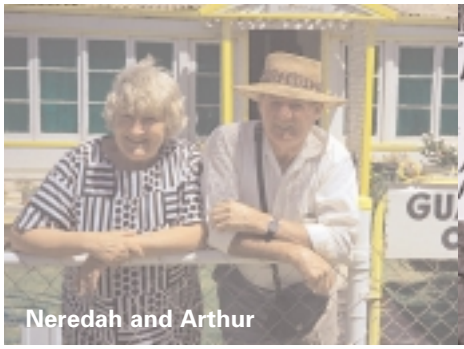
Neredah and Arthur

Herb


Pauline and Marto

CUNNAMULLA

A FILM BY DENNIS O'ROURKE

STUDY GUIDE

SYNOPSIS

Cunnamulla, 800 kilometres west of Brisbane, is the end of the railway line. In the months leading up to a scorching Christmas in the bush, there's a lot more going on than the annual lizard race.

Arthur patrols the sunbaked streets in his Flash Cab, the only taxi in town. He's as terse as the company motto – "no cash, no Flash". His wife Neredah knows everyone's business and tells it all. "My father told me never to marry anyone from the end of the line – they just jump off here and you don't know where they've come from," she says.

Marto, the local DJ, is into heavy metal and body piercing. He dreams of making it big with his band. His girlfriend Pauline sticks up for him, but her parents don't approve. Jack, a pensioner who adopted Marto as a baby, wants him to get a steady job with the local council.

Cara and Kellie-Anne have dropped out of school. They're trying not to get pregnant and longing for the day they can escape to the city. Paul is just 18 and about to go to jail for the first time. Herb, the scrap merchant who lives alone with his dogs and guinea fowls, wages endless battles with the 'bloody government'. Now he's at odds with Ringer, the town's official dog-catcher and undertaker.

In Cunnamulla, Aboriginal and white Australians live together but apart. Creativity struggles against indifference, eccentricity against conformity. Daily dramas unfold.

Famous country-and-western singer Slim Dusty is coming to town, a teenage concert pianist is touring with her pet cat, and Santa Claus is on his way.

Sometimes sad, often hilarious, CUNNAMULLA is an astonishingly honest portrait of life in an isolated community in outback Queensland.

produced and directed by DENNIS O'ROURKE
executive producers STEFAN MOORE and CHRIS OLIVER

MA 15+ PERSONS UNDER 15 YEARS MUST BE ACCOMPANIED BY A PARENT OR ADULT GUARDIAN. ADULT THEMES AND MEDIUM LEVEL COARSE LANGUAGE.

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INTERVIEW WITH THE FILMMAKER

Adapted from 'On the poetry of madness: an encounter with Dennis O'Rourke' by Martha Ansara, published in Metro Magazine No. 126, pp. 26-33

If any man come to the gates of poetry without the madness of the Muses, persuaded that skill alone will make him a good poet, then shall he and his works of sanity with him be brought to nought by the poetry of madness... – Plato

Every time I meet with Dennis O'Rourke, we're in Kings Cross and I step into the melancholy dissolution of other voices, other rooms. Sometimes we're in a gin-mill powdered with the ghosts of stand-over merchants and American GIs, or a Korean cafe watching red-faced white men eat alone, or a room that belongs to Dennis for a week or a month or a year. Following a screening of *Cunnamulla*, we meet in the lobby of the Gazebo Hotel, somewhere in Asia twenty years ago. We sit in a dim corner and Dennis persuades the staff to turn the music way down low; I turn on my tape recorder, and he turns on his. He pays me compliments and fixes upon me the same watchful, vulnerable gaze which I know he fixes upon the subjects of his films, and I too become strangely complicit in his search. It's a momentary shock, sitting with him in the gloom of the pot plants, to recognise that semi-unconscious state of self-manipulation, that blurring of the boundaries between documentary filmmaker and subject, that courtship that lures us where 'the film' wants us to go. This is what I also experience when looking through the camera. And Dennis is, of course, a superb instinctual cameraman. I know that he will run the interview the way he wants to... just as I would try to do, if I were his subject.

Over the past 15 years, Dennis's work has moved far from documentary journalism towards a more pure form of expression. This movement has not been without consequences for him.

This interview is, in part, about these consequences. To rephrase Edward Lucie-Smith, 'The position of the artist as a kind of favoured outcast in our society creates many difficulties for us [Dennis] in our [his] attempt to define his [sic] role. Perhaps the most logical way of dealing with it is to...see the man [sic] who makes art as one who offers a challenge to the rest of society and at the same time accepts a kind of bet with existence.'

