

## Film Review

August 23, 2019

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### The Australian Dream

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Directed by Daniel Gordon, written by Stan Grant, co-produced by Australian NBA basketball star Ben Simmons, and explicitly endorsed by the AFL, NRL and Cricket Australia, *The Australian Dream* examines not only the events covered in documentary *The Final Quarter* but also what it has been like for Grant, Adam Goodes and fellow Aboriginal people to grow up in an Australia where casual racism keeps many Aboriginal people on the bottom rung of society.

By presenting their personal stories within the overall framework of an unexpurgated history of Australia, Grant details the past that must be acknowledged if we are to move forward as a nation.



Over the course of the 230-odd years since Captain Cook erroneously declared this continent to be terra nullius, our Indigenous people have suffered whitefellas' diseases, being hunted like animals, being dispossessed of their lands, having their children taken from them, segregation and marginalisation. It was not until 1967 that Aboriginals were granted citizenship of the country they had peopled for at least 60,000 years.

Today we have Aboriginal people in positions of leadership in all levels of education, politics, government, the arts and sport. Their knowledge of the land, its flora and fauna, passed down for thousands of generations, are finally being acknowledged. Despite this, Aboriginal people still experience racism that is seemingly embedded in the broader Australian psyche.

In *The Australian Dream*, Grant stresses the importance of education, not least for those of us who received a whitewashed version of Australian history.

The best way to learn the truth is to listen to leaders, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Nevertheless, *The Australian Dream* features samples of inflammatory public comments from conservative, right-wing media figures such as Andrew Bolt, Alan Jones and Sam Newman, who's incendiary words highlight the issues of ignorance faced in Australian society.

Adam's mother, Lisa May Goodes, feared having her children being removed from her, as had happened to herself and her mother, so she brought up three boys at a distance from relatives and community. However, like many Aboriginal youngsters, Adam shone at Australian Rules football, which bears a striking similarity to the Indigenous game *Marngrook*. Recruited from the North Ballarat Under-18s to the Sydney Swans in 1997, he made his AFL debut in 1999 and captained the Swans on several occasions. He won the Brownlow Medal

as the game's best and fairest player in 2005 and 2006.

Goodes achieved a Diploma in Aboriginal Studies and was Australian of the Year in 2014.

He has been an important advocate of reconciliation.

Although his team-mates and coach stood up for him, the code he loved let him down when name-calling and booing of Goodes became de rigueur for opposition supporters. By calling out racism, he was seen by the right wing as an uppity Aboriginal — a black man who dared complain about racist taunts. Football stopped being a safe place for him because, as Grant describes it, these were “the howls of humiliation we grew up with — the visceral marks on body and soul”.

One of Goodes's cousins aptly describes it as “Superman being hit week after week with a load of kryptonite”. Goodes took leave and went up country to reconnect with his Aboriginal side. To the relief of his family and fans, he regained his equanimity, but retired without ceremony at the end of the 2015 season.

Despite AFL heavyweight Eddie McGuire and AFL officials acknowledging their role in allowing the situation to escalate, it was too late. The AFL lost not only a great player, but a principled, eloquent Australian leader.

## **The Final Quarter**

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The Final Quarter premiered at the 2019 Sydney Film Festival and has also screened on Channel 10. Like The Australian Dream, it deals with the racism that drove Adam Goodes, champion AFL footballer and 2014 Australian of the Year, from the game he had excelled at for more than 15 years.

Ian Darling's powerful film documents the final three years in the Sydney Swans career of Adnyamathanha man Goodes through archival footage of AFL games, news, interviews and commentaries. The power of this documentary lies in the samples of provocative diatribe from conservative media commentators such as Alan Jones, Andrew Bolt and Miranda Devine after watching and reading opinion pieces on the booing saga. Clips of Sam Newman's vitriolic monologues straight down the camera lens are truly sickening. Equally appalling is the fact these media figures' audiences applaud them.

