



## PRESS KIT

From Rolf de Heer

Director of *Ten Canoes* and *The Tracker*

# CHARLIE'S COUNTRY

Starring David Gulpilil

Best Actor, Un Certain Regard, Cannes Film Festival 2014

Release date: 17 July, 2014

Rating: TBC

Running Time: 108 minutes

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## **ONE SENTENCE SYNOPSIS**

With the new invasion of his Aboriginal community in full swing, Charlie decides to make a stand...and finds he still has a long way to fall.

## **SHORT SYNOPSIS**

Blackfella Charlie is getting older, and he's out of sorts. The intervention is making life more difficult on his remote community, what with the proper policing of whitefella laws that don't generally make much sense, and Charlie's kin and ken seeming more interested in going along with things than doing anything about it. So Charlie takes off, to live the old way, but in so doing sets off a chain of events in his life that has him return to his community chastened, and somewhat the wiser.

## **THE STORY**

Blackfella Charlie lives in his humpy on the remote community almost to spite the authorities. He's getting older, and he wants a house of his own, but the government won't give him one. Meanwhile the government, in the form of Luke the policeman, is busy trying to make everyone conform to the whitefella way of thinking, which means properly registered cars, gun licenses and no carrying weapons around town.

Charlie becomes increasingly frustrated, and uneasy about where things are headed. A hunting trip with Black Pete ends up in the police compound, Fat Albert confesses that diabetes has his days numbered while Old Lulu seems only able to talk about teaching the kids to dance the proper way. And the food at the takeaway is terrible.

Charlie is pushed to the edge. His gun confiscated, he makes a hunting spear. When Luke confiscates that too, on the grounds that it is a dangerous weapon when it's not even a battle spear, Charlie has finally had enough. He "borrows" the police admin car and heads for the bush, to live the old way.

In the bush, Charlie slowly re-connects with his ancestral life. He hunts, he gathers, he can carry spears and do what he wants. And he laughs in triumph at his success. And then it begins to rain.

Charlie moves about, wet, cold and miserable, trying to escape the rain. A cave high on the escarpment offers temporary solace, but the ancestors hold the cave as special, and Charlie, feverish and rapidly declining, stumbles back down to his old campsite. He's on the verge of death when Black Pete finds him.

In the city hospital Charlie recovers somewhat until he finds Fat Albert in the same hospital, asleep while hooked up to a dialysis machine. That's enough for Charlie, he's out of there. He falls in with Faith and a mob of homeless blackfellas, the long grassers, and they spend the days and nights drinking and smoking ganja, until an altercation with Luke, now posted to the city, sees Charlie arrested, and jailed.

Jail passes for Charlie, though Black Pete visits and talks of how he's become a ranger. When it's time for Charlie to be released, he has nowhere to go but back to his community. There he finally teaches the kids to dance the proper way, but only because Bobby's been taken to the city with lung cancer.

## **DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

### **THE STORY OF CHARLIE'S COUNTRY BY ROLF DE HEER**

#### **THE BACKGROUND**

My friend David Gulpilil is a troubled soul. I sometimes liken his plight to that of the great Australian painter Albert Namatjira, who was likewise unable to reconcile the two cultures he had to live in, his own, and ours.



David Gulpilil and Rolf de Heer

David can't handle alcohol. He can't handle cigarettes, or sugary drinks, or most anything addictive. All of these substances, foreign to his culture, both soothe him and enrage him... the question is knowing which of these two it is going to be at any one time. And all of these substances can cast a powerful spell over David.

His role models hadn't helped much. He'd been brought up mainly in the bush, with limited schooling in a language he didn't understand. As a naive sixteen-year-old on his first film, David had been taught, by senior actor John Meillon, first how to get drunk, then how to act sober whilst in a state of drunkenness. By the time he was 22 he was mixing it with the best of them, so much so that David and hell-raising, substance-abusing American actor Dennis Hopper, of *Easy Rider* fame, were together locked up in jail whilst making *Mad Dog Morgan*. Is any of it any wonder?

For much of his adult life, David had lived in his remote community of Ramingining, in north-east Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia. For as long as I've known it, Ramingining has been a self-determined "dry" community... alcohol is banned. It was because of this that David could, on the whole, control the worst of what troubled him...the sugar and tobacco endemic to Ramingining seemed trivial in comparison.

David had left his community of Ramingining in 2004, because of a tribal dispute I was never quite allowed to know the details of. From that time on, David lived largely in the long grass in Darwin. Long grassers are an alternative culture of Aboriginal people who choose to live homeless in the city and surrounds, in a perceived parallel style to how they used to live before white people came. David was supposed to come back to Ramingining and co-direct with me, and star in, the film *Ten Canoes*, but his fear of returning prevented him.

In Darwin there were no controls to hold David back from the demon drink. Over the next few years I saw less and less of him. I heard this and I heard that. None of it sounded very good. From all accounts, tragedy was looming.

Towards the end of 2011 I learnt that David was in jail. My first thought was, tragedy averted. Whatever the rights or wrongs of his imprisonment, whatever the reason, I was grateful for it because it probably saved David's life.

My second thought was, yes, tragedy averted, but for how long?

## **THE BEGINNING**

Molly and I had just moved to southern Tasmania. We were living in a shed and were meant to spend the next six months to a year being the labourers for the building of the house we were to be moving into (winters there being rather too cold for a shed). But thoughts of David in jail, and of him eventually being released, occupied me. What's next, I thought. What will happen to him when he gets out? He'll just end up in precisely the same situation because nothing will have changed for him.

Darwin is 3,815 kms from home in southern Tasmania, a distance slightly greater than that between London and Cairo. I suggested to Molly that despite the house building, I should really go up and see David. Molly concurred... the site team of four would have to manage with there being just the three of them. I went ahead and arranged a jail visit.

