



Wake in Fright images © Madman Press Area

AGGRESSIVE HOSPITALITY:

Wake IN Fright

WHILE TED KOTCHEFF'S 1971 FILM *WAKE IN FRIGHT* IS CLEARLY A PRODUCT OF ITS TIME, IT IS ITS SENSE OF OUT-OF-CONTROL MADNESS THAT MAKES IT A CLASSIC AND UNPARALLELED MOVIE, WRITES *Dave Hoskin*.

STEPHEN King once remarked that a truly classic film is one that doesn't date within ten years of release.

While I'm not sure he's right – he cites *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971) as an example, and I can see exactly what he's getting at while simultaneously vehemently disagreeing with him – it's something I couldn't stop thinking about while watching *Wake in Fright* (Ted Kotcheff, 1971). In many ways the film positively screams that it's the product of a bygone era. The tale of John Grant (Gary Bond), a schoolteacher grinding away at his post in the Australian outback, *Wake in Fright* charts his gradual slide from civilisation to savagery. When the school holidays arrive, Grant eagerly sets

out for Sydney to visit his girlfriend, travelling to the town of Bundanyabba to catch a plane. Initially he only plans to stay one night, but through a series of unfortunate events gambles away his ability to leave. Grant then reluctantly accepts the hospitality offered by several of the locals, but the price is participation in their way of life. Copious amounts of alcohol are thrust upon him, kangaroos are gleefully gunned down, and the bender climaxes in a *Walpurgisnacht* of booze, bush-bashing and buggery.

As you may have guessed, *Wake in Fright* is a film produced before the advent of political correctness. Aside from the yobbos-on-steroids behaviour detailed above, the film

very much depicts a White Australia, with one small part apiece for an Asian actor and an Aboriginal actor. Women are also conspicuously absent. Sylvia Kay has the only female role of any substance, and even her presence is fleeting. Behind the camera, it's also clear that *Wake in Fright* was produced before the mid-1970s renaissance of Australian cinema. Director Ted Kotcheff is Canadian, and while he does throw some local actors a bone, he casts Brits (Bond, Kay, Donald Pleasence) in the really meaty roles. Of course the practice of casting international actors in Australian films is still alive and well today, but where the overseas ring-ins in films like *Rogue* (Greg Mclean, 2007) or *Gettin' Square* (Jonathan Teplitzky, 2003) are given at least a fig-leaf of dramatic justification, the casting of Gary Bond is akin to watching Orson Welles in blackface. As with the 'Australian' performances of James Mason in *Age of Consent* (Michael Powell, 1969) or Jenny Agutter in *Walkabout* (Nicolas Roeg, 1971), Bond doesn't bother trying to sound like a local. This insistence on keeping the Australian voice away from centre stage might once have felt objectionable, but from the perspective of 2009 it just feels amusingly quaint. To quote L.P. Hartley, 'the past

is a foreign country: they do things differently there.' Just as *A Clockwork Orange* could only have emerged in the early 1970s, *Wake in Fright's* odd, outsider perspective on Australia is intrinsically linked to the same era.

The counter-argument to King's assertion, however, is that it's often precisely the things that date *Wake in Fright* that make it a classic. All films are time capsules of a sort and, as with Nicolas Roeg, seeing our country through the lens of Kotcheff's foreign sensibility makes *Wake in Fright* a more valuable capsule than most. It's not really a fashionable thing to say – Australians usually bristle at patronising or inaccurate portrayals of themselves from overseas (see pretty much anything with the words 'Down Under' in the title) – but if we ignore the dodgier bits we can appreciate the view *Wake in Fright* offers from outside the goldfish bowl.

It is interesting to see just how closely Kotcheff's film gels with the perspective of the industry yet to come. Geoffrey Blainey famously argued that Australia's history has been shaped by the tyranny of distance, and it feels like Kotcheff is illustrating precisely this idea in *Wake in Fright*. The opening shot of the film is the camera slowly doing a 360 degree pan around a tiny railway station in the middle of the desert. There are no people visible, nor indeed much of anything – as the poster's tagline informs us, 'Sweat, dust and beer ... there's nothing else out here mate!' It is immediately apparent that, unlike the folksy American wild frontier or the cosiness of the British Empire, this is a threatening landscape, miles from civilisation and blasted by the sun as far as Kotcheff's eye can see. Just as *Razorback* (Russell Mulcahy, 1984), *Lost Things* (Martin Murphy, 2003), *Lucky Miles* (Michael James Rowland, 2007) and countless others will later agree, *Wake in Fright* tells you that if you're not careful in the Australian wilderness it will swallow you whole.

