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WHAT'S 'WHITE' GOT TO DO WITH IT

A universal if tragic story of three young friends trying to find themselves while caught between cultures in a remote community, *Yolngu Boy* is the result of collaboration between the real Yolngu community and the filmmakers; and director Stephen Johnson explains to Andrew L. Urban why his being white has got nothing to do with it.

It seems odd to Stephen Johnson when the occasional oaf asks him what a white man's doing making a film about Aboriginal youth. "I grew up with these people in Darwin," he says by way of explanation, with a tone of incredulity in his voice. "I don't see them as different." Indeed, as he likes to point out, the story of *Yolngu Boy* could be about three 15 year olds anywhere in Australia. Or the world.

The story of Lorrpu (John Sebastian Pilakui), Botj (Sean Mununggurr) and Milika (Nathan Daniels), three boys of the Yolngu people in a remote Arnhem Land community, pulls no punches, makes no judgements and has no-one walking happily into the tropical sunset. It deals very clearly with how the youngsters struggle with identity and self in a world of two cultures where they see no clear role models or indeed a clear future.

"reconciliation, petrol sniffing"

"We never wanted to be judgmental," Johnson explains, sitting barefoot in a Sydney hotel room during a brief publicity tour, before heading back to Darwin to scratch his head about which film project to focus on next. "There are issues of reconciliation, petrol sniffing, social and cultural things . . . but we're not highlighting them. They're just the fibre of contemporary Aboriginal life. It's more focused on the three friends."

It took five years to develop the script, which was written by Johnson's collaborator Chris Anastassiades, including lots of workshoping, "and going hunting, fishing and playing basketball with the people. It's all derived from actual observations."

"send a message"

An English born filmmaker, Johnson's family travelled to the Bahamas and Africa before arriving in Darwin. It's his home town. Professionally, his connection to famed music group Yothu Yindi – as music video maker – gave him access that became crucial to the film. "Access is all based on trust," he explains. "And the genesis of the 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 . . . and the reward for me is to have young people in the region seen and heard through their own eyes. And to send a message about making the right choices in life – not just the young, but the adults, too."

On the other hand, Johnson hopes the film will be seen primarily as entertainment, although it is hardly a comedy. Nurtured by its producer Dr Patricia Edgar of the Children's Television Foundation – whom Johnson describes as the film's Number One champion, followed closely by the Yolngu themselves, especially the Yunupingu – *Yolngu Boy* is aimed at a youth audience, says Johnson, "but by its nature and because of its unique aspects – seeing inside the reality – it will cross over to adults."

"Yolngu magic"

Making the film deserves a whole book, with physical and creative difficulties, "amazing negotiations to get access to places," all peppering the journey. But there were also moments of mystic support. Johnson recalls one especially memorable incident, when a spectacular shot was to be filmed on a remote escarpment, requiring helicopter delivery and hefty logistics.

Having obtained the necessary permission, the crew turned up at dawn ready to shoot, when an elder intervened, saying "he felt it wasn't safe for us to do it," says Johnson. "So I talked to him and asked if we could shoot a bit lower down the giant escarpment, and he said okay. So we got there, and just as we were completing the shot, a massive black cloud floated in over the original spot and there was a little tropical storm. Had we gone as planned, we would not have got our shot," he says, still amazed. "There were a lot of similar incidents....Yolngu magic, maybe. It was a good feeling."

For the future, Johnson is undecided, except he doesn't want to be pigeon holed. "I've seen quite a lot of this wonderful world and as a filmmaker I'd like to tell stories about it."

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