

Generation Films present

# WOMEN OF THE SUN

25 YEARS LATER

A FILM BY BOB WEIS

In memory and respect the following indigenous people who portrayed characters in  
**WOMEN OF THE SUN**

Mrs Margaret Tucker MBE

Molly Dyer

Bob Maza

Wandjuk Marika

Essie Coffey

Joyce Johnson

Paul Pryor

Freddie Reynolds

Iris Lovett-Gardner

## INTERVIEWEES

Sonia Borg

Professor Marcia Langton

Djerrkngu Yunupingu

and her sons Ralkurra and Bakamumu Marika

Shirley Nirrpurranydjji

Naykalan Mununggur

Gatja Munyarryun

Chips Mackinolty

Justine Saunders

Boori (Monty) Pryor

Michelle LaCombe

Eva Johnson

Renee Johnson

**Cinematographer** Jason Ramp

**Colour Grade** Adrian Hauser

**Sound recordist** Nathan Codner

**Editor** Rani Chaleyer

**Additional Editing** Cindi Clarkson

**Composer** Ruby Hunter

**Performed by** Ruby Hunter, Amos Roach, Willie Zygier

**Music Engineer** Willie Zygier

**Translator** Mayatili Marika

**Co-producer & research** Julie Andrews

**80 minutes Rated PG**

### Distribution enquiries:

RONIN FILMS

PO Box 1005, Civic Square ACT 2608

Phone: 02-6248 0851 Fax: 02-6249 1640

Email: [andrew.pike@roninfilms.com.au](mailto:andrew.pike@roninfilms.com.au)

### Publicity enquiries:

TRACEY MAIR

50 Bay Vista Lane, Ewingsdale NSW 2481

Phone: 02-6684 7128

Email: [traceym@tmpublicity.com](mailto:traceym@tmpublicity.com)



# WOMEN OF THE SUN

25 YEARS LATER

## SYNOPSIS

**WOMEN OF THE SUN** is a remarkable drama series that screened on Australia television in 1981. It had a tremendous impact, bringing the Aboriginal story through the eyes of Aboriginal women – in their own language – to a national audience for the first time.

Twenty-five years later, Bob Weis, the producer of **WOMEN OF THE SUN**, sets out to find out the impact of the film on five of the women who played major roles in the original series. His journey – from Arnhem Land to the southern states – reveals a profound and moving tale of discovery, for himself and those with whom he meets.

In the film, Bob Weis interviews renowned actor Justine Saunders, actor/playwright Eva Johnson, academic Marcia Langton and co-writer of the original series Sonia Borg. Remarkable footage includes Bob Weis' return to Yirrkala where he found the cast for the first episode of the original series, and archival footage of Hyllus Maris who co-wrote the series.



# WOMEN OF THE SUN

25 YEARS LATER

## BOB WEIS BIOGRAPHY

Bob Weis is a director, screenwriter, producer and executive producer and has been one of Australia's most highly regarded filmmakers for more than three decades.

Bob began his film career with a documentary about the seminal Australian rock band Daddy Cool and went on to produce the feature PURE S, part of Australian cinema's resurgence in the 1970's.

Another film CHILDREN OF THE MOON and a children's TV series STAX followed but for a number of years Bob was primarily involved with the Pram Factory theatre in Melbourne and the establishment of the cultural and training organisation Open Channel.

Bob is perhaps best known as a producer of quality television mini-series. As well as **WOMEN OF THE SUN**, his producer credits include WATERFRONT, THE DUNERA BOYS, THE PETROV AFFAIR, and CASSIDY. Bob was executive producer on THE EMPTY BEACH and also produced the short television series SIX PACK, SEVEN DEADLY SINS and RAW FM.

His feature films as producer include the Australian films THE CLINIC, GEORGIA, WILLS AND BOURKE and LUCKY BREAK and the international productions RAGGEDY RAWNEY (UK), HEARTBREAKERS (US) and THE COLD ROOM (UK).

As a documentary filmmaker, Bob has produced and directed **WOMEN OF THE SUN - 25 YEARS LATER** and produced RAOUL WALLENBERG - BETWEEN THE LINES.

The principal of Generation Films, Bob Weis, was the Chairman of the Australian Film Institute for four years until 1998, and President of the Screen Producers Association of Australia for four years until 1994. From 1984 to 1990 he was a Council Member of the Australian Film TV and Radio School. Bob was also a Board Member of Museums Victoria and Film Victoria and is currently Chairman of the Australian Art Orchestra and a member of the Koorie Heritage Trust.



