

A promotional poster for the TV series 'House of Gods'. It features three characters standing in a mosque. On the left is a woman wearing a green hijab and a black and gold patterned abaya. In the center is a man with dark curly hair wearing a brown tunic. On the right is an older man with a white beard, wearing a white turban and a brown robe, holding a blue book. The background is a large, arched doorway with a red carpet on the floor. The title 'HOUSE OF GODS' is written in large white letters across the center.

HOUSE OF GODS

Starts Sunday 25 February 8.30pm

ABC TV | **ABC iview**

An ambitious Iraqi Australian family grapples with newfound power and privilege when their charismatic patriarch is elected Head Cleric of The Messenger mosque.

Series Synopsis

It's election day at The Messenger, a Shi'ite mosque in the bustling metropolis of western Sydney, Australia. In the running to take the mantle of head cleric is the charismatic and visionary Sheikh Mohammad (Kamel El Basha) and his key opponent is conservative hardliner Seyyed Shaaker (Simon Elrahi). But when a controversial photo of Sheikh Mohammad goes public, his election bid is derailed. Nonetheless, in a shock victory, Sheikh Mohammad wins the vote 4-3. Unbeknownst to Sheikh Mohammad, his eldest son, Isa (Osamah Sami) bought the vote to ensure his father's election.

The Sheikh's family adjust to their newfound power and influence in the community. Isa, who owns a truck wash business, has longed for the status and power his own position as Vice President of the mosque would bring. Eldest daughter Batul (Maia Abbas), pragmatic and pious, seizes the moment to stay in Australia and avoid her marital problems in Iraq. Hind (Safia Arain) an aspiring Hijabi fashion designer, sees an opportunity to pursue her dreams and study design.

Isa is dealt a blow when the Sheikh controversially appoints Batul as Vice President of his Committee. Without control of the Messenger's treasury, Isa finds himself resorting to desperate measures to make the monthly payments to Iraq and keep his father in power. Highly ambitious and yearning for her father's validation, Batul soon cements her place as an effective and strategic VP. But when she discovers an irregular transfer of \$12,000 from the Messenger's account, she immediately suspects her brother.

Isa is eventually forced to come clean to Batul about buying their father's vote. Batul is astounded by his gall, but soon realises that if she doesn't play along, not only would it irreparably damage her beloved father's reputation, she would have to return to Iraq and her troubled marriage, losing her hard-fought visibility and sense of purpose as VP of the Messenger.

Isa and Batul form an uneasy alliance, balancing the hefty secret payments with their father's grand (and expensive) initiatives for the community. Before long, they're wading into dangerous waters, manipulating those closest to them to keep their father, and themselves, in power. Meanwhile, an increasingly bitter Seyyed Shaaker closes in on the corruption, threatening to bring the Sheikh and his family down once and for all.

A tale of faith, family, secrets and lies, **House of Gods** takes audiences behind the walls of an imam's family and the community he leads, exploring the personal cost of power and ambition.

Production Credit: *House of Gods* is a Matchbox Pictures production for the ABC. Major production investment from Screen Australia in association with the ABC. Financed with support from Screen NSW. International sales by NBCUniversal Global Distribution. Matchbox Pictures is part of Universal International Studios, a division of Universal Studio Group. Produced by Bree-Anne Sykes and executive produced by Blake Ayshford, Debbie Lee and Sheila Jayadev. ABC Executive Producers Brett Sleigh and Sally Riley.

For further information please contact: Rob Caulley, ABC Publicity: Caulley.rob@abc.net.au

Episode 1: Dining with the Wolves
Sunday 25 February, 8.30PM on ABC TV and ABC iview.

It's election day at The Messenger mosque and the charismatic Sheikh Mohammad (Kamel El Basha) is the favourite to win. On his way to a radio interview with his daughter Hind (Safia Arain), he allows a group of girls to take selfies with him. One kisses him. He thinks no more of it.

During the radio interview, the selfie of Sheikh Mohammad being kissed goes public. The radio interviewer grills him over the controversial picture. Is he trying to re-write Islamic law by suggesting males and females can touch outside of marriage? Sheikh Mohammad tries to explain the context, but it falls flat. While some in the community stand by the Sheikh and his progressive ways, most are deeply offended. The kiss could have cost him the election.

Batul believes her father must condemn the kiss. Isa (Osamah Sami) says the Sheikh must urgently talk to Seyyed Modhaffer (Faris Daniel), the representative of the clergy who is here from Baghdad. The clergy has voted on the position of head cleric, but Seyyed Modhaffer could alert them to the scandal and change the outcome of the vote. But Sheikh Mohammad is steadfast in his principles. 'What is written, is written'.

After a brick is thrown through the window of Sheikh Mohammad's house, the Sheikh asks to speak to the elders in the community at a tribal council. The Sheikh defends himself in front of his opponent Sheikh Shaaker (Simon Elrahi), and the elders. He explains that he didn't initiate the kiss, and the woman wasn't trying to seduce him. The tension grows. The elders were expecting an apology.

At election night in the mosque, Sheikh Mohammad finally condemns his actions, acknowledging he must be a leader for everyone in the community. Seyyed Modhaffer reads out the votes, and Sheikh Mohammad wins. But what no-one knows is that Isa made a deal with Seyyed Modhaffer in return for ensuring his father's victory – a payment of \$25,000 a month.

Episode 2: Family Blood

Sunday 3 March, 8.30PM on ABC TV and ABC iview.

As the new head cleric, Sheikh Mohammad's (Kamel El Basha) most pressing concern is ensuring he has control of the mosque's governing committee so he can execute his vision for the community. The committee consists of five people – Sheikh Mohammad, his Vice President, his opponent Sheikh Shaaker (Simon Elrahi), a respected elder, Abu Zuhayr (Kennan Ali) and finally, a community seat voted on by the community.

Sheikh Mohammad knows that the balance of power rests with who wins the community seat. There is an obvious candidate, his oldest friend Samir (Majid Shokor). Samir and the Sheikh were imprisoned together in Iraq, and Samir is widely respected by the community. But Samir refuses the nomination. He no longer believes in God and will not be a hypocrite.

Isa (Osamah Sami) assumes he will become his father's Vice President. It's a position he needs as it will give him control of the mosque's treasury, allowing him to keep his deal with Seyyed Modhaffer (Faris Daniel). In the meantime, Isa withdraws the last of the cash from his truck wash business to make the first payment, using the local grocer's money transfer service.

Sheikh Mohammad tries to think about another candidate for the community seat, but struggles to find anyone appropriate.

