

JIRGA

PRESS KIT + PRODUCTION NOTES

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SUMMARY INFORMATION

PRESENTATION CREDITS

SCREEN AUSTRALIA and FELIX MEDIA present

KEY CREDITS/ BILLING BLOCK

Writer & Director BENJAMIN GILMOUR

Producer JOHN MAYNARD

Producers in Afghanistan AMIR SHAH TALASH, GULL HUSSAIN BAIZADA,
BENJAMIN GILMOUR, SAM SMITH

Executive producers DAVID GROSS and BRIDGET IKIN

Camera BENJAMIN GILMOUR

Editor NIKKI STEVENS

Sound Designer LIAM EGAN

Composer AJ TRUE

Cast SAM SMITH, SHER ALAM MISKEEN USTAD, AMIR SHAH TALASH,
BAHEER SAFI, ARZO WEDA, INAM KHAN

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TECHNICAL INFORMATION

Digital Cinema Package

Duration: 78 mins 04 secs

Sound: Stereo Mix / 5.1

Aspect Ratio: 16:9

Languages: English and Pashto (with English subtitles)

Australian Classification: M – Mature themes

Website: www.jirgafilm.com.au

SYNOPSIS

SHORT SYNOPSIS

Jirga /'dʒə:ɡə/ Noun: An Afghan court of tribal elders.

A traditional Pashtun tribal authority of community elders. The decision of the Jirga is binding on all members of the tribe.

An Australian ex-soldier returns to Afghanistan to find the family of a civilian he accidentally killed during the war. Seeking forgiveness, he puts his life in the hands of the village justice system – the Jirga.

STORY BREAKDOWN

(Backgrounder for journalists only. Not for publication.)

Australian soldiers conduct a helicopter raid on a small village in Afghanistan, searching for Taliban. It's night – civilians are shouting and crying, cowering behind mud-brick walls amidst the sounds of gunfire and radio calls. Shots ring out, followed by a scream. A soldier lifts his night-vision goggles, revealing the ashen face of Mike - he has killed an unarmed man.

Three years later, Mike has returned to Afghanistan as a civilian to find the family of the man he killed. Mike's only contact in Kabul, an ex-Afghan Army colonel, is no longer willing to help him due to the Taliban presence in the area. Despite this, Mike is determined to continue on the journey.

A taxi driver agrees to take Mike as far as the tourist attractions of Bamiyan. Mike offers the taxi driver more money to carry on to Kandahar. Initially the taxi driver refuses, as the journey farther south is too dangerous. Eventually, Mike is able to persuade the taxi driver to help him.

At a Taliban roadblock, Mike escapes into the desert. In the fierce desert sun, with no water, Mike lapses into unconsciousness.

Mike wakes to the Taliban dragging him into a cave. He is beaten and chained up. A short time later he witnesses the execution of two ISIS hostages, by his captors.

The Taliban are perplexed as to what this Westerner, in Afghan clothes, is doing in Afghanistan. When they find his Australian passport and large stash of cash, they conclude their hostage is no ordinary tourist. Upon interrogation Mike reveals his intent to apologise to the family of the man he killed during the night raid and to offer them compensation. The Taliban warn him that pride loves revenge and his money can't buy forgiveness. They decide to lead Mike to his destination.

Heeding the Taliban's advice, Mike decides to abandon the cash before he reaches the village where the raid took place.

Upon reaching the village, Mike surrenders himself and is escorted by hostile villagers to the house of the man he killed, to meet his grieving widow. The villagers hold a jirga, a trial by community elders, to determine Mike's punishment. The young son of the man Mike killed is delegated by the jirga to decide if Mike should be allowed to live or die. The son forgoes his right to avenge his father's death and instead he forgives the former soldier. The villagers make a blood sacrifice as a symbol of Mike's atonement.

DIRECTOR AND PRODUCER

BENJAMIN GILMOUR

Writer, Director, Camera

Benjamin Gilmour is a filmmaker, author and paramedic, based in Northern NSW. His key film credits include the feature *Son of a Lion* (2008) and documentary *Paramedico* (2012).

It was Gilmour's paramedic work that led him to the film industry, originally working as an on-set nurse. Gilmour lends his experience, as a front-line paramedic, to his work with NGO Trek Medics International, to assist in developing emergency medical systems for low to middle income communities in Africa and Central Asia.