# WOMEN OF THE SUN

25 YEARS LATER

## JUSTINE SAUNDERS BIOGRAPHY

Justine Saunders, of Darumbal descent, had her first acting experience at a convent school in productions of *Finian's Rainbow* and *Annie Get Your Gun*. She joined the Aboriginal Black Theatre Art and Culture Centre company in Redfern soon after it was established, her first part being in Bob Merritt's play *The Cake Man*. Her television debut was in the ABC production of *PIG IN A POKE*. Saunders became a professional actor in 1974, although she later complained about stereotypical Aboriginal roles at the time. Her first film appearance was in *THE CHANT OF JIMMIE BLACKSMITH* (1978), followed by her role in **WOMEN OF THE SUN** (1982) and in *THE FRINGE DWELLERS* (1985).

In addition to acting, Justine helped establish the Black Theatre and the Aboriginal National Theatre Trust, taught drama at the Eora Centre, and participated in the 1987 and 1988 national indigenous playwrights conferences. She was declared the Aboriginal Artist of the Year by NADOC in 1985, and received an Order of Australia Medal for her service to the performing arts and national Aboriginal theatre in 1991. Justine later returned the Order of Australia Medal in protest at the Australian Government refusal to give an apology for the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families.

Justine's impressive professional acting career includes extensive theatre credits such as *The Crucible* (Sydney Theatre Company), *Marginal Farm* (Melbourne Theatre Company), *Black Mary* (Nibago) and *Bullie's House* (Nimrod and Long Wharf Theatre, Connecticut, United States).

Her other films include *UNTIL THE END OF THE WORLD* and *CHARLEY'S WEB* and her television credits include *Heartland*, *MDA*, *The Violent Earth*, *The Flying Doctors*, *Prisoner* and *Farscape*.

Among her many accomplishments and acknowledgments, Justine was awarded the Aboriginal Artist of the Year Award by Prime Minister Bob Hawke in 1985 and she received the 1999 Red Ochre Award. The Red Ochre Award was established by the Australia Council to pay tribute to an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander artist who, throughout their lifetime, has made outstanding contributions to the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts, at both national and international levels.



# WOMEN OF THE SUN

25 YEARS LATER

## EVA JOHNSON BIOGRAPHY

Eva Johnson was born in 1946 and belongs to the Mulak Mulak people of Daly River in the Northern Territory. In addition to being a playwright, she is an artist, student, speaker and political activist.

In 1979, *When I Die You'll All Stop Laughing* was the first play to be produced by Black Theatre in Adelaide. In 1981, *Faded Genes*, a dramatised revue on racism, was presented by Widjarooki Theatre. In 1984 she wrote, co-directed and acted in *Tjindarella*, part of the first National Aboriginal Women's Arts Festival. She was Aboriginal Artist of the Year in 1984. In 1987, *Murras* was workshopped at the National Black Playwrights Conference and the following year was presented at the Adelaide Fringe Festival. In 1988, Eva attended the first International Women Playwrights Conference in Buffalo, US, and was writer in residence at the Heart of the Earth, Native American Community School in Minnesota. *Mimini's Voices* was performed as part of the Hiroshima Arts Festival in Japan in 1990.

In 1991, Eva spoke at the International Feminist Book Fair in Barcelona, Spain. *Heartbeat of the Earth* had its world premiere at the 1993 Second World Indigenous Youth Conference in Darwin. In the same year Eva was the first Aborigine to be awarded the Australia Council Red Ochre Award in recognition of outstanding contribution to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Culture.

*What Do They Call Me?* (published in Australian Gay and Lesbian Plays) was first performed at the Lesbian Festival, Melbourne in 1990 and more recently was staged in New York in 1995 and in Western Australia in 2004 by Black Swan Theatre. *Bull Bar Tours*, co-written with Katherine Fitzgerald, was performed by Vitalstatix in 1996. Eva has collaborated on works with the Junction Theatre in Adelaide, with *Piercing the Skin* performed at the Space Theatre at the Adelaide Festival Centre.

Eva speaks regularly at universities and other educational institutions around the country on issues of race, class, sex and indigenous politics and she is completing a Bachelor of Arts in Indigenous Health at Darwin's Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education.

In 2004 Eva was artist in residence at the Parks Community Centre in Adelaide and she is a member of the Kinship Art Program run by the Indigenous Health Centre in Adelaide.



# WOMEN OF THE SUN

25 YEARS LATER

Interview with Bob Weis - May 2006

**INTERVIEWER:** Bob, can you tell me something about your career and how you see your place in the Australian film industry? For example the first film I seem to recall you having made is something to do with a rock festival and it went out on television.

