

# SPARK SHORT FILM INITIATIVE 2026

A SCREEN TERRITORY INITIATIVE




Department of Tourism and Hospitality



Proudly supported by:



A photograph of a film set in a forest. In the center, a man in a red shirt holds a clapperboard that reads "DAY # 3 | 1A | 1", "HEPHAESTION", and "SPARK 2023". To the left, a person in a blue cap and headphones is operating a camera. To the right, a person is holding a large, textured prop. The background is a sunlit forest with tall trees.

The SPARK Short Film Initiative has become a highly anticipated program in the Northern Territory screen industry and this year it returns with the theme:

**“IN A PICKLE”**

# | OVERVIEW

The SPARK Short Film Initiative has historically been supported by Screen Territory as part of the annual program of the Darwin International Film Festival. The intention of the initiative is to support emerging filmmakers by providing funding and mentorship to help bring their short film projects to life. Screen Territory is administrating the program to provide more scaffolding for clear career outcomes for successful participants.

**In 2026, three successful SPARK recipients will be provided with \$30,000 in production funding to produce a ten-minute short film and will have the opportunity to work with an experienced Screen Industry story development mentor and will also be assigned an Executive Producer. Each film will be provided with a significant equipment rental package from Panavision, one of world's premier camera and lens suppliers for the film and TV industry. As part of their sponsorship, Panavision will also provide a technical and creative consultation prior to the principal photography of each successful film.**

At the end of the program, the completed short films will be screened at a showcase event during the festival program that will be attended by industry professionals and the public alike. The initiative aims to provide an opportunity for emerging filmmakers to not only gain experience, but to also build their portfolio and connect with seasoned industry professionals.

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Please note: Screen Territory reserves the right to vary the SPARK short film initiative at any point and to exercise its discretion to make exceptions.

# |COMMITMENT

Embarking on a SPARK short film as a key creative demands a significant commitment, representing that it is a distinctive opportunity for substantial career development.

Remember that professionals turn their passion into a disciplined craft.

Professionalism lies not just in skill, but in the unwavering dedication to refine and elevate one's pursuit from a pastime to a constant and purposeful journey.

**This endeavour necessitates your dedicated investment of time, care, and diligent effort; mirroring the standards expected in the realm of professional screen production. *Aimed at early career and mid-career screen practitioners.***



# | PROGRAM COMPONENTS

## **PRODUCTION FUNDING**

Three successful recipients will receive a production grant of \$30,000 to shoot and produce their short film.

## **BUDGET**

The filmmaker will work with the assigned Executive Producer to budget and allocate \$22,000 worth of production expenditure.

\$8,000 of each film's production budget will be pre-allocated to fixed costs including Panavision gear rental, insurances, professional sound mixing and a professional colour grade.

## **STORY DEVELOPMENT MENTOR**

Each recipient will be assigned an experienced story development mentor to provide guidance and support throughout the development process, and to help refine their film's concept and narrative structure.

## **ASSIGNED EXECUTIVE PRODUCER**

Each recipient will also be assigned an Executive Producer who will provide support and guidance throughout the production process, ensuring the film is completed on time and on budget.

## **SUBMISSION GUIDELINES**

Applicants must submit a film concept that is related to the theme of "IN A PICKLE," along with a brief synopsis, character breakdowns, director's vision, producer's vision, and key creative CVs.

## **NT CAST & CREW REQUIREMENTS**

Applicants must use NT based cast and crew unless exceptional circumstances can be established and have been pre-approved by Screen Territory.

## **SHORT FILM**

Successful recipients will be required to produce a short film that is no longer than 10 minutes, including credits. The film must be completed within a specified timeframe and must adhere to the submission guidelines.

## **SHOOTING PERIOD**

Each film will need to commence and complete principal photography in a four/five-day block in mid-June to early July 2026.

## **NT MUSIC**

Each film will need to source music from an NT musician, composer or band. MusicNT can assist with this process.

## **PANAVISION GEAR**

Courtesy of Panavision, each film will be provided Panavision gear rental to produce the film during the principal photography dates. Panavision will also provide creative and technical advice prior to your filming block.

