

## ESSAYS

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From "Eve in Ebony" to a "Bran Nue Dae":  
The Representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander  
People in Australian Motion Pictures – A Synopsis<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The year 2014 marks the thirtieth anniversary of the first transmission by the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)* television service of a remarkable series of Aboriginal-themed documentary programs. The six-part series, called *Six Australians*, was caesural in that it was the first time that contemporary Aboriginal people had been given an opportunity to tell their own stories on Australian national television in a series designed for that purpose. This was a television series that was neither dramatised nor ethnographic. It was about real people – three men and three women – recounting their own stories as people whose lives spanned two cultures.

I am proud to say that, as director of the series, I was honoured in 1984 with the inaugural Australian Human Rights Commission Media Award (McGowan). This essay, partly based on my own experiences as series director, reflects on the representation of Aboriginal Australians in Australian film and television.

The underlying aim of the series was to provide positive role models for young Aboriginal people. This broad aim had been the decision of an advisory committee of educators, including some who were Aboriginal, convened in the manner of the then standard procedure at the *ABC*. The committee agreed that the six programs would be

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gender balanced by featuring three men and three women, and that there would also be an attempt to achieve a cultural balance within the Aboriginal community by choosing people from the length, breadth and centre of Australia. It was also decided that the people chosen would not be individuals with especially high profiles in the wider community. This was done to encourage viewers to consider that the achievements of the people who appeared in the programs were on a scale that could, possibly, be emulated in everyday life.

As writer, director and interviewer, I was then given ultimate responsibility for the entire project: from the design of the programs through to directing and interviewing in the field and the supervision of post production. The six people chosen to participate in the series were selected after more than a year of consultations with Aboriginal organisations across Australia. I was involved in this entire process and had discussions with most of the people who were suggested as potential participants. Eventually, I guided the choice of participants towards those individuals who I believed had interesting stories to relate and who I felt would be able to convey those stories effectively to a general television audience. The budget allowed for just six programs and it had been decided that each program would feature only one individual which meant that many potential participants had to be left out. Filming for the series took place over the course of two years and included location shooting in a number of remote areas of the north, the west and central Australia. The recording medium used was sixteen millimetre colour film and all post-production was undertaken at the ABC facility in Adelaide, South Australia. From its first transmission the series was praised enthusiastically by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal viewers and the ABC chose to give the series repeat transmissions over a number of years.

During the ten years following the success of *Six Australians* I worked as a writer and director on a number of other Aboriginal-related television and video projects, including the *Special Broadcasting Service (SBS)* television current affairs series, *First in Line*, and other video productions for the federally-funded Aboriginal

Development Commission. Later, after the publication of my biography of Hollywood pioneer actor-director J.P. (John Paterson) McGowan in 2005, I turned my attention to writing about motion pictures.

This article arose from a fusion of my earlier television work with Aboriginal people and my current focus on motion pictures. Some of the material in this article has resulted from discussions I have had with directors Rolf de Heer - *The Tracker* (2002), *Ten Canoes* (2006) and *Charlie's Country* (2014) - and Warwick Thornton - *Samson and Delilah* (2009). Warwick Thornton's mother, Freda Glynn, was one of the people featured in *Six Australians* and, as a teenager, was auditioned for the role of *Jedda* in that groundbreaking movie which is discussed later in this article.

To assist in my consideration of the history of the representation of Aboriginal people in motion pictures, I developed the concept of the *arc of acceptance*. This is a visual tool designed to illustrate with its simple upward swing, the proposition that, since the release of *Jedda* in 1955, the depiction of Aboriginal people in motion pictures has been moving steadily upwards towards their acceptance as an integral part of the multicultural Australian society. The question of whether movies produced since *Jedda*, do, in fact, provide evidence to support this concept will be explored in this article.

In its audiovisual archive the *Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies* lists more than six million feet of film footage and has also archived over five thousand video titles (AIATSIS 2012) so, in preparing this article, I have had to be selective about my choice of subject matter. I have therefore chosen to focus my discussion mainly on a group of eight movies which I regard as providing landmark indicators of the ways in which Indigenous people have been represented in Australian films. The eight key movies dealt with in this paper are: *Jedda* (1955), *Walkabout* (1971), *Storm Boy* (1976), *The Tracker* (2002), *Ten Canoes* (2006), *Samson and Delilah* (2009), *Bran Nue Dae* (2009), and *The Sapphires* (2012).

