

The Balanda and the Bark Canoes

A documentary about making Ten Canoes

May, 2005

Central Arnhem Land, Australia

'We are making a movie. The story is their story, those that live on this land, in their language, and set a long time before the coming of the Balanda, as we white people are known. For the people of the Arafura Swamp, this film is an opportunity, maybe a last chance to hold on to the old ways. For all of us, the challenges are unexpected, the task beyond anything imagined. For me, it is the most difficult film I have made, in the most foreign land I've been to...and it is Australia.' – Rolf de Heer



Directors' Q & A

Q: What was the inspiration behind this documentary? And/or how did it come about?

The documentary is a companion to the feature film *Ten Canoes*. *Ten Canoes* is an in-language indigenous tragi-comedy set in the historical (pre-white settlement) and mythical past of the Ganalbingu (Yolngu) people.

It is a cautionary tale of love, lust and revenge gone wrong. Although financed, the film spent three years in the development phase. There were a number of reasons why but one of them included consolidating the early rapport and trust between Rolf, his team and the community. During this time, Rolf began visiting the communities regularly and would return with new sets of working challenges and with stories full of adventure. It became apparent that a compelling documentary could be made in its own right. Rolf approached SBS Independent, investors in the feature film *Ten Canoes*, about documenting the already crazy yet exhilarating journey. It was a proposition that SBS openly and readily embraced.



The documentary is not so much about the making of *Ten Canoes* but of the trials and tribulations of two peoples with different cosmologies working together to realise a common goal. This common goal is not the making of a film (that is a vehicle and physical manifestation), but as Djigirr, the co-director of *Ten Canoes*, so aptly

says in the documentary, *"If we go more further with losing our law then white man can tell us, 'Where's your culture? Nothing, you're lost, well bad luck for you'"*. The common goal is about having respect for one another and one another's cultures.

Q: What do you like/find challenging about making documentaries? Did you encounter any particular challenges in making this documentary and, if so, how did you overcome them? Any lucky breaks, and if so, how did they come about and how did you embrace them?

One of the great challenges with this documentary, as with the film, is the fundamental difference in language and expression. The Yolngu language is very different; for example they don't use conjunctions like *but* or *because*. They also don't have specific words for pronouns like *you* and *I*. Instead the Yolngu word for *we* takes on many meanings depending on the context in which the words were spoken. For example, *we* could be referring to self and everyone else or it could mean those two people over there. It is largely an oral language and one needs to be in-situ to be able to understand the full meaning of what is said.



These differences did not really present themselves until it came time to translate everything that was spoken in-language. Gladys, our wonderful translator for the doco, worked hard to overcome the challenges of translating out of physical context and usually succeeded. There were scenes like the one towards the end of

documentary where the extras are marvelling over the photos that Beverley (Ten Canoes Art Director) had in her working book. One set photo was of a speared man lying dead with the spear jutting out of his back. In the film he had been speared as he was going to the toilet and the turd was lying alongside him. Gladys, in her translation, ascribed their admiration for the balanda technology to the turd prop instead of the life-like spear sticking out of the dead man's back. It was sometime later in the edit that Tania, the editor, noted they must have actually been talking about the fake bloodied spear because there was nothing very tricky about making a fake turd.

Gladys came and stayed with us for almost a week to do all the translating and there was a lot of laughter trying to work out what had happened and what was said. There were hours of footage for which we had high expectations, only to learn that they were talking about the weather. Then there were a couple of wonderful gems. One scene that comes to mind is the conversation that the mob are having about the women being on set as observers. In the words of Bobby, one of the ten canoeists, "*What are they doing here? We're naked and trying to make a film!*". It goes from there.

Q: How does the documentary relate to your past work, if at all? Was this film a natural next step or a radical departure from your previous work in film, TV etc?

Essentially we all work in the craft of story-telling, in particular story-telling for the screen. In making the feature film, *Ten Canoes*, we realised that there was tremendous potential for good and entertaining factual stories to be told – hence this documentary.



The adventure began with *Ten Canoes*, but many other related projects developed soon after. There are nine related projects including *Eleven Canoes*, a training program in which the local students learnt to make video stories, the exhibition *Thirteen Canoes* which showcases the local art, especially that relating to the film

and *Eighteen Canoes*, as this documentary was once called. The book and the website are still works in progress and the screening of rushes on the local close-circuit TV during shooting was never quite realised (and no that story did not make the doco).

