

# 25 years on, classic film still shocks

By MARGARET SMITH  
in Sydney



THE classic Aboriginal film *Lousy Little Sixpence* has just turned

25-years-old, but it still shocks viewers with its stories of stolen children, stolen wages and systemic discrimination.

Even today, it remains one of Ronin Films' best sellers.

The film screened recently at the Campbelltown Art Centre in a festival organised by curator Djon Mundine to celebrate Indigenous artists.

Five stolen children – Margaret Tucker, Bill Reid, Geraldine Briggs, Flo Caldwell and Violet Shaw – told their stories in the documentary, narrated by Chicka Dixon. It depicts how a servant class was created on Aboriginal reserves with little regard for human rights.

The film starts in 1900 and chronicles personal and bigger-picture histories until the 1970s. It includes the impact of wars, the Depression and the Aboriginal protest movements.

Film producers Gerry Bostock and Alec Morgan were present at the screening and answered questions from the audience. They described how they travelled through Victoria and New South Wales looking for archival evidence such as newspaper stories, photographs and newsreel footage, most of which had never been seen by the general public. The film took three years to research and produce.

"Many of the archives were kept in boxes because no-one had looked at them. In those days archival footage was only \$40 a minute, but now they charge by the second," said Mr Bostock.

The pair found disturbing images of Indigenous children lining up for their rations from white mission managers, absurd servant work practices, Aboriginal farming enterprises, and strong protest leaders and large rallies, to name just a few.

The research wasn't funded and they had to stay in caravans because they were mainly on unemployment benefits. They wanted the stories of their five interviewees to be backed up by archives, 'but even then we were accused of fabricating the evidence', Mr Bostock said. When they made the film,



An image from *Lousy Little Sixpence*.

they had small investors from various sources such as the Nurses Union, and the Australian Film Commission.

They needed \$10,000 to finish the film, so when Bob Hawke was elected Prime Minister of a new Labor Government, they and Chika Dixon set up a meeting with the new Aboriginal Affairs Minister, Clive Holding.

"The Labor Party needed to show they were on side with

*Sixpence* came out in 1983, and showed for six weeks at Sydney's Dendy Cinema.

"It was the same time that Henry Reynolds' book, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, was released, and there was a hunger in the wider community to learn more about Aboriginal people, as nothing was out there," he said.

But their troubles didn't end there. ABC-TV wasn't interested in screening the film, so they had to get a petition to convince the broadcaster. The film was then taken up by Linda Burney when she headed the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, and it became a text for schools.

"(Author) John Pilger even told us that he'd seen it being projected in a remote NT Aboriginal community," Mr Bostock said.

Mr Morgan explained that back then, there was no word or term for the Stolen Generations.

"So the film was very significant in bringing this whole issue to the public. Later it influenced Phillip Noyce's film *Rabbit Proof Fence*," he said.

"It took 25 years after the release of *Lousy Little Sixpence* for the Prime Minister of Australia to formally apologise to the Stolen Generations."

The festival continues at the Campbelltown Art Centre.



An image from the classic Aboriginal film *Lousy Little Sixpence*

Aboriginal people. We were euphoric when we got the money and Clive Holding took us to dinner," Mr Bostock recalled.

Alec Morgan said it was a phenomenon when *Lousy Little*