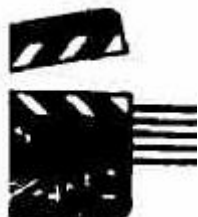


# American remake rather less chilling



## CINEMA

By DOUGAL MACDONALD

*The Vanishing* (M). At Electric Shadows in the Boulevard Twin and Pacific 6, Tuggeranong.

★★★★

**O**NE OF the most chilling films ever is French director George Sluizer's treatment of a psychopath anxious to work out his angst by the simple act of taking complete power over the life of another human being, a stranger.

What first distinguishes that film, made with a French cast in that language, is not so much the rather pedestrian commonness of its thesis as Sluizer's development of the tension and revelation of the denouement.

It sent you reeling out of the cinema quite revolted (which was never a reason for not seeing it; people have an atavistic yearning to participate vicariously in the worst of human behaviour, as the popularity of *Silence of the Lambs* bears witness

ty of *Silence of the Lambs* bears witness, but the jury remains out on the question of how much individuals' exposure to filmmakers' fantasies determines their real-life actions).

What distinguishes this American remake is that it was made at all. The original was perfectly serviceable for all countries. I have a suspicion that Americans have a grassroots objection to having to read subtitles and a belief that they generally consider their country to be so superior that they need not acknowledge the existence of other countries or cultures except in American terms. Thus, numerous foreign-language films successful at box-offices outside America have come to be rebuilt with American ingredients to make them palatable for that market.

The result of this in the case of *The Vanishing* is that Sluizer, who directed the remake, has had to compromise about the ending. Whereas the French version ended on a high-note of pure horror, the victim/hero encased in an absolutely no-win, no-escape situation, doomed, the American one has to provide the pabulum of the happy outcome without which no American mainstream film can hope to succeed at home. He gets out. On the way to getting

in . . . — but I over-reach the situation for those who have not seen the original.

Two lovers have a tiff. They make up. The girl goes to the shop in a gas-station and never returns. The man (Keifer Sutherland) spends the next three years trying to trace her. He becomes involved with a new partner (Nancy Travis) who tries with

partner (Nancy Travis) who tries with some success to subdue his obsession not to recover the missing beloved but simply to know what happened to her. (The introduction of the second partner is an American ingredient missing from the original, for reasons that should not be hard to fathom.)

But hang on a moment. The film begins differently from the original by introducing the perpetrator at the outset. Jeff Bridges plays the psychopath with chilling brilliance that may well gain peer-group admiration when the time comes for such things. And the way that Todd Graff's screenplay works his early introduction into the film's tension levels is no less effective than having his part in the girl's disappearance emerge slowly.

The last 20 minutes of *The Vanishing* is the part that panders to American tastes. They cover Ms Travis in mud and scare her more than it scares the filmgoer, who can unwind from the film's real horror secure in the knowledge that the conventions are being observed.

## Workmanlike story of UFO adventure

*Fire in the Sky* (M). At Pacific 6, Tuggeranong.

★★★

**T**HE PROMOTION for Robert Lieberman's sci-fi drama set in a small town in Arizona proclaims that it is based on a true story.

You can take that with a grain of salt or

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accept it without question, which latter is clearly the hope of the filmmakers. The better way to approach *Fire in the Sky* is to go with its flow and let the cultural conditioning that other films about extra-terrestrial visitors, notably *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, have laid over us, carry you through its quite admirably created sequence within the visitors' UFO.

At its real core, *Fire in the Sky* is about human fears, prejudices, cynicism and narrow-mindedness in a small rural community. The story tells of a team of forest-clearing contractors put together by Mike (Robert Patrick) who, returning from work, see a red light below the brow of the nearby hills which they think at first to be a fire but later realise is the glow of an incandescent flying object. One of the crew, Travis (D. B. Sweeney), gets out of the cab of the utility to see the object more closely. A ray of white light surrounds him and he falls to the ground. Believing him dead, the others take flight. Mike later goes back to the site and finds his friend's body is not there.

