

THE DEFENDERS

FEATURE DOCUMENTARY
PRESS KIT

**SWEETSHOP
& GREEN** PRODUCTIONS

WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY

Matthew Bate

PRODUCED BY

Gal Greenspan, Alice Burgin

PRODUCTION COMPANY

Sweetshop & Green Productions

AUSTRALIA

www.sweetshopgreen.com

INTERNATIONAL SALES

Autlook Filmsales

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TECHNICAL DETAILS

Country of Production	Australia
Year of Production	2023
Running Time	81 mins @ 24 fps
Finishing Format	DCP Colour
Ratio	2.39
Sound	5.1 Surround
Language	English, Arabic

TAGLINE

To level the playing field they'll need to change the game

SHORT SYNOPSIS

When talented Bahrain refugee footballer Hakeem al-Araibi steps off the plane in Thailand to begin his honeymoon he finds himself surrounded by police with an Interpol arrest order accusing him of terrorist activity. What unfolds is the gripping true story of an heroic whistle-blower who, after speaking out about his own torture, sets off a revenge plot involving three countries, two royal families and the world's most powerful sporting body, FIFA. As Hakeem awaits extradition back to Bahrain where he will likely be killed, a rag-tag group of campaigners led by a retired Australian football captain turned television pundit, play out a nail-biting thriller, racing against the clock to save Hakeem's life and the very soul of football itself.

LONG SYNOPSIS

In 2018, while on his honeymoon in Thailand, Australian political refugee and football player Hakeem al-Araibi unwittingly steps into a deadly trap. Arrested under an illegitimate Interpol warrant issued by Bahrain, he was detained by Thai authorities and awaited extradition back to Bahrain, where he would be likely tortured and potentially killed. Bahrain hoped the extradition would be quiet and quick. From his jail cell, a desperate Hakeem sent a short video SOS back to Australia asking for help.

A few years earlier, a number of Gulf States began countering falling oil prices and covering their human rights abuses by using football as a way to gain prestige and political power. Bahraini Royal Sheikh, Salman bin Ibrahim Al Khalifa's FIFA 2016 presidential bid (one of the most powerful positions in world sport) was a key part of this tactic. A frontrunner to win, the Sheikh's candidacy hit a road block when former national team player Hakeem al-Araibi, now a protected refugee in Australia, revealed to the world's press that he and many of his teammates had been tortured for taking part in the Arab Spring uprising while Al Khalifa had been in charge of Bahrain football. Still reeling from years of corruption - FIFA was looking to clean up its act, and Al Khalifa brought too much baggage. Salman lost his presidential bid.

In 2018, the Bahraini monarchy was given its chance for revenge. The Australian border force mistakenly alerted Thailand - a monarchy with close economic ties to Bahrain - of a bogus arrest warrant for Hakeem, issued to Interpol by Bahrain years earlier. Hakeem, who was now a free refugee under Australia's

protection, was illegally arrested immediately on arrival in Bangkok. As Hakeem awaited extradition, would football's governing bodies fight to save this footballer's life - or would he be quietly sent back to the country who wanted him dead?

Hakeem's SOS video was received by Fatima Yazbek - a Middle Eastern human rights activist, and Lou Tona, Chair of Pascoe Vale FC - Hakeem's team in Melbourne, who had no idea why he would be arrested. They began contacting everyone they could think of to try to help Hakeem. But while their grassroots campaign began to gather some momentum, it was not gaining the noise it needed to attract international attention. Enter Craig Foster - former captain of the Australian team, the Socceroos, and the face of football on Australian TV. Outraged that FIFA was doing nothing to help a fellow footballer and that the Australian government remained silent, Foster became the on-field general the campaign desperately needed. Together with a rag-tag team of social media warriors recruited from all over the world, the #SaveHakeem campaign would take on new life. What follows is an incredible end-to-end thriller fought on an uneven geo-political playing field against opposition willing to use dirty tactics. Playing for the ultimate stakes, Craig and his team will have to adapt and outwit if they are to pull off the ultimate come from behind victory.

The disastrous plot to create a Super League of clubs, the rising death toll of immigrant workers building Qatar's 2022 World Cup stadiums and big business' strangulation of football culture. Once, football stood for passion, community, honour, even beauty - but corruption and greed has meant 'the people's game' is in danger of losing everything it stands for. Against this backdrop, we tell the story of how an unlikely group of fans, led by a retired football captain, created a movement that took on a military junta, two monarchies and the world's richest and most influential sporting body - to save the life of a single footballer, but also to defend the very soul of football itself.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT - MATTHEW BATE

I was born in the North West of England with a ball at my feet and my Dad's love of Liverpool Football Club. I played at a high level as a youth player and today I play in a senior's men's team. Football is a massive part of my life - to me, it's as close to religion as I get. I believe the way you play football represents how you live life. The values you show on the field are the ones you believe in and will fight for off the pitch. Which is why I wanted to make this film. What happened to Hakeem made me very angry. There was something deeply unjust and deeply wrong about Bahrain wanting to exact revenge on Hakeem for simply speaking the truth, and the fact this also involved a senior member of FIFA, the body that is supposed to represent him, but in reality did very little, was outrageous. How could football so completely fail one of its own? This film is an angry shout at those people who had the responsibility and the power to do something but looked the other way. But this film is very much a story of hope - of how fellow players, fans and everyday people became powerful when they worked together to stand up for the powerless, and how justice can be served when we are willing to defend the truth. Making *The Defenders* in the year of the World Cup and during enormous global crises story very much for reminder that people have the power.

Matthew Bate, Writer/Director.

