“A cause worth fighting for”

An interview with Phillip Gwynne and Lisa Flanagan

Richard Phillips
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Australian Rules, *directed by Paul Goldman and produced by Mark Lazarus, exposes racial discrimination and intolerance in a small South Australian fishing community. Currently screening in Australian cinemas, the movie, which has also been shown at recent festivals in Scotland, Greece and Spain, was opposed by a handful of Aboriginal activists who attempted to assert control over the film's creative content and falsely claimed that the film was racist.*

Lisa Flanagan, who plays Clarence in Australian Rules,*and Phillip Gwynne, scriptwriter and author of* Deadly, Unna?, *on which the movie is based, spoke this week with the* World Socialist Web Site.

Forty-four year-old Phillip Gywnne began writing professionally about six years ago and won acclaim for his first novel Deadly, Unna?, *indigenous slang for "Cool, isn't it".* Nukkin' Ya! *("See you later!"), his second book, was published in 2000. Gwynne's stories, which are categorised as young adult fiction, are drawn from his teenage experiences in rural South Australia—he is from a family of eight children—and are regularly listed on school reading lists because they are humorous, insightful and attempt to grapple with contemporary social questions.*

Phillip Gwynne: I've read your website—it's fantastic—and the reviews are good. It's nice to know that someone is telling the truth. The standard of reviewing in this country is pretty abysmal. It's political, of course, but just take a look at the Murdoch-financed films and see what the Murdoch press has to say about them.

Richard Phillips: Before we discuss the film, can you name some of the writers who have inspired you?

PG: That's pretty difficult because there are so many. Off the top of my head, I would have to say Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* had a huge impact on me when I was young. There is Orwell and Hemingway, not for Hemingway's content so much but his style, and I like Tim Winton's use of the Australian vernacular and his obsession with the ocean, which I share. I have to admit that I'm not all that fond of contemporary Australian writers, or at least I don't have a lot of respect for the best-known ones, because they refuse to tackle contemporary issues.

The great thing about YA [Young Adult] literature is that although it's clumsy at times and sometimes wears its heart on its sleeve, at least it has a go. Morris Gleitzman, who is a popular young adult writer, has just written a book about an Afghan refugee in Australia. Where are the adult fiction writers tackling these questions? And what about our most-lauded writer, Peter Carey? He never writes about anything that touches everyday lives.

The same is true with film. There has been a whole slew of recent movies about Aboriginal themes. *Rabbit Proof Fence* is an example. It's OK but it has an escape clause—the kidnapping of Aboriginal children happened a while ago, it doesn't go on now and so we can forget about what's going on today.

At least *Australian Rules* is relatively contemporary and forces people to think about current issues. Interestingly, there was a review in the *Adelaide Advertiser*, which, despite all the evidence to the contrary, suggested it was a period piece. Psychologically, the writer wanted to block out today's reality by trying to place this in some distant period.

RP: The movie deals with a number of serious themes—racism, poverty and small-town attitudes. Why did you decide to deal with these issues?

PG: I get that question a lot, especially from kids studying the book at school, who get themes drummed into them so much by teachers who think writers work that way. *Deadly, Unna?* has themes, and they are significant ones, but I don't start this way. In fact, it's a kiss of death, especially for young adult literature writers, because you end up with a polemical tract. Kids smell it a mile off and keep away.

I have a strong sense of social justice and always had and I hope that comes through naturally. When I was growing up, the racism and bigotry were incipient. I probably would have had racist views when I was a kid, except that I got to know Aboriginal kids.

My best friend Derek was Aboriginal, and I based Dumby Red on him, the difference being, however, that he was not shot. He is about my age and still alive. We were in Melbourne three weeks ago going round the schools talking about the book and it was great. We're planning to show the film to some indigenous kids in his town in South Australia.

RP: There are some differences between the movie and book. Why did you decide to change the emphasis?

PG: The film obviously belongs to the director. He is a dark and somewhat pessimistic person, but I think it worked for the benefit of the film. If I had the skills of a director, and I probably never will, it would have been somewhat different. I'm not sure but maybe because I grew up with all this as a kid and got over it, I find it very painful to go there again. My brothers and sisters saw the movie and some scenes for them, particularly where the children climb out the window and spend the night in the hen house, were too unbearable for them.

RP: Can you explain the campaign to stop the movie and the allegations of racism?

PG: The first point is, don't believe anything you've read in the press. Most of the articles were wrong or deliberately designed to stir things up.

David Wilson, who was involved in the Adelaide Arts Festival as an indigenous advisor and led the campaign to stop the film, claimed the book had no presence in South Australia. This is rubbish. It won two awards there and is studied in the schools. Of course it had a presence.

The script landed on his desk and he had problems with it. What were his differences? First he said that the shooting incident in the movie, which is loosely related to the killing of two youth in 1977, would cause serious grief to the families all over again. He said the film had racist language and was therefore racist, it had negative stereotypes of Aboriginal women and was a black story and white people had no right to tell it.

He began this in pre-production and got other people involved, including Peter Sellars, the festival director, who initially gave support, but when it got too tough he just swapped to the other side.

Anyway, it was decided that there should be consultation with Point Pearce Aboriginal community and so Paul [Goldman], Mark Lazarus and I went down there and met with about 15 Aboriginal people from the community. Wilson was invited but never turned up. This was typical. He never came to anything we organised, but worked behind the scenes stirring people up.

