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Introduction of “His Name is Gulpilil” Series and Nicholas Roeg’s *Walkabout*
Remarks of Michael A. McRobbie
University Chancellor, Indiana University
IU Cinema
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7:00 p.m.

1. INTRODUCTION

Thank you very much, Alicia (Kozma), for that kind introduction.

Let me begin by commending you and the staff of the IU Cinema for building on the cinema’s commitment to innovative programming and strengthening the vital contributions it makes to many academic disciplines on campus. Since the cinema opened in 2011, it has hosted nearly 3,000 events and welcomed more than 300 visiting filmmakers and scholars who have invariably had high praise for this facility. Given the subject of this month’s series, it is fitting to quote Peter Weir, one of the central figures in the Australian film renaissance of the 1970s known as the Australian New Wave. Mr. Weir was a guest here in 2015—I had the honor of interviewing him on this stage—and he directed one of the films in this series. During that visit, he wrote memorably, ["If the Ancient Greeks had invented cinema, they'd have a temple like this."](#)¹

I would also like to thank the faculty and staff whose gifts in 2017 generously endowed a fund to establish the McRobbie’s Choice Film Series, a series I greatly enjoy curating each semester. So, I am delighted to be here this evening to say a few words about the three films I have selected as part of this semester’s series “His Name is Gulpilil,” which showcase the work of the late iconic indigenous Australian actor David Gulpilil.

¹ Personal correspondence with the Office of the President from founding director of IU Cinema Jon Vickers. Mr. Weir wrote this when signing a poster during his visit.

2. THE LIFE AND CAREER OF DAVID GULPILIL

Mr. Gulpilil passed away in 2021. His films are not widely known in the United States, but they are among the most renowned works in the history of Australian cinema, and he long ago reached legendary status there as an actor of brilliance and huge charisma. This, then, is an excellent opportunity to honor his passing by showing three of his finest works.

David Gulpilil was raised in the Australian bush as one of the Yolngu people of Arnhem Land, a remote region of the Northern Territory of Australia. Director Nicholas Roeg was scouting locations for *Walkabout*—the film you will see tonight—when he witnessed a 16-year-old Gulpilil performing a traditional ceremonial dance. When Roeg approached him and asked for his name, he could only reply, “Yes.” Though fluent in several Aboriginal languages, he did not speak English—though he soon became fluent simply by listening to others.

He was a skilled hunter, tracker, musician, painter, storyteller, and one of Australia’s most renowned traditional dancers. Sometimes called “the Black Nureyev,” he organized troupes of dancers and musicians and performed at festivals throughout Australia.

His breakthrough performance in *Walkabout*, made in 1971, led to a remarkable and distinguished acting career, during which he consistently communicated Aboriginal identity, culture, values, and history with nuance, humanity, and humor.

His next screen appearances came in 1976 with the films *Mad Dog Morgan*, where he worked with Dennis Hopper, and *Storm Boy*, in which he played Fingerbone Bill, an Aboriginal man estranged from his tribe.

In 1977, he appeared in *The Last Wave*, a seminal film of the Australian cinema renaissance, which the IU Cinema will screen one week from tonight. It was the first of

famed director Peter Weir's films to be released in America. In the movie, Gulpilil plays Chris Lee, an Aboriginal man who helps a white Sydney solicitor understand what he is going through as he defends four Aboriginal men accused of murder. Weir has said that he wrote the role for David Gulpilil after a conversation between them led Weir to understand the importance of dreaming in Aboriginal culture.

Even while developing his film career, Mr. Gulpilil continued to maintain his tribal and family obligations in the Arnhem Land, where he continued to live. As a result, his film appearances in the 1980s and '90s were somewhat sporadic. He played a small role in *The Right Stuff* and appeared as Neville Bell in *Crocodile Dundee*, a film he later rightly denounced.

In the early 2000s, Mr. Gulpilil returned to prominence as Australian cinema finally began to more widely and more accurately depict Aboriginal people and their history since the European settlement of Australia.

On April 25, the cinema will screen the haunting and beautiful 2007 film, *The Tracker*, one of three feature films in which Mr. Gulpilil collaborated with Dutch Australian director Rolf de Heer. *The Tracker* was the first film in which Mr. Gulpilil was cast in a leading role. Luke Buckmaster, film critic for the *Guardian Australia*, wrote that "it is a great shame of the Australian film industry—and a testament to its longstanding whiteness—that Gulpilil was not given more opportunities as a leading actor, which he so richly deserved."² His remarkable performance in the film earned Best Actor awards from the Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts, the Film Critics Circle of Australia, and the Inside Film Awards.