As a published author, Gilmour's titles include *Warrior Poets: Guns, Movie-making and the Wild West of Pakistan* (Pier9), *Paramedico – Around the World by Ambulance* (Harper Collins) and most recently the children's book *The Travel Bug* (Penguin Random House).

www.benjaminilmour.com

Filmography

Jirga (2017) – Writer / Director

Paramedico (2012) – Writer/ Director

Festivals:

Busan International Film Festival 2013

Sydney Film Festival 2013

Awards:

Winner - Foxtel Best Documentary Award, Sydney Film Festival 2013

Son of a Lion (2008) – Writer/ Director

Festivals:

Busan International Film Festival 2007

Berlinale Forum 2008

Edinburgh International Film Festival 2008

San Francisco International Film Festival 2008

Sydney Film Festival 2008

Awards:

Winner - Independent Spirit Award Inside Film Awards 2008

Nominated - Best Film Inside Film Awards 2008

Jury Prize - Tehran Film Festival Iran 2010

JOHN MAYNARD

Producer

John is well known as a producer with an eye for talent, producing the debut feature films of a number of directors, including Jane Campion, Vincent Ward, Rowan Woods, Robert Connolly, Richard Roxburgh and Kasimir Burgess.

In 2007 John received the AFI Award for Best Film for *Romulus, My Father* (co-produced with Robert Connolly) and in 1989 for *The Navigator*. John has had three films In Competition in Cannes (an unrivalled Australian record). With partner Bridget Ikin, he co-produced Jane Campion's *An Angel At My Table*, winner of the 'Silver Lion' in Venice in 1990. *The Boys*, John's first collaboration with producer Robert Connolly, debuted In Competition at Berlin in 1998. For many years, he was in partnership with Robert Connolly, in Arenafilm.

He has been an active independent distributor in Australia and New Zealand for almost 40 years with his company Footprint Films having a reputation for creating innovative and cost effective marketing campaigns.

In 2003 John was awarded an Honorary Masters Degree at the Australian Film Television and Radio School for his "commitment, as a creative producer, to ground breaking independent cinema; for nurturing new Australian talent and reflecting diverse themes of social and cultural relevance".

In 2005 the Australian Directors Guild awarded their highest honour to John, The Cecil Holmes Memorial Award for his support of directors and the ADG.

In 2011 John established Felix Media with Bridget Ikin produce original screen-based works by artists.

Filmography

Jirga (2017) Benjamin Gilmour

The Rehearsal (2016) Alison Maclean – Executive Producer

Sherpa (2015) Jennifer Peedom (Sydney Film Festival, In Competition) – Executive Producer

Fell (2014) Kasimir Burgess - Sydney Film Festival, In Competition

The Dream Of Perfection (2013) John Weiley

Coral: Rekindling Venus (2012) Lynette Wallworth

Lucky Country (2009) Kriv Stenders – Executive Producer

My Year Without Sex (2009) Sarah Watt – Executive Producer

Balibo (2008) Robert Connolly

Romulus, My Father (2007) Richard Roxburgh - Afi Best Film.

Three Dollars (2005) Robert Connolly

The Bank (2001) Robert Connolly

The Monkey's Mask (2000) Samantha Lang

The Boys (1998) Rowan Woods (Berlin, In Competition)

All Men Are Liars (1995) Gerard Lee

An Angel At My Table (1990) Jane Campion (Venice Silver Lion) – Co- Producer

Sweetie (1989) Jane Campion (Cannes, In Competition)

The Navigator (1998) Vincent Ward (Cannes, In Competition and Afi Award Best Film)

Vigil (1984) Vincent Ward (Cannes, In Competition)

CAST

SAM SMITH

Former Australian Army soldier Mike Wheeler

Sam Smith is an Australian actor who works in film, television and theatre. His most recent roles include the HBO drama series *The Leftovers* and Jennifer Kent's *The Nightingale*. His past performances include lead roles in Ben Briand's *Hammer Bay*, winner of both the MTV Optus 180 Project and the Creative Annual Best Long Form Project; and *Some Static Started*, which was nominated for an Australian Directors Guild award.

