

The peerless vision of a pioneering Lord of the Bush

Filmmaker **TOM ZUBRYCKI** goes in search of Broome's Lord of the Bush and finds a multi-faceted Lord Alistair McAlpine shooting about in a Lear jet

A WEEK of calls to Lord Alistair McAlpine ... all it did was to leave me and a journalist colleague with hefty fax and phone bills. I simply wanted to get his reactions to a film I'd made about him and his affairs in Broome — the once exotic pearling port — where he'd been dubbed by locals as "The Lord of the Bush".

It's not that McAlpine shuns publicity, he just couldn't be bothered with it. It distracts him from his work as a London hotel developer, raising funds for the British Conservative Party, being an antique dealer and building tourist resorts in the West Indies and Australia.

In retrospect, I was lucky even to get the film shot. It was through no lack of trying. I remember being in Broome six months earlier. The shooting had been arranged but I couldn't get through to him to confirm anything. Here I was, sending faxes to his ex-pearling master's villa from a hotel less than a kilometre away.

His house was one place I couldn't film him. "Why?" I asked.

"You can film me anywhere," he told me, "except in my Lear jet and Broome residence. It's terrorists I fear. We all have to be very careful now in England, you know."

It seemed beyond me why terrorists would want anything to do with McAlpine. Here was this affable, diminutive and slightly portly man. Very little research would reveal where he lived and how he travelled.

Maybe there was a different reason. Perhaps McAlpine didn't want to appear pompously rich in the film. After all, he assiduously cultivated the image of being one of the locals. He would always be seen in Chinatown strutting round in his bush hat, denim shirt, moleskins and desert boots. Every day for filming, he turned up in the same gear.

Yet it was very difficult to disguise the lavish grandeur of his Cable Beach Club where everything was imported — even the palm trees were not indigenous to Broome. There was Jarrah timber panelling supported with beams from a dismantled Indian temple, while Sidney Nolan, Elizabeth Durack and Sali Hermann paintings were in every corner. One private alcove had a collection of antique bird cages suspended from the ceiling.

"Staying in a hotel is about fantasy, McAlpine told me as the cameras rolled. "You want it to be a little theatrical ... if you stay here, you can imagine yourself to live like the pearling masters used to."

The older locals see McAlpine simply as a recent manifestation of a long line of colonial/pearling masters — although it would be more accurate to describe him as a country squire.

McAlpine is an unusual developer: "The policy of my company is when we operate in a community, then we become part of that community and help it as much as possible."

Whenever McAlpine is in town, a constant stream of people come to his zoo office — many of them Aboriginal artists trying to sell work to him. McAlpine usually buys at a much higher price than the local government-supported co-operative.

This has always been a source of some friction. None the less, McAlpine has an excellent relationship with Aboriginal people, especially community elders. Their interest in protecting sacred rites coincides with his abhorrence of high-rise, Gold Coast-style ribbon development. The problem is that the elders aren't fully aware that McAlpine's power to dictate Broome's

London, attending the Conservative Party conference.

It was this "other life" of McAlpine that I wanted to explore. I flew to London without an appointment.

"He can hardly plan his diary from week to week," his secretary told me. "He often makes last-minute decisions to leave the country. Come at your own risk."

In the end, I did. Once I was there, McAlpine knew I was serious and arranged to meet me for a filming session in his antique shop near London's pricey Burlington Arcade.

He had recently purchased a large selection of 17th-century English weaponry, and when I found him he was pulling out swords from scabbards and discussing their relative merits with another dealer. He managed to squeeze me in before entertaining a group of Middle Eastern businessmen for lunch.

On home turf, McAlpine appeared more relaxed than in Broome, reminding me of a gentleman of leisure from another time. As the cameras rolled, he proceeded to show me around. His collection included rare 15th-century Venetian bows, exotic African masks, suits of armour, medieval tapestries and much more. A strange assortment of skeletons of animals and birds littered the shop.



McAlpine lives in a rarefied world; one of his London staffers told me that he sometimes even forgets his own phone number. They all appear to put up with his eccentricities. "But up with his eccentricities. After all, why not ... he's been known to fly some of them from London to Broome just for a party.