In terms of the representation of Aboriginal people in Australian motion pictures we are fortunate in being able to witness a remarkably significant moment in time. In 2012 a movie made *about* Aboriginal people *by* Aboriginal people was released into the international distribution mainstream. The movie is called *The Sapphires* and it relates the true story of four Aboriginal girls who formed a singing group back in 1968 and found themselves entertaining large audiences of American troops during the Vietnam War.

### *The Sapphires 2012*

This is a polished, well-made movie which celebrates the triumph of the human spirit and it is a vibrant celebration of Aboriginality. It tugs at the heartstrings, uplifts audiences and leaves them feeling good. It is a movie crafted almost entirely by Aboriginal people. The screenplay was written by Tony Briggs, an Aboriginal playwright whose mother was one of the original *Sapphires*. In addition, the director, choreographer and director of photography were all Aboriginal people. I regard *The Sapphires* as the single most powerful demonstration of the manner in which Aboriginal people can now be represented in contemporary motion pictures.

*The Sapphires* is set apart from most other Australian-produced movies in that it has not been limited to the so-called *art house* circuit but instead has gone straight into a mainstream theatrical release. Not only did it open on almost three hundred screens across Australia, but it has also been sold to major distributors outside Australia, including the *Weinstein Group* in the United States. In Germany, it was distributed by the Berlin-based *Senator Entertainment Group*.

The four young women who formed *The Sapphires* came from humble backgrounds, but they are depicted in the movie as feisty and humorous: confident about the qualities of their own personalities and proud of their Aboriginal heritage. But there is something else that makes this movie remarkable. The women are depicted as Aboriginal, contending with racial prejudice and

marginalisation, but they are also shown to be – at the same time – ordinary Australian women. In their terms, and in terms of what the audience accepts, they are shown to be a part of ordinary Australian life.

There are problems and issues to be dealt with, and back in 1968 there were even more racial issues than there are now, but, against the odds, these four women – in real life – managed to make something of their lives. There is a touching moment right at the end of the film, when a still image shows the *real Sapphires* as they are now: four happily-smiling grey-haired middle-aged women who have, between them, seven grandchildren. The caption notes that they “*still sing to their grandchildren*” (The Sapphires 2012 DVD).

### **The “Arc of Acceptance”**

*The Sapphires* is at the leading edge of a gradual, upward trajectory of positive change in the manner in which Aboriginal people have been represented on film. This change parallels a wider growth of understanding of Australia’s Indigenous peoples by non-Indigenous Australians. This growth of understanding is reflected in legislative changes over the past 60 years and reached a high point in 2008 when Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, apologised to the “Stolen Generations”, those people who, as children, were forcibly taken away from their families under a variety of so-called Protection Acts from 1900 until the 1970s.

I have chosen to use the concept of an *arc of acceptance* to illustrate the gradual process of the development of an increasing understanding and acceptance of Aboriginal people as an equal element in Australia’s multi-cultural society. Within the Australian community there is still a vast amount to be done to improve attitudes toward the treatment of Aboriginal peoples. So, within the broad Australian community, the *arc of acceptance* still has a long way to travel. However, at least in the movies, there is increasing understanding.

During the past thirty years, Aboriginal people themselves have developed much greater control over the manner in which they are represented on screen, and this has led to much more diverse screen images of Indigenous people. This is not to say that, even with a much greater degree of control of the means of production by Aboriginal people, we will no longer see what may be called traditional images of Indigenous people on screen. The movie *Ten Canoes*, released in 2006, was largely conceived by Aboriginal people themselves and portrays an image of Aboriginal people which is grounded in a traditional context. However, with movies such as *The Sapphires* and *Bran Nue Dae* reaching large audiences, it seems likely that, in the future, audiences can expect to find much greater diversity in the ways in which Indigenous people are depicted on screen; and this development, perhaps paradoxically, will have been driven by the creative decisions of Indigenous people themselves. It is a strong part of what I call the upward trajectory of *the arc of acceptance*.

