53rd Sydney Film Festival--Part 2

Ten Canoes: a dramatic exploration of ancient Aboriginal culture

Richard Phillips
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This is the second part of a series of articles on the 2006 Sydney Film Festival, held June 9-25. The first part was posted July 17.

Over the past two years the number of features made in Australia has dropped to record lows. By contrast, this year has seen a substantial increase, and, over the next three months, 16 local movies will be released, the largest number at any one time in Australian cinemas. Hopefully some of these will be of the same standard as *Ten Canoes*, a valuable and visually striking film about ancient Aboriginal life, directed by Rolf de Heer and Peter Djigirr.

Ten Canoes, which recently won a special jury prize at Cannes and opened this year's Sydney festival, is set thousands of years ago and is about a tribe of Aborigines living near the 130,000-hectare Arafura Swamp in far north Australia. The movie, which is the product of a two-year collaboration between de Heer, veteran Aboriginal actor David Gulpilil and local Aborigines from Rampagining, is a long overdue introduction to Aboriginal social life and cultural traditions before European settlement, just over two centuries ago.

The first-ever movie made in the Ganalbingu language, its story is relatively simple and bound together by a light-hearted English-language narration by Gulpilil.

Ten men, under the leadership of tribal elder Minygululu (Peter Minygululu), are preparing to hunt magpie geese, a wild bird that provides eggs and meat for the tribe. This involves the construction of bark canoes to traverse the crocodile infested swampland that surrounds their territory, and lengthy periods spent on raised platforms in the swamp.

Minygululu discovers that one of the young men in the hunting party has taken a fancy to Minygululu's third and youngest wife, and decides to tell him a lengthy morality tale to teach him about the "do's and don'ts" of life.

Without repeating the entire story, Minygululu's tale involves sexual jealousy, kidnapping, sorcery, inter-tribal conflict and customary law. Those elements of the movie set in ancestral times are filmed in colour, while the hunting trip is shot in black and white. None of the actors has any formal training.

Ten Canoes opens with a long helicopter tracking shot along a river and into the spectacularly wild Arafura Swamp. As the camera records this stunning country, narrator Gulpilil playfully explains to non-Aboriginal audiences: "Once upon a time in a land far, far away.... No, it's not like that. It's not like your story—but it's a good story all the same."

Many of the film's memorable visuals are recreations of photographs taken in the mid-1930s by Donald Thomson, a University of Melbourne anthropology professor who spent almost two years with the Arafura Swamp people. Thomson shot more than 4,000 photographs and thousands of feet of film during this time, carefully recording every aspect of daily life. One of these photographs—a picture of ten men in bark canoes—became the key image around which the film's story was developed.

The concluding scenes, dramatising the passing of Ridjimiraril (Crusoe Kurddal), one of the ancient tale's central characters, are memorable. Ridjimiraril's final dance and the traditional ceremonies of fellow tribe members coming to terms with his death, have a luminous beauty.

De Heer's film is certainly not a revolutionary work and some scenes lack dramatic tension. In fact, the canoe making and hunting sequences are mainly of anthropological interest. But overall it is a sincere and audacious attempt to explore subject matter never before dramatised on film. No previous local movie about Aborigines—*Jedda (1955)*, *Walkabout (1971)*, *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith (1978)*, *Women of the Sun* television miniseries (1981), *Radiance (1998)*, *Yolngu Boys (2001)*, *One Night the Moon (2001)* or *The Tracker (2002*)—has ever tried to recreate pre-European Aboriginal life.

At the same time, de Heer's film does not indulge in suggestions that a return to the "old ways" would provide an answer to the appalling social problems now facing Australia's aboriginal population, amongst the poorest and most oppressed in the world. *Ten Canoes* simply, but with optimism and confidence, employs Aboriginal story-telling traditions to present an authentic picture of life in the past. Under conditions where most Australians, let alone the rest of the world, know little about Aboriginal society, this is not a minor issue.

Moreover, by demystifying the Aborigines' hunter-gatherer existence, *Ten Canoes* educates its audiences and provides a much-needed corrective to the historical falsification and racist lies that have long polluted Australia's cultural atmosphere—which seek to blame the Aboriginal people themselves for the horrendous oppression and poverty they continue to suffer.

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Rolf de Heer spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about *Ten Canoes* during the film festival. The Dutch-born director, who immigrated to Australia with his family in 1959, worked at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation for seven years before embarking on a filmmaking career. He has made 11 features since 1984 including, *Incident at Raven's Gate*, *The Quiet Room*, *The Old Man Who Loved to Read Stories*, *Dance to Me My Song*, *Bad Boy Bubby*, *The Tracker* and *Alexandra's Project*.

Richard Phillips: Could you tell me about anthropologist Donald Thomson and how his photos helped inspire *Ten Canoes?*

Rolf de Heer: Thomson was a serious anthropologist who worked for extended periods in northern Queensland and the Northern Territory during the 1930s. He was sent to Arnhem Land in 1937 because there were moves to send a punitive expedition against local Aborigines—in other words a killing party. There had been strife between the tribes and Japanese pearl fishermen, and some police had also been killed. These

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conflicts were usually over women.