## **MENTORSHIP THROUGH AFTRS**

The Australian Film Television and Radio School (AFTRS) will be providing each successful team with disciplined focused mentorship to hone craft skills.

## **FINAL SCREENING**

The completed films will be screened at a final showcase event for industry professionals and the public at a launch curated by Screen Territory.

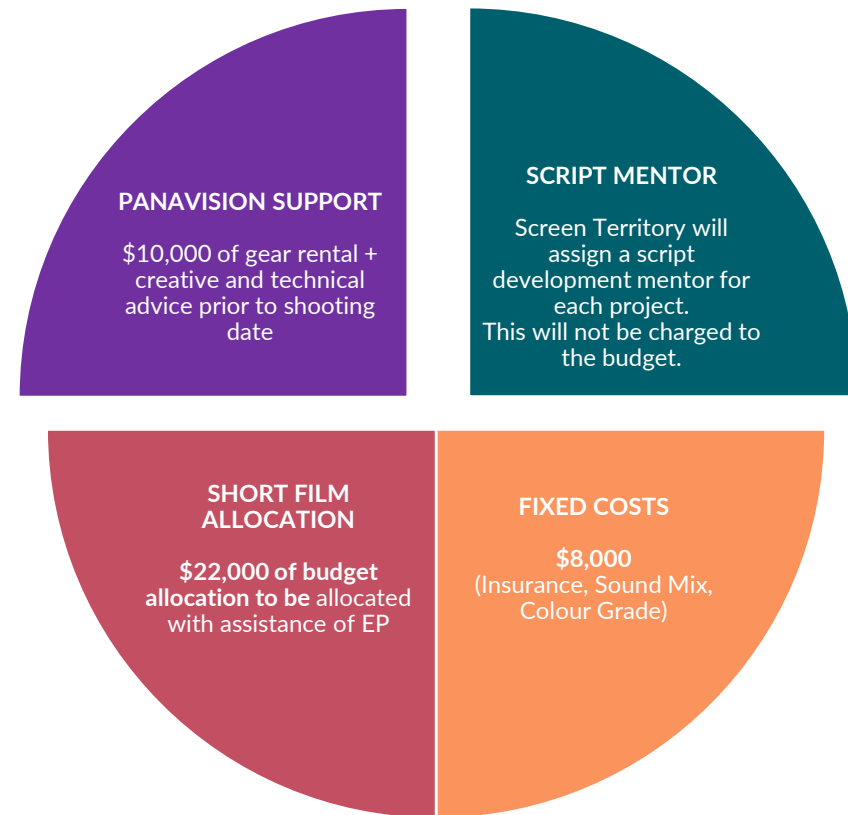
## **COLOUR GRADING AND POST-PRODUCTION**

Each film will engage with Kojo (*Territory*, *Talk To Me*, *I Am Mother*, *Hotel Mumbai*, *The Lucky One*, *The Babadook*, *Wolf Creek*, *Ticket to Paradise*, and *Mortal Kombat*) to undertake colour grading, title design and DCP generation.

# | BUDGET ALLOCATIONS

Each successful team will work with the assigned Executive Producer (EP) to budget and allocate \$22,000 of their production expenditure.

\$8,000 of each film's production budget will be allocated to fixed costs including insurance of Panavision gear, Sound Mixing, and a Colour Grade.

