

When the enemy is human

By Ben O'Shea

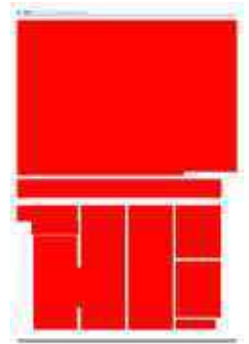
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Page 6 | Section: General

972cm on the page



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Doco aims to change the way we think about one of the planet's most vital materials

When you're talking about man-made climate change, it doesn't take long for the conversation to turn to carbon.

Carbon tax. Carbon credits. Carbon offsets. Carbon footprint. You'd be forgiven for thinking carbon was the enemy.

But far from being our enemy, carbon, an element that is ubiquitous throughout the universe, is literally part of us.

In fact, we couldn't live without it, with its ability to bond with a wide variety of elements key to forming the long molecules that are the basis of DNA, and thus the building blocks of all life on Earth.

So, documentary makers Daniela Ortega and Niobe Thompson set out to prove carbon is utterly essential to our future — she just has a PR problem.

It may seem a little weird to give an element a gender and have it speak in first-person as narrator of your film, but this narrative device is at the core of *Carbon: The Unauthorised Biography*.

"What I intended it to do, like, what I hoped that it would do, is I hoped that it would change the way we think about carbon,"

Ortega tells Today via video call.

"I wanted to make carbon a human, a person, because I thought that would be surprising, disarming, and also engage with carbon on a level that was more emotional, rather than, you know, cerebral or theoretical or political, or all the other things that we're talking about in how carbon is framed."

It's one thing to decide to make carbon a person, it's quite another to find a person to play the pivotal role of the voice of carbon in your film.

"It was a real conundrum, because you need to find someone that has a kind of universality, you know, because carbon . . . can't be too old, she can't be too young, she can't be too pompous, she can't be English," Ortega says.

"It was about finding just the right voice, but it also had to be someone who's an amazing actor, who could do the performance of this complex and fascinating character that we were trying to build."

Ortega had one name at the top of her wish list of actors who'd be perfect in the role: Succession star Sarah Snook, pictured right.

The Aussie actor has a Golden

Globe to her name for portraying Shiv Roy in the hit TV show, which revolves around the fortunes of a deliciously unscrupulous media dynasty.

Ortega pauses when asked who has the worst reputation, carbon or the Roy family.

"I reckon carbon because definitely more people, universally around the world, probably think of carbon as an enemy rather than the Roy family," the writer-director laughs.

As luck would have it, Snook just happened to be in Australia in between shooting seasons of *Succession*, so Ortega was able to show her the film sans carbon's narration — and the actor was wowed by the concept and production values.

"And she nailed it, you know, she got it just right," Ortega says.

"I love her performance and her contribution — she made carbon human."

Snook is a bone fide star, no doubt, but Ortega pulled off an even bigger coup by securing the services of arguably science's

biggest celebrity, Neil deGrasse Tyson, pictured inset, who leads the doco's cast of talking heads.

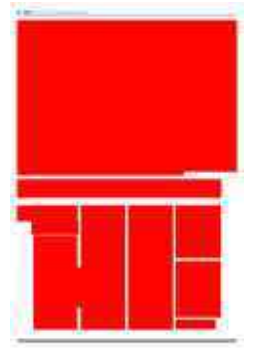
"He's like the science communicator superstar," Ortega gushes.

"My co-director, Niobe Thompson, knew somebody that knew Neil.

"And he introduced the film to Neil, and he loved the idea so much that it was like 'Yes', it was just a 'Yes'."

When the film finishes its short theatrical run, Ortega hopes it will be included in the school curriculum, so the next generation can get to know carbon, too.

Carbon: The Unauthorised



Biography is in select cinemas tomorrow.



Coal, which is rich in carbon, being dug. New documentary *Carbon: The Unauthorised Biography* explores the the ubiquitous element.