SHER ALAM MISKEEN USTAD

Afghan taxi driver

Sher Alam Miskeen Ustad was the former chief Palace Guard of former Afghan President Mohammed Daoud, who was assassinated in 1978 by the communist opposition. Before the coup he was part of a small theatre group in Kabul. When the Russian army invaded the following year, Sher Alam joined the Mujahideen resistance and became renown for having decimated several Russian tanks with a single RPG launcher from a mountaintop. He was the only survivor when Russian helicopters responded and killed more than 30 of his friends. The first film he ever saw was 'Rambo 3' which lionised the Afghan mujahedin, many of whom would later become the Taliban. When the Taliban took power in the early nineties Sher Alam fled to Pakistan with his family. He now works in a sweet shop, playing his *rabab* (traditional lute) at local weddings in the frontier city of Kohat. Sher Alam played the father of the lead character in Gilmour's *Son of a Lion* (2008).

AMIR SHAH TALASH

English-speaking Taleb

Amir Shah Talash is an Afghan actor and producer based in Jalalabad. He is known for the action and thriller films he self-funds by working nights, unloading bags of cement. Talash has become a house-hold name in Afghanistan, particularly in Pashtun areas. He is trained in Taikwando, which he uses to fight off dozens of gangsters at a time, whenever he plays the hero. Talash works with Australian director George Gittoes at The Yellow House, his artist's collective in Jalalabad. On *Jirga*, Amir Shah Talash played Sher Khan's (the Taliban leader) right-hand man, and was also the local producer for the film.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

ABOUT THE FILM

I've been eager to return to Afghanistan, to work with locals on another project, ever since my first feature film, *Son Of A Lion*. In my experience working and travelling through the northwest frontier of Pakistan and Afghanistan, I found the Pashtun people to be extremely hospitable, warm and funny. And, after decades of war, they have the most incredible and moving stories to tell.

With *Jirga* I wanted to counter the Islamic terrorist stereotypes and modern military propaganda we face in the West, demonstrating the true human cost of conflict. Civilians trying to survive in their ravaged lands are not the only ones who believe that war is unjust. Many damaged and disillusioned soldiers have also come to share that view.

The motives for Mike's return were inspired by the lingering sense of responsibility experienced by army veterans, from conflicts in Vietnam, Iraq and Timor-Leste. In my research I came across the stories of a number of Australian SAS veterans who had returned to Afghanistan, as civilians, to help rebuild villages damaged in conflict.

Jirga is also intended to give the audience a new perspective on the lives of ordinary Afghan Muslims. It's a great shame most westerner's understanding of Afghanistan is only as a war zone. Of course, there's active warfare in some provinces, but the country also boasts stunning natural landscapes and a rich culture of music and poetry. These aspects are so often overlooked yet so close to the hearts of Afghans.

I hope *Jirga* is seen as a film that doesn't attempt to neatly divide the good from the bad, but instead offers an insight into the character and motives of those we view as the enemy and the struggles of Afghans and the mercy found in their faith and traditions.

SHOOTING THE FILM

An early draft of the script garnered the attention of a Pakistani producer. He was in contact with a wealthy businessman from Islamabad, who would contribute \$100,000 to make the film. Although the script was set in Afghanistan, to benefit from the finance, it needed to be shot in Pakistan. We would shoot in Khyber Paktunkwha province, among the Pashtun tribes whose territory straddles the Afghanistan/ Pakistan border, as the culture and the look of the landscape and villages is very similar on both sides of the border.

With funding and location decided I began casting for the lead role of Mike. A casting agent recommended Sydney theatre actor, Sam Smith. Though he'd never travelled to Pakistan or Afghanistan, Sam was willing to take a risk on shooting in this volatile location.

After arriving in Islamabad, we discovered the financier had not secured the required permits from Pakistan's national security agency. The script had been deemed politically sensitive and, in turn, the Pakistani backer also pulled his funding.

Sam Smith and I were left stranded in Pakistan with no team and no money. Returning to Australia to make alternative plans would've been the sensible conclusion to our adventure. Instead, we went with Plan B and decided to shoot the whole film ourselves in Afghanistan.