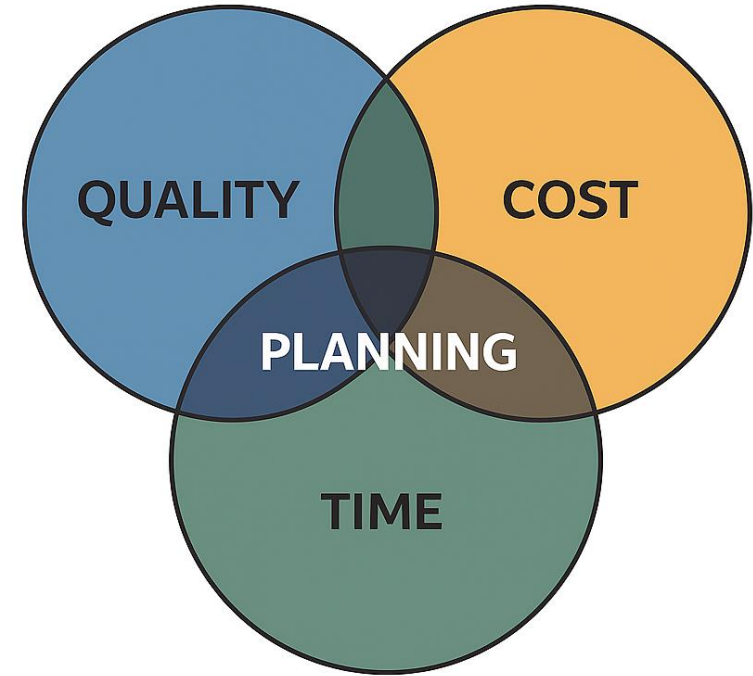


# | BUDGET CONSIDERATIONS

To make the most of the budget it's crucial to prioritise elements that contribute **significantly** to the narrative and overall quality of your proposed film.

Resourcefulness, careful planning, and collaboration can help mitigate costs without compromising the creative vision.

Below are some items that will drive up costs, and so your consideration should be story impact vs cost/achievability.



Considerations moving into your scripting/conceptualisation that will generally drive costs of your budget:

- Stunts
- Historical Periods
- Specific Set Builds
- Multiple Locations
- Ensemble Casts
- Armourer Requirements
- SFX Make-Up & Prosthetics
- Animal Wranglers/Animals
- Specialist Vehicles
- VFX heavy set-ups
- Housing and relocating crew



# | WHAT ARE WE LOOKING FOR?

**PRODUCTION QUALITY:** We expect that the film will be of high production quality, with clear audio and visuals suitable to theatrical exhibition. The cinematography and editing should be of a professional standard, and you should indicate in your application that you have the knowledge and capacity to reach this standard.

**SUBMISSION FORMAT:** The finished final film will need to be submitted in a high-quality digital format in a container such as a QuickTime file or MP4 alongside a DCP, and the final submission should include a brief synopsis of the film, the running time, and a list of credits. The technical specifications for final submission will be detailed during the contracting and delivery phase if you are successful.

**RIGHTS:** The filmmaker must have the necessary rights and permissions to use all elements of the film, including music, images, and any copyrighted materials. If the film includes actors or on-screen talent, the filmmaker must secure their permission to use their likeness in the film. The Executive Producer(s) will be available to assist in this during the pre-production process.





# | WHAT ARE WE LOOKING FOR?

**CREATIVITY**: The film should demonstrate creativity and innovation in its approach to the chosen genre and the theme of the initiative.

**LENGTH**: The film should be no longer than 10 minutes in duration. The short films can be either scripted or factual.

**THEME**: The film should explore the theme of “IN A PICKLE”.

*(See next slide)*

**STORY**: The story should be engaging, positive and have a clear narrative structure. It should be well developed, hold the viewer’s interest throughout and be up-lifting.

**CHARACTERS**: The characters should be well developed and relatable. The audience should be able to connect with the characters and feel invested in their fate. Consider how you can challenge genre tropes and provide depth of motivation for your characters.

