

A surprise film star

When Jessica Rees signed up for a Berkeley youth workshop four years ago she had no idea where it would take her.

The workshop was run by community arts organisation Beyond Empathy.

"My brothers were doing music and I thought I could do a better song than them," says Rees.

"Beyond Empathy were writing a film. We collaborated and they used my song to fit into the storyline."

The short film, *2506* features a unique blend of musical theatre and hip-hop dubbed Hip hOPera.

In the film, Rees plays 17-year-old Boo, who is in a relationship with the troubled Jake, (played by Lucas Buchanan).

A crew of young participants from the Berkeley Neighbourhood Centre produced the film using mobile phones, cherry picker cranes and hand-held cameras.

Now, with the support of Beyond Empathy, Rees and Buchanan are off to New Zealand for the Show Me Shorts Film Festival, where *2506* is a contender for an award.

The festival is a showcase of the 40 best short films from Australia and New Zealand.

The film has also been selected as a learning tool for media courses at the University of Wollongong.

"It's opened up a career path,"



Jessica Rees (left) and Gemma Parsons are part of the team behind the short film *2506*.

Rees says. "Some of the participants are working towards a certificate in media.

"It's great to see the stuff they're doing paying off.

"Everyone is so young and some of us are indigenous."

Beyond Empathy is working with the same team on a feature-length film, *Rights of Passage*, which follows a similar theme to *2506*.

"It's about having family troubles, being on the wrong side of the track," says Rees, who is stepping out of the spotlight for a role behind the camera.

"It's a bunch of short stories rolled into one. You follow the beginning of the story and then go straight to what happens at the end.

"It's amazing when you hear some of the stories.

"I can't wait to see it on the screen."

Rees and Buchanan will be travelling to New Zealand on November 3.

"It's been an amazing experience and everyone supports us," says Rees.

"None of us have been overseas before. I'm so excited."

EMILIE LOVATT