



IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

The Proposition

+ Q&A with director John Hillcoat, actors Emily Watson, Danny Huston, Guy Pearce and Ray Winstone, and producers Cat Villiers and Chiara Menage. John Hillcoat, Danny Huston, Guy Pearce and Ray Winstone will be appearing via Zoom.

We screen this new restoration to mark the BFI's release of The Proposition on UHD and Blu-ray on 28 March.

The Proposition is an Australian Western with tinges of classical tragedy. Nick Cave claims to have written the script in three weeks, with much of the first week taken up working out how to get the dialogue into the middle of the page. Sparse, evocative and with a highly disturbing balance between beauty and brutality, *The Proposition* is a fine piece of screenwriting (and Cave, for all his flippant description of the process, knows it). In the merciless heat of North Queensland, it pits the British administration against a family of Irish bushrangers, with the native aboriginal population aligned with and against both.

On the side of law and order is Captain Stanley (Ray Winstone in a startlingly subdued performance), a man who is married above his station to the beautiful but frustrated Martha (luminously played by Emily Watson). Determined to bring civilisation to the hell-hole to which he has been assigned, Stanley struggles against blinding headaches, his own sense of failure, the arrogance of his superiors and the incompetence of his juniors. On the bushranger side are the Burns brothers: in order of age, Arthur (Danny Huston), Charlie (Guy Pearce) and Mike (Richard Wilson). The Burnses are held responsible for a murderous attack on a local homestead and when Stanley captures Charlie and Mike in a shoot-out he makes the proposition of the title: if Charlie brings in Arthur by Christmas (exactly a week away), Mike's life will be spared.

Stanley's 'proposition' is as deadly a deal as any since Emilio Fernandez told Warren Oates to bring him the head of Alfredo Garcia. It is a game in which no one can win, giving it the unmistakable whiff of tragedy. Whatever Charlie does, he brings about the death of a brother. What's more, Stanley gradually comes to realise that he has set in motion a series of events which will prise free his tenuous grip on civilisation, destroying everything he has achieved. And yet, at the end, the script finds a place to take this conflict which is at once astonishing and profoundly moving.

Cave's screenplay has all the purity of a Western by Anthony Mann or Sam Peckinpah, free from the deadly homogenisation that script doctors and three-act structures usually bring. And John Hillcoat as director has responded with a wonderful combination of grand gestures and minute control of detail, the latter including the plague of flies that descends when

Mike is lashed and the aboriginal servant sent home for Christmas, who carefully removes his European shoes as he goes out of the Stanleys' gate.

The Proposition harks back to the first years of the Australian cinema renaissance – what David Stratton called 'The Last New Wave' – where the tension between a hostile landscape and a country in search of a civilised identity, between freedom and compromise, forged a new mythic structure. 'The Australian Western,' says Hillcoat, 'has several similarities to the American Western. In fact, the Australian bushranger films predate the American Western: the first feature film ever made in Australia was *The Story of the Kelly Gang* in 1906. They have a primeval conflict between good and evil, with human nature pitted against itself as if on a blank slate.

'The bushrangers were outlaws who went into all the remote areas: outback Australia was a final frontier full of people trying to escape their past, very extreme and harsh and brutal. The clash was between the outlaw Irish-convict generation, represented by the brothers, and the British, with the aboriginals in conflict with both of them – three ways, like a triangle. The bushrangers either utilised the aboriginals' knowledge to help them escape from the law or were tracked down and caught by the same trackers. There was a symbiotic relationship, either antagonistic or for mutual gain.'

To realise the central conflict Hillcoat places enormous confidence in Guy Pearce in a role – not unlike Eastwood's in the Leone trilogy, with many of the key moments similarly played out in the actor's haunted eyes. This, too, was in the script: Cave wrote the role of Charlie for Pearce, he says, personally tracking the actor down in South-East Asia – where he was having a difficult time shooting Jean-Jacques Annaud's *Two Brothers* – to make sure he read it.

'His character didn't have a lot of dialogue,' he explains, 'and I realised that a certain kind of actor has to play that. I loved a couple of Guy's roles: there's so much going on in his face.'

'We wanted to avoid having American stars,' says Hillcoat. 'We wanted it to be a real Australian film – Australian talent and English talent – because Australia has such great actors.'

