



NEW RELEASES

# Nitram

*Please note: this film contains scenes that some viewers may find distressing.*

Nitram (Landry Jones) is a troubled young man who lives with his parents in a small Tasmanian town and is profoundly aware of his inability to fit in with the wider world. His father dreams of buying a B&B in the belief that it will bring the family closer; meanwhile Nitram finally makes a friend who tolerates his unpredictable behaviour. Despite this, his feelings of anger and loneliness build to an inevitable crescendo, culminating in an irreversible moment of violence. *Nitram* is a huge achievement from an outstanding cast and from Justin Kurzel (*True History of the Kelly Gang*, *Macbeth*), who has created a disturbing take on a true story that's both thought-provoking and shocking.

**Justin Johnson, BFI Lead Programmer**

Australia was rattled to the core in 1996 when a gunman murdered 35 people and wounded 23 others in its island state of Tasmania. *Nitram* is based on the Port Arthur massacre. Like other films based on real-life shooting rampages, it has reignited a longstanding debate about whether big-screen crime dramatisations adequately respect victims and survivors, or rather amplify the notoriety perpetrators crave. Director Justin Kurzel and writer Shaun Grant, who also based their brutal 2011 feature debut *Snowtown* on an actual Australian murder spree, tackle the ethical complexities of representation sensitively and responsibly by couching the film as a caution against lax gun laws. They avoid a thriller-type, adrenaline-fuelling recreation of the attack itself, showing instead the killer's life leading up to it, how unfit he was to own firearms, and how easy it was for him to buy them.

Caleb Landry Jones won Best Actor at Cannes last year for his portrayal of the deeply troubled young shooter, addressed only as Nitram. The mocking nickname is a trick of first-name reversal by which the filmmakers avoid voicing the name (and adding to the celebrity) of the real perpetrator, Martin Bryant, who is still alive and in a Hobart prison, serving 35 concurrent life sentences without possibility of parole. In a remarkable balancing act, Landry Jones captures the hairtrigger reactivity of Nitram's frustrated need to belong, while his inner world remains inscrutably shut away behind straggling blond hair, where it cannot unduly manipulate our empathy.

A clip shows the future killer as a child in a hospital burns unit, insisting he will continue to play with fireworks, despite his injuries. Years later, lunging for car steering wheels, he remains an uncontrollable hazard, even as gentler moments peek through. Judy Davis is superb as Nitram's mother, whose icy control clashes against the spineless indulgence of his father (Anthony LaPaglia). It remains ambiguous how much this parental dysfunction has stemmed from the stress of raising such an unmanageable child, and how much has caused it. Nitram has been prescribed antidepressants by a doctor who prefers to discuss his symptoms with his parents rather than him, but there is no clear diagnosis to allow us to pigeonhole his unpredictability.

Foregrounding the perpetrator's point of view, even if coldly observational rather than expressionistic, may in some respects be more problematic than, for instance, the adoption of the perspective of the camp victims in Erik Poppe's reconstruction of the 2011 Norway attacks, *Utøya: July 22* (2018),

which took great care not to name the killer and depicted him only peripherally. But in eliding the context of the white supremacist’s manifesto and violent radicalisation, in favour of real-time suspense that sought to pay tribute to survivor agency and bravery, *Utøya* failed to address a need for wider reflection on far-right extremism in Norwegian society. Kurzel had, arguably, an easier job than Poppe, because his subject has no programmatic ideology of domestic terrorism to combat. Nitram fits in with the stock perception of white mass shooters as mentally troubled loners who snapped (like gun enthusiast and murderer David Gray in 2006’s *Out of the Blue* by Robert Sarkies, based on the equally nation-rocking 1990 Aramoana massacre in New Zealand.)

Kurzel offers a vision of normality as queasily relative, in keeping with much Australian cinema that plumbs a dark side to mythical colonial utopia (James Vaughan’s *Friends and Strangers* is a recent, blackly comic example). Outcast though Nitram is, failing to fit in with the surfers he tries to emulate, he is far from the only oddball in town, and finds brief companionship with Helen (Essie Davis), a onetime actress with theatrical flourishes caught in lost time; a mentally checked-out heiress to a lottery fortune in a rundown mansion full of dogs. Nitram, despite admitting to not having a gun licence, is casually sold a semi-automatic and shotgun by a store dealer with no qualms about skirting the rules on the sly. Guns number more now than at the time of the massacre, an intertitle informs us, despite legislation to tighten laws in the immediate wake of the tragedy, and a buy-back scheme that saw 640,000 guns destroyed.

Kurzel’s, then, is a disquieting, combustible Australia: an isolated continent of culturally displaced and disconnected eccentrics, who seem forgotten or left to go mad, where violence lurks just under the surface – and plentiful firearms lie in easy reach.

**Carmen Gray, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 2022**

**NITRAM**

*Directed by:* Justin Kurzel  
*Production Company:* Good Thing Productions  
*Co-produced by:* Melbourne International Film Festival  
*In association with:* Nude Run, Stan Originals  
*International Sales:* Wild Bunch International  
*Executive Producers:* Nick Forward, Paul Wiegard, Anthony LaPaglia, Alice Babidge, Jenny Lalor  
*Produced by:* Nick Batzias, Virginia Whitwell, Justin Kurzel, Shaun Grant  
*Location Manager:* Nicci Dillon  
*1st Assistant Director:* Nathan Croft  
*Casting:* Nikki Barrett, Alison Telford  
*Screenplay by:* Shaun Grant  
*Director of Photography:* Germain McMicking  
*Editor:* Nick Fenton  
*Production Designer:* Alice Babidge  
*Costume Designer:* Alice Babidge  
*Music by:* Jed Kurzel  
*Supervising Sound Editor:* Steve Single

**Cast**

Caleb Landry Jones (*Nitram*)  
Judy Davis (*mother*)  
Essie Davis (*Helen*)  
Anthony LaPaglia (*father*)  
Phoebe Taylor (*Riley*)  
Sean Keenan (*Jamie*)  
Conrad Brandt (*doctor*)  
Jessie Ward (*pupil's mother*)  
Zaidee Ward (*young child*)  
Ethan Cook (*teacher*)  
Kyan Hugh Mana Walters (*pupil*)

Australia 2021  
112 mins

A Picturehouse Entertainment release

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**NEW RELEASES**

**Nitram**  
From Fri 1 Jul  
**Wayfinder**  
From Fri 1 Jul  
**Brian and Charles**  
From Fri 8 Jul  
**Hit the Road (Jaddeh Khaki)**  
From Fri 29 Jul