

MICHAEL GIFFIN

ADAPTING PATRICK WHITE TO THE SCREEN



THERE'S NOTHING PREVENTING Australians from making excellent films. For each of its component parts, we have the talent, expertise and energy. We're also innovative: Eric Miller patented the fluid tripod head in 1946; Jim Frazier won an Oscar in 1997 for his lens system; both these innovations revolutionised the international film industry. The weak point, if there is one, is usually the screenplay. There are reasons for that. Our films tend to be a battleground on which our national identity is fought, although perhaps this was more the case in the twentieth century than the twenty-first. Also, directors aren't necessarily all-knowing commentators on what they're realising: we shouldn't assume Fred Schepisi knows any more about the cultural context of Patrick White than Peter Weir knows about Australia's involvement in the First World War.

Regardless of whether you love or hate him, White is regarded as a complex author of international stature; he's widely read overseas, at least in academic settings; he may even be better understood overseas. It requires a large vision to adapt his novels to the screen. The task is challenging, but then screen adaptations are challenging. Writing a novel and writing a screenplay are different processes. The author of a novel usually works alone and controls what appears in print. The screenwriter adapting that novel usually works in collaboration and has less say, is less in control of what appears on screen.

The collaborators may differ on what they want to achieve, should achieve, can achieve; each collaborator may understand the novel differently and might not understand White. The challenge doesn't require being literally faithful to his novel; that's logistically and economically impossible; the audience would get bored with the attempt. Anyway, his novel is always there to read, if the audience wishes. The collaborators needn't worry about protecting its integrity; although neither should they undermine its integrity.

In the pre-release publicity for Schepisi's film of *The Eye of the Storm*, the difficulties of adapting White for

the screen were avoided. There was a mixture of special pleading and a cavalier tone—presumably to pre-empt criticism. The underlying assumption was that, as the novel is densely-woven and multi-layered, these woven layers wouldn't make for good cinema: cinema the director could reasonably be expected to realise; cinema the audience could reasonably be expected to enjoy. The case was presented for White-lite, an adaptation that's much

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simpler, more interesting, and more entertaining than the novel, presumably aimed at those unfamiliar with White; those who feel they should be familiar with him.

Excuses, if you want to call them that, were offered. In an interview with Michael Bodey in the *Weekend Australian*, Schepisi put it thus:

"It's a 600-page book that meanders and goes on little raves about things and has inner monologues and attitudes and things turn into these surreal kind of rants," he says. "So that's never easy to translate into film let alone get the whole 600 pages down into effectively 100 pages ... it's a question of what's the story you can extract and what characters do you extract to represent all the other characters that [White] goes into in a big way. So we chucked that job to Judy Morris," he says, referring to his screenwriter and laughing heartily, "Good luck, girl!"

So, as Schepisi felt the task of adapting the novel was impossible, we're meant to be grateful to him for having a go. This isn't a recipe for cinematic excellence, although excellence was within reach. The right elements were all there, in rare and abundant quantities. We won't often see this amount of talent, expertise and energy at the same time in the same place. Many big names rallied around the cause, because they knew the cause was culturally important. That in itself may have presented difficulties for Schepisi, though, if some of those big names were also collaborators in the realisation. It's hard to make an excellent film by committee.

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That said, almost everything about Schepisi's *The Eye of the Storm* is excellent, apart from the screenplay, which might have been better if he had a higher sense of what he should achieve and a greater commitment to how White's fiction operates. Of course, the director needs a degree of licence; the question is how much. Is it allowable to leave out whole dimensions of the story when cutting it down to a manageable size, rewrite several scenes so they are unrecognisable to those familiar with the story, and include several new scenes that deviate significantly from the story? Where is the line? When is it crossed? At what point does the screenplay cease to be broadly faithful when it can't be literally faithful? When can we say Schepisi's realisation doesn't represent the novel's ideology and aesthetic, its discourse and style?