Batul (Maia Abbas) visits Samir. She opens up about her life in Iraq. She hasn't been able to fall pregnant and it is causing a strain on her marriage. After a few wines, Samir tells Batul a secret about the past. Samir informed on friends in return for his and Sheikh Mohammad's release from prison in Baghdad. It's a dark secret that haunts him every day.

Hind (Safia Arain) is accepted into design school and has found a place to live but is furious when her father says now is not the right time to move out. Hind blames Batul for her father's change of heart. Sheikh Mohammad is sent footage of Isa partying and drinking in the aftermath of the Sheikh's election, and seriously questions if Isa would be a suitable Vice President.

When Samir still refuses to run for the committee, Batul blackmails him. His shameful secret will surface if he refuses the community seat nomination. Batul wins more favour with her father for "convincing" Samir to stand for the vote.

Samir is elected and in a shock decision, the Sheikh chooses Batul as Vice President over Isa. It's a huge blow for Isa, keeping the deal with Seyyed Modhaffer, and thereby his father in power, just became much more difficult.

Episode 3: Ramadan Sin

Sunday 10 March, 8.30PM on ABC TV and ABC iview.

As Ramadan begins, large cash donations stream into the mosque. Isa (Osamah Sami) skims off the top before handing them over to Batul (Maia Abbas) to be logged. Isa sends another payment to Iraq from the grocer Om Marwan (Gehan Sawires) but Om Marwan now worries these regular payments may be flagged by the authorities.

At The Messenger mosque's first committee meeting, Sheikh Mohammad (Kamel El Basha) presents his ambitious plans for a new Shi'ite school. Sheikh Shaaker (Simon Elrahi) and Abu Zuhayr (Kennan Ali) rankle at the modern curriculum, and in a shock move, Batul also refuses to vote in favour of it due to the inclusion of music and dance, which she sees as haram (sinful). The Sheikh is furious with Batul. The school was a shared dream with his deceased wife, Khadija.

When Batul wonders why donations are down but attendance is up, Isa is evasive. Isa gives money to Nadir (Andrew Attieh) to wire to Iraq from out of town. Seyyed Modhaffer (Faris Daniel) calls. He wants the \$25,000 each month in one payment, not installments. Isa tries to explain that a large transfer would attract attention from the authorities, but Seyyed Modhaffer is not happy.

On the last night of Ramadan, Sheikh Mohammad sends Isa and Sheikh Shaaker to the Iraqi Ambassador's Eid dinner. Isa must ensure Sheikh Shaaker feels important. As Isa and Sheikh Shaaker leave the dinner, Seyyed Modhaffer's heavies show up and force Isa to transfer the balance for the month. Isa makes the transfer from the mosque's account.

Meanwhile, Sheikh Mohammad tries to secure Abu Zuhayr's vote for his school. He agrees to drop the dance and promises Abu Zuhayr's extended family cleaning contracts at the school. Abu Zuhayr agrees, and Sheikh Mohammad celebrates having secured the votes he needs to make his school a reality. Samir and Batul wonder who the Sheikh is becoming, compromising on his values.

Batul notices an irregular transfer from the mosque's account.

Episode 4: He in whose hands is dominion
Sunday 17 March, 8.30PM on ABC TV and ABC iview.

Batul (Maia Abbas) confronts Isa (Osamah Sami) about the money transfer from the mosque account. Isa insists it was for charity. Sheikh Mohammad (Kamel El Basha) accepts Isa's explanation, but tells him not to touch the mosque accounts again without approval. Batul remains suspicious.

Batul's husband Bilal (Saif Alawadi) tells Batul he would move to Australia if it means Batul would try IVF. Batul wrestles with the idea of interfering with God's will, even though her father says IVF is sanctioned and indeed encouraged, if it means fulfilling one's duty to raise children. Batul rails against the notion that she isn't enough without children.

Isa appeals to Seyyed Modhaffer (Faris Daniel) to provide a courier to take the money back to Iraq as he cannot make large transfers unnoticed. Seyyed Modhaffer agrees on the proviso Isa comes up with collateral for the monthly payments.

Isa talks to Samir (Majid Shokor) about possible family assets in Iraq. He learns there may still be a property that Isa's mother owned. In the safe at the family home, Isa discovers a deed to his mother's Baghdad apartment, which she left only to her daughters. Feeling betrayed and minimised as an adopted child, Isa offers the title deed to Seyyed as collateral. It's the apartment Batul and Bilal still live in.

Hind (Safia Arain) asks Batul's best friend daughter Jamila (Priscilla Doueihy) to help her with an assignment for college by modelling her designs in a secret photoshoot in the mosque. After the photo shoot, Isa confides in Jamila about his mother's will. She suggests that his mother would have thought her two daughters needed a safety net that her son may not need. Isa misses Jamila, his former flame, she always knows what to say. He tries to kiss her.

Batul tells Bilal that she will not do IVF. She can't reconcile it with her faith, even though she knows how much it would mean to Bilal.

After Abu Zuhayr (Kennan Ali) retracts his vote in favour of Sheikh Mohammad's school, the Sheikh issues Batul an ultimatum - she will support the school, or return to Iraq and her husband.

At the mosque, the Sheikh announces that the school will go ahead. Batul shocks her family and enrages her father when they discover she has told Bilal to take a second wife.

Episode 5: Lament

Sunday 24 March, 8.30PM on ABC TV and ABC iview.

Iraqi musician Jasim Al-Helou (Mustafa Al Tayar) performs at Samir's (Majid Shokor) shisha café to a captivated audience. Jasim is the courier who will take a generous "payment" for his performances back to Seyyed Modhaffer (Faris Daniel) in Iraq.

Sheikh Mohammad (Kamel El Basha) departs for Mecca, to take pilgrims on the Hajj. Sheikh Shaaker (Simon Elrahi) deputizes, and immediately enforces his conservative values. During this holy period, there will be no football, games or music. Just the Koran. Jasim Al-Helou's concert and hence the money handover is put at risk.

Samir (Majid Shokor) has noticed the budding romance between Hind and Isa's best friend Nadir (Andrew Attieh). He tries to discourage it, but Nadir asks Hind on a date.

Batul (Maia Abbas) is terrified for her husband when he tells her that militia broke into their home, and mentioned Isa (Osamah Sami). She confronts Isa, who is ultimately forced to confess that he bought their father's election and gave Seyyed Modhaffer the apartment as collateral. Batul is aghast. When she realises the money is primarily coming from the mosque, she mandates that Isa sell his business. He cannot steal Allah's money and it's the price he must pay for her silence.

Sheikh Shaaker dreams of his dead sons. This softens him. In a bid to bring the community back on side, he lets go of his strict rules. He will let Jasim Al-Helou play his concerts, and even attends one.

