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| **Ideas and Society Program:** **Bendigo Writers Festival – Session 2****Anne Manne interviewing Robyn Davidson and Raimond Gaita** |
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| **Anne Manne** |
| Welcome to this wonderful session I'm so delighted and honoured to be chairing on the transformation of much loved books into films. The film has been made of *Tracks*, the wonderful international best seller coming out of the late 1970's of this extraordinary trek across the Western Desert, from Central Australia 2700 km, if I'm right by Robyn with four camels and her beloved dog Diggity through the West Coast of Australia. It was I think, really desired by many film makers, as we'll discuss in a moment to be made in a film, but was finally made, into one in 2013. And Rai a very dear friend, I have to say and the author of a very cherished book *Romulus, My Father*, and this is set not far from here in Baringhup. Many of you will know and love the book about his father, his complicated relationships with his very troubled mother who finally committed suicide, her lover Mitru who also committed suicide. But a story which belies that really stark relaying of the facts, one full of luminous understanding of love, forgiveness and gratitude to the two men who raised you. Particularly your father Romulus, but also Hora, this wonderful friend he had and the kinds of values that you came to see as a child that they lived by. And this was, I think also, there were numbers of filmmakers who wanted to make a film of it but you finally relented when Richard Roxburgh came along.So first I just wanted to ask both of you what you thought about the idea of your book being made into a movie, what was your reaction?  |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| Shall I go first? Well it's had many avatars *Tracks* the movie. It started pretty much as soon as the book was published and I think the first person who offered me lots and lots of money was (out of Africa what's his name?), Sydney Pollack. So he took me to lunch and the first thing he said to me was, "Honey you're not going to like what I'm going to do to your book". I thought that was so frank and nice, he was completely charming but I had this sense that it shouldn't ever be a Hollywood film, it should be made in Australia, it should be a small budget film, not small budget but an independent sort of film. I was very concerned that the Aboriginal content be treated properly so I said "No" and I was very stupid because… |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Or very clever? |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| Well no, stupid because in the end it became very Hollywoodised anyway and I couldn't protect it. So the penultimate version was going to be Julia Roberts and lots and lots of budget and I got sent these scripts that were so appalling, so embarrassing, so 'utterly, utterly' terrible and luckily it didn't get up. So by the time it was taken up by Emile Sherman in Sydney, a) I thought they would never make it and b) I thought, I have no control so it doesn't matter, let them get on with it. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Was it true that they were going to have Americans playing Indigenous people? |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| Not Emile, Emile sort of seduced me into trusting him, and I did and I have to say I enjoyed the whole process of them being involved in the film. But in one of the scripts prior to that when Julia was involved, there was a scene when Robyn Davidson gets across the desert by being taught 'The Dreaming' by the Aboriginal people and she is initiated into 'Snake Dreaming' and she follows the snake all the way to the West Coast. And there's a scene where there are these Aboriginal men dancing around the fire carrying Julia – Robyn, smeared in ashes and tom toms going. I mean just unspeakable. So I'm very glad that one didn't happen. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| So, before I ask Ray the same question, how did Emile seduce you into, or how did he overcome his resistance? |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| Oh I just liked him and I liked the way he spoke about it and also once you get involved, it was sort of like a big Jewish family, it was great. But I think the thing that finally convinced me to be somewhat involved in the process was when they got Mia to play me and I had wanted her I thought she was absolutely the right person. So once that happened I felt even more comfortable and it was fine. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Well she is an absolutely wonderful actress, I remember when we first encountered her in *In Treatment*, she was playing an adolescent, she was very troubled… |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| Absolutely…  |
| **Anne Manne** |
| … and she certainly caught that extraordinary combination of fragility, tenacity, iron will, but incredible delicacy at the same time. |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| Yeah, I think she was very good, the whole team really, it's not the film I would have made, but that's not the point, I think all of them, the director, the actors and Emile tried their best to honour the spirit of the book and I think that's all you can ask for as an author really. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Yes. Ray I know you were quite resistant for a time in having your book made into a film, so tell us a little bit of what you thought about that and how you overcame that? |
| **Raimond Gaita** |