But the real theatre on which *The Proposition* is played out is the Australian landscape, lovingly captured by French cinematographer Benoit Delhomme, fresh off the more controlled beauties of Michael Radford's *The Merchant of Venice*. Delhomme, who won the AFI Best Cinematography Award for *The Proposition*, has responded to the light of the outback – harsh, unfiltered, almost horizontal – like many a northern DOP before him discovering the special properties of the southern hemisphere.

Yet *Out of Africa* this isn't: *The Proposition*'s aim is not to place its characters against a beautiful backdrop but to link them directly to the land's Darwinian indifference. 'These were brutal times,' says Hillcoat, 'but the land also had a great beauty to it. I think it's a metaphor for the whole thing. In the middle of the day it's so harsh and oppressive yet when the sunsets come it's stunningly beautiful. It goes from one extreme to another.'

So, too, do the central characters: Stanley, Charlie and above all Arthur, a brutal bushranger who will kill almost without thinking and who the script makes quite clear was responsible for the grisly massacre that sets the story in motion. But Arthur – played with much the same mood swings as Danny Huston brought to his lead role in *ivansxtc*. – also travels with a library of books, improbably arranged in his mountain bolt hole, quotes poetry at will and tenderly quizzes Charlie about the girl young Mike has supposedly met. This scene, which takes place on a rock outcrop, the two brothers silhouetted against a blood-red setting sun, is one of the best in the film, not just for its harsh pictorial beauty but for its brilliant marshalling of irony. We know Charlie is lying: Mike is locked up and probably dying in Stanley's jail. But the details he invents for Mike's girl under Arthur's cheerful but relentless questioning – her name, family background, cooking skills represent a yearning that both brothers find hard to resist. Best of all, there is every possibility that Arthur knows Charlie is lying, that he sniffs the possibility of a set-up, thus preparing us for the film's wonderful ending.

'From my point of view,' says Cave, 'we weren't putting the film forward as truthful: we were looking for truth more at a poetic level – with, of course, the amount of research Johnny always does to keep things on track.'

'There are certain aspects to our history that we wanted to include, but without getting bogged down,' says Hillcoat, who spent years researching the complex relationship between the aboriginal population and the two groups of settlers. 'Nick brought those alive through the conflict between the environment and the European immigrants, and between the Irish and the British, and the British and the aboriginal community. Basically, it's a panorama of life from that time.'

As Hillcoat keeps stressing, the late 19th century in Australia was a violent period – and *The Proposition* is a violent film. 'It's really fucking violent!' Hillcoat says. 'The violence is brutal and very real but it's buried in the thrust of the story, which is why a lot of people don't have a problem with it.'

John Hillcoat and Nick Cave interviewed by Nick Roddick, *Sight & Sound*, March 2006

