

THOMAS KENEALLY

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[CONVERSATION WITH NOTABLE AUSTRALIAN AUTHOR ABOUT HIS BOOKS THAT HAVE BEEN FILMED: “SCHINDLER’S LIST”, “THE CHANT OF JIMMY BLACKSMITH” AND HIS WORK WITH DIRECTOR FRED SCHEPISI]

Alright, talking to Thomas Keneally and you are talking now to the students in my class. Would you say hello?

Hello students and I hope you’re having a great time with these Australian films.

Is it unusual, do you think, for a course at a university to be solely on Australian cinema?

Ah, yes, to the extent that I admire your wrong-headedness and enthusiasm in concentrating on Australian cinema, but there have been, there are great films there by directors who have made great films in Australia and America.

Well in that 1970 to about ‘82 period is fertile indeed.

That is true and I remember, and this isn’t germane for the moment, but I met Schepisi because he brought the script of “The Devil’s Playground” to me in about 1972 and he and I were friends and he is a man who left school, actually, about the age of 15.

It was a comparable background, I think, between the two of you.

Yes, that’s right, in that we’re both at an impressionable age in the church. He was studying to be a brother; I was studying to be a priest, and of course he escaped and I escaped, and that was one of the reasons he knew I’d have the fellow feeling to read his screenplay. But about “The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith,” he approached it, as I said, as a man who’d left school at fifteen but who has a great capacity to read a text. I’ve noticed this also and I hope you don’t mind my dragging his name in, Spielberg, he has a capacity to appreciate a text and to see the film in it. And indeed there’s been some discourse between those two, and at one stage Spielberg was thinking of Scorsese as the maker of “Shindler’s List” and I had dinner with Scorsese. Now this is a very rare event for me, and I stumble over my words as I am with you at the moment, but Scorsese told me that “The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith” is one of his formative movies. When he wants to go back to the springs that refresh him, it’s one of the springs that he visits, and he didn’t seem to be lying either, he knew all about it. But yes, it is written in a fairly brutal language, this book, which then conveys itself to the film. It’s also written in the kind of English that Aboriginals speak. I was influenced and have been all my life, by the fact that I spent my early years in a town where there was an Aboriginal reservation either side of town. I used to see Aboriginal kids coming past the gate on Friday afternoons when they always came to town to

shop and I was fascinated by the fact that they had to sit in a different part of the cinema.

How interesting.

I was also fascinated by something that will sound funny to you, but my uncle was the, before the days of sewage, my uncle collected the waste material from toilets. He had a very fancy truck with golden scrollwork in which he would carry the pre-assorted cans, both empty and full, and he collected the waste from the Aboriginal reservation as well and I thought in my childish way, "Why is it that a white man can collect Aboriginal toilet cans but can't, they can't sit near him in the cinema?" It was not a moral question, it was one of the questions kids ask themselves, and so my fascination with Aboriginals lasted from that time. I didn't fully understand the culture. I was a bit reckless in writing the book from the point of view of a fully-initiated but half-European, half-Aboriginal.

As is the case with Jimmy.

And is the case with Tommy Lewis, the man who plays Schindler's -- oh, sorry -- the man who plays Jimmy Blacksmith. It was a time when, when I wrote it it was during Vietnam. You might notice that there's war going on in South Africa at the time of the Jimmy Governor, Jimmy Blacksmith, the original

That's the original

The original Jimmy Blacksmith was a fellow called Jimmy Governor, who really existed, so there's a Boer (?) war going on from which troops are kept back to chase Jimmy and the sort of language of the Aboriginals is, it's got some Cockney in it, it's got some grammar of their own, it's a sort of reservation English. It's a mixture of Australian argot and, it's not what Aboriginals speak now, but it's what they spoke then, and of course I was fascinated by the part the totemic animals played in their life. And so, that's why the language of the book, the dialogue of the book, is -- sorry -- the dialogue of the film is as it is. Well I suppose I could say the dialogue of both the book and the film is as it is. It's a very savage and brutal book, and a very savage and brutal film, and the book was written by an angry young man, myself, when I was, I was certainly older than you guys in that class but I was not much older.