# | IN A PICKLE

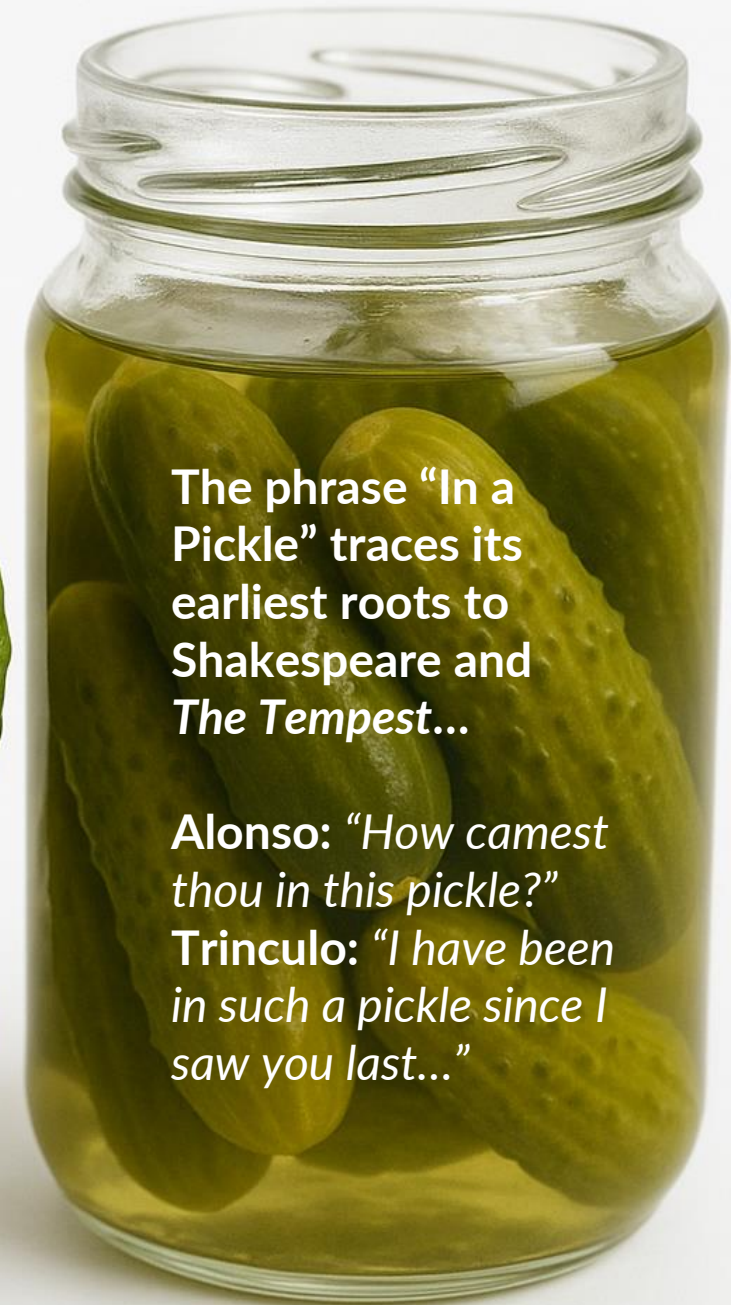
## Every story needs a moment of truth.

This year's SPARK theme: "In a Pickle" - invites filmmakers to explore the art of being stuck, cornered, or caught between choices.

It's about pressure. Predicaments. Those make-or-break moments where character and creativity collide. Whether it's a laugh-out loud comedy of errors, a heart-wrenching moral dilemma, or a quiet battle of conscience, being in a pickle reveals who we really are when the stakes are high and there's no easy way out.

Filmmakers are encouraged to interpret the theme however they choose - literally or metaphorically... A mystery jar of pickles on a shelf... A soldier trapped by duty... A friend (or lover) torn between truth and loyalty... A surreal world where decisions ferment and transform...

The possibilities are as endless (and deliciously messy) as the phrase itself. At its heart, "In a Pickle" is about tension, transformation, and finding flavour in adversity - because sometimes the best stories come from the stickiest situations!



The phrase "In a Pickle" traces its earliest roots to Shakespeare and *The Tempest*...