| Well the reasons didn't become clear to me for a long time, I mean I had reasons, but there are all sorts of reasons and there wasn't one. In fact when I sat down to write after *Romulus* which was 14 years later, no sorry it was only six years after the film, that it became a bit clearer to me. But I just, at first just thought oh well, they'll make melodrama and kitsch out of a story that's reasonably dramatic and has a lot of potential for being turned into melodrama. There was that general thing, but it was also the case that I feel very strongly that it's hard to portray madness without degrading it in some obvious ways, or degrading it in sentimental or sympathy.And so there are three mad people in this film and I thought it was hard to get it right with one so how're you going to get it right with three? So that was, and my agent Margaret Connolly was even probably less keen than I was. She wouldn't even tell me, sometimes she'd say, "Oh about three months ago I won't say who they were, but so and so came, and I said, you make the film and we'll tell you if we like it", that was her attitude. But one day she phoned me in London and said "This fellow Richard Roxburgh", (I didn't know who he was so) she described him as a young man, very very popular in Sydney, which immediately put me against him…. (Laughter) "and he's been phoning and phoning and may I give him your phone number?" And I thought, there must be something there if she's gone this far. So he phoned me and asked if he could come to London and I said "No I don't want you to come to London because, if you do it's a long way and I'll feel I owe you something if you come all that way." He said, "I'm coming nonetheless" and he came and he had two bottles of red, very good red wine which… |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Which is always persuasive. |
| **Raimond Gaita** |
| I liked him immediately as a person, so all my prejudices fell away and I was very impressed by how much he loved the book and he said to me, "I don't want to be a director, I just want to direct this and I had told my sister as soon as I read it, I'm going to direct this book", so. So we talked and drank his wine and I said "I'm sorry Richard you can't have it", and then he said, "Well will you allow me to write a screen play"? And then I really did think, oh you'd have to be mean to say no to such a modest request as this, and then he couldn't do it. He tried for a year and then he said… I said "Good it's all off", I didn't want it. He said, "No I've got the best screen writer in the country to do it", I won't say who it was and it was just awful. (Laughter)… then he did a second version, and then he was angry with me because he thought, who am I to reject this famous screen writer and I thought good it's all off. Then Richard, ever enthusiastic said "No, no I have this producer John Maynard and Robert Connolly and then he told me John Maynard has been involved with that film about a New Zealand writer, An Angel at my Table, Janet Frame and I thought that was a wonderful. And so I thought, oh if they can do something like that I'll go along with it. And so I agreed to do that, but we still couldn't get a screen writer but it was a long story and eventually, six years down the track I still hadn't signed a contract. So I still felt I had complete control, I could say 'No' at any time, but by that time I had trusted Richard absolutely, I mean not to make a good film, I had no idea if he could make a film, he'd never made one before, but I trusted his integrity absolutely and I trusted… even more importantly the integrity of the producers because I know they could say 'No' to anything a director does if they want to. So that mattered a lot to me and when they got Nick Drake an English poet of the European sensibility which had been my criteria for the writer. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| So, say that again, you actually set a criteria that it had to be someone with a European sensibility? |
| **Raimond Gaita** |
| Yes, I mean, First of all I said "I'd like poet," and them it would be good if they understood what they were doing and for that you needed some inwardness, you didn't have to be European, but have some inwardness for the European sensibility and not turn all that into a cliché. Which, the most famous writer in Australia had done twice over, (screen writer).  |
| **Anne Manne** |
| And was that important for you because you felt that the film couldn't have integrity unless the person understood your mother's sensibility and your fathers? |
| **Raimond Gaita** |
| Yeah |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Because she'd come from Romania, she had come from Germany… |
| **Raimond Gaita** |
| Yeah, I know they're different, but Czech's not a bad place to be, The Czech Republic. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| But so, when he came out to Australia and he visited he believe at Shalvah, the place you have now at Baringhup, very close to where you grew up in Frogmore, what was his reaction to the landscape? |
| **Raimond Gaita** |
| He liked the landscape because Shalvah is a very beautiful spot, you've got hilly granite country on one side and the plains on the other side. And when I took him to where, to the plains where the house had stood where I grew up, and it had burned down in a grass fire many years before and it was a sort of one of those grey sultry oppressive summer days, it was 25th February I remember. And dry scotch thistles just covered everything, and I could see how crestfallen he was because he'd has his sense that this was a beautiful landscape as I had tried to describe it and then I just knew he had to see it, literally in two senses, in a different light. So I took him again that late afternoon and early in the morning and he fell in love with it. But he said afterwards, that "He was glad of the first time because it gave him a sense of how my mother must have responded to that country". |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Yes, that was something I was really stuck by in both books and films that the landscape looms as if another character, and so every person is interacting, not only with each other or with animals which are a really delightful aspect of both books and film and we'll come to that in a moment. But with this landscape and it struck me as also being both a common factor in both films but rather different, so see if I get this right? In your case Rai I was really stuck by the forbidding harshness of the landscape, in one particular scene which was when your mother arrives with the little suitcase and she's in a quite delicate kind of dress and she's dropped off by a taxi and suddenly you see this vibrant, spirited but very fragile woman in this extremely harsh, and you see it through her eyes. |
| **Raimond Gaita** |
