



TRIBAL VOICE

He lives in a two-room tent in the remote outback but last month, Jamie Gulpilil – son of acclaimed Aboriginal actor David – became the toast of the international film world as the star of Cannes prize-winner Ten Canoes. These are strange times for the shy, happily married actor. By Claire Scobie.

When Aboriginal actor David Gulpilil trod the red carpet for the premiere of *The Tracker* in 2002, he turned to his youngest son, Jamie, then 18, and said, “One day you’ll be walking through here.” Last month, *Ten Canoes* took the jury prize at the Cannes Film Festival. Jamie, who comes from Ramingining – 10 hours’ drive east of Darwin and a place so remote it was once described by *Canoes* director Rolf de Heer as “the most foreign country” he’d ever been to – plays the lead role. “He’s already a natural,” says his father, who narrated the film.

When a teenage David Gulpilil was plucked out of the Maningrida bush in central Arnhem Land to star in 1971’s *Walkabout*, he was an unknown, an accomplished ceremonial dancer who barely spoke a word of English. But the film was groundbreaking – the first time a Western audience had seen an Aborigine cast in a lead role. Now his 22-year-old son, Jamie Dayindi Gulpilil, is also breaking new ground. *Ten Canoes*, which is released on June 29, is the first feature film to be shot entirely in an indigenous language – Ganalbingu, “maggie goose people” – spoken by fewer than 1000 people.

When the film premiered in Adelaide in March, father and son came on stage to rapturous applause. Jamie blew the audience a kiss self-consciously, his eyes dazzled by the bright lights. David warmly embraced him. Yet, the two could not be more different. David’s broad, craggy face and larger-than-life character – always telling stories, cracking jokes – contrasts with Jamie’s sharp features, huge ‘fro and introverted nature. While David talks, Jamie listens. “Jamie doesn’t have the ego that David has,” says Airlie Thomas, a nurse and de facto wife of David who lived with him in Ramingining between 1990 and 1993. “He’s not flash. There’s no desire for attention.”

At the Adelaide premiere’s after-party, Jamie stands awkwardly, arms crossed, not meeting my gaze. (Holding eye contact is considered confrontational by the Yolngu.) In stilted English – his fourth language after three indigenous languages – he says he’s proud of the film. He chats about football, Australian rules and his favourite music: rap, the Backstreet Boys



In his dad’s footsteps Jamie Gulpilil, at three, with his father, David, and David’s former de facto wife, Amie McElvay.

and Bob Marley. Back home, he’s been hunting with his dad for crocodiles. “We don’t do it the old-fashioned way but with a gun. We tie up their jaw with rope, then cut up and eat them.”

Jamie’s friends join us. They make a joke I can’t understand about “jiggy-jiggy” – sex. *Ten Canoes* has turned Jamie into something of a local pin-up. “After the film was made there was love interest with young Yolngu women chasing him,” says Belinda Scott, associate producer and assistant manager at Bula’bula Arts centre in Ramingining. But Jamie is more interested in talking about his wife, Lisa, 21, who works in Maningrida’s general store, about 60 kilometres from Ramingining: “Beautiful with long hair. We’ve been married two years. She chose me.”

I momentarily turn away and when I turn back, Jamie has vanished. Such light-footed presence is a quality he does share with his father, whose disappearing acts from film shoots are legendary. Back in 2004, when I interviewed David for *Sunday Life*, he had excitedly talked of working with de Heer on *Canoes*, to set a film in Arnhem Land’s Arafura Swamp, to preserve the traditions of the Yolngu. But within months, David had withdrawn from the project after breaking up with his tribal wife of 15 years, Robin Djuginy. “Robin wouldn’t let David back on her traditional land in Ramingining because he is [now] with a different woman,” says Peter Djigirr, the film’s co-director. Today, David lives in Darwin with his new wife, Miriam Ashley, and paints. “I wanted a change of location,” he says.

Filming had to continue. Inspired by a photograph of a bark canoe taken by Melbourne anthropologist Donald Thomson in the 1930s, de Heer loosely wrote the script to please both the Yolngu storytelling tradition and a Western audience. Thomson’s photos of Yolngu life, artefacts and even hairstyles were an invaluable reference to a time when the culture was intact. Today it is a community in transition. In Ramingining there is a supermarket and a disco.

From the outset, *Ten Canoes* was a tough assignment. Aside from the language difficulties – most of the cast, including Jamie, speak rudimentary English and had never acted before – complex →



kinship relations made conventional directing impossible. As the cast considered they were not acting but were playing their forefathers, they could play only roles in the film that fitted their skin and language group in real life. Filmed on location in the mosquito-infested Arafura Swamp, half the shoot was spent waist-deep in murky water. “We had croc spotters who’d tell us when a big one was coming,” says de Heer. “I could see Jamie wasn’t comfortable when paddling his canoe in the open water but he grinned and played the brave warrior. He was far more jumpy about leeches.”