I had two contacts in Afghanistan - a tour guide and an eccentric actor who made Pashto action movies on a Handy-cam. To make our whole film in Afghanistan was a long shot, achieving anything in Afghanistan comes with a very high risk factor. Could we shoot a feature film in such an unpredictable environment on the little money we had left? Would our local contacts be able to pull the production together with us, in a short period of time?

While we waited for our Afghan visas, we frantically re-wrote the screenplay, stripping the story right back. I reluctantly decided to shoot the film myself and bought a Sony A7S camera in a Pakistani shopping mall. We arrived in Kabul, ready to go, guerrilla style. We set up a production office behind layers of blast walls with two keen Afghan producers and were able to secure permits from the Afghanistan government very quickly.

We set out for Jalalabad, a mainly Pashtun city in the shadow of the Tora Bora mountain range. The road to Jalalabad saw regular skirmishes between militants and Afghan Army units; the Taliban occupied many of the villages surrounding the city and ISIS spotters were said to roam the streets looking for potential hostages. Only the day before we arrived, the last Westerner in town, a nurse from Perth who'd stayed in our hotel, was kidnapped. Amir Shah Talash, our Pashtun actor/producer, reassured us that he had contacts with both police and the Taliban, and we'd be left alone.

We managed to shoot *Jirga* in under a month in the mountains of Jalalabad with ex-Taliban members. At night in our hotel room we listened to gunfights and mortar fire in the mountains. The police warned us they suspected militants, possibly ISIS, had been watching us and had planted IEDs at our shoot location. On one occasion we were told it would be too risky to return to a cave location, so we had to complete ten scenes in just three hours. Possibly more dangerous than any of this, was the fact that Sher Alam (our actor playing the taxi driver) didn't actually know how to drive. Whenever we shot a scene with Sher Alam driving, Sam would have his hand just out of shot on the bottom of the steering wheel, making sure we didn't plunge into the valleys below.

Finally, back in Sydney, producer John Maynard was captivated by the footage, and financed *Jirga* through its post-production. 38 hours of hand-held footage were studiously whittled down to a 78 minute feature by first time feature editor Nikki Stevens. The film's music was the first film score for composer AJ True.

PICTURE

NIKKI STEVENS

Editor

Editor Nikki Stevens has a background in documentary and television, her recent credits include; *Black Divaz* (2018); *Howard on Menzies: Building Modern Australia*; *Pauline Hanson: Please Explain!*; and *Once Upon a Time in Cabramatta*. *Jirga* is Nikki's first feature drama.

Shot in 4k MP4 25fps the rushes were exciting but a challenge to work with. There was a story to refine and a lot of technical work to check the picture and deal with rough sound. Initial investigations and tests at post-production house Definition Films demonstrated the effectiveness of stabilization, sharpening and grading to create an image suitable for a cinema screen. Archive footage was extensively used; SlateFX designed and executed the pick-up shots; and Jamie Hediger was the colourist.

MUSIC AND SOUND DESIGN

AJ TRUE

Composer

Benjamin wanted a score that would be recognisable and as individual as the film itself. We aimed to achieve this with diverse and unconventional instrument combinations; Afghan rabab, tanbur, harmonium, electric guitars, vintage 70s synthesizers, cello drones through guitar distortion pedals, and a string quartet. It's always interesting to be pushed into unknown territory and encouraged to take risks. Benjamin would send me obscure 70's electronic music like Ash Ra Tempel, Brainticket and Edward Artemiev. He would ask me to find unusual synthesizers, experiment with combinations of instruments, and try different production techniques. All traditional instrumentation would need to be put aside, even our string quartet would be mixed in a way to make it sound like it was played by a synthesizer.

Benjamin and film producer John Maynard were interested in hearing a layer of drones under the other musical elements. We settled on cello (through distortion pedals), doubled with harmonium. These drone layers help create a feeling of tension that lasts through most of the film, it also grounds each cue in a tonal centre, a sort of minimalist 'basso continuo'.

The score for *Jirga* is minimal and tension-based, utilising recurring themes played on western and non-western instruments performed by musicians from Australia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the USA.

The soundtrack also features songs performed by cast members Sam Smith (Mike Wheeler) and Sher Alam Miskeen Ustad (the Taxi Driver). These were their own arrangements, performed on location and recorded by Benjamin in Afghanistan. When we weren't talking about the work at hand, Ben and I had many conversations about music's mysterious power to cross great divides, opening doors to knowledge, understanding and acceptance.

