

PART II - YOLNGU BOY (2001)

THE CRITICAL REVIEW

Yolngu Boy — Personal Review

Yolngu Boy is the story of the friendship of three teenage boys who find themselves on a journey from North East Arnhem Land to Darwin, a trek initiated to save one of the boys who is in trouble with the law. The story and plot that evolves is one of immeasurable passion and beauty. *Yolngu Boy* is a sincere glimpse into the Yolngu culture of North East Arnhem Land and the people living there. Set in contemporary Australia, *Yolngu Boy* does not try to veil the social issues pertaining to many Aboriginal people today, such as petrol sniffing, yet at the same time it does not point the "finger" or the "blame" at anyone. Stephen Johnson has created a film that is refreshingly honest and open, focusing upon the unique and strong friendship of the three main characters. The film moves along at quite a fast pace, and its visual imagery is always perfectly accompanied by deliberately chosen musical tracks, mostly composed by the band Yothu Yindi. The viewer is left with the sense that they too have accompanied the boys on their journey, thus making the ending all the more "real" and tragic. *Yolngu Boy* is an adventure. Ultimately it is dramatic and comical, inspiring and uplifting and in general a film that Australians should see due to the fact that it does offer considerable insight into a culture that we know so little about, yet judge so often.

Critical Uptake

The vast amount of reviews relating to *Yolngu Boy* that can be found upon the world wide web, signifies how the film has had a widespread impact upon Australian cinema viewers, or as Tom O'Regan would say, it indicates the way in which *Yolngu Boy* has been "discursivised". With regards to discursivising O'Regan demonstrates that, "Our ways of turning Australian cinema into a social bond and a natural entity are also ways of knowing it and of endowing it with meaning and significance." (1996:27). Many of the reviews that can be found to focus and comment upon such things like, the brilliant scenery of Kakadu and North East Arnhem land, the background of Stephen Johnson; a white man who grew up part of Yolngu culture, and of course, Jack Thompson's cameo role. This discursive element of *Yolngu Boy* is the audience's way of coming to terms with the film, placing it in a field of understanding

Throughout the reviews that were collected for this research, weaknesses in the film's stylistic nature, its camera work and acting were all noted. Yet the common conclusion was to be that *Yolngu Boy* is an "important" film, one that people must go to see. Examples of this can be found in the following reviews, "*Yolngu Boy* raises some very important questions, it makes us look at other Australians in a different light and it deserves to be seen by a large audience." (King:2001:website), and "I devoutly wish I could compel every single Australian to see it...it's probably the most important Australian film of the year." (Thompson:2001:website). The purported importance of this film lies within the fact that in the age of the new millennium, Australia still suffers when it comes to trying to consolidate positive race relations between the indigenous and non-indigenous communities. Aboriginal affairs are still prominent both politically and socially. The importance of *Yolngu Boy* is that it provides an insight into Yolngu culture, this insight thus offering a form of understanding and education.

However, throughout the reviews, *Yolngu Boy* was conceded to be an important film, yet the writers', with the exception the review by Greg King, failed to mention the collaboration on behalf of Stephen Johnson and the Yolngu people and failed to provide any insight into Yolngu culture at all. Yothu Yindi for example contributed an enormous amount to the production of *Yolngu Boy* in terms of both the soundtrack and Mandawuy and Galarwuy Yunupingu as associate producers. Greg King highlights in his review, "Mandawuy Yunupingu, lead singer of Yothu Yindi and also an

influential member of Yolngu people, was instrumental in helping Johnson finally realising his vision through financial support from the Yothu Yindi Foundation, an organization established to support and further the development and teaching of Yolngu culture." (King: 2001: website). It is important to recognize these facts and to provide to potential readers with such details, as a means of promoting inter-cultural dialogue, thus continually educating and informing people about cultures that are different to their own.

The appreciation of *Yolngu Boy* has been vast and has been proved to be quite popular as the box office details highlight in part one. However, it may be worth mentioning that for now *Yolngu Boy* has been most popular in its birthplace of the Northern Territory. "In Darwin the film has been enormously popular even outgrossing Oscar favourite *Traffic* at the cinema." (King:2001: website).

