

Jedda: racist relic or ahead of its time? essay sample

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Jedda: Fifty years ago the movie Jedda broke new ground in its portrayal of the indigenous inhabitants of this land. Andre Greenhalgh examines its rich legacy.

In the 1930s, 40s and 50s, government, Charitable and church groups moved many mixed-race children into orphanages and in some cases helped adopt them into white families. It was felt that part-white children could be integrated into white society. Some Aboriginal and part-Aboriginal parents gave up their children voluntarily; some children were taken by force. About 15% of children are thought removed from their parents in this time. Jedda (1955) was notable for its position as the first movie to be released in Australia in full colour. Jedda was a well-respected movie, as it demonstrated lack of Racism, by incorporating Aboriginal actors to play the parts of indigenous folk. It won more international attention than previous Australian films, during a time when Hollywood films were dominating the Australian cinema. (Wikipedia, 2012) Jedda premiered at Darwin's Star Theatre on January 3, 1955, to an audience divided by race and class. The Aboriginal stars, Ngarla Kunoth in the title role and Robert Tudawali as the leading man, Marbuck, were with the silvertails upstairs from where they looked down on the seating known as " the blacks".

Determined to tell a story that could be told only in Australia by Australians, Charles Chauvel made Jedda—the first Australian feature film to use Aboriginal actors in the lead roles and the first to be filmed in colour. Set in the Northern Territory, it is the tragic story of a young Aboriginal girl of the Arunte tribe, adopted by a white woman, Sarah McCann, as a surrogate for

her own baby who has died. She names the baby Jedda after a wild bird and raises her as a white child, isolating her from Aboriginal contact. But when Marbuck, an Aboriginal man seeking work arrives on the station, Jedda is fascinated by him.

Marbuck takes the half-willing teenage girl as his captive, returning to his tribal lands, only to find he is rejected by his tribe for breaking the marriage traditions. The two are hounded from the tribe and chased by the men from Jedda's home station, until Marbuck is driven mad, and falls over a cliff to his death, together with Jedda.

Racism is an ever-looming perspective and is present throughout the entire film. The film opens with Joe, a half-caste aboriginal male that has been raised by a white family, and as such has been granted a portion of respect. Half-Cast Joe, the narrator and male lead, was played by a white actor in blackface. Yolngu Boy is the story of the friendship of three teenage boys who find themselves on a journey from North East Arnhem Land to Darwin, a trek initiated to save one of the boys who is in trouble with the law. The story and plot that evolves is one of immeasurable passion and beauty. Yolngu Boy is a sincere glimpse into the Yolngu culture of North East Arnhem Land and the people living there. Set in contemporary Australia, Yolngu Boy does not try to veil the social issues pertaining to many Aboriginal people today, such as petrol sniffing, yet at the same time it does not point the "finger" or the "blame" at anyone. Stephen Johnson has created a film that is refreshingly honest and open, focusing upon the unique and strong friendship of the three main characters. The film moves along at quite a fast

pace, and its visual imagery is always perfectly accompanied by deliberately chosen musical tracks, mostly composed by the band Yothu Yindi. The viewer is left with the sense that they too have accompanied the boys on their journey, thus making the ending all the more “real” and tragic. Yolngu Boy is an adventure, Ultimately it is dramatic and comical, inspiring and uplifting and in general a film that Australians should see due to the fact that it does offer considerable insight into a culture that we know so little about, yet judge so often.

Despite Yolngu Boy being distinctively Australian, despite its social message and significance, it is still treated with a sense of caution and this highlights its place with Australian National Cinema and its value. It has been stated that films about Aborigines are never really that popular. As is stated on the Yolngu Boy official website, “In a period spanning forty years only two Australian films featuring an Aboriginal theme have come close to enjoying some degree of success — Jedda and Walkabout.” This says a lot about the value of Aboriginal films within Australian National Cinema and its audience(s), especially when there are such fabulous Aboriginal films such as Rachel Perkins’ Radiance (1998) and Tracey Moffatt’s *beDevil* (1993). It seems as though the common consensus is that Aboriginal films are “important” but accepted that they will probably not be seen. As David Stratton suggests, “Yolngu Boy looks great but despite its qualities it is unlikely to make much of a splash Down Under, where films on Aboriginal themes are generally box office poison.” The box office figures highlight that Yolngu Boy has been popular and it is certainly gaining widespread interest through word of

mouth. Hopefully audiences in general will come to appreciate the importance of Yolngu Boy in both its presentation and creation and that this attitude that Aboriginal films just will not be seen can be overturned.