LIAM EGAN

Sound Designer

Jirga was an exciting project for sound due to the challenges provided by the location of the film and the use of many non-actors. *Jirga* was filmed without a dedicated sound recordist – only recording guide tracks on the camera microphone, most of which couldn't be used or needed technical intervention and modification for the final soundtrack.

The scale of the landscapes depicted in the film necessitated a complementary, immersive surround soundtrack while the scenes set in Kabul required a detailed and textured soundtrack to help bring this busy and exciting city to life.

A sound editorial team consisting of sound designer, Liam Egan, and effects editor, Tom Heuzenroeder, created the surround ambiances and sound effects design elements. Dialogue editor, Tony Murtagh, forensically removed the wind noise and heavy background noise from the location audio, in order to use the dialogue recorded on location, from actors who could not be re-recorded later due to the challenges of film making in Afghanistan. All of Sam Smith's dialogue was re-recorded in Sydney. Foley artist Les Fiddess rounded out the sound editorial team and recreated the many textures of the surfaces of the Afghan landscape.

Liam and sound mixer Robert Sullivan then brought all these elements together in the sound mix to create a sound track that invites the viewer to enter and become part of the world depicted in *Jirga*.

CREDITS

END CREDITS

Card 1:

Writer and Director
BENJAMIN GILMOUR

Card 2:

SAM SMITH

Card 3:

**SHER ALAM MISKEEN USTAD
AMIR SHAH TALASH**

Card 4:

**BASHEER SAFI
ARZO WEDA
INAM KHAN**

Card 5:

Producer
JOHN MAYNARD

Card 6:

Producers in Afghanistan
**AMIR SHAH TALASH
GUL HUSSAIN BAIZADA
BENJAMIN GILMOUR
SAM SMITH**

Card 7:

Executive Producers
**DAVID GROSS
BRIDGET IKIN**

Card 8:

Camera
BENJAMIN GILMOUR

Card 9:

Editor
NIKKI STEVENS

Card 10:

Sound Designer
LIAM EGAN

Card 11:

Composer
AJ TRUE

Rolling Credits:

Cast

Mike Wheeler	SAM SMITH
Dress Shop Owner	MOHAMMAD MOSAM
Antiques Dealer	KEFAYAT LAG HUMANI
Hotel Receptionist	NAQIBULLAH KHAN SHINWARI
Bell Boy	SHARIF 'STEEL' ULLAH
Colonel Rafiq	MOHAMMAD SHAH MAJROH
Taxi Driver	SHER ALAM MISKEEN USTAD
Roadblock Taliban	SAMAD 'PADDLE-POP' KHAN
Amir Talibani	AMIR SHAH TALASH
Militant #1	JANAAT GUL MASTANA
Militant #2	SADAR KHAN
Young Militant	WASEEM ARMAN
Sher Khan	BASHEER SAFI
Hostage #1	MUKHTAR SERAT
Hostage #2	WARIS KHAN
Young Villager	ZAKIR ULLAH
Second Villager	KOCHAI KHAN
Translator	ZEESHAN KHAN TALASH
Old Villager	BAZ MUHAMMAD
Even Older Villager	GHULAM FAROOQ
Malik Dawood Khan	MALIK ABDUL BAQI
Atta Ullah's Son	INAM KHAN
Sherbano the Widow	ARZO WEDA
Elder #1	SEEDA JAN
Elder #2	UMAR GUL
Elder #3	UMARA KHAN
Elder #4	MERA JAN
Elder #5	ABDUL HALEEM
Elder #6	ZER GUL
Elder #7	HUKAM KHAN

Elder #8	SHERALAM KHAN
Elder #9	MOHAMMAD GULL
Elder #10	RANGEEN KHAN
Elder #11	MERZA KHAN
Bus driver	DAD MOHAMMAD

Crew

Felix Media Associate Producer	BROOKE SILCOX
Felix Media Production Coordinator	MIA TIMPANO
Felix Media Production Accountant	LEAH HALL

