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FINDING FOLEY

During the filming of *Backroads*, Phillip Noyce's 1977 largely improvised road movie starring Gary Foley and Bill Hunter, one lost scene captured Australian race relations at the time.

Driving south along a New South Wales country road in a Pontiac, Foley and Hunter were working a scene as per usual — playing off each other while Noyce waited for the right dialogue to present itself — when they struck gold. Foley tells it that: 'Me, Billy and Noyce had all agreed this was one of the most fantastic scenes — we had gone on much longer than expected because the conversation was going so well. Then in the middle of it we came upon this whole herd of cows just standing in the middle of the road and they were black and white cows, so the dialogue started around that completely impromptu — Billy and I said, "what's going on here?" Billy said, "where did *they* come from". And I said, "look out for the black parts".'

'I reckon it was the best scene in the entire film,' says Foley. '[But] it was lost in the lab back in Sydney when some fucking idiot switched on a light.'

Naturally, it was the type of scene that could never be recreated — even if there was the money to do it. In fact, it was only because of this blunder that the film was finished. The \$5000 compensation for the lost reel paid for the shooting of the last few scenes, and the film was made for \$30 000 all up.

Noyce's first feature *Backroads* (1977) is the story of a young Aboriginal man who steals a car with a white Australian and sets about on a road trip from northern NSW towards Sydney. The film had limited success in Australia, but was a favourite at the *Berlin Film Festival* in 1978 before gradually making its way from *Cannes* to England and the United States.

Nearly thirty years later Foley, Noyce, Oscar-winning cinematographer Russell Boyd and others have just begun work on a DVD release. DIANA WARD talks to the controversial actor and activist Gary Foley about *Backroads* and beyond.

Finding Foley

'[Director] Ken Cameron had recommended Foley to me,' says Noyce. 'Then a friend showed me a photo of Gary Foley in the *Sydney Morning Herald* [which] described [him] as "Fire Brand Black Activist". He was charismatic and handsome, so it seemed in the photograph. So I tracked Foley down.'

'He invited me to the Cricketers Arms Hotel in Redfern. It was a notorious blackfellas' pub. This was 10 years after [Charlie Perkin's led the 1965] Freedom Ride that had brought attention to the state of Aborigines in country NSW. Redfern at the time was pre-heroin and after three years of Whitlam government was a hotbed of activity, radicalism and forward thinking. There was a real air of optimism because for the first time in a long time [Aboriginal people] were in a position to take things back into their own hands, to create their own destiny.'

Foley remembers: 'When Noyce walked into the pub, we all thought he was a cop, particularly because he is so tall and imposing. We were all ready to jump him when he saw me and came over and talked. From then we were mates.'

'He handed me the script and asked me what I thought. I said the story was good but the dialogue was shit.' After some consideration, Foley said he would only take part in it if he could write his own dialogue. 'He was then, as now, a brilliant confrontationist and negotiator,' laughs Noyce. 'He basically said "fuck off, I don't want any part of your white bullshit, BUT maybe I would consider it if I could have a say in the content".'

'He didn't really have to twist my arm, because in some ways that was exactly what I was looking for. I had seen Wim Wenders' *King of the Roads*, which is quite a formal road movie, but I had also seen a number of films that had relied a lot on improvisation such as Paul Morrissey's *Trash* and *Heat* and John Cassavetes' films. The idea of improvisation was something I was eager to explore, particularly in trying to capture Australian argot.'

The night before filming, Foley leant over to co-star Bill Hunter and whispered, 'you know I'm not an actor'. Hunter replied, 'don't worry about it, we'll talk about it in the morning'. The next morning Hunter demanded a case of Fosters beer before stepping in front of the camera. When the case arrived, he handed a six-pack to Foley and said: 'here you go Foley, first acting lesson, drink these'. 'That was the last time we were sober for the entire shoot,' quips Foley.