Prior Work of the Cast and Crew

Yolngu Boy has basically been born ten years after its original inception. "Yolngu Boy has taken some ten years out of Stephen Johnson's life, but he has no regrets about it as the film is something that he remains passionate about." (King:2001:website). This very passion for *Yolngu Boy* was readily observed at Johnson's question and answer session after the premiere of the film in Perth at Cinema Paradiso (May 3, 2001). Here Johnson stipulated that he was keen to promote, educate and inform people about Yolngu culture as a means of encouraging reconciliation and cooperation. However, it was due to Johnson's prior work that he was able to project his vision of *Yolngu Boy* on to the screen. Johnson's prior work includes working on several video clips for the band Yothu Yindi. Here he established a close relationship with the band members resulting in their contribution and collaboration later on in *Yolngu Boy*. Johnson also worked for The Australian Children's Television Foundation (ACTF) on such projects as, *Crash Zone* (1998 TVseries) and *The Genie From Down Under 2*(1998 TV series). This work lead to Johnson befriending the director of the foundation, Dr. Patricia Edgar who later became the executive producer of *Yolngu Boy*. The Australian Children's Television Foundation also contributed financial support to the project. Johnson's work at the ACTF also lead to him meeting the writer of *Yolngu Boy*, Chris Anastassiades. Anastassiades has been most famous for the creation of the film *The Wog Boy* with his friend Nick Giannopoulous, and his involvement in the creation of the television programs *Acropolis Now* and *Effie Exposed*.

One of the most talked about aspects of *Yolngu Boy* is its amazing depiction of scenery. This is largely credited to the director of photography, Brad Shield whose previous work includes films like *The Thin Red Line* (1998) and *Mission Impossible 2* (2000). *Yolngu Boy* also boasts one of Australia's great film editors, Ken Sallows. Sallow's prior work includes editing famous Australian features such as *Malcom* (1986), *Proof* (1991), *Love and Other Catastrophes* (1996), and *Chopper* (2000).

The three lead actors were all newcomers to the acting scene. The introduction of inexperienced actors had both a positive and negative affect on some people's attitudes towards the film. As David Pearce suggests, "There is a trading off that you get when using inexperienced people. You can get a freshness and naturalism that is hard to get from a more experienced person. But you lose the skills that are sometimes essential." (Pearce:2001:

website). For work done after the film the only notable progression comes from Nathan Daniels who played the football crazy Milika. In a review on a football website, the Australian Football League state that, "Nathan Daniels is a sixteen year old indigenous teen who stars in the new Australian film *Yolngu Boy*. He plays Milika, who dreams of playing for Essendon. Nextweek he

will strengthen his links with the AFL when he tosses the coin before round one, Kangaroos versus Essendon on Friday March 31st at the MCG." (Australian Football League:2001: website).

Circumstances of Production

On September 20 1999, shooting for the film *Yolngu Boy* began. The film took seven weeks to complete and shooting finished on November 5, 1999. As aforementioned, *Yolngu Boy* took ten years to get to the "big screen". This was due largely to the significant amount of collaborative research required for the film as well as the need to secure financial agencies for funding. The script alone took about five years to develop. The writer, Chris Anastassiades had to travel to North East Arnhem land in order to learn about Yolngu culture before writing about it. As Heather Gallagher stipulates within her interview, "Wog screenwriter creates Aboriginal film" that, "A screenwriter who describes himself as a 'wog from Richmond', spent five years in North East Arnhem Land researching Aboriginal life before creating his feature film *Yolngu Boy*." (Gallagher:2001:website). This indicates the collaborative effort that put into *Yolngu Boy*. The collaboration was between the film crew and the Yolngu people. As Johnson highlights, "Access is all based on trust, the genesis of this film was a collaborative one. The elders have been brave to allow us to show sacred ceremonies. They see it as giving insight to further understanding." (Urban:2001: website). The collaborative nature of the production stresses the importance of inter-cultural dialogue.

