

Samson and Delilah: a searing portrait of life for Central Australian Aboriginal youth

By Richard Phillips
14 May 2009

Written, filmed and directed by Warwick Thornton

Samson and Delilah is a confronting and deeply humane film about two teenagers from a remote Aboriginal settlement in Central Australia. Billed as a love story, Thornton's first full-length dramatic feature touches on many social issues—poverty, homelessness and substance abuse in Aboriginal communities—questions that Australian feature filmmakers have, up until now, largely chosen to ignore.

Samson (Rowan McNamarra), who is addicted to petrol-sniffing, shares a battered cinder-block house with his brother. The dwelling is dirty and, apart from a refrigerator that has no food, devoid of any real furniture. Milk crates, empty beer cans and abandoned cars litter the desperately poor and oppressed community.

Samson's life is miserable in the extreme. He sleeps on a thin-rubber mattress and spends much of his day listening to the radio, sniffing petrol, which alleviates his physical hunger and boredom, and trying to amuse himself. His brother has a reggae band that practises on the front veranda, playing the same song, hour after hour, day after day. Samson wants to learn guitar but his brother refuses to allow him to use the instrument.

Delilah (Marissa Gibson) lives with her grandmother Nana (Mitjili Gibson). Nana ekes out an existence producing paintings for a local art dealer. The dealer pays the old woman a pittance and then on-sells the paintings for thousands of dollars to Alice Springs' galleries. The old woman is frail and Delilah spends her days running errands, helping her grandmother produce paintings or wheel-chairing her to a local Health Centre, a battered semi-trailer that appears to have no real facilities or any healthcare workers. Delilah's escape from the monotony is a tape cassette

of Mexican pop songs.

Samson is attracted to Delilah but his overtures toward her are clumsy—throwing stones, a scrawled graffiti message on the store wall, and later hurling his mattress over the young girl's front fence. Delilah rejects these advances, but two events bring the teenagers together in mutual support. There is a violent altercation between Samson and his brother and when Nana dies in her sleep, Delilah is beaten by her relatives, who blame the girl for the old woman's death.

Alienated from the community, the two teenagers decide to head for Alice Springs. They have no money or anywhere to stay, but eventually find shelter under a bridge over the town's dry Todd River, where they are befriended by Gonzo (Scott Thornton), a homeless middle-aged alcoholic. He feeds the frightened teenagers and provides some light relief with his songs and sardonic comments.

Delilah unsuccessfully attempts to sell paintings in Alice Springs; Samson's petrol sniffing escalates; and the teenagers' lives spiral out of control with catastrophic consequences. They eventually find their way to a remote outstation—a small tin shed with an adjoining well in the desert—where Delilah tries to help Samson end his petrol-sniffing addiction. The movie's last scenes attempt to provide a sense of hope, but apart from their love, there is little to suggest that there is any real escape for the teenagers from the social misery they confront.

Samson and Delilah is not an easy or comfortable work—the poverty, oppression and the social dysfunction is overwhelming at times—but it has an intelligent and carefully measured pace, with moments of visual beauty, dry humour and wry social observations. Performances from Rowan McNamarra

and Marissa Gibson as the principal protagonists, and Scott Thornton as Gonzo, all non-professional actors, are strong.

There is no direct dialogue between Samson and Delilah, who communicate through looks and gestures. In fact, Samson only speaks once during the film when he stutters his name to Gonzo. While this makes demands on audiences conditioned by contemporary films about articulate and garrulous teenagers, it is an important and realistic element in the story. The difficulty Samson and Delilah have in verbalising their feelings is another expression of their poverty and oppression.

Thornton skillfully uses a mix of American and Australian country music, songs by Mexican Ana Gabriel and contemporary Aboriginal tunes to give added emotional depth. The opening scene in Samson's bedroom, with Charley Pride's "Sunshiny Day" playing in the background, is striking and tragic, as is the bedraggled Gonzo singing Tom Waits's "Jesus Gonna Be Here" about alcoholism and religious salvation.

Samson and Delilah has some narrative loose ends and the police, a major and dangerous aspect of everyday life for homeless Aborigines in Alice Springs, are absent. Nor does the movie make any direct reference to the Northern Territory "intervention", the raft of anti-democratic measures initiated by the former Howard coalition government in June 2007 and now being expanded by the Rudd Labor government.

The Howard and Rudd governments both claimed that their "intervention" was to "save Aboriginal children" from sexual abuse and other problems created by alcoholism and substance abuse. Its real purpose was to axe Aboriginal welfare rights via "income management", break up so-called "unviable" remote indigenous communities, and impose government control over indigenous land on behalf of the mining corporations and agribusinesses. The measures included suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act, a violation of international human rights conventions.

Notwithstanding Thornton's decision to omit this issue, a subject that no doubt provides material for countless serious movies, *Samson and Delilah* is a damning social portrait. It is, moreover, a powerful

antidote to the lurid and sensationalised media reportage of the nightmarish conditions in Aboriginal communities and the slanderous claims by the Rudd government and state authorities that Aboriginal people are to blame.

For those who have not witnessed firsthand what life is like for Aborigines in outback Australia, it is necessary to point out that conditions in many remote communities, particularly since the "intervention", are far worse than those portrayed in *Samson and Delilah*.

The "intervention" has forced hundreds of Aborigines out of remote settlements and into over-crowded town camps, creating worsening health problems and intensifying already serious problems of alcoholism and drug abuse. A recent survey by Sunrise Health Services in the Northern Territory's Katherine area found that the number of anemic children under 5 years had trebled to 55 percent in the past three years.

Last year there were more than 20 Aboriginal youth in Alice Springs addicted to petrol and glue sniffing. The town's first treatment clinic, which only accommodates 10 people, opened in early 2008, ten years after medical experts called for the facility.

Samson and Delilah was made for just \$1.6 million. It is a visceral work, infused with Thornton's determination to tell the world about the horrendous everyday social obstacles facing Aboriginal youth in contemporary Australia. In a local industry dominated by political conformism and box office success, this is an encouraging sign and one that has been a long time in coming.

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