While the main focus of this paper is on the representation of Indigenous people on screen from 1955 to the present, some pre-1955 backgrounding is necessary. So, at this point, I will take a brief excursion back to a much earlier, but very significant, date. Australia's Indigenous peoples have been represented on film since the earliest years of cinematography. In 1898, just three years after the Lumière brothers astounded audiences in Paris with their demonstrations of pictures that moved, a British anthropologist, Alfred Cort Haddon (1855-1940) recorded splendid images of the ceremonial dances and fire-making rituals of the people of the Island of Mer in the Torres Strait to Australia's north (Long and McKernan 2008). Haddon's images were recorded on 35 millimetre film and are said to have been "the first ever use of the medium as an ethnographic record" (ibid). Some of this very early material still survives and has been preserved by *Australia's National Film and Sound Archive* in Canberra.

## Charles and Elsa Chauvel

With regard to the earliest representations of Aboriginal people in dramatised films I need to introduce an Australian filmmaker – a true auteur – whose work eventually formed a turning point in the manner in which Indigenous people were seen on film. This man is Charles Chauvel (1897-1959). In a career of over 30 years, he made nine feature movies in Australia, on most of them working as producer, writer, director, publicist and, sometimes, as an actor as well. During this time he also made four long visits to Hollywood where he sought to inform himself about movie-making techniques and technology. Most of his films were made in a collaborative partnership with his wife Elsa (1898-1983) (Cunningham 1991:3).

Three of the Chauvels' movies, made between 1935 and 1955, included depictions of Aboriginal people, but there was great change in this twenty-year period. In the first two of these movies, *Heritage* (1935) and *Uncivilised* (1936), the representations of Aboriginal people closely follow the attitudes prevailing in the broader Australian community at the time. In *Heritage*, the Indigenous people appear as threats to the non-Aboriginal settlers. They are shown as the enemy that must be conquered and subdued by the European colonists. In *Uncivilised* a white man lives amongst Indigenous people in the manner of a Great White Chief and Aboriginal protagonists are shown as savages who make tribal war on each other. However, by 1955 the Chauvels' attitude towards Aboriginal people had undergone a vast change, and this resulted in the watershed movie *Jedda*.

### *Jedda* 1955

Writing in 1989, the Chauvels' daughter, Susanne Chauvel Carlsson, described her parents' decision to star two Aboriginal people in a colour feature film set in outback Australia, as being "like a step into the unknown" (Carlsson 1989: 151). Carlsson notes that "initial response to their (proposed) venture was incredulity" and that the Chauvels' usual financiers, *Universal*, "thought the *Jedda* concept too

unusual to succeed". The movie was eventually financed, according to Carlsson, by "various Sydney businessmen" (ibid).

The Chauvels' visionary leap was to construct a screenplay in which they gave their Aboriginal leading protagonists personalities and layered characters which set out to present them as real people with real emotions. *Jedda* herself is a person in conflict: a child-woman torn between two cultures. She has been raised as the adopted daughter of non-Aboriginal parents but has a desire to discover more about her own culture. It is this desire that initially attracts her to a tribal man, Marbuk. The character of Marbuk is also complex. He is a man of mystery and a person who is fully immersed in tribal culture. However, Marbuk is also an outlaw who has contravened European law as well as the precepts of his own people. This powerful mixture drives the plot of *Jedda*.

In the early 1950s there were no Aboriginal actors in Australia, so the Chauvels had to seek out untried unknowns and then coach them through their roles. It was a daunting task for both the Chauvels and the performers. A man from the Tiwi Islands, north of Darwin, Robert Tudawali (1929-1967), was chosen to play the tribal man Marbuk, while Rosalie Kunoth, a sixteen year old girl then still at school in Alice Springs, was selected for the title role of *Jedda*.

*Jedda* is far from perfect as a movie and this, perhaps, reflects the challenging task which the Chauvels had set for themselves in attempting to develop a story to "match the magnificent backgrounds" (Cunningham 157) of northern Australia, and then setting out to tell that story using untrained leading actors. The narration of the story is lacking in cohesion, and the development of the characters is uneven and melodramatic. In addition, its observations and attitudes toward Aboriginal people would be guaranteed to provide today's audiences with fuel for much debate and discussion over the nature of its racial representation. Indeed, the expression *Eve in Ebony* is one such point of possible contention. I have used this expression as part of the title of this paper because it appears in promotional material associated with *Jedda*, often as a



kind of subtitle for the movie. There are clearly Biblical associations with this subtitle. However, the Biblical story of Adam and Eve is in fact inverted so that instead of Eve leading Adam astray, in the movie it is the 'Adam' character – Marbuk – who leads *Jedda* or 'Eve' astray. This subtitle also carries some implication of nudity, conjuring up images of black people romping about naked in a kind of Garden of Eden: a titivating and enticing prospect, no doubt designed to lure potential audiences during the very conservative nineteen-fifties. Charles Chauvel, of course, was a student of the ways of Hollywood (Cunningham 40-41) and he knew only too well that, when it comes to advertising, 'sex sells'.

