

QUT Digital Repository:
<http://eprints.qut.edu.au/>



Starrs, D. Bruno (2007) Sounds of silence: an interview with Rolf de Heer. *Metro Magazine*(152):pp. 18-21.

© Copyright 2007 D. Bruno Starrs

Sounds of Silence: An Interview with Rolf de Heer.

By D. Bruno Starrs.

Rolf de Heer's twelfth feature film, "Dr. Plonk" (starring Nigel Lunghi, Paul Blackwell and Magda Szubanski), premiered on closing night of the 2007 Adelaide Film Festival recently. Already feted as South Australian of the Year, De Heer received the Don Dunstan award on opening night to rapturous applause from his home town crowd. D. Bruno Starrs interviewed Australia's most successful non-mainstream film-maker about the black and white, silent slap-stick comedy three days before its inaugural screening.

D. Bruno Starrs: With "Dr. Plonk" you've made an ostensibly silent film. Do you think audiences don't care about sound?

Rolf de Heer: They care enormously about sound. Sound is, from my point of view, 60% of the emotional content of a film. So they do, enormously.

Why, then, have you made a silent film?

(Laughing) Because I thought I'd enjoy doing so. Look, it's a funny one, and it's not what I expected to do ... In fact, I hit upon it at the time James Currie and I had just finished the "Ten Canoes" mix and, literally, just about to have a drink to celebrate and that's when I discovered that I would be doing a silent film. And I said, "Sorry, Jim, you're not working on the next one". Which was a very bizarre thing, because we'd just had this great mix. But I don't have those sorts of considerations. I just think, 'Ah! That's a great idea, I'd like to do that!', and then everything else flows from that. I didn't realise at first, in the first five minutes, that Jim wouldn't be working on it – in the end he did – but it's just something I wanted to do, that seemed like a great idea at the time. And in the sense that music is part of the sound-track and a terribly important one, you know, "Ten Canoes" had almost no music in it, and it turns out "Dr. Plonk", of course, is wall-to-wall music.

You're rehearsing a live band, "The Stiletto Sisters" to perform Graham Tardiff's music at the premiere of "Dr. Plonk". Is there going to be much difference for the audience seeing this compared to when it's screened in ordinary cinemas?

Yeah, there's a bit of difference, in the sense that the live screening - and presumably there will be others - they're something of an event that loads the film and layers the film in a way that adds to it. The recording for the film and what the band can do live are almost exactly the same thing and in one sense there's not going to be a lot of difference between the two, but once we'd done the recording and once we'd mixed it last weekend I was quite pleased to see the film sound-track take some steps of its own, in the sense that you can do things there that you can't do in a live recording unless you rehearse 'stupidly' on the location, and get the right mixing desk and get all the right reverbs and get the whole surround speaker system and all that sort of stuff. You can't in a live performance get the precision and the decisions that you make in a mixing theatre, but the whole idea of the stuff in a mixing theatre is to make it feel more like a live performance. But anyway, the two sit differently and I enjoy them both.

In “Bad Boy Bubby” you used 32 cinematographers but only one sound designer, James Currie, and one composer, Graham Tardiff. Why was that?

Well, I never had the idea that I needed to use different sound recordists. And if that had happened, in post-production, it still, would have, I think, ultimately have been done by one sound person. OK, the 32 cinematographers come from history. When I was first going to do the project, I was going to do it at weekends over a period of perhaps two years and the film is structured to accommodate personnel changes and so-on. When we got to make it conventionally, it seemed like an interesting thing to still do was use the different cinematographers but the sound doesn't necessarily have to follow that road. And it was so complex, what we were doing with the sound and so individual, that you couldn't have had sound recordists coming in. You couldn't have done it anyway because we were doing something that nobody had ever done and they wouldn't be able to learn it in five minutes and just do it.

So 32 sound people wouldn't have worked?

No, not at all. Because we were doing this stuff that just hadn't been done before. And it took Jim and I a long time to suss it all and work it all out and gradually build what we did.

This is the binaural technology?

This is the binaural technology and what that does and what it gives ... OK, it's the technology in the first place but then it's how you use it because in a way you do the opposite of what you do in conventional sound recording situations, the simplest example of that is, when you go for a take, in a domestic situation, for example, you would turn the fridge off, because the worst thing that could happen is that the fridge turns itself on during the middle of a take. Well, we would be turning the fridge on and opening windows – even windows out of shot - so that the sound is coming in. You know, really quite diametrically opposed to conventional sound recording.

Academics Anna Hickey-Moody and Melissa Iocca have said in Metro that the person who experiences your films could be called an “aurator”. What do you think about that?