Hind turns up for her date with Nadir, but Nadir is a no-show. Later she discovers the shocking news. Nadir was in a car accident on the way to meet her and is now fighting for his life. The community rallies around Nadir and his mother, Om Nadir (Neveen Hannah). Om Nadir wants Sheikh Shaaker's permission to take Nadir off life support so he can pass peacefully, but Sheikh Shaaker won't grant it as it's against Islamic law. Isa calls his father in Mecca who immediately returns home. After talking to the doctors, Sheikh Mohammad makes a difficult decision and allows Nadir's life support to be turned off, following the doctor's recommendations. Sheikh Shaaker is furious that Sheikh Mohammad is playing God.

Jamila (Priscilla Doueihy) comes to comfort Isa at his truck wash over losing his best friend. The two kiss.

Episode 6: When God Speaks

Sunday 31 March, 8.30PM on ABC TV and ABC iview.

Sheikh Shaaker (Simon Elrahi) realises one of the heavies who met Isa (Osamah Sami) outside the Ambassador's home during Ramadan was at Jasim Al-Helou's (Mustafa Al Tayar) concert. Sheikh Shaaker and the butcher Abu Hany (Wadih Dona) demand the musician tell them how he knows Isa. With a knife to his throat, the musician tells them that Isa gives him money to take back to Iraq. But he won't reveal to whom.

Sheikh Shaaker digs for evidence that Isa is paying Jasim Al-Helou using mosque money. At the next committee meeting, Sheikh Shaaker requests the mosque ledger. While Batul (Maia Abbas) attempts to prevent it, Samir (Majid Shokor) turns up, drunk. Shaaker takes the ledger, but his son-in-law Aqil (Azmi Al Hasani) can't find a single discrepancy in it.

Isa sells his truck wash. He then discovers that Jasim Al-Helou has refused to return to Australia, and Seyyed Modhaffer (Faris Daniel) leaves it to Isa to find a new courier.

Batul (Maia Abbas) offers up herself and Bilal (Saif Alawadi) as the new couriers. Bilal will visit Australia every two months; she will visit Iraq every other month. It's the only option they have and she doesn't trust anyone else.

When Aqil uncovers the name of the now defunct charity that Isa has been wiring money to, and discovers a connection to Seyyed Modhaffer at the charity, Sheikh Shaaker realises that Isa bought his father's election. Sheikh Shaaker confronts Sheikh Mohammad (Kamel El Basha) with the news, and says that he must step down, honourably, after Friday prayers.

Sheikh Mohammad is devastated and furious upon learning of his son's deceptive and illegal actions. He prepares to step down. He calls Seyyed Modhaffer, telling him Isa's deal with him is over. Seyyed Modhaffer tells him he did actually have the votes of the clergy, and Isa saved his election.

In a shock move at Friday prayers, Sheikh Mohammad tells the community that Isa was stealing from the mosque, and then banishes his son from The Messenger. He then asks the congregation to decide if he should step down. Impressed by the Sheikh's integrity, the majority want him to stay.

Sheikh Shaaker confronts his nemesis one final time, and discovers the depths of Sheikh Mohammad's ambition. Sheikh Mohammad did a new deal with Seyyed Modhaffer to retain his position, and now Seyyed Modhaffer will join the board of Sheikh Mohammad's new school.

THE MAKING OF 'HOUSE OF GODS'

Osamah Sami grew up in Iran, as an Iraqi, during the Iran–Iraq war (1980-1988), moving to Australia as a teenager with his family, so that his father could take a position as a lead cleric at the Great Prophet Mosque in Fawkner, the largest Shiite mosque in Melbourne.

The newly arrived family faced many adjustment hurdles.

“We wanted to make sure we understood what this new land was,” Sami recalls, “because we hadn’t really heard of Australia, apart from the fact that it had kangaroos and was a monarchy with a Queen at its head.”

The first few years for Sami were spent learning English, and learning new cultural nuances, whilst going to high school.

“It is hard enough going through adolescence and puberty – add to that uprooting from your home to a new continent, illiterate in the new home’s language, you feel lost,” he continues. “Experiencing two extremely different cultures is both challenging and a teacher; the teacher takes you on a journey to overcome the challenges.”

Attending the Fawkner mosque was hugely important, then, as for the family it was a continuation of culture.

“It was less of an expectation and something we just did,” Sami says, “and was as essential as, say, having a shower or sitting down to a meal.”

The mosque was not just a place of worship, but a place to make and meet friends, a place of true community, in the absence of their extended family.

For Sami, it also meant he was privy to the intricate politics and pressures involved in running a religious institution – an intimate insight that would, years later, allow him to create a powerful and authentic story about a community told from the inside.

“Spending most of my young adult life in a mosque, I craved to see my beloved Arab/Iraqi community reflected in mainstream culture,” he adds. “This longing gave birth to House of Gods – a celebration of my community with all its colours and flaws.”

Sami, who also stars in House of Gods, had begun acting as a child in Iran.

“I was always interested in storytelling and in pretending - to be elsewhere, or to be someone else, because growing up during a war, I wanted to form another reality,” he says. “My parents put me in a well-known arts institute in Iran, and it was wonderful getting to play. Being an Iraqi in Iran, who were at war, I was not really accepted, so acting was an opportunity to put on a different face.”

In Australia, Sami performed in some plays at school, but his grasp of English hindered tackling lengthy dialogue or monologues, so acting took a back seat.

“Once I’d completed my 500-hours of English language classes and entered high school, I found the confidence to write essays and short stories in English, and immersed myself in reading as much literature as I could.”

The idea for *House of Gods* was born on the set of the 2017 film *Ali’s Wedding*, which Sami co-wrote with Andrew Knight, and in which co-creator / associate producer of *House of Gods*, Shahin Shafaei, was also acting. Shafaei, who is Iranian-Australian, had a similar upbringing to Sami.

“One day, inside Osamah’s trailer, we were talking about his father as a progressive Sheikh,” recalls Shafaei. “He talked about the myriad of things his father did for his community and the challenges he had to face. There and then we thought it would make a very interesting project.”

The concept was to examine the intoxicating effect of power. In a community where faith and religion play a defining role, the series would explore the complexity of balancing the pursuit of power with holding onto one’s faith.

For Sami and Shafaei, representation was vital.

“As I’ve gotten older, the stories I’m interested in writing are the ones that represent or reflect my people,” says Sami. “We’re all humans but we have different experiences and I like stories that represent the culture that’s in my blood. They’re the stories that, growing up in Australia in the late ‘90s and early 2000’s, I can’t remember seeing on screen. There’s a saying, the gist of it is - if you don’t see yourself reflected, you don’t exist. That’s a big motivating factor in my storytelling.”

