

# Heir apparent

Forget the red carpet. Des Partridge attends a red dust premiere for a very different love story

**T**HE tall bearded Aboriginal man in the Lee Kernaghan black hat stands anonymously near the caterer's tent in a crowd of some 2000 who've gathered at dusk at the historic Telegraph Station on the outskirts of Alice Springs in central Australia.

He's Warwick Thornton, the 38-year-old Alice Springs-based filmmaker whose first feature film, *Samson and Delilah*, voted the most popular film at this year's Adelaide Film Festival in February, is having its hometown premiere.

Thornton describes his work, filmed around Alice Springs and featuring two indigenous shy and untrained 14-year-old actors Rowan McNamara and Marissa Gibson, in the title roles, as "a story of true love".

The free walk-in screening, with a big screen erected between two ghost gums close to the site of the original Alice Springs waterhole, where spotlights illuminate a rocky outcrop behind the screen, is a triumph with the crowd audibly reacting to the film's humour and drama on cue.

Despite light rain falling about 20 minutes before the end of the 101-minute film, the audience stays put, caught up in the moving love story filmed around the town of 30,000 residents.

Hollywood has hosted numerous red carpet premieres — this one here, the first film premiere since the British-made version of Neville Shute's *A Town Like Alice* (starring Peter Finch and Virginia McKenna) 53 years ago — is more a red dust premiere.

Latecomers to the outdoor screening have had to park up to 3km from the venue because of the huge crowd that's responded to the free movie, a sausage sizzle and soft drinks event which has the national Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation among its sponsors.

Several hundred indigenous moviegoers who have travelled on free buses from distant communities don't need encouragement to offer generous applause at the end.

Apart from a brief introduction, together with cast and key crew involved in making the \$1.6 million, Thornton stays out of the spotlight, but he's unlikely to remain in the background for much longer.

*Samson and Delilah* has been selected to open this year's *Message Sticks* program of indigenous films at the Sydney Opera House on May 7, the same day the film has a deliberate soft opening on 14 screens in capital city cinemas around Australia.

There's also a continuing buzz in the Australian film community that Thornton's film will be showcased at this year's Cannes Film Festival's Un Regard section — a selection which may have been confirmed by the time you're reading this.

"I think Australians are a lot more educated and hungrier for indigenous stories that offer a unique perspective of their own country that they haven't seen," Thornton says a few hours before he heads to the Telegraph Station to check arrangements for that night's screening.

The father of three children, a son, 16, and daughters 13 and 5, is partner of Beck Cole, also a filmmaker (whose "making of" *Samson and Delilah* documentary will screen on the ABC, which has rights to the first TV screening of her partner's film, probably next year).

Now Thornton is smoking, sitting on a large, brightly decorated couch in an airy space at Vatu Sanctuary, an oasis in this desert town.

The apartment building offers visitors from Australia and overseas accommodation in a unique artistic environment. Central Australian art is featured throughout the building,

which last year served as production offices for the *Samson and Delilah* crew.

There's a strong connection for Thornton, as originally the building was the headquarters of the influential CAAMA (the Central Australia Aboriginal Media Association) which his mother, Freda Glynn, helped establish in 1980.

Warwick, the youngest of her five children, descended from the Katjy people (many of them killed in what history records as the Coniston massacre in the late 1920s), was schooled in Alice Springs but dropped out before the end of year 7.

"I bummed around a lot," Thornton says, "but I ended up being a DJ, and I did the *Green Bush* show on the CAAMA station, a period Thornton recalled in 2005 in one of several short films which he made leading up to his feature, including the 2007 short *Nana*

which scored international prizes, including the Crystal Bear from the Berlin International Film Festival.

At 18, he enrolled for a video training course conducted by CAAMA through the Australian Film Television and Radio School — at the same time as Rachel Perkins.

In 1998, Thornton, after having completed the BA course in cinematography at AFTRS, was director of photography for Perkins on her feature film *Radiance*, for which Queensland actress Deborah Mailman won the year's AFI female acting award.

"Some of the best cinematographers in Australia came to CAAMA and gave us instruction, and you learnt pretty quickly as you were thrown out on the road practically from day one — you were given the camera told this is the battery, this is the lens, go to it," he laughs.

Thornton says he shot "hundreds" of videos before he went to more formal training in Sydney at the training school, and his short films made when he returned to Alice Springs quickly marked him as a filmmaker to watch.

"I've had *Samson and Delilah* in the back of my mind for years, and *Nana* was actually the five-page back story I wrote for the grandmother character in *Samson and Delilah*," Thornton says.



"I was writing a much bigger film to be my cinema debut,

cinema extraordinaire, the biggest debut since Baz (Luhrmann), but it was a monster, a period thriller set in a monastery and out of control," he chuckles.

"I was writing this, another *Days of Heaven*, but something in my head told me this is not the film I need to make. I needed to make something smaller, and more focused and more controlled.

"I needed to make something I believed in, something I'd seen happen.

"I was thinking about *Samson and Delilah* for a year before I sat down and started to write it.

"Not having had much schooling, I absolutely hate the writing part and find it incredibly painful.

"I write English how it sounds so there are a lot of numbers in my script, 2 for 'to'," he says. "I do it all by hand on pen and paper. I'm not a person who discovers too much in the

writing, as I've thought it out from the very beginning and know my characters, how they feel, how they act, it's all there in my head before I start.

"I had the initial draft for *Samson and Delilah* in about three days — 60 or 70 pages of script."

Thornton says completing the first *Samson and Delilah* draft had turned out to be perfect timing, as the Australian Film Commission (now incorporated in Screen Australia) under former chief Brian Rosen sent out an SOS for an indigenous feature script via Sally Riley, now in charge of Screen Australia's indigenous section.

