



THE FILM CRITICS CIRCLE OF AUSTRALIA PRESENTS

ROLF DE HEER

DIRECTOR, PRODUCER & WRITER

IN RECOGNITION OF A UNIQUE BODY OF WORK AND ITS
CONTRIBUTION TO AUSTRALIAN CINEMA

A NOTE ON THIS ACKNOWLEDGEMENT.

Over the years the FCCA has presented a number of special awards to individuals who have contributed something outstanding /exceptional through their work to cinema and film culture.

This is not a Life Achievement Award, as a number of recipients - including Rolf, we hope - are only part way through their career.

During Rolf's career his films have frequently gained nominations in various categories at the FCCA awards, along with many overseas accolades.

It seems appropriate at this time to acknowledge Rolf's overall body of work to date. The FCCA wishes him the best for future projects and with this award, recognises his unique contribution to date.

Adrienne McKibbins

Awards Manager



PREVIOUS RECIPIENTS INCLUDE

Michael Pate - Actor/Director/Producer

Cezary Skubiszewski - Composer

Judy Davis - Actress

Richard Brennan - Producer /Cinephile Extrodinaire

Russell Boyd - Cinematographer

Bryan Brown - Actor /Producer

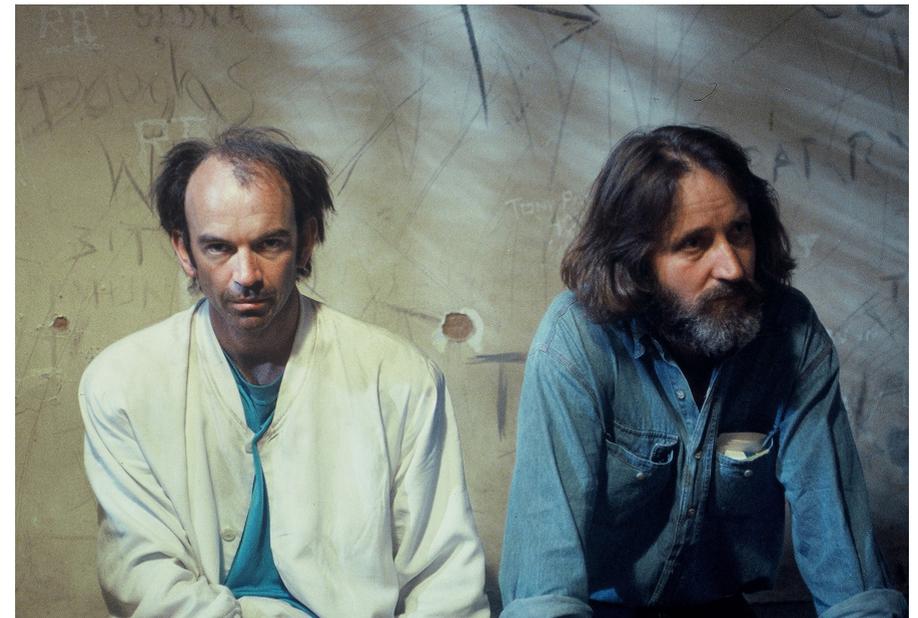
ROLF DE HEER BY RUSSELL EDWARDS

While soft-spoken, patient and respectful in person, as an audacious film-maker Rolf de Heer is not interested in Australia's comfort. His vision doesn't merely hold a mirror up to our society; he goes much deeper than the surface.

Almost every film in his extensive resume is an x-ray disclosing our deepest fears, and exposing faults we desperately try to hide. Our partnerships; our childhoods; our parenting; our prejudices; our society; everything is up for examination. In short, Rolf de Heer's films reveal us to us.

Self-examination is not always a pleasurable process. Declare that you enjoyed *Bad Boy Bubby*, *Alexandra's Project*, or *The Quiet Room* and some people will look at you askance. Along with the confronting but vital *Charlie's Country* and *Dance Me To My Song*, these unsettling, but essential films are designed to make us squirm.

But if we allow ourselves to sit with the discomfort, these films also change the way we look at our world — who ever regarded a roll of plastic wrap in the same way after watching *Bad Boy Bubby*?



Alongside the sense of menace in Rolf de Heer's films, there is frequently an accompanying sense of freedom that encourages us to embrace life in all its forms. There are alternative ways to see and be. Elation is possible; just don't be foolish enough to forget that there are dangers too.

There are oppressive forces all around us — and even within us — yet de Heer's work demonstrates that we don't have to bow to them. Rolf de Heer's collaborations with David Gulpilil and the Ramingining people (*The Tracker*, *Ten Canoes* and *Charlie's Country*) are key films in Australia's fuller embrace of indigenous representation. And what other Australian film besides *Dr Plonk* called out McCarthyist paranoia for what it was when John Howard's government was finding terrorists behind every tree?



