

Article

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Phillip Noyce: Director of Many Moods

Rabbit Proof Fence

Celebrated Australian director Phillip Noyce cannot be boxed into a particular ‘genre’ of filmmaking. On one hand, he made blockbusters in Hollywood like *The Quiet American* with Michael Caine, *The Bone Collector* with Angelina Jolie, etc. and then back in his homeland he made *Rabbit Proof Fence*, a tale of human tenacity based on a true story of three Aborigine girls escaping from a detention camp when the then Australian government set up these to ‘educate’ and ‘civilize’ the indigenous people of mixed parentage with white fathers. This film was screened, along with his other works, at the 24th Kolkata International Film Festival (2018) when Australia was the focus country. Noyce was present at the festival and conducted a couple of workshops for the cine enthusiasts.

Noyce’s obsession with the moving images began when he was introduced to ‘underground’ (as opposed to Hollywood big studio films and its distribution network and made more as personal expression by passionate followers of cinema) short films in 1968 made by a group of young Australian filmmakers under the Ubu banner on a shoe-string budget. As Noyce recalls, after watching their seventeen short films which he attended more out of curiosity and expectation to enjoy some ‘vicarious thrills’ as the ‘underground’ term connoted, he was stunned by the experience. ‘On that night I guess my whole attitude to art, my whole attitude to movies-in fact my whole life-changed’, thinking, ‘I’m gonna make movies like that. I can do it.’

It was a long journey. He saved money to

make a short film from wages he earned by digging sewerage ditches when he was in between high school and college. He made other short films later. He considers *Backroads*, about a white vagrant and an aborigine on a road trip after stealing a car, his first feature film though only 60 minutes long.

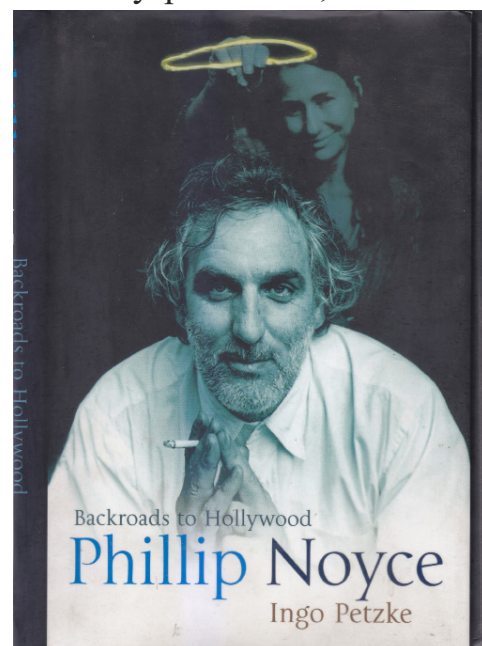
Hollywood came calling and Noyce spent a decade (1989-2000) when many of his films became box office hits – *Blind Fury*, *Patriot Games*, *Sliver*, *The Saint*, *The Bone Collector*, to name a few.

Ingo Petzke who has written a biography *Phillip Noyce: Backroads to Hollywood* observes that, ‘In his American films...he seems to be nearly obsessed with high-tech equipment, particularly surveillance technology in all its forms ... Also typical is his thorough researching of the subject matter of his potential films.’

As Noyce himself says, ‘Preparing to shoot a film is like training to run a marathon,’ and ‘unfortunately’ he is a perfectionist when it comes to his approach to work. But Noyce does not attempt to ‘lecture his audience’ Petzke writes. ‘With him we usually see a style that is in love with the power of the film image ...He works with skill and commitment to get the best out of any film project – with sensitive interpretation of the actors’ performances and mastery of image composition and *mise en scene*.’

Then Noyce ‘came home’ literally, to make *Rabbit Proof Fence* set in Australia in the 1930s. The script was offered to him by doc-

umentary maker Christine Olsen who had bought the rights to the book *Follow the Rabbit –Proof Fence* written by Doris Pilkington –Garimara, daughter of Molly Craig, the main protagonist based on her true story. Noyce was attracted by the universality of the story but he was busy with reworking a screenplay with Harrison Ford in the lead. It went on and on through many rewrites. Ultimately, ‘I began to feel frustrated with the whole Hollywood system and my place in it,’ recalls Noyce in