Q: Any other production anecdotes/stories?

“That’s disgusting” has become a part of our regular vocabulary. It was Bobby’s response upon learning that one of the canoeists had absconded on the first day of the shoot. As Rolf announces this to the actors, who are about to go naked for the first time, the only response is Bobby’s *“That’s disgusting”*. No-one asks who is he, why did he do it, when did he go or how is he going to make the 20 kilometres home. There is a natural acceptance that is so different to our culture and yet is made very funny by Bobby’s disgust. We are pleased to find our audiences have been amused by it as we have.

Filmmaker biographies (2006)

Writer/Director Molly Reynolds

Making Ten Canoes marks a return to production for Molly Reynolds. Reynolds has worked on dramas, documentaries and TVCs in various capacities including assistant editor, post production supervisor and production manager.

For the past decade Reynolds has concentrated on digital media. At the ABC she produced, designed and created content in a cross-media environment. As the Executive Producer at Beyond Online (part of the Beyond group), her crew pioneered production processes and created three award-winning broadband channels (ATOM 2002). Reynolds has also been in the employ of the South Australian Film Corporation as Head of Development and Investment.

When working as an independent, Reynolds has consulted, produced and directed across various media and for entities like the NSW Government, the AFC and Film Australia. Molly Reynolds has also taught media and is a published industry commentator/broadcaster.

Writer/Director/Editor Tania Nehme

An editor since 1986, Tania Nehme edited numerous documentaries, commercials and short dramas before she cut her first feature, EPSILON, for Rolf de Heer in 1995.

A graduate of the Australian Film Television & Radio School, Nehme was nominated for an Australian Film Institute [AFI] Award for Best Editor in 1991 for her work on the short drama ONCE IN A TIME.

Working as both picture and sound editor, THE TRACKER was the fifth feature Nehme has cut with de Heer, earning her Best Editor nominations at both the 2002 AFI Awards and the 2002 Film Critics Circle Awards.

Nehme also edited, DANCE ME TO MY SONG, THE SOUND OF ONE HAND CLAPPING and THE QUIET ROOM.

Apart from feature films, Nehme edited the Barron Television children's series CHUCK FINN, the SBS Australia documentary KUMARANGK 5214 and the Australian Film Commission funded short feature THE 13th HOUSE.

Nehme worked on her sixth feature collaboration with Rolf de Heer, ALEXANDRA'S PROJECT, which resulted in nominations for Best Editing for Film Critic's Circle and AFI awards in 2003.

As well as film editing nominations, Nehme also received nominations for an IF and AFI Award as part of the sound team for THE TRACKER (2002) and ALEXANDRA'S PROJECT (2003).

In 2004, Nehme won Best Editor at the IF Awards for THE OLD MAN WHO READ LOVE STORIES. In that year, she also received nominations for Best Editing at the Film Critic's Circle and AFI Awards.

Nehme recently completed editing her seventh feature film with de Heer, TEN CANOES.

Writer/Director/Producer Rolf de Heer

Born in Holland, Rolf de Heer migrated to Australia with his family in 1959. From eighteen, he spent seven years working at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. In 1977, he was granted entry into Australia's prestigious Film Television and Radio School, completing the three-year course with Diplomas in Production and Directing. Since then, de Heer has become one of Australia's leading filmmakers.

De Heer's first film, the children's feature TAIL OF A TIGER (1984), attracted both critical and commercial success and played at the Berlin Kinderfest. INCIDENT AT RAVEN'S GATE (1987) was an atmospheric science fiction mystery thriller, followed by DINGO (1990) a musical odyssey that travelled from outback Western Australia to the streets of Paris starring Colin Friels and jazz legend Miles Davis in his only film role.

BAD BOY BUBBY (1993) marked de Heer's first collaboration with Italian producer Domenico Procacci. It won the Grand Special Jury Prize and the International Film Critics Prize at the 1993 Venice Film Festival, as well as four Australian Film Institute Awards. De Heer spent the next two years working on EPSILON (1995) which made extensive use of motion control cinematography. During a break in filming, THE QUIET ROOM was shot. The story of a family breakdown as seen through the eyes of a child, THE QUIET ROOM was selected for Official Competition in the 1996 Cannes International Film Festival.