Sami and Shafaei took the idea to Matchbox Pictures, where director of scripted Debboe Lee and executive producer Sheila Jayadev brought on Blake Ayshford to develop the series with Sami and Shafaei and lead the development within the writers’ room. Sami, Ayshford and Shafaei were joined by writer Sarah Bassiuni. Bree-Anne Sykes came on as producer.

Bassiuni, who wrote two of the six episodes, has Egyptian heritage and was able to provide great insight into the female experience, as seen not only through Batul and Hind, but many other characters.

“Rarely, have we in the West told stories of Arab communities and even then, the female characters are often an afterthought, or desperately trying to break free from their culture,” says Bassiuni. “It was a privilege to be empowered and encouraged to create characters who were faithful to the rich, complicated and big-hearted reality of Arab women.”

The challenges Batul, Hind and Jamila face are things that Bassiuoni herself had gone through, or that close friends had.

“It felt incredibly powerful, dangerous and thrilling to write these women,” she says. “It changed my professional outlook and imbued a confidence in my writing that I’ll carry with me from now on.”

Bassiuoni also took immense pride in helping shape the men of the series, especially Samir and Sheikh Mohammad.

“In my formative years, it was commonplace for popular culture to depict Arab men as selfish, violent and extremists,” she explains. “Such men seem to act from endless wells of hatred and misogyny. Those types of reductive assessments are the polar opposite of my lived experience. My father is the most tolerant and inclusive person I know. He is complex, hardworking, poetic, generous and at times, like all of us, sure he knows best. It was exciting to write male Arab characters who grappled with stories using the traits I had seen modelled my whole life.”

Sami adds: “We’re not here to tell a story of how young mosque kids are suddenly radicalized, but that is the kind of stories I grew up watching and potentially, ones that people would expect. In *House of Gods*, we wanted to showcase the other 99% of stories within the Muslim world which are filled with love, heartache, family bonds and betrayals, order and chaos, and all the spices in between.”

At the same time, Sami and his collaborators were conscious that nothing's black or white when it comes to human beings and to characters. In the series, Sheikh Shaaker is a conservative and traditional cleric, but they wanted to ensure he was not a two-dimensional villain.

“He is a hard liner, but we look at the context - where has he come from and why is he holding onto traditional values?” Sami explains. “Holding onto traditional values isn’t necessarily a bad thing, and our focus was on making sure he was a complex character, a real human.”

The scripts were sent out to trusted and respected people within the community, to ensure that the writing and characters rang true.

“Authenticity is ground zero for our story,” adds Sami. “If there’s even a whiff of phoniness in a story like *House of Gods*, it would crumble because people can smell something is off, from the community itself, to the wider audience.”

The support of Matchbox and the ABC, who came on as the broadcaster for the series, were vital in ensuring authenticity.

“Sheila and Debbie championed our story and crazy ideas all along,” says Shafaei. “They helped us envisage possibilities, as did our very supportive network the ABC, who were

constructive and believing in the importance of the tale we were trying to tell. I am not sure we would be telling the same compelling story we are if we did not have these partnerships.”

“I’m attracted to telling stories about underrepresented and misrepresented communities, and in particular, stories about migrant communities, being the child of migrants myself. After working with Osamah on *Ali’s Wedding*, I knew I had found a long-term creative partner in Osamah. He’s a special artist with an endless well of stories and a true collaborator”. Sheila Jayadev

“Assembling a strong creative team to realise the series was vital, and that team came together beautifully. All our heads of department and the wider crew were excited to be part of a project that could offer something fresh to the Australian television landscape; to embrace its integrity of authorship, bold characters and compelling drama.” Bree-Anne Sykes

As production began, Sami and his collaborators felt they would do what they set out to do – to make their communities proud.

“There are a lot of Muslims in Australia, yet I can’t recall too many mainstream stories which have truly depicted us in all our facets,” he says. “And what I mean by ‘all our facets’ is not just the good, but also the bad and the ugly and the mysterious and the loving and the wicked and the kind.”

CHARACTERS and CASTING

In approaching casting, the creative team of House of Gods followed a self-prescribed mandate, which was to ensure the actors were of either Arab, Middle Eastern heritage or else Muslim.

“The way we wrote the story is that it’s not an all-Iraqi community,” explains Sami. “Muslims from different parts of the world attend The Messenger mosque.”

“Safia Arain, for example, who plays Hind, is not an Arab woman,” he adds, “but she’s a Muslim, so she understands what it is like to live as a Muslim in Australia and how different Islamic cultures interconnect here. I believe that philosophy served us really well.”

Winner of Best Male Actor at the 74th Venice International Film Festival, Kamel El Basha, who was cast as Sheikh Mohammad says: “It’s an honour to join the cast of House of Gods. Islam and Arab Muslims in the West is not an easy topic to deal with, it’s a great challenge for any actor. But the scripts were written very well, with great detail and authenticity, opening a wide window to look at this community and, I hope, better understand it.”

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

When director Fadia Abboud read the first episode script, she “fell in love with it.”

“*House Of Gods* was the kind of project I’d been waiting for – conceived and written by Arabs and with Arab leads,” she says. “It stood out as original and risky. Importantly, it wasn’t an “us” and “them” story. The dilemma didn’t come from our relationship to the West and racism. It was a powerful drama, with no big name Anglo actor, which always seemed to be needed in shows with non-English speaking communities.”

For the creators and producers, Abboud was the clear choice to helm the show.

“Fadia had a strong vision from the very beginning of how she wanted to tell this story,” says Shahin Shafaei, “and yet she was thoroughly collaborative in her approach. Her understanding of the Arabic/Islamic culture was deep, and we knew she would bring great care for the story.”

Abboud knew Osamah Sami from *Ali’s Wedding* which had screened at the Sydney Arab Film Festival when Abboud was its director.

“Osamah is a force of nature who has so much pure talent,” Abboud says. “Before taking on the project, I called Osamah and said; ‘So as a creator, writer and star of the show, how are we going to work together on set?’ He promised me that at a certain point, he was going to take his writer/creator hat off and become the actor and leave it in my hands. And to his credit he did exactly that, although having the writer on set was always handy and especially important with the cultural and religious details that we had to get right.”

Although the story was deeply personal for Sami, he wasn’t precious about being adaptable and collaborative on set. For Abboud, the fact that every character, no matter how small the part, was Arab, created a rare familial bond.

“It was a real family,” she says. “As nearly all the actors were Arab and if not, they were Muslim, there was a deep sense of understanding between everyone, a great respect for each other, for the story we were telling and the responsibility to tell it with integrity. I was thrilled that we could recruit so many Iraqi actors, and besides their talent, they brought authenticity to every moment.”