**BOB WEIS:** You're talking about DADDY COOL, which has just been released on DVD. When I think about my film history, all I'm really thinking about is the last film and the next one. Or more accurately probably the next one because the last one is done, somebody else is worrying about it. One of the few exceptions was I suppose, **WOMEN OF THE SUN** because that has stayed with me, grown, and asked me questions for the last 26 years.

In terms of my place in the film industry that's really for someone else to answer. That's not something I'm even going to make an attempt on because really my view of it is not even interesting.

**INTERVIEWER:** You said you always wanted to make films. What was it about film that was so exciting and interesting for you?

**BOB WEIS:** I've always been a storyteller I suppose. I can think of myself back as a young teenager, twelve, thirteen or fourteen years old, holding parties and weaving together a passage of humour, or narrative of a story, and it always fascinated me. In a way I suppose it's a way of being able to work on yourself and your own past and story.

To me each film is a little organism that is being extruded and teased out and shaped into something that makes sense to me and hopefully to others.

Film is the only medium I am interested in working in. I've been working for the last ten or twelve years on the idea of writing of something that will end up as a piece of literature and that has taken a very sharp turn in the last couple of years. I would hope to be able to turn that around in the next two years.

**INTERVIEWER:** What was the stimulus in the first place for **WOMEN OF THE SUN**? Why were you drawn towards that particular story?

**BOB WEIS:** I remember very clearly reading the screenplays of **WOMEN OF THE SUN** as they existed then. They weren't all finished when I originally came to read the series, and thinking both consciously and unconsciously, I realised that this is our story. Now, this is our story, both as the Jews who were left in Europe after the war, and also very importantly our story as white Australians with a responsibility to the people of the land that we stole. We can never feel comfortable in this land until we own up, show up, and give up.



# WOMEN OF THE SUN

25 YEARS LATER

**INTERVIEWER:** Was the series, the four screen plays presented to you or were you involved in the inspiration of it and getting it started?

**BOB WEIS:** There were three screenplays finished or close to finished when I came to the project. I'll tell you the story: I was working Sonia Borg who was one of the writers. It was on a screenplay which I didn't really have a sense of her relationship to it.

So I said to her one day, just walking through the paddocks where she lived then, do you have anything that you feel very proud of, that you've written? I didn't know much about her work, and she very tentatively and shyly gave me the three scripts that existed to

date and said to me: "I know these will never be made but I really like them."

I took them home and put them by the bed and with the insomnia that I normally have, I picked them up in the middle of the night and I didn't put them down until I had finished.

I rang her up the very first thing in the morning and I said: "Sonia forget the other thing: this is what we are doing. And if we are going to make it we need the fourth episode written, let's set up a meeting with the co-writer"

The co-writer was Hyllus Maris, and never even thought at that stage it wouldn't be made. Luck plays an enormous part in every aspect of life, it doesn't matter how hard you work or how well planned you are. I sent the scripts to Bruce Gyngell at SBS and as luck would have it, he had to go down to Canberra to face a Senate enquiry and they asked him what he was doing about Aboriginal people and he said: "Oh I've got this wonderful series." Which he hadn't read. But then he read it and, to his credit, he said: "We want to make this." And I said to him: "Bruce, give me your feedback on the scripts." And he said to me, and I'll never forget this: "We don't get into bed with creative people to tell them what to do." I said: "Okay, but tell me what you thought I won't take it as an instruction."

And I had a very interesting conversation with him because in the first episode, I had the idea - and I got quite a bit of resistance to this - that people should speak their own language. It seemed to me ridiculous that you would have people who had never met Europeans, and that's the first 20 minutes of the first episode, speaking English. So I argued and argued and argued, and Bruce also said to me that he was not sure that it would work. I said: "Well, SHOGUN has just been to air, an American project, with Japanese spoken and subtitles." "Anyway" he said, "I'm not going to tell you what to do." And he was good to his word. He said: "Look, that's my feeling, you do what you think is right."

Now to have that sort of relationship today with any TV executive would be amazing. Perhaps you couldn't imagine it. They're right, you're wrong, do what you're told.



# WOMEN OF THE SUN

25 YEARS LATER

**INTERVIEWER:** So you were excited that it was the subject matter itself and you felt that it connected with your own Jewish background. Was it the first proper film made apart from the television film of 'Daddy Cool'?

**BOB WEIS:** No.

**INTERVIEWER:** What had you done before?

**BOB WEIS:** Well as a producer I'd done PURE S, for which I'd had some input into the screenplay as well. I'd done another film called CHILDREN OF THE MOON which was a sort of young extravagance.

