

# GULPILIL

## Treatment

The overriding theme that I want to explore in the documentary is how David Gulpilil manages the struggle and the cultural conflicts in moving between Yolgnu culture, beliefs and values and that of western society. David has two personas to maintain - that of a professional film actor and that of a Yolgnu elder - each bringing its own pressures, obligations and responsibilities.

The film's narrative strand starts with observations of Gulpilil's work as an actor on the set of a new feature film "*The Trackers*" directed by Rolf De Heer. "*The Trackers*" is a feature film with Gulpilil playing a lead role – his first for many years. The story, set in 1922, is about 4 men who trek through rough bush to re-capture a black man accused of murder. We see David on location in the spectacular Flinders Ranges. He is driving to set, learning dialogue, rehearsing scenes, interacting with the director and other crew members, as well as being interviewed by reporters and publicists.

From comments he makes to camera as well through dialogue with others we learn what it means to him to be acting in this film – something about the character he plays etc. We also hear from the director Rolf De Heer about their working relationship. The over-arching link is my own narration – introducing the themes to be explored in the film, and David's own background – how he didn't meet a white person until he was nine, how English is his 55<sup>th</sup> language etc. I will also talk about how David approached me to document the story of his life and use it to communicate cultural issues to a wider audience.

We then follow Gulpilil back to Adelaide - a world of clean streets and sterile shopping malls. David is uncomfortable in this environment yet he depends on it for his identity as an actor. As he patiently waits for a flight to return to his community in northern Arnhem Land the back story begins. David tells us in his first language of 'yunupingu' how he first left his community at the age of 14 to go to Darwin to perform as a dancer. (The earliest footage depicts Gulpilil as a young teenager performing Aboriginal dances). We learn how he was 'discovered' a year later by Nic Roeg who was casting his film WALKABOUT. In the film Gulpilil plays the role of an

Aboriginal rescuer who guides two lost children back to civilisation. *Walkabout* launched Gulpilil's acting career. Bobby Randall, the Aboriginal singer/song-writer was Gulpilil's major mentor at the time and taught him how to speak English. He describes how this first acting role radically changed David's life, and changed it perhaps too quickly. It was a time of dramatic change in both the lives of indigenous people and the film industry. We see David in London walking the streets after the film's premiere..

Next we see David in Ramingining. He takes us back to his own country and learn about his cultural environment. Hunting for him is very important and we will show David killing crocodiles, buffaloes, snakes, spearing fish and stingrays etc. This is part of his daily life. The other part is the responsibility of being an elder in the community – participating in ceremony, as well as in meetings discussing issues vital to the community – like substance abuse etc.

We meet his family – his brothers, sisters and cousins and learn how they regarded him when he first started to earn a reputation as an internationally famous actor and how, if at all, it changed their lives and changed David as well. We will film them looking at his films. Ironically this is first time most of his family have ever seen them . Their memories of those times are contrasted with, David's own recollections. These I will combine with my own narration and in the process gradually chart the highlights of his career eg *Mad Dog Morgan* (1976) where he plays the only ally of a notorious bushranger (played by Dennis Hopper, and *Storm Boy* (1976) where Gulpilil plays Fingerbone Bill - the Aboriginal who teaches a boy about his environment and becomes a surrogate father to him, and finally *The Last Wave* where he plays a mystical 'prophet' who advises the main protagonist played by Richard Chamberlain.

Some of the themes and issues I want to explore are through the roles David has played in these films.. What were the processes of working with white directors? Did he have artistic or any input into the story or character? How he felt about the characters he was portraying and what effects this has had on his life. I also intend to link David's roles to the broader implications of Aboriginal representation in cinema and television.

We suddenly switch to Hollywood. Its 1981 and Gulpilil has just finished the LAST WAVE. He is on a promotional tour and he is toast of the town. Documentary footage shot at that period shows a 30 year old man –

celebrated and feted by Hollywood matrons. David is seen to relish these accolades – dancing for the cameras on Hollywood Boulevard and entertaining awe-struck audiences. It gives him the confidence to push an idea he has for his own first feature film. It is simply a dream - this film is never made.

It is important to record not only the triumphs of David's career but also the lows points and the difficulties as well. By the mid 80's Gulpilil's artistic output declined. His film roles became cameo pieces - sporadic and less demanding. Justine Saunders, an film and television actor and one of his contemporaries, has maintained a close relationship with him for the past 20 years. She describes him being troubled by a 'personal crisis' - one that is connected with his day to day life beyond the acting realm.

As the film develops we discover that Ramingining is not all that it seems. People have described as a 'living hell'. The community's total economic existence has become dominated by the welfare system. Welfare had lead to a level of dependence that is crippling and created hopelessness which in turn has been translated into destructive social behaviour - drug abuse, family violence, incest and suicide. We learn it wasn't always like this. The Yolgnu where once highly skilled hunters, producers and traders. During the mission days they acquired a high level of mastery in white trades as well as clerical work and administration. However, loss of meaningful employment and traditional living skills have robbed Yolgnu of their dignity and bred a sense of failure. Alcohol abuse has been both a symptom and cause of this pervasive sense of powerlessness, and it seems Gulpilil himself has been unable to avoid becoming a partial victim of this pathology. Over the last 20 years David has incurred a string of drink-driving offences. The latest incident took place in 1999 when he was sentenced to jail for two months and forced to attend an alcohol rehabilitation program.

The film finishes where it started – with the film *The Trackers*. Gulpilil returns to the urban setting for the Adelaide Arts Festival to be (presumably) acclaimed for his role. This is the first film he has starred in for many years. Will it be his last or one of many more to come? The answer will depend on whether he has managed to finally reconcile for himself the identity conflict of moving between Yolngu culture, beliefs and values and that of western society, and my film will hopefully provide some insights into this process.

I want to make an evocative many-faceted film about a complex individual who through his life's work has made an extraordinary contribution to Australia's cultural identity, but not without the expense of personal loss and trauma. This project also offers me the real possibilities of exploring the tensions and triumphs and the very real difficulties of 'success' in white terms.

**Darlene Johnson - Writer/Director**