...and if you were upset or disturbed or even confused by one of Rolf de Heer's films... at the very least you knew you had seen something. Unlike the constant cavalcade of 'car park' movies (by the time you get to the car park you've forgotten it), Rolf de Heer's films have the capacity to haunt you for days, if not weeks, months or even years.

Finally, it's also important to celebrate the versatility of Rolf de Heer's films on a purely technical level. The sheer velocity of *Incident at Raven's Gate*. The trust in the eerie silences of *Bad Boy Bubby* and *The Quiet Room*. The slapstick dexterity of *Dr Plonk*. The motion control cinematography of

Epsilon. His comfort with black and white imagery in the ground-breaking *Ten Canoes* (and *Dr Plonk* again).

The exhilarating colour of *The Old Man Who Read Love Stories*. There is not an Australian director who — while maintaining a distinct sense of authorship — has so convincingly re-invented his approach to his craft in service to the stories he wished to tell, rather than force the story to conform to his way of seeing.



De Heer's tendency to play hit and run with genre recalls the range of the Coen brothers, but our honoured guest has achieved much more visually and thematically with much, much less money. And if comparison with the Coens doesn't sit well, then let me ask: to which international filmmaker could you compare Rolf de Heer? To grapple with this question is to appreciate that there is no one else truly like him and how lucky Australia has been to have this resourceful artist in our midst.



ROLF DE HEER

BY SUE WILLIAMS

There's nothing Australian film director Rolf de Heer loves more than a good challenge.

I've interviewed him many times over the years, and reviewed most of his films, and there's one thing that always strikes me about his vast body of work.

Each film seems to have little in common with the next – except for the fact that none of them were easy, and every single one is very, very different from anything we've ever seen before.

Take his very first film. Most film-makers would opt for a soft entry into the industry. Not de Heer. For *Tail of a Tiger*, he saw nearly 300 kids before finding the child actors who'd play the young gang at its core and, with an exceptionally low budget, gathered up many of his mates from AFTRS to help as crew.

For his next film, *Incident at Raven's Gate*, he switched to another genre completely – science fiction this time – which picked up three AFI nominations. And then came *Dingo*, for which he persuaded legendary US jazz trumpeter Miles Davies to come to the Australian outback to play his first and last ever role in a movie, opposite a young Colin Friels.

Next was his career-making, mind-blowing *Bad Boy Bubby*, an exceptionally fine piece of work, strange, horribly dark, disturbingly funny and forever memorable. Winning the Special Jury Prize at the Venice Film Festival in 1993, its star Nicholas Hope later said it was one of the bravest Australian films ever made, alongside *Wake In Fright* and *Chopper*.

That was the moment de Heer really hit his groove, deciding he could push the boundaries of Australian film harder and further than anyone had dared before and, in doing so, give us a vision of Australia we'd never experienced.

He's continued, more or less, in that same vein ever since. The films kept

on coming – *The Quiet Room* (1996), *Epsilon* (1997), *Dance Me to My Song* (1998), *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1998) ... -- and de Heer never shied away from any material, however dark, difficult or dangerous.

His films about Aboriginal Australians likewise have always been intelligent, confronting and, even harder, entertaining. *The Tracker* was terrifying but, in order not to subject his Aboriginal actors to the humiliation of being bound in chains, he came up with the ingenious ploy of portraying them in sketches instead. The film ended up with an honourable mention at the Venice Film Festival in 2002.



Ten Canoes was a remarkably ambitious masterpiece that was also an exercise in resilience and patience, working with a number of Aboriginal Australians who'd never acted before, with many of whom not even knowing what a film was.

It was the first movie ever to be made wholly in Aboriginal languages, and won a welter of awards, including the Un Certain Regard special jury prize at the 2005 Cannes Film Festival, three Film Critics Circle of Australia awards, six AFI Awards and was Australia's entry into the Oscars for Best Foreign Language Film.

The documentary that later aired on SBS, *The Balanda and the Bark Canoes* about the making of the film, gave a fascinating insight into de Heer's difficulties, with language problems, crocodiles, leeches and misunderstandings, and gave some sense of his fortitude, stamina and unfailing good humour.

His latest movie, *Charlie's Country*, was no less sensitive, revealing and ultimately heartbreaking. About a traditional Aboriginal man fearing the loss of culture from his country, at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival it was nominated for Un Certain Regard and won David Gulpilil the award for Best Actor.

