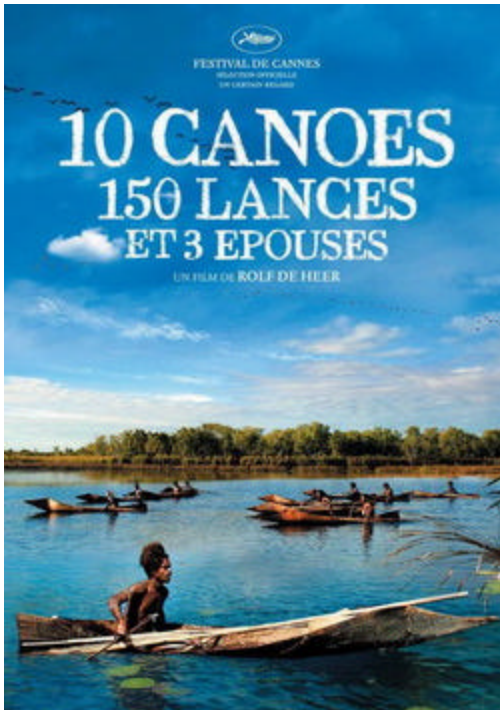


Oct
03
2007

2007 IIFF—Ten Canoes

Posted by [Michael Guillen](#) at 6:53am.

Posted in [Film & DVD Reviews](#) , [Comedy](#), [Drama](#), [UK, Ireland, Australia & New Zealand](#), [Random Festival News](#).



Along with the theme of the regionality of the [Idaho International Film Festival](#), there's the theme of how films brought in will play regionally. At the closing night gala I overheard a woman complaining to her friend about the closing night feature [Ten Canoes](#): "All they did was talk about poop!" I shook my head in disbelief and thought, "Regional is as regional does."

I first caught Rolf de Heer's ethnographic photograph come to life—*Ten Canoes*—at the 2006 Toronto International Film Festival. It had won a special mention at Cannes and had just been announced as Australia's Oscars entry in the foreign film category. The screening was problematic in that the print projected did not have subtitles. Misled by the English narrative voiceover, however, I didn't know there were *supposed* to be subtitles so I absorbed the film on its projected merits. More than a year later, I finally caught *Ten Canoes* with its randy subtitles here in Boise, Idaho, which did indeed add another layer of comic meaning onto the film. One of the reel changes was a bit messy and the sound dropped out and I momentarily worried, "Oh no, am I going to get subtitles this time but no sound?" Fortunately, the projectionist pulled it together and I have finally seen the film as it was meant to be seen. I replicate (and tweak) my writeup from 2006 TIFF.

Ten Canoes is visually stunning, depicting movement between real time and dream time through strategic shifts of color and black and white cinematography. The story is simple even as the storytelling is complex. While hunting for geese and geese eggs, an elder tells his younger brother a story that proves relevant for the younger's own inappropriate feelings for the elder's youngest wife.

During the Q&A after the Toronto screening, Rolf de Heer was asked how he cast *Ten Canoes*. He responded by saying he would have to paraphrase the question: how the film was cast. It was the most remarkable casting process he'd ever been through. In many respects he could do little. The inspiration for the film was a photograph by the Australian anthropologist Donald Thomson of ten men in canoes on a swamp. The initial casting of the movie was for four of those ten. It was the community itself who more or less decided who was going to do what. The ten men in the canoes in the photograph were all named and everyone was related to them in some way and so the people who were most closely related chose to "be" them. The last of the ten canoeists were cast in that way. For the rest of the casting, a number of aspects came into play. Primarily, there is a complex kinship system where everyone belongs to one of two moieties with subsections and classifications that determine who can marry who. As far as he could understand it, in the aboriginal culture there is no concept of "fiction." Thus, the relationships on the screen between the characters had to be allowed in real life between actors playing those characters. This was so complex that there was nothing he could do to even determine who he could cast from. It didn't work for him to ask each actor which moiety they belonged to and try to figure it out from there; they more or less determined these casting choices themselves. He had to concede to their cultural imperatives.

He was asked how Australians and the aboriginal communities reacted when they saw the finished film. The very first people to see the film were the aboriginals who saw the version that was completely in their language, including the storyteller's narration (in our version the narration was in English). It was the wildest screening he had ever been to. It was complete madness, chaotic, wonderful. It was the first time any of them had seen anything on the screen that was about them in their own language. There was yelling, screaming, laughing. The response was tremendous.

He was asked how he came about to write this story, to know this community, and to become so involved, and whether he spoke aboriginal. Not at all, he admitted, maybe five or six words. It started when he made a film called *The Tracker* and he cast David Gulpilil [who, incidentally, is the English-speaking narrator of *Ten Canoes*]. After he cast David, he found himself not knowing how to deal with him because he was so different from anyone he'd ever dealt with before. He didn't even know how to talk to him. David invited him to come meet his people and de Heer realized he had to accept that invitation so he could understand him better to direct him. As their relationship developed during the filming of *The Tracker*, David kept asking de Heer to make a movie that would be about his people starring his people. As the project developed, David himself moved away from his community and became distant from the project, but, by then de Heer had developed a relationship with everyone else in David's community.

When de Heer was at the Toronto International for his previous film *Alexandra's Project*, he was walking across one of Toronto's parks ruminating on *Ten Canoes* when all the contradictory elements of the script's thematic necessities and cinematic structure fell into place. In gist, the story of ten men hunting for geese and geese eggs was fundamentally undramatic but this was what the community wanted in the film and what he had to work with. The community was very attached to the Donald Thomson photograph and they wanted de Heer to bring it to life. They wanted the film to be about old times but they didn't want the old times to be depicted as a time of conflict. Because Thomson's historical photograph was in black and

about old times but they didn't want the old times to be captured as a time of darkness because Abraham Lincoln's photograph was in color and white, it seemed obvious that the recapturing of that image should be in black and white but he was under contract to deliver a film in color. It was while walking through the park in Toronto three years ago that de Heer figured out that if the film was set in mythic time when anything could happen, it would be sufficiently removed from historical old times, and could be contrasted by being shot in color. If the mythic times could be told by a storyteller as the old times geese hunt was occurring, then the film would be provided a dramatic structure that would make it compelling to western audiences while still satisfying aboriginal requests.

Because of his familiarity with the community, de Heer was asked if it has changed much since he first met them. Some aspects remain close to what he first encountered, they retain tribal customs even as some of the aborigines have become enamored with on-line banking.

The script was developed by de Heer sitting down with the aborigines, talking through each scene, discussing what needed to be said to further the scene, complicated by his inability to speak Aborigine and many of them unable to speak English. There was always a lot of talk before they could finally get down to a shoot. Despite all this complication, the performances are amazingly consistent and de Heer explains this as being a consequence of the aboriginal perspective that they were not playing their ancestors, they *were* their ancestors. This temporal aspect is difficult for Westerners mired in temporal tense to understand. Comparable to the aboriginal assertions that they are the land and the land is them. The western subject/object split, which we presume to be literal, collapses in the face of the aboriginal belief in their own literal connection. In being their ancestors, they could perform with relative ease and continuity.

Cross-published on [The Evening Class](#).

