

alt.pop:



Connecting with culture

During our interview at Melbourne's trendy Hotel Lindrum, film-maker Melanie Hogan estimates she's had 95 per cent positive feedback on her latest doco, *Kanyini**. The other five per cent comprised accusations that she'd simply 'romanticised' Aboriginal culture.

Such criticism—albeit thankfully minimal—seems like a slap in the face for a film that documents the various devices that have systematically undermined Australia's indigenous culture during the centuries since white colonisation.

More so when you consider that Hogan herself, apart from applying her respectful gaze on the issues at hand, is all but absent from the film. Instead of editorialising, she places her eloquent Aboriginal subject, 'Uncle' Bob Randall (who joins us for this interview), front and centre.

'That was really important,' Melanie reflects. 'I remember thinking how wonderful oral storytelling is, because you need to have a relationship...you need to have the connection. By removing myself, I allowed a connection between the storyteller and the audience.'

In the film, Uncle Bob, a former Australian of the Year, introduces the viewer to *kanyini*—an indigenous concept that relates to a person's connectedness with their land, family and belief system.

With stirring insight and the pang of personal experience, he explains how each of these connections was systematically severed—by colonisation, genocide, and the Stolen Generation debacle (he himself

was a member of the Stolen Generation).

Despite the pain and trauma that weaves through 'white Australia's black history', Uncle Bob's hopes for the film's impact could hardly be simpler.

'I hope people will want to meet more of our people,' he says, his 70-something-year-old face crinkling in a smile. 'That's the kind of thing everybody needs: coming together and listening to each other.'

'In the film Bob says there's two-way learning that needs to happen,' says Hogan. 'I don't think our role is to tell people what to do, but if people want to connect, then solutions will come out.'

'I think one of the biggest problems is that people aren't sitting down, talking and trying to work it out together,' she adds. 'Everyone has different things to offer—skills, life experiences—but by coming together...I can learn, you can learn. I think that's how things should happen in life.'

There's no question that for Hogan making *Kanyini* has been nothing short of a life-altering experience. She initially set out to make an anti-petrol-sniffing documentary on behalf of the community health clinic in Mutitjulu, the Aboriginal community near the base of Uluru that Uncle Bob calls home.

But during her research she realised petrol-sniffing, and the sense of alienation that drives many Aboriginal youth to the practice, were simply harsh footnotes to a much larger, often tragic but also frequently beautiful indigenous history. And it's a story she, as a film-maker, intends to keep telling.

'I'm a big believer in trying to use my films to give voice to those who aren't normally heard,' she says.

'I'm going to keep chipping away, encouraging the closeness, because I find so much beauty. And I keep learning more and more about my own country, and I find that a very exciting journey.'

As for Uncle Bob, the process of making *Kanyini* (he worked closely with Hogan to track down and select the black-and-white film footage that comprises a good deal of the film's visual element) has been quite therapeutic.

'If a lot of my people who have the same kind of anger I had would go down the track I did [i.e. sharing their story with their fellow Australians], they would find it's a healing process that is real, and it does make you a better person.'

'What I like about what this film,' he adds, 'is that it's increasing interest and awareness, and that in itself is a reward.'

'I think we're reaching a time where the young people are going to make a difference. I tell you, we are stepping into a new age that is going to be a good age... eventually our children won't need to talk about reconciliation—they'll be living it, because their parents are reconciled.' TK

**Kanyini* (PG) is screening with short film *Mimi*, directed by indigenous film-maker Warwick Thornton and starring Sophie Lee, Aaron Pederson and David Gulpilil.