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**S**UNDAY *Too Far Away* was one of the seminal films in what is often referred to as the 'new wave' of Australian cinema that emerged in the 1970s. A significant step forward in Australian filmmaking and storytelling, *Sunday Too Far Away* was also one of the first major features of the new wave to be made entirely with Australian finances (it was funded by the South Australian Film Corporation) and by an all-Australian creative team.<sup>1</sup>



The title *Sunday Too Far Away* is derived from a poem, *The Shearer's Wife's Lament*. It refers to a comment made by the shearer's wife on the lack of opportunity for a sexual relationship with her husband when he has left her to work on another sheep shed: 'Friday night, too tired, Saturday night, too drunk, Sunday Too Far Away.'<sup>2</sup>

A very popular film at the box office at the time of its release, *Sunday Too Far Away* also garnered critical praise. The film won several Australian Film Institute awards including Best Film (beating Peter's Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*), Best Actor (Jack Thompson) and Best Supporting Actor (Reg Lye). It was also selected for screening at the Director's Fortnight at the Cannes Film Festival in 1975.<sup>3</sup>

*Sunday Too Far Away* is told in a straightforward, no-nonsense style. Significantly, the film depicts the camaraderie associated with Aussie mateship (including knockabout larrikin

# Of Myths and Men

## *Sunday Too Far Away*

Ken Hannam's 1975 film *Sunday Too Far Away* is the archetypal film about the Australian male. Set in 1955, the film revolves around a group of itinerant shearers who are contracted to work on an isolated sheep station in hot and dusty outback Australia. BY PETER WILSHIRE

humour) in a way that many Australians viewers can identify with (even though they may know nothing about shearing in outback Australia in the mid-1950s). These men sweat it out shearing during the day and hit the grog at night. The central character is Foley (Jack Thompson), a former 'gun' (champion) shearer. Foley has been 'top dog' (the shearer who shears the most sheep) in every shed he has worked in the last ten years. Initially 'shanghaied' by former shearer turned contractor

Tim King (Max Cullen) into taking a six-week job at a remote sheep station (Timberoo), Foley becomes part of a team with other rough-hewn stubble-faced shearers. These shearers include Old Garth (Reg Lye), a former gun shearer who is now an aging broken-down alcoholic; Ugly (John Ewart), a knockabout larrikin who knows how to spin a yarn; and Michael Simpson (Gregory Apps), a young and very green roustabout (unskilled labourer). Another very competitive shearer from New South

Wales, Arthur Black (Peter Cummins), or Black Arthur as he comes to be known, will battle Foley to be top dog (and end up beating him). *Sunday Too Far Away* ends with the confrontation between the shearers (who have decided to strike because the graziers are trying to remove their prosperity bonus) and the 'scabs' (non-union labour brought in by the graziers to do the shearing). The strike lasts for nine months, with the shearers eventually winning.

### Fight Club

Ken Hannam was only thirty years old when he directed *Sunday Too Far Away*. Although it was his feature film debut, he had been directing and producing TV programs in London for several years when producer Gil Brealey of the newly formed South Australian Film Corporation offered him John Dingwall's script of *Sunday Too Far Away*. Originally titled *Shearers*, Dingwall has said that what interested him about the shearing culture was that the shearer 'worked like a dog, lived like one, and fought like one, but this somehow gave him a respect for himself, a tremendous dignity'.<sup>4</sup> Fascinated by Dingwall's insightful screenplay (and also keen to return home to Australia), Hannam later admitted that he would happily have done the film for nothing (he was paid a mere \$6000, with no residuals).<sup>5</sup>

No article about *Sunday Too Far Away* would be complete without mentioning the difficulties surrounding the editing of

ALL PHOTOS FROM: *SUNDAY TOO FAR AWAY*

the film. The finished film version is markedly different from both Dingwall and Hannam's original visions. It has been claimed that Dingwall's script would have made for a three-hour film. It revolved around a specific labour struggle at a particular historical moment – the events leading up to the 1955 shearers' strike in Northern Queensland<sup>6</sup> – and involved three generations of shearers: Michael Simpson, Foley and Old Garth. Crucial to the script was that Old Garth represented a vision – a premonition – to Foley of what his own future would become. The last third of the film was to focus on the 1955 shearers' strike. However, a three-hour film was not a possibility for commercial reasons. Therefore, the action in the film ended up being limited to the six-week period leading up to the strike. It has also been claimed that Dingwall reluctantly wrote abridged scenes relating to the strike and added them to the script (including the final caption at the end of the film that describes how the strike was resolved).<sup>7</sup>

Importantly, it has also been documented that producer Gil Brealey – under government pressure to make a profit – interfered with the editing process. Removing most of the scenes with young Michael Simpson, Brealey took advantage of Jack Thompson's box-office appeal, making Foley the hero. Ken Hannam, who was overseas during this interference with the editing process, was reportedly very angry and upset when he returned and heard about the changes.<sup>8</sup>



Unfortunately, as Hannam is no longer alive (he passed away in 2004), there will be no director's cut to set the record straight.