| Yeah, that was brilliantly done by Richard actually, because probably only literally two minutes before, you had this, I never know whether to say Rai, or 'the boy', but anyway, Richard always refers…. anyway it doesn't matter. Alright Rai was riding his bike down the track full of joy and two minutes later Christina looking up the track utterly desolate wondering 'how the hell did I ever end up?' And then with a detered, but a kind of despairing look, walks slowly up the track in high heel shoes. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Yes I thought that was one of the strengths of the film that you could see that same landscape through different eyes and you do see the joyousness of the boy and you see even when she looks despairingly at a tree, but the little boy Rai played wonderfully by Kodi McPhee, I thought perhaps that was one of the ways that your anxieties about the film might have been overcome. I thought his performance as the little boy was quite miraculous. |
| **Raimond Gaita** |
| I think it is, it astonished me when I actually saw the film. I had read over every draft of the screenplay, but I didn't read it as a play so that was one thing that got in the way of my really imagining how it would be. When I actually saw the film I was shocked, I was in 95% of the scenes because I should have known it was there on the page, it was still a shock. I thought Kodi miraculously or really uncannily captured exactly how I felt. And he's ten years old at the time, but he was in one sense, deeply embedded in the plot because at a wrap-up party at the end, because I hadn't seen him, sorry I had seen him but anonymously I went to his tenth birthday party, but I didn't say who I was. But at the wrap-up party he put his arms around my waist when he was introduced and cried and said, "He'd lived my life for four months and wasn't able to leave", and he held onto me for a full hour in the middle of this party, so in once sense he was deeply. Nick Drake told the story at one stage Kodi said, "What am I supposed to feel like here? Am I supposed to be sad, am I supposed to be happy, am I supposed to be this?" And then for an audience is a traumatic scene where Romulus beats me after I'd lied about what I'd done with his razor, Kodi goes off and giggles and plays some game, it's amazing how this can happen. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| No he seemed to utterly inhabit your spirit as a boy. I want to come back to that in a moment, but Robyn, back to this question of landscape and I was interested that I felt that that was not the same at all with your encounter with the landscape. So that, here's this astonishing desert and there's no doubt there was someone who said to you, "You don't have to be unlucky to die out there". And yet you didn't seem to see it as hostile? |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| No I never did. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| And the longer you went on, it wasn't just the dust on you, the more you seemed to meld into the environment. |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| In the film? |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Yes, and the more you seemed a part of it and it was actually the social world which seemed more impinging and difficult? |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| Well I think that's absolutely correct. I mean, it's interesting isn't it how we conflate what actually happened with *Tracks* the book with the film, it all starts to get a bit blurry. I think in the film, it's a very difficult book to make into a film because there's one character and there's not a lot of dialogue. So I think they had to make her, mere Robyn, certainly more merging into the desert but struggling, in the film it looked very hard. In real life I felt more and more comfortable as the journey went on and more and more, in a funny sort of way 'at home' in that desert, but therefore because I was at home in that desert, therefore alienated from what had come before and what was about to come after. Now I think that's a very difficult thing to portray in a film, so the way they did it visually was to cover her in sunburn and to see her sort of spacing out, but of course it wasn't actually like that, in a sense it was the opposite to that. So it's one of those difficulties of translating, you know there's three translations what actually happened into a book – that's one set of problems, translating what happens in a book into a film is another set of problems, you have to solve a whole different set of problems. And interestingly the landscape, they shot it in South Australia in cattle country, so to me it was rather scrubby uninteresting landscape in the film, whereas the country I travelled through was really pure desert… |
| **Anne Manne** |
| And very various. |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| Extremely varied. And yet people say, "My god the landscape in that film, what a fabulous country", I say, "If you only knew?" So yes. But I do like their attempt to make that landscape a character in the film, well they had to I guess they had no choice. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| And partly like Kodi, Mia was so wonderful at inhabiting your spirit so she is able as an actress to… |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| Actors are incredible people, I don't know how, well good actors are, there's a lot of not so good actors out there. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| She was able I thought to give a sense of an interior journey which was very hard to do. |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| Well that's why I wanted her because I think she is one of those actors who underacts if anything, but her internal life is so present on the screen and that's what the script required really, someone who has that internal life going on. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Yes, there's a scene in the film where she's loading up the camels time and again and at a certain point she says to the photographer from National Geographic who comes out and she says, "All I'm doing is loading and unloading" and putting one foot in front of another in those marvellous sandals you were wearing, but not a lot else was happening. But in fact you could see both in the film and certainly that's one of the really marvellous things about the book is this interior transformation that goes on. Now I was wondering if you could explain to us, something I read that you'd said somewhere that that journey was formative, but also you felt your consciousness, by being alone there for so long, had kind of rewired you in some way? |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| Yes, I think probably literally. Yes it did, it took a long time on the journey to get rid of (I'll use this term wiring – it's terrible shorthand but you know what I mean), to get rid of that previous wiring which was wiring that was required for an essentially urban life and a particular way of thinking. But when you're on your own in that intense sort of way, and I think walking has a lot to do with it also, and this vastness around you all the time and being totally dependent on you acting correctly in this landscape or you're dead. It's like that. That you, inevitably your consciousness changes, it just does. So, and the irony of it was, that the more alone I was and the more isolated and remote I was, the more that I felt completely connected to everything. It was the antithesis of being lonely, but then of course, coming into culture again was very difficult and I simply could not remember why I would need to cover my breasts or, literally I was thinking, "Do I need to do that, is that the wrong or the right thing?" So all of those ways of being that we take for granted had really fallen away and if it took eight months to go into the desert and be at home there, I think I still haven't quite come back. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Probably, thank goodness for that. |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| Maybe. Because, I'll just follow that up with, I was in New York two weeks after the trek and it was very clear to me that we were all completely deranged, we were all…. (Laughter). |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Well I felt that was really striking in that, we normally think of someone, we would describe them as going loco or troppo or there's some disparaging way of saying they've gone out to the… |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| Yep. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| But in fact, you kind of went sane out there and then you confronted.. |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| And then I had to go mad again and it's taking a really long time. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| So with the, when you're out there alone, you're actually not alone because you're with these beloved animals and one of the revelations for me, dogs I understand, horses I understand, many different animals, but camels I had no idea they were so fierce for one but also so charismatic. |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| That's a very good word, they are charismatic, extremely personable: they are. Look I don't know if it's true with all camels, but certainly mine were idiosyncratic and very very funny and witty, just very clever wonderful beings really. And of course, you know because I was in that situation and we were mutually dependent, we were all dependent on each other, that's a very deep bond. But it's left me with a real interest in this cross species communication, it seems to me very peculiar that a camel and a human being can communicate and how does that happen really, we're on such different band widths. So I'm very interested in that, I'm interested in how these different consciousness make sense of one another.  |
| **Anne Manne** |
| And they clearly were very attached to you in a way too? |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| Yes, they were and I guess they saw me as some sort of other camel, I don't know. (Laughter ). |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Well you were the leader of their herd, |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| Yes, |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Oddly walking on two legs rather than four, but… |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| Maybe I do look a bit like a … ( Laughter ) |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| I went back to see them, maybe a decade later and they'd been wild for all that time and they were in a huge holding paddock about ten miles square and I went out and I called the herd and I had all their treats, the liquorice and the water melon and all the things they loved. So I spent about an hour with them, no ropes or no nose-lines, nothing and they remembered all the commands ten years later. And I'd whoosh and they'd sit down, really it was extraordinary. So that was great and it was time to leave them again and I had to walk back to the homestead, and they fell in line behind me and followed me all the way back to the homestead. Oh!!! (Laughter). They were remarkable animals really. |
| **Raimond Gaita** |
| There are wonderful passages in T. E. Lawrence's – Seven Pillars of Wisdom about the camels. |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| Yes that's right, they are amazing. But aren't you interested in how this species interaction, what the hell is going on there? |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Well we have to remember that Rai, you had a bird that used to make love to your father every morning. He would say, "I love you Jack", every morning a cockatoo who used to say it. There's a certain way they kiss apparently. |
| **Raimond Gaita** |
| This cockatoo whose name was Jack, my father refused to cage him and so he flew free everywhere and he slept on our kitchen door and we just put some paper underneath for him to shit on, you know they're very destructive birds. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| He ate the door. |
| **Raimond Gaita** |