Arab consultants were engaged for all aspects of the show. Each department had attachments who would advise on and help create culturally specific details.

“We were very lucky because our consultants and advisors really embraced this project and it became their project too,” says Sami. “They didn’t just provide feedback; it was a collaboration. They were on set with us, and became a vital part of the series.”

Production designer Roslyn Durnford undertook extensive research into Arab-Australian homes and shops, and most importantly, into an accurate and vibrant creation of a mosque. Durnford and her team then built the interiors of the mosque from scratch inside the Arena Sports Club in Yagoona in Sydney's west.

For that process, Firas Najil, a respected Iraqi in Sydney, was critical. Firas organised visits to various mosques around Sydney, attended potential sites for the creation of the mosque set, and advised on design elements and materials. He introduced the team to calligrapher Shaia Kaia who created all the calligraphy on the mosque's walls.

"The transformation of an empty space into a beautiful mosque was incredible," Sami recalls. "When I first walked in, I was mesmerised. The attention to detail that Ros and her team and our art director Robert Wood created in partnership with the cultural collaborators, like Firas, was incredible. When people walked onto set and saw the quality and care that went into creating that space, they knew it was going to be something special."

Costume was a key part of bringing the vision together, especially with the character of Hind, an up-and-coming designer. Costume designer Wendy Cork worked with fashion designer Ilham Ismail in the creation of Hind's designs, which feature in episode four when Jamila models the designs for a college assignment.

Cinematographer Sky Davies and Abboud developed a detailed style guide for the series, that they would continually return to when considering how to shoot particular moments and the best ways to cover scenes.

"We wanted the camera to be part of the world, not a voyeur," says Abboud. "We wanted to be free to change the style at times from a more formal beauty to gritty realism."

One of the challenges the team faced was filming during Ramadan, when some cast members were observing fasting protocols. The producers went to great lengths to support cast and crew, providing male and female prayer rooms, and Iftar (the meal eaten at the end of daily fasting) dinner boxes.

"It's always challenging to shoot over Ramadan, especially for cast members who are observing, like Kamel El Basha was," says Sami. "I can't speak on his behalf, but during Ramadan you're not eating or drinking even a droplet of water from sunrise to sunset and that's got to be rough. He'd mentioned it's something he's done before, but also that it gave him a spiritual push to play the role of Sheikh Mohammad."

For Sarah Bassiuoni, seeing the performances come to life on set was exhilarating.

"As a writer, the story lives in your head for so long that every aspect of a character becomes known," she says. "But on set, your characters and story world become independent of the writer's room and script. Everyone else's hard work doesn't matter if the actors don't feel true."

This ensemble breathed life into words on a page. Seeing them embody the characters of this world was a thrill. It's like making new friends that you know you'll keep for life."

For Sami, the atmosphere on set was so positive because every member of the cast and crew understood what this project meant.

"Beyond the fact that it's a drama series that's hopefully going to be engaging and entertaining, everyone understood that there were other elements at play – what we were doing hadn't been done before, going behind the doors of a mosque. When community members came on set and saw that we were treating the subject matter with respect and dignity, it was a real motivator and source of pride."

For the cast and crew, it was Sami's and Abboud's leadership and commitment that was inspiring.

"Osamah's daily enthusiasm and infectious energy was a great boost to our morale," says Maia Abbas. "He showed up every day brimming with ideas. And Fadia has a unique ability to bring out the best in you. On set she has incredible strength and sensitivity. She feels your pain, your excitement, your love. She feels everything taking place and yet she commands the set like a true pro."

"Fadia made it very easy for me," adds Kamel El Basha. "She is a genius in her simple and direct way to deal with actors, supporting them by leading them gently to do what she planned, but flexible and ready to change direction if convinced. I enjoyed and loved every moment, and was honoured to be working with such a brilliant director and wonderful cast and crew."

For co-creators Osamah Sami and Shahin Shafaei, an extraordinary energy drove them right through from development, to the final stages of production.

"We were fully immersed in the process," recalls Shafaei. "And then one day, as we were filming the last scene of episode 5, when Sheikh Mohammad is alone at the mosque praying, it just hit me. It was all real. We were bringing this story to life. We were going to take audiences who have never experienced a mosque, on a journey inside and around this very spiritual place. It gave me goosebumps."

CAST and CHARACTER BIOS

KAMEL EL BASHA

Kamel El Basha is a Palestinian actor on screen and stage, theater director, playwright and producer.

He began his career as a stage actor during the 1980 and gained critical acclaim in 2017 when he won the Volpi Cup for Best Actor (male) during the 74th Venice International Film Festival for his role as 'Yasser Abdallah Salameh' in *The Insult* by the Lebanese film director Ziad Doueiri.

He is currently starring as 'Youssef' in the upcoming Disney UK original series *Culprits*. Other notable TV credits are Egyptian series *Room 207* and *Khareg El Saytara*. Outside of TV, he has a handful of films including *Hamza*, *Curfew* and *Our Males And Females*, that gained critical acclaim, nominations and awards among the festival circuit including the Cairo International Film Festival and the Oscar-qualifying Regard International Short Film Festival.

SHEIKH MOHAMMAD portrayed by Kamel El Basha

Sheikh Mohammad has an ambitious vision for his community to ensure they thrive in their adopted homeland, whilst holding onto their roots. Charming and eloquent, he's at the service of his community and God Almighty. A people's person, he would be the envy of the shrewdest of politicians.

He loves Isa and his two biological daughters equally – not that they see it that way. He lost the love of his life, Khadija, four years ago to illness, and not a day goes by when he doesn't feel her absence.

He seeks a version of Islam which is adaptable and re-interpreted for Muslims in the West. He wishes to see his community coexist peacefully within the wider society, and he aspires to fulfil his duties perfectly. However, in pursuit of realising his grand ambitions, the Sheikh becomes increasingly political, skirting the boundaries of integrity and causing those closest to him to question whether he is acting solely for the greater good, or is intoxicated by power.

Of the character, Kamel El Basha says: "Sheikh Mohammed is an ambitious community leader, and a father, trying to bridge the gap between generations but also between Islam and modern life. When you become a community leader everything looks different, and you must find your ways to deal with it. I loved and enjoyed playing all the parts of him."

Shahin Shafaei says: "Kamel's grasp of Sheikh Mohammad's character was so deep. We would work on his sermons, and he would sometimes come back to me the next day, suggesting different Koranic verses or Islamic quotes that were definitely more suited to the moment. I can't see any other actor who would have been able to care as much or have the knowledge to bring such depth to this character."

