Ten Canoes

Talent: Jamie Gulpilil, David Gulpilil, Richard Birrinbirrin, Peter Djigirr, Frances Djulibing.

Writer/director/editor: Rolf de Heer
Classification: M (Mature)
Duration: 90 minutes
We rate it: Five stars.

Date of review: 1st June, 2006.

For over two decades now, Rolf de Heer has shown himself to be one of Australia’s most groundbreaking, idiosyncratic, intelligent and unpredictable filmmakers. With projects as diverse and unusual as Dingo, Bad Boy Bubby, The Quiet Room and The Tracker to his credit, de Heer’s filmography is about as challenging and as artful as they come. With his most recent work, Ten Canoes, the director may well see his reputation expand as one of the most significant Australian filmmakers ever to have worked in the industry.

Ten Canoes is a film that tells numerous stories, and also concerns itself very directly with the act of storytelling. As the ravishing opening-credits images of Arnhem Land unfold in a beautiful helicopter-shot, the evocative voice of David Gulpilil tells us that we’re in for a story, his story, the story of his character’s people. There is a playfulness about the voice-over that pervades the film; this is a knowing and warmly human narrative, and it gives many of us a truly fascinating and important encounter with a culture whose inner workings many of us will not have seen before. Set in both the distant past and a nearer timeframe, Ten Canoes tells an almost mythic story of jealousy and desire, and is overlaid with a narrative of brotherhood and community. From narratives of goose-egg gathering to tribal conflict and infidelity, the stories told in Ten Canoes are woven together beautifully, and are consistently surprising, exciting humorous.

The characters in Ten Canoes are all played by members of the Ramingining community from north-eastern Arnhem Land. De Heer has explained that not a single performer who appears on screen had ever acted before; this fact may seem as extraordinary to audience members as the film itself. There is a naturalism and vibrancy to the performances that is difficult to adequately describe; these characters are vivid and utterly believable creations, and indeed the inextricable connections binding the characters/performers to their environment are palpable, and beautifully

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recorded. Cinematographer Ian Jones, who has worked so well with de Heer in the past, has shot this film with extraordinary skill and subtlety; the luminous quality of the images, saturated with the variegated greens and browns of the swamp environment, is gorgeous in the extreme. James Currie’s enveloping sound design is another of the film’s exquisite elements; another long-time collaborator of de Heer’s, Currie endows the film with a staggeringly beautiful soundscape that is perfectly evocative of the Arnhem Land environment, and subtly enhances the emotional film’s terrain.

Ten Canoes has deservedly won praise wherever it has been screened. De Heer has just returned triumphant from the Cannes Film Festival, where the film won the Special Jury Prize, an honour that is bestowed upon films regarded as having particular significance for the art form. This is absolutely the case for Ten Canoes, a film that is important not just for the community that has helped to make it, but for Australia and for the world as well. One of the most unusual, beautiful and artfully made films to have been made in this country in quite some time, Ten Canoes deserves to be seen by every Australian. De Heer’s exquisite film will be talked about for years to come.

Nick Prescott