These questions are worth asking, as the Bodey interview suggests Schepisi used the film as a vehicle for competing priorities: first, to portray the Sydney acting milieu of the early 1970s, of which he was both fan and source (and which, we're told, financed one-third of the film's budget). Hence Basil Hunter's stopover in Bangkok, where he ran into his old acting chums, was transposed to Sydney and expanded to include several scenes that aren't in the novel and are unnecessary to its realisation. The most disturbing of these surround Basil's relationship with his mother's nurse, Flora Manhood—competently portrayed by Schepisi's daughter—which was blown out of all proportion and made into something the novel never meant it to be: Flora didn't hover seminaked in Basil's old bedroom with the intention of seducing him; she never went to the theatre and dinner parties with him; likewise, he never regarded himself as having a serious relationship with her, and he never introduced her to his acting chums as his possibly pregnant girlfriend and potential fiancée. Then there's Basil's autobiographical stage project, a background idea in the novel which Schepisi curiously turns into a fully-realised play-within-the-film. Several minutes would have been saved without these unnecessary scenes, which would have left more time for White.

Second, in Geoffrey Rush's words, Schepisi's accomplishment with *The Eye of the Storm* was making a big social portrait of Australia in the early 1970s which captured "the Whitlam energy after decades of conservative rule and the kind of urban squattocracy" that existed at that time. While this competing priority may have fitted in with White's vision—more so than pandering to Schepisi's acting milieu from the 1970s—I'm not sure why Cherry Cheeseman's celebrity party for Dorothy Hunter, the expatriate princess, was transformed from a boozy dinner party on the North Shore into a boozy luncheon party in Vaucluse. Also, Athol Shreve's faux-Whitlam-esque election speech on black-and-white television was quite unnecessary and may contain a con-

tinuity error. Did Australian politicians of the 1970s really make statements like: "If I'm elected Prime Minister"? Australians have never elected prime ministers.

There are two fundamental strands in White's *The Eye of the Storm*, both of which are given equal weight in the novel: first, Elizabeth Hunter's relationship with her three nurses and one housekeeper-cook; second, her relationship with her son and daughter. In the first relationship, White was exploring the varieties of Western religious experience. Flora Manhood is pagan (like Elizabeth herself), Lotte Lippmann is Jewish, Mary de Santis is half-Catholic and half-Orthodox, and Jessie Badgery (who was completely omitted from the film) is Protestant. His exploration of how these characters relate—or fail to relate—to self, world and other is consistent with his late Modernist and Spenglerian enthusiasms. Given the complexity of White's discourse—and the fact that these characters function as tropes as well as persons—it's easy to understand why Schepisi ignored this aspect of the novel. However, the novel's readers, and the film's audience, should know this aspect exists and that White was frustrated by the inability of academics to recognise it.

Schepisi chose to focus on Elizabeth's relationship with her son and daughter. While that was a pragmatic choice, the screenplay took many curious liberties which distort the way White portrayed their relationship, which skew how their relationship functions in the novel. This has nothing to do with the actors—Charlotte Rampling, Geoffrey Rush and Judy Davis are marvellous as Elizabeth, Basil and Dorothy Hunter; indeed, the entire cast is marvellous—the problem is the screenplay. Perhaps most serious—apart from an eccentric scene in Centennial Park where Elizabeth, supported by her staff and lawyer, banishes her son and daughter to their country home—is the way Schepisi distorts Dorothy's character. Why does his Dorothy spend so much more time with Elizabeth in their city home than was really the case? Why does she flee their country home to return to the city? Why does she put her mother on the com-mode before she died? Dorothy wasn't in the house when Elizabeth died; she wasn't even in Sydney.

Finally, while incest is still a delicate subject, nothing else about this film is delicate, and the whole significance of the incest scene is lost. For philosophical reasons, White meant Elizabeth to die in the city at the same moment Basil and Dorothy were having sex in the country, in the bed they were conceived on.

These deviations would matter less if the audience is inspired to read the novel. As that's a big ask, we'll have to make do with White-lite.

Michael Giffin's literary criticism includes books on Patrick White, Jane Austen, and religion in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century novel.