One of my thoughts had been, what can I do to help David? What can anybody do? A visit is a fine thing, but unless there are some possibilities for the road ahead, it doesn't amount to much. Unless I were to change my life however, move up to Darwin to help him find his way, that sort of thing, there was little I could do for him. And even that would probably achieve little but heartbreak.

I realised that the only thing I might be able to do for him was to make a film with him. It might give him a renewed sense of purpose, of belief in himself. It might just help set him on a different road, be useful as a transition to a more ordered life. It'd give him something to look forward to.

I had no sense, however, if David wanted to make any more films, or if he was even capable of making a film. My previous attempt to make a film with David, when the tribal dispute had caused him to avoid the shooting of *Ten Canoes*, had almost been a catastrophe for me.

And anyway, one of the last things I really wanted to do at that time was to get involved in making another film of any description. And besides, how can one just decide to get a film going, no finance, no script, no idea, nothing?

These were among my musings during the journey to Darwin, which due to plane mechanical troubles and re-routing, ended up taking around 30 hours, about the same amount of time as a trip from Tasmania to London.

January is the wet season in Darwin, and generally stinking hot. Meeting David for the first time at 9 am in the low-security unit at Berrimah, it was wet and already stinking hot, almost unbearable.

Though apparently much improved compared to when he was imprisoned (he had weighed only 39 kgs by then), David looked pretty awful... khaki shorts, thongs and olive green t-shirt (David can be a snappy dresser), short hair (good for the climate but very un-David), expression pretty-well lifeless (David is one of the most fiercely alive people I've met). I feared for him, understood that he must have been severely depressed, and why wouldn't he be, considering where he was and what was ahead of him?

He didn't have a lot to say during the hour-long visit. He smoked and drank coca-cola...they treated him pretty well here, they looked after him here, the cops were pretty good here. Towards the end of the visit I asked him what he was going to do when he got out. He shrugged.

What do you want to do? He looked off into the distance...make more films, he said, as if it wasn't possible. Make another film with you, that's what I really want to do. That one we did together was the best I ever did. He was talking about *The Tracker*.

I acknowledged what he'd said and I told him that since I was from far away, they'd given me special dispensation to see him again the following day. Did he want that? He shrugged and nodded as if it didn't make any difference.

By the time I got back to my hotel room at 11 am, I had purchased some index cards and some Blu-tak. I knew I had no choice but to attempt to make a film with David.

## **IN THE BEGINNING IS THE WORD**

I drew the blinds of the hotel room to isolate myself, and because the view was less than salutary.

I sat down and thought about things, made some notes. I wanted to be able to present some hope to David the next day. But hope that could mean anything would require something tangible.



View from Darwin Hotel Room, 2012

What to do with this film? The first, most obvious thing to me was that for David to find any sort of rehabilitation out of this, the strength of the film had to come through him. For this project to succeed. David clearly had to be the lead, he had to dominate the film in a way he had never done in any film before. And the camera so loves David, he can do such extraordinary things with his face, his eyes, the slightest twitch of a muscle, that you can practically point the camera at him and you know that if the context is right, it'll work. That became my starting point, my image for the film... a long, unwavering closeup of David.

But you can't just film closeups, and I now knew how fragile David had become. The acuity of his thinking seemed reduced from when I'd worked with him a decade previously on *The Tracker*, and even back then he'd had difficulty learning dialogue that was in English. Now, after years of not doing his brain any favours, I felt he'd have even greater difficulty. The first decision slowly emerged from this line of thinking...we'd try and do something without formal written dialogue, and with David able to speak either his own language or English as he felt like it, as the situation might demand, as he does in his own life.

The words "... as he does in his own life..." had resonance for me. I felt that if we made it so that David could draw on aspects of his own life in playing a character, if we put that character in situations that David might be familiar with, then David could more easily access or improvise dialogue that would work. He would also be able to keep a better handle on who the character was and where that character had been and was going in any particular part of the story. This was then the second decision, to think constantly about how to give David personal access to the material.

That led easily to a third decision, to set the film in contemporary times to allow a shoot with more ease than restriction, and also to keep the budget down, because for this process to be meaningful to David, there had to be a realistic chance of financing in very short order a film, the film, the one that was forming in my head by now.

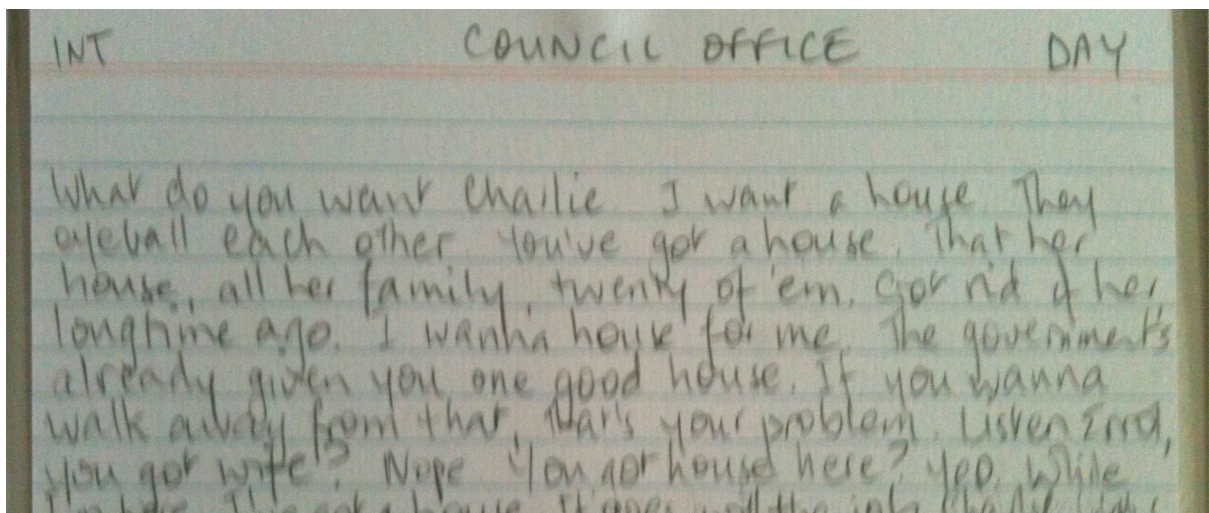
And so the next morning, after more ordering of thoughts late into the night, I was once again sitting in the steaming heat with David. He listened silently as I outlined my preliminary thoughts, which were more about the how of the film than the what's in the film.

