

Home Truths

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The sexual exploitation and even murder of young Aboriginal girls and women is an enduring mystery in Australia. Why are so many of these crimes unsolved?

Mystery Road, Ivan Sen's new film that was given the honour of opening the 2013 Sydney Film Festival, is a brave and unflinching attempt by a powerful cast of Australians to tell the world the truth.

The past and present blur for me as *Mystery Road* opens with the discovery of the body of a beautiful young Aboriginal girl dumped in a culvert by the main truck route. This has happened many times before in my lifetime and it is still happening.

Aaron Pedersen is on the screen, staring long and hard at the dead girl with her throat slashed. His performance is so intense, so real, that I feel he is carrying us all on a journey to uncover the true evil that stalks the most vulnerable lives on desolate streets.

This is all so close to home for *Mystery Road's* writer, director, cinematographer, editor, and music composer, Ivan Sen, who has poured all of his intense, emotional realism into a story that must be authentic, must let others see what is happening. Three members of Sen's extended family have been brutally murdered.

On the opening night of the Sydney Film Festival my wife, Kim and I talked with Ivan's mother, Donella, about the deeply disturbing death of Theresa Binge. A cousin of Ivan's from Boggabilla, Queensland, her battered body was found far from home under an overpass on Boomi Road, about ten kilometres south of the border, in June 2003.

I see the strain now on Donella's face, just like Aaron's on the screen, looking at the young woman sitting there, propped up in a death pose, asking us all, *why hasn't someone found my killer?*

Despite a \$100,000 reward offered by the NSW and Queensland Governments earlier this year a police Strike Force has made no prosecution. No one has called Crime Stoppers on 1800 333 000 to tell the truth of what happened around midnight on that June evening in Goondiwindi ten years ago. The Barwon Local Area Command still cannot give Theresa Binge's daughter, Daylene Barlow, any explanation that would give her closure.

This is the true-to-life scenario that drives Jay Swan, the fictional Aboriginal detective in *Mystery Road*, played so convincingly by Aaron Pedersen.

The black detective in a white hat comes back to his desolate hometown to find that most of the local police seem uninterested in the murder of the young Aboriginal woman. To his horror he discovers that the dead girl used to hang out with his own daughter. Step by painful step he learns that the girls are caught up in a dangerous mix of sex, drugs and terrifying violence. To the white police there is a threat "*to our way of life*" but through Aboriginal eyes they are more focussed on shaking down the locals who buy the drugs than stopping the murder of innocents.

Think about the subtle messages here. With his flowing white hair and beard, the Aboriginal actor Jack Charles plays Old Boy, an all-seeing clever man who always knows what is happening in his community and yet is incapable of stopping the drift of children towards the greatest dangers. Then there is actor Tony Barry's ever so familiar portrait of a good-natured country police Sergeant who likes the young Aboriginal detective, listens to his desperate pleas about the murder and yet still appears unmoved or even complacent. A next door neighbour of the dead girl, another old white feller, sees a lot but remains silent. Is this the combination of real life characters that explains why Australia fails to come to grips with the brutality against so many of the most vulnerable people?

This is not the Wild West of that dark and fearful story of American drug violence, *No Country for Old Men*. Ivan Sen gives us the bright sunlight and the vastness of Australia's landscape, country cleared and now eerily bone dry, to create a setting for murder with a uniquely Australian sense of place.

The town in *Mystery Road* is like many in our nation where some Aboriginal people have drifted or more often been driven from their lands to endure the tension of overcrowded houses, the pressure of unrelenting racism from some whites and the daily crises of family battles, alcoholism and all of the usual habitual escapes from such grim, hollow boredom. Gambling games for the young and old, a full menu of drugs and enough alcohol to wash away the will to live reduce human beings to incoherence, even about their own pain.

How many times have we all seen this where Aboriginal people end up in the worst houses on the worst streets, living on the fringes of the national prosperity that eludes them, while others stare right through them as if they are invisible?

The Central Queensland town of Winton warmly cooperated with the film-makers. A local real estate website now proudly offers for sale one of the homes filmed in *Mystery Road*.

This director finds humanity in all of his people and places. Like his earlier portrait of Aboriginal life in *Toomelah*, this new story too could be set in so many communities, in the bush, the big cities or the suburbs, because it is about all of us, wherever we live, whatever we pretend to know or leave unseen and unsaid.

The aerial views of rutted dirt tracks scratched between the houses like the lines and patterns in some Aboriginal paintings captures the enormity of the interior life of this nation, not merely the landscape.

There are ghostly truths about the past and present laying just below the dust.

