

# TEN CANOES

In London chats to director Rolph De Heer about his collaboration with the people of Ramingining in the making of Ten Canoes

By Jen Perkin



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**D**on't be scared off by the serious looking posters and subject matter: *Ten Canoes* is a funny film. Not a comedy exactly, but it does have many smile, giggle and laugh out loud moments and a fair share of fart jokes.

"It's the thing that surprises audiences most," says writer and director Rolf De Heer. "It was a case of the mob up there wanting their culture represented and, you know, they laugh a tremendous amount. It wouldn't be an accurate representation unless it was also funny - it wouldn't begin to capture who they are." While the history of films made with indigenous themes tend to be heavy and serious affairs, *Ten Canoes* tells a story by an indigenous community, rather than just about them.

The film is set in pre-settlement times, is largely spoken in indigenous language and the cast consists mostly of non-actor residents of the Arafura Swamp region of north-eastern Arnhem Land. While that might make it sound like some kind of highbrow exercise in obscurity for the arty and intellectual set, *Ten Canoes* is in fact very accessible; a triumph in good old fashioned storytelling. It also gives us insight into a culture and people that most Australians know shamefully little about. The film proved an unexpected success at the local box office and received glowing reviews across the board - not least within the indigenous community itself.

On the surface, the story is simple. A group of men are on a goose egg gathering expedition. While trekking through the bush, the youngest confesses to his uncle his lust for one of his wives, so the uncle launches into a lengthy story of the old times to illustrate the error of his ways. The flashbacks make up the bulk of the film, returning periodically to the goose egg hunters. It is a sprawling collection of stories and characters branching

and sprouting in every direction, and ultimately flowering into the sort of film whose appeal spans most age and taste divides. The story-within-a-story structure is threaded together effectively by a self-reflexive English voice-over spoken by legendary Aboriginal actor David Gulpilil, whose son Jamie appears in the film.

De Heer, the ever risk-taking director of such films as *Bad Boy Bobby* and *The Old Man Who Read Love Stories*, explains how the genesis of the project occurred when he cast Gulpilil in his film *The Tracker*, back in 2000. When De Heer first met him he found communication difficult - "I realised I had nothing to say to him because I had nothing culturally in common with him" - and so took him up on his invitation to make the arduous journey to Ramingining to meet his people (the Yolngu) and get an insight into his background.

De Heer says: "When I first went up there it was the most foreign country I'd ever been to. I've been to a lot of countries and here in our backyard was THE most foreign country because I had culturally less in common with them than anywhere I had ever been." From the very beginning Gulpilil pestered the director about making a film in his land, about his people - something De Heer wasn't exactly rapturous about given the occupational hazards included mosquitos, leeches and crocodiles, and the fact that many in the area spoke little English. But eventually the opportunity (and financial backing) arose and De Heer decided to give it a shot.

The film took a lot longer than De Heer expected: "We were scheduled and financed to start shooting in September 2003 and in the end we didn't shoot until May 2005. At any stage of the film it felt that it could just implode."

Ultimately, the extended production was for the best as it gave the director

time to develop a relationship with the Yolngu people and earn their trust. "It takes a lot, because they've been screwed around so often by so many white people. But by the end of it they did trust me, and they did feel ownership over the project and it had become terribly important to them."

The making of the film was a collaborative effort. De Heer consulted the community at every step of the writing process and they would instruct the director on what they did and didn't want in the film. "All the incidents that are in the film came from discussions, and in the end I joined all the dots and made it work dramatically."

There were a number of cultural specifics that De Heer had to adhere to in order to get the film done. One was the casting - it was more a case of the mob casting themselves due to the intricate hierarchies that dictate who could play who. He explains: "They have this incredibly strong and impenetrably complex kinship system. Everyone in their universe fits within that system and you then know how to behave around that person."

The project was a watershed for the Yolngu people, who had the opportunity to relearn many of the old skills, like canoe-making, and to have a representation of their culture in the public arena. The film made its premier at a makeshift screen set up in Ramingining to a rapturous and emotional response, and has had a lasting effect on the people who live there. Says De Heer: "There's been this slight shift where now it's a little bit more pro-active, more forward looking. They're doing projects, because on the film they achieved something far greater than they ever thought possible for themselves and they now have the confidence to think about achieving many other things." ♦

**Ten Canoes is released in the UK on June 1**