The interview begins:

Dennis, as an artist, you require, I think, a very particular energy?

Energy would probably not be the word. It's a force, something that's inside you. It sounds pretentious to say 'creative force', but it's a sort of qualified madness and you just absolutely feel you've got to do something. It's all intuition for me. I believe that it's no good being rational. You have to be irrational. If you're rational, the true beauty of any idea will escape you.

In this respect then, many documentaries miss the mark, especially if their production is driven by feeding the tv slot and developing the career.

There is a fundamental crisis of critical understanding of the potential of documentary filmmaking. I think that these days, the word 'documentary' has almost lost its meaning. It has so many different meanings. The term 'documentary fiction' that I invented for *Good Woman of Bangkok* is somewhat misleading also. It stresses the fiction too much. As adjectives, 'documentary' and 'non-fiction' are good words. I like 'non-fiction'. It's understood in book publishing what non-fiction is. Although it might mean a cookery book or instructional manual to some, it also means serious writing.

I'm still trying to get at this sense of working with the observed reality, and changing it—but at the same time as it's changed, it remains the same. It's about trying to transfer the experience, the recorded reality, to make it totally different. I tried to make every scene in *Cunnamulla* this way, to take something that seems unprepossessing, almost banal to some people -- someone sitting on a bed talking, or sitting around a kitchen table talking. So that's just what it is. There's no movement. There's only that. But something happens in the process, in the tone of the recorded moment, such that it changes fundamentally while staying the same. It acquires a deeper meaning, which is universally understood. People don't miss it.

The only two things you've really got to work with in all cinema are *mise en scene* and montage. But how it works, what gives it this extra dimension of meaning, is what puzzles people when they say to me, 'How did you get people to be so intimate?' I can't answer that. I don't think they actually are being so intimate; I think they're just being how they would be if they could, any time with anybody. They're being themselves, really. But there's a transforma-

Dennis O'Rourke

tive effect, if it's recorded and photographed in a certain way and then placed in a certain context. As my hero, Joseph Brodsky, the Russian poet, says, what matters in telling a story, is not the story itself, but what follows what.

It seems that except on a few occasions you haven't edited for 'meaning' or by making obvious links.

When I say 'what follows what', I'm not saying 'cut from eye looking through keyhole to keyhole-framed shot of naked woman in bed'. I'm talking about what follows what in terms of the totality of the meaning of the previous moment. Every scene has to have some level of transcendency before I use it.

Don't think that I've lost my sense of this film's deficiencies and my ego's out of control. Quite the opposite. I know what its deficiencies are—well, I don't know, but I know that it is deficient. It's what Mallarmé said about poetry: a poem is never finished; it's merely abandoned. It's true: you run out of time, you run out of money and your film is abandoned and you send it out there and that's the end of it. It's quite imperfect.

But talking about the montage now, what I'm striving for is best described as a symphonic effect. There are ten major characters in the film: Arthur and Neredah, Marto and Jack and Pauline, Cara and Kellie-Anne. Herb, Paul and Ringer, the dogcatcher. There are ten people and they're supported by fifteen minor characters: the man who does the classical music program, the man who announces Slim Dusty, the concert pianist, Paul's sister, the mother of Cara, and so on. You can't rely on a tightly constructed script to connect all those people together. They're just disparate, really. You've got an elapsed time of eighty-something minutes for the whole film, and it's happening in a non-specific time frame, although there's the conceit of Christmas to create a sense of movement and to try and universalise the specific, because that's what I'm attempting to do. So these ten characters are basically just living. They're living and these are just the moments that are there, with their stories and their concerns. Will Marto get a job? Will he marry Pauline? Will Cara and Kellie-Anne get pregnant? Will they be able to get away? What the hell is Ringer doing shooting a dog one day and burying a man the next? How wounded is Herb, living alone there and hating the Council? And then you get to understand a little bit. They're just there, and they all exist in a certain time and place and that's the basis of the symphonic effect.

While each of these individual stories is respected, in the sense that they're living and they're sharing some of their life with me, I'm making a film. Their autonomy is respected but then they're all there to serve a larger idea and the larger idea is this: that the film is about nothing and, one hopes, everything ... that it is about life. That's what I'm striving for. And increasingly I'm drawn to the most unprepossessing situations. I find more meaning, a more fertile environment to have the things that are inside me come out, in these more banal situations. I used to be attracted to more exotic scenarios where the gloss was already in place but I'm moving away from that now. I wish I'd discovered that earlier.