Numbers of times I said "We'll try, David, but remember, it might not happen, it still has to be financed, but we'll give it our best shot". After about the fifth time I'd said this, David gestured... he didn't want to hear that the film mightn't happen, he wanted to hear that it would.

He eventually began to talk... disjointed and fragmented, though with some life coming back into his delivery. I quickly enough knew what he was doing, which was feeding me anything he thought might be useful or could go into the film. I had index cards with me, and a pencil, and began to make notes, sifting David's words for ideas, scenes, dialogue, anything. The project was underway.

## THE SCRIPTING

I'd taken away with me enough from that one conversation to get a good sense of where David sat with content. David has strong political ideas, passions about race and culture and about the effect on his people of cultural dislocation caused by white colonisation (he would never use words like 'colonisation' and 'cultural dislocation', but his meanings are clearly that). It was in this direction that he wanted to go with the film, make it something political and meaningful, and I was only too happy to oblige.



Index card in Darwin hotel room, February 2012

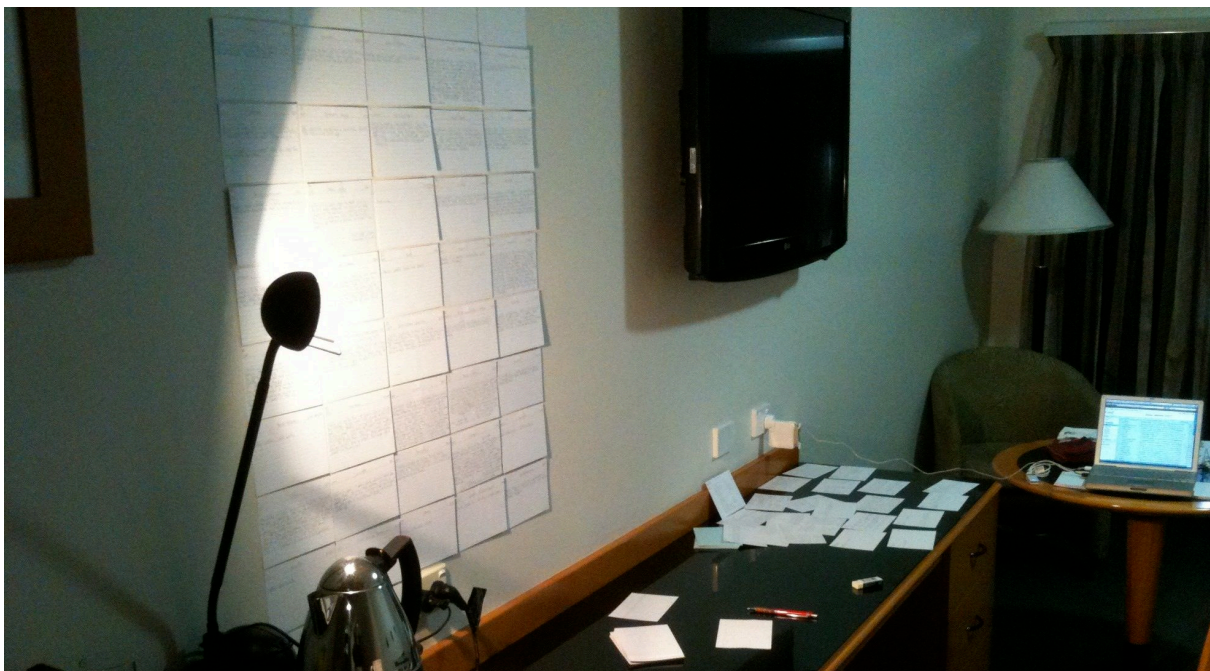
For me, different elements were starting to coalesce: David's sensibility existing within the content; giving David personal access to the material; David's natural enthusiasm for anything that might have something to do with him ("This is my film, about me!" is how he often enough describes it, though the 'about me' mostly means, 'authentic to my experience of these things').

In that combination of elements lay the danger, however, of making something that was largely autobiographical, or something autobiographical thinly disguised as something else. That would have immediately narrowed the scope of what David, and indeed I, wanted to do. The film would then inevitably be seen as being about one particular (real) individual, rather than being about issues much more widespread, much more representative of many individuals.

When I returned to Darwin barely three weeks after I'd left (this time for an eight-day stay), these and other considerations were clear in my mind. I'd made some progress structuring what felt like an appropriate vehicle for our cinematic intentions and I had something like 50 index cards beginning to take shape as scenes. I'd made appointments to see David in jail for the first few days, and then he was to be shifted to a live-in drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre for Aboriginal people where he was to stay for three months before coming out on parole.

My intention was to complete some sort of shooting/financing document by the time I left Darwin this trip. I set myself up in the same hotel room (a different room, but who can tell in the same hotel?), blu-tacked what cards I already had to the wall and began to work.

