

Phillip Noyce, a filmmaker whose work challenges audiences with moral questions.

The unquiet Australian

Phillip Noyce has directed 15 feature films, including *Newsfront*, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *The Quiet American*. JULIE McCROSSIN finds out what motivates him

‘My dad’s sister, Kath, was one of the 21 nurses who were captured and killed during the Second World War in Borneo with Sister Bullwinkle, who was the only one to escape,’ Phillip Noyce says plainly.

“Dad’s sister was bayoneted to death by the Japanese. Dad spent a lot of time after the war in Japan with my mother trying to come to terms with the Japanese Bushido warrior code and trying to understand why a soldier would kill a non-combatant, or many non-combatants, and how they could think this was an honourable and justifiable act.”

Noyce, 58, is sitting in his rooftop apartment overlooking the sparkling beauty of Sydney Harbour. Our surroundings provide a stark contrast to the ugly story of the 1942 sinking of the *Vyner Brooke* hospital ship while it was fleeing with wounded passengers after the fall of Singapore, and the deaths of Australian nurses who were marched back into the sea.

As a young boy in Griffith in rural NSW, hearing of the shocking family trauma in a foreign land was particularly painful. So it’s not surprising that questions about morality and violence are themes Noyce has explored in several films. The questions of when violence can be justified, when it cannot, and what motivates such human behaviour are the core concerns of Noyce’s latest film *Catch a Fire*, which has just been released in Australia.

Catch a Fire vividly re-creates South Africa in the 1980s. It tells the true story of what drives black South African Patrick Chamusso (played by US actor Derek Luke) to join the

African National Congress (ANC), receive military training in Mozambique and single-handedly blow up the Secunda oil refinery.

The film also depicts the systematic use of torture, including the torture of Patrick’s wife Precious (played by South African Bonnie Henna) and Patrick’s imprisonment on Robben Island, Nelson Mandela’s prison, for 10 years of a 24-year sentence.

But *Catch a Fire* is not just about what drives people to violence; it also deals with the motivation for reconciliation and forgiveness. At the close of the film, we see the real-life Patrick Chamusso running an orphanage for more than 80 children and choosing not to pursue violent revenge against the colonel of the Security Branch, Nic Voss (played with great complexity and nuance by Tim Robbins), who was responsible for his capture and torture.

Noyce describes his new film as “a love letter to South Africa”, which he sees as “a beacon to the world in terms of conflict resolution”. In South Africa, he explains, “black and white were engaged in a struggle to the death. They are the ones to show us, better than anyone else in the history of mankind, how to resolve conflict.”

The film, he says, strives to tell both sides of the story: “We worked very closely with many former police interrogators who spoke very openly about the need to extract

information that would stop the slide into anarchy they felt the ANC represented.”

But in this era of the war on terror, some may find the film provocative because of its sympathetic portrayal of a man’s decision to set off a bomb. *Catch a Fire* is also “a love letter from two daughters to their father”.

Screenwriter Shawn Slovo and producer Robyn Slovo are the daughters of Joe Slovo, a member of Nelson Mandela’s first cabinet in government, who led the military wing of the ANC in armed resistance after the Sharpeville massacre. This resistance included the bombing of the Secunda oil refinery, one of several refineries bombed on a single night. Joe Slovo is portrayed in the film training Patrick in the skills of a saboteur.

Noyce says the Slovo daughters — including a third sister, writer Gillian Slovo — “were denied ongoing, close relationships with both their parents because they were spirited out of South Africa and spent most of their lives in Britain”. Indeed, Shawn Slovo described her sense of abandonment by her parents and the horror of her mother’s violent death in her award-winning film *A World Apart*.

This intimate family connection to the events depicted in the film, combined with the historical news footage and real-life images of people in the story, enhances the emotional intensity of the movie and

Noyce describes his new film as ‘a love letter to South Africa’, which he sees as ‘a beacon to the world in terms of conflict resolution’.

real life

challenges the audience to really engage with the question of when violence is legitimate.