Assistant Editor	JESSIE HILDEBRAND
Editing Intern	DUYGU DOGAN
Special Thanks	MARCUS D'ARCY

Casting	LUCKY PRICE
	AMIR SHAH TALASH

Additional Writing	SAM SMITH
Script Editors	DREW FAIRLEY
	STUART PARKYN
Script Translator	ZEESHAN KHAN TALASH
Pashto Subtitles	WAQAR ALAM
	ALI MEHMOOD MARWAT
	NICK SHIMMIN

Pre Production Assistant	REUBEN BRAND
Concept Art	TRISTAN COUMBE

Security	AHMAD ZIA
-----------------	------------------

	MASHOOQ SHADAB
	MUKHTAR SERAT
First Assistant Director	AMIR SHAH TALASH
Second Assistant Director	ZEESHAN KHAN TALASH
Production Cook	HEJRAT 'ITCHY' BASOODI
Armourer	KABUL KHAN
Runner	SALUDDIN KHAN
Cast Assistant	FARHAN SHALMANI
Stunts	ADAM NEILD
	SAM SMITH
Consultant	DAVE POLLARD
Personal Trainer	CHRIS FEATHER
Hairdresser	JENNY KIM
Political Advisor	SAMI YOUSAFZAI
Cultural Advisor	HAYAT KHAN SHINWARI
Afghan Film Advisor	IBRAHIM ARIFY
Research	PETER GRECH
	JOHN ZUBRZYCKI
	MICHAEL PRATO
Post Production	DEFINITION FILMS
Head of Post Production	DAVID GROSS
Post Production Supervisor	WAYNE C BLAIR
Post Production Coordinator	AMELIA McCARTEN
Post Production Accounts	RANALD DUHIG
Conform Editor	CLAUDIO LIUCCI
Colourist	JAMIE HEDIGER

Mastering Operations	SIMON ASHBY
Video QC	KIERAN BLEAKLEY
Post Production Script	CLEVER TYPES
Key Art & Website	STELLA MAYNARD
Building 53A Facilities Manager	VINCENT IANNI
Visual Effects	SLATE VFX
VFX Producer	PRUE FLETCHER
VFX Supervisor	BRYN FARRELLY
VFX Camera	JAMIE GRAY
VFX Gaffer	GRAHAME DICKSON
VFX Production Design	MATT PALMER
VFX Production Assistant	MATT CONNORS
VFX Costume	CLAIRE GRANVILLE
Sound Supervisor	LIAM EGAN
Mixer	ROBERT SULLIVAN
Dialogue Editor	TONY MURTAGH
Foley Supervision	LES FIDDESS
Foley Mixer	TOBI ARMBRUSTER
ADR Facility	TRACKDOWN STUDIOS
Pashto ADR	SADAR ALI
	WAQAR ALAM
Score Mixer	DAVID HAMMER
Musicians	QAIS ESSAR
	SAYD SARSHAR
	ALI SARSHAR
	FARMAN KHAN
	VERONIQUE SERRET
	HEATHER LINDSAY
	MICHAELA DAVIES
	DIRK KRUIHOF

AJ TRUE

Legals VERGE WHITWORTH

CAROLINE VERGE

Trailer Production SOLID STATE

WALTER BIENZ

Audit ROSENFELD KANT & CO

Music Licensing LEVEL TWO MUSIC

JEMMA BURNS

Music

“LAKES SOLO”

Written and performed by Sam Smith

© Sam Smith, 2016

“RO RO KEDA”

Traditional, arr. Zarsanga

(Long Distance Productions)

Performed by Zarsanga

(P) 1993 Long Distance Productions

Licensed courtesy of Creaminal and Velvetica

“MAN RANDA ZE MAIKHANA AM”

Re-arranged and Performed by Qais Essar

© Qais Essar / Qaissar LLC (889211409167), 2015

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With cooperation from

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NASIM IHSAN	'ONE FLOWER' KHAN
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BEE SMITH,
KEN & ANNE GILMOUR
DREW FAIRLEY
SUE MURRAY**

This film was shot on location in Afghanistan.

All characters and events depicted in this motion picture are entirely fictional and any similarity to any persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Rolling End Logo

Afghan Film

Rolling End Logo

Australia Cultural Fund/ Creative Partnerships Australia

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