And you are already out of the priesthood

Oh yes. I was, I had cracked up in the priesthood, I had lost my faith in the more arcane areas of Catholic dogma. I also wanted to meet girls. You know I was a heterosexual, I didn't fancy altar boys and, sorry, that's a nasty joke and I shouldn't make it. (laughter from Tibbetts) Schepisi, the Sicilian-Irish-Melbournian boy from Melbourne, came to me, I think because of our similar backgrounds and I was very impressed with that script.

About the same age, were you not?

We're about the same age, he's a little bit younger. And he talks like an Aussie plumber but he's enormously brilliant. Even when he's made American films, he says things like, Meryl Streep for example, he says, "She told me at a party once that he said to her, when he first met her, 'now listen Meryl, you old cat,'" but that's just the way

She would have loved it.

That's just the way Australians tend to talk and Fred talks like an Aussie plumber so when he's done American films, it's taken the actors a few days -- Roy Scheider told me this -- to work out that Fred is actually brilliant but he *is* brilliant. Now he had gathered the money to make "Schindler," -- God, here I go again, I do, do forgive me. So many people ask me about "Schindler;" it's not that I'm fixated about it because all the questions have

And for the record, it's "Schindler's Ark," not "List."

Yes. "Jimmy Blacksmith" movie, he was able to make it and raise the money because of the success of his early, earlier films, "The Devil's Playground," which had great critical acclaim in the United States and, indeed, so did "The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith." It received more critical acclaim in the U.S. from people like Pauline Kael than it did in Australia.

Now I would have thought that the success of "Devil's Playground" was owing primarily to your role as Father Marshall.

Ah, no, I don't think that's true (laughter from Tibbetts) but when I encountered that film script and said, "Boy, it reads so well" -- not that I'm an expert on film scripts but we all know what a story that works is -- and Schepisi raised the money for "Devil's Playground" by going round at art gallery (indecipherable) in Melbourne and selling five dollar, five thousand dollar shares in the film.

Amazing.

And he made that film for \$375,000, and it was both well-scripted but he also scripted it in, on the set, as many directors do, so the sermon I gave about the great orb, I'm smilingly tell the poor little kids about the great orb and they, a bird brushes it with its wing every ten thousand years and when it's worn away by the bird, eternity will have just started and you'll still be in hell

And you're smiling now (laughter).

That's the sort of thing we're told when, at Catholic school, when we're kids and I believe Americans of my generation were told the same sort of stuff.

Actually, John Barrymore tells a similar story about his upbringing, of all things.

And so we gathered around the night before that scene was shot, all the ruined Catholics in the cast and in the crew, (laughter from Tibbetts) and we threw in all the best metaphors we'd heard to make the substance of the script, of the sermon, and I actually wrote that sermon, that's my little bit of the movie. That's the other thing about Schepisi; just because you're a fine director doesn't mean that you're a good screenwriter, but he is. I've read a few of the screenplays he's written of movies that were never made; screenplays based on books. There was, for example, a book by the Australian Booker Prize-winning author Jack, uh Peter Carey and it was called *Jack Maggs*.

Oh yes.

Which he dearly wanted to make.

Oh yeah.

A film of that. So his career began with "The Devil's Playground," and "The Devil's Playground" was made at a time when a kind of infection came over young Australian film people. "Why can't we make our own films?" Throughout the 60s, we'd been a bit dejected because the American distributors owned all the distribution and were very hostile to distributing Australian material, not out of malice but because the local managers were under pressure from the studios in the U.S., and their job was to cover Australia with a light covering of American movies but brilliant ones, like "From Here To Eternity," and not so brilliant ones. And these men and women, there was a young film student called Gillian Armstrong whose made some splendid films. There's, of course, the young Jane Campion who would ultimately make "The Piano." Bruce Beresford, Peter Weir, Fred Schepisi -- they all got infected with the concept at the same time that it was time.