OSAMAH SAMI – Co-Creator / Co-Executive Producer / Writer (Episodes 1, 3 & 6)

Osamah Sami is an award-winning actor, writer, and comedian, born in war-torn Iran to Iraqi parents. His critically acclaimed memoir *Good Muslim Boy* was the winner of the NSW Premier's Literary Award and Highly Commended at the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards. It was also adapted for the stage in 2018 for Malthouse Theatre Co and Queensland Theatre, selling out both seasons.

Osamah recently starred opposite Zar Amir Ebrahimi (winner Best Actress at Cannes) in *Shayda* (written and directed by Noora Niasari, producer Vincent Sheehan and EP'd by Cate Blanchett). *Shayda* was the winner of the Audience Award for Best Film after premiering as the 2023 Opening Night film at Sundance. *Shayda* was also selected as the Opening Night film at Melbourne International Film Festival.

His other feature for the year, which he wrote and played the lead, the psychological drama *Tennessee*, was selected to premiere at the 70th edition of Sydney Film Festival.

Osamah also co-wrote and starred in the hit Australian film *Ali's Wedding*, which was the winner of the Audience Award for Best Feature Film at Sydney Film Festival, as well as The Age Critics Prize for Best Australian Film, and the Cinefest Oz Prize for Best Film. His screenplay earned him an Australian Academy (AACTA) Award, an Australian Writers Guild (AWGIE) Award and a Film Critics Circle of Australia (FCCA) Award for Best Screenplay. He also received AACTA Award, FCCA Award, and Australian Critics Choice Award nominations for Best Lead Actor.

In 2016, his work in Melbourne Theatre Company's *I Call My Brothers* earned him a Green Room Award nomination for Best Lead Actor on a Main Stage production.

He was also on the jury at the 7th International Persian Film Festival, and a judge on the 2020 AWGIES Awards, as well as the NSW State Library Literary Awards. Osamah has appeared in Melbourne Writers Fest, Sydney Writers Fest, Perth International Arts Festival, Ubud Writers & Readers Festival, and Shanghai Literary Festival.

Osamah was winner of Creative Artist of the Year at the Australian Muslim Achievement Awards (2019). He is also recognized as a 'Notable Australian Muslim' by the Commonwealth of Australia.

ISA portrayed by Osamah Sami

Isa's parents were Christian Iraqis. He grew up in an orphanage in the slums of Baghdad. He is scarred by these early experiences, but was adopted at a young age by Sheikh Mohammad, so his sense of loyalty to his adoptive father is intense.

Isa is extremely loyal, ambitious, a wheeler and dealer, a survivor. He will go to any length to achieve his goals and protect his loved ones. He runs a truck wash business, which is gruelling work. An 'outsider' all his life: as a Christian orphan in Iraq, and now as a Muslim in Australia, Isa's ambitions of converting his rags to riches see him teetering on the edges of morality.

Isa is still in love with Jamila, the daughter of his father's rival, Sheikh Shaaker. Aware of the dangers of their connection, Isa and Jamila do everything in their power to remain in each other's orbit whilst 'staying apart.'

Of working with Sami, Kamel El Basha says: "Osamah is not only a very creative writer and a great actor, he is very open minded, full of love and passion, devoted to his work, energetic, skeptical and humble. Working with him was a great joy."

MAIA ABBAS

Maia is an Iraqi born Australian actor and filmmaker.

Most recently, Maia played the role of Gamila in the ABC series *Savage River*. She has also appeared in the award-winning mini-series *Fires* (2021) and alongside Abby Cornish in *Secret Bridesmaid's Business* (2019).

Feature films include Cate Shortland's *Berlin Syndrome* and *Ali's Wedding*. She starred as Nasrin in the hit web series, *Fresh!* (2018) the official selection at the LA Film Festival.

Maia's directing debut, the short feature, *Trichotillomaia* (2018) was an exploration of her interest in experimental narrative.

After working as assistant director on the Sydney Film Festival Dendy Awards finalist *The Fall* (2020), Maia went on to produce the short film – *Land Of Nod* in which she plays the historical figure Jeanne d'Arc.

BATUL portrayed by Maia Abbas

Batul, Sheikh Mohammad's eldest daughter, has returned from Iraq where she's been living for the last three years with her husband, Bilal.

She and Bilal are at an impasse. After failing to conceive over many years, Bilal wants to try IVF, but Batul believes they shouldn't interfere with Allah's will. Batul loves Bilal, but she can't go against her faith.

Batul longs to be seen and respected, especially by her father. Ever since her adopted brother Isa entered their home when she was five years old, the spotlight moved away from her, and she has been longing for her father's approval and attention ever since.

A young woman of faith, Batul has moved towards a more conservative line of thought, and fuelled by spending three years in war-ravaged Baghdad, she has a ruthless instinct it seems the Sheikh lacks. She will use this to prove her worth and capabilities to her father, and in turn find the purpose and power she has longed for.

Actress Maia Abbas migrated to Australia in 2015 and met Osamah Sami in an audition room for *Ali's Wedding*.

"As an Iraqi I felt truly inspired by his strong work ethic," she says. "He showed me that anything was possible if you believed and worked on your dream. When I read the audition sides for *House of Gods*, I knew it was going to be not only groundbreaking, but Batul's character was

likely to cause a stir among audiences. You just don't see female characters like that – human, flawed, multi-dimensional, and an Arab female Muslim! There was a huge responsibility to tell her story as truthfully and authentically as possible.”

Batul's methods are questionable, but Abbas sees her intentions as, for the most part, well-meaning.

“I enjoyed piecing the puzzle together and figuring out what makes her tick, why she does the things she does,” Abbas says. “She's a fighter and when the going gets tough, she gets tenfold tougher. She isn't afraid to get her hands dirty. I admire her steadfast faith despite her doubts, and the unwavering love for her father that knows no limits.”

Shahin Shafaei adds: “Sometimes I would question how I felt about Batul making certain actions. Then at that very moment, Maia would show a gentle vulnerability that would make you accept whatever decision Batul is making. Maia brought such a variety of light and shade to the character that you have no choice but to be on this journey with her.”

SAFIA ARAIN

Safia Arain is an Australian actor who was born in England, but grew up in Sydney. Both sets of her grandparents migrated to Australia from Pakistan in the 1970's.

Throughout her schooling, Safia was involved in theatre and realised her passion for acting. She went on to graduate from Screenwise's Diploma of Screen Acting in 2019, where she fine-tuned her technique for screen performance.

Since graduating, Safia has appeared as a series regular in all three seasons of the Stan Original series *Bump* as well as *The Last King of the Cross* (Paramount+), *Underbelly: Vanishing Act* (Stan/Nine), *Pieces of Her* (Netflix) and *Amazing Grace* (Nine Network). Most recently she was cast in the feature film *The Appleton Ladies Potato Race* (Paramount+).

