

POLL

JULY/AUG 1978 \$2

**AUSTRALIA'S
BEST FILM YET?**

**AVOIDING
THE RETIREMENT
SCRAPHEAP**

**INTRODUCING THE
HOMOSEXUAL
FAMILY**

**THE IRON
MAN
WHO BEAT
PARALYSIS**



PROD. NO THE CHANT OF
JIMMIE BLACKSMITH

SCENE

1001

TAKE

4

SOUND

24FPS

DIRECTOR

ERIC SCHEIDT



The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith is a tragedy in the classic tradition, says producer/director Fred Schepisi. And in the classic tradition, Schepisi's film is fast becoming the most celebrated tragedy around.

"I should make the point that it's not just a conflict of Black versus White," he told us back in April. Days later it was. A union black ban over the involvement of non-union crew threatened important pre-release screenings.

The point that Schepisi was making was that The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith is the chant of the underdog ... "of everyone who finds themselves on the outside of a system, trying to get in ... and not being allowed to."

Union hassles aside, Schepisi is no longer an outsider in his chosen system. At 37, he's arrived a little quicker than most. But the evolution is more dramatic than the age. His first full-length feature, The Devil's Playground, found its way on to our screens a couple of years back. There was no great pre-release trumpeting from the production house, but critical acclaim was universal, commercial success was considerable, and it became the

second Australian film invited to the Directors' Fortnight at Cannes.

Jimmie Blacksmith will confirm Schepisi as Australia's leading director ... if the London Evening News, the Los Angeles Times, the London Sunday Times and the authoritative Films and Filming can be regarded as an ambit of informed opinion. Only his second full-length film, it has become Australia's first entry into the competition category at the Cannes Film Festival.

At \$1.2 million, the screen version of Thomas Keneally's novel is the biggest-budgeted Australian film yet. Keneally's Jimmie Blacksmith is history's Jimmie Governor, a young half-blood Aborigine who, at the turn of the century, went on a one-man war of revenge against the whites and kept one jump ahead of 5000 troops for five months.

Schepisi's experience as an underdog might be limited, but his empathy with the Aborigine—particularly the half-caste—faced with leaving behind a culture that once offered pride to search for one that offers only derision, is intense. Maybe it's a sensitivity to integration that comes from being a blond, six-footer of Sicilian extraction, but the tragedy of Aboriginal treatment jolts Schepisi out of his modest film-maker image and into a rabid evangelist.

"I don't want to bring about revolution or violence," he says. "I just want to make people aware of what attitudes were and, in many cases, still are." It has started out reasoned and deliberate but you know the blue touch paper has been ignited by the escalation of volume, intensity and gesticulation.

"These were people with a proud culture," he booms. "Disadvantaged by our White Western pressures ... by our ignorance in trying to convert them to our society ... by our greed

in exploiting land that had a significance to them. They were pressured to adopt our way of living and condemned for not being able to handle it.

"The more I think about it, the more I'm convinced it was the White component in him that made him snap."

Schepisi read the Keneally novel while making The Priest, a Keneally script which he filmed as one of four half-hour episodes in the feature film Libido, his first commercial screen effort. "I knew then that I wanted to film it, but Tom had been advised not to sell the film rights in Australia because the locals could not do justice to it internationally." Schepisi convinced him otherwise with his treatment of The Priest.

Schepisi rates Jimmie Blacksmith as "one of the great stories." Certainly, were it not for the national shame that surrounds the whole issue, it would be a more prominent chapter of our folklore. "It's the kind of story that can reach people en masse and tell them something that they need to be told," he says. Yet despite his empathy with the underdog, he is quick to

TWO STEPS TO THE TOP

It has taken only two full-length features to establish Fred Schepisi as our most promising film-maker. NIGEL KERSHAW speaks with

defend the fact that his film is easier on the Whites than Keneally's novel was.

He explains that adapting the award-winning novel was something basically opposed to his principles. "I have always held that a work of art in a particular medium, should stay in that medium. But this is a book that demanded being filmed. It is a very visual book but Tom is so precise in his craft that transferring it to film posed certain difficulties.

