

Rabbit-Proof Fence

Hardly your typical Christmas movie, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* is, rather, a terrific chase and kids-in-jeopardy movie with both wonderful momentum and stirring acting. But beyond this, it tells a real, almost incredible, story of a great escape and heightens that reality with a palpable feel for the raw bush country of Australia.

The film's director, Phillip Noyce, who made a career with notable small films in Australia before becoming a big-budget Hollywood director (*Clear and Present Danger*, *Patriot Games*, *The Bone Collector*), has returned to his home base--and most effectively. Here he has used much more modest means--only a few weeks shooting time, untrained actors, an unforgiving landscape--and emerged with a full-blown triumph.

The tale treats the case of three half-caste Aboriginal girls who were forcibly taken away from their families by the government in 1931 (this practice, begun in 1905, continued up until 1971). Australian "Aboriginal policy" assumed that the Aboriginal race was dying out, and to help it along--and solve the nation's "colored problem"--half-castes should not be permitted to breed with full-blooded Aborigines but should be placed into mainstream white society, but only in menial domestic jobs. In this instance, Molly, 14 years old (played by Everlyn Sampi), her sister Daisy, 8 (Tianna Sansbury) and their cousin Gracie, 10 (Laura Monaghan), all living with their mothers and a grandmother near Jigalong Depot in Northern Australia, are torn from their family and consigned to a reeducation camp 1,200 miles south from their home. Molly, who is old enough to know a real mother and family (most of the girls at the camp are orphans with no such experience) despises the place and looks to escape at the first opportunity. She leads her two other charges out one night to begin their amazing trek.

The girls must survive on their wits and plunge ahead but are too young to realize how hopeless their quest to get home is. They begin with only a vague sense of direction until Molly recalls a fellow at the depot talking about the "rabbit-proof fence," a thigh-high barrier constructed across the entire breadth of Western Australia in the early part of last century to keep a plague of rabbits from invading grazing land. That fence turns out to be her guide to lead the girls back to Jigalong depot.

Their adventures are myriad. They must avoid the relentless search for them by the camp's Aboriginal tracker Moodoo (David Gulpilil, well-remembered from his role in 1971's *Walkabout*). There is the constant search for food. Little Daisy suffers sore feet and must be carried part of the way. A devious fellow on their route tries to get them to give in to city authorities (Gracie succumbs). They suffer, but they also scrounge shelter and food from kindly farmers along the way. Their dramatic escape becomes a nasty cause celebre for the Aboriginal Affairs office in the western city of Perth, and the severe Mr. A.O. Neville (Kenneth Branagh), as "Chief Protector" of the Aborigines, must persuade police authorities to help find the missing girls. The finale comes when the sisters, after weeks already on the roam, enter a grim stretch of northern desert outback, a fried landscape where nothing grows...

Rabbit-Proof Fence documents a true triumph of the spirit, but one played modestly and honestly, matching the tenacity and spunk of the girls it follows. Those girls are portrayed wonderfully by the three young Aboriginal actresses, who, completely

new to pictures, prove themselves to be naturals in front of the camera--especially young Evelyn Sampi. In her, we see a bright young child turn into an indomitable fighter, using all of her native wit and her tough-minded skepticism to reach her goal. During the trek, she quickly learns to read scheming adults, to adjust to changing circumstances, to measure her strengths. Hers is a compelling, memorable performance--which is really no "performance" at all, so genuine is she. Director Noyce noted that, in casting the children in his movie, he felt he was like a gold prospector, "chipping away at (a) mountain,..fueled by the knowledge that somewhere you are going to find that nugget." "In fact," he concluded, I did better than that; I found three diamonds, perfectly cut." Second the motion.
(*"Rabbit-Proof Fence"* is rated "PG.")

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