| Ate a hole in the wall, the door was like that. And my father and I slept in the same bedroom and it was a door you could just push it didn't have handles and all that. Every morning you'd hear Jack coming down off the door and then there was lino, and you could hear his feet pat, pat, pat on the lino, and with his head he'd push the door and he could never get it open with just one go so he'd push and you could hear pat, pat, pat as he walked, push, pat, pat, pat, - push. And then he would eventually get in and he would climb up to my father's bedstead and just sit there until he saw my father's eyes open and I think my father kept his eyes closed for longer than he was asleep. ( Laughter ) Anyway, eventually so Jack would just jump in, under the blankets and from under the blankets put his head up and his beak to my father's lips and go 'kiss, kiss'. And my father could just pat this like a cat, just roll him over and it was just extraordinary. It wasn't a sort of, on your arm - type relationship. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| There was also an aspect of animals, it comes back to your cross species consciousness being connected to each other, there are things that animas know that we don't. |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| Yes of course, things that we see that we don't. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| I was very interested in the way you wrote about it and then I think Mia depicts this really effectively. You had to be more and more observant and you had to, in a way, relate to your environment like an animal, like a human animal, in that you had to survive and if you didn't observe enough about waking up at 4am to hear the bells, if you didn't know what the tracks are, you could be done for. So and we are human animals, we kind of forget how, this is a lovely word of Rai's – creatureliness, we forget that: that we are. And so they were observing things that you might not be, you were observing things that they might not be, but also, this beloved dog Diggity. I wept the first time I read of the death of Diggity, I wept the second time. |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| He's broken many a heart. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| I think it's one of the most moving descriptions of a relationship between a human and an animal anywhere in literature. |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| Oh thank you. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| So just say a little bit about Diggity and what she… because she really saved your life on occasion. |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| Yes, it's interesting what you said that there you've got these three different species as a group and we're all perceiving slightly different things. Yes quite interesting that. And of course Diggity, at night I would, when I'd stopped for the evening I'd go out exploring or I'd go out for wood and so on, and at one point I'd sort of got disoriented and I just told her to "Go home" and she didn't get it at first and she thought I was punishing her. And I said, "No you go home." And you could see this light bulb go on over her head and she thought, "Oh yeah," and so off she went and she'd look behind and make sure that I was following and she really got it. So I just find that whole thing really really interesting because I don't think anyone's quite understood how those connections happen between different species, I really don't. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| No I think you're right, I think it's a very deep thing. I think one of the other things that was really fully present in your book, the film, but also in your work Rai, is ways of relating to other human beings that turns on its head all our normal social assumptions. So you were talking before about the cockatoo who chewed a great hole in the door and you put some newspaper down to collect the cockatoo shit, there was a way in which you lived and the way in which you lived in that camp, you know each campsite and with sleeping with Diggity and occasionally apparently, you'd wake up with a camel head on your pack. But it's a way of stepping outside the cultural and the social, but particularly away from that kind of paranoid competitive, very elbows out way that you would have hit for example when you got to New York, or the way many of us just live our lives, so that there's this a stepping out of the world in a way or out of the social world… |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| Out of the social world. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| That's true of both the way you're able to see it. But in another way you're able, because of that, to not live according to the conventional ways of seeing things of your time, and one of the things which is an extremely strong theme in both of you is, I think to use your phrase Rai, 'the common humanity' that's in all of us. But it was particularly evident for example in relating to indigenous people and that's obviously been a huge part of your work too Rai, but it struck me that they're really deeply connected to set aside human hierarchy and just to try and relate one human heart to another. And so tell us about Mr Eddie and how he helped you shed some of the burdens that you walked into the desert with? |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| Well I was incredibly privileged, I mean that was such a stroke of luck and it's unprecedented, very unusual for an old Aboriginal bloke to just decide that he'd walk with a konka across a…. I mean just really unusual, he was an unusual man within his own community, and he did this unusual thing, so that was my great good luck.He didn't speak any English, I spoke very rudimentary Pitjantjatjara and I think the way… so up until that point I think in the journey; and he met me sort of half way through, I hadn't yet got rid of the obsession with time, I had a clock, I mean I….. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| You had an alarm clock? |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| I had an alarm clock… (Laughter)… and I'd put this bloody alarm clock on in the morning and if I didn't get out of the swag I'd feel guilty. Really, really mad. So being with him and having to adjust to his time or lack of time and realising my own frustration with his lack of time and how absurd that was in that context, he helped me just get rid of it. And also I think watching him being in that landscape and being of that landscape and being so utterly integrated, so completely, just totally 'In it'. And we were going through his dreaming, we were following his dreaming, and this old fellow, we'd be walking along and picking a bit of bush tucker and suddenly he'd burst into song and he'd start singing his landscape. It was a very wonderful moving thing, and yet sort of ordinary. So I think when he left, I felt very confident of a) my skills and b) I seem to have got rid of that anxiety about time and performance. So I got rid of the clock and from then on, the next few months was when I really felt that I'd come home to that landscape and I'm sure Eddie had a great deal to do with that. And the interesting thing now when I go back to visit that mob, is that they've got a story of the camel lady as well, only they call me desert woman which I think is a step up. (Laughter) So it's quite nice to get their view of the camel lady story as well. