

*The*

*Colleen's Heart*



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## *Production Contacts*

**WildBear Entertainment Pty Ltd**

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*Australia*

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## *Technical Information*

*Production Format: HD 1080x1920*

*Frame Rate: 25 FPS*

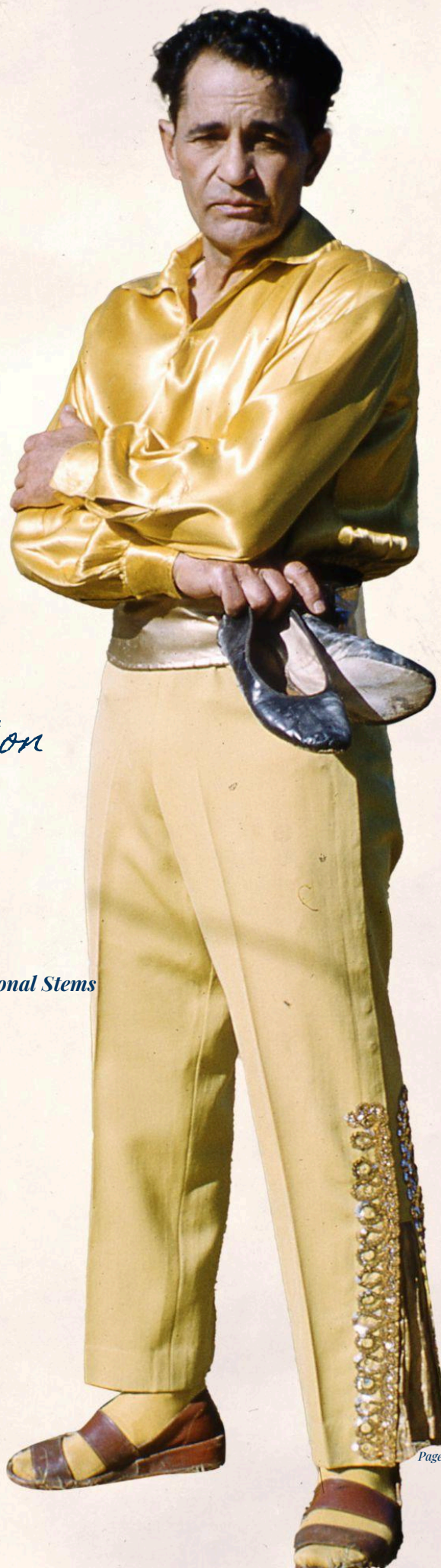
*Release Format: ProRes/MXF OP1a Available*

*Sound Configuration: Stereo/5.1 Available with Additional Stems*

*Duration: 88 minutes*

*Date of Production: 2025*

*Date of Release: 2025*



*Reigniting the legacy*



# *Synopsis*

A brilliant circus family's hidden legacy unfolds as descendants reunite across continents, revealing their Australian Aboriginal ancestry, global stardom, and the extraordinary secrets they kept in order to survive.



### **Short Synopsis (75 Words)**

Circus was once the world's grandest entertainment and the Colleano Family reached the highest echelons of circus stardom. When the Colleanos reunite they reveal family secrets and showbiz lives that intersect with iconic moments in history. As the Colleanos rise to international stardom, they also conceal their Australian Aboriginal identity to keep their family together. Through the family's remarkable home movies and never-before-seen footage, their extraordinary story comes to life.

### **Long Synopsis (300 Words)**

The greatest entertainment on earth in the 1900s was the circus and its performers were the global superstars. The big top transported children and adults alike into a world where anything was possible. Con Colleano, 'the wizard on the wire' defied gravity, while he and his family defied all odds to become a global phenomenon.

Through the Colleano family's remarkable home movies, never-before-seen footage, family interviews and archive, their extraordinary story is revealed. Rooted in humble beginnings from the Australian bush, the family outmanoeuvred punitive Australian laws and prejudice to travel the world, concealing their Indigenous heritage and reaching the highest echelons of circus stardom. Con Colleano dazzled fans as the renowned 'wizard on the wire', mingling with icons including Charlie Chaplin, at the most exclusive social sets of America and Europe, beguiling even the likes of Hitler and Mussolini.

