

Aaron Glenane stars in *Killing Ground*. PHOTO: SINGAPORE CULT AND UNDERGROUND FILM FESTIVAL



# Attuned to violence

Having worked at a censorship board, director Damien Power has a professional interest in how much violence ought to be shown on films

**John Lui**  
Film Correspondent

When it comes to making a horror picture as unnerving as it can be without resorting to gore and violence, director Damien Power has an advantage.

One of his jobs before he made the acclaimed horror-thriller movie *Killing Ground* (2017, NC16) was at the Australian Classification Board, the government body that rates and censors films.

He is specially attuned to violence on screen, he tells *The Straits Times* on the telephone from his home city of Sydney.

"I've had a long professional interest in violence and how we watch it. It was important to me as a director, and as a filmgoer, to think about how much to show and how much to leave to the imagination," says Power, 46, about his debut feature.

Some have compared his film with the popular 2005 slasher movie about hitchhikers on the run from a serial killer, *Wolf Creek*, but there is much less blood on show in *Killing Ground*.

"Sometimes leaving it to the imagination is worse, because the audience can fill it in, in a more horrific way than you would want to portray on screen," says Power.

*Killing Ground* tells the story of a couple who go camping only to run into two men with bad intentions. The film is one of four that will be screened at the Singapore Cult and Underground Film Festival 2018, the event that specialises in horror, thriller and exploitation genres.

Critics on Rotten Tomatoes have been generally positive about the thriller, using phrases such as "cruelly uncomfortable" and "nerve-shredding" to describe the cat-and-mouse game that ensues between the hunters and their prey.

Writer-director Power says he made the stylistic choice to make his villains as unmythical and realistic as possible, rather than writing them as insane, or members of a cult or possessed by demons, or any of the convenient creative options taken by many horror movies.

He says he had to "go to a pretty dark place" to write the villains' mo-

tives and dialogue, but that task was made simpler with one screenwriting truth.

"The one thing that unites all good villains is that they never think they are the villains. In their heads, they are the hero of their story," says Power. He came up with the idea of them having a father-son relationship, the older man "mentoring the younger man in murder" as a twisted coming-of-age ritual.

The action in *Killing Ground* takes place in the bush, a location familiar to fans of well-known Australian films such as *Picnic At Hanging Rock* (1975), *Mad Max* (1979), *The Proposition* (2005) and, more recently, *The Rover* (2014). In these films, the outback is one more antagonist, out to do harm.

"In Australian cinema, there's a long history of white Australians' unease with our own backyard," he says.

"I think that white Australians don't understand the bush, don't know how to live in harmony with it, so it seems alien and hostile, and that was something I wanted to tap into - the feeling of claustrophobia, of feeling trapped."

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