I was thinking about some of the decisions you made about the photography of the film and its steady gaze.

A lot of it, again, was not thought through. In the beginning, my films were pretty much all hand-held. I then began to realise how much pure cinematic power could be obtained just from the landscape of the human face talking. It all depended on the quality of the conversation. And I discovered the notion of the absolute static frame. If I ever do use movement, like when there are two characters, you notice, there is quite a lot of panning, that's just bringing time into the space. It's not done in any way that's mechanical, where the pan seems to be motivated the moment you expect it. It's happening in a different moment, a moment that's actually going on in the other person's brain and there's something like telepathy occurring, a message being sent to my head saying, 'Move at this point'. It's not call and response; it's not action-reaction. Those movements are done through an intuitive process—Marto and Jack having the fight about the drugs, or Cara arguing with her mother across the kitchen table with Kellie-Anne in the middle. Why you move at a certain time and why you don't move when in theory you should be moving: this creates an extra level of tension. It creates a sense of this word I keep harping on about: verisimilitude, the semblance of absolute truth. And it's only true because of the actual process of making the film, that synthetic process. You have to tell lies to get at the truth. Not really lies, but illusions.

By the very act of making the frame rock solid, locked off, and letting things happen outside the frame as they would, you get an advantage that you can never get if you're just doing it handheld -- because even if you don't change the frame, the way that the audience reads film, they're getting the sense that at any moment they could go there. In my film, they know that mostly they're not going to.

I'm sitting here and I'm really looking at you. I'm not interested in what's over there. But if it were relevant, I would look.

Well, and if it were relevant to me, I would do it too. But you know the other thing is that there are only 220 cuts in this film, 220 event changes in the picture. The average ninety minute film would have a thousand or more.

There's something abstract about cutting, something that gives us a sense of the musicality of the film.

It's ineffable. You cannot pin it down. If you do pin it down, I think you're fucked.

That's what I was saying: if you cut for 'meaning' too much...

Oh, I'm cutting for meaning. But the meaning is a meaning which I don't myself fully comprehend. I don't know it, but I do have faith that it's there. That's my God. I don't believe in God, but I believe that there's this level of possibility of meaning, of exploration, of each other. All of these mysterious things and all of this emotional, sexual energy that drives us all, which can be explained through genetics and some people want to explain through religion, I like to channel all those things to the point of just living, just knowing when you're there and doing it. As much as anybody, I've had experiences. I have five children, I've had three wives, and still fall in love all the time, and still drink too much.

You talk about the banal circumstances in which you can 'let the things inside me come out'. All documentaries that are supposedly about the outside world are also the reflections of the feelings and obsessions of the people who make them.

Well, they would be if they were made well. But so many filmmakers don't go there. You cannot expect to create any good work of any kind, unless first of all you go inside. As a filmmaker, whether I'm making a fiction film or a non-fiction, I reject the notion that I can pretend to represent something, especially other people's ideas and, in part, their lives, without first of all placing myself completely within—in so far as I can. This always involves very, very deliberate strategies, and sometimes dangerous strategies, in terms of my emotions and what it might do to other people around me. I try to collapse all that normal, comfortable, insulating distance.

You're making a film but you've got to align yourself emotionally as much as you can. You're in this other space, but you work see it through other people's eyes, to put yourself emotionally, physically and intellectually in their position. You try to. But at the same time, for them to understand and to take you on, to love you, knowing what you're doing goes beyond that. They don't see you as the filmmaker who turns up with a crew and says, 'Okay, now just show me how you live your life today and we'll film. We've got two days and then we're out of here.' I need many, many days with anyone I'm filming. I make myself vulnerable to them and I have all sorts of strategies for this. The strategies are always different depending on who the person is.

Dennis! I don't think we should talk about this in an interview; it's so easily misunderstood. Besides, it's 'secret filmmakers' business'.

Why not? There's one thing, above all: you've got to be totally, totally engaged. If there's one word that sums it up, it's engagement. Now that word engagement can mean different things to different people. For me, it means that when I'm not with Neredah or Arthur, they might be thinking

about me and I might be thinking about them, even though I'm not there. I might be somewhere else and we're dreaming about each other. I'm turning up in their dreams and they're turning up in mine. Someone might have sexual desire for me, boy or girl. And I'm aware of that and they're aware of that. Or we have an argument about something. It's that complex.

