

## David Gulpilil and me: Margaret Pomeranz, Tony Briggs and more reflect on a pioneer



*David Gulpilil in My Name Is Gulpilil.*

By Jake Wilson  
April 30, 2021

Nobody can tell David Gulpilil's story better than Gulpilil himself. In some ways, this is what he's been doing on screen for half a century, though never as directly as in Molly Reynolds' new documentary, *My Name Is Gulpilil*. "I'm an actor, I'm a dancer, I'm a singer and also, a painter," he says at the outset. "This film is about me. This is my story of my story."

A Yolngu man born and raised in North-East Arnhem Land, Gulpilil has done as much as any one individual to represent Indigenous culture to the world, ever since he was "discovered" as a teenager by the British director Nicolas Roeg, who cast him in the 1971 film *Walkabout*.

As he recounts in *My Name Is Gulpilil*, this made him an instant star, allowing him to meet everyone from John Lennon to the Queen to Bruce Lee – though when I spoke to him in 2014 he remained amused and perplexed by the film's ending, in which his character takes his own life after failing to win the love of a British schoolgirl (Jenny Agutter).

Gulpilil's subsequent career resembles a summary of the history of modern Australian cinema, from 1970s landmarks such as the rambunctious "bush western" *Mad Dog Morgan* and the family classic *Storm Boy* to his more recent collaborations with director Rolf de Heer, including *The Tracker* and the semi-autobiographical *Charlie's Country*.

*My Name Is Gulpilil* is yet another milestone in this journey, which hasn't always been an easy one. Gulpilil is not just the star but one of the producers of the film – originally conceived as something like a final testament, combining a candid account of his career with an often painfully intimate picture of his ongoing battle with lung cancer.

"I supposed to die pretty long time ago," Gulpilil says on camera. "But I'm still alive here. I'm still in this movie!" Despite his frailty, he walked the red carpet at the world premiere in Adelaide, and more recently attended the first screening in the South Australian town of Murray Bridge where he now lives, greeting each audience member after the credits rolled.

The concept of *My Name Is Gulpilil* is that the actor speaks without interruption: there are no additional "talking heads". To mark the film's release, we asked some of his colleagues and friends to add to the picture by describing what he means to them, as an artist and a human being.

*TONY BRIGGS is the author of the play **The Sapphires**, adapted to film in 2012. As an actor, he has appeared in many Australian films and TV shows – and in stage adaptations of **Walkabout** and **Storm Boy**, in the roles Gulpilil played on film.*



*Tony Briggs says seeing David Gulpilil on screen "changed my whole perspective on what possibilities were there for me".*

As a young boy, I saw him for the first time on screen, and it changed my whole perspective on what possibilities were there for me. I had no idea that I wanted to be an actor then. That had nothing to do with it. But it was just the fact that I saw an Aboriginal man doing things that I'd seen that made me comfortable, made me feel capable.

And to be in his presence sometimes, like I've been lucky enough to be over the years from time to time – you can feel that power that comes out of that screen when you're watching him. It's something really tangible.

*“There's a truth in his eyes that has forced us to take notice – a truth that comes from thousands of years of cultural knowledge.”*

Tony Briggs

There's no doubt in my mind his strength comes from his culture. His power comes from the land that he came from, and that's what he's carried with him everywhere, in everything he ever did. Look at Gulpilil's portrayal of characters in his films; they are always so complex, played with dignity, intellect and elegance. There's a truth in his eyes that has forced us to take notice – a truth that comes from thousands of years of cultural knowledge.

*Walkabout*, I think, is his best, because it was the first he'd ever done. He was a young man, a very young man. And for him to carry an entire film, and make it look effortless, and make it look fun, in a time when filmmaking was actually filmmaking, was amazing.

He deserves all the praise and recognition for being the true trailblazer that he is. He's made a lot of sacrifices, I'm sure, to bring our culture and our faces to the world. And I particularly thank him for helping me to believe in myself, just by being him.

*As one of Australia's best-known film critics, MARGARET POMERANZ has followed Gulpilil's career over many years – and has joined him on stage in Sydney and Melbourne, discussing his life and films.*



*David Gulpilil and Margaret Pomeranz in 2015.*

I did this program at the Sydney Opera House, and they asked me to do an evening with David. And I went back and looked at all his films in preparation. And what is extraordinary about him is that it's almost like a beam of attraction on screen. You literally can't look anywhere but at him.