However, as drama, *Jedda's* value lies in its bold attempt to create layered characters for its Aboriginal stars as well as its determination to depict Aboriginal cultures – particularly in sequences showing the man's tribal group – as having their own validity and separation from the white world. *Jedda* broke new ground for Australian film production in a number of ways. Not only was it the first movie to give central roles to Aboriginal people, but it was also the first colour feature film shot in Australia. The Chauvels made fine use of the colour film to capture the rich ochre tones in the spectacular rock formations of Australia's north and the vast, untamed landscapes of the region which is now known as Kakadu National Park. Reactions to the movie were varied. A New South Wales magazine for Aboriginal people (*Dawn*, cited by Cunningham 159) praised it for instilling racial pride while the journal of cultural comment, *Overland*, wrote that it peddled "the worst kind of racist nonsense" (ibid). However, it received major theatrical release in Australia and was distributed overseas. It also became the first Australian motion picture to be invited to participate in the Film Festival at Cannes (ibid). Yet, it was the Chauvels' last motion picture. The year after *Jedda* was released, television arrived in Australia, and local feature film production fell into the doldrums for a period of around fifteen years.

However, by the time Australian motion picture production increased again in the 1970s, there was a new attitude toward the

representation of Aboriginal people in big screen movies. *Jedda* had pointed the way, and the next movies involving Aboriginal people would go a step further, depicting them more thoughtfully and representing them for who and what they are, tacitly acknowledging them as Australia's First People and as such, the true custodians of the land. This new attitude would effectively recognise that Aboriginal people have an impressive range of life skills as part of a deeply spiritual culture, developed over thousands of years of successful habitation of the often harsh Australian environment. The new attitude, expressed in these new motion pictures, also represented Aboriginal people as accommodating to white society, while still retaining their own culture. This I consider a major turning point and an important point of difference between the new attitude and the earlier, assimilationist view, which is seen in the Chauvels' *Jedda*.

With these new movies there emerged a genuine Aboriginal actor, a prodigiously talented performer whose image would become the instantly recognisable face of Aboriginality on the big screen right up to the present time. This man's name is David Gulpilil Ridjimiralil Dalaithngu.

### *Walkabout 1971*

The next three movies which I will discuss form a kind of trilogy, illustrating both the development of David Gulpilil's career and the development, over the past four decades, of a new attitude underlying the depiction of Indigenous people on screen. David Gulpilil has been described by director Rolf de Heer as Australia's "finest Indigenous actor" (*Interview: Rolf de Heer*). He was born in 1953 in Australia's Northern Territory and grew up in a tribal community in Arnhem Land. The *Australian Centre for the Moving Image* records that, "It was his talent for traditional dancing that led the 16-year-old Gulpilil to be cast in Nicolas Roeg's film *Walkabout* (1971) ... [and that] ... This performance turned Gulpilil into an international star overnight" (ACMI 2012). Following *Walkabout*, Gulpilil worked in television as well as appearing in a number of significant movies; in 2002, he was awarded Best Actor by the

*Australian Film Institute* for his role in Rolf de Heer's film *The Tracker*.

Gulpilil's first movie, *Walkabout*, is a challenging film, containing examples of the narrative eccentricities often encountered in movies from the early 1970s. Although its director and writer are British, the landscape and the casting of David Gulpilil make the movie unequivocally Australian. The story concerns two British children, a teenage girl and her seven year old brother, who are abandoned by their father in the Australian outback. In this wilderness, the children appear destined for certain death until they are joined by an Aboriginal youth, played by Gulpilil, who is on a journey, or walkabout, as part of his initiation rites. The youth emerges from the desert landscape as though he is a part of it. He is naked except for a loincloth. He has no name and speaks no English. Over the course of the movie, his impressive skills as a hunter-gatherer enable him to sustain himself and the children with food and water over many days while he navigates them back to safety.

