

Racism and small-town bigotry

Australian Rules, directed by Paul Goldman

By Richard Phillips
19 September 2002

Australian Rules, directed by Paul Goldman and based on Phillip Gwynne's semi-autobiographical novel *Deadly, Unna?* is a compassionate exposure of racism and small-town bigotry and its tragic consequences.

Set in fictional Prospect Bay, a poverty-stricken South Australian fishing village, the story is told from the standpoint of Gary Black (Nathan Phillips), a 16-year-old white boy, whose best friend is Dumby Red (Luke Carroll), an Aborigine and champion Australian Rules footballer.

The Aborigines do not live in Prospect Bay but are segregated some kilometres away in a former mission settlement. Football provides the only point of contact between the two communities and for talented players like Dumby Red, the possibility of escape from the bleak and isolated region.



Nathan Phillips, Lisa Flanagan and Luke Carroll

Gary is regarded as a “gutless wonder” by Bob Black (Simon Westaway), his overbearing and heavy-drinking fisherman father. Gary hates working on his father's fishing boat but enjoys reading (his favourite book is *A More Powerful Vocabulary*), loves composing erotic fantasies for Dumby, mainly about Madonna and Kylie Minogue, and is increasingly drawn to Clarence (Lisa Flanagan), Dumby's beautiful sister. Bob Black regards these literary pursuits and his son's friendship with the local Aborigines as alien and dangerous.

Just before the all-important grand final Gary, a mediocre footballer, is promoted to the key “ruck” position. The match goes badly at first until canny tactical advice from his

mother Liz (Celia Ireland), outstanding play by Dumby, and an accidental act of bravery in the last few seconds brings the club a narrow victory. As the town celebrates its first grand final triumph in 37 years, a chain of events is set in motion that ultimately leads to Dumby's murder, a tragedy penetrating into the heart of Gary Black's family.

Relations between the Aboriginal and white communities are explosive but Gary, who has fallen in love with Clarence, resolves to take a stand against the apartheid-like separation of the two communities. He decides to attend Dumby's funeral, the only white person to do so.

After the funeral he confronts his bullying father and by implication the ingrained backwardness and racism in the town. The 16-year-old is no match for his father but the decision marks a turning point in Gary's life. While none of the underlying problems are settled, the film concludes with Clarence and Gary swimming together beneath the local jetty, deciding that their only hope is to escape Prospect Bay.

Australian Rules is Goldman's first feature and was made on a \$3.8 million budget, a miniscule amount by today's standards. The director decided to make the film out of his concern over the rise of the racist One Nation movement and the refusal of Australian governments to address the long-standing discrimination and social problems facing Aborigines.

Not unexpectedly, particularly for a first-time feature director, there are gaps between these genuine concerns and the final result. The football scenes are patchy and caricatured at times with an exaggerated performance by Kevin Harrington as Arks, the coach. Goldman never really finds the right tone required for the country town football game, a problem not helped by the often heavy-handed musical soundtrack. The characterisation of Gary's mother Liz is also limited.

These faults, however, do not diminish the essential humanity of the work or the strong performances of Nathan Phillips, Lisa Flanagan and Luke Carroll who provide unaffected and convincing portrayals of youth struggling to

confront and overcome real social problems. Phillips and Flanagan, both newcomers to cinema, are exceptional as the teenage lovers and Simon Westaway, as Bob Black, has a powerful presence, especially in the family settings.

Australian Rules has several memorable scenes. Gary and Clarence's moments together on the beach, where they share a few words of poetry and kiss for the first time; the nighttime evacuation of the Black family children to the hen house, distressed over their father's drunken bullying of their mother; and the altercation between father and son after the funeral. Few recent Australian filmmakers have captured so well the poverty and bleakness of rural towns, where disdain for intellectual pursuits and racism is a common undercurrent.

Cultural censorship

This, however, is only one side of the *Australian Rules* story. Initially commissioned by the Adelaide Arts Festival, which planned to present several new Australian films mostly dealing with indigenous themes, Goldman's movie was very nearly sabotaged by a malicious campaign.

David Wilson, a former coordinator of the South Australian Indigenous Screen Culture Organisation, script consultant to the Adelaide Arts Festival and a vocal black nationalist, alleged that Goldman and the film's producers did not adequately consult with Aborigines and had violated "cultural protocols" laid down by the Australian Film Corporation, SBS Independent and other financing bodies. He also claimed that the film denigrated Aboriginal women, was racist and demanded that the murder scene be excised completely because it rekindled memories about the 1977 shooting of two Aborigines in Port Victoria, the town where scriptwriter Gwynne grew up.

Under Wilson's influence, consultation meetings with Aborigines in Port Pearce, near Port Victoria, were disrupted during early production phases in 2001. Pressure was brought to bear on Luke Carroll, Lisa Flanagan and other Aboriginal actors to withdraw from the film. Flanagan, whose grandmother lives in Port Pearce, was a particular target.

While the book and film are loosely based on Gwynne's experiences in Port Victoria, the story is entirely fictional. The 1977 shooting occurred when five armed Aborigines attempted to rob a local pub. Two of the young men involved were shot and killed by the publican. Gwynne incorporated some aspects of this tragic event into *Deadly, Unna?* but predated the event by several years. Gwynne's account was further modified for the film with additional name changes.

These adjustments, however, were not acceptable to Wilson, who asserted that the killings were an Aboriginal

story and that Goldman and Gwynne had no artistic license to dramatise the events or anything remotely like them. Alarmed by this, Goldman, Gwynne and producer Mark Lazarus resolved to continue and, with the support of one of the families whose son had been killed in 1977, completed shooting.

Australian Rules had its world premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in January. In the meantime, Wilson secured the political support of Adelaide Arts Festival director Peter Sellars, who, having previously backed the film, alleged the filmmakers had "violated serious protocols". Sellars, however, quit the festival and replacement director Sue Natrass, after some prevarication, decided to screen the film.

Wilson threatened an injunction, and although legal action failed to materialise, he and his supporters attended festival forums denouncing Goldman, Gwynne and Lazarus, who were told that "white Sydney filmmakers" had no right to tell stories involving Aborigines. Nevertheless, the screenings were a critical success and Wilson's campaign eventually petered out.

Any allegation that *Australian Rules* denigrates Aborigines is preposterous. Its central theme is opposition to racial discrimination in all its guises, with the tragedy at the heart of its plot a direct product of racist prejudice. Moreover, the accurate portrayal of the social conditions under which these events occurred points to the organic relationship between bigotry and backwardness and the endemic poverty, lack of education and a loss of hope.

Goldman, Gwynne and Lazarus should be supported for opposing the attempts to censor their creative work. *Australian Rules* is an honest and moving work, which deserves a wide audience.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>