Foley played the part of Gary, a young man from Dodge City Reserve, Brewarrina, NSW who was once married to a white woman. The film begins with Gary emerging from the lock-up and meeting up with Jack (Hunter), a fellow outsider. Together they steal a '62 Pontiac Parisienne and hit the road. On the way, the duo pick up Gary's alcoholic Uncle Joe (Zac Martin), a French hitchhiker Jean-Claude (Terry Camilleri) and Anna (Julie MacGregor), a local woman tired of her dead-end job. Along the way, the group stops by Gary's home – the Aboriginal fringe town of Dodge City, where Gary says goodbye to his son. Meanwhile Jack looks around the reserve and its drunken inhabitants in disgust He is desperate to get away from his discomfort. 'I'd no trouble talking about some of the stuff I was talking about,' says Foley. 'But I had trouble trying to make it sound like it was coming from an uneducated reserve blackfella. That was the most difficult thing for me.'

Foley likes to explain the film as a film critic once did: 'a product of creative tension between Noyce, Foley and Hunter'. But the relationship between Noyce and Foley was more than that. 'We were interdependent on each other,' says Noyce. 'We couldn't go into Dodge City without Gary and the trust that his presence brought. And he didn't have the technical expertise to make the movie by himself.'

'We shot quite a lot of Dodge City Reserve and these scenes [were] cut out of the first cut, but Gary felt that these were important scenes to show the sense of community and to add some explanation of [his character's] background, and just the presence of a strong, politically aware woman like Essie Coffee in the movie... so these were put back in,' Noyce says.

Backroads abroad.

Backroads had only a brief season in Australia at the Longford Cinema in Melbourne, then owned by the Australian Film Institute. According to Foley, 'it was too tough for Australian audiences, it wasn't nice [enough]'. Then, Foley and Noyce went to Germany for *Backroads*' screening at the 1978 *Berlin Film Festival*. Internationally renowned German directors Werner Herzog and Wim Wenders were also there, and they both loved the film, wrote about it and it became a minor hit at the festival. As a result it was shipped off to *Cannes* to screen out of competition in a little theatre rented by Noyce, Foley and the Sydney Filmmakers Co-op. Foley was eager to get to Cannes, he just had to find a way.

'I had heard that Marcia Bennett from the Sydney Filmmakers Co-op was going to accompany the film and Noyce was going to be there for *Newsfront* (1978). So I went to see the director of the NSW Aboriginal Arts Board, who at the time was Bob Edwards, and I said to him "there's an Aboriginal film showing at the *Cannes Film Festival* but there's no blackfellas there, what are you going to do about it?" He replied: "what do you want us to do?" I said: "give me a ticket to get there, that's what" and he says, "well we can't give you a grant but we can probably give you an emergency grant — \$3000". After a quick calculation I figured that would get me to Paris, so I said, "give me that". I managed to get a return plane ticket to Paris and a one-way train ticket to Cannes. I landed there with 30 English pounds in my pocket.

'I was there for the duration of the festival — the most expensive time in the most expensive part of the Riviera, and lived like a king. When I left two weeks later, I left with 20 of the original 30 pounds still intact.'

From *Cannes*, *Backroads* was sold to Scala Films in the UK, as well as Channel 4, and found distribution in the US.

Endings and beginnings.

Backroads ends with Gary being shot by police and Jack and Uncle Joe being arrested. Its pessimistic ending was a talking point for critics both in Australia and in the UK. While Australian critics often described it as a melodramatic ending; ('a symbolic finale of violence and death,' *The Herald*, Melbourne, 1977), UK papers said it brought home the reality of the desperate situation of Aboriginal Australians; ('The odyssey ends on a desperately pessimistic note, but that only adds poignancy to reality,' V. Dignam, London *Morning Star*, 1978).

Noyce says that 'in his heart' Foley 'wanted to play a character that became a martyr'. But: 'In the original screenplay the ending is quite open — they get stuck in a traffic jam on the outskirts of Sydney and all the occupants abandon the car, fleeing from the killing of the white fisherman and the Gary character presumably ends up in Redfern and ends up becoming somebody like Gary Foley,' says Noyce.

Foley came to Sydney from Nambucca Heads in northern NSW as an idealistic, apolitical youth planning to be a rugby league star. 'My only hero when I was 16 would have been rugby league player Reg Gasnier. I saw him play at the SCG, in 1966 and up until that point in my life, it was the best thing that had ever happened to me,' he says. 'My father was a superstar in rugby league, so I grew up knowing rugby league culture, and there were two observations that I made even when I was young, that it was sexist and racist, and I barely knew what the word sexist meant back then. When I moved to Sydney, I signed up for the Redfern All Blacks, which was set up by Bill Onus in 1942, and my first year in rugby league at Redfern turned out to be my last.

