

Sydney Film Festival: Filmmaker Ivan Sen speaks to WSWS

Richard Phillips
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Writer/director Ivan Sen spoke with the World Socialist Web Site about Toomelah, his latest feature, during the Sydney film festival (see review).

Richard Phillips: How and why did you decide to make *Toomelah*?

Ivan Sen: This is my mother's community and her mother lived there also. I didn't grow up in Toomelah but would go back there from time to time. After leaving high school and studying photography, I reintroduced myself to the place and took lots of photographs. When I started making films it was always on my radar to do something there but wasn't sure how to do it until recently.

I made an experimental film called *Dreamland*, which I'm still working on, with just myself and a couple of actors. This gave me a process and the confidence to capture the sort of authentic performances I wanted. I didn't have to take a big crew out to Toomelah, which would have influenced how the community responded to the film.

RP: How did you develop the story?

IS: I spent about a month in Toomelah observing the place—and kids like Daniel—so it emerged from that. All the dialogue, and all the swearing, comes from what I heard there and the situations were either directly observed or relayed to me from other residents' experiences.

The script was modified in line with what I was filming—in other words what was working or not during the various scenes—and some scenes were developed on location. Daniel's film father, who is his real father, was a great actor and so I created a few extra scenes to use that ability.

RP: This is a tough film, precisely because it's the reality of life for most Aboriginal people in these settlements.

IS: That's true, but my intention wasn't to make a political statement. My aim was to create something that accurately reflected the experiences of this particular boy and his community.

People in Toomelah don't consider these things as political issues as such. This is their life. When Aboriginal people, including my sister, watch *Toomelah* they just laugh all the way through it; they know these situations. It just depends on your perception, I suppose.

When you're removed by force from your traditional lands by some government power then everything about your existence is a political issue. When your father is an alcoholic and your older brother is incarcerated and your great auntie was taken away by authorities when she was a child, then everything about your life is an issue. In fact, you're a living breathing issue.

I don't want my film to dictate what people should do or think, but allow them to understand the circumstances. If these issues are going to be resolved in any way then there has to be an appreciation of what the real situation is and it must come from deep inside.

RP: *Toomelah* was screened at this year's Cannes film festival. What was the response?

IS: It was incredible. When the screening ended the applause went on for about ten minutes. Daniel and the other actors were overwhelmed and broke down and then others in the audience started crying. It was very emotional. There were lots of questions about the future facing the Toomelah community, and the living conditions, but also discussions about the filmmaking process.

RP: It's now the fourth anniversary of the federal "intervention," which essentially abolished the welfare and democratic rights of indigenous people in the Northern Territory. Did that have impact on your decision to make *Toomelah*?

IS: Not really. To be honest I don't know enough detail about the intervention and I'm sure most people don't know much about it either. What is its objective, what are its guidelines? None of this is clear to me, so I find it hard to comment.

I suppose you have to say for that Aboriginal people there's been an intervention going on, in one form or another, for over two hundred years. The current intervention is just another string in the government's bows. Numbers of children are still being taken away from their parents by DOCS [Department of Community Services]. It's extraordinary that this still goes on.

RP: Only one of your actors—Dean Daley Jones—was a professional. How did you prepare Daniel and the others for each scene?

IS: My direction was sometimes very precise, on other occasions not. Daniel was incredible and as the shoot developed he became very skilled. We could turn up to shoot and he would just do it. Every now and then there'd be a performance that was so strong that it just blew me away. When you make films about children there's such an innocence and unconsciousness to their behaviour which is so pure and profound. It's like the universe and so beautiful.

I enjoy shooting and directing at the same time. There's a real magic holding the camera and being intimate with your actors. In fact, I find it more difficult judging a performance by viewing it in a separate monitor rather looking at it in the camera. There's something very instinctual in my response but I seem to be able to assess things more clearly this way.

RP: Has *Toomelah* changed much in the years you've been visiting the settlement?

IS: The church held the place together to some degree but the older people who grew up in that situation have died, so that factor has basically disintegrated. There's no modern Australian way of life or a traditional system of life and there's all the American rap culture and other influences. There are cycles of drinking, drugs, family feuds and other problems but nothing like in Moree [a nearby town] where there's much more

aggression and tension. It's a bit like a war zone there. My next film will be set in Moree and it's about race relations in that environment.



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