The following day I visited David. He was in good spirits, very content to be going to rehab and starting to talk about having given up drinking. We talked, me about what I had managed to do so far, him about anything that sparked from that or anything at all that might make a contribution. From my phone, I showed him that morning's photo of the wall of my hotel room, the progress being made with our script:



Darwin hotel room, 18 February 2012

It was the first time I'd seen him properly, positively excited in almost five years.

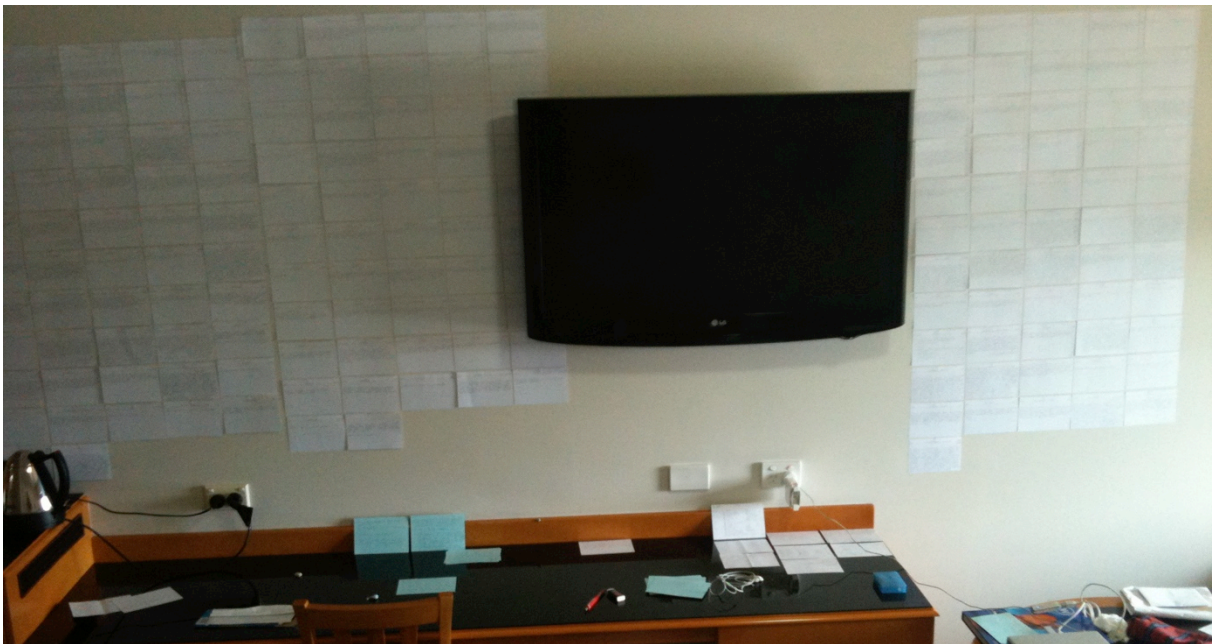
We talked more, then I returned to the hotel room and bunkered down writing for the next twelve hours solid, a sleep, a couple more hours work and then another visit to David, this time on his last morning in actual prison.

I showed him the photo I had just taken of what had become "his wall":



David's Wall, Darwin hotel room, 19 February 2012

...and two days later, when I saw him in the rehab centre for the first time, another photo of his wall:



David's Wall, Darwin Hotel Room, 21 February 2012

During this visit at the rehab centre, David was clearer in his thinking than at any time I'd ever known him. He was not going to drink again, he was going to give up smoking... those things had made a mess of his life, they'd taken all his money off him.

The "scriptment" (neither treatment nor script, but elements of both) was completed just prior to my last visit before my departure. It took about an hour to read it aloud to David, as a whole story. He gripped my arm many times, had tears in his eyes more than once. "That's my movie!", he said, "It's about me!"

## **KAKADU**

Some months later, after much of the financing work on the project had been done but before any of the contracts had been finalised or signed, it had become somehow inevitable that we'd end up making this film. David had lasted only some weeks in rehab, then decided he'd had enough and left. His parole officer had been sympathetic because he still wasn't drinking, so he was allowed to remain out, as long as he didn't leave Darwin.

But it was away from Darwin that I wanted to take David. He hadn't been bush since he was incarcerated, and who knows how long before that. There were locations of interest to me in Kakadu National Park and I felt it was a good, neutral way to re-introduce David to what of his life he'd left behind. Corrections granted conditional permission for a three-day absence and with Genda from Kakadu 4WD Safaris as our guide, we set off very early one morning from Darwin.

Genda turned out to have been an inspired choice. He and David spoke each other's language and David became quite relaxed, just being able to communicate easily with someone. I became very relaxed, dozing in the back of the vehicle...I was suddenly the foreigner, and happy that it was so.

Kakadu is far from David's land, but he's been there often enough to know parts of it well. And David learns new land so well, remembers so much about it, even at a time when he forgets so many other things, that he felt almost at home. When we started getting out of the vehicle in Kakadu, walking about in different areas, David would gaze around, breathing deeply, as if letting the demons escape.

He said little, but looked at times as if he would start crying. At those times I almost started crying myself.



David in Kakadu, first morning

Though half a year later we didn't end up shooting in Kakadu, the three days there were powerfully restorative for David. It gave him the time, and the solitude, and the peace of mind, to consider both his past and his future.

Around the campfire that first night he began to talk about his own country, Marwuyu Gulparil, how he'd been born under a tree there, how it was longtime since he'd been, and that in all this time, he'd been neglecting his land.

I worked out it had been eight years since he was last there and twelve years since he'd shown it to me the first time. I said to him that soon, soon I would ask his parole officer for permission. I would get permission and take him there.