KEY CONTRIBUTORS

Hakeem Al-Araibi

"I was saved by the generosity of so many people who helped me. But corrupt governments around the world are free to keep chasing and torturing those who disagree with them. I hope this documentary helps to shine a light on these corrupt leaders. To help save the next person in need."

Craig Foster

"Sport has a line that it won't cross when money and politics become more important than principle or human life. Hakeem al-Araibi pushed football to be better and we made it respond."

ADDITIONAL CONTRIBUTORS

Alexandra Engel Mallon

Brendan Schwab

Duncan Philip

Evan Jones

Fatima Yazbek

Joanna Soucek

Lou Tona

Nadthasiri "Nat" Bergman

Minky Worden

Phil Robertson

Sayed Alwadaei

Yahya Alhadid

THE FILMMAKERS

MATTHEW BATE – Writer, Director

Matthew Bate is a multi-award winning writer, director and producer. His 2011 feature *Shut Up Little Man!* premiered in competition at the Sundance Film festival before screening theatrically across the U.S and being bought by Netflix. His follow up feature *Sam Klemke's Time Machine* premiered at the 2015 Sundance New Frontiers Program, winning Doc Aviv's Artistic Spirit Award and an AWGIE for best screenplay. Mathew's short films have won the Dendy Award and Melbourne Film Festival's Best Documentary Awards. His Virtual Reality work *Summation of Force*, made with Magnum Photographer Trent Parke, was selected for Sundance's New Frontier Program and won the inaugural VR Award at the 'Imagine Film Festival' Amsterdam. In 2021 he co produced the Netflix Original documentary *The Dreamlife of Georgie Stone*, and was co-creator, co-writer and producer on two seasons of the comedy TV Series *Aftertaste*, starring Rachel Griffiths and Erik Thomson. Matthew is a co-founder of the South Australian film company Closer Productions.

GAL GREENSPAN – Producer

Gal Greenspan was born in Tel Aviv and studied film production at the Sam Spiegel School for Film and Television. In 2009, Greenspan launched GreenProductions, a film and promotional production house in Tel Aviv, which has produced over 15 feature length films and countless shorts to date. He has produced nearly a dozen critically-acclaimed films, including *SCAFFOLDING* (Cannes Acid 2017, TIFF 2017, JFF 2017 Best Film award), *MENASHE* (Sundance 2017, Berlinale 2017, distributed in the US by A24), *YOUTH* (Berlinale 2013), and *SUMMER VACATION* (Sundance 2013, shortlisted for Oscars). Since setting up Sweetshop & Green in 2020, Gal has gone on to produce the feature drama *VESNA MOJA* (dir. Sara Kern) and the short film *DATSUN* (dir. Mark Albiston), both of which had their world premieres at the 2022 Berlinale. He co-produced the animated feature film *WHERE IS ANNE FRANK?* (dir. Ari Folman), which premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2021, and produced *THE ENDANGERED GENERATION?* (dir. Celeste Geer) which premiered at the 2022 Melbourne International Film Festival.

ALICE BURGIN – Producer

Alice Burgin is Sweetshop & Green's Head of Documentary and oversees the company's development and production of non-fiction features and series. Prior to joining the Sweetshop & Green family, she was best known for her role as the CEO/Conference Director of the Australian International Documentary Conference (AIDC). In 2021 she was awarded an Enterprise grant from Screen Australia to take over the documentary slate at Sweetshop & Green. *THE DEFENDERS* is her first feature documentary and she is in production with *LEFT WRITE HOOK* (dir. Shannon Owen) to be released in 2024.

BRYAN MASON – Editor

An award-winning editor and cinematographer, Bryan Mason edited the Sundance and Berlin award-winning 52 TUESDAYS for which he won the Screen Editors of Australia Award, ANIMALS, which premiered at Sundance in 2019 and GOOD LUCK TO YOU, starring Emma Thompson, which is currently in post-production. His feature documentary credits include LIFE IN MOVEMENT, SHUT UP LITTLE MAN! (for which he won an AACTA for Best Editing), MY TEHRAN FOR SALE, SAM KLEMKE'S TIME MACHINE, EMBRACE, MOTHER WITH A GUN and IN MY BLOOD IT RUNS.

DAVID SCARBOROUGH - Co-Editor

David is an award winning editor who has collaborated with directors and producers from around Australia to deliver a diverse range of film and television work. His desire to bring the director's vision to life comes from the storytelling skills he has crafted through more than a decade of experience in the film industry. Through this time he has helped documentary and drama projects achieve international recognition and has received 5 nominations and 1 award from the Australian Screen Editors Guild for his work.

BEN SPEED– Composer

Benjamin Peter Speed is an Australian musician who composes scores for film, television and theatre. He performs and records as Mister Speed and was vocalist and songwriter in the Australian alternative, electronic and hip hop band The New Pollutants. Growing up in Adelaide, Speed graduated with an honours degree in Music Technology from the Elder Conservatorium of Music at Adelaide University and has a Masters Degree in Screen Composing from the Australian Film Television and Radio School (AFTRS) in Sydney.

PRODUCTION STILLS

[A selection of production stills can be downloaded for press use here.](#)

CREDITS

Written & Directed By
Produced By
Co-Produced By
Executive Producers

Edited By

Director of Photography
Composer
Sound Designer
Associate Producers

Archive Producer
Colourist

Matthew Bate
Gal Greenspan
Alice Burgin
Mandy Chang
Darius Family
Sharlene George
Roi Kurland
Rebecca Summerton
Bryan Mason
David Scarborough
Alex Cardy
Benjamin Speed
Simon Rosenberg
Rachel Forbes
Kate Laurie
Lisa Savage
Daniel Stonehouse

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