**Finding Your Way: The Films of Peter Weir**

# The Last Wave

**The Last Wave**
*Directed by:* Peter Weir
*Produced by:* Ayer Productions
*A* McElroy & McElroy *production*
*In association with:* Derek Power, South Australian Film Commission, Australian Film Commission
*Produced by:* Hal McElroy, James McElroy
*Production Manager:* Ross Matthews
*Production Accountant:* Penny Carl
*Location Manager (South Australia):* Bev Davidson
*Production Assistants (New South Wales):* Rod McMorran, Philip Hearnshaw
*Producer's Secretary:* Fiona Gosse
*Production Secretary:* Su Armstrong
*1st Assistant Director:* John Robertson
*2nd Assistant Director:* Ian Jamieson
*3rd Assistant Director:* Penny Chapman
*Continuity:* Gilda Baracchi
*Casting Consultants:* xM & L Casting
*Screenplay by:* Peter Weir, Tony Morphett, Petru Popescu
*Original Idea:* Peter Weir
*Director of Photography:* Russell Boyd
*Additional Photography:* Ron Taylor, George Greenough, Klaus Jaritz
*Colour Consultant:* James Parsons
*Camera Operator:* John Seale
*Focus Puller:* David Williamson
*Clapper Loader:* David Foreman
*Gaffer:* Tony Tegg
*Best Boy:* Alan Dunstan
*Key Grip:* Merv McLaughlin
*Stills:* David Kynoch
*Optical Effects:* Optical & Graphic
*Special Effects:* Monty Fieguth, Bob Hilditch
*Editor:* Max Lemon
*Assistant Editors:* Peter Fletcher, Justin Milne
*Production Designer:* Goran Warff
*Art Director:* Neil Angwin
*Set Decorator:* Bill Malcolm
*Construction Manager (New South Wales):* Greg Brown
*Construction Manager (South Australia):* Herbert Pinter
*Wardrobe Designer:* Annie Bleakley
*Make-up/Hairdresser:* José Perez
*Music:* Charles Wain
*Sound Recordist:* Don Connolly
*Boom Operator:* David Cooper
*Sound Re-recording:* Phil Judd
*Sound Editor:* Greg Bell
*Adviser on Tribal Aboriginal Matters:* Lance Bennett
*Cast:*
Richard Chamberlain (*David Burton*)
Olivia Hamnett *(Annie Burton)*
Gulpilil [i.e. David Gulpilil] *(Chris Lee)*
Nandjiwarra Amagula *(Charlie)*
Frederick Parslow *(Rev Burton)*
Vivean Gray *(Dr Whitburn)*
Walter Amagula *(Gerry Lee)*
Roy Bara *(Larry)*
Cedric Lalara *(Lindsey)*
Morris Lalara *(Jacko)*
Peter Carroll *(Michael Zeadler)*
Athol Compton *(Billy Corman)*
Hedley Cullen *(judge)*
Michael Duffield *(Andrew Potter)*
Wallas Eaton *(morgue doctor)*
Jo England *(babysitter)*
John Frawley *(policeman)*
Jennifer De Greenlaw *(Zeadler's secretary)*

## Peter Weir on 'The Last Wave'

*David Gulpilil, the young aboriginal star, is familiar to American audiences as the star of Nicolas Roeg's* Walkabout. *How did you come to use him?*

It's very difficult to tell you about Gulpilil. I know very little about the man. He's enigmatic; he's an actor, a dancer, a musician. He's a tribal man, initiated in the tribal ways, found by Roeg at a very early age and put into an international movie. Roeg took him on publicity trips to Europe and the States. He has a foot in both cultures. It's an enormous strain on the man. In movies sometimes you can draw on that. In his instance in the story, as one of the men accused of manslaughter, he is torn between two cultures. I didn't get the performance out of him, the situation did. The man is torn, and he has broken his tribal law by moving to the city, by marrying a Black girl who is not tribal. He goes home, they still accept him in his tribal area, but he's under enormous tension. It's impossible to know what tension he's under. He speaks English well and I talked with him. You can have a conversation about anything and then suddenly, he'll have a moment, as I experienced. It was one of the things that got me on to the movie. He'll say something in English that makes no sense. This is one of the things that drew me to write a part for him. I'd used him in a TV episode in a very straightforward part. He was being persecuted by a white overseer in a historical series, and we were chatting in a bar one night after work and he said some things about his family and then suddenly he said some English sentence. It was something like 'You see my father and I and that's why because the moon isn't.' And I said, 'What's that mean – your father and I and the moon isn't?' And he repeated it. I said, 'David, I don't understand.' And he said it again. This was ridiculous – we'd been talking. I said 'What are you talking about?' So he rearranged the sentence. It still made no sense. Well, I had to leave it, otherwise we couldn't continue the conversation. And I thought about it that night and the next morning and suddenly I realised what it was. That he was talking about another perception. He was talking about an experience for which there are no words. He'd seen something in another way. That was a breakthrough for me, firstly in my writing of the screenplay, and secondly in my future conversations with him, because then I would look out for these moments or I would provoke them.