He's got that amazing ability to move. When he dances outside the house in *Walkabout*, he's extraordinary, and that dance is so beautiful. It's really sad and yearning and elegant – I still think of it as one of the great moments in cinema.

He's such a performer. He loves being on the stage, he loves the attention, he loves being mischievous. He's just a really charming man. He's like an alchemist. I don't know what it is that he puts together, but he gets up on stage, or he's in front of an audience, and the light turns on.

I think there was a stage where he felt that he wasn't being acknowledged enough, and he probably still does. I was executive producer at SBS of the Independent Film awards, for three years. In one of those years, Gulpilil was given an award, and he wasn't coming down for them.

And so someone went up there to Arnhem Land to film a response. And it's got this thing in it, his acceptance speech, where he goes "I'm owed this." And then he wanders off into the distance. "I'm outta here." There is that element of him saying "I deserve this because I think I'm great too." You have to agree.

*An Australian film icon in his own right, JACK THOMPSON has known Gulpilil since the early 1970s, co-starring with him in **Mad Dog Morgan** (1976) and **Australia** (2008).*



*David Gulpilil and Jack Thompson in 2016.*

It's been a friendship, really, that's a sort of mutual admiration society. He never approached fellow actors and said "Can you give us a clue?" Largely because he didn't need to.

At the heart of Indigenous culture there is the bungul, in Yolngu language – the corroboree. And that is all communication, all inherited knowledge, cultural knowledge that's passed on in that way. And so you are required to communicate through dance and song.

And when (*Walkabout* director) Nic Roeg went to find the young man who could really dance and sing, they took him to young Gulpilil who'd learned from his father, who was the flawless dancer, the great communicator within that cultural context.

I think what happened on *Walkabout* was not just that cinema discovered Gulpilil. Gulpilil discovered cinema. And as he says, he loves it. He loves nothing better than to be working the camera.

I'm not sure if he realises what a significant pioneer he is in terms of Indigenous filmmaking. Prior to David there was Bob Tudawali in Jedda, and that was it, pretty much. But after David there were a number of young men and women, and now a whole lot of wonderful Indigenous filmmakers. He has the admiration and respect of the next generation of young men.

Everyone should see *Storm Boy*. They should see *The Tracker*. *Charlie's Country*, if anything, is a film about David. I heard him talk about wanting to make that picture for quite some time. I think he's good in *Mad Dog Morgan*, but if you want to see David, *The Tracker* is fantastic.

I think the people who really did embrace David were his fellow actors – and actors do have a sense of brotherhood. The aim as an actor is to not be seen to be acting, and for you to disappear into the character, whatever that character may be. And that's true with David. You totally accept the reality of what he's doing.

*STEPHEN PAGE has been director of the Bangarra Dance Theatre since 1991. As director of the 2004 Adelaide Festival, he co-conceived Gulpilil's autobiographical one-man stage show, directed by Neil Armfield and simply titled Gulpilil.*



*When a young Stephen Page met David Gulpilil, he thought: "What did I miss out on through my parents' assimilated generation?"*

He's a storyteller, he's an artist. Dance is just one of the many mediums he carries in his artistic vessel. His connection to land, to hunting – his presence, just his physicality, the way he stands, there's a poise in that.



When I first met David I was 18, 19, 20, and I was watching him in a room with teachers and tutors from North-East Arnhem Land. So he knew that we were urban fellas, and our parents didn't carry traditional dance and stories, and he connected with us by showing us a dance.

And whether it was a Baru – a crocodile dance – or whether he was mimicking a brolga, what I loved is that it was like you could see him visualising, and then he would follow what that vision is, and then he would embody that vision, and then he would become physically, through his body, that totem or that animal.

And I was like, I want some of that! What did I miss out on through my parents' assimilated generation? And that's when I realised how much I loved the form of dance.

Theatre, compared to film, was a real challenge for him. But he understood black theatre, because he was around when black theatre started in Redfern, some of the first black playwrights' conferences. So it was very challenging but at the same time it was a medium that he just took to.

There's no hiding in David, you know? He can admit he's an alcoholic, he can admit he's this, he can admit he's that. *Charlie's Country*, I think, was so true to him and true to his life. This man living in both worlds, and the challenges you face from a predominant Western system, and then how you try to find your spiritual balance.

He is not frightened of death. Because he doesn't allow the Western supremacist system to interfere with his internal mapping of his culture. I f---ing love that. He's beyond death. He can lay in a coffin and go "F--- you all, I'm connected to the spiritual world of kinship. This is not death, this is white death. This is not black death. We go on."