The collaborative nature of the production of *Yolngu Boy* was essential in order to project images of Yolngu culture that Yolngu people could appreciate. Hence the involvement of the Yunupingu brothers as associate producers, "Both were on set throughout the production to ensure that cultural issues were handled with equanimity, resulting in a total collaboration between the crew and the families of the region." (*Yolngu Boy*: 2001: Website). Tom O'Regan highlights that, "The massive and diversified interest in, and presence of, Aboriginal and Islanders on the public record is not always wanted by the Aboriginals and Islanders. They object to stories that they do not create, or at least co-create because such stories impact on them." (1996:227). This sentiment is echoed passionately by Wal Saunders, former Director of the Australian Finance Corporation Indigenous branch,

"Indigenous people as a whole have not really has access to the tools and resources to create our own images...All these images are create by non-indigenous people in positions of creative and artistic control. There are only two ways to go: either stop non-indigenous people from using government money to make films about indigenous people, or allow only collaborative projects which ensure that indigenous people have the right to creative and artistic control. In light of the fine works that have come from such collaboration, I personally opt for the latter." (Filmnews:1994:6).

Collaborative productions are needed because as Michael Leigh estimates, "A staggering 6,000 films have been made about Aboriginals." (Langton: 24) and as Marcia Langton highlights, "In film as in other media, there is a dense history of racist, distorted and often offensive representations of Aboriginal people." (Langton:24) The need for more collaborative productions inspired the "Guidelines" for the production of television and film about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. (See Appendix C).

Funding

The information found relating to the funding of *Yolngu Boy* came from the question and answer session that director Stephen Johnson had after the premiere of the film in Perth. Costing a total of 4.5 million dollars, Johnson said that 2.2 million was contributed by the Australian Film Finance Corporation. The remaining 2.3 million had been provided by the Australian Children's Television Foundation, SBS Independent, Cinemedia, and private investors who happened to be Johnson's friends who contributed around ten thousand dollars to the project.

Yolngu Boy — As part of Australian National Cinema

Yolngu Boy was finally established and filmed in 1999 and reflects the nature of Australian National Cinema. As Tom O'Regan demonstrates, "The aim of a National Cinema is one of producing a local presence alongside the dominant imported presence in both the local and international markets." (1996: 48). *Yolngu Boy* is a distinctively Australian film that has been produced as a means of providing audiences with an Australian supplement to the dominant Hollywood features, as well as educating and informing audiences about Yolngu culture. "National Cinemas often work to produce social purposes as a means of enlisting local audiences." (O'Regan: 1996:66). *Yolngu Boy* is a film that prompts social discussion concerning issues to do with Aboriginality, reconciliation, inter-cultural dialogue, friendship and unity, and formations of identity.

Yolngu Boy is the story of three Aboriginal boys, yet the film is bought to us in English as opposed to being in Yolngu dialect. This has been an intentional ploy by Johnson, "Johnson decided that, if the film was going to reach a wider audience, then it had to be shot in English." (King: 2001:Website). *Yolngu Boy* was shot in English in order to benefit both the local and international audience. "With its large market and considerable

wealth, the English language is the dominant audiovisual language." (O'Regan:1996:83). Had the film been shot in an Aboriginal dialect the audience would have been very limited. Johnson also decided against the idea of working with subtitles for he felt that they would distract the audience away from what was taking place upon the screen and that it would be hard for them to then follow the story and the journey of *Yolngu Boy*. (Johnson:2001). This journey being part of the genre that *Yolngu Boy* has been created from.

Though *Yolngu Boy* is distinctively Australian it is also a film that employs a distinctive genre, that of the "rites of passage" and the "road movie". These are genres that audiences are familiar with. Thus, the use of these genres will aid in both local and overseas sales as the audience will have some form of understanding as to what the film is meant to be about. However, *Yolngu Boy* must remain in some way "Australian" in order to avoid "ripping off" Hollywood films. As O'Regan states, "Australian cinema must not imitate so much as negotiate." (1996:106). Thus *Yolngu Boy* must deploy its own set of Australian values, it must look and feel "Australian". *Yolngu Boy* could be situated in what is known as Lotman's model of cultural transfer, particularly within what he describes as the third stage, this is where a film will, "Re-evaluate the home culture's product in a situation of assumed international comparison. Australian films can be appreciated because they are true to the film making ideals derived from over there but renovated and innovated here." (O'Regan:1996:220). The renovation and innovation of *Yolngu Boy* is what makes it distinctively Australian.