As the filmmaker, Pauline Clague, reveals her connection to the story, she finds Australian Deb Hescott, who uncovers her own secret link to this family. Connecting with Molly, one of the oral history holders of the family, they go on a profound journey of discovery. The Colleano Heart unravels the hidden secrets of their family of circus royalty, revealing them as survivors of Australia's Hidden Generation of Aboriginal people.

The film shows the resilience of an extraordinary self-made, elite Aboriginal family whose legacy was concealed but now stands ready to be reignited in the Colleano Heart. Supported by Indigenous historian Prof. Em. John Maynard, renowned circus historians Mark St. Leon and Betsy Golden Kellem, and supported by Aboriginal creatives and activists Dist.Prof Larissa Behrendt AO and Kirk Page, The Colleano Heart presents a rich portrait of the family, and the global socio-cultural shifts shaping First Nations lives.



## Key Creatives



**Pauline Clague (Writer/Director)** is a Yaegl woman from Australia's New South Wales North Coast, she has worked as a storyteller and producer in film and TV for 25 years. Pauline is founder and Artistic Director of Winda Film Festival in Sydney, was the programmer for imagineNATIVE media+arts festival in Toronto and is co-creator of NativeSLAM, a 72-hour Indigenous film challenge held at Maoriland Film Festival in Otaki and nativeSLAM the feature. Her roles include the Series Producer for ABC's Message Stick from 2000-2004, the Indigenous training officer at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School from 2009 to 2013; and from 2013-15 she was the Commissioning Editor and Head of Internal Productions for NITV.

**Kate Pappas (Producer)** is an Executive Producer, Producer and Series Producer at WildBear Entertainment. She has built a successful career producing close to 60 hrs of internationally recognised science, wildlife and history documentaries. She cut her teeth in London in kids' science and has since worked across a diverse and award-winning documentary slate. Her strengths lie in navigating culturally sensitive topics, along with applying a pragmatic and inclusive approach to creative storytelling. Recent credits include *Stuff the British Stole S1 & 2*; *Playing With Sharks: The Valerie Taylor Story*; *A Dog's World with Tony Armstrong*, *The Black Hand* and *Westwind: Djalu's Legacy*. Kate is also passionate about a planet first approach to making content.





**Bettina Dalton (*Executive Producer*)** is one of the founding Principals and Executive Producers, as well as a Director, of WildBear Entertainment. She is passionate about stories that resonate globally and shift the dial on social and environmental issues. Many of her projects are borne from discovery and reimagining of little known film archives. Her recent projects include feature documentary *Every Little Thing* which premiered at the 2024 Sundance Film Festival and the Emmy-nominated feature documentary *Playing With Sharks* about Australian icon, conservationist and filmmaker Valerie Taylor, which was acquired by National Geographic Documentary Films following its premiere at Sundance in 2021.

**Ljudan Michaelis-Thorpe (*Co-writer*)**

Ljudan is a Bidjara/Dhughutti filmmaker with a passion for writing First Nations content in factual and drama. She was the Director of Indigenous Content on 'Rachel's Farm' and the director/writer on its impact short 'Rachel's Cultural Adventure'. She has produced and directed numerous independent shorts for film and television. In 2021 she was selected for the SPAA Ones to Watch, Screen Australia Enterprise Stage 1 & several script writing opportunities in retreats, workshops and trainings. Ljudan is also the impact producer on the Colleano Heart. Ljudan sees her future in writing and impact producing.





# *Creative Statement*

The origins of the Colleano story began with a circus historian's book anchored in Con Colleano's story. However as we dived into the research, the richness of all the Colleanos coming together to form a family circus revealed an untold story. The director's personal passion for the Colleano story through her family's oral histories helped shape the film through a black lens and bring the Indigenous voice to the forefront of *The Colleano Heart*. It is a daunting task to make a film about multiple subjects – especially ones that keep the truth well hidden.

As Deb the lost cousin, Pauline the distant relative (& director/writer) and Molly the descendant with living memories of the Colleano family circus, form an alliance to bring the Colleanos' and their intrepid matriarch Julia's heroism to light – truth telling unfolds that will surely change the Australian history books.

