

# Ten Canoes

## float back in time

**T**en Canoes was written by Rolf de Heer in collaboration with the people of Ramingining, a community of Yolngu people in Central Arnhem Land, in Australia's Northern Territory.

Produced for Vertigo Productions by Julie Ryan and Rolf de Heer who, in September, became the first Australian director to receive the prestigious Silver Medallion Award from the Telluride Film Festival, the film is de Heer's eleventh feature and the first feature film to be shot entirely in an Aboriginal language - predominantly Ganalbingu.

Ten Canoes was inspired by indigenous performer and Australian screen icon, David Gulpilil who showed De Heer a black-and-white photograph of ten canoeists, taken by 1930's anthropologist Dr Donald Thomson. It is about a young man who covets one of the wives of his older brother. To teach him the proper way, he is told a story from the mythical past, a story of wrong love, kidnapping, sorcery, mayhem, and revenge gone wrong.

The uniquely Australian story has earned international critical acclaim, winning the 2006 Cannes Film Festival Un Certain Regard Special Jury Prize and takes the viewer into a world never before seen providing rich insights into Australian indigenous lifestyles and cultures.

Co-directed by de Heer and Peter Djigirr, a key member of the Arafura Swamp people, the film was narrated by Gulpilil.

Australian Director of Photography, Ian Jones, ACS joined de Heer in their fifth collaboration and for over twelve weeks, the crew transformed Murwangi, an old cattle station at the edge of the Arafura Swamp, into the production base camp.

With no choice but to make their own tracks into locations, the crew quickly became adept at pulling their weight, building sets, warding off crocodiles and setting up for shots.

The film is set in two separate time periods: the mythical past, just after the time when the ancestors lived and set the rules and standards of life, and then a more recent but unnamed past, when people lived according to the laws

created by the ancestors. It uses color and black and white to make the time distinctions. A contemporary black-and-white sequence duplicates Thompson's photographic work and we are then transported back to "Dreamtime" which is shot in color using Steadicam.

Converting to black-and-white influenced the choice of film stock. "When you shoot black-and-white, if you want to take that scene to color, you can't," explained Jones. "You're committed to



that. We didn't know how the ebb and flow of the film would go day-to-day, so to lock ourselves into black-and-white would have been a big gamble."

Local film laboratory, Atlab, discussed options with de Heer and Jones and arrived at an agreement that meant Ten Canoes would be Australia's first 4K digital intermediate. This allowed Jones to work with color stock and later, where necessary, to pull out the color. After extensive tests, Jones found that the KODAK VISION 320T 5277 had enough grain to "give us a nice, ballsy black-and-white".

Jones chose KODAK VISION2 500T 5218 for the color stock and to help him get the contrast down. "Rolf liked the saturation of the colors with Kodak, so we ended up going with the 5218. The high-speed meant I could eat into the dark areas and have control over that later on."

Although Jones prefers to shoot anamorphic, the digital intermediate process persuaded him to shoot in Super 35mm. "Generally, I'm not a believer in Super 35mm," he comments. "With the

Selected by the Australian Film Commission as Australia's official entry for the 79th Annual Academy Awards® Best Foreign Language Film category, Ten Canoes is the first feature film to be shot entirely in an Aboriginal language

image being manipulated at the end, you never see the final result, whereas with the anamorphic system, what you see is what you get. With the DI process, you don't lose a generation when you squeeze so you can keep an ideal image. Super 35mm also gave us more flexibility in the low light scenarios we found ourselves in."

The cast of non-actors demanded a very basic shooting style and a second or third take, a close-up or mid-shot was simply impossible because the untrained indigenous actors had difficulty repeating what they had just done. Fortunately Jones' significant Steadicam experience provided the solution, allowing the DP to give the frame an interest while conversations or action took place.

Working with an old ARRI BL4, modified to an Evolution, with a set of Cooke S4s, Jones quickly adapted to de Heer's simplistic shooting style. Even using a generator for lighting became an issue because de Heer wanted to record the natural sounds of the bush. To get around this problem, Jones used flecky boards and white sheets. To pull absolute detail from the eyes of the dark skinned actors, he used inverters that silently converted 12 volts to 24 volts, along with small HMI sun guns for the eyes. The result is stunning. ■



Above: Ian, Rolf and crew.