

FWENDS

Director Sophie Somerville

Australia | 2025

92 min. | English, French with English subtitles

Screenplay Sophie Somerville, Emmanuelle Mattana, Melissa Gan. **Cinematography** Carter Looker. **Editing** Sophie Somerville. **Music** Mike Tilbrook. **Sound Design** Rizky Pratama. **Executive Producers** Brendan Donoghue, Amanda Maple-Brown, Adrian Holmes. **Co-Producers** Carter Looker, Sophie Somerville, Sarah Hegge-Taylor. **Production company** Excellent Friends and Future Success! (Melbourne, Australia). **With** Emmanuelle Mattana, Melissa Gan.

World sales Excellent Friends and Future Success!

Synopsis

Walk and talk in Melbourne: Em has travelled from Sydney to visit her friend Jessie. They don't have any plans – and there isn't even a proper duvet for Em, although the two young women won't be sleeping anyway. For soon their sweet, smart babbling is in full flow, moving from the banal to the heavy and back again. Both of them are lost in their own way: Em because her supposed dream job comes with an exploitative, misogynous climate; Jessie because she's now in a vacuum following a break-up. The hours they share become a space of play, just as their slacker-like movements through the city turn into an observation of themselves and those around them. **FWENDS** alights upon the diffuse, sensitive realm between late adolescence and adult life, or, as director Sophie Somerville fittingly describes it, "how being in your 20s means staring into a dark, deep, meaningless void." Yet the film hews closer to comedy than to drama, as analyses of the difficult present are delivered with costumes and special effects, with rap and improvisation. Made without a big budget, **FWENDS** goes to unexpected places – and is also a declaration of love to a metropolis in spring. (Carolin Weidner)

Sophie Somerville is a Melbourne-based Australian writer, director and editor. Her shorts have screened at festivals around the world including Telluride Film Festival and London Short Film Festival. Her films have won the Dendy Award for Best Live Action Short (PEEPS, 2021) and Rouben Mamoulian Award for Best Director (LINDA 4 EVA, 2023) at Sydney Film Festival. In 2023 she was an attendee of the Melbourne International Film Festival Accelerator Lab for emerging Australian and New Zealand directors.

Films: 2019: Peeps (short film). 2023: Linda 4 Eva (short film). 2025: Fwends.

Director's Statement

We So Badly Need Each Other

Stories about ordinary people are essential to interrogate ourselves

Hi, I'm Sophie. I really love making films. I am really proud of my first feature film. It came about out of pure determination and sheer will. Carter Looker (DOP) and I decided we were done with waiting around. We made this film using what we had, with the people we could find, the free locations we could shoot at, and the favours we could pull.

Throughout my career, I've been imagining inventive solutions to limiting situations. My short film PEEPS was shot guerrilla-style in a shopping centre on a budget of \$4,000 AUD, and ended up being selected by Gregory Nava for Telluride Film Festival, as well as many other film festivals worldwide. I enjoy the challenge of working with minimal resources, and have been developing a formula for funny, original, inventive and heartfelt storytelling that embraces the real world as part of the aesthetic.

FWENDS elucidates the complexity of modern female friendships in a way I haven't seen before. It comes from a unique perspective, from my little corner of Australia, and speaks authentically about our pathological inability to admit that we so badly need each other. We're always hearing about how loneliness is an epidemic these days, especially among young people, and I feel that the constant pressure to make money and succeed smothers and obfuscates our ability to listen to our human needs. It's easy to feel like the world is crushing you and that you have to make it on your own. It's much harder to admit that you just need to see your friends.

I see actors as so much more than talking puppets. They are my co-collaborators who challenge me to give my characters the depth and humanity they deserve. One of the reasons I keep going back to making films is my obsession with the craft of acting, and how I keep wanting to go deeper and deeper into my study of humans. Actors humble me. They are some of the bravest people in the world. The stylistic choices in the film came about as a result of my interest in creating situations for people to be as honest and as human as they could be within the confines of the story. It was a terrifying thing to commit to such long takes, but it was such a humbling experience to watch Emmanuelle Mattana and Melissa Gan rise to the challenge with such finesse and courage. I am still in awe of them both.

I believe it's essential that we tell stories that allow us to see super ordinary people who look a lot like us. It's a way to interrogate ourselves with an unflinching, playful, and skeptical eye. There is so much healing and catharsis to be found in just being honest about how scared, wounded, chaotic and funny we are. My main intention in making **FWENDS** was to find a way to show two real people, and the very real world, in all its splendiferous messiness. I think the mess is sort of beautiful.

Sophie Somerville

Interview

“There was a chemical reaction”

Sophie Somerville talks to Carolin Weidner and Christiane Büchner about walking into the void, the joys of improvisation and the tension between serious and silly

Carolin Weidner: Sophie, in the crowdfunding campaign for FWENDS you wrote: “Being in your 20s means staring into a dark, deep, meaningless void.” I found this to be funny and true. And I wondered, if writing and shooting this film was a bit therapeutic for you?