I'd been on the edge of making a number of things, and then I went and worked in theatre. I worked at the Pram Factory for a number of years then set up Open Channel, which was a work of some passion and enjoyment. And did a kids' TV series called STAX.

**INTERVIEWER:** But this was a huge project, altogether different compared to your earlier work, but you saw it as a natural progression; you had a lot of confidence.

**BOB WEIS:** You see, your observations about what I do are from the outside, and my actions are very much from the inside. I never even think about, is this big, is this small, is it song, is it dance; it's just what I do.

**INTERVIEWER:** Okay. What were the challenges you faced with the production of the mini-series?

**BOB WEIS:** I remember something rather wonderful. When we held the auditions, one of the more experienced theatre actors came up to me and said, "You don't expect me to act with these people, do you? I'm a trained actor." And I just let it go; then he came up to me half way through the filming and he said: "You don't expect me to be as good as these people do you, they know what they're doing; I'm just pretending." So you know he had gone a huge distance, from the beginning, learning in the process.

I went up to the Northern Territory to meet up with Hyllus, who had family up there. We went up to recruit people to be in the first episode, and I had this thundering realisation that I'd got to the age of 28 without ever meeting an Aboriginal person. I mean to be able to say that is so overwhelmingly sad in a country that doesn't recognise anything to do with their history or their current cultural situation. There I was meeting people who suddenly treated me as a friend. I went back 25 years later for the documentary, and got out of the car, went to that man's house who is now dead, and his wife came up to me smiling, beaming, and I said "I'm...." and she said "I know, welcome back."





# WOMEN OF THE SUN

25 YEARS LATER

**INTERVIEWER:** How did you decide on the four directors for your series?

**BOB WEIS:** I cast the directors in the same way that I cast the actors I suppose. I looked around, talked to a lot of people. There were some directors who shall remain nameless who were much bigger in terms of stature at the time who seemed completely inappropriate to me. I included the writers in the process of choosing directors, so if they weren't happy with somebody it was out of the question. What I was looking for were people who were deeply committed to the story. And also people that could work with a combination of actors who did it for a living, and actors who were playing something that they understood from their own lives. It wasn't tremendously difficult, it just required patience and an attitude that I didn't think about at the time.

**INTERVIEWER:** Steven Wallace, who went on to do BLOOD OATH - what had he done at the time. Were you looking at films that they had previously done?

**BOB WEIS:** Of course. He had done a film called STIR with Brian Brown and he had also done LOVE LETTERS FROM TERALBA ROAD, and I just saw amazing tenderness in his approach to storytelling. I cast the directors very carefully and one very well known director had his agent call me and say he was prepared to be considered because he had time between this project and that project, and I said to the agent: "I'm really not interested." And he said: "Really?" I said "I don't want somebody who's got time between projects; I want somebody who is passionate about this."

**INTERVIEWER:** What about the other directors?

**BOB WEIS:** David Stevens, James Ricketson, Geoffrey Nottage - all of them in that moment of history were absolutely right for what they did, and that was all I cared about. What they've done since then and who they are now, that's their business.

**INTERVIEWER:** What feedback did you receive from the indigenous Australians when the mini-series went to air, what was their response?

**BOB WEIS:** I didn't get much feedback from Indigenous Australians at the time, and I was amazed recently, in the documentary, we talk to Marcia Langton, and she says when the series went to air, Aboriginal people all over Australia were glued to their sets, and it started a national conversation. Well, I didn't know that but that's partly why I made it, to get people talking.

The feedback I did get was mainly from the white community or communities. One thing I'd like to tell you about: I got a letter from a boy in Queensland and I'd love to catch up with him now; I'll never forget what he wrote, I will quote it to you, he said: "I didn't think I was a racist till I saw your series, now I know I am and I'm going to change." We've got people in Canberra who don't know that and who won't change anyway. So this was a very powerful statement. And it echoed in a way the complexity that a lot of people have.



# WOMEN OF THE SUN

25 YEARS LATER

I can say that unlike the opinion that many people in the industry had that no one would watch it and Australians wouldn't care about it, the opposite seems to have been true. It has been shown nationally four times, twice on the SBS and twice on the ABC, it's been on school curricula pretty much since it was made, there is a book of it, there is a book about it I mean, and it has been an important part of the conversation we have about being Australian. And who could ask for anything more than that.

**INTERVIEWER:** It won a United Nations award didn't it. What award was that?

**BOB WEIS:** The UN Media Peace Prize but it also won an award for the best TV drama for that year, which when you think about it, up against Nicholas Nickleby and Thorn Birds, either one of which spent over a hundred times what we spent in production costs.

