next project is a further collaboration with director Robert Connolly on an adaptation of Nikki Gemmell's novel Shiver, set in Antarctica. Without elaborating too much, he comments that ***"we've taken a few big swings. We're not making it in a particularly traditional model. It's exciting and equally daunting, which is probably how you want to make films."***



Scene from 'Inside' - IMAGE Courtesy Andrew Commis ACS