

# CHRISTOS TSIOLKAS

Christos Tsiolkas was born in Melbourne in 1965. His novel, *Loaded*, was published in 1995 (adapted for the screen as *Head On*, 1998) and his second novel, *The Jesus Man*, was published in 1999. He is the co-author of *Jump Cuts: An Autobiography*, a dialogue written with Sasha Soldatow. Christos' plays include *Who's Afraid of the Working Class?*, *Viewing Blue Poles*, *Elektra AD*, *Dead Caucasians* and *Fever*. Along with Spiro Economopoulos, he co-wrote and co-directed the short film, *Thug*, for SBS Television. Christos has also worked as a reviewer, essayist and journalist.

He is currently working on a new novel, *Dead Europe*, the screenplay for *Who's Afraid of the Working Class?*, as well as working with Spiro Economopoulos on a play titled *Non Parlo di Salo* about the political and artistic legacy of filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini. Christos lives in Melbourne with his lover Wayne van der Stelt.

AUSTRALIAN SCREEN CLASSICS

# the devil's playground

CHRISTOS TSIOLKAS



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# AUSTRALIAN SCREEN CLASSICS

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Series Editor

Our national cinema plays a vital role in our cultural heritage and in showing us what it is to be Australian. But the picture can be blurred by unruly forces including competing artistic aims, inconstant personal tastes, political vagaries, constantly changing priorities in screen education and training, and technological innovations and market forces.

When these forces remain unconnected, the result can be an artistically impoverished cinema and audiences who are disinclined to seek out and derive pleasure from a diverse range of films.

Screen culture, of which this series is a part, is the glue needed to stick these forces together. It's the plankton in the food chain that feeds the imagination of our filmmakers and their audiences. It's what makes sense of the opinions, memories, responses, knowledge and exchange of ideas about film.

Above all, screen culture is informed by a *love* of cinema. And it has to be carefully nurtured if we are to understand and appreciate the aesthetic, moral, intellectual and sentient value of our national cinema.

## A U S T R A L I A N   S C R E E N   C L A S S I C S

**Australian Screen Classics** will match some of our best-loved films with some of our most distinguished writers and thinkers, drawn from the worlds of culture, criticism and politics. All we ask of our writers is that they feel passionate about the films they choose. Through these thoughtful, elegantly-written books, we hope that screen culture will work its sticky magic.

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I

An Antipodean summer merges one year into another, and similarly, my memories of the summers of the late 1970s merge together. I begin thus because I have to admit that I cannot recall the exact date that I first saw *The Devil's Playground*. It must have been a summer's weekend because I remember a hot blast of sun hitting my face as I stumbled out of the theatre in Melbourne, and I furiously scrubbed at my cheeks to remove the telltale signs of the tears I had cried. Other things I remember of that summer in which 1977 merged into 1978 include sitting on a chair at the barbers and flicking guiltily through a cheap soft-porn magazine—the sort that combined lurid photographs of big-breasted girls with sensationalist editorials on vice and sin. There were photographs of pale, angry British youths dressed in bin liners, safety pins through their clothes, and I recall thinking how frightening these young punks looked. I remember my voice breaking and I remember showing my friend Jane my first pubes.

The production notes for *The Devil's Playground* state that it was completed in 1976. By the end of the following year I was twelve and I am sure that I was at least that old before I saw the film. Maybe this is a conceit. I identified so strongly with Tom Allen, the film's central character, that I want to believe I was the exact same age as he: thirteen. Reminiscences always carry the

danger of nostalgic reconstruction, but I do remember telling a teacher how I ‘liked that film a lot’ and she scrunched up her nose and asked me bluntly, ‘Do your parents know the kind of films you’re watching?’. An odd question.

My mother, who loved films and passed on this love to me, would come along with me to see *Coming Home* or *An Unmarried Woman* or *Alien*. She also took me to *Gone With the Wind* and *It Happened One Night* and, unbeknownst to her, handed down to me her passion for Clark Gable. Admittedly, trekking off to the cinema with my mother was somewhat embarrassing. The last thing a boy entering adolescence wants is to be seen hanging out with a parent. Nevertheless, the red cheeks were worth it. As she bought the tickets, I gained access to many films I wasn’t meant to see. For her, she got a translator by her side.

‘What did she say? What’s going on now?’

Around us the old Australian women would purse their lips and occasionally give us a serve.

‘Shut up. We’re here to see a movie, not listen to you wogs shout.’

My mother would be incensed. I would sink lower and lower into my seat. It wasn’t till years later, going to the movies in Athens, that I would realise how strange Australian movie going must have seemed to my parents. In Greece they do shout commandments and insults to the screen. As an adult I was to understand my mother’s fierce, passionate interaction with the melodramas and themes unfolding on the screen as a means of communicating her love of film to me. But at thirteen, I was only conscious of her difference. I recoiled from her, from her ‘wogginess’.

I started keeping certain movies from mum.

## THE DEVIL'S PLAYGROUND

*The Devil's Playground* was one of these. I had seen the trailer. I do remember that clearly. I remember making a mental note to make sure that I saw the film. What I had responded to were the images of the boys in the shower, the craggy ocker profile of the actor Nick Tate, who plays Brother Victor in the film. If I had no words for these instinctual responses to the images—homosexuality was, if not unknown, certainly not a word I would dare attach to myself—they were strong enough to make me seek out the strange, the difficult and the esoteric.

*The Devil's Playground* was not a film any of my friends would have chosen to see. Just as I kept it from my mother, I also knew to go to the film alone, knew that there would be something dangerous in explaining my keen need to see it to any of my schoolyard friends. So sometime in the summer of 1977 and 1978, alone, in a nearly empty cinema, I saw the film.

Brother Victor smoking a cigarette. Tom Allen's smile and Tom Allen's arse. The underwater sirens attacking Brother Francine's naked body. Two boys giving each other a clumsy hand job in the dark. The reflection of the trees on the car window as Tom is driven towards Melbourne and away from the seminary. The nausea I felt when Brother Victor condemns the seminary rules as 'unnatural', as making 'poofters' of the boys. Tom hanging out his piss-wet sheets to dry and rubbing his hands together against the cold winter air.

Looking through this list of memories, it strikes me as odd that I have included nothing about faith and spirituality, nothing about God. Like Tom, the film's young protagonist, I too was determined to follow a Christian God into good works and self-sacrifice. Also like Tom, I too was clutching at a permanent