He sat silently in the glow of the fire, looking at me. And then he really did begin to cry.

Much as this was a journey for David though, it was also a journey to make a film. I knew we were somewhere close to getting there when next morning I again saw that lithe shape of his in the landscape, in its natural landscape, in its belonging. And I then knew fully the meaning of that word.



David in Kakadu, second morning

## **RAMINGINING AND GULPARIL**

The last great test of whether the film was really possible was Ramingining. David had left the community eight years before. He'd foregone a starring role and a co-directing job out of fear of being speared. Much of the new film was to be shot in Ramingining and I couldn't take the risk of spending other people's money before David had been back and was willing to return again after that. And it was opportunity to make good on my promise to take David to Marwuyu Gulparil, an hour and a half or so from Ramingining by 4WD and boat.

To say he was nervous on the flight in would be to rather understate things...he hates flying at the best of times, but this time the flight was the least of his issues. A vehicle was waiting at the airstrip to take us to our accommodation, a house belonging to Bula'bula Arts Aboriginal Corporation, who were to be our partners in the project. We got to the house, inside with a cup of tea, and David seemed determined not to leave it.

But word was around. First some children's faces at the fly screens covering the open louvre windows, then some calling out by some women. I could understand nothing of what was being said, but David became undecided. More calling out, and then David calling something back. Screams of laughter from outside and David rushed out, scattering the little dark faces at the windows. I didn't see David again until late that night, and during the ensuing four days, rarely. He felt, at this time, that he was home.

It had taken me until the second last day to organise a boat to take us to Gulparil, and even then, our time with it was to be limited because of the way the tides were behaving. But enough time to get to Gulparil, wander around some, and then get back.

On the boat, David was as excited as I'd seen him, energetic and jumpy, then suddenly yelling at the boat to Pull over! Pull over! And out of the boat he was, and fifty metres running

through the mud before he realised I was not with him. Back he came, yelling at me in a mixture of English and language to follow him. So I did.



David on Marwuyu Gulparil, his country

We headed to a grove of trees and there David's excitement became an intense focus as he acted out his birth story... that's the tree under which I was born, my mother right here and the women around her, and then they carried me over here, to where that rock is, that's where my father was sitting, and they gave me to him and he held me like this...

I looked around at the empty bush, trying to imagine it peopled, a birth happening, David's beginning almost sixty years before. Unimaginable, but in that moment I understood more about my troubled friend David than I had in all the previous twelve years of my knowing him.



David on Marwuyu Gulparil

## EPILOGUE TO A STORY OF CHARLIE'S COUNTRY

Some months later we struggled through a shoot, as one does, and we made a film called *Charlie's Country*, in which David is as exceptional as I'd hoped he'd be. Remarkably though, it's a film that speaks as loudly for David the man as it does for David the actor. He goes through deep emotion when watching it...he laughs, he trembles on the brink of crying, and the politics of it make him angry with the world.

For me, the film is certainly about David, but not at all in the sense that it depicts his life. It doesn't. David never lived in Ramingining during the Australian Government's "Intervention", he's never gone bush to live the old way, he's never been in hospital in Darwin or attacked a police car or gone back home and taught the young kids to dance. Although he may do any of those things in the future, for now, those things are all Charlie.

But the film is about David nevertheless. It is about his journey, his journey towards redeeming himself. "It's my movie! It's about me!"

## **THE CAST**

### **DAVID GULPILIL, OAM, as CHARLIE**

When, as a seventeen year-old, David Gulpilil lit up the cinema screen in Nicholas Roeg's *Walkabout*, he did more than play a role. The performance was so strong, so imbued with a new type of graceful naturalism, that it re-defined perceptions of Aboriginality, especially in the field of screen acting.

Over the next decade, David became the iconic Aboriginal actor of his generation, paving the way in the resurgence of the Australian film industry for more parts to be written for Aboriginal people, for more Aboriginal stories to be told. His charismatic, engaging and unforgettable performances in films like *Storm Boy*, *The Last Wave* and *Crocodile Dundee* helped bring Aboriginality into the mainstream of the screen arts.

In his later work, including *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *The Tracker*, *Australia* and *Satellite Boy*, David has brought tremendous dignity to the depiction of what it is to be Aboriginal. Through his performances he has brought an incalculable amount of self-esteem to his community.

David is not just a screen actor, however. He was a peerless dancer, for a time perhaps the most renowned traditional dancer in Australia. He has written the text for two volumes of children's stories based on his people's beliefs. He has performed a one-man autobiographical show to great acclaim on the stages of the Adelaide Festival of Arts and Sydney's Belvoir Street Theatre. And he paints, in his own distinct but traditionally evolved style, paintings which convey his reverence for the landscape, people and traditional culture of his homeland.

### **PETER DJIGIRR as BLACK PETE**

Peter Djigirr is a man of many talents. He's a Gurruwiling Ranger for the South-East Arafura Catchment, close to his traditional tribal lands. He's also the primary crocodile egg collector for Ramingining, earning his people significant royalties. He's a hunter, a guide and a fisherman.

In 2003 he became involved in *Ten Canoes*, initially as an actor in a minor part. He showed such aptitude for film making that he was soon appointed co-director. Djigirr's role as one of the ten canoeists in that film was small, but with his gift for improvisation and rapid understanding of the needs of cinema, he was an influential performer, often being the one with the drive to make a scene work.

*Charlie's Country* provided the opportunity to write a much more substantial role for Djigirr. Playing the character of Black Pete required a much more formal approach to acting, and Djigirr's intelligence as an actor is shown to full effect.

Djigirr was also co-producer of the film.

