

Introduction of Peter Weir's *Gallipoli*

Remarks of Michael A. McRobbie

President

Indiana University

IU Cinema

Wednesday, March 4, 2015

4:00 PM

1. INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you, Dean Ciccarelli.

And let me commend you as well for coordinating Indiana University's yearlong commemoration of the beginning of World War I.

World War I was supposed to be the "war to end all wars." Instead, it was, in many ways, a precursor to a second massive global conflict, and its impact continues to pervade the most complex international issues, especially in Europe and the Middle East.

Of course, part of our commemoration of the war is this yearlong film series at the IU Cinema, which has explored, through a number of notable films that focus on the Great War, the impact of the war, the human suffering that has been caused by war over the last century, and the futility of war as a whole. And I also want to commend the IU Cinema's staff and director, Jon Vickers, for their role in programming and coordinating this film series, and, more generally, for their commitment to highly innovative programming that has helped the IU Cinema become widely recognized—in just its first four years of operation—as one truly of the finest university cinemas in the nation. In fact, after her most recent visit to Indiana University to receive an honorary doctorate,

three-time Academy Award-winning actress Meryl Streep told *Variety* “The IU Cinema is one of the finest projection houses I have ever seen: state of the art sight and sound facilities enclosed in a beautiful building which has been painstakingly restored and updated.” She continued, saying: “Thomas Hart Benton murals of a quality that would normally be showcased in the art museum adorn the walls of this magnificent screening theatre. I was honored to be invited to screen films there.”

I’m delighted to be here tonight to briefly introduce today’s guest of honor and to say a few words about the wonderful—though, at times, harrowing— film we are about to see.

2. PETER WEIR

Our guest filmmaker has, as British film critic David Thompson recently wrote, “(built) the unquestioned status of one of the great directors still at work.”¹

Peter Weir first earned international acclaim as one of the central figures in the Australian film renaissance known as the Australian New Wave.

Australia’s thriving early film industry had declined after World War II and had come to a virtual stop by the 1960s. In the 1970s, filmmakers like Mr. Weir began to make films that dealt with Australian history and culture—films that also dealt with universal personal and moral issues. The resurgence in Australian film was also a manifestation of Australia’s transformation as a nation. It foreshadowed major political change and marked the emergence of Australia from the shadow of Britain as a modern, progressive nation.

Mr. Weir’s film, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, which was screened here at the IU Cinema last night, was certainly one of the keystones of the Australian film renaissance and is

¹ David Thompson, Foreword to John C. Tibbets (ed.), *Peter Weir: Interviews*, (University Press of Mississippi, 2014), ix.

widely considered to be the film responsible for making the rest of the world aware that Australia was once again producing compelling, quality films.

His wonderful 1977 film, *The Last Wave*, and *Gallipoli*, the film we will see tonight, are also considered two of the most notable films of the Australian New Wave.

And Mr. Weir is, of course, one of many veterans of the Australian film industry who have gone on to broader success in Hollywood and around the world.

In addition to the films I have already mentioned, Mr. Weir has directed such magnificent and iconic films as *The Year of Living Dangerously*, *Witness*, *Dead Poets Society*, *The Truman Show*, and *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*, which was nominated for 10 Academy Awards, including Best Director and Best Picture.

Many of you, I am sure, were fortunate enough to attend his talk yesterday as part of the Jorgensen Guest Filmmaker Lecture Series.

We are honored to have him with us again tonight, and after this evening's screening of *Gallipoli*, he will join me onstage for a few minutes of conversation and to take your questions.

Would you please join me, then, in welcoming Peter Weir.

3. PETER WEIR'S GALLIPOLI

As Luke Buckmaster, film critic for *The Guardian Australia*, recently wrote: “Few films impact the (Australian) national psyche with as much force as ... *Gallipoli*, one of the best loved and most quintessentially ‘Australian’ films.”²

The film, one of the masterpieces of Australian cinema, was Mr. Weir’s first film to be based on historical events—in this case, the participation of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (or ANZAC) troops in the doomed 1915 Dardanelles campaign.

Anzac Day, the anniversary of the landing of those troops at Anzac Cove on April 25th, 1915, is of the most important national celebrations in Australia and New Zealand, and, of course, we are about to observe the centennial Anzac Day.

Variety described the film as “an intimate epic” that “tackles a legend in human terms.”³

Gallipoli stars Mel Gibson, fresh off his performance in *Mad Max*, as Frank Dunne, and Mark Lee, who appears here in his first film, as Archy Hamilton.

The film follows the journey of these two friends from their time as sprint race competitors, to their enlistment in the Australian Imperial Force, to their training in Cairo, and, finally, as they face combat in the Dardanelles.

David Williamson, one of Australia’s most successful playwrights, wrote the screenplay for the film based, in part, on historian Bill Gammage’s book, *The Broken Years*, which incorporates the diaries and letters of Australian soldiers who fought at Gallipoli.⁴ And you will see Williamson in a cameo in the film as the football player who gets tackled hard when the soldiers play Australian Rules in Egypt.

² Luke Buckmaster, “Gallipoli Rewatched: Weir Scathingly Deconstructs War as Grand Adventure,” *The Guardian*, Thursday, November 6, 2014

³ “Gallipoli,” *Variety*, 5, August 1981, *Variety Film Reviews 1981-1982* (New York, 1986).

⁴ James Clarke, *War Films*, (Random House, 2013)

The film was produced by Patricia Lovell, who also produced *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

A number of films that were part of the Australian New Wave, including *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Last Wave*, had received production or financial support from the South Australian Film Corporation, the first state film corporation established in Australia and one that played a major role in the 70s film renaissance. The corporation was potentially to be involved with *Gallipoli* as well, but deemed an early draft to be "not commercial." The film was eventually funded largely by Associated R&R Films, a company founded by media mogul Rupert Murdoch and music entrepreneur Robert Stigwood. With a cost of \$2.8 million, it was, at the time, the most expensive Australian film produced.

Gallipoli won eight Australian Film Institute Awards, including Best Film, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Supporting Actor, Best Screenplay, and Best Cinematography. It was also nominated for a Golden Globe for Best Foreign Film.

As a number of film scholars have observed, the film's popularity, especially in Australia, lies not in its being a war film or an antiwar film, but in its powerful celebration of ideas that are an important part of the Australian national psyche: mateship, brotherhood, nationhood, and sacrifice.

And now, enjoy *Gallipoli*.