



'Imbued with gravitas and pathos': David Dalaithngu in 2016.

The star has left behind a profound body of work – and a permanent, inimitable impression on his industry

by Luke Buckmaster
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In the 1976 classic *Storm Boy*, the great Yolŋu actor David Dalaithngu delivers a line that became immortalised in Australian cinema. “Bird like him, never die,” he says, describing the pelican Mr Percival.

The substance of that line can apply to the man himself, who will live on through the light and shadow of the cinema, on to which he left a permanent and inimitable impression.



David Dalaithngu, Luc Roeg and Jenny Agutter in 1971's Walkabout.

For all the language we use to describe motion pictures, there really are no words to precisely articulate how Dalaithngu changed the movies, and how he changed us. The actor died on Monday, having been diagnosed with lung cancer in 2017. As I said in my review of his final film, Molly Reynolds' amazing documentary, he was like "a portal to a different way of thinking, a different way of being, even a different state of consciousness".

Dalaithngu's breakthrough role was in the British director Nicolas Roeg's hallucinogenic 1971 film Walkabout, in which two young white siblings (Jenny Agutter and Luc Roeg) wander through the outback after the death of their father. They meet Dalaithngu, who provides the drama's emotional core with a warm, affecting, fresh-faced performance, and an irresistibly cheeky gleam in his eye that never fully faded all those years later, even during his illness-ravaged final years.



David Dalaithngu in 1977's The Last Wave.

In the latter half of the 70s Dalaithngu appeared in other classics of the Australian new wave. In *Mad Dog Morgan* he played the partner-in-crime of the titular bushranger, played infamously by Dennis Hopper. In *Storm Boy*, which adapted Colin Thiele's classic children's book, Dalaithngu was the enigmatic Fingerbone, who at one point recites a spiritual story about pelicans with the entire weight of the film behind him – the director Henri Safran cutting to trees, crashing waves and back to Dalaithngu dancing, which was magic every time you saw it.

Continuing the theme of water, which runs throughout his oeuvre, the actor played another mysterious character in Peter Weir's *The Last Wave*, materialising from the protagonist's dreams to reflect on how a "dream is a shadow of something real".



Dalaithngu in 2002's The Tracker.

Dalaithngu's body of work is dotted with small but memorable performances. The clipped nature of many of his portrayals gives his oeuvre a fragmentary quality that, as this interview published in *Senses of Cinema* attests, was also apparent in the way he spoke, his answers to questions being "often indirect and fragmentary", but also "constantly making surprising connections", with the ability at any moment to be "startlingly lucid".

It is a great shame of the Australian film industry – and a testament to its longstanding whiteness – that Dalaithngu was not given more opportunities as a leading actor,

which he so richly deserved. Rolf de Heer's 2002 meat pie western *The Tracker* was the first feature to cast him as the lead; he played the titular character, accompanying police as they make a slow trek across the wilderness in pursuit of an accused murderer.

A more impressive production, with a richer and more expansive leading performance from Dalaithngu, was 2013's *Charlie's Country*, for which he won the best actor award at the 2014 Cannes film festival. De Heer made the film, which Dalaithngu co-wrote, after visiting the actor in prison; Dalaithngu had been found guilty of assaulting his partner.

On several occasions the late performer discussed the alcohol and substance abuse that occurred throughout his life, comparing beer to "putting his brain in a freezer" and marijuana to "like an early morning fog".

During his prison visit De Heer discovered that Dalaithngu was sick, frail and – as the film-maker expressed in a 2015 interview – "seemed to have lost interest in life". When he played a semi-autobiographical version of himself in *Charlie's Country*, the cheeky gleam in Dalaithngu's eye had grown into something more profound, imbued with gravitas and pathos.



Dalaithngu in Baz Luhrmann's 2008 film Australia.

In another world, the film would have kickstarted a career renaissance for Dalaithngu, finally leading to a period in which he was delivered lead role after lead role. It was not meant to be.

His subsequent work returned him to small parts, in films including the zombie movie *Cargo* and the neo-western *Goldstone*. His final performance in a narrative feature – playing the father of Finbergone Bill in the 2019 *Storm Boy* remake – had a cyclical quality, evoking memories of an earlier and more triumphant time in his career.

If “bird like him, never die” applied to David Dalaithngu, the form of bird he would take would perhaps be a kingfisher. In Molly Reynolds’ documentary the actor explains that his name – which his family have requested not be used for the time being – means “kingfisher”. Therefore, as he explained, his name is in the trees, in the fish, in the sky, in the stars, in the storm.