It's as if you make yourself fall in love with each person, in a way, each time, and you're completely convinced of it and yet you have a distance. It's too weird and people don't understand it.

Well, we're all frightened and we're all part of the Judeo-Christian tradition. There's a lot of repression and for me, being brought up Catholic, there's a lot of baggage. I seem to have been shuffling it off more and more, which is good. But there's another element to this scenario: the characters in my film understand my role. They're not filmmakers. They're the taxi driver or a kid who does break and enters for a living who's in trouble with the police, or a scrap merchant. They can't make the film. But—and I hope it comes through in *Cunnamulla*, I think it does—their recorded moments are as true as you could hope to have in terms of the realities of their lives as recorded and represented within the frame of cinema. And that's not just because I was clever enough to get it. They also understand that I'm getting it. In a way, it's another form of contract. Week after week, they understand that whatever my process is, I need to do it in order to properly tell their story.

And you need to do it for reasons which have nothing to do with their story and nothing to do with film.

Yes. One of the marvellous advantages of the new digital technology is that you can keep rolling and you only have to break the mood every forty or sixty minutes. I think of the cameras and my microphones as my recording angels, they're silent and non-judgemental. They're doing my bidding. They understand me like I understand them. I've set them, and pushed the button and made the frame and adjusted the technical stuff, but, from that moment, they're doing something beyond me. They capture something that's in the air. It's not just the image, it's something else they capture: the moment. The notion of a moment is a beautiful one; a moment can be quite long.

People like you make films in order to embark on an exploration. It's not as if the end is the end.

Oh no, of course not. Each film is a project to connect your past experiences, all of them, of all kinds, with the present and the future. Most people only do that in their private lives because their work is drudgery, they don't have that privileged situation. I talk about my atheism but priests, for instance, have what artists have. They're connecting all the time, the past and the present and the future and their beliefs. It's all fused. Artists have it if they're real artists, as opposed to artists who are really just careerists.

Let's not lose sight of the fact that you've gone to a place in Australia that's usually only treated in terms of victims, but there's a huge underclass if you want to call it that, hundreds of thousands of people...

Millions.

Who live the lives that you describe, but who never appear in our films as themselves. They appear as victims...

Stereotypes.

Or not at all.

Stereotypes of failure, which we feel comfortable with.

Whoever 'we' is.

Well, that's the elites.

And in the cities.

Absolutely. People who just cannot connect with the wider world, who can't keep up for whatever reason.

Or don't want to.

Who don't want to, that's right, and why should they?

You seem to identify very strongly with these people in your films. I think *Cunnamulla* rejoices in their strengths and deeply shares their sorrows.

Well, that's very nice of you. Cunnamulla happens to be the name of a town and it's the name of the film. I could not have called the film Cunnamulla if it were simply a film about a town. It's not a portrait of a town. It's a portrait, if you want to call it a portrait at all, of ten characters. The locus is Cunnamulla, but Cunnamulla is not the subject. The subject is just ten people who know a little bit about each other. And I refer back to the symphonic effect.

Cara and Kellie-Anne

But people like the characters in my film, and I suppose it can be extended to most people who live in these remote places, are considered marginal, at least from the perspective of the city. We deny it but it's nevertheless true: we say 'marginal' about people who live west of a certain line in Sydney. In Sydney particularly there's this obsession with postcodes: where you live defines you, and there's sociological information to back it up. Oh, you live in a place like Cunnamulla; your level of education is probably low, you're probably not physically attractive, or you've got right-wing politics or whatever. The implication of all this is somehow that these people have less humanity. It's implied that somehow they would not be able to, say, care about the environment or care about politics or be as eroticised as someone who lives in a nice house in the Eastern suburbs in Sydney. But these people are not marginal in their own heads and they're not marginal to each other. People like the people in my film are always represented in the media at one remove. They're always spoken of as a sociological class and not as individuals -- as a stereotype, as a statistic. And we accept it. We say, 'Oh, the bush'. And the bush means people who don't like classical music and don't have erotic feelings or whatever. There's 20,000 towns like Cunnamulla in Australia. We see nothing. Who would imagine that in this town, as you've driven through, there's Marto and Cara and Kellie-Anne and Neredah—of all people, Neredah! They're there and they're so vibrant and so full of humanity, longing and love.