*How did you decide on the subject matter?*

It just arose. A series of connecting things, moments, that conversation with Gulpilil that I couldn't understand. Something that happened before that. I'd had a premonition. I'd never had anything like that in my life. I don't consider myself psychic. I was on holiday in Tunisia. We were driving to Duga, this inland city which looks like Pompeii, and we stopped the car to exercise a little and everyone was picking up bits of marble by the roadside in the fields. We were heading back to the car and I had this feeling which lasted some seconds that I was going to find something. I was picking up bits of stone and I saw on a stone these three parallel lines and I picked that stone up. In fact it was a hand, a fist, and the lines were between fingers. It resisted a little bit, then burst up through the ploughed field and there was this head, the head of a child, broken off at the neck and at the wrist. I smuggled it out and took it home and had it dated and put it on my desk. I wondered about the head; why did I know I was going to find it? And I thought: what if a lawyer had found it – that's more interesting. And at some stage from that I thought, what if a lawyer dreamt of some evidence, what if he found some evidence through a premonition? Someone trained to think precisely on one hand; on the other, to dream some evidence. I told Gulpilil about this and we discussed things and gradually the forces began to come together. I did a lot of reading during that period – Casteneda and the Old Testament, strangely different influences. Thor Heyerdahl's theories, Velikovsky – and somehow these clues began to form a pattern. There was a new way to look at tribal people.

Richard Henderson *(prosecutor)*
Penny Leach *(schoolteacher)*
Merv Lilley *(publican)*
John Meagher *(morgue clerk)*
Guido Rametta *(Guido)*
Malcolm Robertson *(Don Fishburn)*
Greg Rowe *(Carl)*
Katrina Sedgwick *(Sophie Burton)*
Ingrid Weir *(Grace Burton)*
Australia 1977
106 mins
Digital

The screening on Wed 1 Apr will be introduced by producer Jeremy Thomas

**With thanks to**
Peter and Ingrid Weir

*The Cars That Ate Paris* and *The Plumber* will be released on BFI Blu-ray on 25 May



*Are the aboriginal legends in the film authentic?*

Everything passed through the hands of the tribal aborigines we used. The Sydney people are dead – white contact destroyed them. Around the city they've left signs and symbols, some paintings, carvings in national parks; they're now protected. Nobody knows what they mean unless there's obvious hunting in the picture. We took the Groote Island people to look at them. And Nanji just said 'Poor fellows.' So therefore, we created a fictional situation. The only thing was, Nanji insisted that there are still the Sydney people there, but they're spirits and their spirits exist at sacred sites and protect sacred sites, so if there's a sacred site under Sydney he said, 'This is true, your script is true. The spirits will be there, therefore I cannot be human.' That was one change because in my story Charlie was human, initially. He pointed out that that was impossible. But he could be a spirit that took on human form; this is quite possible.

*In* The Last Wave *a white man seeks spiritual assistance from a Black man. Was it your intention to show that whites can learn from Blacks if they take the trouble?*

I don't think so. You can't come in contact with them. I paid a million dollars to spend six weeks with them, when it gets down to it. Who could do that? They're in the North, a long way away. There are a few books, but I haven't been lucky enough to find anything interesting. They're either academic on the one hand or quasi-poetic on the other, and I didn't set out to preach in the film. But something to think about, something I think about a lot is the fact that I, with a basically Scottish-Irish-English background, have lost my past. I have no past. I'm nobody. I ask my parents who these people are in the photograph album and they can't remember. Nobody knows. I have no culture. I'm a European who lives in Australia. I'm an Australian in a sense, but I've lost something. And that's what I made a film about.

*Part of the film seems to be about the white man's guilt over the destruction of the aboriginal culture.*

It's part of the story but by no means the most significant. The loss of Dreamtime on our side is much more interesting.

*What do the aborigines mean by Dreamtime?*

It's a system of perception. I first learned about it as if it were some kind of mythology. Like Grimm's fairy tales: a collection of aboriginal Dreamtime legends: how the rivers were formed, where the sun came from. In fact, I didn't like anything I read. They always seemed cute in English, or coy. 'The great great bull was in the sky and he hit the wombat on the head and that's how the sun came.' I just didn't like it. It was only when I talked to tribal people, not only about that but about other things, that an idea of Dreamtime, as a way of perceiving, as another perception, started to come to me. The Dreamtime wasn't something in the past, but was a continuing thing. It is, in fact, another time, and people of great power can step into it and step back into our time. Now, how or what that means, I only touched on.

*It seems that in your film primeval forces are gaining control over a part of the world that was previously considered civilized.*

We, 40 million of us, live hard along the coasts. We're mostly in the cities on the edge of this vast continent. It's just there to be seen if you live there. It affects you even if not conscious of it – that great emptiness. You can travel and see nature as it was before the history of man and you can be days driving from a hamburger joint or something. It doesn't take any imagination at all to feel awed.

*You've been quoted as saying, 'It takes the littlest thing to reveal the chaos underneath.' What is there under Richard Chamberlain's suburban life? It seems happy and tranquil.*

Things not thought through, things suppressed. The natural forces that have been cemented over and the bloodstains of the corpse are seeping through for some people. It's there and we just don't choose to see it.

Peter Weir interviewed by Judith M. Kass on 8 January 1979, for WBAI Radio