Safia is strongly influenced by her heritage, her Muslim faith and the power of the arts and storytelling to heal and transform.

HIND portrayed by Safia Arain

Sheikh Mohammad's youngest daughter, Hind is creative, stylish and confident. Hind dropped out of her design degree when her mother became ill, and never went back – instead, she supported her grieving father by taking over many of the home duties whilst working at her Uncle Samir's shisha restaurant.

Hind particularly resents Batul, who left for Iraq soon after their mother's death. When her father becomes head cleric, Hind sees an opportunity to reclaim her life and pursue her dream of becoming a successful hijabi fashion designer.

As Hind strives to carve a path for herself and experiences what it really means to be the daughter of a powerful Sheikh, she begins to push the boundaries. Her growing attraction to Nadir will show how protective her family are of their status. When Nadir is involved in a serious car accident, Hind questions her family and her faith more than ever.

Safia Arain, who portrays Hind, says of her character, "Hind is a sweet but fiery girl with big dreams for her life and a strong moral compass that she holds tight to."

She felt uniquely connected to the role when she first read the audition scenes: "It just felt like it was going to be a natural fit. I also loved that the story was centred around Iraqi-Muslims in Sydney, I thought that was the coolest thing."

For Arain, looking at who was involved in the creative team also made it a no-brainer for her.

Director Fadia Abboud says: "Safia Arain was someone I had been wanting to work with ever since I saw her on *Bump*. She shines on screen, easily combining and delivering dramatic and comedic moments in the show."

SIMON ELRAHI

Simon Elrahi was most recently seen in Paramount+ series *Last King of the Cross*, the Stan Originals *C*a*u*g*h*t* and Black Site opposite Jason Clarke and Michelle Monaghan.

Prior to that he was seen on AMC series *Preacher*, season 2 of ABC TV's *Harrow* and in David Field's feature *Combination Redemption*.

Simon was known for his numerous recurring arcs on the small screen including Network Ten's family comedy *Street Smart*, Goalpost pictures miniseries *Fighting Season*, SBS crime drama *Deep Water*, season 2 of ABC's mystery series *Janet King* and acclaimed drama *The Principal*.

His notable feature credits include *Alex And Eve* directed by Peter Andrikidis, Kriv Stenders' *Australia Day* and action feature *6 Days* directed by Toa Fraser.

He was also an award-winning writer and director of short and feature films. Simon is of Middle Eastern heritage (Lebanese) and is fluent in Arabic, Lebanese, Egyptian, Jordanian and Iraqi.

SHEIKH SHAAKER portrayed by Simon Elrahi

Sheikh Shaaker is conservative and short-tempered, despite his best efforts to maintain his cool. A devout man with a strict moral compass, who in Australia runs a halal butchery, Shaaker has a sizeable following within the community – but smaller than that of the charismatic Sheikh Mohammad.

Despite manipulating holy scripture to his benefit, Shaaker is incorruptible. His only objective is to seize power and 'rule' the mosque with his orthodox, hard-line ideologies.

Though he will never admit it, Shaaker is envious of the respect Sheikh Mohammad commands, longing for the community to come to him for advice. Shaaker was a proud member of the failed uprising against Saddam Hussein in 1991, and lost his two sons in the quashed revolution before fleeing to Australia. The loss, coupled with his own brush with death, have made him a hardened, weathered soul, and his views are turning more extreme with time.

PRISCILLA DOUEIHY

Priscilla Doueihy is a graduate of the three-year program at the Actors College of Theatre & Television (ACTT) and the MET film school in London as well as The Actors Studio, under the mentorship of BAFTA award winning director Chris Bould and Director Tim Kent.

Priscilla's theatre credits include the lead role in *Them* by Samah Sabawi, which attracted a number of wins and nominations including Best Ensemble Cast at the Greenroom Awards. She has also starred on one of Australia's flagship theaters, Belvoir St, playing 'Remely' in *44 Sex Acts In One Week* and the gender swapped role of 'Petya Trofimov' in the artistic director's adaptation of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*.

Priscilla made her feature film debut in the *Aftrs* feature film *Suburban Wildlife*, directed by Imogen McCluskey; starred in director Shannon Murphy's debut feature film *Babyteeth* and featured in *Godzilla vs. Kong*.

Priscilla's other notable film credits include the role of 'Artemis God' in *Thor: Love and Thunder* for Disney Studios and the leading role of 'Piranha' in Daniel Askill's debut feature film *Lunacy* alongside Isabel Lucas and Lily Sullivan.

She has also appeared in multiple short films including *Atomic Love* and *Deepfake* by Imogen McCluskey, *Occupied* by Ruby Lennon, *Sugar* by Tine Jensen, *Why Not Both* by Mansoor Door, *She Let Him Stay The Night* and *Iceland* directed by Sarah Vaughan, as well as award-winning web series' including *The Unboxing* and *The Out There* by Hannah Lehmann, *Back In The Game* by Andreas Tombas and *Love Bug* by Imogen McCluskey.

Her TV credits include a leading role in *On The Ropes* for SBS, which attracted a number of nominations including Best Ensemble Cast at the Equity Foundation, 'Jasmine' in the Seven Network TV series *Fam Time*, 'Gina' in the Stan Original TV Series *Eden* and has appeared in the TV series *Orange Is The New Brown*.

Priscilla will next be seen in the much-anticipated television series *Lioness* for Paramount+ with Nicole Kidman and Zoe Saldana.

Now based in Los Angeles and fluent in English, French, Arabic and Spanish, Priscilla's mission is to demystify the sensibility and temperament of the Middle Eastern expression through storytelling.

JAMILA portrayed by Priscilla Doueihy

Sheikh Shaaker's only surviving child, Jamila is enigmatic and beguiling. She worked as a lab researcher, and married young, whilst studying – a condition put upon her by her father.

At first, her husband Aqil was supportive of her work, but with time he grew resentful of her intellect. After giving birth to their child, house duties took over her life. Jamila's world is her 10-year-old son Yusuf – a sensitive, nonverbal boy with autism.

Jamila went to school with the Sheikh Mohammad's older children, and has remained close friends with Batul. Against her own judgment, and against the holy book's words, Jamila finds herself drawn again to Isa, and a dangerous game – increasingly visible to others – of encouraging yet resisting affection with Sheikh Mohammad's adopted son.

KEY CREATIVES

OSAMAH SAMI – ‘Isa’ / Co-Creator / Co-Executive Producer / Writer (Episodes 1, 3 & 6)

See above

SHAHIN SHAFAEI – Co-Creator / Associate Producer / Co-Writer (Episode 6)

Shahin Shafaei is a socio-cultural storyteller and writer, raised and nurtured through theatre stages of Iran and Australia.