**Alonso:** "How camest thou in this pickle?"

**Trinculo:** "I have been in such a pickle since I saw you last..."

# | IN A PICKLE

## Planes, Trains and Automobiles

External chaos pushes characters into emotional honesty, transforming frustration into empathy and friendship. *A comical predicament.*

## Cube

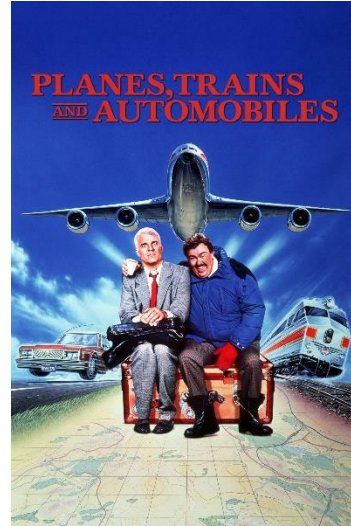
The physical entrapment becomes a psychological dismantling – fear exposes morality, intelligence, cruelty, and humanity. *The Existential Predicament.*

## Collateral

A character pushed far beyond his comfort zone discovers his courage, agency, and identity through a night of escalating danger. *The Moral Predicament.*

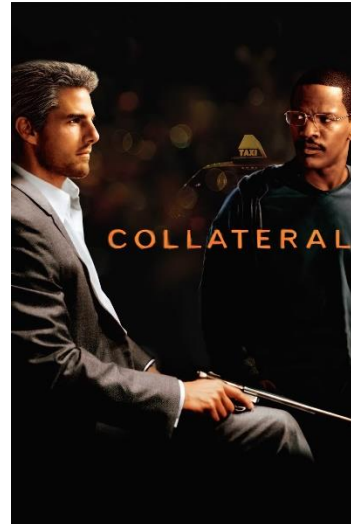
## After Hours

The environment becomes the antagonist; survival becomes comedy. *The Urban Nightmare Predicament.*



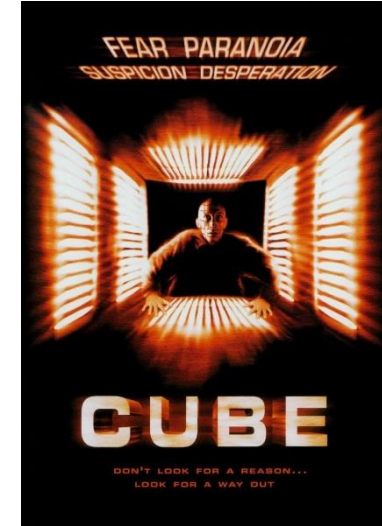
The pickle is:

- a chain of travel misfortunes
- forcing two incompatible personalities together
- creating relational tension through comedic and dramatic moments



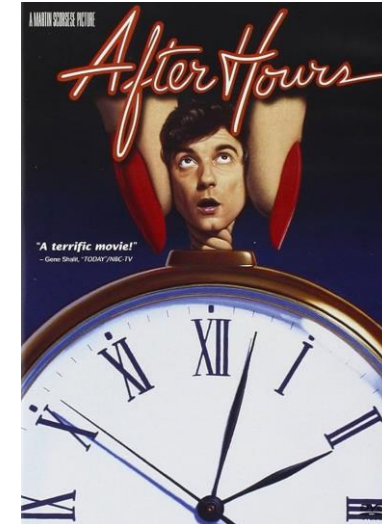
The pickle is:

- a moral crisis: comply or resist?
- a physical trap: he's captive in his own taxi.
- a ticking clock as the story engine
- an ordinary man in an extraordinary situation



The pickle is:

- a literal escape room style trap they cannot escape
- high-stakes trial by character choices
- forcing strangers to reveal their true selves under pressure



The pickle is:

- the inner city turning in a maze and labyrinth
- social and psychological pressure through unusual character interactions
- escalating absurdity

# | SUBMISSION MATERIALS

## **SYNOPSIS**

Please provide a brief synopsis of the film that highlights the story, characters, and treatment of the theme. The synopsis should be no longer than 300 words and should give the judges a clear understanding of what the film is about.

## **SCRIPT**

Submit a script (minimum 10 pages) in professional screenplay format as a .PDF file. You must submit a script as the development period will commence immediately upon the announcement of successful recipients.

## **CHARACTER BREAKDOWNS**

Provide a breakdown of the main characters in the film, including their age, gender, personality, and motivations. The character breakdowns should be no longer than 150 words per character and should give the judges an understanding of the characters' roles in the story.

