

LAND OF THE LITTLE KINGS

By Dennis Pryor

THE AGE

"It's a mother's last attempt to save her children: "Run, kids, run that way.' I said, and we ran the other way to make the police follow us, not the kids." It is a story that punches holes in your heart. TRY TO IMAGINE THAT THE LAST WORD YOU HEARD FROM YOUR MOTHER WAS "RUN".

If you have tears to shed, prepare to shed them watching LAND OF THE LITTLE KINGS. Forget the political squabbling, the semantic quibbling, the meanness of the powerful. HERE ARE STORIES OF THE STOLEN GENERATION TOLD WITH SHATTERING DIRECTNESS.

The teller is Archie Roach and other Aboriginal victims with the help of Paul Kelly's LITTLE KINGS, which sings of so many lies in the name of history. It was a big king who sent the whitefellas to Australia. Their successors are the little kings and everywhere they are getting away with murder.

The shape of this formidable work is determined in the opening sequences. Roach sings the title song and then is seen drawing a circle in gravel. The circle is a powerful form with no beginning and no end, but for him it is the world and the circularity of life. If the circle is broken, we no longer know where to go.

He sets out in a circle that takes him around Australia, talking to us and to those of his people who have found, or failed to find, their parents, grandparents, birthplace. The effect of the journey is to give a sense of what it means to be spiritually attached to the place, and the people you and your ancestors came from.

He is an extraordinarily good listener. Few documentary makers can resist trying to massage the story into the form they have predetermined, but Roach lets them speak and the cameras play none of their clever tricks of cutting and polishing instead of looking.

THE RESULT IS THE CLOSEST THING WE HAVE TO AN AUSTRALIAN INDIGENOUS EPIC. LIKE ULYSSES LOOKING FOR ITHACA, THESE PEOPLE ARE LOOKING FOR THEIR ORIGINS. "My mother was born here. Your parents and grandparents gave you your story, they gave it back to you."

Globalised and rootless, many of us find it difficult to understand what it means to possess our own story.

Memory is the history of indigenous people. Mumma Mick Clark remembers: "It happened so quick and they are gone."

Roach keeps pushing on around Australia, talking as he drives about a series of foster homes and of running around the streets from the age of 14. Jean McKenzie Carter tells of being spirited away to Cootamundra where she was not allowed to ask about her parents. "Your family did not want you," she was told.

With the potent clarity of folk poetry, she says "you break the heart of the people". Roach weeps as he listens. At the Cherbourg mission, Sam Murray recalls arriving too young to know his own name. Alec Kruger talks of floggings and hunger. He and his mates would pull out carrots eat them and replace the tops.

They dreamt of parents coming to visit. The reality was an antipodean slave market where property owners came to pick out strong lads. Alec ran away to enlist in the army. Was there ever such an upside-down world as his, where a man could only feel safe in the army?

Watching this odyssey, you get a sense of the land, its variety and beauty. Everywhere they talk without worrying about the camera. Fragments of sentences stick in the mind. "You look like a woman I once knew." Thus a man recognised his mother. "I came from Sydney and found other people who looked like me." "A policeman sold my grandmother for some gold."

Ruby's mother was fooled by the officers who said they were taking the children to the circus. "You'll be all right, I trust them." But the kids were charged with neglect and never came back.

Fragments of songs hold the narrative together. There is no rage, no whining. "All we wanted was to come home. That's what we want tot do. Don't give us no money."

Roach goes back to his circle in the gravel. They are enduring in their persecuted stoicism. **SOME OF OUR LEADERS BAULK AT APOLOGISING. THEY SHOULD BE ASKING FOR FORGIVENESS.**"