The 2010 David Lean Lecture

delivered by
Peter Weir

6 December 2010
Introduction

by Jonathan Rayner

AN AWARD-WINNING director of distinction and finesse, Peter Weir has an admirable body of work that reflects his key role in the Australian New Wave of the mid-1970s, through to his remarkable standing within contemporary Hollywood.

After dropping out of university and travelling across Europe, Weir worked in television before joining the Commonwealth Film Unit. With his segment (Michael) in the CFU portmanteau film Three To Go (1971) and acclaimed independent short Homesdale (1971), Weir was at the forefront of the Australian revival even before his first feature, The Cars That Ate Paris (1974).

Jean-Luc Godard’s influence on Michael and the gothic allegory driving Homesdale became fully realised in Cars’ unpredictable shifts in tone from horror to comedy to social satire. His debut feature now stands as a classic of Australian Gothic and a key New Wave film.

Enigmatic drama Picnic At Hanging Rock (1975) retained the gothic atmosphere of Cars, but integrated European style and Impressionist aesthetics to create an Australian art cinema. It was one of the first Australian features to reach an international audience.

His status was then cemented by WWI drama Gallipoli (1981), a prestige project that united national cinema with national history.

Bigger productions followed, which led to the critically-acclaimed romantic drama The Year Of Living Dangerously (1982) and hit thriller Witness (1985), which showcased Weir’s deft handling of mainstream productions and garnered his first BAFTA and Oscar nominations.

International recognition followed for Dead Poets Society (1989), a moving drama set in an all-boys school which critiqued American post-war conservatism and echoed the depiction of Victorian repression in the all-girls school of Picnic At Hanging Rock. It earned Weir his first BAFTA win (Best Film). The Truman Show (1998) memorably satirised the American media and reality TV, and brought Weir a BAFTA win for Direction.

Though not as commercially successful, The Mosquito Coast (1986) and Fearless (1993) explored the same themes of alienation, identity, morality and mortality that inspired Weir’s earlier supernatural thriller The Last Wave (1977). These themes are also embedded in the screwball comedy of Green Card (1991) and the Western in Witness.

Master And Commander: The Far Side Of The World (2003) is a masterwork, an intellectual action film which scrutinises authority, loyalty and integrity, and is imbued with immersive detail alongside a distancing realism. It earned Weir his second BAFTA win for Direction, his third to date.

Weir’s latest feature The Way Back (2010) is, in contrast to Master And Commander, a modest independent production. However, it embraces diverse international locations and Hollywood stars with the same level of visionary grandeur and dramatic gravitas that have come to typify his work.

Dr Jonathan Rayner is a Reader in Film Studies at the University of Sheffield, and author of The Films of Peter Weir and Contemporary Australian Cinema.
On film production
An extraordinary feeling of the proximity of chaos hovers around a film set. That is dangerous to the director because it is all-pervasive and you can get very rattled. People are under great stress and are very excited and determined to do their best. In the early days of a shoot, people trip and knock things over until the unit is in rhythm, which sometimes doesn’t happen until quite late. In those early weeks it can be very chaotic and you need to develop your own approach to combat that, to harness it, or your ideas can begin to disintegrate.

On style
I’ve tried, to some extent, to disassemble my style, to fight against my own signature. Because I’ve observed that the great post-war directors from Europe, the great stylists – eventually, their horizons began to narrow. And I found myself tuning out their films because the subject became less and less important. So I decided I would try to be unpredictable and just look for good stories.

In His Own Words

Much is made of David Lean’s ability to combine the intimate with the epic, and rightly so: he was also a brilliant Editor. His feeling for structure and his sense of rhythm were valuable lessons in my own long apprenticeship. Therefore it is doubly gratifying to have twice received the BAFTA award bearing his great name.

Orange British Academy Film Awards Souvenir Brochure, 2007

Advice to first-time directors
Don’t give your big ideas up because of budget; try and do the same idea another way. Second of all, write down anything you want to do, no matter how outrageous it might sound. You never have enough time or money, whether it’s a big film, or a little film. Also, keep dialogue constantly going between yourself, your actors, and your crew. Keep the collaboration alive throughout.

The Hollywood Interview, 2005

On ‘less is more’
When the Hays Code [which governed Hollywood movies between 1930–1966] operated, directors were far more inventive with the way they showed strong attraction between male and female, love and lust. With the Hays Code gone – and who would argue it should be there – I tried to use the lessons I learned from those directors, that less is more. You allow the viewers to join in making the film and apply their imagination. I like to make films in which, at least emotionally, you are joining in and completing the picture with me.

Pitch Weekly, 1998
Ed Harris

Back in 1998, I was asked to meet Peter Weir about a role in *The Truman Show*. My heart skipped a beat, knowing I’d soon be meeting one of the greatest film directors of all time. I had been a huge admirer of Peter’s films since *Picnic At Hanging Rock*.

Cast as Christof, the God-like creator and manipulator of Truman’s world, I literally had two days before I was to begin filming. Thankfully, I was working on a Peter Weir film: his ‘book’ for the film was filled with sensory images of what he was after, his description and ideas about Christof were inspiring and provocative and his meticulous attention to detail made me quickly realise I was in strong, highly intelligent, passionate hands.