## **DIRECTOR'S VISION**

Please provide a brief statement outlining the director's vision for the film. This should include the director's creative approach to the theme of "In a Pickle," as well as any other relevant details about the director's artistic vision.

## **PRODUCER'S VISION**

Please provide a brief statement outlining the producer's vision for the film. This should include the producer's approach to the theme of "In a Pickle" as well as any other relevant details about the producer's vision for the film such as proposed locations or reasons for choosing their creative team.

## **KEY CREATIVES - CVs**

Please provide a CV for each of the key creatives involved in the film.

This can include the director, producer, writer, cinematographer, editor, and/or sound designer. The CVs should include the name, contact information, credits, education and relevant experience for each creative.

## **CAREER STATEMENT**

How you will benefit your career by taking part in the SPARK 2026 short film initiative? The statement should be no more than 150 words.

## **PROPOSED BUDGET**

How will you utilise the \$22,000? Please note any third-party funding or in-kind contributions that you may also bring to the production of the short film, e.g. crowd-funding, Australian Cultural Fund, private investment, etc.

## **PANAVISION GEAR**

Courtesy of Panavision, each film will be provided Panavision gear rental to produce the film during the principal photography dates. Panavision will also provide creative and technical advice prior to your filming block.

## **SUPPORTING MATERIALS**

Any supporting materials that you wish to provide, e.g. Location Photos, Mood Boards, Examples of Previous Work, Colour Pallet Ideas, etc.

# | HOW WILL WE ASSESS THE SUBMISSIONS?

**Applications will be reviewed by a panel of selected Screen Industry judges, who will evaluate each application based on the assessment criteria below.**

## TRACK RECORD:

The applicant's track record in the screen industry will be considered, including any previous projects, awards, previous training, and engagement with Screen Territory, as well as how participating in the initiative will likely benefit their career progression.

## CREATIVE QUALITY:

The quality and creativity of the film concept, story, and characters will be evaluated. The judges will consider how well the film explores the stipulated theme, how clearly the story is articulated, and how effectively the theme is utilised in the conceptualisation of the film.

## APPLICATION MATERIALS:

The quality of the application materials, including the way they are presented and laid out, and the level to which these indicate a considered and achievable approach to the realisation of the short film.

## PARTNERSHIPS:

The chosen filmmaking teams must work collegially with the partnerships contained within this program. This includes the supervising mentors as well as sponsorship companies and their representatives (eg. *Panavision*).



2023 SPARK short film *Fiasco*



2023 SPARK short film *Rust*

# | ELIGIBILITY

To be eligible to apply for the SPARK Short Film Initiative applicants must:

- Meet the Screen Territory Terms of Trade
- Not have any current outstanding acquittal with Screen Territory or any other Northern Territory Government Agency.
- The project's crew must be comprised of residents of the Northern Territory (NT) and proof of residency may be required to validate this.



Cast of *Bear* at 2024 DIFF screening

Please note: Screen Territory reserves the right to vary the SPARK short film initiative at any point and to exercise its discretion to make exceptions.

# | DATES

**Applications open:** 8am on Monday 8  
December 2025 (ACST)

**Applications close:** 11.59PM on Sunday 08  
February 2026 (ACST)

**Notification:** Approx. Monday 02 March  
2026 (ACST)

Applications must be lodged through  
[GrantsNT](#)

## PRE-PRODUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT MODULES

Three script development sessions, a script lock, casting, and pre-production meetings will occur between Late March and May.

## SCRIPT DEVELOPMENT

Each writer will have 3 script development sessions (1 x 1.5 hour + 2 x 1 hour) and 1 x digital table read of the script.

**The writer and director must be available to participate during all 3 script development sessions and the table read.**

## FILMING

Each team will have 4-5 days (to be negotiated with EP) to film their project in June of 2026.

## POST-PRODUCTION

Rough Cut, Fine Cut, Picture Lock, Colour Grade, Sound Mix and Delivery will occur between Early August and mid-September.

## PUBLIC SCREENING

A public screening will occur during a screening event in the third quarter of 2026.