In this, the first of the movies reflecting the new attitude to Indigenous people, the Aboriginal youth is depicted as the saviour of the helpless white children. It is his culture, and the skills he has learned as part of that, which make the difference between life and death for the brother and sister. There is no suggestion that the youth is a wild savage. He is purely and simply a young man who is at home in his natural environment: a person who lives in a symbiotic, harmonious relationship with the land – *his* land.

### *Storm Boy 1976*

Five years later, in the movie *Storm Boy*, Gulpilil again played the character of an Aboriginal man who becomes the protector of a white child. *Storm Boy* was one of the earliest productions of the Government-funded *South Australian Film Corporation*. It was based on a novel by the popular German-Australian children's author Colin Thiele who was also closely involved with the writing of the screenplay. This time, Gulpilil's character *does* have a name: he is Fingerbone Bill, one of the last of his tribe who, until white settlers

came, inhabited the coastal region of sand dunes and shallow lakes known as *The Coorong*, about one hundred kilometres southeast of the city of Adelaide.

As with the Aboriginal youth in *Walkabout*, Fingerbone Bill is depicted as living in harmony with his environment. However, author Colin Thiele takes this notion a step further and gives this character a mystical connection with the elements which, in a dramatic sequence in the story, appears to enable him to summon up a violent storm by way of punishing a group of thoughtless white men who are despoiling the sand dunes and creating havoc amongst the wild creatures living there. The central core of *Storm Boy* – the issue of environmental protection – was given expression with this film far ahead of its time.

It is clear that the Aboriginal man, Fingerbone Bill, is the embodiment of Colin Thiele's views of the relationship that *should* exist between man and this pristine region. The Aboriginal man lives lightly upon the land, like his forebears did for thousands of years, nurturing it and taking from it only what he needs to sustain him, according to Aboriginal belief. It is the Aboriginal man who is depicted as the defender of this place of wild beauty. He is also the protector of those who live in harmony within it – the birds, such as the great pelicans, and the child, *Storm Boy*. He also instructs the white boy with his wisdom – a strong piece of symbolism indicating Thiele's view that European Australians have much to learn from their Aboriginal fellow citizens. And it is David Gulpilil who brings this character to life on screen to perfection.

### *The Tracker 2002*

In 2002, *auteur* director Rolf de Heer cast David Gulpilil in the leading role of his Australian Western, *The Tracker*, in which three policemen on horseback trek through a mountainous region of the outback in pursuit of an Aboriginal man who is suspected of the murder of a white woman. In this movie, Gulpilil's character again has no name; he is simply *The Tracker*, an Aboriginal man pressed into the service of the police in order to use his skills as a hunter to

track down the fugitive. It is clear from early in the movie that this man is serving the police reluctantly. The senior policeman is a brutal murderer who shoots Aboriginal people without provocation and hangs their bodies from trees as a warning to others of the fate which awaits them. At the beginning of the film *The Tracker* leaves the police camp without permission and this arouses the anger and suspicion of the senior policeman. As punishment, he uses the chain prepared for the fugitive to shackle *The Tracker* like a dog; and the Aboriginal man is depicted in this condition for much of the rest of the film.

As the story unfolds, the Aboriginal tracker gradually reveals that he is the moral and intellectual superior of his brutish white master – the white policeman. Despite the humiliation of having to wear a chain around his neck, it is *he* who cleverly beguiles the policeman, eventually leading him away from the path of the wanted man.

Rolf de Heer, the writer-director of this movie, was born in the Netherlands and migrated with his parents to Australia when he was ten years old – so he may not immediately seem like the most obvious person to be making a film on the theme of the persecution of Aboriginal people. In preparing this article I interviewed de Heer in order to establish why he was drawn to making movies about Aboriginal people. I first asked him why he had chosen to undertake *The Tracker*. His initial response came in one word: “outrage” (Interview: Rolf de Heer 2012). He said that during the 1990s, while researching another Indigenous project, he learned of a history which, he said, he “had not been taught in school”. As a result, he said: “I just felt this rage. Because it was horrible. And there was no real voice yet. And I was just drawn to it as a consequence – to help give voice” (ibid). He said that his next Aboriginal-themed film, *Ten Canoes*, flowed from the relationship he had developed with David Gulpilil while making *The Tracker*. He said: “David wanted me to make a film with him and his people on his land” (ibid).