Thomson persuaded the government to send him and told them he could sort the problems out—and he did. He was an astonishing person and his travel diaries are amazing. They're amongst the most graphically descriptive suffering journey writings that I've read. He is a revered figure and rightly so. When the war came he went back up there and organised native patrols.

He took thousands of photographs and lots of film of a people who had resisted previous incursions, but were largely an unconquered nation, and whose way of life was still pretty much intact. Unfortunately all the film footage—more than 20,000 feet of it—was destroyed in a Melbourne warehouse fire in the 1960s, which was a real tragedy.

The photographs provided us with a wonderful reference. The shot looking down on the ten canoeists in the swamp near the beginning of the film was recreated from one of his classic photos. The original individuals in that picture have all been identified and there are many people up there related to them.

The photos were therefore something quite special and were used to develop sequences for the film. There was a collection of goose-egg hunting photos, so those sequences were developed around them. Other photos weren't as dramatic—women digging for food, etc—but they were used as the staging point for particular scenes and this is how the film developed.

RP: How much discussion was involved in developing the story?

RH: There was a lot—about the photographs and many other things.

For me, the goose-egg hunting had to be a major element in the film but, of course, this is not very dramatic and the locals wanted it set in "old times". But what was meant by this? Nobody was exactly clear. So we decided that it had to be thousands of years ago, before the influence of any other cultures.

The next major issue was they didn't want the "old times" portrayed as a period of conflict. This presented me with another problem because conflict is the essence of drama. It meant that if there was to be any conflict, it had to occur in a much earlier period, so the main part of the film is set in mythical times.

Story-telling traditions are very strong in Aboriginal society and these had to be reflected in some way. So the story developed through the resolution of all these issues.

RP: How do you conceive of your role as director in this sort of process?

RH: It's quite different, because it's not about imposing or hijacking the process. I was simply the means through which they could tell their story.

I had the expertise, but they had the power of veto, the power of inclusion and the creative expertise. My job was to show them how to make what they wanted work for them, and for a cinema audience in the rest of the world. The film couldn't be made if they didn't feel that they had ownership of the process. But with patience and care we did it.

RP: *Ten Canoes* is being released under conditions where the government and the media continuously claim that the social problems facing Aboriginal people today are caused by welfare—or what they call "sit down money"—and the use of tribal customary law in sentencing. Can you comment and were you trying to counter this?

RH: The most recent media campaign started the day I left for Cannes, so I don't really know all the latest details about what they've been saying.

Did these sorts of things encourage me to make the film? I actively avoid analysing what I do, because if I have a special reason in mind for making a film and the themes I want to deal with, it becomes contrived. This is anathema for my sort of filmmaking.

Obviously there were many different reasons why I made *Ten Canoes*, but I guess overall it did provide an opportunity to make something that would help balance our views on Aboriginal society.

Most people are so ignorant about this society and its complexities, and there are so many faulty judgments made about how Aboriginal people live.

For example, one of the most pervasively damaging images of Aboriginal dwelling camps is the rubbish.

When I was in Rawapingi for the first time, I stayed in a house that seemed fairly well built and designed for the conditions. There was this veneer of western civilisation, but inside, the house was like a garbage tip, with rubbish everywhere. The reasons for this are really complex.

Culturally, cosmologically these people are still in the bush. In fact, a generation ago there was no concept of what garbage was—it didn't exist in their society. Everything is from the bush. You use it and when you throw it away, it breaks down—it's recycled. There was no tin, no plastic, everything was degradable. And yet most white people judge them viciously on this issue, which is wrong. So I began to realise that I should never judge the situation in Aboriginal camps and dwellings on this level again.

Fifty years ago, white people thought nothing about throwing whatever rubbish they had out the car window, as they were driving along. This attitude has changed, of course, but it took time.

So yes, in a way, one of the reasons for making this film was to somehow subvert our skewed views of things, by showing aspects of Aboriginal society and culture, which are largely not understood and falsely judged to be worthless.

And this is what Aboriginal people wanted from the film, because most of them have such low self-esteem. The dominant culture has told them often enough that they are useless, they don't work, they don't get the kids to school, they throw rubbish out, etc., etc. It is terribly important for Aboriginal people to say I have value, have a look at me and listen to my stories, and to show their own kids and the rest of the world.

That is why winning a prize at Cannes was so important for them, because it was evidence that the world has seen their culture and valued it.

RP: *Ten Canoes* certainly educates its audience and undermines the right-wing ideologues and racists who seek to blame Aboriginal people for their own demise.

RH: That's true. But I hope the film doesn't find an audience because it is used in this particular debate. I don't want people to think that it is part of this discussion and not go and see it, which would be a real pity. It is an important film and, I hope, one that people will go along and just enjoy.

To be continued

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