Seeing the personal toll taken on Goodes by the escalating abuse by football crowds, fanned to a frenzy by the right-wing media is heartbreaking and confronting. Many people in the audience at the screening I attended were in tears.

Both films should be shown to all school and sporting communities to call out bullying, especially racist bullying, for what it is. The casual racism that pervades Australian society is cowardly and wrong. Nothing is “just a joke”.

## **The Nightingale**

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In her film, The Nightingale, writer-director Jennifer Kent seeks to truthfully depict Tasmanian history during the early years of colonisation, when Van Dieman's Land was the ultimate destination for the most hardened of male convicts. It was also where unfortunate females, convicted for minor offences such as stealing food, were sent to even up the gender balance. While not a safe place for white women, it was truly horrific for Aboriginal people, upon who the British were waging an undeclared war of genocide.

Although Irish Clare (Aisling Franciosi) has served out her sentence, sadistic Lieutenant Hawkins (Sam Claflin) to who she is indentured, has refused to sign her ticket of leave for three months, wanting to keep her for his pleasure and sexual gratification. Just after Hawkins has been denied recommendation for promotion, Clare's husband, Aidan (Michael Sheasby), confronts him and demands her release. This leads to an attack of unconscionable, alcohol-fuelled violence by Hawkins and his officers, Ruse (Damon Herriman) and Jago (Harry Greenwood), who subsequently set out for Launceston with tracker Charlie (Charlie Jampijinpa Brown) to further pursue Hawkins's promotion aspirations.

When Clare is fobbed off by the magistrate to who she reports the murder of her husband and child, she

enlists the grudging assistance of tracker Billy (Baykali Ganambarr) to catch up with the men and avenge the horrific crimes. Having been taken as a child, chained and beaten, his family killed, Billy has experienced trauma at white hands. En route to Launceston, mutual distrust and racism gives way to empathy as they contend with their common British enemy. Ironically, they must converse in English, which is the second language for both of them.

Through Clare and Billy, Kent shows that it is possible to come together. Although theirs is not a conventional happy ending, Billy's defiant words in the closing scene resonate in contemporary Australia. "I'm still here ... and I'm not going anywhere."

Kent's starkly realistic retelling of Australia's past was sanctioned by Tasmanian elders; she collaborated with rape crisis counsellors and psychologists to accurately portray the effects of sexual violence. The film looks superb thanks to Radek Ladczuk's cinematography and the design team.

## **Emu Runner**

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Along with *The Final Quarter* and *The Nightingale*, *Emu Runner* was a highlight of the Sydney Film Festival. Filmed in and around Brewarrina, it tells the story of young Gem (Rhae-Kye Waites) following her mother's sudden, unexpected death. The emu had been her mother's totem and now, just like the male emu, Gem's father Jay Daniels (Wayne Blair) has to raise their children.

When he decides that it would be best for Gem to live with her grandmother, the girl is torn between filial obedience and the bond she has formed with the emu that had appeared just before her mother died. In the belief that the emu is hungry, she has been pilfering food to feed it. Not wanting to upset her father, Gem stays silent when accused of stealing. Fledgling social services worker Heidi (Georgia Blizzard) may be full of good intentions, but she is out of her depth. Local policeman Stan (Rob Carlton) has a bit more experience with the local community, but still automatically assumes superior status. In the ensuing course of events, Heidi and Stan learn to listen to Indigenous people and to appreciate their knowledge of not only the land, but of human nature. Daniel Gibbs's cinematography captures the beauty of inland Australia, and the heart of the country and its people.

Just as the local community comes together to support the Daniels family in the film, the Brewarrina community supported writer-director Imogen Thomas in the production of *Emu Runner*. It was primarily financed by crowdfunding. Most of the actors, including Waites, are locals, as are the many "background artistes".

*Emu Runner* is scheduled for release on 7 November.

Tricia Youlden is a retired drama teacher