And television, television had come along relatively lately so there was a generation just waiting to pounce, once TV was there, as an apprenticeship

Yes, absolutely, yes an apprenticeship for screenwriting and, of course, Schepisi made industrial documentaries and commercials, and we make good commercials in Australia. It's interesting. Our beer commercials are particularly good but, I mean, insofar as commercials are good. It's a little bit like choosing between cow pats. But insofar as commercials are good and witty, we make fairly good ones and Schepisi had made

Okay, I'm going to put new batteries in. This thing uses up batteries like crazy. I'm going to ask you, too, about the fact that so many of the films from that era are about coming of age in schools.

Yes.

It's got to have something to do with this sense of the directors coming of age, Australian film coming of age. I mean, it can't be coincidental. "The Devil's Playground" is certainly in there.

Yeah. I've got, I've got a theory about that.

Oh good, let's get into that. Okay.

Where would you like me to start now

Okay, I'll ask the question again. In talking about "Devil's Playground," you're bringing up a fascinating topic which is so many of the films from that time are about coming of age. "My Brilliant Career," um let's see,

Even "Picnic At Hanging Rock,"

And "Devil's," and later on, "Dead Poets Society."

And a very good movie. Yes, "Dead Poets Society" of Peter Weir, that's a brilliant film and there was

"Getting Of Wisdom" is another

"The Getting of Wisdom." There's a wonderful, early forgotten early Nicole Kidman movie called "The Year My Voice Broke." I just forget who made it but Nicole Kidman was the -- naturally her voice didn't break -- but some boy who was attracted to her, his voice

But how do we account for this, how do we account for

Well, I think, I've always thought it's because childhood has great dramatic -- and adolescence -- has great dramatic unities that adult life doesn't have. There are the parents. There is the fixed environment of the school. There are the teachers you love and hate. There's the mutual incomprehension between you and teachers. There's the uncertainty about the other generation; the repulsion and the attraction and. There's the insecurity of approaching other people; more intense, that is, in adolescence than any other time. So adolescence has great -- and childhood -- have great intensity and great dramatic unity, and you might notice that so many first books are about childhood. From *Angela's Ashes*. Now *The Catcher in The Rye* wasn't the first book of J. D. Salinger but, again, childhood. James Joyce *Portrait of the Artist as a*

Young Man

Young Man and I think it's that fact that our childhood is something we always want to talk about. If someone gets us in a room and says, "Tell us about yourself," we'll always very quickly get back to childhood as an explanation for who we are.

Is this adolescence you're talking about, could we apply that to the Australian cinema emerging in the early 1970s?

It might be an unconscious reference to that fact that as -- Australian cinema was interesting because, I should know, there is a claim that the first feature film was made in Australia.

Right!

And it was made before the first feature film in the U.S. There's certainly two feature films; one on the Bible made by the Salvation Army, and the true history of the Kelly gang, who were a famous gang of outlaws and it's an archetypal Australian story, and then in the silent era there were some great directors. A man called Raymond Longford

Longford

spanned into the 30s where we used to see stories about the bush. We used to see the Dad and Dave series; Dad was a sort of naïve country farmer and Dave was his even denser son, and they were, a number of those movies were made. In my childhood, near the beginning of World War I, "Twenty Thousand Thieves," about the Australian Light Horse, made by a man called Chavel (sp?), very fine film. Post-war, a very good Chips Rafferty film

"Overlanders"

Called, yes, "The Overlanders" and also "Eureka Stockade." "Eureka Stockade" was an uprising on the gold fields. And so we weren't (indecipherable) bereft of Australian films but it got worse during the 60s, people lost their confidence somehow and they were making money out of the new medium television, and then in the 70s it was time for the resurrection and (Tibbetts laughter) and that's what happened and Schepisi was one of the makers of that revolution. He was sick. He told me he was sick of making documentaries of various industries and commercials, even though, and he got the idea that he could use the, his business, whose name I used to know when I was younger and before I became demented (laughing), but he used his business to underwrite the movies he made but he also got money from other sources as well.