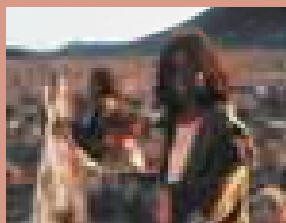
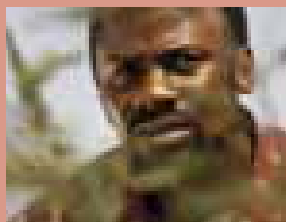
Noyce's stance is clear. "I want people in theatres to cheer for Patrick," he tells me. "The issue of taking up arms to fight for freedom is a complex one. The screenplay is saying we should not be too quick to judge those who feel marginalised and feel they must engage in armed struggle to achieve their political and social goals."

After many hours in conversation with the real-life Patrick Chamusso, Noyce concluded it was his sense of powerlessness that led him to armed resistance.

"He felt that to be a real husband, to be a real father, he had to fight back," Noyce says, adding he believes "most people will feel he was justified, remembering that he was under strict instructions that no one must die".

Does Noyce have a clear view as to when violence is legitimate as a tool of change?

"No. It's not something that can be measured. I'm not even sure a court of law could judge. You can only judge it according to your own feelings and they reside in the barometer that constantly changes — the human heart."



Left: Derek Luke as rebel Patrick Chamusso in *Catch a Fire*. Below left: The 2002 hit *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. Right: Noyce with Hollywood playwright Harrison Ford in 1994 blockbuster *Clear and Present Danger* which Noyce directed.



Noyce's earlier film, *The Quiet American*, set in 1950s Vietnam and based on the novel by Graham Greene, also explored the theme of political violence. It was screen-tested in New York on September 10, 2001, the day before Noyce witnessed the twin towers fall while he was standing in a nearby street.

The Quiet American's critical depiction of a US aid worker and the CIA was a marketing challenge at that moment in history. Will *Catch a Fire* face a similar challenge?

"There is a similar challenge," Noyce acknowledges, "but a much easier one

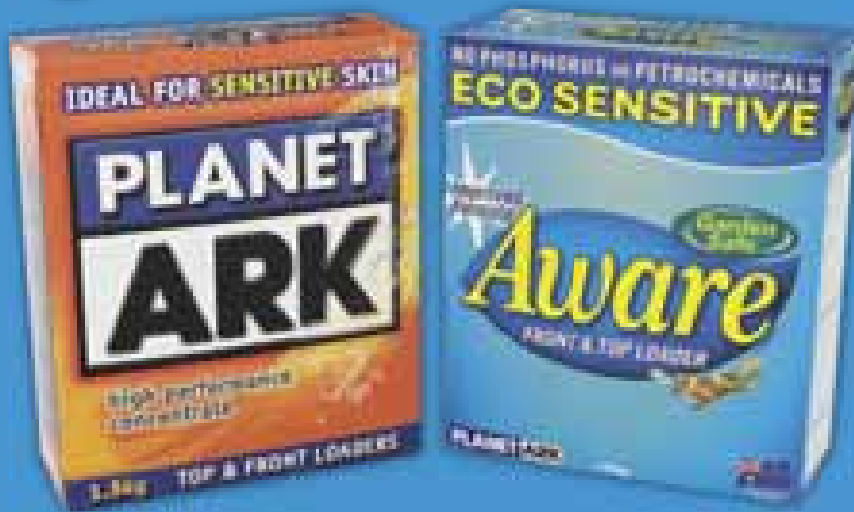
because history has already allowed the audience to take the side of the so-called terrorist and to call him a freedom fighter. That allows the audience to see this story and maybe think about the motives of the so-called terrorist."

Noyce agrees there's a link between *Catch a Fire* and *The Quiet American*, both exploring the legitimacy of violence, but he says there is another link between these two movies and *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, his film about Aboriginal children fleeing the Moore River settlement after being removed from their families.

A clean and green wash!