So my project with this film—as with all my films from now on—is to get inside and then look out, not be on the outside looking in. And in *Cunnamulla*, the opening scenes are set up that way as a metaphor. The very opening moment is with Neredah talking conspiratorially to me about something that's already going on outside. I'm already in. Our relationship is clearly one of intimacy and that's the all-important tone for the whole film, that I'm on the inside. Mercifully, somehow I've got myself there. And how I do it? You said we're not going to tell people but I don't even know how I do it. How I make my films is truly a mystery to me. I'm not bullshitting you. I've already spoken to you about all these strategies which I employ. A lot of them are automatic. It just comes out. It's like a sort of a courtship and there is manipulation, I'm not denying it, but it's mutual manipulation. It's engagement.

I'm searching for something and I was drawn to people like Paul, Cara and Kellie-Anne who can speak with such eloquence about their condition. Cara and Kellie-Anne speak for all young girls like this in all country towns of Australia—and cities, for that matter. The first time you see Paul he just talks about chasing girls and getting drunk and smoking dope and breaking into houses, and he's on the screen for a minute and half. The next time you see him, he talks about the lack of culture. And in so few words, through this transcendental moment, just one shot, slightly easing back, and the pauses, suddenly he has summed up everything

about the condition of Aboriginal youth more eloquently than even Noel Pearson could do. And he's a marginalised person within a marginalised place. He's the marginalised of the marginal.

You know you're going to get into trouble for not showing the other layers in the town, and for revealing the sex life of the girls.

Good. I wouldn't want it any other way. I believe that if I'm not provoking people, then I'm not doing my job, which is to reveal certain realities, no matter how troubling they are. How can we progress, if we don't address these things? These prurient types who want to save the world, they're wrong, and they'll be proven wrong.

Not that I think it's the filmmaker's job to show a balance.

But in this film, there is a balance. For whatever bleak picture of Cunnamulla it shows, I don't think that it's totally bleak. I believe the film is about redemption in the end. The girls do go away to Brisbane. Paul maintains his autonomy to the end. Herb does get a letter saying that his sister who he's never seen is coming in four and a half years. Neredah is pleased to get vegetable oil and seaweed soap, even if she's opening her present alone and Arthur's out there cruising the streets. She's still making the best of it. And Marto and Pauline, they may be at the end of the railway line, but they're still in love. The bleak picture of Cunnamulla would have detailed all the incest cases that went on while I was there, all the murders and bashings. That's the *Sixty Minutes* version. In the early days I thought I'd be doing a lot more filming of the graziers. They were very cautious, because they're paranoid about the ABC and they thought this was an ABC film. At one point, the man who was acting as the representative of the grazier's association called me on the mobile asking, 'When are you going to film us and get our side of the story?' thinking that the film was going to be the Aboriginal versus the whites story on land rights. For the same reason, there's none of the Aboriginal activist in the film because he was not able to drop his mask, his official stance. But while he couldn't, Paul could. It's not a sociological profile of Cunnamulla. It's about these people.

And it's a film about you.

Well, it's always that too, they're all about me. *Half-Life*'s about the death of my father; *Cannibal Tours* is about my leaving Papua New Guinea. But so what? This is not news. A filmmaker carries these things with him all his life.

And if the filmmaker doesn't invest the exploration of how they feel into the film, the film remains in the realm of the exterior.

If people don't get the idea that just because the film is called Cunnamulla it's not about Cunnamulla, that's just the title of the film, they're in trouble. But I'm not going to let it get to me. If people want their truth as fantasy, I can't help that. I'm not going to give it to them. If I want to make a film about ten characters, the film is its own defence. There's no other defence. I'm not interested in what's not in the film. That's somebody else's film. Go ahead and make it!

I shot 100 hours of film. I could have made that other film, but it wasn't the one that I wanted to make. And I have that great privilege. I can make the film I wanted to make. If I couldn't, I wouldn't make anything at all. I'm not a careerist.

As I say, my recording angels were just collecting it all. As I'm looking through the viewfinder, I know where the performances are transcending and where the performances are official. And eventually I was more and more drawn to the characters who were opening up to me. They were revealing themselves, and at the same time they are emblematic of all the conditions that affect people who live in marginal, remote parts of Australia.

I want to ask you about the sadness in the faces of Paul, Pauline, Cara, Kellie-Anne and the girl who plays the piano—what's the word?