To be fair, this generosity also extends to Broome people. Last year during the pilots' dispute, he flew the Broome band Kuckles to the Spoleto Festival in Melbourne in his hired Lear jet. The fuel alone would have cost more than \$20,000. Recently, McAlpine donated \$25,000 to the Aboriginal musical Bran Nue Dae written by Broome Aboriginal playwright Jimmy Chi. The show went on to become the hit of the Perth Festival.

These favours, however, didn't extend to everybody in the town. Earlier this year he sued the local newspaper proprietor for damages totalling \$5 million. The writ concerned an article published two years earlier critical of some of his development plans.

McAlpine may be very sensitive to what other people say of him, but he's certainly not reluctant to expound at length about his future plans.

In one memorable sequence in the film, he bends over a map indicating the places he'd like to pioneer with more tourist development.

Suddenly his hand moves across the map: "I'm interested in the whole Top End of Australia," he admits. His vision is quite staggering. Small towns would turn into small cities, tourism would no longer be the dominant industry, the Kimberleys would become the new Silicon Valley.

Lord, what a charmer

IT WOULD be difficult to claim that Lord of the Bush is the most riveting entertainment imaginable.

But this film portrait of Lord Alistair McAlpine is full of interest and well worth seeing.

A limited season of the film begins tomorrow at the AFI Cinema in Paddington.

Lord McAlpine is an intriguing fellow, a man of many parts.

He is not only a British peer of the realm and



treasurer of Mrs Thatcher's Conservative Party but also a collector of art, owner of a far-flung real estate empire which includes Sydney's Intercontinental Hotel - and clearly very, very rich.

What's more he is the fortunate possessor of a personality that could charm the birds out of the trees.

Among other questions the film wants to ask is whether that charm is natural and sincere or whether it is a cunning cloak for a devious schemer.

Wherever the truth happens to lie, Lord McAlpine has made a considerable impression on Australia in the past

few years and is not finished yet.

"Basically, I'm interested in the whole top end of Australia," he says and the statement is enough to make some people shudder.

They shudder because Lord McAlpine is a developer who has already altered the nature and appearance of the sleepy little port of Broome on the coast of Western Australia - and not to everyone's satisfaction.

He is fast on his feet; he arrived in Broome 10 years ago, liked what he saw and within hours had bought the local cinema. Before the year was out he'd had started a zoo.

Mind you, this is not the sort of developer who finds a beautiful piece of landscape and proceeds to develop it into an eyesore.

Lord McAlpine is something of a greenie and a strong opponent of high-rise building.

HE agrees with the rule in effect in downtown Honolulu, where nothing is allowed to be built higher than a palm tree.

There can be no argument that McAlpine puts his money where his mouth is, as in the case of the Cable Beach Club tourist resort at Broome, a model of restraint and good taste.

Much of the trouble seems to stem from the speed at which McAlpine

moves, which is much too fast for some people.

The producer-director of the film, Tom Zubrycki, has been scrupulously fair in giving equal time to the various opinions.

For example Paddy Roe, an Aboriginal elder of the Yawaru tribe, who is opposed to further development, is given the opportunity to present his views and in one scene he chats quite amicably with McAlpine.

The film is interesting because it is important to all of us, even those of us at the other side of the continent.

Far away though it is, Broome could be the pattern for important and irreversible change along the whole of the northern



Lord McAlpine: Fast mover coastline and we all deserve an opinion about such a big matter. An important short-term effect of the film is that it gave me a strong desire to visit the town.

Such an effect can only be good news for the Broome tourist industry, especially that large slice of it which belongs to Lord McAlpine.

RICHARD GERE
JULIA ROBERTS

PRETTY

She walked off the street.

"ONE OF THE YEAR'S 10 BEST!"
TWO JUBILANT THUMBS UP FOR THIS TRIUMPHANT COMEDY.
AN AMERICAN CLASSIC.
EASILY ONE OF THE MOST ENTERTAINING FILMS OF THE YEAR.
IT HAS A CHANCE AT BEING NOMINATED FOR ONE OF THE BEST PICTURES OF THE YEAR!"

A hometown hero battles a giant corporation to save his city.