"There was a call for submissions, and we were accepted and shooting started in March last year," Thornton says.

With Sydney-based producer Kath Shelper, who has worked with Thornton since he made *Green Bush* in 2004, he assembled a small crew, most of them friends, acted as his own director of photography, often lugging

the 18kg Panasonic 35mm camera on his shoulders for hours at a time, and shot *Samson and Delilah* in six weeks, working Monday to Friday so his teenage stars could rest each weekend.

His "Samson", Rowan McNamara, grew up in the small Santa Teresa community about 200km southeast of Alice Springs, and "Delilah", Marissa Gibson — step granddaughter of Thornton's *Nana* star, Mitjili Gibson who also appears as Nana in the film — lives in Alice Springs.

Both attended the local community college, where Gibson remains in year 10 while her co-star has dropped out since working on the film.

While teenage petrol sniffing is at the core of the film, Thornton says he didn't want to scare people away because they feared it was going to be a movie about substance abuse.

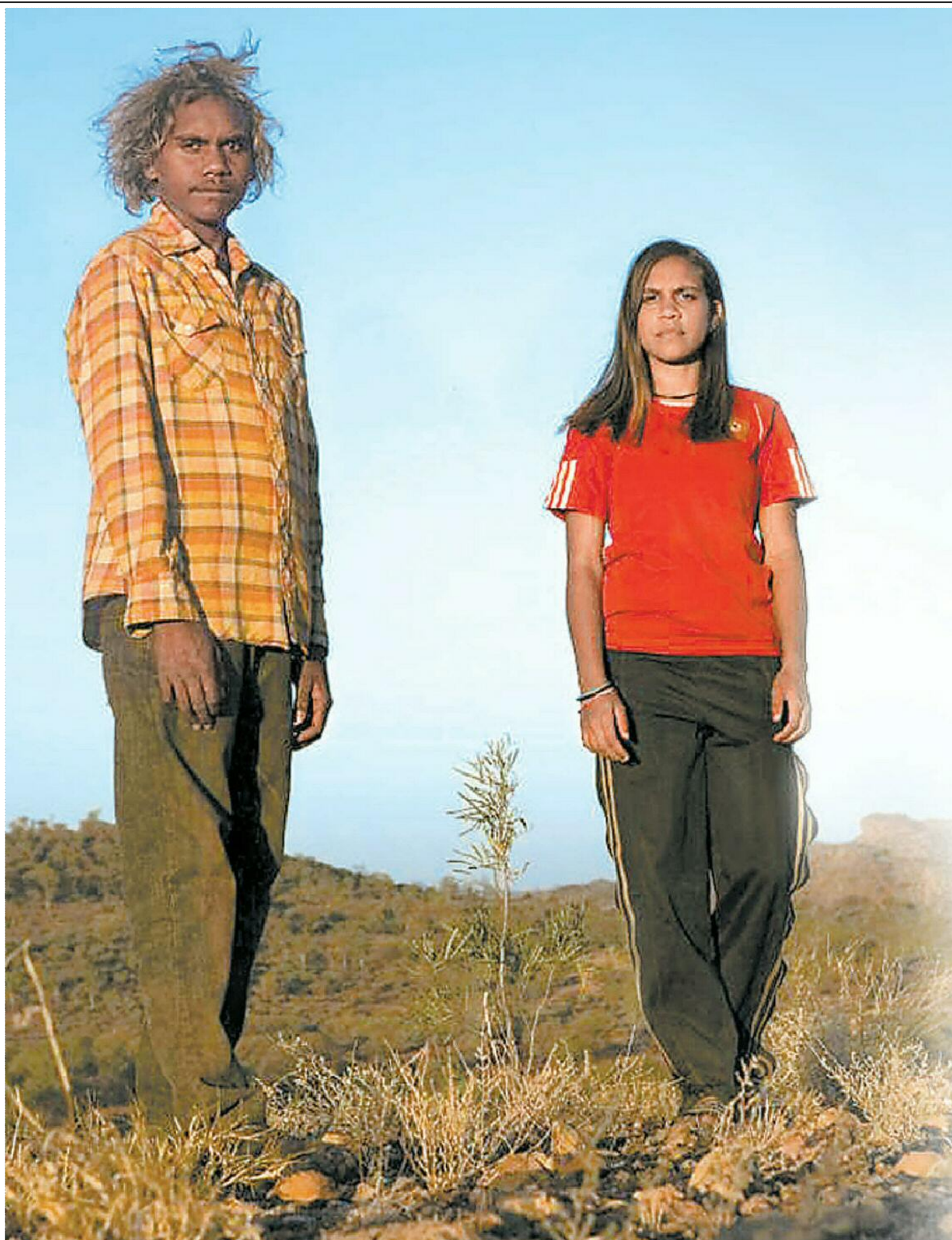
"I just wanted to

make a teenage love story set in an Aboriginal community about the love between two petrol-sniffing teenagers," he said. "We do have a problem with substance abuse, and there are going to be people who will say 'aaaggh! I don't want to watch a film about petrol sniffers'.

"But this is a love story, and I needed the idea of love which is universal. It's not black or white, it's universal.

"These kids became bigger than my story, and we were just so lucky to find Rowan and Marissa."

***Samson and Delilah* opens May 7. Des Partridge was invited to the film's Alice Spring premiere by the distributors, Arena Films.**







**NEW talent ... far left, Rowan McNamara and Marissa Gibson; above, Mitjili Gibson; and, below left, writer-director Warwick Thornton on location. Pictures: Mark Rogers**