PLANET ARK ADVERTISING FEATURE

Now you can clean your clothes *and* help protect the planet knowing all the ingredients in your laundry powder have been carefully selected for their minimal impact on the environment and human health.



Planet Ark and Aware laundry powders:

- Are fully biodegradable
- Are garden safe. Independent tests show the grey water is safe to use on gardens
- Contain no phosphates or petrochemicals
- Are perfect for front or top loaders, and in hot or cold water
- Are concentrated which means each wash costs less than 30 cents
- Support Planet Ark's campaigns such as National Tree Day and the Plastic Bag Reduction campaign.

PLANET ARK

Available at selected supermarkets and health food stores, and at www.planetarkdirect.com or telephone 1300 731 781.

“The link is in the characters of the white authority figures,” Noyce explains. “The CIA agent posing as a medical worker in *The Quiet American*, the Chief Protector of Aborigines in *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and the Police Security Branch Colonel in *Catch a Fire*: all three are white colonialists who feel their actions are for the good of the natives, the Vietnamese, the Australian Aborigines and the Africans.”

What has influenced Noyce to engage so deeply with moral questions about violence, whether perpetrated by the colonisers or the colonised?

“My father Bill Noyce, who was a lawyer and a farmer, has been a big influence. He’s 87 now,” says Noyce. “My mother Phillippa also had a sense of morality.

“And I was heavily influenced in my life by my grandfather George Sanders, who was a Church of England minister and who came to Australia as a missionary. I spent a lot of time with him because he would babysit me.

“He would take me on his rounds. I would see him counselling people in distress. He was dealing with the unknown, with what we would call the spirit. Wherever you find it. And that’s about good and bad and your soul.”

As I listen to Noyce, I’m reminded of the comment by the news correspondent played by Michael Caine in *The Quiet American*: “Sooner or later one has to take sides if one is to remain human.”

Throughout our conversation, I’m struck by the depth of Noyce’s engagement with Africa, its history and all its current challenges. This engagement extends into the personal. His partner is Kenyan filmmaker Wanuri Kahiu, managing director of DADA Productions, a company in Kenya that operates training and work exchange programs for the entertainment industry in East Africa.

Kahiu has studied and worked in Britain and the United States; she and Noyce met in LA. She’s directing a behind-the-scenes documentary about *Catch a Fire* with the working title *Making a Terrorist*.

Noyce has a daughter Lucia, 25, and a stepdaughter, Alice, 31, from his former marriage to Jan Sharp. When I ask about the impact of his filmmaking on his family life, he simply answers, “It’s not easy.”

What advice would he offer to another passionate director about managing the personal side of your life? “Merge the personal

and professional,” he replies succinctly.

On reflection, I believe the greatest legacy Noyce has received from his father’s and grandfather’s “investigation of human behaviour and morality”, as he describes it, is his capacity in the midst of all the technical complexity of movie making to keep his focus on the spirit at the heart of his films.

“The technical people are not going to make a difference to the essence of a movie,” Noyce tells me. “It’s the people on the ground who’ve experienced the events that do.”

The heart of *Catch a Fire*, Noyce says, is the man called Four O’Clock, David Mbatha.

“He’s my main guide; the man who taught all these people to sing all the songs we hear in the film because he sang them,” Noyce explains. “David lives in a shack outside Pretoria. He is the man in the movie outside the gates of the Secunda oil refinery who starts the first chant.”

Mbatha is credited as Freedom Song and Crowd Choreographer. The moment he starts singing is very powerful. It goes beyond words and historical research to a visceral cry for freedom, capturing the creative power of this great film director. ■

Age Intervention®

EYELASH

One application daily gives you longer, darker, thicker eyelashes in just a few weeks.

Available exclusively from Jan Marini Skin Research® stockists.

Now we’re not just looking after your skin...



Jan Marini Skin Research

www.janmarini.com

Enquiries Tel: (03) 9509 9526

Refer to directory listing for stockists.