For his performance in the 2007 film *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, Mr. Gulpilil was nominated for an AACTA award for Best Supporting Actor.

² Luke Buckmaster, "Vale David Gulpilil: the inimitable actor who changed the movies, and changed us," *The Guardian*, November 29, 2021, Web, Accessed April 2, 2023, URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/nov/30/vale-david-dalaithngu-the-inimitable-actor-who-changed-the-movies-and-changed-us>.

And in 2008, he appeared as the mystical Aboriginal elder King George in Baz Luhrmann's *Australia*.

His later roles tended to be more complex. They reflected struggles he faced in his own life, including negotiating the disconnect between his traditional lifestyle and the settler state, persistent discrimination against Aboriginal people, and substance abuse issues—to which he claimed he was introduced when working with Dennis Hopper in 1976.

He received the Un Certain Regard Award for Best Actor at the Cannes Film Festival for *Charlie's Country*, an autobiographical film that Mr. Gulpilil co-wrote with Rolf de Heer and filmed while he was in rehab, getting his life back on track.

3. WALKABOUT

The film you will see tonight, Nicolas Roeg's *Walkabout*, was, as I have mentioned, Mr. Gulpilil's first film and the one that put him on the map.

Before his appearance in the film, Aboriginal characters in Australian cinema were often played by white actors in blackface. Gulpilil's powerful performance helped bring an end to this deplorable practice.

Louis Nowra, a prominent Australian playwright and screenwriter, writes: "[There are some films that change the way you see things. *Walkabout* is one.](#)"³

Nowra writes of seeing *Walkabout* for the first time: "[...from its violent opening to its ambiguous conclusion, I was stunned. The images of the Outback were of an almost hallucinogenic intensity. Instead of the desert and bush being infused with a dull](#)

³ Louis Nowra, *Walkabout*, (Currency Press Pty. Ltd. and ScreenSound Australia, 2003), 3.

monotony, everything seemed acute, shrill, and incandescent. The Outback was beautiful and haunting.”⁴ The Outback of Australia has never looked more beautiful on film.

But the most striking aspect of the film is David Gulpilil’s remarkable performance. His on-screen charisma made him an instant star... even though his name is misspelled in the credits. The press celebrated him as he toured the world with the film, and during this time, he had dinner with the royal family and met figures such as John Lennon, Bruce Lee, and Bob Marley.

Film critic Luke Buckmaster, whom I quoted a moment ago, writes that Gulpilil’s performance “is anchored by small gestures. The audience may not understand what this smiley, generous-hearted man is saying, but it’s clear how he’s feeling without Roeg needing to signpost his emotions.”⁵

In 2017, Mr. Gulpilil was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. He retired from acting in 2019.

Australian filmmaker Molly Reynolds made an acclaimed documentary, *My Name is Gulpilil*, with Rolf de Heer as producer. It was primarily filmed in 2017, with the expectation that Mr. Gulpilil would not live much longer.

His death in 2021 at the age of 68 elicited tributes from all corners of the world and scenes from his outstanding career were projected onto the sails of the Sydney Opera House.

Hugh Jackman wrote in tribute: “I join all Australians, and the world over, in mourning the loss of David Gulpilil. One of the great privileges of my life was to work with David

⁴ Ibid., 5-6.

⁵ Luke Buckmaster, “Walkabout rewatched – a wilderness of the mind as much as of the land,” the Guardian, July 10, 2014. Web, Accessed April 2, 2023,

on the movie *Australia*. His contribution to film is immeasurable. From his cheeky laugh, to that mischievous glint in his eye and effortless ease in front of the camera ... His humanity is irreplaceable.”⁶

My cousin, Georgina Parker, a distinguished Australian television actor, posted a brief tribute, calling Mr. Gulpilil “Such a powerful actor and a beautiful artist. He was too young to leave us, and we’re all going to miss his presence more than we know.”⁷

In presenting him with a posthumous lifetime achievement award, Damian Trehwella, CEO of the Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts, said of Mr. Gulpilil: “David carried the legacy of his people into all his performances, creating an authenticity that had never been seen widely before and will never be forgotten. By redefining how the world sees Indigenous Australians, he paved the way for the next generation to reject cultural stereotypes and express their own truths.”

Tonight, you will see how this all began with his unforgettable performance in Nicholas Roeg’s *Walkabout*.

Enjoy the film.

⁶ Hugh Jackman, Tribute to David Gulpilil, Instagram, November 29, 2021, Accessed April 3, 2023, URL: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CW3SJ-4I2DQ/?hl=en>.

⁷ Georgie Parker, Tribute to David Gulpilil, Instagram, November 29, 2021, Accessed April 3, 2023, URL: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CW394EehH8a/>.