

# David Gulpilil (1953–2021): Talented dancer and actor who changed the way Australian film portrayed indigenous people

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The passing late last month of acclaimed Australian actor and dancer David Gulpilil, after a four-year battle with lung cancer, has seen an outpouring of heartfelt statements by directors, actors and film audiences from across the country. On Wednesday night images of Gulpilil were projected onto the outside of the Sydney Opera House during the annual Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts (AACTA) awards as numerous tributes were delivered about the remarkable performer and his work acknowledged with this year's Longford Lyell lifetime achievement award.

Gulpilil, 68, was part of the so-called Australian New Wave in the '70s and '80s and a significant figure in local cinema. As film historians have rightly noted, the multi-talented young man “forever changed the way Australian film represents indigenous people and their cultural heritage.”

Gulpilil Ridjimiril Dalaithngu was Yonglu, the indigenous tribes that inhabit Arnhem Land in Australia's Northern Territory, and deeply immersed in his people's complex aesthetic and cultural values.

During his almost 50-year career, Gulpilil, which means kingfisher in Yonglu, appeared in about 40 movies and television features. The best of these were *Walkabout* (1971), *Mad Dog Morgan* (1976), *Storm Boy* (1976), *The Last Wave* (1977), *The Tracker* (2002), *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002) and the semi-autobiographical *Charlie's Country* (2014).

Born in 1953, Gulpilil was raised in the Ramingining settlement located in the isolated Arafura swamp region and assigned the name David at a government-run English school he briefly attended. An accomplished ceremonial dancer, singer and hunter at an early age, he was “discovered” by British director Nicolas Roeg, who needed a young Aboriginal dancer for *Walkabout*, a dramatic feature.

The ground-breaking film, which is based on Donald Payne's 1959 novel, *The Children*, and scripted by Edward Bond, is about two white children—a teenage girl (Jenny Agutter) and her much younger brother (Luc Roeg)—who are stranded in the central Australian desert, after their father tries to kill them and then commits suicide. The lost children are saved by a teenage Aboriginal boy. (See: *Walkabout* trailer)

Gulpilil's performance was mesmerising and appeared effortless. The teenager, who spoke six native dialects but little English, had an extraordinary on-camera presence and grace. His intense, and ultimately tragic, dance to win the teenage girl's affections is hypnotic. Nothing like Gulpilil's dance sequence had ever been screened in an Australian cinema.

*Walkabout* was nominated for the Palme D'Or at the Cannes film festival in 1971, along with Ted Kotcheff's *Wake in Fright*, a fierce protest against violent male-bonding rituals, self-destructive drunkenness and generalised brutality in an Australian outback mining town.

Other films nominated that year included *Death in Venice* (Luchino Visconti), *Sacco and Vanzetti* (Giuliano Montaldo), *Johnny Got His Gun*

(Dalton Trumbo), *Joe Hill* (Bo Widerberg) and *The Go-Between* (Joseph Losey), an indication of the progressive and left-wing sentiments prevailing amongst filmmakers at the time.

*Walkabout* was made not long after the heroic 1966 wages strike by Aboriginal stockmen at Wave Hill in the Northern Territory and, in the following year, an overwhelming “Yes” vote in a national referendum for the “right” of indigenous people to be counted in national censuses. The vote reversed laws established when Australia became a federated nation state in 1901, that insisted that Aborigines should not be counted because they were members of an “inferior race” that was “dying out.”

Both the strike and the referendum vote reflected the broad concerns, particularly among workers and young people, for an end to the decades of brutal political and social discrimination of Aborigines by federal and state governments and judicial authorities.

While *Walkabout* did not directly deal with these issues, the rising opposition to the treatment of Australia's indigenous population by state authorities was an important backdrop to the film's production. The movie's international success also encouraged Australian filmmakers—tentatively at first—to begin exploring the dark history of British capitalism's unrelenting pursuit of land and profits, against all existing inhabitants and forms of social life that stood in the way.

Gulpilil consolidated his acting career in his next two features, *Mad Dog Morgan*, about a 19th century Australian bushranger and starring Dennis Hopper; and *Storm Boy*, a popular children's movie about a lonely young boy living with his reclusive father on a deserted South Australian coastal strip. In *Storm Boy* Gulpilil played the part of Fingerbone, a young indigenous man who had fallen out with his tribe. He befriends a boy and teaches him how to take care of three orphaned pelicans. (See: “*Storm Boy* : Story of pelicans sequence”)

Next Gulpilil appeared in *The Last Wave* (1977), directed by Peter Weir and starring Richard Chamberlain; followed by a minor role in Philip Kaufman's *The Right Stuff* (1983); and in 1986 *Crocodile Dundee*, a light-weight action-comedy written by Paul Hogan and set in the Australian Outback and New York. The low budget film became the highest grossing non-US released movie in America for that year and the most commercially successful film in Australian history.

Despite the movie's success and Gulpilil's celebrity status—feted by film stars, rock musicians and international film industry figures since *Walkabout*—he only appeared in a handful of movies over the next decade.

In 2002, however, Gulpilil began working with director Rolf de Heer and played the title role in his movie *The Tracker*. Set in 1922, the tracker is forced by a group of violent police officers to find the alleged murderer of a white woman. It marked the beginning of a long and fruitful collaboration between the men.

Later that year Gulpilil starred in Phillip Noyce's *Rabbit Proof Fence*, a

true story about three Aboriginal girls forcibly removed from their mothers by government authorities and relocated to a mission school, some 2,400 km away. The girls escape and successfully find their way home after a nine-week walk while being pursued by police and Moodoo (Gulpilil), an Aboriginal tracker. Australian governments removed thousands of the mixed-race indigenous children (the “stolen generations”) from their parents between 1905 and 1967.