**INTERVIEWER:** And of course now we are getting to the really interesting question, what made you re-visit the making of the film and wanting to make a documentary about it?

**BOB WEIS:** I'd commissioned research three or four years ago because I'd always wondered what was the impact on the people who were in it. I had no idea initially what the format of the eventual project would be. I don't really think about the form that a film is going to take. At the end of the day what really interests me is content; the format - musical, dance, comedy, drama, thriller, documentary - will be moulded by the research, the way that it stacks up. At the end of the day the stories that came back to me about these women were so astonishing, they could be told in drama but I wanted to tell each woman's story from her mouth to my ear then to your ear then to the ear of every person in Australia and overseas that wanted to hear about it. Even if they didn't know if they wanted to hear about it yet.

As more and more information came in it became absolutely compulsory to do. Not nice to do, not wouldn't it be interesting to do, but absolutely compulsory. I had to go and do it. Rather than spend a year or two thinking about it, I said this is what I'm doing now. Next Monday I'll be in Adelaide at Eva Johnson's house from there we will go to Darwin. And that's what we did, pretty much.

**INTERVIEWER:** And I suppose the answer is obvious now I've listened to you but, why direct it, since you've been a producer for most of your film time.

**BOB WEIS:** I trained as a director and I made the determination fairly early on that producers made films. There are two things I like: being involved in the screenplay and the development of the intellectual property, and then the producing.

In terms of producing what I tell a director if they come to me to find a producer for their project, is that I'm very hands on, I'm not going to sit in the background and smoke cigars, and if you want me I'm going to interfere a lot. I don't see it as interfering but if you're of the bent that would build the Australian industry around the auteur director then it could be seen as interfering. I think Australians completely misunderstood the idea of the auteur.



# WOMEN OF THE SUN

25 YEARS LATER

**INTERVIEWER:** What have you directed before?

**BOB WEIS:** I directed PROUD TO LIVE 30 years ago. I directed DADDY COOL. I directed CHILDREN OF THE MOON.

**INTERVIEWER:** So you're going back to direction.

**BOB WEIS:** I don't like to put it like this but I've kept my hand in all sorts of things. I've directed second unit on every film we've made.

**INTERVIEWER:** Can you talk about the breadth of your involvement with Indigenous support organisations, for example the Koorie trust?

**BOB WEIS:** I'm a board member of the Koorie Heritage Trust and I'm a fairly new board member so there is not much to say. I'm honoured to be in the company of the Koories and make whatever small contribution I can make to that organisation. I see myself more theoretically involved in the sort of political social stance of white Australia in a black country and as I said early on I think until we resolve the issues of how we can live in this country, tell the truth about what we did in this country, I don't think there is any rest for anybody. When you look at things like infant death and the rate of infant death in black communities compared to white, it's just so plain that there are two different Australia's. That is just completely and utterly unacceptable, it's wrong. And as long as there is breath in this body, something will have to be done about it. I almost said somebody will have to be held to account, but at the end of the day we don't care about that, if this society gets it right it doesn't matter who did what.

I have a credit on the film thanks to, and there are heaps of people to thank, you always forget somebody or other, but I was going to have a credit and say "no thanks to you know who you are" ....

I think there is a general point to make: I don't think a lot of films generally from anywhere try to grapple strongly with any sort of central idea; what they're trying to do is to be entertaining and sell tickets, and I think if you try and second guess what will get somebody to put their hand in their pocket and buy a ticket, you're not making films, your selling popcorn or doing something else. And inevitably the film is going to be weaker. I think passion has got a lot to do with it. If you feel passionate about an idea, then you will want to investigate it and the rest will follow or not.

**INTERVIEWER:** What are your hopes for the documentary about **WOMEN OF THE SUN**?

**BOB WEIS:** My major hope with anything that I make is first of all, that it will make a difference with somebody, and second, that it's a beginning of another conversation, and thirdly, that that conversation will go on and have an effect on the lives of society that it finds itself in.



# WOMEN OF THE SUN

25 YEARS LATER

**INTERVIEWER:** You think we are more ready for it now than 25 years ago?

**BOB WEIS:** I think the time has unquestionably brought a lot of difference and change in consciousness, and I think that the film is going to be important for Aboriginal people as much as it is for the wider society

**INTERVIEWER:** In what way? Seeing themselves again?

**BOB WEIS:** Having the validity of your story being told and out there in the wider community, I think is very important for all of us. As we've pointed out a number of times, it's been important for the Jewish community to have something out there that they could say "That's me", and there have been very very few opportunities in terms of Aboriginal people being able to tell their stories and have their stories told in an honest and direct way.