I don't know what that is – I haven't read it. Well, my journey of discovery with sound and the way I tend to look at things sort of combine. And I have to say the fact that Jim Currie was there at the time when he was, you know, and had the sort of analytical approach that he has meant that sound - it's important anyway - became a particular journey for me, about what to do with it and how to deal with it: to add, to make a difference, to enhance what feeling you're trying to get from this stuff. And it really goes back to “Raven's Gate”, which was the first proper Dolby stereo soundtrack film that I did, and here I was looking forward to Dolby stereo and we get to the mix and there's nothing stereo in it - you know, one atmosphere, I think - because people just didn't do it that way. They put mono with pan-pots and it's not proper stereo and I thought ‘Why is this? It just doesn't make sense to me’, and that's when I began this investigation into what, in fact, is stereo. ‘What is stereo?’ And that's when I discovered binaural recording and XY and there was the MS

microphone that Jim introduced and all this sort of stuff. And even on “Dingo” with the Belgian sound recordist that we had, he was pretty interested in taking that a bit of the way and was pretty open to doing so because it’s not so often that a director is really concerned about location sound. Again on “Raven’s gate” I became concerned about location sound, more, I mean I already was, I mean, as I say, to me the totality of sound including music is 60% of emotional content of a film so why should I not be concerned about it? But, you know, we had some post-synching to do on “Raven’s gate”, and I didn’t much like that process, and nor did I much like the results. OK, some actors are very good at it and enjoy it but some actors don’t like it very much and struggle to reproduce something that’s as good as what they did on the day. And then you’ve got to fit it in, make it fit, I didn’t find it very satisfactory so location sound becomes more and more important to me.

Obviously, Jim Currie is someone you collaborate with quite productively, but how do you hold onto your vision as a film-maker yet, on the other hand, utilise and incorporate the input of others?

Look, that’s an evolving thing. I used to think that I had to do everything. Choose the cups that are in the back of the shot? ‘Of course I want to choose the pattern on the cups!’ But quite quickly I learnt that other people are much better at their job than I am at their job, and the more you can allow them to feel they’re making a contribution the more contribution they’ll make, and the better the film will become. Now, it helps a great deal, in general, that I write the scripts ... You can do a second draft of the script, you can change things. And that means if somebody comes up with an idea, I then apply a fairly simple test to it: is it better, or worse, or just different? If it’s better of course I’ll want to use it, although I have to be careful that it fits in with everything else. If it’s worse I tend to say ‘No’. If it’s just different, then I’ll make a call on it, as to which way to go. Mostly, I’ll go with it. Not for the sake of doing something different but because it will allow that person to have made that suggestion and for me to have incorporated it and make them feel that they are making a contribution and make them more enthusiastic to make a better contribution and also it will make it easier for me later on to say ‘No!’ to a suggestion that they might think is really important. There’s lots of reasons for doing it. And I can’t tell very often that it was better or worse or just different. I’m not the world’s arbiter on taste. You know, it’s ‘How does it sit with me?’ and I could be quite wrong.

Many film directors who have written, directed, produced and even starred in their own films have been called ‘auteurs’ and perhaps they are the sort of film-makers who do want to do everything their own way. What do you think is an auteur and are you one?

Oh, look, I don’t go in much for that sort of analysis that in the end is terminology. It’s for other people to make those sorts of calls on it. I enjoy melding the three – I don’t know how to do it properly unless I do – melding the three main functions because for me they’re all the same thing, they’re making a film, and by doing all three I do a much more efficient job. The producer, director and writer. It’s instantaneous perfect communication: there’s no arguments. Because this person receiving that message knows all the reasoning behind it and can’t think of anything better ... I don’t know how people successfully direct a film that they haven’t written and they are not producing. I don’t know how they do it! And I can see why people might be unhappy who’ve written a script and see what’s been done to it. Look, I

write the damn things, and direct them and I don't completely produce them anymore, there's other people. If that makes me an auteur in other people's terminologies, then fine.

Do you think your films give a voice to marginalised people, those whom might not otherwise be heard, for example, women, children, the Aboriginal?

I don't intentionally go about doing that, but it seems to be the analysts have said that this is the case. Fine. I think for me it is to do with 'What am I attracted to? What do I like? What can I make good, intimate drama from?', and, you know, what attracts me. And it's different at different times. I mean, "Dr. Plonk" is quite an aberration, in a way, in that it's a piece of froth. In my view, that's what it is. You've yet to see it – in fact, an audience has yet to see it, so we'll see. These things come about for such strange reasons, and it's a combination of that and the sort of things I find interesting. Now, I wouldn't have ever thought I was interested in marginalised people, but apparently I am because it seems to be some sort of recurring theme across not every film I do but across numbers of them, yeah.

Could it be a recurring theme that is unconsciously expressed?

Yes. I'm sure. I'm sure there are degrees of unconscious ... and, look, it's in that area that me and the film theorists not so much part ways, but my process is deliberately not intellectualised. I don't like to work that way. For me it's either 'It feels right or it doesn't', and I like to keep it that way because I want to avoid contriving. Now, OK, every film is contrived in some description but there are particular kinds of contrivance that I find offensive. I don't want to go there and I think that the more I intellectualise about this stuff the more I will artificially structure things and the further I get away from getting an emotional response myself from the film. Which is after all, what I intend to do, is what I intend to get, as a viewer, from the film.

The young guys at the gym I train at love movies with lots of action, fast cars, explosions, blood and guts – but not many of them have seen a Rolf de Heer film. Why don't you make films for this significant demographic?