## **LUKE FORD as POLICEMAN LUKE**

Luke Ford throws himself into varied roles with an enthusiasm and intensity that bring just reward. Some such roles have been the autistic Charlie Mollison in *Black Balloon*, which won him an AFI Award for Best Supporting Actor, and the gangster Darren Cody in the much lauded *Animal Kingdom*.

Director Rolf de Heer first worked with Luke in 2011, when Luke played the part of Shrek, the neighbour-from-hell's bad friend in *The King Is Dead!*. Rolf enjoyed the process so much, from working on set with Luke to editing Luke's footage, that when *Charlie's Country* began to form he saw the opportunity to do it again, and wrote the part of the community policeman specifically for Luke.

The process was good the second time as well, but on this occasion it was more the David and Luke show. David Gulpilil and Luke took to each other like magnets and drove each other's performances to greater and greater levels. On set, the fight between Policeman Luke and Charlie was something to behold.

## **JENNIFER BUDUKPUDUK GAYKAMANGU as FAITH**

The role of long-grasser Faith in *Charlie's Country* is Jennifer Budukupuduk's first performance as an actor. She was cast on instinct by director/co-writer Rolf de Heer and co-writer/lead actor David Gulpilil, and it can surely be said that their instinct didn't fail them.

Jennifer had been, at one stage of her life, a 'long grasser' such as she depicts in the film, but what helped her most was her innate ability as an actor. According to director de Heer, "Jennifer inhabits her character with such grace that I wonder, knowing her now, where it comes from. She seems to just know precisely what to do next, and how to do it."

Jennifer is also a mother, a grandmother, and a fluent artist in the style of Johnny Daingangan, her father.

## **PETER MINYGULULU as OLD LULU**

Minygululu is an intensely traditional Yolngu man born and brought up in the bush. He speaks almost no English (although he speaks numbers of tribal languages) and, for him, a spear is still the best weapon. He cares enormously about the culture of his birth, and sees himself as one of the guardians of it, which is how he came to be involved in *Ten Canoes*. He was a swamp canoe expert, possibly the only one left at the time, and it was a combination of his knowledge and anthropologist Donald Thomson's photographs that enabled ten swamp canoes to be correctly made.

This talent led into a significant acting job on that film. When original choice David Gulpilil was no longer available to play the dual lead characters, Minygululu proudly stepped into his place...and promptly regretted it. Though performing creditably, it was all "Too much humbug!" for him and partway through filming, he disappeared into the bush for three days.

Upon his emergence therefrom, director Rolf de Heer managed to convince him to complete work on one of the roles, and he was replaced, to his delight, on the other of the two characters he was meant to be playing.

It was, therefore, to everyone's surprise that Minyngululu volunteered to be available for *Charlie's Country*. A part was promptly written to suit his not inconsiderable talent. He played that part with great sensitivity, notwithstanding his denial that any of it was any good.

Minyngululu was also chief cultural advisor on the film.

## **DIRECTOR BIOGRAPHY**

### **ROLF DE HEER**

Director Rolf de Heer has been making feature films for thirty years now, and in that time he's managed to complete fourteen of them (there are numbers of others that haven't been completed, one way or the other). The films are usually low of budget but high in impact; they generally have something to say about the human condition, despite conventional wisdom that it's wiser to the contrary; and, more often than not, each succeeding film is quite, quite different from the previous.

With those fourteen films, however, Rolf has had some measure of success...four different films in Official Selection at the Cannes Film Festival (including the Jury Prize for *Ten Canoes* in Un Certain Regard); two films in Competition at the Venice Film Festival (including *Bad Boy Bobby*, which won both the Jury Prize and the Critics' Prize there); films selected for Berlin, Toronto, Telluride, London...the list goes on.

He's also had a measure of failure with some of them, the odd one or two disappearing without trace, even though for someone, somewhere, they're their favorite film of all time...and some of all these films have in fact turned a small profit, a rare thing in the film world.

## **WRITERS' BIOGRAPHIES**

### **ROLF DE HEER and DAVID GULPILIL**

Rolf de Heer is a classically educated (French, Latin, German, English, Philosophy etc) writer who generally doesn't much collaborate on the screenplays he writes since, as the producer/director of said screenplays, he has a fair sense of what it is the producer and the director might want.

David Gulpilil is a classically uneducated (a little bit of schooling in Maningrida in a language he couldn't really speak) non-writer who is full of ideas for all sorts of screenplays, from Westerns to action movies to thrillers, but who is without the proper means of expressing those ideas.

It seemed like a fair basis for collaborating, which is precisely what they decided to do. David talked a lot, Rolf listened, talked a little and wrote a lot, and then they talked some more. *Charlie's Country* is the result. They're both happy with the result, and they're still friends.

## **PRODUCER'S BIOGRAPHIES**

### **NILS ERIK NIELSEN and PETER DJIGIRR**

Producers of *Charlie's Country* are Nils Erik Nielsen and Peter Djigirr. Two more different people, culturally and physically, are hard to imagine, Nils Erik being a tall Norwegian and Djigirr being a much less tall traditional Indigenous Australian. About their only similarities are that their hair is silvery white and that for both of them, English is very much a second language.

Long before *Charlie's Country* took over his life, Nils Erik ran a steamship company in Norway and had interests there in trade, real estate and import/export businesses. After moving to Australia, he became involved with Vertigo Productions as Financial Controller and Company Secretary. Djigirr became involved in *Ten Canoes*, initially as an actor in a minor part. He showed extraordinary aptitude for film making and was soon so indispensable to the production that he was elevated to the position of co-director, being deeply involved in many levels of the film, especially casting, locations, art department, script and translation. He was a natural co-producer for *Charlie's Country*.