As I watched *Mystery Road* in the darkness and flickering light I remembered massacres that have occurred across so much of this country. The writer, Bruce Elder, declared in his book, *Blood On the Wattle* (and he stands by this conclusion after investigating hundreds of accounts of brutality on the frontier) "that every hectare of land in Australia has seen some kind of atrocity."

In Sen's earlier films, all with beautifully simple titles such as *Tears, Wind, Dust, Journey* and the unforgettable masterpiece, *Beneath Clouds*, this assured storyteller is always reminding us that we are possessed in a way, sometimes haunted, by the longer timelines of history in such places.

Another one of the intriguing old timers in *Mystery Road*, Jack Thompson's melancholic hermit (Mr Murray) reported to the white cops in town that he had seen savage dogs with human bones in their jaws. When confronted by the black detective with the white cowboy hat and the gun on his hip, the old man appears to have lost his memory. This amnesia, summoned up very movingly by a magnificent Australian actor who has walked with Aboriginal people for much of his life, is symbolic of our nation's denial of the past and the present.

The most important location in *Mystery Road*, the scene of the climactic violence, is signposted by Sen with careful deliberation, "Slaughter Hill". For some this is too much.

The film critic, Alice Tynan, writing a review for *The Vine* website objected to Sen's explicit deathly place names, commenting that "*Mystery Road* is one thing but Massacre Creek and Slaughter Hill are so on the nose they almost ruin the film's stunning locations."

While the film is a clever hybrid of western, murder-mystery and Australian Outback story, this is merely Sen's imaginative, low-budget approach to draw in not only millions of film-goers around the world, but the Australian viewers that he wants to connect to a clear understanding of the murder that is happening in our lifetime. We not only hear the Aboriginal voice we get the Aboriginal way of seeing.

If you become familiar with Sen's film visions you will notice that they are often directly sign posted to keep us on track through the journey. But at the same time they are deeply mysterious. Often as I watch his stories I find myself thinking more about other disturbing truths I have stumbled across.

Mystery Road made me recall walking years ago at Kalkarindji in the Northern Territory with Jimmy Wavehill and Gus George, two survivors of the Gurindji Walk-off at Wave Hill Station. Near yet another one of those countless old Aboriginal campsites marked on the map today as *Blackfeller Creek* is the burial site of old men, women and children who were murdered by white stockmen on that lawless frontier.

The truth is there are Massacre Creeks and Slaughter Hills down many country roads.

It is on the edges of Australia's towns that so often the evil lurks. The outsiders, the drifters, the strangers passing in the darkness, exploit young girls who end up trading sex for money or drugs. Often it is someone in the extended family group who takes advantage of the young and vulnerable. A regular go-between in this exploitation is the petty local crim' like the sneering dealer played by Damian Walshe-Howling in *Mystery Road*.

Ryan Kwanten's character, a repugnant pig-shooter, brings such hateful intensity to the racism that spills from his mouth that it will bring back a lifetime of experiences for so many people who watch this story. The pig-shooter's father, a farmer fallen from good times and now part of the drug harvest, is played by David Field with that ingrained racism, oozing his ignorance and acceptance of the vilest discrimination.

Sen is insistent that we also think of what happens to good people who try to oppose the malice. Aaron Pedersen's Aboriginal detective is "Boy" or "Abo" to the whites while a very young Aboriginal kid tells him, "We hate coppers bro... We kill coppers bro."

Pedersen has to hold his nerve and stay true for virtually all 122 minutes of this journey. He is not walking between two worlds. This is the world virtually all Aboriginal people know today. The man shows us that it is possible to be in touch with those ancestral strengths, especially dignity and integrity. There is a right way to live.

I can see why Pedersen and Sen became brothers, why they both knew, in the actor's words, that "the Ancestors were watching over them."

On the opening night, Aaron shared the thought that every one of these wonderful actors had brought to Ivan Sen's story what they each believed in their heart was the real Australia.

The producer, David Jowsey, has long worked with Aboriginal people on telling their stories, as have Jack Thompson and Hugo Weaving. They brought their very best to the film. Tasma Walton and the rest of the cast felt it too.

"We all worked very hard and the whole cast felt it," Pederson said, "but we worked with a smile because we wanted to tell the world this story."

With his usual calm and clarity, Sen's *Mystery Road*, presents Aboriginal people with strengths and flaws, but always with great humanity.

My personal tribute to this storyteller after his film's first public screening, goes to Sen's honesty:

"You give us the truth that this country doesn't want to see but you always maintain a sense that these are human beings we are getting to know. You see their depth and you show a great understanding of the essential humanity of all of these people. This is what makes *Mystery Road* so very real."



Hugo Weaving and Aaron Pedersen - picture supplied by *MYSTERY ROAD*



Aaron Pedersen in *Mystery Road*