

Censors re-route Backroads signal

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CINEMA



PAUL
HEINRICHS

Backroads (Longford, R) is a vivid journey into the remote corners of white responsibility for black despair in Australia.

For his first fiction feature, the 27-year-old Sydney director Phil Noyce has given us a "road movie" which combines a statement of major importance with technical brilliance.

This one-hour film boasts stunning photography by Russell Bold, of **Picnic at Hanging Rock** fame, with a sophisticated over-lapping soundtrack a la Robert Altman, in **Nashville**.

The backroads here are in outback New South Wales, and the milestones, from a black view, are injustice, hatred, prejudice, misunderstanding and neglect.

The film we see shows the consequences of this mistreatment in a story with well-depicted characters, plenty of action and exceptionally good dialogue.

Noyce has obtained superbly natural performances from his actors, particularly the Aboriginal activist Gary Foley, who also helped monitor the film's black statement.

He plays Gary, a young black from a reserve outside Bourke. Gary's marriage to a white woman has broken up, and he is drifting into casual crime. We see him emerging from the lock-up.

Loud-mouth

Across the park, a loud-mouthed white drifter named Jack decides to steal a huge Pontiac while its owner is in the lavatory. Gary joins in.

Together they take off on a breakneck drive across the State, going nowhere in particular, but bound for oblivion.

The message emerges on the way. They stop in a squalid Aboriginal reserve, for instance, where Gary tells Jack: "This is what the gubbos (whites) have done to us."

Conversations in the speeding car reveal their backgrounds, the reasons for their alienation with Jack expressing the vicious white prejudices and Gary passively providing the black answers.

Other people fill the back seat as they make stops. There is Gary's uncle Joe, a broken-down alcoholic; a French hitch-hiker; and a lonely woman at a remote petrol bowser.

The sound track becomes more complex. We hear the conversations in the back seat as well as the front in a clever piece of editing. The look at Australian society is expanded.

Their money runs out, and the dramatic tension builds as their efforts to survive without it becomes more aggressive. Guns are produced.

The film's climax is more conventional, but completely appropriate. It is ultimately pessimistic — but that is just another part of the film's realism.

The R certificate placed on **Backroads** is ludicrous. Apparently earned for its four-letter words, the certificate will deny this film's essential message to mature teenagers who ought to be shown the truth.