Did the success of your work on "Devil's Playground" then lead inevitably to "Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith"? Your working together?

Yes, he told very explicitly that he wanted to make a film that was cheaper and more intimate in its scope.

A whole different tone too.

And a whole different tone, and he wanted to do that as a prelude to making "The Chant." I was

impressed by him from the start and he was such, obviously such an intelligent fellow and, but I was also hooked by his personality, as so often happens. He was such good fun to be with

Kind of a puckish quality

Yes, and as soon as he, as soon as he says anything serious about art or film, he has to undermine with some great test joke.

Yes.

Or confession of his own wrong.

Kind of a drollery (?)

Yes, and so I think to talk about “The Chant,” I think “The Chant” had a problem that film has, as a film, and that is in the novel you can say how Jimmy is feeling.

Oh yeah.

He’s full of utter revenge. It’s not in the dialogue but he’s also aware that if he lets anyone off, his proposition that all the whites are his enemy is undermined. It’s like the SS men who let one Jew go. I don’t know how they, why they didn’t let them all go then. And it is the schoolteacher McCready who undermines Jimmy by being the human he is and who by being the human he is, actually saves his own life but undermines Jimmy’s cosmos so that he sends his brother away, which happened in real life, so the Australian Aboriginals were treated dreadfully and they still were in, when I was writing this novel, even though we had overwhelmingly endorsed civil rights for Aboriginals in a constitutional referendum to change the Australian Constitution, and things have improved since then, greatly. And we had freedom rides like you did here, where busloads of young Aboriginals and university students would move into a town and try by Ghandi-like methods to desegregate the town, to allow Aboriginal kids to swim in the local baths and so on.

Well and how important was it to have David (?) up there on camera too?

Yes, indeed. It’s also, of course, reconciliation has occurred in Australia through government apology, through trying to do the best we can, not always successfully and not with, always with the good will or good sense of all politicians. And I was certainly shocked by the degradation of Aboriginal culture and it wasn’t their fault.

Am I going to far by comparing this interchange of civilization and the Aboriginal culture with the American experience (overlapping)

You’re not going too far at all. One of the first things that we blamed Aboriginals for was they

were not farmers. Farmers were part of our self-definition and we felt that if we could get them to farm, we could make them not quite up to our standards, but pretty much manageable. And you in America did the same thing. The question of farming amongst indigenous Americans, amongst the American tribesmen and women, was whether to give in and farm or not. So out in places like Utah and in Colorado, you've got people who did farm and people

(recorder beeping) Like I said, these things use up... And there's also another thing I want to get into which is the dialogue about federation.

Ah yes.

This is real important and I was happy to see as much of it in the film as there was. You've got some great dialogue sequences in the bar early on when they're talking about, they're weighing the virtues of (laughter) the unification as it were.

Yes.

I guess unification isn't quite the right word.

Yes.

I'm sorry, I've got to

The people in the small states, it's just like America. The people in the small states thought they'd be overwhelmed by the big ones.

Right.

The people in the big states, the big rich states, thought they'd have to sustain the people in the poor states. All that stuff.

And the fact that so many of the models came from Canada and America and all of that so, even in the, I'm trying to figure out where I put that other... Is it time?

(other voice) Yes.

Okay.

(other voice) It's been about thirty minutes that they've filmed and your camera's out of batteries, right?

No, I'm trying to find it. I had another memory card with me.

KENEALLY: Do they need this space?

But if it's time to go, believe me, we've had a nice long talk. It's okay.

(other voice) They were supposed to be done at the end of the last interview and they're doing this out of the graciousness of their heart.

Ah good, yeah, fine.

Well, that's alright. I'm so happy with what we have been able to talk about.

Give the kids my regards. I hope they understand it all anyhow.

Yeah, here it is. Let me take this out and put a new one in.

(other voice) Are there any other courses in the United States that are taught about Australian films?

