



## **THE NEW BOY (15)**

Director: Warwick Thornton

Starring: Aswan Reid, Cate Blanchett, Deborah Mailman

Australia, 2023, 1hour 36 minutes, English

A complex and profoundly Australian film, *The New Boy* is the work of Kaytetye writer-director and cinematographer Warwick Thornton. During innumerable telephone conversations during Covid with Cate Blanchett, Thornton was encouraged to develop his long-standing ideas on the topic. Blanchett came on board as producer, and subsequently as a member of the leading cast. After eighteen years in the making in total, the film was filmed on location near Burra, South Australia, and has a score by Nick Cave and Warren Ellis.

The film is set in the 1940s and the new boy of the title is the latest arrival at a remote Catholic orphanage. This is not a story of a wild child encountering an alien culture, however, but rather 'a moving and needfully blunt statement about the clash that's too often been enforced upon the country's First Peoples since colonisation' (Sarah Ward). It centres on a dark and relatively recent chapter of Australia's history: the forcible kidnap of Aboriginal children, their removal to orphanages, and the imposition of Christianity alongside the erasure of their languages, customs and family ties. Cate Blanchett's role as the troubled Mother Superior at the institution brings Christian belief and ritual into conflict or even, perhaps, a kind of balance with the boy's Indigenous spirituality, rooted in the land and in his forebears. Her presence in the film has met with some mixed reviews, perhaps as a consequence.

Through the compelling and virtually silent central performance of Aswan Reid as the new boy – he has never acted before – the film spirals off into a sequence of mystical phenomena. In terms of filmic technique, this narrative and visual trajectory disrupts any easy story-telling. Angela Bates, *Screen Australia's* Head of First Nations, describes *The New Boy* as "a genre-defying film that explores spirituality, culture and colonization". In what is bound to become a notorious but eye-catching assessment, Luke Buckmaster of the Australian branch of *The Guardian* wrote after an early viewing, "a cryptic and borderline impenetrable noodle-scratcher stuffed full of heavy religious imagery".

The final word should go to Thornton, whose own originating story is how his mother sent him away from Alice Springs to a remote monastery as a young boy because he was difficult to manage. In an interview he has said that the film "brings with it the weight of a certain pocket of Australian history. Which always follows us and in a way, as a filmmaker, you always reference this part of Australian history in some way".

Preview courtesy of Signature Entertainment

Notes compiled by Catherine Neale