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Desert woman is definitely a lot nicer. |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| I think I'll go with that. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| I wonder whether you sometimes now have, you know you're in a social situation, perhaps you're having a high tea in England at a garden somewhere, I'm imagining and a snake crawls across and people look to you to deal with it because you're the camel lady. (Laughter) |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| It doesn't happen a lot in England, but yes. Well I'm more the camel lady in Australia, in England not so much because thirty years of my life was in London and in India and no-one knows about the camel lady in India, let me tell you, so there are these quite discreet parts of my internal life. So I have to sort of, go back, I have to leap over my pervious thirty years to get to the camel trip and the camel lady so she does feel very remote. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| And Rai, I was thinking about your father, the way he saw the world and how nourished you were by that despite this incredible tragedy unfolding as well around you, and the way you saw the light of your father's friendship with Hora and how that gave you a way of seeing that also allowed you to have an understanding of what it is to really grant an equality of respect to indigenous people? And I was thinking the way of explaining what you learned in childhood is probably by the story of Vacek and how they treated him? |
| **Raimond Gaita** |
| I've always felt… I was at a conference in Berlin not so long ago and someone gave a paper in which he was asking whether some acts are unforgiveable? And I thought, well I don't know how you'd ever work that out? I mean you could describe the most awful acts, but whether you felt that someone could without sentimentality and authentically forgive, is something you have to wait and see. So I've always felt in all my philosophy that in the end we see things deeply through the way people live them, the way things deepen a person's life. And I suspect I've come to see that, or feel that, or think that way because of my childhood with my father. And the person in question Vacek had come with them in 1950 on these assisted passages and was sent to work on Cairn Curran Reservoir with is about 40 minutes drive from here; between Maryborough and Maldon. And Vacek lost his mind within a year or two of coming and he went to live on the slopes of a small mountain between a couple of boulders and had put bits of tin on the boulders and in fact built a shed nearby. I never knew why he didn't live in the shed, but I suspect it was because the boulders were warmer than the tin shed. But in the tin shed he kept things that, the food that he'd made and pickled mostly in his urine and he was physically mad, he talked to himself and he offered you food that had been cooked in his urine. In the film actually there's a scene where he cooks eggs in his urine. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Oh that's right. |
| **Raimond Gaita** |
| And someone said, "Oh my God", and we just said it could have been worse, they might have been poached. (Laughter). But I don't think I fully realised how wondrous my father's attitude towards him and also Hora's attitude towards him was until I reflected on a response I'd made to a couple of journalists just before the book was published and there was going to be a big piece in The Age about it. I took them to where Vacek's boulders had been and one of them said to me, asked me, "Did Vacek appear weird to you when you were a kid?" And I said "No" and afterwards I thought, why did I say "No" without even thinking because he was weird? And it wasn't because he was good to me, he was he was always very very kind and I also knew him to be a very kind hearted man. We had a dog called Orloff and Vacek had very little money and once he'd bought some sausages in Maryborough and he left them out and Orloff ate them and Vacek came to Orloff and said "Orloff how could you do this? They are my only sausages." And he said to my father afterwards, or to Hora, "That Orloff gave him a very clear look." As though it was a promise he would never do it again. (Laughter). He was such a good hearted person. He once looked over a whole field of Scotch thistles and wondered what you could do with them in a factory? And the reason he was thinking of factories was not to make money, he wanted to build a factory and to produce things in the factory that would pay workers descent humane wages. So I knew he was a very very good man, but that wouldn't have made the difference. I realise when I reflected on this question neither my father nor Hora, ever showed towards him the slightest trace of condescension in that sense and I think both my father and Hora were enabled to do (I really want to emphasise it wasn't because I had any virtues - I was as I was towards him), it was just because I saw him in a the light of their behaviour towards him, that was it, just like you behave towards animals because of the way you see people treat them and things like that. So that became very important in my whole life. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Philosophical thinking? |
| **Raimond Gaita** |
| But I think they were enabled to do it in part because, as I say I think in *Romulus,* I've never known people who have such a fierce disdain for external signs of status and prestige and putting on airs and so on. It was really fierce. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Well I thought that was something deep in both of you, in both your ways of seeing the world and I think what people fell in love with in the books was, and felt nourished by, there's a quote by the environmentalist Clive Hamilton where he says something along the lines that, "People work long hours at jobs they don't like, to buy things to impress people they don't like and so there's a sense of the rat race and a treadmill and so on." But I thought that in the extraordinary response to both books and also to the films that there is a yearning and hunger in people for something different where, as we were saying earlier this way of relating to someone without that hierarchical way, without status, you know one human heart to another. |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| Yes I think that's probably true, yes I think that's true. But I don't know where that comes from necessarily, I suppose similar to Rai it's an atmosphere that you absorb when you are a child I guess. I'm really 'so not interested' in status. |
