

Walkabout [15] 1971|UK|100 min

UK release date **7th October 1971**

Director **Nicolas Roeg**

Screenplay **Edward Bond**

Cinematographer **Nicolas Roeg**

Cast **Jenny Agutter** (Girl); **Luc Roeg** (White Boy); **David Gulpilil** (Black Boy); **John Meillon** (Father)

Director Nicolas Roeg's 1971 classic, *Walkabout*, about two young British siblings who get lost in the desert and befriend a wandering Indigenous man, is a work of striking atmospheric contrasts. From light and pretty flourishes — glimpses of plants, gorgeously framed sunsets and rocks cooled by moonlight — to moments of darkness and brutality, Roeg eases from beauty to menace in a manner befitting the fickle environment he captures. Glorious and awe-inspiring one moment, dangerous and harrowing the next.

The film put David Gulpilil, one of this country's finest Indigenous actors, on the map. It premiered at the Cannes film festival but performed poorly at the local box office and drew a mixed response from critics. Among the topics debated by reviewers was whether it was actually Australian. *Walkabout* was financed with American money, adapted from an English novel by an English director and stars mostly English actors.

Walkabout may not be an Australian film in the technical definition, but it went on to form an enduring legacy. It is regarded as one of the earliest works of the Australian New Wave and is considered seminal — particularly for its bold, dreamlike exploration of the Australian wilderness and the deep spiritual bonds between the land and its original occupants.

The film's opening shots form a mosaic of metropolitan life strung together with a buzzy Tati-like vibe. Roeg overlays didgeridoo music onto cluttered cityscapes loaded with cars, buildings, businesspeople and slickers going about daily routines.

Suddenly we're relocated to the outback. Then things turn weird. The dapperly dressed dad starts shooting at his children with a real gun, then lights the car

on fire and kills himself. When the kids wander into the desert, Roeg overlays the soundtrack with music of school girls singing. It's a striking reversal: from traditional Indigenous music over shots of the city to white person's music over shots of the outback. Fifteen minutes in, Roeg delivers one of the film's most rousing images: a stunning shot of the sun framed as a glowing yellow ball ensconced by orange and black, strikingly reminiscent of the Aboriginal flag.

Walkabout finds an emotional centre when the kids meet an Aboriginal Australian (Gulpilil) who helps them find water and joins them as they drift between sun-parched settings. Gulpilil's unforgettable performance, so warm and affecting, is anchored by small gestures. The audience may not understand what this smiley, generous-hearted man is saying but it's clear how he's feeling without Roeg needing to signpost his emotions.

Walkabout's historical significance as one of the first feature films to explore the Australian outback in rich detail is part of a hugely influential canon of films about Indigenous Australians. The unforgettable vividness with which Roeg captures the outback arises from the perspective of a foreigner trying to understand it. And like the nightmarish aesthetic of Ted Kotcheff's masterpiece Wake in Fright, released the same year, Roeg revels in the hallucinatory, creating a wilderness that exists as much in the mind as it does the land.

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