Peter’s single-mindedness when he is directing is astonishing. You know his laser-like focus is paying attention to your every move, every inflection, every emotional detail. For an actor who loves to work with artists who pursue the truth relentlessly – Peter is like manna from heaven.

When he asked me if I would play Mister Smith in *The Way Back*, it was the fulfilment of a wish. It had been 12 years since we worked together… and I was ready to go wherever Mr Weir was leading me.

Harris was BAFTA-nominated for his performance as Christof in *The Truman Show*.

Robin Williams

Peter Weir is an extraordinary director but he is also a teacher. I would have to say more like a cinematic sensei. He would play classical music before scenes and inspire both the boys and myself to push the creative envelope.

He also gave me an invaluable piece of advice. He told me that silence and stillness have great power and for someone who thought they had to fill every pause, this was a revelation. Doing a movie with Peter definitely changes you and I would have to say not just as a performer, but as a human being.

Thank you, My Captain.

Williams was BAFTA-nominated for his performance as John Keating in *Dead Poets Society*.
Peter Weir was a great leader. He was kind, gentle, but definitely the one everyone listened to. He had the most respect for his crew that I have ever witnessed and in return he was loved with devotion that he earned.

There was always a feeling of peace and creativity on the set and everyone worked together as a team. Peter loved to gather the cast and crew together in the mornings for some kind of motivation, celebration, a game or something that made us all laugh.

There were no feelings of above and below the line… there was no line and this made for a set that felt even and humble.

I never heard him raise his voice; I never saw him get angry. He always thanked people. He is a master filmmaker; he has all the technical skills and brilliance to match any of our best directors, but he has something that I have not often seen that makes him the man that he is. He knows how to treat people.

I was young and inexperienced and I had no idea how lucky I was to be there. Not that I wasn’t pleased and thankful because I was. However, I am older, wiser and more experienced now. He is a beautiful man and to me, that is much more than being a great filmmaker.
Filmography

2010  *The Way Back*¹
2003  *Master And Commander: The Far Side Of The World*¹
1998  *The Truman Show*
1993  *Fearless*
1990  *Green Card*¹
1989  *Dead Poets Society*
1986  *The Mosquito Coast*
1985  *Witness*
1982  *The Year Of Living Dangerously*²
1981  *Gallipoli*²
1979  *The Plumber (tv)*²
1977  *The Last Wave*³
1976  *Luke's Kingdom (tv)*
1975  *Picnic At Hanging Rock*
1974  *The Cars That Ate Paris*²
1973  *The Aunty Jack Show (tv)*³
1971  *Three To Go (segment: 'Michael')*³
1969  *Man On A Green Bike (tv)*

**SELECT AWARDS**

**BAFTA Wins**

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<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Film</th>
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<tr>
<td>Director</td>
<td><em>Master And Commander: The Far Side Of The World</em>¹</td>
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<tr>
<td>Best Film</td>
<td><em>Dead Poets Society</em></td>
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**BAFTA Nominations**

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<tr>
<td>Best Film</td>
<td><em>Master And Commander: The Far Side Of The World</em>¹</td>
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<tr>
<td>Original Screenplay</td>
<td><em>Green Card</em>¹</td>
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**Oscar Nominations**

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<tr>
<td>Director</td>
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<tr>
<td>Best Picture</td>
<td><em>Master And Commander: The Far Side Of The World</em>¹</td>
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**Short Films**

- 1979  *Heart, Head And Hand*
- 1975  *Three Workshop Films*
- 1974  *Fugue*²
- 1973  *Whatever Happened To Green Valley*
- 1973  *The Fifth Face*³
- 1972  *Incredible Florida*
- 1972  *The Billiard Room*
- 1972  *The Computer Centre*
- 1972  *Best Builders*
- 1972  *The Country Couldn’t Do Without You*
- 1972  *Field Day*
- 1972  *Australia Colour Diary No. 43: Two Directions In Australian Pop Music*
- 1971  *Homesdale*²
- 1971  *Tongue: Australia in the ’70s*³
- 1970  *Stirring the Pool*
- 1968  *The Life And Flight Of The Reverend Buck Shoots*
- 1967  *Count Vui’s Last Exorcise*

¹ Also wrote and produced ² Also wrote ³ Writer only
THE DAVID LEAN LECTURE

The Academy’s annual David Lean Lecture is generously funded by The David Lean Foundation. The lecture series serves to continue the legacy of the great director David Lean, one of the founders of the British Film Academy (as it was then known) in 1947 and a continuing inspiration to many through his exceptional body of work.

Previous David Lean Lectures have been given by:

2009  Atom Egoyan
2008  Lean Centenary Celebration
2007  David Lynch
2006  Oliver Stone
2005  Woody Allen
2004  John Boorman
2003  Ken Loach
2002  Robert Altman
2001  Sydney Pollack

A webcast from tonight’s lecture will be made available online at www.bafta.org.

THANKS

Anthony Reeves
The David Lean Foundation
Peter Weir

William Anderson
Russell Boyd
Phil Cairns
Katie Campbell
EM Foundation
Entertainment One
Quentin Falk
Ed Harris
Andie MacDowell
Dr Jonathan Rayner
Theresa Roberts
Robin Williams

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