| **Raimond Gaita** |
| It's certainly never a matter of moral principle. |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| No exactly, its… |
| **Raimond Gaita** |
| It's not in the ordinary sense of virtue either, that's why I so want to emphasis it doesn't matter how you're able to see the world, certain things are perfectly natural obviously. |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| Exactly |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Well at this point we have a little time for questions, so it might be a good point for people if they want to think of a question to ask. |
| **Audience** |
| What's the process of marking a book to a potential produce and how do you sell the why of your work to a producer? |
| **Anne Manne** |
| The process of making from the book to the film, is that what you're saying? And to be produced, what's the process of transformation? |
| **Raimond Gaita** |
| Well in my case I had very little to do with it except to discuss the screen play with the writer and I was not involved in anything else whatsoever. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Were you involved with the production? |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| Well, I eventually had an agent who took care of that when it became obvious that I wasn't going to have control over any film that was made, I just asked an agent to act in my best interests and then I would never have been involved in any of the scripts that I've received over the years, but when Emile sent me scripts and I'd get these frantic calls from New York from John Curran in the middle of the night saying, "What do you think about this and what do you think about that?" And I'd tell him and then they'd take no notice whatsoever. (Laughter). So I was sort of involved and not involved. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| One thing relating to that, both films really do have a shift from the perspective of the writer and the book. In your case it is that they give an explanation. |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| It's the one thing I was a bit - not cross about but I disagreed with. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| They link it to your mother's suicide and to your childhood even your love of Diggity is linked to your love of Goldie and so on. So you're cross with that? |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| Well I wasn't cross with it and I could see why he would feel that it was necessary to give some sort of reason for why this girl decides to do this thing. I just don't think life is like that, I do not think I crossed the desert because my mother killed herself, I just don't think that's true. And it certainly had nothing to do with the dog I owned when I was a kid. But as I said before there are problems you have to solve in writing a film script are very different to the problems you have to solve in writing a book, so in the end, not that I could have changed it anyway but in the end I dais, "Oh well, do what you feel you need to do." But I am personally uncomfortable with those scenes in the film because I don't think they're … really… AND I would add to that, that when you put forward the idea that this girl is doing this extraordinary thing because her mother hanged herself, you're also saying that, 'For anyone particularly a woman to do something out of the ordinary or unconventional or apparently difficult, there has to be something a little bit wrong with them or they have to be working something out or?' |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Escaping something? |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| Yeah, you can't just do it because - it's a bloody good thing to do. (Applause). |
| **Raimond Gaita** |
| Can I just say one other important thing I found out is how extraordinary actors, how extraordinarily they can understand things even though they might articulate the thing utterly banally. I was really worried about a scene in Romulus, My Father in which my mother has a child with her lover and there's a scene in which Romulus comes to the house and the lover whose name is Mitru has the baby in his arms and he says at one point to Romulus, "Would you like to hold her?" And Romulus takes her and says I think, "She's very beautiful just like her mother," and I thought this could be played in a really awful 1970's way where a wife to be rational would…. etc… And I thought I talked to Franka Potente about this. So I discussed the scene with Franka, we were in Maldon actually and she said "Yeah, just like hippies they were," and I thought 'Oh my god, that's the exact opposite of what I wanted to say", anyway I went away very anxious about this, she plays it beautifully.  |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| So just intuiting it. That's talent isn't it? Often actors aren't able to articulate what they're doing but that magic thing happens and they just seem to absorb a character and present that character they're wonderful. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Yes I was struck by how Kodi intuited your… I have to preface this by saying; my husband is a very old friend of Rai's and when I married Rob he wanted to introduce me to this very deep and important friend and he described a number of things, your philosophy and how original and remarkable it was and how intelligent you were and so on, how he climbed mountains and I thought "Ok'. And then he said "And he's sort of a bit of a rocker, he really loves Elvis Presley" and that bit I really found rather startling, all the rest was interesting. But not so startling. And then Kodi actually is able to enact a kind of incipient sexual vivacity. He dances, he's a child but there's a kind of vibrancy and… |
| **Raimond Gaita** |
| Yeah I know, they have him, nobody knows why they put these dates in the film. It's 1962 and they have him discovering rock and roll in '62. I said to Richard, "For God's sake, I might have been a country boy, I wasn't that backward, it took me until 1962 to discover it?" |