By virtue of being constructed within the Australian National Cinema as part of a medium sized English language cinema, *Yolngu Boy* has to work against the stereotypes that are formed when one mentions the word Aboriginal Film. "By virtue of its medium size, Australia and Australians become known internationally for a narrow range of things: peoples, stereotypes, myths and settings. They are known as "Outback" types, freaks, Aboriginal peoples and convicts." (O'Regan:1996:92). *Yolngu Boy* avoids displaying the stereotypical images

of the "primitive" Aborigine; or as Colin Johnson states, "The noble-savage, a stereotype familiar to us from Tarzan." (1987:52). *Yolngu Boy* is set in contemporary Arnhem Land and whilst the boys may uphold traditional values, they are still "in the present" as they wear funky clothing, have mobile phones and listen to rock music. *Yolngu Boy* highlights the inter-relation of two cultures in one country and does not play upon the stereotypes that are evident in a lot of films that feature Aborigines.

Conclusion — Yolngu Boy and its value within Australian National Cinema

Despite *Yolngu Boy* being distinctively Australian, despite its social message and significance, it is still treated with a sense of caution and this highlights its place with Australian National Cinema and its value. It has been stated that films about Aborigines are never really that popular. As is stated on the *Yolngu Boy* official website, "In a period spanning forty years only two Australian films featuring an Aboriginal theme have come close to enjoying some degree of success — *Jedda* and *Walkabout*." This says a lot about the value of Aboriginal films within Australian National Cinema and its audience(s), especially when there are such fabulous Aboriginal films such as Rachel Perkins' *Radiance* (1998) and Tracey Moffatt's *beDevil* (1993). It seems as though the common consensus is that Aboriginal films are "important" but accepted that they will probably not be seen. As David Stratton suggests, "*Yolngu Boy* looks great but despite its qualities it is unlikely to make much of a splash. *Down Under*, where films on Aboriginal themes are generally box office poison." (2001:44). The box office figures (appendix B) highlight that *Yolngu Boy* has been popular and it is certainly gaining widespread interest through word of mouth. Hopefully audiences in general will come to appreciate the importance of *Yolngu Boy* in both its presentation and creation and that this attitude that Aboriginal films just will not be seen can be overturned.

<http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/film/dbase/2001/yolngu.html>

Cast

John Sebastian Pilakui Lorrpu

Sean Mununggurr Botj

Nathan Daniels Milika

Lirrina Mununggurr Yuwan

Makuma Yunupingu Matjala

Mangatja Yunupingu Maralitja Man

Gurkula (Jack Thompson) Policeman

Garritjpi Garawirrtja Botj (9 years)

Buywarri Mununggurr Lorrpu (9 years)

Buwata Mununggurr Milika (9 years)

Yithangarra Wunungmurra Ruwu

Lalambarri Yunupingu Lorrpu's Father

Balupalu Yunupingu Milika's Father

Malati Yunupingu Botj's Father

Merrki Ganambarr Botj's Mother

Crew

Stephen Johnson Director

Stephen Johnson

Dr. Patricia Edgar Executive Producers

Dr. Patricia Edgar

Gordon Glenn Producers

Galarrwuy Yunupingu

Mandawuy Yunupingu Associate Producers

Chris Anastassiades Writer/Screenplay

Brad Shield Director of Photography

Ken Shallows Editor

Maggie Mills Casting

Finance

Australian Film Finance Corporation

Australian Children's Television Foundation

SBS Independent

Film Victoria Division of Cinemedia

Distributors

Australia and New Zealand Palace Films

Internationally Beyond Films

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