There are many stories that could have been told, but as we had access to Con's Colleano's personal footage of the family, and archives of world events, we went with the ones that allowed us to tell the stories of the family that had images to match. It is an incredible record of a bygone era and a testimony too to the Colleano's immense talent, their love of family and their joy doing what they love. The creative flair of the director to draw the archives to life with the contemporary narrative and the oral storylines echoes of First Nations' ways of seeing, being and doing. Undercurrents of secrets, and mystery... of power and powerlessness. and the foresight of a woman who held the family together against all odds.

More than a circus story, our collective creative vision brings to life a phenomenal story of Aboriginal resilience and pride – that ripples through to the present day Colleano descendants. Our stories always start with the land. Whether we hear the land speaking to us or not, it calls us back home, back to the truth. This film flips the white Australian narrative on its head and by doing this the film gives some of the truth-telling back into our history of the 1900s era and its impact on Aboriginal people.

The story you will watch is really only the tip of the iceberg and I do hope there is more in the future. As this story emerges on the big screen undoubtedly other stories from across the globe will find their way to the Colleano story coffers.



## *Director's Notes*

I had been told about this family from a very young age, but I always said I would not do this documentary without the international family members involved. For me the story written in books and newspapers was quite different to the one I had heard, which was more that Julia, mother of the Colleano circus stars, had agency in their history. I had been approached around 15 years ago about a documentary and for me I wanted to do it with the right family line in play, so I worked on my own research and gathered information that allowed me to think about the Indigenous women of this story and how they had been written out of the history. Ljudan knew I had been researching the family and got in contact about the Colleano story as she was working with Wildbear on the project, and the rest is history as they say.

We knew this film was heavily an archive project, we also know there is limited footage of Aboriginal people at the turn of the 20th century. It took years of trawling through newspapers, photos and other archives to tell the story of this family using material that shows their agency. We are used to seeing the same footage of this era being played over and over again, so we wanted to give it new life. Along with the amazing movie footage from Con, we wanted to show the family in those spaces of history.

Finding the stories within the family that show their resilience and strength and love for one another was the element that I never wanted to lose. The rabbit hole that is archive became a battle about what was most important to the story but also about showing the magic and the world the family created.

Finding Deb allowed us to go on the Australian search together, and then finding Molly we gained the knowledge of someone who had lived experiences, even though often as a child. The way she held her family up not because of the things they had done, but more for the way they treated each other, made them start to come alive for the film.

Interestingly we ended up shooting in America during the week before the American election in 2024, often following the convoy of cars or skirting road closures in Allentown and New York due to the presidential campaign made us very aware that we had limited time to get the shoot complete. The outlandish statements being made about the “outsiders” in the country as well as this being Deb’s first time in New York, we had a real “fish out of water” story happening that mirrored some of the feelings that would have happened for the Colleano’s making us feel like we were walking in their footsteps from the moment we hit New York and Allentown.



I unfortunately had my mother pass two weeks before we shot in America and was also dealing with funeral arrangements. We also encountered Hurricane Milton, in Florida, which changed our plans to shoot down there. Molly had moved to the North West Pacific region just before the hurricane hit, so access to Ringling museum was not able to happen and so the we shifted our shoot to New York, Bridgeport Connecticut and Allentown Pennsylvania, but this meant we got to meet more of the family as a large contingent live in that region. We were lucky that it was also Halloween, during our shoot as the community the family lives in go all out, making it a visual palette to engage in. On returning to Australia, doing the road trip with Deb to Narrabri and Lightning Ridge allowed us to really look at the places the family lived before they left Australia.

A lot of reflection and thoughts about the way they would have travelled and the importance of spending time debriefing all we had learnt in the past four years on this incredible journey of bringing this part of the family's history to life was an intense privilege to be able to do this journey as the director.