### *Ten Canoes 2006*

In 2005 de Heer went to live for a time amongst David Gulpilil’s

people at Ramingining, in Arnhem Land, and the movie *Ten Canoes* was the result: a collaborative effort involving de Heer, Gulpilil and many Aboriginal people of the region. *Ten Canoes* conveys the feeling of a documentary depicting how the Aboriginal people of Arnhem Land lived their lives before the coming of the white man. However, it does have a dramatised narrative spine which unfolds two stories told in parallel. Both of the stories are set sometime in the past – before European colonisation.

This movie is at a high point on the curve of the *arc of acceptance* because it reveals Aboriginal people in the manner in which they express their wish to be portrayed, in this instance, recalling and celebrating their own history as skillful hunter-gatherers whose lives were conducted within an intricately structured cultural fabric. For non-Aboriginal audiences the movie has an educative role, informing the viewer about how Aboriginal people lived before the European invasion. *Ten Canoes* broke new ground in a number of ways, not least because of the respectful collaborative manner in which Rolf de Heer acted as facilitator in order to enable the people of Ramingining to be deeply involved in the process of making the film – from concept to completion. The film was also the first Aboriginal-themed movie to have a sound track entirely in an Aboriginal language, although, for its theatrical release, the dialogue was subtitled in English and the background story was narrated in English with David Gulpilil providing the voice-over.

In terms of the involvement of Aboriginal people in the process of production, *Ten Canoes* could be considered a cross-over film, a movie in which Aboriginal people had a great deal of input but which was, ultimately, under the guidance of a non-Aboriginal director. It is just over twenty years since Aboriginal author Marcia Langton issued a call for Aboriginal people to take greater control over media productions which impinge on their culture (Langton 1993) and indeed, Aboriginal directors, some of them *auteurs*, are now taking control and telling their own stories in their own way. This change raises the question about the role which non-Aboriginal directors might have in the future when it comes to presenting Indigenous

stories on screen. This issue has been considered by Aboriginal documentary producer and historian, Frances Peters Little, who, in 2002, wrote: "What I most hope for is for black and white filmmakers to become more courageous in their representations of Aboriginal people" (Little). I asked Rolf de Heer about the role of white directors on Aboriginal projects and he responded by saying: "I think there's only a role if it is asked of them ... I would never have done *Ten Canoes* except that I was asked to do it" (Interview: Rolf de Heer).

Subsequently, David Gulpilil again asked Rolf de Heer to collaborate with him in creating another movie. On this occasion, while David Gulpilil was serving time in prison for alcohol related offences, Rolf de Heer and he co-wrote the screenplay for the dramatic story of an ageing contemporary Aboriginal man caught between two worlds. Upon his release from prison David Gulpilil played the leading role in *Charlie's Country* (2013) which Rolf de Heer directed. For his performance, David Gulpilil won the Best Actor award in the *Un Certain Regard* category at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival.

### **The 'small screen'**

Before I move on to look at two movies which are almost entirely Aboriginal in origin and production I would like to take a brief sidestep into the world of the 'small screen'. Movies which are almost entirely Aboriginal did not just come out of the blue. The momentum for this has derived from a great deal of groundwork in the form of Aboriginal television production whereby the beginnings of this can be found in the establishment in 1980 of the *Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA)*. Initially broadcasting in radio, CAAMA expanded into television in 1986 and, two years later, formed a subsidiary, *CAAMA Productions Pty Ltd.*, to "perform the function of a commercial film and television production house" (CAAMA 2012). *CAAMA Productions* now claims to be "the largest Indigenous production house in Australia" (ibid). A number of other locally-based Indigenous production and broadcasting organisations have followed, and both of Australia's federally funded