It was a mesmerising piece; tragic, humorous and terribly, terribly human. And, like all of de Heer's work that's gone before, as he continues to go from strength to strength, enormously challenging, not just for his audience, but for the film-maker himself.

But as we've learned over the years, there's absolutely nothing he enjoys - or we appreciate - more.



ROLF DE HEER BY JANE FREEBURY

Rolf de Heer learned his craft when the Australian films that reached the international festival circuit had a reputation for high production values and were often seen as vehicles for endorsing the official view of cultural identity. They were good to look at, but safe and non-confronting. It was a reputation that some local commentators, and the late, formidable Pauline Kael in New York, were impatient with.

Then along came *Bad Boy Bubby* in 1993, a rude retort to the polite reserve that characterised Australian cultural production. A pitch black comedy that was really out there, it had something to offend just about everyone. Even Rolf took a step back at one point and wondered aloud 'Where the hell did that come from?'

It refused outright to be culturally enhancing and legitimising. Rolf's films have never made us look that good.



The rest, of course, is history. *Bad Boy Bubby* shared the FIPRESCI international critics' prize with Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* and took out two other prizes at the Venice International Film Festival. It won awards in Seattle and Valenciennes, and was an AACTA nominee for best film.

Notoriety went with the acclaim. Censors in the United Kingdom cut the scene with the cat, leaving other scenes of incest or matricide alone.

So persuasive did Rolf's films become that we came to find ourselves

celebrating more crimes and misdemeanours. The entombment of an errant husband in the family home, the extra-judicial killing of a homicidal, racist coloniser, and so on. A step too far? He made a habit of daring his audiences to take it with him.

In the new millennium, he has become known for his magnificent Indigenous stories in the outback wilderness, the triptych *The Tracker*, *Ten Canoes* and *Charlie's Country*. With his key collaborator on this work, David Gulpilil, he has given rare prominence to Aboriginal protagonists in Australian film.

However, Rolf has ranged freely across genres, from Bubby's man-child coming-of-age, to silent comedy in B&W, to intense psychodramas set in the domestic space, to science fiction, and more.

It will surprise some that he has also made two international coproductions with protagonists in pursuit of their artistic passion. The outback trapper fond of jazz in *Dingo* is a perennial favourite, while *The Old Man Who Read Love Stories* in the Amazonian jungle is less well known.



Ever since that career-defining moment when Rolf first courted creative risk, it has continued to define him. Collaborating closely with his team of creatives, he has been willing to take risks with projects, even extreme risks, and it has seen him develop a profile as a filmmaker who is bold, innovative, unorthodox and unpredictable.

I believe that his bold and spirited approach has given heart to many young emerging filmmakers in Australia. 'Yes, it can be done.'

The result is a body of work over the last three decades that few contemporaries in the Australian film industry can match for range, ambition and audacity.

Over the course of his career – more often as writer/director/ and producer of his work – he has become adept at the art of bricolage, of using the materials at hand and transforming them. It is his form of creative risk.

Some incident energised him, sparked his curiosity and his imagination, or his indignation, and set him on a course of action in support of social justice. The bricolage has determined the character of the film in production and fixed the de Heer brand.

While refusing to accept the apparent limits imposed by a low budget, he has taken a chance on the very element that presented risk for his production. The wheelchair-bound lead actor who speaks with a voice synthesiser (*Dance Me To My Song*), shy or incapacitated child actors (*The Quiet Room*), alternatives to prohibitively expensive filmstock (*Alexandra's Project* and *Dr Plonk*), unwillingness to represent live-action violence (*The Tracker*), or to manage a large crew (the genesis of *Bad Boy Bubby*), moving house (*The King is Dead!*). Then turned it into an essential building block.

The restriction or obstacle that might hold another director in check seems to supply the essential energy to this filmmaker's creativity. A negative is transformed into a positive. Something comes from nothing.

The singular cinema of Rolf de Heer maps a country all its own. Like many auteurs, he has created a body of work that is its own country, a place and people of the imagination to which each new de Heer film adds a further dimension. Identifiably Australian, yet refusing to endorse any notion of a national identity, the territory he explores lies at the margins of the mainstream. Inhabited by outliers, marginalised protagonists who effectively and comprehensively turn the table on their oppression.

As Rolf developed a distinctive authorial signature, he has been a pioneer, revealing to our industry what is possible with limited tools. He has become an inspiring role model for emerging filmmakers working within constraints.

The success of his work is best measured by the admiration, respect, provocation and debate that it has generated. Rolf is an internationally recognised auteur whose invigorating, challenging work has achieved high standing in world cinema.

Drawn from: Freebury, Jane (2015), *Dancing to His Song: The Singular Cinema of Rolf de Heer*, Currency Press / Currency House, Sydney.

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