Sophie Somerville: Absolutely. I think that’s why I wrote the initial script. It was very much me trying to solve problems in my head and trying to figure them out through characters and getting them to have conversations with each other. Everyone in the crew was friends with each other and I was just so determined with this film to make something that was just for us, a space for us to resolve the issues that we’re trying to solve. We were like, let’s just make something and not expect any results. Let’s make a cool piece of art and make something that we love. And then hopefully in by doing that, someone else out there will see how much we love it and love it as well.

CW: Can you tell us a bit about the process, how you worked? You wrote the script together with Emmanuelle Mattana, who plays Em, and Melissa Gan, who is Jessie. There is clearly a lot of improvisation in the film, how did that go?

SS: For my previous films, I’ve done a fair bit of scripting. But with this film, I really wanted to go very deep into improvisation. So the way I thought about developing a process was really specific to this film individually, because I wanted it to feel like one long conversation that could spread in any direction and not feel constrained by what it says in the script. I wrote an initial treatment that was never a script. It was just this rambling, messy document. I used that to cast the actors, but when I started working with the actors that got completely chipped away. Then we started shooting, basically with an idea, but not really any clear plan of the story. We shot in order to just follow the actors. And as we shot the film, the initial concept was in one place, and the film started traveling into a different direction.

It forced us to be so present with what we were making because it was just ‘what do we have right now’ as opposed to ‘what do we not have’ and ‘what are we trying to make happen?’ Because we had so little money. It was really about using every single thing that is real and out there and available to us right now. And if we don’t have something, then we completely change the scene and the script and the story and we work with the thing that is there.

CW: Watching Em and Jessie walk through Melbourne makes it seem like an emotional landscape. Did you draw a map of the places you wanted to film beforehand? Or was this also spontaneous?

SS: We created a geography of where they would go. That was the main thing that was locked in, they start here and then they go here and then they go over there. That was the only framework we had. We didn’t know what they’d be talking about, but they’d be in that park. It’s an awesome way of working, actually, because it’s really fun and exciting.

Christiane Büchner: The film has a lot of freedom, and you can feel that. That’s probably the basic joy that you have. But within this freedom, you have very crafted scenes, like the scene with all the drapes and fabrics. How did you implement things like this?

SS: I think the craftedness is more spontaneous than you think. My DOP Carter [Looker, ed.], who’s also the producer, and I have made quite a few films together. For this film, there was a real sense of trust between him and me, knowing that he would start zooming on something and I would be very okay with this. Obviously, there were lots of scenes where we would be very clear about where the camera moves. But there are moments that seem very planned out that aren’t planned out at all, and they’re incredibly lucky and spontaneous. And I think that was the magic of this film when I was cutting it, because I was like, wow, all of this looks intentional.

CB: That probably means that you brought together a lot of knowledge. People from the art world, people from stage design, maybe with some expertise in all of this. Is that the secret behind it?

SS: I think all of our crew are very multi-talented, young, artistic people with different backgrounds. And the actors: Emmanuelle [Mattana, ed.], one of the main actors, is a playwright, so she has a lot of writing in her background. That was so useful because she was a co-writer with me, even though it was an improvised process. Because of that rounding that she has, she knew instinctively what would be good dramatically. And Melissa [Gan, ed.] had that sensibility as well. All of our crew were great friends, who are also talented filmmakers, and all brought an individual love and passion for the art form.

CB: I would like to talk a bit about this void we mentioned earlier. Now that we know more of how you made the film, do you think that the void of being 20 is deeper and darker now than maybe my void, when I was 20? Because this recalibration of people after school, this is very painful after only a few years because these few years show whether you’ve made it or not, whether you made good decisions or bad ones. I just had a 40 year school reunion. And everybody is like, okay, fine. What is the furniture of this void you are showing?

SS: I’m thinking back to the initial spark that started me writing this, which was really this idea of what is the point of feeling this pressure to work so hard and define yourself through work, so that you can compete in a housing market that is so difficult, especially in Australia, because the housing situation is really terrifying for young people. There’s this idea of feeling like you’re a hamster in a little hamster wheel, trying to earn more money so that you can pay more rent, so that you can earn more money so that you can pay more rent. And this indoctrination we’ve all received about needing to feel successful and important so that we can impress our parents, so that we can feel like we matter. I suppose that was the void I was staring into when I was writing. It was the realization that all the things that get told to you when you’re young, about needing to reach this happy ending, where you have security and a house and an important sounding job, all of these things, will not necessarily make you happy. All of the propaganda of your schooling may not lead you to any victory. And that’s a universal sense of panic, that my friends and I all feel. So it’s really interesting that you said ‘the furniture of the void’, because I’m just thinking about furniture. I don’t know. But I don’t know as well whether it’s a darker void than it would have been in the past. Perhaps I was just depressed when I wrote that. I think I probably was. Yeah, I don’t know.

CB: The housing situation was much better when I was in my 20s. It was not difficult to find a place, and it was cheap. It was very, very bad, but it was cheap. I think there are things that are changing, really. But another aspect of it is the relationship between the two women. What I found very touching is how they recalibrate their relationship over the course of this short weekend. When Em is telling Jessie that she misunderstood some parts of her in the past, so they need to be recalibrated. I think that’s something important that you have to learn throughout your life, that you are able to rectify your relationships. I found that very deep, and I wanted to know more about your approach towards this aspect of your film.

