



CHESTER FILM SOCIETY PRESENTS:

TEN CANOES

2006 AUSTRALIA 90 MINUTES

Directed by Rolf de Heer, Peter Djigirr

Starring the Aboriginal tribesmen from Arafura

Once upon a time, in a land far, far, away,' starts the narration for 'Ten Canoes' – before the speaker (David Gulpilil) cracks up. 'Ha ha ha! Nah, not like that! I'm only joking. But I am going to tell you a story...' Different modes of storytelling, and its various effects, are at the heart of this rich, wise and quite unique collaboration between filmmaker Rolf de Heer ('Bad Boy Bubby', 'The Tracker') and the Aboriginal community of Ramingining in Australia's Northern Territory. The fruit of a remarkable production process whose primary challenge was to synthesise often contradictory European and Yolngu expectations of narrative – not to mention casting, performance and photography – 'Ten Canoes' is at once a wry fable about jealousy and desire, a fascinating ethnographic document and a highly enjoyable nudge-in-the-ribs shaggy dog story.

Opening with sweeping overhead vistas of the Arnhem Land wetlands typical of Ian Jones's superb cinematography, 'Ten Canoes' develops as a nesting set of stories. Our narrator takes us back to a time before the arrival of Europeans, when a group of men are setting off to prepare bark canoes for a traditional goose-egg hunting expedition. The black and white photography here is explicitly modelled on the extraordinary archive of Arnhem Land images captured by anthropologist Donald Thomson in the 1930s. When village elder Minyngululu (Peter Minyngululu) learns of his callow younger brother Dayindi's (Jamie Dayindi Gulpilil Dalaithngu) desire for Minyngululu's youngest wife, he embarks on an ancient cautionary tale that unfolds, in colour, over the course of their expedition. In this story, the life of Ridjimiriril (Crusoe Kurddal) – a proud warrior who also has three wives and an

envious younger brother (Gulpilil Dalaithngu again) – is thrown into turmoil when one wife disappears following the unexpected arrival of a stranger in the area.

Having been eased into things by the English-language narration, the group's casual camaraderie and some ribald business about farts, pricks and turds, it's easy to take for granted the complexity of the film that develops. The fun which the voiceover pokes at both the characters on screen and us viewers is emblematic of the playful engagement with the nature of storytelling that runs through both the action and execution of 'Ten Canoes'. While the cautionary tale might be wise in itself, it warns of the dangers of buying into rousing but unsubstantiated yarns, before closing with a powerful sequence in which, through ritual, a character effectively narrates his own passing.

The many layers of framing – there are even brief, witty hypothetical scenes within the story within the story – find visual analogues in images of paint on scars on skin, or river compositions in which the moving water, the foliage floating on it and the sunset clouds reflected from above form a fluctuating but cohesive whole. All this multifacetedness is, remarkably, handled with the same relaxed assurance the hunters bring to the construction of their canoes. It's a pleasingly organic process underlined by the narrator's note that 'this story is growing into a large tree now, with branches everywhere.' Do yourself a favour and get climbing.

Ben Walters, Time Out London

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PLEASE LEAVE ANY COMMENTS ABOUT THIS FILM ON THE REVERSE OF THIS FORM. MANY THANKS.

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TERRIBLE FANTASTIC