'I remember grabbing the ball... I was running like the wind down the sideline and everyone was cheering and I remember thinking that I was going to be a star after this and I have a vague memory of catching a glimpse of something coming at me very fast, and this big Maori guy hit me at about 100 miles per hour and that was the end of my rugby league career.'

Foley was born in Grafton in 1950. He grew up in NSW when Aboriginal people's lives and movements were controlled by the state, through the Aboriginal Welfare Board. He says he was lucky. He went further in school than most, finishing fifth form at Macksville High. By the time he had turned 18 in 1968 Aboriginal policy had passed into federal hands as a direct result of the 1967 referendum. Foley sees himself as part of 'a wave of landless refugees'. 'We were the first generation that had relative freedom of movement and were able to escape from the rural reserves. There was a mass exodus from rural areas of NSW into Sydney, which is what created the situation known as the block in Redfern'.

Foley landed a job as a mechanical design draftsman, 'specialising in evaporative air conditioning in multi-story buildings — which is just what black Australia needed at that time'. He designed the mechanical services in

numerous post offices, telephone exchanges and other NSW Department of Works projects.

'It took a good kicking in Redfern to politicise me. I was more interested in rugby and young women than anything else at that time in my life,' he says. 'I got the shit kicked out of me at the Regent Street Police Station by the 21-division — a notorious NSW squad of police who had been set up in the 1930s to counter the cocaine dealers' razor gangs in Darlinghurst and had been kept on ever since. They were turned onto the black people in the late 1960s.'

A few weeks later a bloke called Paul Coe came up to me and challenged my apathy, as only he could. He said he was setting up a group to try to do something about police harassment of blackfellas in Sydney. He didn't need to say anything more, I joined up immediately. Coe and others around him began my political education. Coe said to me "you've got to read" and I said "what's that? I've never read a book in my life" and he said, "here, read this" and handed me a copy of the autobiography of Malcolm X. And that book changed the way I thought.'

In 1971 Foley was faced with a choice: 'whether to stay and become an engineer or to go to Canberra and become a political bum to start up the Aboriginal tent embassy'. Already, he was doing 'more work in the community than in the Department of Works office'. Given the advent of computers, Foley jokes, he made a smart career move.

Foley was part of a generation of Aboriginal activists that 'brought about dramatic political change in the Australian landscape' through the setting up of Aboriginal-controlled organisations, and agitation for land rights. Foley reflects: 'what we didn't realise at the time was that we were just the latest in a long chain of resistance. The language we were using in the 1970s was used by Bill Onus in the 1940s and 50s. I regard myself as more and more as a protege of Onus. I was very strongly influenced by Bruce McGuinness, and Mac's primary mentor was Onus.'

William (Bill) Onus was a Victorian Aboriginal civil rights campaigner, active from the 1940s, through organisations such as the Australian Aboriginal League and the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League. His son, Lin Onus AM, was a celebrated sculptor and contemporary visual artist.

'Walt Disney invited [Bill] Onus to America in the late in 1953 and the Americans refused him entry on the grounds of his communist associations. As a result of this, Onus did a rethink of the stuff he had been doing up until that point —he was an intensely political person of the left and then suddenly after the American incident he changed his tactics started to argue that the way to communicate is through the arts.'

Our stories

In the early 1970s Foley saw a theatre group from Melbourne that involved Bob Maza and Zac Martin do a production called *Jack Charles is Up and Fighting*. 'It taught me about the theatre was a great medium to get a political message across. I thought 'wow this is fantastic!' That was the first real theatrical production I ever saw,' says Foley.

'Eighteen months later in Sydney I was approached by Bob Maza to check out their of rehearsing *Basically Black* for the National Black Theatre (started by Coe, Maza and Jenny Sheen) at the Nimrod Street Theatre. About halfway through I started laughing — they asked: "what's the matter?" I replied, "I can do better than that," so they said, "come down and do it smart arse". They basically conned me into being part of it.'