The sense of anomie.

That's part of it.

I've often thought an apt description for the Australian character in general is the term 'to be dessicated'—like dessicated coconut. You're dried up. This is not contradictory to all the things that I've been saying about these people being vibrant and full of love. It's something in the Australian character in general, a kind of deep emotional woundedness, a sense that life's possibilities are more restricted—that's not everybody of course, but the national character. I think that's even happening with, say, Italians who migrate here or the second generation of Lebanese or Vietnamese migrants. I'm struck by it every time I travel to other countries, in Papua New Guinea, in Mexico, in Laos as I was a couple of weeks ago. We're so vibrant and free and young, blah-blah-blah, but there's an emptiness, a void. It's almost like the huge, gorgeous wide blue skies somehow suck up some aspect of our sensibilities and make us less. The poetry of life is reduced—I'm going to offend a lot of people when I say this.

People cannot speak their feelings but it comes pouring out of their faces.

That's just what it is. Everyone is emotionally constricted somehow.

And why are you so interested in this?

Well, you'd have to be. I don't understand why you ask me this. Because I'm desperate to be loved, and I'm always wanting more. I'm like that character in that Saul Bellow book.

***Henderson, the Rain King.* He's travelling through Africa crying out, 'I want. I want.' Do you think your feeling of depression prior to making the film was being worked through in any way? In the film we see several people who have a strong edge of depression as part of their make-up.**

No, I was very much a working man in Cunnamulla. It was very hard to get through. The only two characters that I imagined would be in the film before I commenced filming were Neredah and Arthur, essentially fulfilling the role of dual unreliable narrators as it were, a constant point of reference from beginning to end.

I filmed a lot more of the interaction of the characters, but I found that didn't serve the purposes of the story I was trying to tell in the editing. Those moments lost a certain energy. For example, Herb comes down to see Neredah and give her some eggs from his guinea fowls and Neredah brings out this old broken jaffle-maker and says, 'Oh Herb, I was going to throw this on the dump and then I thought you might have it'. It's a very funny scene and it works a treat, but there was something about the sort of hermetic quality that I was trying to get in the film itself, and those scenes somehow broke the mood. That sort of scene somehow diluted the level of subconscious tension I was trying to keep there all the way through. The idea of the depression, well...I have to say after several years of not feeling confident to go out and make another film like *Good Woman*, the light went on and I saw in my head the film that we're now talking about. It does sound like I'm up myself, but you want honest answers and I have to say I just had the film in my head. It was a film that I imagined from my own childhood memories, from reading literature, from reading newspapers, from watching politics in Australia, from travelling in the bush, working there as a young man, and knowing that they were badly served by the way the bush was represented. So the film that I made was the film that I already saw. I didn't know who was going to be in it, I didn't know what town it was. I had no idea.

So when you say 'saw it', what do you mean?

What I saw was the effect the film would have on me when it was finished and—as much as I can know this—in my contract with the audiences, the effect it would have on the audiences of the film. And then I had to just find it, find the town and find the people. And I found Cunnamulla. The story of settling on Cunnamulla is interesting too. I was still just coming out of these years when I was feeling very low and I was asked to give a talk at the National Library of Australia at a rather high-brow seminar on biography. One of the other speakers was Sister Veronica Brady, who I'd never met, but I admired her. I wasn't so sure she was going to admire me. [Laughs]. I had to talk about *The Good Woman of Bangkok*. And I was conscious that Veronica Brady was going to talk after me. And I was very insecure. Then she spoke and it was this great relief. She spoke beautifully, in the way a great teacher can speak, and she said something about what I had said and I forget what it was, but at that moment I thought, 'My God, she's with me and I'm with her!' And then when we were having drinks, some of her friends brought her over. And she's this wiry, diminutive feminist nun and I was feeling a bit worried, but she comes over and shakes my hand and—I cherish the words—she said, 'I thought *The Good Woman of Bangkok* was a very moral film, Dennis.' And I thought, 'Jesus, these fucking Phillip Adamses of this world and those holier than thou characters that want to pillory it, thanks Veronica!' Then she asked, 'What are you doing next?' And I said, 'Well, I've been feeling a bit low for a little while but I've just got this idea about a country town.' I told her how it had to be black and white and all these issues I wanted to deal with. She said, 'Oh, come to Western Australia!' When you're talking with somebody so formidable like that, you really have to engage. You step up a gear in terms of your own cognitive process and it just hit me straight away because I knew I owed her answer. I said, 'Oh, I think I have to do it in Queensland because that's where I grew up'. And you know what she said? She put her hand on my shoulder—she had to reach up—and she said, 'That's right, Dennis, that's your country'. And she was right. So then when I got some money to make it, I went to about thirty places in Queensland over a month, looking for the right town, just anonymously. Coming into town, checking into the pub, starting conversations. Cunnamulla was the first place I went to and I came back to it again. Intuition plays a big role. And then when I started filming, I started filming with all those official type people but what happened in the process was just by being there, I got to meet the characters who are in the film. And I've been saying this for twenty years: You don't so much make the film but the film makes you.

