

MYSTERY ROAD

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Mystery Road's seed was sewn in 2006 when I began developing an idea about an Indigenous cop, who was caught in the middle of the police establishment and the Indigenous community. And from that early time I had Aaron Pedersen in mind to play the role. But instead of the outback, the story was set in the inner city of Sydney. I remember bumping into Aaron one night and I mentioned the idea to him. But after that moment, I went onto a different project and it got pushed aside until I picked it up again in late 2011.

I've always been interested in the fringes of cultures, and especially drawn to the historical role of the "Turncoat". In Australia he was the Indigenous Black Tracker or the Native Policeman, and in America was known as the Native American Scout. He was a man employed to track, disburse, and even slaughter his fellow people.

Even though they were often engaged in areas of opposing tribal groups, the internal pressures of such an occupation must have been hard to comprehend, at times possibly being the ultimate identity crisis. This struggle of cultural identity is something I personally dealt with while growing up in a small country town, and have continued to explore it through Mystery Road.

Jay Swan is not just a modern day Turncoat. He is an empowered Detective, but the power still remains with the establishment, through his colleagues and superior. Unlike many of the past Native Police, Jay is not a stranger to the town in Mystery Road, although he sometimes feels that way.

Jay Swan makes Mystery Road more than just a mystery thriller. He provides a fresh and thought provoking perspective that is a struggle at every turn, and on many levels. He has moved out of the local public housing estate, and found himself a big house on the other side of town. But it has come at a cost. He has lost touch with his ex-wife, his teenage daughter, and the community, which he is trying to make a better place. But perhaps only Jay believes it can be a better place. He is a loner, an archetypal cowboy, and a victim of his own wishful thinking.

There's a lot of thematic detail in Mystery Road, which I find difficult to articulate outside of the film. The film is full of my childhood and adulthood experiences. From the murdered young girl found under the highway, to the gunplay of the cowboys. The elements are largely drawn from my own country life experience. A few years ago, a

distant cousin of my mother was found dead under a roadway in northern NSW. She had been stripped and brutally murdered. The police have seemingly done very little to bring her killer to justice and has brought resentment from the local Indigenous community. I have also wanted a chance to express the gun culture from my childhood. In the country, people rarely go into nature purely for the nature experience. There's usually always a reason for it. I grew up surrounded by a hunting culture. Although I didn't enjoy the kill, the most enjoyable part was the chance to connect with nature, to see and feel something beautiful, outside the harshness of the town.

Mystery Road is essentially a Murder Mystery thriller. It's a genre which doesn't get used so much these days in the cinema, though it is commonplace on television in many different forms. The challenge was to make it cinematic in every filmic detail.

We were incredibly blessed to have the involvement of many of Australia's finest and most talented actors. All of whom came on board with a love for a project they felt very strongly about. All of the actors were incredibly generous and supportive, as was every single crew member, for that matter. I involved Aaron Pedersen from the scripting stage, and that was the early beginning of our journey together.

In early pre-production, the two of us travelled together on a location scout to Moree and then to outback Queensland. Aaron got a chance to see where his character came from, and to feel the dirt under his feet. It was a very important part of our preparation, and something an actor rarely gets to do. We agreed we were both in this thing together, and we couldn't do it without each other. We both believed strongly in the story and felt like our ancestors were watching over us as we made this film. So there was a very strong bond between the film, and us and that bond would get us through any of the more difficult parts of the shoot later on.

From the writing stage, I wanted Mystery Road to have a timeless, classical feel. A feel that was reminiscent of Hollywood films of the 60s and 70s which were more dialogue based and relied little on music and trickery. I wanted this film to have a quiet, almost trance like atmosphere, where the music became the words spoken from the characters.

In conversations with Aaron Pedersen, we constantly used the word precision. We were conscious that we weren't experimenting with this project. We wanted to be very precise in every aspect of making this film. I have made several experimental films over the last few years. This time it was about finding intricate beauty in every frame, every camera move being for the right reason, every word to be clear and convincing. I wanted to put the audience into the driver's seat, and allow them to enjoy every second of the ride. Mystery Road is a Murder Mystery film, but it is one with undercurrents, which can swirl around the feet of the audience, and enhance the generic experience.