

A failure to confront reality

Yolngu Boy directed by Stephen Johnson, script by Chris Anastassiades

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17 May 2001

Stephen Johnson's *Yolngu Boy*, which centres on a few weeks in the life of three 14-year-old boys, was shot with a cast of non-professional Aboriginal actors and the cooperation of the Yirrkala community in Arnhem Land in Australia's Northern Territory. Yolngu is the collective name of the 16 clans that live in North East Arnhem Land, which, according to Johnson, is one of the oldest living cultures in the world. First contact between Yolngu natives and white people did not occur until 1935.

The film, Johnson's first feature, opens with a dream by one of the boys, Lorrpu (John Sebastian Pilakui), who imagines himself and his two friends—Milika (Nathan Daniels) and Botj (Sean Mununggurr)—as children, hunting and fishing in the shallow coastal waters like their Yolngu elders. But the dream is shattered when Lorrpu wakes and recalls that Botj has just been released from six months detention for stealing a motorbike and that Milika, who is an aspiring footballer, is only interested in fame, cars, and the perks associated with being a sports star.

While Lorrpu is not clear about his own future he wants to learn the religious ceremonies of his forefathers and be initiated into manhood by the tribal elders. In contrast to the other boys, Botj has no family. His mother rejected him after his scrape with the law and his father, who is an alcoholic, left and moved to Darwin, the Northern Territory capital, years earlier. Lorrpu and the easy-going Milika are his only friends.

The three boys have reached initiation age but Botj is excluded from the men's sacred ceremony. Local elder Dawu (Nungki Yunupingu) does not feel Botj is ready to become a tribal man and his uncle, Matjala (Makuma Yunupingu) the local correctional officer responsible

for keeping watch on him, regards him as a rebel.

Outcast and enraged Botj starts sniffing petrol from a plastic bottle, a habit he acquired before he went to jail, and persuades Lorrpu and Milika to help him burgle the local general store for cigarettes. Once inside Botj loses control and begins to trash the place. Lorrpu tries to drum sense into his crazed friend and they all leave the store. Dejected and alone, Botj walks to the local community centre sniffing petrol. Hallucinating from the fumes, he imagines that a sacred crocodile and other ancient spirits depicted in paintings on the community centre walls are haunting him and he accidentally sets fire to the building. Botj escapes the inferno but seriously burns his arm and is admitted to hospital.

Lorrpu thinks he can persuade Dawu to forgive Botj and prevent his arrest but the tribal elder is in Darwin, the Northern Territory capital, on business. Lorrpu decides to rescue Botj from the hospital and, with a reluctant Milika, lead them through the harsh northern Australian wilderness to Dawu.

The boys walk, paddle a canoe, steal a motorboat and later hitch a ride with a group of tourists to Darwin. In the course of their journey, which constitutes most of the film, they take up the hunting methods and survival skills of their ancient ancestors. The boys survive their difficult trek and Botj's badly burned arm heals after Lorrpu applies some wild plants to the wound.

Lorrpu finds Dawu in Darwin and tries to convince him that Botj is totally rehabilitated and ready to be initiated. Dawu, however, is unconvinced. Botj suspects he could be turned over to the police and runs away, attempting to find his father among the “long grass people”—the drunken or drugged out Aborigines living on waste land on the fringes of Darwin harbour.

He eventually locates his father, who is so intoxicated that he cannot recognise the teenager. This encounter further disillusioned Botj and he begins sniffing petrol again. Before Lorrpu, Milika and correctional officer Matjala can get to him, Botj falls to his death from a bridge. The film concludes with Lorrpu weeping over Botj's mud-covered body.

Director Stephen Johnson spent his formative years with the Yolngu people and has an intimate knowledge and understanding of these people and their culture. This shows in the stunning outback scenery and his intermixing of plot narrative with traditional dance sequences of dreamtime stories and surreal images of mythical spirits. This makes *Yolngu Boys* an interesting visual experience and gives the ancient culture a depth and richness not seen before in Australian films.

These features, however, cannot disguise the fact that the director stubbornly refuses to provide viewers with any understanding of the broader social problems underlying Botj's tragic life or the racism, police harassment, repressive laws and horrendous poverty that confront Aborigines, young and old throughout Australia.

Aside from the very short sequence involving Darwin's "long grass people" and superficial presentations of Botj's petrol sniffing, life in the local community is rather idyllic, with happy young children playing sport or splashing about in the ocean. No clue is provided as to how or why Botj turned to this debilitating form of substance abuse or how widespread it has now become amongst Aborigines. Botj has his problems, but these are the product of some vaguely defined rebellious spirit and his subjective dislike of the Aboriginal elders and the state authorities. By contrast, the future for Lorrpu and Milika is simply a matter of choice—whether to be a successful footballer in the big city or adopt a traditional and generally happy and healthy lifestyle in Arnhem Land.

Portions of *Yolngu Boys*, particularly the excessive helicopter camerawork, resemble tourist advertisements for the Northern Territory. Other sections could be appropriately screened at trade promotions or in government-run migrant English classes about outback Australia, with local families and community leaders generally content with the scheme of things and police and "correctional" officers wholesome and likable fellows.

This is wrong and confusing for those who know nothing about the real situation confronting Australian Aborigines in which poverty is endemic and jobs, health clinics and other basic social facilities virtually non-existent. Educational facilities for Aboriginal children in Northern Territory are so bad that *Yolngu Boy's* producers had difficulties finding lead actors, who were able to read a film script.

While only 2 percent of the Australian population are Aborigines, they comprise 12 percent of the homeless, 19 percent of the prison population, 31 percent of people living in "improvised dwellings," and 40 percent of all children in "corrective institutions"—most jailed for minor property offenses. Aborigines have the lowest life expectancy in Australia, half Aboriginal males and 40 percent of females dying before the age of 50. As local and international experts have regularly remarked, if the above statistics applied to Australians in general, the country would be declared a World Health disaster area.

But rather than artistically exploring these issues, or at least giving the audience some indication of their existence, *Yolngu Boy's* simplistic and utopian message is that tribal elders should be revered, official law and order respected, and Aboriginal spiritual values followed. Unless this path is taken, the film intimates, bad spirits will haunt you until your destruction.

In a recent interview Johnson said he wanted audiences to be "entertained" and to "leave the cinema feeling that these [Yolngu] people are not unlike themselves". But surely the challenge for a director who has voiced concerns about the plight of young Aborigines is to make a film that will disturb his viewers and engender a hatred for what is taking place and those responsible for it. This does not require a statistical or overtly polemical approach but a genuine attempt to artistically probe the underlying social conditions that have shaped the attitudes and actions of the film's characters. Without this, all that can result is a visually interesting but misleading and rather empty film.



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