Of course, *Wake in Fright* is part of a long tradition that views the world beyond the edge of 'civilisation' as lawless and taboo, although Kotcheff was one of the first to set these themes in the outback. In particular, the modern horror tale returns to this theme again and again. Shelley kicks things off in *Frankenstein* (Victor, like so many mad scientists, only attempts his blasphemous experiments far away from civilisation), Conrad contributes the classiest example in *Heart of Darkness* (in which Mr Kurtz literally goes native in the African wilderness),

Lovecraft perfects the idea (in his countless short stories about ancient evils resurrected in remote, often foreign locales), and films like *Wolf Creek* (Greg Mclean, 2005) demonstrate it is still going strong in the twenty-first century.

While *Wake in Fright* obviously uses this empty-landscape-as-metaphor-for-moral-dissolution template, it is pleasantly jarring that the film seems determined to bounce off the idea in unusual ways. For starters, although many people have described it as a horror film (the film's poster quotes Nick Cave calling it the 'most terrifying film about Australia in existence'), *Wake in Fright* manages to unsettle its audience without a clear antagonist. The wilderness creates an imposing atmosphere, but unlike in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Peter Weir, 1975) or *The Last Wave* (Peter Weir, 1977) it is not actively malign. The locals also look foreboding, but again – with the exception of one ambiguous moment – they never actually harm the leading man. Instead, the worst thing that happens in Bundanyabba is what Grant dubs 'aggressive hospitality'. Upon his arrival, the townsfolk go out of their way to make him feel welcome, showing him where to get a decent meal and a decent drink. The first harbinger of what is to come is the local po-

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liceman's determination to buy Grant a beer. The Bundanyabbans drink virtually non-stop, and in order to fit in Grant reluctantly tries to keep pace: this is his grave mistake.

If *Wake in Fright* were a traditional horror movie, it would be retitled *Beer*. None of the story's terrible events would have occurred if not for the demon drink, and Kotcheff creates an unpredictable, nightmarish tone that plugs the audience directly into Grant's off-balance experience. Many horror films are about the inability to control an outside force, but *Wake in Fright* is about the loss of personal control. There is an element of outside pressure – the aforementioned aggressive hospitality of the locals – but Grant is at the

very least the co-author of his own destruction. An early example is his discovery of the locals' obsession with two-up. The key to the sequence is rhythm, with Kotcheff brilliantly orchestrating the noise of the gamblers ebbing and flowing. Raucous chatter gives way to bated silence, and then noise erupts once more. We see Grant wound into this rhythm, tentatively at first, but after one big win he is hooked.

Kotcheff's masterstroke is that Grant walks away straight after that big win. He puts his windfall on the floor of his hotel room and then stands back to look at it, trying to get perspective on the size of his good fortune. It takes a careful filmmaker to make this pause work, but the result is that the audience is reeled in. We can feel the buzz Grant is on, feel how *seductive* it is. The tipping point, and the point at which the audience is completely sucked into the film, is when Grant decides to push his luck. This is maddening because now the audience is *sure* that something terrible is about to happen. We can sympathise with Grant's desire to gain full control of his life (if he continues winning he can use the money to buy himself out of his government teaching contract), but we're still *willing* him not to go back. Sure enough, when Grant returns to bet again, he loses. He then makes the classic gamblers' error: he confuses perseverance with the reassertion of control and bets again. Loses. Bets again, one final toss of the coins ... and he's busted. All his money is swept away and he finds himself stranded. He can't get to Sydney and he can't go home. He's trapped in Bundanyabba.

The two-up sequence is a key plot development that also unifies the film's themes. It demonstrates that Grant carries the seeds of his own destruction within himself, but the two-up game is also very much a community affair. It literally feels like every man in town is participating in the game, and the odd, cyclical rhythm of proceedings gives it the air of some weird native ritual. Once Grant elects to join in, it is notable how quickly the other players make him part of that ritual. After Grant's final loss it feels like the entire town is laughing at him: the shots of the townsfolk are distorted and the sound of their laughter is harsh, almost maniacal. One of the defining differences between urban and rural communities is that the latter are more closely knit. In presenting the triumphant

ALL IMAGES FROM *WAKE IN FRIGHT*

townsfolk as mocking gargoyles, Kotcheff demonstrates how easily that community spirit can morph into outright tribalism. As we see those laughing, distorted faces we realise that not only has Grant condemned himself, but that somehow the town of Bundanyabba itself has won.

The sick, powerless feeling that permeates the aftermath is what drives the remainder of the film. As soon as Grant loses the ability to control his fate, he also loses the option of refusing the locals' hospitality. It's here that *Wake in Fright* really settles into the outback-as-heart-of-darkness routine, with Grant being dragged further and further out of his depth. What seems so subversive now is that Kotcheff's vision of hell is a funhouse mirror image of the Australian stereotype. We've always been considered a nation of drinkers, our national identity has always been dominated by the image of the outback and we've always lionised larrikin behaviour.¹ It should perhaps come as no surprise that a film like *Wake in Fright*, made by foreigners well before Australians began complicating the national stereotypes, sometimes feels like a tourist brochure on acid.