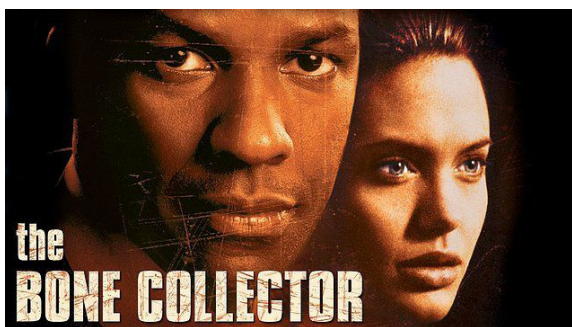
PHILLIP NOYCE Book Cover.

the book and returned to Australia to make the film.

The story portrays the agony of the displaced Aborigines in that era, thousands of whom were forcibly removed from their families. This is one of the darkest chapters in Australia’s history. As he said in Kolkata Noyce, ‘This is a marvellous adventure story and thriller, celebrating courage and the resilience of the human spirit.’

It is 1931. From a small depot, Jigalong, on

the edge of the desert, runs a rabbit-proof fence bisecting the continent from north to south. The purpose of the fence is to keep the rabbits out of the pasture. Molly, her sister Daisy, and their cousin Gracie are three independent-minded Aboriginal girls in the close-knit community. Their fathers are white fence workers who are cut off from white Australian society, the only connection being the weekly ration day at Jigalong Depot.



Meanwhile, in Perth, the area's Chief Protector of Aborigines, who believes that the answer to the 'coloured problem' is to breed out the Aboriginal race, passes the order that children of mixed marriages cannot marry full-blooded Aborigines. Settlements are set up across the state and 'half-caste' children are removed from their families to train them as domestic servants and labourers to serve the white bosses. The three girls are forcibly removed from their homes and family and are relocated 1,200 miles away. The harsh conditions of the settlement is not for the free spirited girls and they decide to run away. Despite having Moodoo, a cruel and master tracker on their tails, they evade the pursuers and take a gruelling three-month journey home, following the rabbit-proof fence as a guide.

Casting was a major problem for the film. A three-month search across Australia among Aborigine communities, helped by their leaders and school teachers, found 2000 girls auditioning; interviewing 800 of them Noyce selected the three girls. The effort shows- the girls fit the roles perfectly.

Cinematographer Chris Doyle deliberately adopts a 'washed-out look', not a pretty picture-postcard depiction of the Australian backwaters because for the girls it's a world 'harsh and cruel and tormenting' in his own words.



Still from Rabbit Proof Fence

Noyce believes that a musical score holds a film together (unlike the general notion that 'story is king') giving it a language that merges with the story as he revealed in a workshop in Kolkata. So he took pains to convince the legendary composer Peter Gabriel (of *The Last Temptation of Christ* fame) to join in. "We sent him sound recordings of Australian bird-calls, beats of indigenous instruments, even conversations, and sitting in London Ga-

briel composed the marvellous background score that enlivens the girls' journey authentically.



A Still from Rabbit Proof Fence

Noyce is a music aficionado and has an eclectic collection of tracks. 'It keeps me young,' he says. Though there was some controversy in Australia due to the sensitive subject, *Rabbit Proof Fence* went on to win awards in major international film festivals, and was well-accepted by the Australian audience.

Asked why he left Hollywood's big budget scenario to come back and make this film, Noyce tells Petzke, '..the idea of making a film that celebrates Aboriginal family history as an important component of mainstream Australian history was an irresistible challenge...When I grew up we knew nothing about Aborigines, we didn't talk about them. Aborigines weren't counted in the census un-

til 1967 ... they were second category of human beings.'



Phillip Noyce

In 2008, Kevin Rudd, then prime minister, apologised for causing '.. the pain, suffering and hurt of these Stolen Generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry.'

Noyce says that despite making so many successful films (both at box office and artistic recognition) *Rabbit Proof Fence* for him is 'both the best and the one closest to his heart' because it portrays Aborigines in a positive way not seen before in Australia.

For all his achievements Noyce does not believe a director can take sole responsibility for a film. As he reiterates, "A director is totally dependent on their crew. We might wish it were otherwise, but we can't make movies by ourselves.'

To this day, from his first short made with savings as sewerage digger to encompassing continents with his work, Noyce has remained breathing, dreaming and living cinema. 'I am *my* films,' he admits frankly.

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