The meeting was very heated at first but once the formal side of things finished we had tea and biscuits and everyone started talking to each other calmly. We had another meeting, local people offered suggestions and we made changes and things were going fine until Wilson hijacked the process.

He held a meeting and invited every Aboriginal activist he could get hold of in Adelaide. None of them had read the script or the book, but he lifted bits of racist language from the book and script, all out of context, and put it on an A4 sheet and denounced the film as "racist". We were crucified at the meeting, virtually blamed for everything that has happened to the Aborigines from Captain Cook onwards.

Next there was a script reading in the community and the actors went down, including Lisa Flanagan and Luke Carroll. I didn't go and can only report secondhand but apparently it was harrowing. They demanded the Aborigines pull out of the film, which is ridiculous because Lisa's mother is from the area.

Consultation broke down completely and we had to decide whether to go ahead or pull it. It was very traumatic. I couldn't sleep at night and kept wondering whether I was racist and had I written a racist book or script. Obviously the answer was no and we decided to proceed. Wilson's campaign continued right up until the film was shown in Adelaide early this year, where he and his supporters denounced us at a forum after the screening.

The biggest pressure was that the family of the kids killed would experience the pain all over again. This is an incredibly emotional argument, but the Aborigines in Point Pearce don't practice "Sorry Business" anymore [the Aboriginal custom of not mentioning the names of the dead] and probably haven't for decades. Yet Wilson always tried to bring this in. This is a subtle form of racism because it homogenises Aborigines and suggests that they all observe the same traditions. But there are different cultural beliefs all over the country.

What about September 11? The media has constantly reported this terrible event; there's been blanket coverage. But did the media consult with the families about this? No one would suggest that you can't mention it or show footage of the disaster?

There were many great suggestions from the community. They told us about the funeral and what the police did in the community after the shootings. I wish the dialogue could have continued but Wilson hijacked it.

RP: Wilson's allegations are outrageous but they are politically motivated. When he says that only Aborigines have the right to tell these stories, and we've encountered this on many occasions ourselves, he speaks for a layer of Aboriginal bureaucrats who have a vested interest in maintaining a divide between Aborigines and white workers.

PG: That's right, but Australians have a shared history and although some of it is not pleasant, I'm willing to own it and write about it. Instead we have a sort of colonialism in reverse, where particular individuals lay claim to it and say no one can write about it.

My stories are not a metaphorical representation of the past—it is my past. Neither the book nor the movie is told from an Aboriginal perspective; they're from a white boy's point of view. The boy knows nothing about Aboriginal people and through the course of the book he starts to learn. He is wrong on some things but he starts to accumulate some understanding and knowledge.

RP: One of Wilson's allegations was that you breached Aboriginal cultural protocols. What is your response to this?

PG: This has more than a whiff of censorship and it scares me. I don't exactly know how cultural protocols are supposed to be applied in fiction writing, but it probably means that if the writing funding bodies decide you're in contravention then you won't get any grants.

I wouldn't attempt to tell an Aboriginal story but if the protocols say you have to go through a consultation process because you've got an Aborigine in your book or movie, then forget it. This is censorship and anathema to writers. No one will be able to create anything decent through this process. Writers have to operate outside these restrictions or they die, intellectually speaking.

There has to be a fight on this issue because it is a real step backwards. And if there is going to be a debate then you'll see me in the front line. This is a cause really worth fighting for.

Australian Rules *is Lisa Flanagan's first feature film role. Born and raised in Adelaide, the 23-year-old actress was involved in local theatre and had a small part in Phillip Noyce's* Rabbit Proof Fence *but the scenes were not used in the final cut. She is hoping to secure a part in a future television series. Flanagan bluntly rejected claims that* Australian Rules*denigrated Aborigines and told WSWS that she was "totally committed" to the film from the outset.*

LF: This is not a racist film but simply a picture of what really happens in this country. It was something I felt very strongly about and I told Mark Lazarus the producer, that I'd be there 100 percent.

A lot of white Australians are sheltered—they don't know what's going on—and some are shocked when they see the movie. Many people have approached me after screenings and asked whether this really goes on and you wonder, where have you been? This sort of racial discrimination has been going on for years.

I grew up in Adelaide and although primary school was fine I was the only Aboriginal kid in high school and there was a lot of racism. I copped a lot of crap but stood my ground, stuck my nose in the air and said, if you can't handle me because of the colour of my skin then you've got the problem.

I changed schools at Year 9 and finally left at Year 10. I now have a six-year-old daughter and don't want her to go through all the racial taunts and verbal abuse I did.

RP: Why do you think there were attempts to stop the film?

LF: I have no idea what David Wilson is on about, but he won't speak to me any more. He's known my mother for years and done video work with her but won't talk to her either. It's ridiculous. He has not even approached me to ask questions or discuss the movie, which I would love to do. I don't know what his problem is.

My grandmother lives in Point Pearce and the man that the Dumby Red character is based on, is my cousin. But it was really strange going out there and being confronted by people attacking the film and saying that Paul, Mark and Phillip were only interested in making money. It was horrible and there was a lot of pressure on us. But I had a couple of cousins and my aunty say to me after the meeting, "good luck" and "do what you think is right". I was happy for this and thanked them but even if they hadn't said this, I was determined to go ahead with the film anyway.