"My screenplay basically holds the integrity of the novel. But I guess I have tended to de-villainise the Whites. I believe they were mostly acting out of ignorance. They hadn't had exposure to civil rights or ethnic understanding. But, please, understand that in de-villainising them, I am in no way excusing them.

"Tom depicted the Whites as out-and-out rats. But he wrote the novel during a very black period of his life. If he'd written it today, the mood would almost certainly have been different."

Schepisi is also eager to fight his way out of the perennial criticism that Australian producers have a preoccupation with period pieces. "Journalistic bullshit," he declares. "It just so happens that the period films have been the successful ones. Besides, who makes that criticism about the British film industry? There, it is just accepted that television is covering the contemporary scene so well, cinema should focus its attention elsewhere."

London critic Alexander Walker, who has become something of a champion of the Australian film industry, has also provided Schepisi with ammunition on this issue. He sees in Jimmie Blacksmith a relevance which pushes right through to today. "We're all outsiders to some degree," Schepisi explains. "All of us are somewhere short of our ideal exist-

ence. Jimmie Blacksmith makes this frustration a stark tragedy. But we can identify with him for all that."

Was Schepisi tempted to give his film a contemporary setting? "It would have been too much like a time bomb," he says. "Identification would have made it too hot. The time lag acts as a pressure valve."

As it is, the mood of the film was harrowing enough to take its toll of the cast. Star of the film is Tommy Lewis, a 20-year-old half Abo garage mechanic from Darwin. In true Hollywood fashion, he was discovered in the lounge at Tullamarine Airport by Rhonda Schepisi, the producer's casting director wife. She gave him the classic line. "How would you like to be in movies?" He just about dropped on the spot and the Schepisis kept fingers crossed until he phoned them on his return from Darwin. They thought they may have scared him off.

The established talent in the film includes Jack Thompson, Ray Barrett, Ruth Cracknell and Angela Punch. "The intensity of the murder sequence knocked us all about," Schepisi recalls. There were the added pressures of a schedule to keep ... of drama to maintain ... and we had actresses leaving the set and bursting into tears. There was general depression and a marked increase in beverage consumption all round."

The effect on the young Aborigine actors Tommy Lewis and Freddy Reynolds, a gangling 22-year-old who plays Jimmie's half-brother, Mort, was constant. Schepisi explains that they were able to identify with what they were being asked to depict. Prejudice is something both have experienced frequently. And, again, the touch paper has been ignited.

"Imagine the pressure of some bastard picking on you ... maybe five people picking on you

... without any provocation. The pressure of being in country towns where you know what the time is by the number of people pointing at you, nudging, looking sideways. If it happened to us, we'd ask what they were on about in a very short space of time. But it happened ... even during the filming. And the calm these boys were able to muster was staggering."

The violence is an aspect of the story that has deliberately been played down in the publicity. But in the film it is unavoidable. "Some passages are very Deliverance," he confides, "... but the treatment of the violence is probably more Saul Bass than Sam Peckinpah. We haven't been coy and we haven't been brutal. It is stylised but it is powerful. Avoiding it would be like having sex without an orgasm."

Coyness is an aspect of Australian films that Schepisi finds irritating. "Many of our films tend to avoid a lot of things on an intellectual level. They guess that the audience will know what is going to happen, so they don't tell them. What they should do is tell them on a physical level. The murder is a physical climax to an intellectual suspense ... and all the more powerful as a result. It is devastating."

Jimmie Blacksmith will make waves ... and Fred Schepisi knows it. "From the beginning there has been a giant division between those who said we should make it and those who said we shouldn't. Australia is still young, still divided, and we've got to accept it. But there are things Australians have to accept too.

"No, that's too narrow. Australia is just one of the markets for this film. It is a message to a wider audience. A Black guy saw it in England and didn't see it even as a Black versus White issue. He identified with Jimmie as someone with frustrated ambitions ... the chant of the underdog." ■