Each managed very different parts of the production. Nils Erik, who came to producing through commerce, worked at the pointy end of the finance, its distribution and governance. Djigirr, who came to producing through the bush, was a solid foundation to the interface between the two main cultures involved, and a wise head in ensuring a relatively smooth shoot. Producing the film along with Nils Erik Nielsen and Peter Djigirr were writer/director Rolf de Heer and line producer Julie Byrne.

## **CREW BIOGRAPHIES**

### **Director of Photography – IAN JONES**

Inventive, passionate, considered, compassionate and occasionally cantankerous, Ian Jones is a director of photography who combines the best of old school methodology with everything the modern field has to offer. That makes him seem a luddite to some, a genius to others. In truth he is probably neither, just a wonderful Director of Photography for most every occasion.

Having worked on big films, small films, foreign films, local films and international films, Ian has worked on a lot of different sorts of films, films with markedly different budgets and resources. It makes him especially qualified to shoot films with restricted budgets, knowing all the tricks that he does know (which is not to say that he isn't especially qualified to shoot higher budget films, knowing all the tricks that he knows).

*Charlie's Country* is the seventh time Ian and Rolf de Heer have worked together. Something must be going right.

### **Production Designer – BEVERLEY FREEMAN**

The title of Production Designer is really a rather inadequate description for the range of activities undertaken by the ever-effervescent Beverley Freeman. She might well have earned additional credits such as art director, chief set dresser, construction manager, costume designer, standby wardrobe, makeup artist and hairdresser to name just some.

Beverley's talents have been honed over many years and on many productions. Early in her career she was awarded a Churchill Fellowship to study with selected Opera and Film companies in the USA, Germany and England, and has been able to put the knowledge thus gained to good use on more than twenty feature films, the entire Ring Cycle of Wagner Operas and countless commercials and TV films.

*Charlie's Country* is Beverley's tenth film with director Rolf de Heer.

### **Editor – TANIA NEHME**

The editor of the picture is Tania Nehme, another long time collaborator with writer/director Rolf de Heer. *Charlie's Country* is the tenth consecutive feature film of his, over a period of twenty years, on which Tania has been the film editor. In the course of this collaboration she has seen her work travel to the major festivals of Cannes, Berlin and Venice; she has worked in places as diverse as the jungles of South America and the remote communities of Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia; and has spent the best part of 16,000 hours inside a cutting room (equivalent to a two year prison sentence).

Of course, this is not all Tania has done for the past twenty years, and de Heer is not the only director she works with. She's also been out winning awards for the splendid work she does editing documentaries, documentary series and short films; works such as *First Footprints*, *Kamay Botany Bay*, *Contact*, *Jacob*, *Twelve Canoes* and many others.

### **Music – GRAHAM TARDIF**

There are only two films directed by Rolf de Heer since 1979 that Graham Tardif has not composed the music for, which is yet another case of a longtime collaboration and yet another case of things must be going right along the way. Graham in fact doesn't compose music for anyone else's films, because Graham is too busy to do so. Graham's choice between music and doing great deeds for mankind ended up with a decision to do great deeds for mankind. This leaves his music for de Heer films as a welcome (or sometimes unwelcome) respite to his other duties.

On *Bad Boy Bobby*, for example, Graham emerged from the jungles of Burma, and his role as a humanitarian worker for the Karen guerillas there, to come back to Australia to compose

the music for the film. On *Dr Plonk*, a silent film with 85 minutes of non-stop music, Graham composed only at night, and at a distance: his day job was to supervise 800 workers engaged in tsunami reconstruction in Thailand. But de Heer works with Graham for his music, not for his humanitarian deeds. “I owe a good deal of my success as a film maker to Graham and what he brings to each of the films”, says de Heer. “The purity of his work for *Charlie’s Country* is different to anything we’ve done before, but it is Graham at his best.”

### **Sound – JAMES CURRIE and TOM HEUZENROEDER**

James Currie first worked with Rolf de Heer more than a quarter of a century ago. Tom Heuzenroeder’s association dates back only twenty. Both are still the vital components of a team that has pioneered some extraordinary sound innovations. *Bad Boy Bubby* was the first film to be recorded in binaural sound (try listening to the binaural track on the DVD with headphones). The dialogue of *Ten Canoes*, being largely improvised in a large group, was recorded on specially adapted MP3 players secreted in the hair of the mostly naked actors. And parts of *Charlie’s Country* were recorded directly in 5.1.

Fearless and innovative might be two words to describe the approach of James to location recording, and fearless and innovative and sensitive and artistic might be four words to describe the approach of James and Tom in post-production sound. Theirs is cinema sound at its best, and according to director de Heer, sound carries 60% of the emotional content of the film, and should never be underestimated. With James and Tom, it isn’t.

## HOLLYWOOD REPORTER

### 'Charlie's Country': Cannes Review

David Rooney, 22/5/2014

**The Bottom Line:** *A delicate but powerful film that functions as both a stinging depiction of marginalization and as a salute to the career of the remarkable actor who inhabits almost every frame.*

**Indigenous Australian actor David Gulpilil stars in and co-wrote this semi-autobiographical drama from Rolf de Heer, their third film together after "The Tracker" and "Ten Canoes."**

CANNES – Ever since his indelible first appearance at age 16 in **Nicolas Roeg's** *Walkabout*, **David Gulpilil** to a large extent has been the defining face onscreen of the Indigenous Australian. Now 60, the Aboriginal actor and traditional dancer teams for the third time with director **Rolf de Heer** – following *The Tracker* and *Ten Canoes* – on *Charlie's Country*, inarguably the most personal project of their collaboration. Equal parts ethnographic and poetic, this eloquent drama's stirring soulfulness is laced with the sorrow of cultural dislocation but also with lovely ripples of humor and even joy.