THE PROPOSITION

Director: John Hillcoat
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Pacific Film and Television Commission
©: UK Film Council
Production Company: Sure Fire Films
Co-production Companies: Autonomous, Jackie O Productions
In association with: Pictures in Paradise
With the participation of: The Film Consortium
Developed/Made with the assistance of:
The National Lottery through UK Film Council Premiere Fund
Executive Producers: Robert Jones, Chris Auty, Norman Humphrey, James Atherton, Michael Henry, Sara Giles, Michael Hamlyn
Producers: Chiara Menage, Cat Villiers, Chris Brown, Jackie O'Sullivan
Line Producer: Gina Black
Associate Producer (Australia): Pam Collis
Associate Producer (UK): Christopher Simon
For UKFC: Production Executive: Brock Norman Brock;
Head of Business Affairs: Will Evans; *Head of Production Finance:* Vince Holden; *Head of Physical Production:* Fiona Morham;
Head of Development: Jenny Borgars
For The Film Consortium: Head of Production: Neil Peplow; *Business Affairs:* Andy Ordonez
For Pacific Film and Television Commission: Robin James, Henry Tefay, Paul O'Kane, Ian Dennis
Production Manager (UK): Libby Mourant
Production Co-ordinators: Jennifer Des Champs, Nicki Ellis
Financial Controller: Sophie Siomos
Location Manager: Tony Clarke
Indigenous Co-ordinator: Pearl Eatts
Pre-production Co-ordinator (UK): Polly Taylor
Post-production Supervisor: Louise Seymour
1st Assistant Director: Darren Mallett
2nd Assistant Director: Vera Biffone
Script Supervisor: Joanne McLennan
Casting (Australia): Nikki Barrett
Casting (UK): Gary Davy
Script Editor: Geoff Cox
Screenplay: Nick Cave
Director of Photography: Benoît Delhomme
2nd Unit Director of Photography: Simon Finney
A Camera Focus Puller: Margie McClymont
B Camera Focus Puller: Brett Matthews
Clapper Loader: Troy Reichman
Gaffer: Graham Rutherford
Key Grip: Brett Marks
Special Stills Photographer: Polly Borland
Stills Photographer: Kerry Brown
Special Effects/Armourer Supervisor: Steve Courtney
Visual Effects: Framestore CFC
Graphic Designer: Wendy Buick
Editor: Jon Gregory
Associate Editor: Ian Seymour
Production Designer: Chris Kennedy
Art Directors: Marita Mussett, Bill Booth
Set Designers: Martin Ash, Paula Whiteway, Josh Madrers
Set Decorator: Jill Eden
Prop Master: Steve Taylor
Costume Designer: Margot Wilson
Costume Supervisor: Lyn Askew
Key Hair/Make-up: Sally Gordon
Make-up/Hair: Lea Dixon, Bronwyn Fitzgerald

Guy Pearce Make-up/Hair: Zeljka Stanin
Special Effects Prosthetics: Kym Sainsbury
Title Design: Murray & Sorrell FUEL, Damon Murray, Stephen Sorrell
Digital Film Grade: Framestore CFC
Negative Cutters: Tru-cut
Music: Nick Cave, Warren Ellis
Vocals: Nick Cave, Martha Murphy Badger
Musicians: Warren Ellis, Marty Casey, Doug Leitch, Jim White, George Vjestica
Sound Recordist: Craig Walmsley
Boom Operator: Jenny Sutcliffe
Re-recording Mixer: Richard Davey
Supervising Sound Editor: Paul Davies
Dialogue Editor: Alison Bown
Sound Effects Editor: Jack Gillies
ADR Supervisor: Ian Morgan
Foley Artist: James Hamilton
Foley Recordist: Tim Alban
Stunt Co-ordinator: Ric Anderson
Researcher (UK): Lucy Whitton
Researcher (Australia): M.L. Hillcoat
Dialogue Coach (Australia): Melissa Agnew
Dialogue Coaches (UK): Sandra Butterworth, Julia Wilson Dickson
Horse Master: Ric Anderson
Head Wrangler: Kevin Kasper

Cast

Guy Pearce (*Charlie Burns*)
Ray Winstone (*Captain Stanley*)
Danny Huston (*Arthur Burns*)
John Hurt (*Jellon Lamb*)
David Wenham (*Eden Fletcher*)
Emily Watson (*Martha Stanley*)
Richard Wilson (*Mike Burns*)
Noah Taylor (*Brian O'Leary*)
Jeremy Madrona, Jae Mamuyac (*Asian prostitutes*)
Mick Roughan (*Mad Jack Bradshaw*)
Shane Watt (*John Gordon*)
Robert Morgan (*Sergeant Lawrence*)
David Gulpiilil (*Jacko*)
Bryan Probets (*Officer Dunn*)
Oliver Ackland (*Patrick Hopkins*)
David Vallon (*Tom Cox*)
Daniel Parker (*Henry Clark*)
Carl Rush (*Robert Borland*)
Gary Waddell (*Officer Davenport*)
Iain Gardiner (*Officer Matthews*)
Bogdan Koca (*Paul Broussard*)
Sue Dwyer (*Mrs Broussard*)
Lance Medlin (*Dan O'Reilly*)
Rodney Boschman (*Tobey*)
Boris Brkic (*Officer Halloway*)
Ned Rose (*old aboriginal*)
Leah Purcell (*Queenie*)
Tom Budge (*Samuel Stroat*)
Tom E. Lewis (*Two Bob*)
Ralph Cotterill (*Doctor Bantrey*)
Max Age (*Thommo*)
Jerry Solomon (*Blinky*)

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104 mins

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