

# EPONA

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*A cinematic Australian mythic drama about the histories we inherit and the future we choose.*

|                                                   |                                    |                                         |
|---------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| FORMAT<br>Theatrical feature film                 | SETTING<br>Walcha, New South Wales | CURRENT STAGE<br>Screenplay development |
| DEVELOPMENT PERIOD<br>November 2026 to April 2027 | TOTAL DEVELOPMENT<br>AUD 297,000   | MINDEROO REQUEST<br>AUD 267,000         |

## PROJECT OVERVIEW

EPONA is a feature film set in Walcha, New South Wales, bringing together mythology, horses, rural Australia, First Nations collaboration and a deeply human story about grief, belonging and responsibility.

Centuries ago, the immortal Epona was separated from Croithe, the mare bound to her soul, by OLC, a figure driven by rejection, possession and vengeance. Condemned to wander alone, Epona moves through generations of human conflict and arrives in modern regional Australia broken and without purpose. When nine year old Lilly and her father Wesley become caught in the race to recover Croithe’s spirit, Epona must confront the darkness she has carried and decide whether loss will continue to define her. Alongside Sam, Shannon and the guardian spirit Walumarra, the characters face an enemy seeking to turn grief, dispossession and unresolved history into destruction.

At its centre, EPONA asks a clear question: will inherited pain determine what comes next, or can people choose truth, connection and a different future? The film is intended to be emotionally accessible, visually ambitious and grounded in the distinctive landscape, people and horse culture of Walcha.

## THE DEVELOPMENT NEED

EPONA has progressed beyond concept. An original screenplay, core creative team, preliminary research, audience positioning, production planning and initial engagement with members of the Walcha First Nations community are in place. The current draft contains a distinctive story world, strong visual potential and an emotionally resonant central relationship between Epona and Lilly. It is not yet production ready.

The next stage requires substantial development rather than surface revision. The screenplay must strengthen Epona’s agency, clarify OLC’s emotional logic and their intended sibling connection, build a sustained feature structure, establish consistent mythology, deepen supporting characters, and redesign the climax so character, theme and cultural meaning resolve through the same dramatic action. First Nations material must be developed through local cultural authority, consultation, consent and shared creative decision making, with the production remaining open to changing or removing material that is not accurate, appropriate or authorised.

The film also contains technically demanding elements involving horses, a child performer, action, spirits, animals and gorge locations. These will be tested against welfare, safety, logistics, schedule and budget before the project progresses to production financing.

## DEVELOPMENT INVESTMENT

VAM Paddock Productions is seeking AUD 267,000 from Minderoo Pictures toward a total six month development program of AUD 297,000. VAM Paddock Productions will contribute AUD 30,000 in direct cash.

- AUD 191,000 for Story, Culture and Research Development
- AUD 56,000 for Production Strategy and Creative Feasibility
- AUD 50,000 for Audience, Partnerships and Investment Readiness

If EPONA proceeds into production, the Minderoo Pictures development investment will be repayable, with the mechanism and commercial terms to be negotiated as part of the production financing arrangements.

## DEVELOPMENT METHODOLOGY AND OUTCOMES

The program integrates screenplay development, cultural governance, research, production planning and audience readiness rather than treating them as separate tasks. Consultation and research will inform the screenplay, screenplay decisions will be tested against production feasibility, and the resulting creative and production package will inform finance, audience and market strategy.

Workstream One will deliver a substantially revised screenplay through consultation, a professional writers room, cultural and historical research, script editing, independent assessment and a table read, alongside the governance records and permissions required at this stage.

Workstream Two will test the screenplay through breakdown, scheduling, budget refinement, locations, logistics, horses, stunts, animal welfare and key creative consultation.

Workstream Three will prepare the project for financing through audience, distribution, impact and partnership strategies, investment materials, finance planning, chain of title and a final development package.

## **CULTURAL GOVERNANCE AND COLLABORATION**

First Nations collaboration is embedded throughout the project lifecycle. Shannon Green, a Dunghutti woman and Walcha community leader, is attached as First Nations Co Writer, Cultural Creative Lead and Community Liaison. Initial consultation has commenced with members of the Walcha First Nations community, and the project is supported by a detailed living Cultural Governance, Consultation and Collaboration Framework.

The framework distinguishes production authority from cultural authority. VAM Paddock Productions retains responsibility for production and final film decisions, while relevant First Nations people retain authority over the cultural knowledge, histories, language, locations and protocols they contribute or are authorised to speak for. A Walcha First Nations Community Advisory Group and lead cultural governance representative are intended to be confirmed collaboratively during development. Consultation will be documented, appropriately compensated and connected to a clear creative response process. Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property, cultural safety, restricted knowledge and On Country protocols will be addressed throughout development, production and release.

## **TEAM AND GOVERNANCE**

EPONA is led by Leila McDougall through VAM Paddock Productions. Leila is the writer, director, lead producer and audience and impact lead. Her first feature, Just A Farmer, demonstrated the capacity to raise private finance, deliver a national theatrical release and build a sustained direct relationship with regional audiences.

The core team includes Shannon Green as First Nations Co Writer and Cultural Creative Lead, Chris Odgers as Production Development Producer, David Gregory OAM in governance and production strategy, and Shaun Miller as specialist screen legal counsel. Robert Taylor and Vivian McDougall are attached to the cast, with further cast and creative discussions underway. The governance structure establishes clear responsibility for creative leadership, operational delivery, budget oversight, cultural process, stakeholder reporting, rights control and final approvals.

## **AUDIENCE, DISTRIBUTION AND IMPACT**

EPONA is being developed with its audience from the beginning. Its primary audience is women aged 35 to 64, particularly in regional and outer metropolitan Australia, who connect with emotionally driven stories about family, courage, healing, horses, landscape and community. Secondary audiences include equestrian communities, regional audiences, adult fantasy and prestige drama audiences, schools, councils, cultural organisations and community screening hosts. These audience assumptions will be tested during development.

The pathway builds on the producer controlled model established through Just A Farmer, which reached 80 Australian cinemas, approximately 600,000 viewers through a national television broadcast, a direct audience database of more than 50,000. EPONA will use a staged pathway across festivals, theatrical release, regional activation, community screenings, education, television and digital platforms. The objective is not simply to release a film, but to create a long audience life, measurable community engagement and a credible recoupment pathway.

## **WHY THIS INVESTMENT MATTERS**

Minderoo Pictures support would provide the time, professional expertise and community resources required to test EPONA honestly and develop it responsibly. The development program does not assume that the current screenplay, cultural material or production approach is resolved. It creates a disciplined process through which the project can be substantially strengthened, culturally accountable, production tested and independently assessed before further finance is sought.

By April 2027, EPONA will deliver a production ready screenplay, an active cultural governance framework, verified research and consultation outcomes, a validated production methodology, schedule and preliminary budget, horse and action feasibility planning, audience and distribution strategies, an impact framework, chain of title documentation and a complete finance ready development package.

The application is supported by a detailed screenplay development plan, cultural governance framework, development methodology, production governance structure, development budget and cashflow, audience strategy, distribution pathway, investment summary, team biographies and rights documentation.

**EPONA aims to become a distinctive Australian feature that can reach broad audiences without simplifying the histories and responsibilities at its centre. It invites audiences to consider what becomes possible when people stop turning away, listen to each other, and choose what they will carry forward together.**