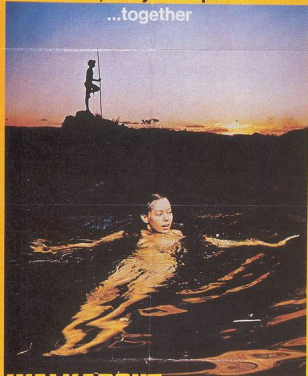


**The Aborigine
and the girl
30,000 years apart
...together**



WALKABOUT

Just about the most different film you'll ever see.

Follows in the ancestry of
the Australian wilderness.

20th Century Fox presents A MCA, INC. / BARRIS LITVINOFF PRODUCTION **WALKABOUT** starring JENNY AGUTTER, LUCIEN JOHN
DAVID GUMPLIN, MICHAEL GARDNER, MALLI L. BARRIS production by LITVINOFF directed and photographed by NICOLAS ROEG
screenplay by EDWARD BOND based on the novel by JAMES VANCE MARSHALL music by JOHN BARRY COSTUME DESIGNER LUCY

Walkabout was to have been the first film directed by Nicolas Roeg, who had established himself by the mid-Sixties as one of Britain's leading cameramen for his work on such films as *The Garetaker* (1963), *Nothing But the Best*, *The Masque of the Red Death* (both 1964), *Fahrenheit 451* (1966) and *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1967). Roeg became fascinated by James Vance Marshall's novel, visited Australia to research settings and locations, and persuaded playwright Edward Bond to construct a screenplay. But the project then had to be shelved for lack of production support, and Roeg instead teamed up with Donald Cammell to make his joint directing debut with *Performance* (1970).

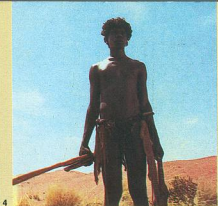
At first glance the two subjects could hardly look more different. *Performance*'s fetishistic study of a small-time London crook's metamorphosis in the claustrophobic home of a retired pop-star has little obvious connection with a trek through the Australian desert. But *Performance* too is about the fortuitous collision of opposites, their possible interaction and exchange, their final severance; and as it happens, the summary applies equally (with small variations) to Roeg's following films — *Don't Look Now* (1973), *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976) and *Bad Timing* (1980). It's all there in *Walkabout*, where the collision is both human (the white girl, the black Aborigine) and cultural (the city versus the outback); the interaction is a matter of both geographical and biological necessity (the girl is helpless in the aborigine's environment, as he would be in hers); and the severance is an inevitable consequence of two highly contrasted origins.

Roeg establishes the contrasts from the film's opening shots in

which the bustling city is invaded by glimpses of the desert, until, with a track from brick wall to open ground, he permits the wilderness to take over completely. At the end of *Walkabout* the pattern is reversed, with the invasion of the landscape by half-formed buildings, discarded equipment (the little boy actually sets an abandoned trolley in motion once more), and at last the city crowds themselves. As a result of Roeg's intercutting, city and desert appear symbiotic, each growing from the other; if the city-dwellers look disconcertingly like flowing sand, the wasteland, with its exotic wildlife, is also seen to have a teeming social structure, in which experience is the vital part of survival. Nature and civilization may be opposites, but they have the same roots, the same needs, and Roeg's examination of those needs reveals with each fresh illustration the special, even lethal, price that they demand.

The 'walkabout', explained in an opening title as an Aboriginal custom, is accordingly an education shared by the children of both cultures. For each, it provides the training for survival in a hostile environment. The Aborigine must learn how to find water, to kill lizards, to cook kangaroo meat. The girl, whom we first encounter in a classroom, must learn elocution, etiquette, and *haute cuisine*; education pursues her and her brother as they carry the radio on their journey, and ineffectual as its contribution may seem when there is no water, the measured tones of technology continue to echo across the outback long after the way home has become clear again and their brief benefactor has been left hanging from a tree. I can multiply 84 by 84, the six-year-old announces proudly to the smiling savage for





whom such skills are irrelevant; at the time, it seems incongruous, but it is the boy who lives and the Aborigine who dies.