From this point, *Fire in the Sky* takes on a totally human face as the survivors tell their story to the authorities and face the inquiries and suspicions which result. James Garner plays a lieutenant of state police who comes to help the local sheriff in the investigation. The townsfolk begin to talk about murder. The media vultures converge. People from a group calling itself the Aerial Research Society arrive to investigate the UFO. All this is the kind of dramatic development that you might expect. Then a caller who Mike expects is

pect. Then a caller who Mike expects is only another crank turns out to be a barely-recognisable Travis whom they find naked and shivering in the rain at an old general store.

The film then moves to an explanation, in which Travis awakes to find himself in some kind of cell covered in strange gloop. The film takes its time dealing with his escape and exploration of the inside of the vehicle and his encounter with a team of living beings that are intelligent but definitely not human. These moments are impressively filmed and carry a measure of emotional weight. They reminded me of an

- ★ Of little merit.
- ★★ Not a total waste of time and money, but not great value.
- ★★★ Value for money without being great cinema.
- ★★★★ A sound investment, offering rewards likely to endure after you have left the theatre.
- ★★★★★ Full value in every sense, with the promise of coming back to please your memories long after you have seen other films.

old episode of *Twilight Zone* in which extra-terrestrials hand out copies of a book in their language which they say is called *To Serve Man*, generating optimism and a desire in many to emigrate, until the heroine, cracking the code of the book's language, discovers that it is a cook-book.

There is nothing particularly notable in *Fire in the Sky*, but it is a workmanlike, well-enough-made niece with the ability to

well-enough-made piece with the ability to engage the mind for as long as one watches it and perhaps leave a residual image of Travis's adventures in the UFO. At most, it makes one wonder whether people really do behave in confrontation with the unknown and inexplicable in the way that filmmakers depict them.

## Aborigines' soap opera ignores real issues

*Jindalee Lady*. At the Playhouse.

★★

**T**HIS, the first film directed by an Aborigine, has yet to find a distributor or get a censorship classification.

The Australian premiere took place in the Playhouse as a fund-raiser for Community Aid Abroad and the Solidarity with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia Group. Senator Bob McMullan gave up his dinner break to come and introduce the film, admitting that he had not seen it.

After the screening, producer/writer Briann Kearney read a message from the director, Brian Syron, explaining his objectives for the film. He wants it to screen to Aborigines and Islanders to show them a different vision of life among black Aus-



traliens. I am always suspicious about filmmakers' statements of intention. If the film doesn't say it for them, no amount of off-screen explanation can.

*Jindalee Lady* is a soap-opera in which the heroine, Lauren (Lydia Miller), mar-

the heroine, Lauren (Lydia Miller), married to David (Patrick Ward), a philandering gubba (the word that Aborigines use for us whities), living in fine style such as any of us might aspire to, is the black head of a couture business. Greg (Michael Leslie), an Aboriginal cinematographer, loves Lauren.

Lauren is showing her collection. David pleads a business engagement that will keep him from attending on her big night. He neither arrives nor answers her phone calls. Long after the parade has finished and the bars have shut, Lauren goes to David's office and finds him bonking one of her employees. You'd expect that by that time of early morning they'd have got their gear off. Never trust a man who bonks with his pants on. Nor one who does it behind a floor-to-ceiling window looking out on to a landing with the venetians set for light.

Is this what Aboriginal people want to watch in films made about their people for their specific consumption? We gubbas watch the same kind of mindless stuff about other gubbas, all the time, without concern for the social values of what we are seeing. But I have a sneaking suspicion that the Aboriginal response to Syron and Kearney's film may be a bit less accepting.

In offering a fantasy picture of Aboriginal success, of an Aboriginal woman living a totally gubba lifestyle at a level of high material comfort (her emotional comfort level is very low at all times), in being a tad patronising about Aboriginal art and culture (the Bangarra Dance Company is wonderful to watch, but even its contribution shows a heavy European influence), *Jindalee Lady* ignores the real issues confronting Aborigines. So do TV soaps such as *Dallas* in relation to whities. But we are better equipped to cope with them.

in relation to whites. But we are better equipped to cope with them.

I truly wish that I could have reported that the first film by an Aboriginal director had relevance, had respect, said something worth hearing about being an Aboriginal to every Australian. *Jindalee Lady* has none of those.