Gulpilil co-wrote the film with de Heer, starting on the project while the actor was serving prison time and then subsequently in a drug and alcohol rehab center for Aboriginal people. While the story is fictionalized and its dialogue improvised (in English and the Yolngu language of the setting), its parallels to Gulpilil's recent past make it alive with authenticity. And yet, the film's observations about spiritual resilience in the face of white colonization and irreconcilable societal imbalance enrich it with emotional universality. It's the most affecting depiction of contemporary Aboriginal experience since **Warwick Thornton's** *Samson & Delilah*.

Charlie (Gulpilil) lives in an alcohol-free Arnhem Land community where any remaining traces of his people's traditional way of life are fast disappearing. Local cop Luke (**Luke Ford**) is friendly enough, but strictly by-the-book in terms of hunting and weapons licenses. When Charlie goes out game shooting with his friend Pete (**Peter Djigirr**), their guns are confiscated along with Pete's unregistered car. Even Charlie's hand-made spear is deemed a dangerous weapon and taken from him. While he helps the cops track white drug dealers selling ganja to the locals, Charlie gets little in return.

Watching with sadness as an ailing fellow community member is flown off to hospital to die far from his people and his land, Charlie decides to "go bush." He returns to the old ways, hunting and gathering food, doing bark paintings and sleeping under a makeshift shelter. Charlie's sense of freedom is written all over his face, in his ambling gait, and in the chuckling banter he engages in with himself. With his wiry body and easy, unselfconscious manner, Gulpilil makes these scenes among the unhurried film's chief pleasures.

But there are also poignant notes as Charlie contemplates a crumpled black and white photo of himself as a boy performing Aboriginal ceremonial dance at the opening of the Sydney Opera House, an event attended by the Queen. This serves as effective dramatic shorthand for Gulpilil's own significant cultural achievements, and it figures in a tremendously moving sequence toward the end of the film.

When the rain comes, Charlie's poor health takes its toll, and after being found by Pete he's removed to a Darwin hospital. From there, however, things take a worse turn as he discharges himself and falls in with a group of "long grassers," urban homeless Aborigines who drink and smoke weed, and are routinely rounded up by cops.

While **Ian Jones'** widescreen cinematography is hypnotic in the fluid gaze it casts over the untamed bushland, it's also magnificent in extended closeups on Gulpilil's face, his eyes telling a multitude of stories. But the most lingering image shows him sitting in stoic silence while his wild gray mane and beard are shorn off by a prison barber, transforming Charlie into another person.

It's a testament to what de Heer and Gulpilil have achieved here -- with simplicity and infinite nuance -- that through all the highs and devastating lows we witness in this brief chapter of Charlie's life, the character's identity remains etched into every aspect of the performance. His sense of himself and where he comes from is the one thing he never loses, which is what gives this melancholy story its haunting beauty.

## VARIETY

### **Cannes Film Review: 'Charlie's Country' Eddie Cockrell, 22/5/2014**

*Rolf de Heer's compassionate, clear-eyed drama about the contemporary Aboriginal condition is a showcase for veteran actor, co-scenarist and friend David Gulpilil.*

**The tangled tale of Aboriginal relations in Australia is rendered richly personal in director Rolf de Heer's 14th dramatic feature, "Charlie's Country." Anchored by the charismatic, tragicomic performance of indigenous icon David Gulpilil, a veteran of "Walkabout," "The Last Wave," "Rabbit-Proof Fence," plus de Heer's "The Tracker" and "Ten Canoes," this atmospheric and cautionary tale of a "Blackfella" caught between two cultures has all the makings of a solid arthouse performer.**

The irony of the title is soon made clear. "You white bastard!" Charlie (Gulpilil) calls almost affectionately to the policeman Luke (Luke Ford) in the small Northern Territory Aboriginal community he calls home, only to get the inevitable response of "you black bastard." But as Charlie goes about his daily tasks, it soon becomes clear he is chafing against the encroaching white laws that increasingly separate him from his traditions. His friends are faring no better, as he runs afoul of the law with buddy Black Pete (co-producer Peter Djigirr) and listens to Old Lulu (Peter Minyngululu) talk about preserving authentic dance culture.

When Luke confiscates a spear Charlie spent some time fashioning, it drives him further into the bush in an attempt to reconnect with the traditional Aboriginal way of living (he is undone by the most mundane of events, a chilly and relentless rain). After falling in with a group of homeless Aboriginals in Darwin who drink and smoke weed constantly ("long grassers," as they're known), Charlie is arrested and incarcerated. In a stunning real-time sequence, his thick mane of hair and full beard are shorn, thus completing his isolation and loss of freedom.

Charlie is the vessel through which de Heer navigates these turbulent waters, and the script was developed during sessions when the actor would throw out ideas and the director would structure the results. It is to both men's credit that amid the suffering, there's a ray of hope for Charlie in the end.

Since his 1971 debut at 16 in Nicolas Roeg's "Walkabout," Gulpilil has developed into an actor capable of mischievousness and gravitas, often within the same shot. His well-publicized bouts with alcoholism and the law haven't significantly tarnished his reputation, and represent the embodiment of the societal tensions addressed in the film. So, too, the Dutch-born de Heer has built a solid reputation as a filmmaker not so much fascinated as moved to modest yet probing action by social friction and injustice (his earliest major success, 1993's "Bad Boy Bubby," was the first of four of his films to be selected by Cannes).

The tech package is seamless. Ian Jones' widescreen photography immerses the viewer in the Australian outback, while Graham Tardif's plaintive score emphasizes both the dignity and the anguish of Charlie's all-too-common plight.