I'm sure there are courses that include them (overlapping)

But not

(other voice) include them as part

Yes, I wonder if are any that are exclusively

Well I've talked to people at the University of New South Wales and Simon Drake at the Sound and Film Archive in Sydney. He didn't know of any over here; none that have been in contact with him

And you were probably a bit gob smacked

(yet another voice) Do you have, like a final question that wanted to use or sync up with your video, we could certainly stick around

Ah. Well, actually there may be one more question, but that's entirely up to you.

(another voice) If we could do that, we could (overlapping)

And I'll try to answer it quickly.

We'll do the federation.

(another voice, overlapping) No, no, no.

Oh, that's hard for an Irishman!

We'll do the federation thing.

(another voice) You'll just...

Okay. I'll just jump right to that then. Okay. "Chant" takes place in around 1900.

Yes, that's right.

Interesting date, isn't it?

Interesting date, yeah.

And right off the bat there's a dialogue in your book about federation. What was that and why was it being so argued at the time?

Well, like the American colonies federating into a sovereign country, the Australians did the same in 1900. They voted throughout the late 1890s to do so, and it was quite a triumph. It was done without bloodshed (laughter from Tibbetts) and it involved a country that's London to Moscow in a couple of hundred miles as well, added on, and I think we're kind of disappointed that we did it without shooting Red Coats the way you fellows did and so there's a connection between federation and war, so the war in "The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith" is offshore, it's in South Africa. But think of Peter Weir's fine, not hardly accurate but magnificent film "Gallipoli,"

"Gallipoli"

There the Australians felt that, at Gallipoli, even though we lost, Australia was born, which is a pretty strange idea to think that a nation was born offshore in a country called Turkey but

Well look at the Alamo here.

In any case, there is that connection between federation, as it were, but the debates were strong and ongoing and the first federal parliament met the year after Jimmy was hanged

But possibility of coming together and then you have the exchange with the Aborigines and the white culture; seems to me like this is an intentional confluence of things

Oh yes, it is, and it's also a reference to the fact that the Aborigines have no place in the Australian census, in the constitution, they have no place. There are fiscal reasons for that but

there's also racism and they are not recognized as the traditional owners of Australia at all. There's no, it was believed at federation that they were a dying race and that our job was to help them on either with the bullet or by squeezing the dying pillow.

I could have wished that some of the songs had made it into the film.

Yes.

Those lyrics that you have scattered throughout the book. Those are yours, I assume?

Yes, indeed.

Amazing.

They're based on Aboriginal poetry, the lyrics throughout the book.

On the whole, happy with the adaptation?

Yes, yeah. The problem of getting inside the soul is the only thing to, seeing the nuance of change in Jimmy, is the only thing that's hard to do and I'm amazed how good filmmakers can, like Fred, can put in as much of that unspoken shift of motivation as they can. I think Schepisi is one of the finest directors and I look at, is it, gee I've forgotten the number, "Two Degrees of Separation?"

"Seven Degrees"

"Seven Degrees"

Six or seven, yeah, one of those

It is "Seven Degrees of Separation" and "Last Orders" and "A Cry in the Dark" and

Somewhere in there is "Mr. Baseball"

Yes, "Mr. Baseball," that's not a bad movie.

(laughter)

And his last film, "The Eye of the Storm," is not, I didn't like it

It's kind of Chekovian, I thought

Yes, and you're not close to the characters but then it's written by a novelist called Patrick White,

won the Nobel Prize, and it's, you know I think a lot of the fault lies with, lies with White actually, his coldness towards his characters. The other thing is Charlotte Rampling, I think you should never put Charlotte Rampling as an elderly mother because you know that she's going to seduce

(laughter)

The daughter's boyfriend and that's what happens in "The Eye of the Storm."

(laughter) Oh, we're probably going to have to get out of here, alas, but Thomas Keneally, you have been so kind to talk with me

Thank you

And my kids at school.

And it's great to talk to you at however a distance. Good luck kids.

That's wonderful. You are the best but then you must

(end of interview)

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