# *Credits*

**SCREEN AUSTRALIA**  
AND  
**NATIONAL INDIGENOUS TELEVISION**  
PRESENT

IN ASSOCIATION WITH  
**SCREEN NSW**

WITH INVESTMENT FROM  
**ADELAIDE FILM FESTIVAL INVESTMENT FUND**

WITH INVESTMENT FROM  
**THE ACT GOVERNMENT AND SCREEN CANBERRA**

**A WILDBEAR ENTERTAINMENT PRODUCTION**

<i>Written and Directed by</i>	Pauline Clague
<i>Producer</i>	Kate Pappas
<i>Development Producer</i>	Caroline Douglas
<i>Editors</i>	Andrea Lang ASE Bonnie Fan
<i>Director of Photography</i>	Susan Lumsdon
<i>Composer</i>	Mi-kaisha Masella
<i>Executive Producers</i>	Bettina Dalton Alan Erson Michael Tear
<i>Voice of Con Colleano Memoirs</i>	Andrew Saunders
<i>Gamilaraay Voice</i>	Nardi Simpson
<i>Co-writer &amp; Development Writer</i>	Ljudan Michaelis-Thorpe
<i>Consulting Development Director</i>	Rhoda Roberts
<i>Associate Producer &amp; Production Manager</i>	Mitch Hatten
<i>Additional Production Management</i>	Stacey Southee
<i>Production Assistant</i>	Sean Cheng
<i>Researcher</i>	Georgia Coles
<i>Additional Research</i>	Marta Jelec
<i>Indigenous Research Consultant</i>	Maddison Coles
<i>Additional Archive Research</i>	Charlotte Tanner
<i>Additional Cinematography</i>	Dale Cochrane
<i>Assistant Camera</i>	Luanne Cheung
<i>Sound Recordists</i>	Adam Toole Marty Butler

*Post Production by WILDBEAR ENTERTAINMENT*

*Post Production Supervisor* Vincent Anderson

*Edit Team Supervisor* Melissa Brooks

*Additional Editor* Natasha Alves Leonard

*Edit Assistants* Joshua Hartwell

Ganu Bhalerao

*Online Editors* Patrick Howard

Pogo Worley

Riley McCartney

*Colourist* Rebecca Lyons Wright

*Sound Design and Re-recording Mixer* Aurimus Juskevics

*Additional Sound provided by Folklore Sound Australia*

*Sound Effects Editor* Wiaan van der Westhuizen

*Sound Producer* Rose Patton

*Post Sound Coordinator* Kyra Bellamy

*DCP Mastering* Edge Content & Technology

*Film Digitisation* National Film and Sound Archive

The Footage Company

*Animation by* Lafinka Studio

*Creative Lead* Andres Gomez Isaza

*Additional Composition & Music Mix* John Ertler

*Eternity Track Producer* William Rimmington (aka Billy Davis)

*Production Music* Audio Network

BMG Production Music Australia

Eternity  
*Performed by* Mi-kaisha  
*Written by* Mi-kaisha Rose Masella, Michael Fatkin, Paul Duncan  
*Produced by* Michael Fatkin  
*Courtesy of* Universal Music

*Additional Sound Recording*      Big Bang Sound Design

*Transcription & Post Production Script*      Rev.com

*Travel Agent*      Stage and Screen  
TAG travel

*Contributors*

Molly O'Donnell  
Debra Lee Hescott  
Professor Larissa Behrendt AO  
Professor John Maynard  
Mark St Leon  
Kirk Page  
Norm Propert  
Heather Propert  
Erin O'Donnell  
Mark O'Donnell  
Betsy Golden Kellem  
Amy McFadden  
The McFadden and O'Donnell Families  
Deriah Advisory Group

*Circus Historical Consultant*      Mark St Leon

*Archive Consultant*      Alec Morgan

*Archive provided by*

The St Leon Family Trust  
The National Film and Sound Archive of Australia (NFSA)  
Australian Broadcasting Corporation Library Sales  
The Footage Company / AP Archive  
The Footage Company / British Movietone  
The Footage Company / Periscope Film  
Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne.  
British Pathe  
Circus World-Wisconsin Historical Society