| **Audience** |
| Robyn a question for you. Some years after your very personal journey where you were separated from society, you were in India and you travelled with some people who also have very close relationship with camels and I was thinking when I read that of what the late writer Bruce Chatwin said about herds people… |
| **Anne Manne** |
| About? |
| **Audience** |
| About herds people, people who herd animals. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Yes, |
| **Audience** |
| Right, as a societal gathering. Now you've lived in very many different societies you commented New York, England, and Chatwin said that he thought that "Because of the many many years, thousands of years of people living in close relationship with camel, that that was a more appropriate society than the ones that we experience now." How did you feel that, any of that with those people in India? |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| Well I'm very interested in nomadism generally, (in fact Bruce was an old mate of mine and we talked about this quite a lot), I mean it's a complicated issue obviously, but it seems to me that the sedentary life is a very recent phenomenon, ten or twelve thousand years. The people that I went on migration with in India represented to me all the humanist values that you would want to see operating in a society and I think that is because they were mobile. That is; they had to deal with difference, they were very cosmopolitan and they were constantly having to deal with different kinds of people. They had to understand their environment or they'd be, you know, they had to depend on that environment. They were good at negotiating with different sorts of people and they were very egalitarian amongst each other. So I think there is something about: there are these values that are associated with the nomadic life that we risk losing or if not losing, we give them up for other values that may not be in our long term interests. I suppose that's what I think, but of course it's a very complicated issue and I don't want to romanticise nomadic cultures, I don't want to romanticise the past, but as we lose these forms, social forms that were dependent upon the nomadic life. And let's face it, the one thing about being nomadic is you can't carry too much gear, you can't accumulate stuff and I think the values that are associated with that kind of life are very high values. And as the nomadic life is being eradicated in the contemporary world, we risk losing not just those values but the idea of leaving a light footprint on this earth I think. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Any more questions, one more, time for one more? |
| **Audience** |
| Yes this is a question to both of you and you've touched on it a little bit but I'm interested in the process of how the lead actors portraying yourselves, whether they at any stage just relied through the director and the script writer just on your text and the translation from text into script, or whether they actually communicated with you through the director? |
| **Raimond Gaita** |
| In my case I knew Richard well by that stage. Nick Drake and I became very very close friends, so… |
| **Anne Manne** |
| The screen writer? |
| **Raimond Gaita** |
| Yes, he's the screen writer, so I'm sure that had a lot to do with it, and then I think Kodi is just a miraculous actor, there were those three things. |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| In my case, I met Mia, I liked Mia as an actor, I'd seen her in *'In Treatment'* and I thought she was just really astonishing, she's got the business. And then I met her a week before they began the shoot, I took her out bush to teach her a bit of camel business and we're both extremely introverted shy people, so she's on one side of the plane looking out the window buttoned up like this, and I'm on the other side of the plane like this… (Laughter). But somehow in that week she absorbed something from me, I don't know what or how because I don't think it was necessarily in the script, and then the next time I saw her I'd gone out to one of the locations and I saw this kid coming across a dune leading camels wearing my clothes and I burst into tears, it was a most extraordinary thing but she really had sort of become me and we're still very close, she's like a daughter or a niece or something. A very strange thing. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Well, I know Rai wants to make a little announcement, I should also say that this was brought to you by the La Trobe University Ideas and Society Program which I omitted at the beginning. |
| **Raimond Gaita** |
| I have a little announcement, some of you may know that I'm involved with the community in Baringhup fighting a proposed chicken factory on the Moolort Plains where I grew up and where the film was made. It's a massive complex, 24 sheds, each is the length of the MCG, 8 million chickens processed a year, it's very cruel, it's a complete blot on the landscape and then in one way or another we have to find $300,000 to pay Beacon, legal fees to fight it – Beacon. So I've been involved in a number of fund raising efforts and recently a young women Yana Canteloupe who's waving there, has devised the idea of forming a writer's prize which is writing from plates, that's basically the theme of it. And the money that will come from entry fees which is very small, $10 for the Youth Prize, $20 for the Open Prize will all go to fight this monster proposal and Yana has come up with the idea of calling it the 'notJack Prize' and then there's a little picture of Jack the cockatoo. And she has a stall as you go into The Hub it's on your left in a little corner, adjacent to the signing table, so I thought I would alert you to that. And I will just say that both these fine women are connected with the prize. (Applause). |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Well thank you for being our wonderfully alert and attentive audience and two wonderful writers and I really urge you if you haven't seen the films to go along and do so they're really marvellous creations. |
| **Raimond Gaita** |
| Thank you. |
| **Robyn Davidson** |
| Thank you. |
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