After shooting the \$2.4 million movie, de Heer decided to track down David in Darwin to see if he would consider doing the voice-over. “He first wanted to know how Jamie was [in the film],” says de Heer. “When I said he was very good, David cried. Jamie has something instinctive for acting. But I never got the sense that he is going to take on David’s mantle.”

Caught between two worlds and not fully accepted by a people unimpressed by fame or celebrity, David Gulpilil has battled with depression and alcoholism. “Jamie is not like his father,” says co-star Frances Djulibing. “He wants to go into the movies but he doesn’t want to become weak.” Jamie is held in high regard in his community. “He is respected because he’s sober and very well behaved,” says Scott. “He

“He is respected because he is sober and well behaved. He likes to work, he doesn’t run around with young men and has respect for his culture.”

likes to work, doesn’t run around with young men who go to Darwin and get drunk, and has respect for his culture.” He does ceremony every year and is on the long road to becoming a lore man.

When Jamie is asked if he’s bothered by David’s drinking, he shrugs. “No, I don’t mind.” If he did, no doubt he wouldn’t tell me; Jamie is still “too young” to voice opinions, says Djigirr. For a movie star in the making, such reticence makes life difficult. Jamie, like his father, now walks between two cultural spheres.

The day after the film’s Adelaide premiere and with a tight schedule of back-to-back TV interviews, it becomes clear that Jamie isn’t coping. He refuses to say anything and by lunchtime all interviews have been cancelled.

“Jamie was different when he was younger. He loved the cameras; he was a real poser,” says Amie McElvoy, who was David’s de facto wife in the mid-’80s. After David separated from Jill Ganindjar, Jamie’s mother, McElvoy raised Jamie for several years: “He had two mothers and was looked after by us both. There was no competition.” Home was his father’s traditional land, Gulpulul, a wooden house with a tin roof, a sink but no running water. “We got that from the river,” says McElvoy, “ate traditional food – emu

and goanna – and lived with the bare minimum.”

When David performed at cultural festivals, McElvoy and Jamie would accompany him on his travels. At five, Jamie lived with McElvoy in Sydney’s Waterloo and went to Redfern Public School. At six, he returned to Arnhem Land and exposure to the outside world became more limited. His primary school years were “hotchpotch”, recalls Airlie Thomas, who was living with David at the time. Jamie attended an out-station school before going to school in Ramingining. He’s since trained as a national parks ranger.

“Jamie is a tribal boy, not real keen on education,” says McElvoy. “He changed after puberty and men’s business. Now he’s a real shy fella.”

“Making *Ten Canoes* gave Jamie confidence,” says Scott. But not when journalists ask lots of questions. “Jamie felt embarrassed. Yolngu people take time to listen. It may take up to five minutes before they reply.”

When I finally interview Jamie, it is in Sydney. Dressed in black trousers and a cobalt-blue shirt printed with skateboarders leaping in the air, a jumper artfully tied over one shoulder, he seems more at ease. We are wandering around a shopping centre near Central Station with David and the publicist, looking for hot chips. “Jamie has always been interested in fashion,” says McElvoy. “He likes

shoes – those that cost \$150 to \$200.”

Did he mind going without clothes in the film, with its full-frontal nudity? “No, I’m not shy up there [in Ramingining].” The conversation slips from one random subject to another. Sometimes he doesn’t answer my questions and I’m not sure if it’s because he hasn’t understood or he’s chosen not to reply. He becomes animated when talking about his childhood: “When I was a little boy, my dad teach me how to spear.” These days he loves to hunt alone and on an average day will jump in David’s old Toyota LandCruiser and catch barramundi or turtle.

His wife, Lisa, is “a little bit excited about the film but not too much,” he smiles. “She is a little bit jealous.” They live in Maningrida with his wife’s extended family and sleep in a two-room tent with a TV outside.

A bus roars past, he pulls a face. “You like Sydney?” I bellow. “Yes. Too many people; I like that.” A stranger approaches and shakes Jamie’s hand, saying he’d seen Jamie on television. How did that make him feel? “A little bit good.” He falls silent. “I hope the film will teach balanda – white Australians – my culture, dancing and ceremony.” He tucks into hot chips. “Balanda world is good but I get a little bit nervous. I get shy when people look at me,” he frowns, his voice peters out but then, more resolutely: “I don’t want to be shy any more. When I am older, I won’t be shy.” ●

Caught between two worlds Jamie Gulpilil’s lean, naked figure features on the publicity posters for *Ten Canoes*.