SS: I really wanted to take these two people, who represent these two outlooks on life, and go deep enough to be able to compare. One of the ideas I had in my head in the beginning was this notion of meeting someone with a different life experience to you, who may have all these things that you don't think you have. Em has this incredible job and Jessie has nothing, but it turns out they both have what the other doesn't have. Jessie has time and space and freedom and Em has none of that. It was this idea of meeting someone on that opposite end and realizing that they're not any happier than you, and the problems are just as deep and complex as your problems. And this idea that they recalibrate. So much of that happened naturally in the way that we put all these ingredients into their heads so that there was this chemical reaction when we had them together. They'd fizzle and then some resolution and drama would come out of it. It's really nice to hear that we pulled off that dramatic shift. Because we obviously wanted to achieve that. I just love going really deep into people's heads. It's really interesting.

CW: *I like your metaphor of a chemical reaction a lot. And it suits the style of FWENDS, which is visually sparkling, very vivid and colorful. I also had to think about '90s slacker films and how Gen X had to deal with their voids. Maybe there is something genuine about this age. However, did you have any film references in mind?*

SS: When I initially wrote this script, I was thinking about MY DINNER WITH ANDRE [dir. Louis Malle, 1981, ed.], because I wanted to do a female Australian version of that. That was a film that is a conversation. And there's also an Éric Rohmer film, FOUR ADVENTURES OF REINETTE AND MIRABELLE [1987, ed.], which is a two-hander between these two French girls, one is from the city and one is from the country. I remember watching that and being a bit inspired.

CW: *I watched your short film PEEPS [2019, ed.], where you use similar classical music as in FWENDS. What is it? It certainly brings a special atmosphere.*

SS: In PEEPS, it was a lot of Bach. I love classical music because it elevates things and makes them feel important, it makes moments feel grandiose and significant. Culturally, it makes them feel like they're the center of attention and they're worthy of you sitting there and taking them very seriously. I think that's why I was so drawn to putting classical music over my work. Especially when I started doing it in PEEPS, it was about these young little girls having these conversations that would not be taken seriously by the world. And the same with FWENDS as well. Sometimes the conversations between these two young women are a bit banal. And if there was no music there, it would feel a lot more mundane and familiar. But then when you add this big, sweeping, grand orchestral, important music written by these important, serious old men from the past, it makes it feel important and serious. And it's like: listen! I also think the music is just really beautiful. In FWENDS, the main theme tune is a Chopin piece called "Tristesse", that is about sadness, but it also has this incredible beauty to it that is so timeless and transcendent. I just love the idea of taking ordinary life and then sending it off into the clouds with some majestic and well-known piece of music.

CW: *Talking of important, serious old men from the past: the switch to the French voice? What were your thoughts on that?*

SS: I've watched a lot of French cinema, a lot of European films that take themselves so seriously. And I think taking myself seriously has always been a struggle throughout my career, as well as the stories I'm trying to tell, because they're often about ordinary life. Should I take this seriously or should I not? Should I be feeling this sense of void? Or should I just be enjoying myself? I love that. I had fun with that moment, for instance, because it is about this question. It's me being like: how serious is this moment? And then it also just looks amazing. It feels really

cinematic and serious. And then it has a silly Frenchman saying something silly. That tension there of how serious are we right now? I like this.

CW: *In the middle of the film there is this scene with the black light, the microphone and the rap. A key scene, I would say. It's brilliant. How did that occur?*

SS: When I watch that scene, I'm still just like, this is the best scene ever. It happened naturally because of the way we were shooting. It was the fifth day and we'd been shooting five days and we'd been building up this imaginary parallel universe with all this stuff going on for them. When we got to that scene, I didn't know what was going to happen after that at all. None of us did, the actors didn't, I didn't. And I think because of the fact that none of us knew what was going to happen next, we were completely wandering out into the void and being like, let's just party. And when we shot that scene I knew it had to be in the film because it's just so electrifying. That's why I love improvisation so much, because you can watch actors just falling and you can see them losing their sense of what this is. And that is what real life is. We don't know what the tone of our story is. We're just living it.

CB: *How long did you shoot? How long were you working on the film?*

SS: Ten days of shooting. Very intense ten days. It took about four or five months to have the shape of the film in the editing process, and then soundtrack related things for another couple of months. We were finished by the middle of last year.

CW: *Could you imagine doing a film with such a small budget again, or do you hope that's over now?*

SS: I would. Carter and I, who produce the film, we talk about it a lot of how we just want to do it again, because we had a great time. But we are developing something that will need proper money. So obviously that would be much better. And we just want to pay everyone we work with, of course. So, yeah, that's the goal.

CB: *That's a good goal. To shoot a whole feature film in 10 days is really very efficient. You found a way to achieve it, even with a very small budget. So you deserve more budget next time. But for now, we look forward to seeing you at the festival!*

SS: Great. Thank you.