Following *Sunday Too Far Away*, Ken Hannam's Australian film work was sparse. He turned down an offer by producer Phillip Adams to direct the David Williamson play *Don's Party* (the film was subsequently directed by Bruce Beresford in 1976).<sup>9</sup> Hannam did make *Break of Day* (1976), a period romance between a former First World War serviceman and a bohemian woman; *Summerfield* (1977), an eerie *Twilight Zone*-style thriller; and *Dawn!* (1978), a biopic of swimmer Dawn



Fraser which was fraught with casting problems. Hannam continued to direct various TV programs in London, although he did return once more to Australia to make the popular mini-series *Robbery Under Arms* (co-directed

with Donald Crombie), which was also released in abridged form as a cinema feature. However, it is as the director of *Sunday Too Far Away* that Ken Hannam will always be remembered.<sup>10</sup>

On one level, *Sunday Too*

*Far Away* is a depiction of a particular historical place and time. These shearers exist in a world of their own. It's a very tough life. Not only is the work repetitive and backbreaking, the shearers also have to endure the heat, the boredom, the loneliness and the isolation that is an everyday part of their working life. Moreover, there is the constant struggle for recognition and respect. The shearers

scenes inside the shearing shed that emphasize the repetitive machinations of the daily grind: close-ups of the sweat-soaked shearers bending over the sheep (including a couple of scenes with the actors actually handling and shearing the sheep); the old alarm clock showing precisely the starting time of 7.30am; the ringing of the bell to start the shift. In addition, the competitive nature of the working

the loss of his long-held position as top dog in the contest with Black Arthur (although it is interesting to note that Foley still retains his charisma as a leader, something that is acknowledged by his fellow shearers).<sup>12</sup>

Foley's ambivalence towards his public persona can be detected right from the beginning of *Sunday Too Far Away*. In the opening scene of the film, a tired Foley is seen through the reflection of the rear vision mirror just before he rolls his car over, world-weariness etched on his face. This is the first hint that Foley may not be happy with who he is supposed to be.

In addition, another scene early in *Sunday Too Far Away* signals that Foley is tiring of the shearing lifestyle and wants to get out for good. He arrives at the local pub and sits at the bar. He has been here before and the barmaid Ivy (Phyllis Ophel) acknowledges his return. Pouring him a beer she remarks, 'You were never coming back.' Foley then tells her, 'I've come back, but I'm not going to bust my gut. I'm going to shear nice and steady, 150 a day. Ease-up on the grog. Put a little bit away. Put a lot away. I reckon in four years, I can have enough to go down the coast, buy myself a prawning boat. What do you think of that?'

Significantly, the above comments by Foley are followed by his prowess as top dog being challenged in the same scene at the pub by another shearer, Frankie Davidson (Ken

Shorter). (Frankie Davidson will also appear later in the film as a member of the 'scab' labour team.) This altercation can be seen as the first indication that Foley may not be the number-one shearer for much longer. Later in the film, when Black Arthur ends up shearing more sheep than Foley, it will be the first time in ten years that the top dog shearer will not have 'rung the shed.' Moreover, Foley's loss of personal status as top dog coincides with the collective loss of the shearers, who are forced to take strike action after being robbed of the prosperity bonus for their hard work.<sup>13</sup>

A crucial element in *Sunday Too Far Away* (which was emphasized in Dingwall's original script and is still prominent in the finished film) is the relationship between Foley and Old Garth. It is a relationship that is identified very early in the film. In the pub scene mentioned above, Foley spots Old Garth, who is drunk and slumped in a dishevelled heap at a nearby table. Foley then says to Ivy, 'When I was a learner, Old Garth was top dog. Now look at him.' There appears to be an underlying tone to Foley's remarks. It's as if Foley senses that he will eventually end up like Old Garth if he keeps on shearing.

As the film progresses, Foley's attitude towards Old Garth oscillates between affection and concern and anger and frustration. In one touching scene, Old Garth reminisces about his life. Referring to his ill-fated marriage, he tells Foley, 'My wife worked it out one day.

## Foley's loss of personal status as top dog coincides with the collective loss of the shearers, who are forced to take strike action after being robbed of their prosperity bonus

have to contend with heartless management who treat them with disdain. Paradoxically, however, it is this treatment that strengthens and reinforces the bonds of mateship between the shearers.