The argument of Foley, Maza, MacGuinness and Jack Charles and was 'double-barrelled'. Firstly they 'wanted Aboriginal actors to play Aboriginal characters rather than painting up white actors like James Laurensen [in *Boney*]. We also wanted to tell Koori stories,' says Foley.

'Too many people think of Aboriginal stories as being *Walkabout* with David Gulpilil in it — the mandatory 'real' Aboriginal with his foot on one knee, a spear in his hand and a long distance look in his eye. An Aboriginal story is a story that emanates from us, a 16 year old kid in Redfern can write a great story — nothing that involves a didgeridoo and dancing, but it does involve being locked up and chased by coppers and having the shit kicked out of them and being taunted by racists — that's an Aboriginal story. They're just as much Aboriginal stories as hunting goannas in Uluru or something.'

Onus had impressed upon Foley the need to communicate with a mass audience. For this reason Foley regards his time on *A Country Practice* as his most politically effective. When approached to play Reverend Steve Murray, Foley again said he would only take the part if he had control over his own dialogue and character development. [Producer] James Davern said yes.

'I was playing a preacher — that was part of the attraction for me because throughout the 70s and 80s I had feuds that continue to this day — arguments with Koori Christians,' laughs Foley. 'The idea appealed to my perverse sense of humour; for me to play, not just a preacher — but a preacher that preaches land rights — was a beautiful thing.'

'For a long time there I couldn't get on a tram in Melbourne [home since 1973] because people would come up to me and ask for my autograph. The strangest people would come up — little old ladies on a shopping trip to town, but the interesting thing was I would ask them "did they learn anything?" and they would say, "ooh yes, I never did think about Aboriginal stuff before". And that was the fucking point — these avenues are a great way of raising the mass audience's awareness.' Still today people come up to me and say, "you're the preacher from *A Country Practice*". I often say "you weren't even born when that was filmed" and they say "nah, the repeats are on".'

Changing focus

In 1984 Foley became the first Aboriginal director of the Aboriginal Arts Board at the Australia Council. This time cemented his close friendship with John Hawkes one of the founders, and strongman, of Circus Oz. Foley is godfather to Hawke's daughter, Lucy and also Noyce's daughter, Lucia. Then after a blue with Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Clyde Holding he became so disillusioned with mainstream politics that he dropped out of everything.

'I was enjoying becoming a horticulturist in my backyard in Northcote until [Jeff] Kennett shut down my son's school [Northlands Secondary College] and I was dragged back into politics,' says Foley. 'It took three years to win that. After that I was fired up again.'

Despite not completing his formal secondary education, Foley enrolled in and completed a Bachelor of Arts, with Honours in history, at the University of Melbourne, and is currently working on a PhD.

Now in his 50s Foley says he will die frustrated like pioneering NSW Aboriginal rights campaigner Pearl Gibbs — who in her later years expressed her disappointment at having achieved so little after a lifetime of struggle. Thirty years ago a journalist asked Foley: 'when will you be satisfied?' He replied, 'when we have land rights and economic independence'. Foley remembers: 'at the time I thought it would take 20 years. 20 years later he came back to me and asked me again. I said, "not in my lifetime, mate".' Foley has been a vehement critic of the 'Mabo jumbo' maintaining that native title is a far inferior form of property tenure than the freehold title delivered by land rights legislation.

'[Since] I made a conscious decision from the age of about 17, my entire life has been one vast continuing learning experience. And it's been fun,' says Foley. His political goals unrealised Foley still has plenty of energy to talk, stir, write, mentor, and work on his website. These days he refers to himself as the 'Koori cowboy from cyberspace' and maintains an extensive archive on his website.

Foley is father to three grown sons, a baby daughter and grandfather to four. After taking his young daughter swimming in the Nambucca River over summer, he now plans to move back to Nambucca Heads and set up a local history project there. 'Given that so many of my contemporaries are dead or dying, it's time for me to go home and prepared for death. I feel a desire to spend my final years in the sub-tropical paradise of my Gumbayngirr homelands among my own mob. I also have important responsibilities to my Gumbayngirr compatriots. The time has come for me to disappear into the sunset with a tear in my eye and a song in my heart.'