Walkabout ends with the girl in her kitchen (as her mother was at the film's beginning). A voice speaks A. E. Housman's lines about 'the land of lost content'... where I went and cannot come again' and we see a possibly remembered, possibly imagined bathing sequence with the girl, her brother and the Aborigine. Much enhanced by John Barry's soaring orchestration, this scene is a richly sentimental idyll, artificial enough to be subtly unconvincing. The viewer is invited to recognize through it that while simplicity has many obvious attractions, and that nature specializes in simplicities, they are awesomely transient. The 'walkabout' provided the justification for the partnership and at the same time its limit; despite the many

erotic half-promises between boy and girl (and much of *Walkabout*'s fascination comes from the delicacy with which it conveys their awareness of each other), they have no conceivable future together - which is why, having witnessed the gratuitous slaughter of wildlife by two white gunmen in a jeep, the Aborigine rises like a

skeleton from a landscape littered with bones to pay despairing homage to the female who has no further use for him. His time is past, even though Roeg's dislocated editing serves as a reminder that fragments of time, like bits and pieces of our upbringing, remain deeply embedded in the memories of us all.

PHILIP STRICK

Directed by Nicolas Roeg, 1971

Prod co: Max L. Raab - Si Litvinoff Films (Pty) Ltd (20th Century-Fox). **exec prod:** Max L. Raab. **prod:** Si Litvinoff. **assoc prod:** Anthony J. Hope. **sc:** Edward Bond, from the novel by James Vance Marshall. **photo** (Eastman Colour); Nicolas Roeg. **sp photo:** Tony Richmond. **ed:** Anthony Gibbs, Alan Patillo. **prod des:** Brian Eatwell. **art dir:** Terry Gough. **mus:** John Barry. **add mus/songs:** 'Electronic Dance' by Billy Mitchell, 'Gasoline Alley' by Rod Stewart, 'Los Angeles' by Warren Marley, 'Hymnen' by Karl-Heinz Stockhausen. **sd rec:** Barry Brown. **sd re-rec:** Gerry Humphreys. **rt:** 100 minutes. **Cast:** Jenny Agutter (*girl*), Lucien John (*brother*), David Gulpilili (*Aborigine*), John Meillon (*father*), Peter Carver (*no-hoper*), John Illingsworth (*husband*), Barry Donnelly (*Australian scientist*), Noeline Brown (*German scientist*), Carlo Marchini (*Italian scientist*).

A teenage girl and her brother are taken for a drive in the Australian bush by their father. As she lays out the picnic, the father suddenly produces a pistol (1) and starts shooting; when the children take cover, he shoots himself. Reassuring her brother that it is nothing serious, the girl leads him away into the desert (2). By nightfall they are completely lost.

Next day they find an oasis - but soon the water is gone and their situation looks desperate (3). Unexpectedly an Aborigine youth appears out of the desert (4); he is on his 'walkabout' - the six-month period in the wilderness which, by tribal custom, will establish his manhood. He takes them under his protection and guides them through the vast wasteland (5).

At last they reach an abandoned homestead (6) which seems a natural place for them to stay. But the Aborigine then takes the boy (7) and shows him a nearby highway that could lead the way back to civilization. Disturbed that he and the girl may shortly have to part company, the Aborigine paints himself and begins a dance of courtship (8); the girl retreats from him in terror (9), fearing violence of some kind. He continues the ritual for hours, past the point of exhaustion, and in the morning they find him dead (10). Seemingly unconcerned, they take the road back to safety, only to be greeted with hostility at the first town they reach (11).

Years later, the girl receives her husband home from the office. As he chatters of minor triumphs in his business affairs, she recalls a time when three children swam together in the sunlit waters of a far-distant lake.