About the author

Martha Ansara, recipient of the 1987 Byron Kennedy Award at the Australian Film Awards, is an experienced documentary filmmaker whose films have won many international prizes and have been broadcast in Australia, the UK, Europe and North America. Martha has worked as a project officer at the Australian Film Commission, as an assessor for a range of government film bodies, and currently teaches documentary at the University of Technology, Sydney.

BIOGRAPHY OF DENNIS O'ROURKE

Dennis O'Rourke was born in Brisbane, Australia, on the 14th of August, 1945. For most of his childhood he lived in small country towns, before being sent to a Catholic boarding school for his secondary education.

In the mid-1960s, after two years of unsuccessful university studies, he went travelling in the outback of Australia, throughout the Pacific Islands and in South East Asia. He worked as a farm labourer, a salesman, a cowboy, a roughneck on oilrigs and as a maritime seaman. During this time he taught himself photography and began to get work as a photojournalist. In 1970, wanting to make films, he moved to Sydney. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation gave him the job of assistant gardener and he later became a cinematographer for that organisation.

From 1975 until 1979 he lived in Papua New Guinea, which was in the process of decolonisation. He worked for the newly independent government, teaching documentary filmmaking techniques to Papua New Guineans. His first film, *Yumi Yet –Independence for Papua New Guinea*, was completed in 1976. It was widely seen and discussed and awarded many prizes.

His other films include *Ileksen–Politics in Papua New Guinea* (1978), *Yap...How Did You Know We'd Like TV?* (1980), *The Shark Callers of Kontu* (1982), *Couldn't Be Fairer* (1984), *Half Life–A Parable for the Nuclear Age* (1985), *"Cannibal Tours"* (1988), *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (1991) and *The Pagode da Tia Beth* (1993). In addition to his own productions, as a cinematographer, director, producer, or mentor, he has contributed to the making of many other documentary films.

Retrospectives of Dennis O'Rourke's work have been held at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, the Pacific Film Archive in San Francisco, the Amsterdam International Documentary Film Festival, the Berlin Film Festival, and in Freiburg, Honolulu, Los Angeles, Marseille, Melbourne, New Delhi, Singapore and Uppsala. On two occasions, he has been a Visiting Fellow in the Research School of Pacific Studies at the Australian National University.

His numerous awards include the Jury Prize for Best Film at the Berlin Film Festival, the Grand Prix at the Nyon Documentary Film Festival, the Grand Prix at the Festival de Popoli, Florence, the Eastman Kodak award for Cinematography, the Director's Prize for Extraordinary Achievement at the Sundance Film Festival, and the Australian Film Institute's Byron Kennedy Award.

Dennis O'Rourke has five children and lives in Canberra, Australia. He continues to make feature documentary films—the latest being *Cunnamulla*.

FILMOGRAPHY

THE PAGODE DA TIA BETH (1993)
Set in a poor area of Sao Paulo, Brazil, this was a pilot film for a television series called *In Search of the World's Great Bars*. The series is as yet unmade.

54 minutes, video

Written, directed and produced by Dennis O'Rourke

THE GOOD WOMAN OF BANGKOK (1991)
The controversial and intimate portrait of Aoi, a reluctant third world prostitute who caters for the enthusiastic first world clientele who crowd the girlie bars of Patpong each night.

