



FILM OF THE WEEK

SAMSON & DELILAH

(MA15+, 100 minutes)
On general release from Thursday

Warwick Thornton's feature debut is a triumph, a Central Australian love story with heart and soul. If you like, it's a teen movie, but in sharp contrast to any teen movie you're ever likely to have seen. Samson (Rowan McNamara) is a 15-year-old with no discernible future. Withdrawn and worn-out, he lives with his musician brother (Matthew Gibson) across the street from Delilah (Marissa Gibson), a 16-year-old angel of mercy who's there to tend to the needs of her ailing artist grandmother (Mitjili Napanangka Gibson). Home is a small, remote Aboriginal community outside Alice Springs.

For the 38-year-old Thornton, who grew up there (and has since worked as a cinematographer on documentaries such as *The First Australians* and *My Brother Vinnie*), *Samson & Delilah* is a labour of love. He wrote, directed and shot it. And his mostly non-professional cast serve him well, with McNamara in his first role and Gibson her first major one delivering spot-on performances. But it's the shape that Thornton brings to their characters' lives that makes the film so powerful, and everything that happens is preparing us for the glorious final shot.

The style is simple, restrained and heart-rendingly precise, more in the way of a Wim Wenders saga of landscape than a Hollywood romp in fantasyland. The pace is measured, the approach observational, a rich accumulation of detail allowing the characters and their oppressive circumstances to emerge gradually, showing them to us rather than planting pointed dialogue.

Thinking he's alone, Samson comes out of his shell, dancing with a controlled energy and instinctive grace that's entirely at odds with his layabout persona. Delilah is watching, but says nothing. Again, much later in the film, when he speaks for the first time — with a stutter — his surly manner and habitual petrol-sniffing appear

in a different light.

The direction in which Thornton takes the young couple might seem like a descent. The quiet comedy of their courtship, of his persistence and her resistance, soon gives way to a struggle for survival. They move away from their desert community to Alice Springs, and then back again, seemingly trapped in an endless cycle of comings and goings.

Echoes of earlier sequences reverberate through later ones, further encouraging the sense of life repeating itself. Delilah pushes her grandmother along in a wheelchair, and, later, performs the same service for Samson. And the obstacles they encounter on their journey towards each other provide constant reminders (to them and to us) of their helplessness: alienated from their own people, they're also social outcasts in a white society, exploited and abused.

But in his admirably understated way, and without ever compromising his telling social critique, Thornton makes us understand that Samson and Delilah's struggle is also an ascent. They mightn't get to give their oppressors the kinds of comeuppance that abound in other teen movies, and their journey has a destination they don't anticipate, but their union allows them to rise above their desperate straits. In the words of Bette Davis in a 1939 Hollywood melodrama, it's to be their "victory over the dark".

At the same time as they're sharply sketched individuals, Thornton's Samson and Delilah also acquire a mythic dimension. The title's reference to the Biblical figures is entirely ironic: rather than telling a story about a Delilah bringing a mighty Samson down, Thornton gives us one about a Delilah with saving grace who hauls a lost soul back from the abyss. But the reference also invites us to consider the film, in its revisionist way, as a parable for our times, one made in celebration, rather than fear, of the resilience and the nurturing power of womankind.

★★★★☆

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