It should also be no surprise, then, that the film's protagonist should stand completely in opposition to that national identity. Grant is a schoolteacher, the ultimate symbol of civilised man, and Gary Bond's wonky accent actually helps because it means he always sounds like an outsider. *Wake in Fright* takes this well-spoken, vaguely patronising Marlow-type and then hurls him down the path of degradation. The Kurtz-figure here is Doc Tydon, played by Donald Pleasence. *Wake in Fright* features one of the most nuanced performances from this grossly underrated actor. Pleasence handles the Aussie accent surprisingly well, and succeeds in delineating Doc as both part of the community and something altogether darker. One of Pleasence's finest scenes involves Doc discussing Grant's recent dalliance with local girl Janette. Doc points out that the locals call Janette a slut, but he feels a certain kinship with her because she rejects the hypocritical morals of a small country town. He notes that both he and Janette are valued for their respective 'skills' (Doc's medical expertise, Janette as the local 'slut'), but neither are fully accepted. It is a speech that could have sounded very clunky to modern ears, but Kotcheff's staging (Grant is trying to have a wee and Doc seems intent on having a look at his dick) and Pleasence's matter-of-fact delivery make it deliciously strange.

There's no self-pity or self-aggrandisement, just a quiet sense that Doc has willingly exiled himself to the edge of the world.

Anyone who's watched enough townie-versus-rednecks movies will have a fair idea of what happens next,² but one of the pleasant surprises is how Kotcheff dodges the usual clichés. As Doc points out, the townspeople do have an odd morality, and they're far from the misshapen, monolithically evil hicks of *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972) or *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974). One of the strangest moments sees Grant hitching a ride with a local who then seems absolutely distraught that Grant won't then have a drink with him. By this stage Grant has done more than enough drinking, but weirdly it somehow still feels like he has delivered a snub. The local doesn't sound menacing as he entreats Grant to join him – instead he is kind of ... wounded.

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Elsewhere, while other townsfolk are capable of violence, the crucial thing to notice is that Grant is an observer – and ultimately a participant – rather than a victim. Unable to withstand the locals' hospitality he gets as full as a state school, and the subsequent booze-fuelled shenanigans culminate in a show-stopping kangaroo shoot. Put simply, this is another time capsule moment: they just don't make scenes like this anymore. The shots of the boys hooning around the desert at night look suspiciously like no one did a safety report, and although the roo shoot was supposedly done as part of an official cull, it's hard to shake the feeling we're witnessing something out of control. There are modern filmmakers who still include scenes of animal cruelty, but they have a different feel – we're all too aware someone is trying to shock us with calculated political incorrectness. By contrast, *Wake in Fright* has a kind of weird truth to it. Of course, that's no excuse for what the filmmakers appear to have done, but if we leave the moral

questions to one side, the scene in which Grant drunkenly tries to stab a struggling kangaroo is unforgettable. Horror and farce sit cheek by jowl as he tries and fails to strike a killing blow, and we know instinctively as we watch this lurching, messy bloodbath that Grant has reached his nadir. Most horror films are about horrible things happening to a protagonist, and these days they are all shot and lit with a robotic professionalism. In *Wake in Fright* this formula is reversed: we see the protagonist doing horrible, clumsy things, and the fact that it all feels so real makes it indelible. For just a moment – a brief, flailing moment – it really feels like we are in the hands of maniacs.

And then ... well, in a sense, the roo shoot is where the film ends, or at least that is where the experience I associate with *Wake in Fright* ends. There are still creepy moments to come, not to mention some inimitably funny ones (a later scene sees Grant stagger back into Bundanyabba covered in blood and waving a gun, and the local copper calmly buys him a beer), but we can tell that things are fundamentally back under control. And that's what I really value about this wonky little film: the sense that someone made it without a map. Only when you're confronted with the real thing do you realise that eccentricity is hard to pull off in this day and age. Most simply don't bother, and those that do are largely poseurs. Australian filmmakers often pride themselves on their anti-Hollywood tendencies, but despite their efforts there is still a safeness to the films we make nowadays, an unspoken agreement that we won't startle the horses. In such a bland 'alternative' culture – to say nothing of the way mainstream cinema has been hollowed out by Robert McKee and films-as-franchises – the restoration and re-release of *Wake in Fright* feels absolutely vital. This is wild filmmaking, scary filmmaking, classic filmmaking.

Oh, and Stephen King would fucking love it. •

Endnotes

¹ We did, after all, elect as prime minister a man who once held the world record for sculling a yard of beer.

² I did mention there was buggery, didn't I? I don't know why this seems to be so popular with movie rednecks, but it's worth pointing out that *Wake in Fright* (both novel and film) 'went there' before *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972) made it axiomatic.