Sydney City Archives / Percy James Bryant  
ContentMint  
Forbes Family History Group  
Getty Images  
GP Archives – Gaumont collection  
Internet Archive  
Kinolibrary  
Lightning Ridge Historical Society Trust  
Bob Mathews / Sue Mathews  
Cinesound Movietone  
Cinesound  
Meg Merton  
Robyn and Mick Wordley  
Pauline Clague  
Shutterstock  
Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales  
State Library of New South Wales  
Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales and Courtesy ACP Magazines Ltd  
State Library of South Australia (PRG/280/1/40/16, PRG/280/1/36/84, PRG/280/1/23/353, PRG/280/1/39/174,  
B 23868)  
National Library of Australia  
Newspapers courtesy of the National Library of Australia  
Archive Farms / Global ImageWorks  
Narrabri and District Historical Society Inc  
Historic Photos  
John Maynard  
The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art  
Library of Congress

*Family Photos Courtesy of*

Amy McFadden, Molly O'Donnell, Mary O'Donnell, Pat O'Donnell, Erin O'Donnell, Deb Hescott, Norm Propert

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*Locations*

Barnum Museum, Bridgeport, Connecticut  
Deriah Aboriginal Area  
Lightning Ridge Historical Society  
National Film and Sound Archive, Canberra  
Puri Global Indigenous History Centre  
National Library of Australia  
Staten Island Ferry  
Jumbunna Institute of Indigenous Education and Research, UTS  
Sydney Circus Company  
McFadden House, Allentown  
Mount Kaputar National Park, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service  
Nettleton's First Shaft Lookout

Special Thanks to the Colleano, O'Donnell, McFadden and Propert Families  
To family and friends who have supported us during this journey

*Special Thanks To*

The late Lew Griffiths  
The late Joyce Clague  
Jeff Hescott, Rob McFadden, Julia Vandall, Paddy O'Donnell, Rodney Clarke  
Jenni Brammall, Barbara Moritz, Leisa Carney and Russell Gawthorpe  
Lightning Ridge Historical Society Trust  
Steven Booby and Aunty Sharon Binge-Booby, Simmone Moodie, Kate Briggs,  
Hannah Binge, Roslyn Binge-Trindall, Marj Howland, Marg Hutton  
Ashley Little, Simone O'Brien, Margot Anderson, Melbourne Arts Centre  
Cieron Cody, Mat Kesting, Daniella Ortega, Janet M Davis  
Robyn Garcia and Indigenous Engagement team at NLA  
Gill Moody and the Indigenous team at NFSA  
Jennifer Lemmer Posey, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art  
Bruce Hawley, Circus Historical Society  
Documentary Australia Foundation

*Insurance Broker*      Arthur J. Gallagher & Co.

Associate Producer & Series Producer Placements Mitch Hatten and Marta Jelec Supported by  
VicScreen

Produced and filmed on the Traditional Country of the  
Bidjigal and Gadigal people of the Eora Nation  
Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people and the Bunurong Boon Wurrung people of the Eastern Kulin Nation

The Gamilaraay, Kamilaroi, Gamilaroi, Gomeroi people  
Awabakal and Worimi people  
Ngunnawal and Ngambri people of Canberra  
Lenape people (New York City, New York & Allentown, Pennsylvania)  
Paugussett people (Bridgeport, Connecticut)

*ICT Manager* Peter Taylor

*Technical Media Manager* Andy Dickinson

*Finance* Financed with the assistance of Tindale Rd  
Investments Pty Ltd

*Production Accountant* Janet Probin

*Business Affairs* Paul Wu  
Katharine Baker

*Development Coordinator* Andrew Burvill

WildBear Entertainment

*Principals* Bettina Dalton  
Serge Ou  
Michael Tear

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*Managing Director* Alan Erson

*Chief Financial Officer* Caroline Nichols

*Chief Operating Officer* Harriet Pike

*Head of Production* Matthew Nightingale

*Head of Production Finance* Miranda Kelly

PRODUCED IN ASSOCIATION WITH NATIONAL INDIGENOUS TELEVISION



NITV Senior Commissioning Editor: Cieron Cody

NITV Commissioning Production Supervisor Chantelle Newton

SBS Business Affairs Manager: Karen Telfer

Subtitles produced by SBS

Head of Indigenous Commissioning and Production: Dena Curtis

NITV and WildBear Entertainment acknowledge the traditional owners of country throughout Australia



POST PRODUCED IN THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY



*wildbear*  
*entertainment*