In 1997 de Heer directed DANCE ME TO MY SONG, selected for Official Competition at the 1998 Cannes Film Festival. In 1999, de Heer spent three months in the jungles of French Guyana shooting THE OLD MAN WHO READ LOVE STORIES starring Richard Dreyfuss and Hugo Weaving. De Heer's next film, THE TRACKER, was shot on location in the rugged Gammon Ranges in outback Australia and debuted to standing ovations at the 2002 Adelaide Festival of Arts and in Official Competition at the 2002 Venice International Film Festival. The film won, among others, the Special Jury Prize at the 2002 Valladolid International Film Festival. In Australia it won Best Film at both the 2002 Circle of Film Critics Awards and the 2002 IF (people's) Awards.

ALEXANDRA'S PROJECT was selected to participate in Official Competition at the prestigious Berlin International Film Festival in 2003 and went on to screen at numerous international festivals including Puchon, Edinburgh, Telluride, Toronto and Montreal.

TEN CANOES is de Heer's eleventh feature and was selected for Un Certain Regard at the 2006 Cannes International Film Festival. He is currently working on a black and white, silent comedy called DR PLONK.

Producer Julie Ryan

After briefly working as an assistant in a film publicity company, Julie Ryan entered the Australian film industry in 1996 when she worked as production secretary with Rolf de Heer on THE SOUND OF ONE HAND CLAPPING.

She joined Vertigo Productions as production manager on de Heer's feature film DANCE ME TO MY SONG, which was selected for Cannes in 1998. She then produced the award winning SBS documentary, HEATHER ROSE GOES TO CANNES.

In 1999, Ryan spent three months in the jungles of French Guyana co-producing her first feature film, THE OLD MAN WHO READ LOVE STORIES, starring Richard Dreyfuss and Hugo Weaving. The film was nominated for Best Film at the 2005 Film Critics Circle of Australia Awards, Australian Film Institute Awards and the IF Awards.

Ryan's next feature with de Heer, THE TRACKER, was shot entirely on location in the rugged Northern Flinders Ranges and premiered to critical acclaim at the Adelaide Festival of Arts and at the Venice International Film Festival in 2002. The film also won Best Film at the 2002 Film Critics Circle and IF Awards, and received a Best Film nomination from the AFI Awards.

Ryan's next feature film, ALEXANDRA'S PROJECT, was selected for official competition at the Berlin Film Festival. It was also nominated for Best Film at the Film Critics and AFI Awards in 2003.

Ryan has recently finished the feature film TEN CANOES, her fourth feature film with de Heer. The film was selected for Un Certain Regard at the 2006 Cannes International Film Festival. She is currently working with de Heer on a black and white, silent comedy called DR PLONK.

Credits

Written & Directed by
Molly Reynolds
Tania Nehme
Rolf de Heer

Camera
James (Jackson) Geurts
Charlie Hill-Smith

Editor
Tania Nehme

Producers
Rolf de Heer
Julie Ryan

Executive Producer
Sue Murray

Translator
Gladys Womati

Consultant
Peter Djigirr

1st Assistant Editor
Natasha Burfield

2nd Assistant Editor
Daryl Watson

Sound Editor & Mixer
Tom Heuzenroeder

Online Grader
Jon Armstrong

Production Accountants
Mark Kraus
Nils Erik Nielsen

Post Production House

THE LAB

Steve Marolho

Chris McHugh

Legals

Bryce Menzies, Marshalls & Dent

Completion Guarantor

Jenny Woods, Film Finances

Traditional Music Performed by

Bobby Bunungurr

Richard Birrinbirrin

Peter Minygululu

Billy Black

John Nudumul

Mark Muruwirri

Incidental Music by

Rupert Gaykamangu

Photograph by D.F. Thomson

Courtesy of Mrs D.M. Thomson and Museum of Victoria

The filmmakers sincerely thank:

The community and traditional landowners of Ramingining and Murwangi

The Cast & Crew of Ten Canoes

Belinda Scott

Billy Black

Bobby Bunungurr

Carl Dhalurruma

Cathy Gallagher

Crusoe Kurddal

David Gulpilil

Deb & Andrew Martin
Frances Djulibing
Gurney Lodge, North Adelaide
Jamie Gulpilil
Johnny (Pascoe) Buniyira
Judd Overton
Kristine Placanica
Louise Partos
Michael Dawu
Peter Minygululu
Philip Gudthaykudthay
Richard Birrinbirrin
South Australian Film Corporation
Steven Wilinydjanu Maliburr

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Commissioning Editor Trevor Graham



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