



Brand new aboriginal

Watching this I could not get out of my mind the tune for one of those popular Christian songs of the 1980s, *It's a Brand New Day* (there are different versions of this), and I don't believe this was incidental. The Christian faith is central to understanding the experience of Aboriginal people in the film.

Bran Nue Dae, the latest movie from Rachel Perkins, who made the acclaimed film *Radiance*, provides a bouncy and earthy homage to a period that has often been portrayed more darkly.

There are well-known actors, Geoffrey Rush, playing Father Benedictus, the head of the Mission School (in the suburb of Waterford, Perth, and is now the Clontarf Aboriginal College, where the Clontarf Foundation and successful Football Academy for Aboriginal Youth began), and Deborah Mailman as Roxanne, a Kimberley woman. Australian Idol runner up in 2006 Jessica Mauboy is well cast as the bubbly singer Rosie, and Rocky McKenzie shows more variety in acting than other Aboriginal newcomers as Willie. Victorian-born Singer Missy Higgins is the traveller Annie, and Ernie Dingo reprises his stage role as Uncle Tadpole, giving a comical and yet poignant portrayal as a realistic drunk too aware of his place in life.

The story is simple. It is 1969 with Willie in Broome during the last days of his school break, already pining for his new-found love Rosie. His mother Theresa (thank goodness there were limited jokes on this theme), is also a strong Christian figure and a member of the local robe-wearing gospel community, which appears at different

times, including the opening church scene. Like Father Benedictus she has high hopes for Willie's religious career. After an incident at the school, he runs off, and is pursued by Father Benedictus, creating a minor road movie, where Willie meets Uncle Tadpole, Annie and her hippie German boyfriend Slippery, and together they go to Broome, though Willie is not sure how he will be received by his mother.

Bran Nue Dae began as a collection of songs, which were turned into a popular and mainly touring stage musical during the 1990's. The key author and promoter, Jimmy Chi (name reflecting his Aboriginal, Asian and European heritage), and the members of the band Kuckles, developed songs reflecting their experience at growing up in the 1960s away from their community, isolated in a mission school, and living with the developing Western rock and roll era, as well as trying to understand what it meant to be Aboriginal.

The influence of the Catholic experience is significant, and the theological aspects are worth exploring. I could see a link with the initial focus on the Ten Commandments as most are broken at some time (at least in the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount), and there is the underlying theme about the need to reinterpret the nature of God as taught at the school which is reflected in Willie's search for his Aboriginal roots and his connection with the land through his journey.

The songs are fundamental, and those who listen carefully realise many are full of political comment, but in a wry and pointed way. This

is a different portrayal of Aboriginal people from many films of the last twenty years.

Given this was first a stage musical developed in the 1980s, one can see the influences of films which were around during the time when Jimmy Chi was writing it, especially musicals aimed at teenagers, like *Grease*, and *The Blues Brothers*, which also contained significant Catholic school references. In the overall script, one could also argue that it is a bit like Dickens writing a contemporary *Great Expectations* with additional help from Jerry Springer. Secrets are exposed, and confessions abound, and all the connections come out.

This is essentially a light relief film, with bright overtones designed to appeal to contemporary audiences and encourage Aboriginal youth. Even the dynamic opening and whimsical closing credits provide a context for this film, and I understand this—it is not setting out to delve deeply into complex and horrifying issues or treatments of Aboriginal people. There is no opportunity for an in-depth consideration of the elements, though the film touches on many areas including a haunting scene highlighting Aboriginal deaths in custody, and there is perhaps even reference to sexual abuse that occurred in some Catholic schools in terms of one element featured prominently.

While many of the characters are stereotyped, especially the religious figures, there is also a warmth about them which may reflect the ambiguous experience of Jimmy Chi. The film also touches on the themes of the oneness of humanity and the place of Christian and Aboriginal beliefs, which is well illustrated by the scenes of repentance and forgiveness, and even at the end of the film with Father Benedictus saying grace as all the main characters gather for a meal.

WA members will see recognisable areas not only in Perth, Fremantle and Broome, but also along the roads, and all viewers will resonate with the beauty of the Western land.

I was intrigued to learn that Jimmy Chi's hymns are apparently regularly sung at funerals of Aboriginals in Broome, again illustrating what I perceive as a quest for reconciliation and also the interest in redemption and forgiveness which is offered through the Christian Gospel.

Peter Bentley