

# Love Blooms in Scarcity and Silence

## Warwick Thornton's *Samson and Delilah*

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A quiet love blooms in an arid desert amid poverty and neglect. In a small community on a Central Australian reservation, An incorrigible teenage boy sets his eye on a girl from a neighboring shack. The young woman lives with her grandmother, an elderly artist, with whom she makes Aboriginal paintings to earn a meager living. Samson attempts to woo Delilah by throwing a rock at her and tagging along on her errands. Undeterred by the cold shoulder, he tosses his mattress over her fence, cooks her a kangaroo for dinner, and still he's rebuffed. Yet when Delilah is blamed for the passing of her grandmother and Samson starts a feud with his brother, boy whisks girl off in a stolen truck and their silent, pensive, turbulent romance begins. In his first feature film, director Warwick Thornton tells an intimate story of two complex characters who barely speak throughout, while offering a penetrating look at a people most of us know nothing about: young native Central Australians living in squalor, hungry, addicted to petrol fumes, yearning to connect.

Thornton pulled from his own upbringing in the crafting of this film. An Aboriginal Australian himself, he grew up in the town of Alice Springs where "my mother was too busy trying to put food on the table to worry about me going to school," he relates. One of five siblings, Thornton got his start as a DJ at a radio station where his sister worked. At 16, Thornton was hosting a radio show that served mainly to help prison inmates communicate with the outside. "Every day you'd go to the prison," he remembers, "collect all the requests, and then you'd take them back and try to source all the records that they wanted to play. But they not only wanted the music; it became like a telephone exchange where we'd be sending out messages. 'I've only got six months to go.' 'My daughter just had a baby. Can someone tell me what his name is?'"

From there he moved on to the station's video unit where he spent two years traveling with the crew and learning the ropes as a camera assistant. His first assignment, he recalls, "was four or five hundred [kilometers] out of town, the middle of the desert. It was two old men sitting under a tree telling an old dreamtime story. A traditional story from pre-colonization." Restless for more training, Thornton enrolled at Sydney's Australian Film, Television and Radio School, which he describes as "the biggest toy shop in the bloody world." Following a string of award-winning short films — the first of which was "Green Bush," based on his DJ years — the filmmaker is now gaining acclaim with *Samson and Delilah*. The feature has won numerous prizes, including the Golden Camera Award at Cannes, and at the time of this writing, *Samson and Delilah* has the rare distinction of a "100% fresh" rating on rottentomatoes.com, an aggregate score based on over two dozen reviews. The film stars Rowan McNamara as Samson and Marissa Gibson as Delilah, both untrained actors who shine in their portrayal of a young love that is virtually devoid of words.

"When I was 13," Thornton explains of his focus on the visual, "I couldn't walk up to a girl and tell her how I felt. It wasn't about dialogue. It was distance and magnetism. I just wanted [the film] to be truthful. I wanted it to be special and different. It's much more fun to get an actor to act happy and act sad. Rather than say it, perform it!"

The rising talent sees himself as one in a long line of storytellers. "Twenty or forty-thousand years ago," he says, "my [ancestors were] sitting under a tree telling stories, and I'm doing exactly the same thing only I'm using celluloid." ▼

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