Five years later in 2007, Gulpilil worked with de Heer in *Ten Canoes*, a fascinating drama about Aboriginal social life and cultural traditions among tribes living near the Arafura Swamp, hundreds of years before European settlement. It was the first-ever movie made in the Ganalbingu language with Gulpilil providing an English-language narration. (See: “A dramatic exploration of ancient Aboriginal culture”)

In 2008, he starred as King George in *Australia*, Baz Luhrmann’s execrable historical blockbuster about a cattle station family in the Northern Territory. As the WSWWS review noted:

... King George (David Gulpilil), Nullah’s grandfather and a key figure in the movie, is depicted as a mystical character, frequently standing on cliff-tops, yoga-like, with one foot on his knee—an iconic and heavily retailed tourist image of Aboriginal hunters. No serious attempt is made to show anything about his life or the squalid, impoverished conditions in which he would have lived. The dispossession and horrendous problems afflicting Aboriginal people at the time are entirely absent, as is the fact that they had no democratic rights and those with jobs on cattle stations were not paid wages but rations—flour, sugar, tea and tobacco.

The underlying sub-text of *Australia* is that the oppression of Aboriginal people is a “thing of the past”—that today, Australia is a country of “reconciliation”—a myth, assiduously promoted by the Labor government and its apologists, and reinforced by the closing reference to Labor Prime Minister Rudd’s official apology to members of the Stolen Generations.

Contrary to this rosy picture, the situation facing indigenous communities, particularly in the remote areas, was and remains catastrophic with endemic unemployment and poverty, fourth world education, housing and health services and stepped-up “law and order” targeting of Aborigines, resulting in high incarceration rates and deaths in custody.

Gulpilil, who was trying to develop his career and maintain his family tribal and family obligations in Ramingining where he still lived, was struggling with worsening alcohol and drug abuse issues at this time. Facing financial difficulties and at odds with his home community, Gulpilil lived in Darwin’s “Long Grass” bush camps during some of these years. “Big name, no blanket,” as he later wryly commented.

As Wayne O’Donovan, the actor’s personal assistant between 1994 and 2006 later explained, Gulpilil had been catapulted in early 1970s from an isolated semi-tribal existence, where alcohol and drugs were banned, into the global entertainment industry: “The whole industry was sex and grog, and David thought that the extravagance in that culture was normal; he thought that was how white fellas lived. ... It was the film industry that turned David into a drunk...

“[We’d go] from chasing crocodiles in deep water to tuxedos and first-class restaurants, to wondering what we’re going to kill the next day to satisfy our hunger. The contrast was huge. From being treated like royalty to being treated like scum.” (*Gulpilil* by Derek Reilly 2019)

Gulpilil’s personal difficulties exacerbated as John Howard’s federal Liberal-National Coalition government, with Labor Party support, unleashed its so-called “Northern Territory Intervention” in 2007, a full-

scale state assault on the indigenous communities.

These measures involved compulsory quarantining of 50 percent of all social welfare payments to Aborigines throughout the Territory to be spent on food and clothing, along with increased policing measures, the banning of alcohol and pornography with harsh jail terms and fines and the imposition of business administrators on Aboriginal communities.

When Labor, under Kevin Rudd, was voted into government in late 2007 it offered an official national apology to the “stolen generations,” renamed the “Northern Territory Intervention” to “Stronger Futures” and then intensified the unprecedented and deeply reactionary social assault on the indigenous communities.

Just prior to the “Intervention,” Gulpilil was prosecuted for drunk driving and not long after that he was charged with taking alcohol into a “dry” community. In 2011 he was accused and was found guilty of assaulting his then wife, Miriam Ashley, and jailed for a year in Darwin’s Berimah Prison, where his weight dropped to just 39 kilos.

Remarkably Gulpilil, with de Heer’s assistance, regained his health and began collaborating with the director on a script for *Charlie’s Country* (2014), about an Aboriginal man who has fallen out with his community, has drinking problems, runs afoul of the law, is jailed and, on release, finds redemption in teaching indigenous boys traditional culture dance. The semi-autobiographical work was critically acclaimed and won two AACTA awards in Australia and the Best Actor Prize at Cannes’ *Un Certain Regard* category.

*Charlie’s Country* was followed by *Another Country*, an insightful and powerful documentary about Gulpilil and Ramingining, the east Arnhem Land community where he lived. The 75-minute film was directed by Molly Reynolds, de Heer’s wife, and narrated by Gulpilil with his characteristically dry but playful sense of humour.

*Another Country* should be compulsory viewing for anyone wanting to understand the generational social trauma and ongoing destructive impacts of Australian government assaults on fragile and desperately poor indigenous communities.

“Why didn’t you just ask us what we wanted?” Gulpilil gently says during the film. It was an important companion piece to Darlene Johnson’s *Gulpilil: One Red Blood*, made in 2002, about his life in the same settlement.

He acted in three more films—*Goldstone*, *Cargo* and as Fingerbone’s father in a *Storm Boy* remake—before retiring in 2017, after being diagnosed with Stage 4 lung cancer and given just six months to live.

Gulpilil decided to use the time he had left to tell “My story of my story,” which, with a courageous struggle, continued for another four years. Working with director Reynolds, the result is *My Name is Gulpilil*, released earlier this year, a moving documentary tribute to his extraordinarily complex and artistic life.



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