"Those who may denounce this movie for its displays of nudity or conversations about sex, will have spectacularly, and foolishly, missed its point. The film does not ask us to revel in the fleshpots, but to comprehend them, to see the world through another's eye—a loved one's eyes—and reflect on its callousness and blind brutishness."
—Michael Wilmington, *Los Angeles Times*

82 minutes, 35mm/video

Written, directed and produced by Dennis O'Rourke

Featuring Yaowalak Chonchanakan as Aoi

Photography and sound recording: Dennis O'Rourke

Associate producer: Glenys Rowe

Film editor: Tim Litchfield

"CANNIBAL TOURS" (1988)
When tourists journey to the furthermost reaches of the Sepik River, is it the indigenous tribespeople or the white visitors who are the cultural oddity? This film explores the differences (and the surprising similarities) that emerge when "civilised" and "primitive" people meet.

"Dennis O'Rourke and his films ought to be regarded like Bernard Smith, another commentator on European vision and the South Pacific, as a living national treasure. *"Cannibal Tours"* is a small masterpiece which puts to shame the work of most Australian feature directors in the acuity of its observations of human behaviour."
—Peter Crayford, *Financial Review* (Sydney)

70 minutes, 35mm/16mm/video

Produced, directed and photographed by Dennis O'Rourke

Associate producers: Laurence J Henderson, Chris Owen

Film editor: Tim Litchfield

HALF LIFE–A PARABLE FOR THE NUCLEAR AGE (1985)
Examines the facts leading up to the Bravo nuclear test in 1954, which irreversibly destroyed the fragile world of the Marshall Islanders.

"A devastating investigation...astonishing contemporary record film."—David Robinson, *The Times* (London)

86 minutes, 35mm/16mm/video

Produced, directed and photographed by Dennis O'Rourke

Associate producers: Martin Cohen, Laurence J Henderson, David Thaxton

Film editor: Tim Litchfield

Archival picture research: Kevin Green, David Thaxton

Music: Bob Brozman

COULDN'T BE FAIRER (1984)
"a devastating account of the Aboriginal land-rights battle in Queensland. It reveals white Australians at their most beer-sodden and hypocritical. O'Rourke has captured scenes showing how racism and vulgarity, which the middle class of Sydney and Melbourne like to think died with the 1950s, are alive and thriving in the Australian heartland."
—Robert Milliken, *National Times* (Sydney)

50 minutes, 16mm/video

Written and narrated by Mick Miller

Produced, directed and photographed by Dennis O'Rourke

Film editors: Tim Litchfield, Ruth Cullen

THE SHARK CALLERS OF KONTU (1982)
Captures the rituals and daily rounds of Kontu village life with some of the most remarkable footage ever filmed in the Pacific Region.

"O'Rourke's film carries us through a whole revolution, or devolution of values, and I for one found it an experience that was sometimes beautiful, and sometimes shaming and painful."—John Hinde, ABC Radio (Sydney)

54 minutes, 16mm/video

Produced, directed and photographed by Dennis O'Rourke

Associate producer and sound recordist: Chris Owen

Film editor: Stewart Young

YAP...HOW DID YOU KNOW WE'D LIKE TV? (1980)
Yap, a small island in Micronesia receives television in 1979, followed by a steady stream of American programs posing what many Yapese felt was a serious risk of cultural imperialism on the part of the US.

"Dennis O'Rourke's film is a witty and disturbing view of cultural imperialism at its most cynical and blatant"
—Geoff Andrew, *Time Out* (London)

56 minutes, 16mm/video

Produced, directed and photographed by Dennis O'Rourke

Film editor: Peter Berry

ILEKSEN–POLITICS IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA (1978)
Ileksen (pidgin for "election") opens a window into Papua New Guinea's attempts to implement the British electoral system in their first independent elections.

"an extraordinary documentary that entertains as well as provokes, makes you laugh as well as think. Its best feature is that it does all this without a hint of patronising..."
—Derek Malcolm, *The Guardian* (London)

58 minutes, 16mm/video

Produced, directed and photographed by Dennis O'Rourke

Co-director and sound recordist: Gary Kildea

Film editor: Peter Berry

YUMI YET–INDEPENDENCE FOR PAPUA NEW GUINEA (1976)
The peoples of Papua and New Guinea celebrate the granting of independence.

"The seamless inevitability of O'Rourke's finest work takes the art of the documentary to a very high level. What's remarkable is his skill at letting his films unfold casually, piece by piece, so that they tell a story without the tiresome intervention of a narrator or even the appearance of telling a story..."—John Powers, *LA Weekly*

54 minutes, 16mm/video

Produced and directed by Dennis O'Rourke

Photography: Richard Marks, Dennis O'Rourke, Alan Shephard

Film editor: Tom Foley

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