television organisations, *ABC TV* and *SBS TV*, have also established Indigenous production units. In 2007, the Federal Government established the *National Indigenous Television Service (NITV)* and in 2012 provided additional funding to expand the service into a new channel which would have “its own distinctive identity, a high level of editorial independence and appropriate Indigenous representation” (Willis 2012:64). In 1993, Australia’s peak motion picture funding body, *Screen Australia* (formerly the Australian Film Commission), set up an Indigenous Branch specifically to promote “the quality and diversity of Indigenous films” (Screen Australia 2007). By 2007, in a publication entitled “*Dreaming in Motion – Celebrating Australia’s Indigenous Filmmakers*”, *Screen Australia* was able to profile 26 Indigenous directors, producers and cinematographers who had successfully engaged in film production as a result of the Indigenous Branch program (ibid). The 26 people mentioned include the director of *The Sapphires*, Wayne Blair, the director of *Samson and Delilah*, Warwick Thornton, and the director of *Bran Nue Dae*, Rachel Perkins. Clearly, over the past thirty years, there has been a large amount of Government funding expended to provide opportunities for Indigenous people to tell their stories and represent themselves in Australian electronic media and film. The results are there to be seen in television productions which are broadcast all over Australia every day of the year.

### *Samson and Delilah 2009*

*Samson and Delilah* has a direct connection back into Aboriginal television. This movie was released in 2009 and was the creation of Aboriginal *auteur*, Warwick Thornton. He is the son of one of the founders of *CAAMA*, Freda Glynn, and learned his craft as a camera operator while a trainee at *CAAMA Productions*. *Samson and Delilah* is a movie which simply could not have been made by anyone except an Indigenous filmmaker. Certainly, no white director would have dared, given the representation of domestic violence and degradation. The movie withholds nothing from the viewer in depicting the ragged, debased, and squalid world in which many Aboriginal people spend their lives. It is a world which Warwick Thornton was able to observe at first hand during his childhood in



Alice Springs in Australia's Northern Territory. Thornton says it was these close observations of the community around him which eventually led him to create the world of *Samson and Delilah* (Interview: Warwick Thornton 2009). Thornton thrusts this world onto the screen with every gut-wrenching detail: a world of tragic disorder which provides the backdrop for a love story about two teenagers who really have not got a chance. The movie thus becomes a plea for understanding and a cry for help. It depicts Aboriginal people in a manner in which *other* Aboriginal people *want* them to be seen and observed. The movie shows audiences that these Aboriginal people are an integral part of the Australian community – not set apart from it.

I chose to use the title of the movie *Bran Nue Dae* as part of the title of this article mainly because it seems to indicate a fresh beginning, a "brand new day", and a rejuvenation of the manner in which Aboriginal people can be represented on screen. In this movie which is an effervescent multi-racial musical, Aboriginal Australians are shown to be living their lives as part of the framework of the everyday Australian community. Their lives are far from easy and there are racial issues to be dealt with, but the Aboriginal people are proud and comfortable with their Aboriginality.

The ethos of the movie is best summed-up in the title of one of its headline songs: "There is nothing I would rather be – than to be an Aborigine" (*Bran Nue Dae* 2009 DVD). As with *The Sapphires*, *Bran Nue Dae* is based on a successful theatrical musical by an Aboriginal author and thereby reflects the influence of theatre and dance as a well-spring for Indigenous motion pictures.

## **Conclusion**

*Bran Nue Dae* did well at the Australian box office. By January 2014, it was ranked at #35 on the list of the Top 100 Australian films for box office returns (Screen Australia Research 2014) and could be seen as having opened the door for the success of *The Sapphires*. Both movies sit at the topmost level of the *arc of acceptance*:

Indigenous people depicting themselves and being accepted as themselves by the wider, multicultural Australian audience. In a comment on the box-office success of *The Sapphires*, its director, Wayne Blair, stated: "What does this mean to Indigenous Australia? Look, it's four black women on the big screen for the first time just having the same wants and needs as non-Indigenous women" (Swift 2012a). Australian box office returns quickly placed *The Sapphires* high amongst the top grossing Australian movies of all time (Swift 2012b) and, by January 2014, it ranked at #15 (Screen Australia Research). In addition, the movie has achieved many industry accolades – both at home and overseas. At the second *Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts Awards* the movie took six awards, including Best Picture (Blatchford 2013).

The question of Aboriginal representation has influenced me in my work with Aboriginal people and the observations I have made are, as outlined in this study, of an increasing self-determination and acceptance. In my 1984 television documentary series *Six Australians*, I set out to provide a program structure in which six Indigenous people could tell the stories of their lives on camera with a minimum of intrusion. The subtitle of the series stated that these people were: "*telling their own stories*" (McGowan 1984). Now, in their own motion pictures, Australian Indigenous people are confidently telling their own stories to the whole world, and on the big screen.

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