The title song (sung by Jack Thompson, with lyrics by Bob Ellis and music by Patrick Flynn) describes the harshness and the loneliness of the shearing life. This harsh lifestyle is set against the distinctly barren Australian landscape (shot by cinematographer Geoff Burton on location in New South Wales), which is hot, dry and unforgiving. For example, early morning scenes of the shearing sheds, with empty beer bottles strewn on the dusty ground, exemplify the hard-drinking lifestyle of the shearers. The authenticity of the working environment is depicted in numerous

environment (with each shearer being paid by the number of sheep he shears) is highlighted by close-ups of a blackboard that denotes the name of the shearer and the number of sheep he has shorn for the day.

### Top Dogs and Scabs

Thompson's Foley gives the appearance of being a confident and self-reliant individual. A natural leader, it is Foley who is voted by the other shearers to be the union's representative. Later in the film, Foley also acts as the shearers' spokesman when the strike looms.<sup>11</sup> However, outward appearances can be deceptive. As the film progresses, Foley becomes increasingly ambivalent about his position of personal power and status. This uncertainty culminates with

I spent with her three years in twenty-one. Three years all told. That's shearing for you Foley.' In another scene, Foley angrily yells at Old Garth, 'You're a bloody alcoholic. Hopeless old drunk.'

Another important scene depicts Foley reacting to the sad death of Old Garth. As the body, loosely wrapped in a white sheet, is being loaded onto an old van, Foley aggressively insists that it be placed in the front seat next to the driver. Foley is intent on giving Old Garth the human dignity and respect that he deserves.



Old Garth's death releases a well of suppressed emotion within Foley. This surfaces in the most revealing scene in the film, when Foley breaks down in front of Sheila Dawson (Lisa Peers), the daughter of the 'boss cocky' (the sheep station property owner). As Foley reflects on his life, including his upbringing in an orphanage, his tough guy persona dissolves and he starts to sob, head in hands.

Another scene near the end of the film further emphasises Foley's fear that he is destined to become like Old Garth. As the other shearers joke and clown around (dancing with the sheep), Foley's raucous laughter is tinged with frustration and sadness.

### How it Turned Out

*Sunday Too Far Away* has been criticized for its ending, and the extent to which the narrative avoids or evades the issues that it purports to engage with, with critics charging that

the issues of trade unionism and labour struggles occupy only a marginal space in the film. The union battle is given a hasty and anti-climactic resolution, and the outcome of the strike is only glimpsed in the final long-shot of the deserted shearing shed, overlaid with a couple of written passages which acknowledge that: *The strike lasted nine months/ The Shearers won/It wasn't so much the money/It was the bloody insult.*<sup>14</sup>

While the above criticism is certainly valid (particularly considering the problems with the film's editing), it could also be argued that a more pronounced emphasis on the shearers' strike (within the given 94-minute time frame) would have made for quite a different film. A focus on the strike would have shifted the emphasis away from the 'human' relationships between the individual shearers (in particular, the crucial relationship between Foley and Old Garth, which provides the film with its

emotional power), and possibly rendered the film less dramatically powerful.

In spite of the damage done by the controversial editing process, *Sunday Too Far Away* is a wonderfully entertaining film. At once a sad, affectionate and humorous portrait of a group of shearers on an isolated sheep station, *Sunday Too Far Away* also boasts outstanding performances, particularly by Jack Thompson and Ron Lye. A unique story, *Sunday Too Far Away* is an authentic depiction of a particular masculine lifestyle at a particular time in Australia's history, and is a film that fully deserves its respected place in the annals of Australian screen culture.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Ian Stocks, 'Sunday Too Far Away', *Cinema Papers*, No.

113, December 1996.

<sup>2</sup> *Sunday Too Far Away*, World Premiere, Adelaide Festival Theatre Program, Sunday, 15 June 1975.

<sup>3</sup> Lorraine Mortimer, 'The Soldier, The Shearer and the Madman: Horizons of Community in Some Australian Films', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 1993.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Mark Juddery, 'Visions of a Raving Romantic', *The Australian* (National Metro), 8 December 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Stocks, *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> Mortimer, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> Juddery, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Jon Bewsen and Imre Hollosy, *Sunday Too Far Away – A Study Guide For Classroom Discussion*.

<sup>12</sup> Jon Bewsen and Imre Hollosy, *Sunday Too Far Away – A Study Guide For Classroom Discussion*.

<sup>13</sup> Noel King, 'A View of Australian Cinema', *Framework*, No. 13, Autumn, 1980, p.40.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*