His acclaimed one-man show *Refugitive* was performed more than 300 times, conglomerating more than 40,000 audiences throughout Australia.

BREE-ANNE SYKES – Producer

Bree-Anne Sykes is a film and television producer based in Sydney, Australia.

She produced the Netflix comedy-drama series *Wellmania*, starring Celeste Barber, which premiered worldwide on Netflix in March 2023. *Wellmania* was in Netflix’s top ten in forty countries, and spent two weeks in the Netflix Global Top 10 TV List.

Alongside Sheila Jayadev (Emerald Productions) and Annabel Davis (Co-Curious), Bree-Anne produced the critically acclaimed Western Sydney feature anthology *Here Out West*, which opened the 68th Sydney Film Festival, before its cinema release in early 2022.

FADIA ABBOUD – Director

Fadia Abboud is a filmmaker based out of Sydney, Australia.

Most recently, Fadia completed production on Matchbox Pictures’ *House of Gods* for ABC, slated for release in 2024. Fadia also recently directed episodes of *Year Of*, for Roadshow Rough Diamond and Stan, a spin-off of the popular Stan Originals series *Bump*.

In 2021, she directed episodes of the Fremantle and ABC series *Barons*, released in 2022 and nominated for a SPA Award in the ‘Telemovies or Miniseries Production of the Year’ category. Fadia also directed episodes of series *After The Verdict* for Subtext Pictures and Channel 9; a segment of 2022 anthology film *Here Out West*, which opened the Sydney Film Festival in 2021; an episode of *Australian Gangster* for Roadshow Rough Diamond and the Seven Network; and *Hardball* for ABC Me, which won the 2020 Prix Jeunesse International award for Outstanding

Children's Television and the 2020 International Emmy Award for Best 'Kids: Live-Action' series. She teamed up again with Roadshow Rough Diamond on ABC drama *Les Norton*, starring Rebel Wilson, which was nominated at SPA for Mini-Series Production of the Year.

Other credits include *Five Bedrooms* for Hoodlum and Network Ten, for which her episode 'Twenty-Seven Weeks' was nominated for an Australian Director's Guild Award (ADG) for Best Direction in a TV or SVOD Drama Series Episode; *Here Come The Habibis!* (Jungle/Nine Network) with Darren Ashton; and *I Luv U But...*, which was nominated for Most Engaging YouTube Channel in Beirut.

Fadia has directed two short films for LGBTQI+ initiatives with ABC and SBS: *Concern For Welfare* (SBS Love Bites 2018), a 12-minute narrative fiction funded by Create NSW; and *Club Arak* (ABC Queer for Short 2018), a seven-minute documentary based on a queer Arab dance party (of the same name) of which she is a founder.

In 2005, Fadia directed a 26-minute documentary called *I Remeber 1948*, which screened on SBS. Fadia's final film at UTS while doing her BA Communications was *In The Ladies Lounge* (2007), which won two awards in the My Queer Career competition at the Mardi Gras Film Festival. *Big Trouble Little Fish* (2010), written and directed by Fadia, was funded by Parramatta City Council and screened at Flickerfest.

Fadia Abboud was also the co-director of the Arab Film Festival Australia between 2007 and 2017.

SHEILA JAYADEV – Executive Producer

Sheila is a creative producer with a background in entertainment law. She produced the critically acclaimed miniseries *Stateless* for Matchbox Pictures and Cate Blanchett's Dirty Films, which premiered at the Berlinale 2020 and won 13 Australian Academy Awards. She most recently produced the feature anthology *Here Out West* which opened the Sydney Film Festival in 2021.

In 2016, Sheila produced the multi award-winning feature film *Ali's Wedding* (Winner - Audience Award Sydney Film Festival, Critics Choice Melbourne International Film Festival, Best Film CinefestOz). Both *Ali's Wedding* and *Stateless* have been sold to Netflix.

Sheila has worked in development at Scott Free, Ridley Scott's London-based production company, and also as a Development & Production Executive for Screen NSW and Screen Australia. She currently works for Matchbox Pictures as a producer, with a slate of high-end drama projects that explore unseen story worlds often with diverse protagonists.

DEBBIE LEE - Executive Producer

Debbie Lee is Matchbox Pictures' director of scripted development where she provides creative leadership to the development of scripted content across a broad range of genres and markets. She also serves as executive producer on series including *The Family Law*, *Mustangs FC*, *Safe Harbour*, *The Heights*, *Hungry Ghosts* and most recently *Irreverent*, *Class Of '07* and *Bad Behaviour*.

Prior to this, Debbie was Head of Comedy at ABC TV (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) where she commissioned shows including *A Moody Christmas*, *Please Like Me*, *Laid*, *It's A Date*, *Upper Middle Bogan* and *The Strange Calls*. She also spent a number of years at Australian's multicultural broadcaster SBS and it's commissioning arm SBS Independent. She was series producer on experimental shorts program *Eat Carpet* and commissioned comedy and dramas including *Wilfred*, *Bogan Pride*, *The Circuit* and *John Safran vs. God*.

BLAKE AYSHFORD – Executive Producer / Script Producer / Writer (Episode 5)

Blake Ayshford is an award-winning writer and producer for film and TV. Recent credits include ABC TV's *House Of Gods*, *Mystery Road: Origin*, *Here Out West*, Foxtel's *Fighting Season*, the AACTA and Logie award-winning *Devils Playground* starring Toni Collette and mystery series *Requiem* for BBC Television. His feature film *Cut Snake* starring Sullivan Stapleton premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2014.

SARAH BASSIUONI – Writer (Episode 2 & 4)

Sarah Bassiuoni is a Sydney-based writer and director, a former Human Rights Lawyer and the daughter of an Egyptian Muslim and Irish Catholic and grew up in Saudi Arabia, the USA and Australia.

Since graduating from the Australian Film Television Radio School in 2016, following a successful law career, Sarah has worked with many decorated producers and award-winning production companies as a writer, director, script editor and researcher. Sarah has directed short films, a web series for ABC iView and, has worked as a script editor and writer on Season 2 of ABC comedy/drama *The Heights*, produced by Matchbox Pictures.

More recently, Sarah completed writing on *The Secret She Keeps* Season 2, the forthcoming *Ladies In Black* (Bunya Productions for ABC) and is currently in pre-production on her own original series, *Critical Incidnet* (Matchbox/NBC Universal for Stan).

Sarah was selected for Screen Australia's Developing the Developer Program, for the Phillip Parson's Fellowship at Belvoir Street Theatre and has worked as a script assessor for Screen Australia.