(Laughing) Well, because I don't make films for anybody except myself, really. Which is not quite true, either, but that's largely the approach.

So you're not interested in watching action films?

Watching, but not going out of my way to watch that sort of film above others, but in the broad range of films that I watch I'm perfectly happy to see one of those, blood and guts, not so much. You know, because, in a way for me, what I ask myself is 'Is this film likely to improve my life?', and if the answer is 'No', or if it's likely to, you know, make your life a little worse, then I don't go and see it. But I can't completely tell ... it could be a very fine film ... I have great arguments with Molly, for example, my partner, for whom film viewing is a different thing than it is for me and, you know, "Wolf Creek" is a great example between the two of us, where, because it's a well-crafted film – for her it has certain value – but for me, I know that emotionally, I will come out of that film a lesser human being. I know that. That's how I am, so I'm

not interested in seeing that film if it will reduce me as a human being. In the same way, what I try and do is make films that don't reduce people as human beings.

You mention your partner, Molly. You live in a female household – do you think that has any influence upon you as a film-maker?

(Laughing) Could do, I don't know. Never actually thought about it. I do all the cooking, for God's sake ...

Are you conscious, while you're making them, of any imprint or signature or world-view that you leave on your films that indicates a pre-occupation with the non-masculine voice?

No, I don't. I don't have that consciousness at all and I actually, in a sense, try to avoid signatures and imprints. What I reckon is that each film requires to be made in a certain way and once there's an idea or a concept or something; how do you make that film in the best possible way, not how do you make it like something else, but what does this film require, what does this film demand? But look, you know, it's up to guys who analyse, to analyse those things.

From within your family and friends who do you see as having had a significant impact upon you as a film-maker?

Well, it would have to be my parents. In the first seven years of my life, because they brought me up.

They brought you up to be a film-maker?

No, not at all. They brought me up, and therefore they formed who I am more than anyone else did. I was one of six kids and we did this and we did that. All I'm saying is early childhood is the most formative thing, in terms of character and predilections and all those things we become as adults. We didn't have television at home, for a start, and my father refused to have it because he didn't think it was doing anybody any good at all. He was right.

What's wrong with television? Isn't it just another medium?

Television!?! If I could do one thing to improve all of humanity it would be to get rid of television. It has had such a negative social effect in every society that it's been introduced to. I can't think of anything positive ... apart from very old people who would otherwise have no-one. But for the rest of us ... it's allowed society to get as consumerist as it is ...

What's the difference between television and cinema?

There's a great deal of difference, because you pay to go into the cinema and you engage with it, as a consequence, quite differently, and you're in a darkened theatre and the experience is bigger and there is an audience with you and you don't jump up and make a cup of tea and doze off. The cinema viewing experience is much more intense, it doesn't mean there can't be very good television because there is ... there

used to be anyway. I don't watch it anymore, so I don't know ... It could be because it's too difficult to make a film without having television running interference, because the two things are different. They ought to be made differently. I can't make television, some people can do that, I can't. I don't know how to do it, it's a whole skill that has to be learnt, and I don't have it. I could make do, I could make some adequate television, but I can't make good television. Television 'artists' can do that. Because the two things are different. I don't actually like to watch television because it means that what I do in terms of cinema is diluted.

Who are the film-makers that have influenced you?

I think it's more particular films than film-makers, although I do remember thinking about Bruce Beresford's interesting early career where he made an incredible variety of films. They were all very different from each other and thinking that that was alright, then, you know, it's alright to do that, it's obviously the way that I've gone, and when you don't know terribly much and you're in film school, it didn't seem that cool to be like Bruce Beresford. But because I admired much of what he did I thought, yeah, yeah, that's interesting, it is allowed, it's a fine thing, you don't have to 'find a style', for example, when people talk about finding a voice or a style, no, you don't have to. Look at that. And this notion of making films for themselves, so that the film itself can be the best possible thing, rather than making it for the 'personal voice' or that it can be recognised as being one of your films.

You certainly have encompassed a whole range of different genres. What's next for Rolf de Heer to explore?

I haven't got the faintest idea what's next and I haven't quite finished this current one. I hope not to do anything for a while. Doing "Plonk", whilst releasing "Ten Canoes" was too much. But then, none of us expected "Ten Canoes" to do what it did and it was a financial imperative to make another film. So, it could be anything.

You've said that "Ten Canoes" was one of the hardest films you've ever worked on. What was "Dr. Plonk" like, in comparison?

It was oddly, I mean, the shoot was ... lovely. It was a very leisurely shoot, twelve weeks of shooting, and a very tiny crew, which I do like. And we could experiment with play, we could rehearse. I could decide not to shoot today, let's look at what we might shoot next week, instead. And the hours were reasonable. We were shooting in winter and we had to use daylight so you couldn't shoot for very long and it was a very friendly little crew and close-knit. And I wouldn't say it was the easiest – in some ways it was, I guess – but it was very pleasurable. Very relaxed. Post-production turned out to be a fair bit more difficult, but I think that was largely because I had to go away so often for "Ten Canoes". But, it was good, it was enjoyable. Post was a bit heavier than it should have been. But no, "Plonk" has been a good experience.