

AUSTRALIAN SCREEN CLASSICS

wake in fright

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INTRODUCTION

Wake in Fright is a film that plays an important role in Australia's recent cinema history; it's a film that people remember vividly no matter how long ago they saw it. And yet it's a film that was made at a time when Australian audiences were indifferent to local production, a film that disappeared from view for many years and was only restored to its proper place by the amazing diligence and sheer determination of one man. For someone like me, who loves films and who has written about the ups and downs of the Australian film scene for many years, the story of *Wake in Fright* is one that is both intriguing and mysterious, a story that demands to be told.

Films have always been part of my life. I grew up at Bayview, on Pittwater in Sydney's northern beaches, where I was one of a gang of local kids. It was a great place to grow up; we spent most of our leisure time outside, swimming, riding and climbing trees. But we did go to Saturday matinees at the local cinemas at Narrabeen and Collaroy, and even as far afield as Manly when there was something particularly enticing. It was a good hour's bus ride to Manly, but there were four cinemas there, including the Metro by the beach which showed wonderful MGM musicals, such as *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) and all those ones with the diminutive all-singing, all-dancing Jane Powell, as well as swashbuckling films like *Scaramouche* (1952). But it was at another cinema, the

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one in the Manly Corso, where I remember seeing a thrilling double bill of Jacques Tourneur's *Cat People* (1942) and Gunther von Fritsch and Robert Wise's *The Curse of the Cat People* (1944), an early introduction to the joys of producer Val Lewton's subtle and creative take on the horror genre. Yet another Manly cinema, the one around near the Manly ferry wharf, was where my mother took me to see James Stewart in Anthony Mann's great western, *Bend of the River* (1952), although I wouldn't have realised then how stark and implacable a tale it was. These are films I've never forgotten—and have seen many times since.

In my last years at high school I'd take the odd day off, especially if I was running late or hadn't done my homework, and I'd go into the city for a couple of sessions at the city cinemas. Although it was mainly Hollywood fare that enticed me, I did take in the occasional British film. Once I left school I started working in the city, where I not only kept up my diet of contemporary films but started attending screenings of a quite different kind—at the Sydney University Film Group, the Realist Film Group, the National Film Theatre of Australia—and very soon I started going to the Sydney Film Festival. All these screenings introduced me to a wide range of national cinemas, genres and filmmaking periods and really expanded my film knowledge and understanding.

Australian film, however, came a bit later. As is well known, there wasn't visible filmmaking activity at this time, in the early to mid-1960s. But I moved in a social milieu that included people involved in all sorts of creative activity, from art to publishing, from acting to music. Several friends were involved with showing American surfing movies in halls and surf clubs up and down the coast and soon started talking about making their own films; other friends were working at the ABC and the Commonwealth Film

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Unit (later to become Film Australia) and were also venturing into filmmaking.

Then I moved into a big share house where a friend, Albie Thoms, not only screened experimental films in the front room, but shot footage on the stairs. Albie, together with David Perry, Aggy Read and John Clark, was setting up UBU Films, and I watched from a front-row seat as Sydney's small but active underground film movement began to grow and become more visible. Taking its name from Alfred Jarry's absurdist 1896 play, *Ubu Roi*, UBU Films became a Sydney-based independent filmmaking co-operative dedicated to making, exhibiting and distributing experimental films. From the mid-1960s the UBU circle took in many young film-makers who in later years became prominent mainstream film-industry figures, including Peter Weir, Phillip Noyce and Bruce Beresford, as well as artists who experimented with filmmaking, like Garry Shead, Mick Glasheen and Peter Kingston. These filmmakers, and many others, would become members of the Sydney Filmmakers Co-op when it was established in 1969.¹

The films that UBU produced were extraordinary, highly inventive and always a challenge to the mainstream. I spent a lot of time driving around the city with Aggy in his battered Mini Minor, delivering bundles of *Oz*, the soon-to-be-notorious libertarian magazine produced by Richard Neville, Martin Sharp, Richard Walsh and others. Aggy had used lots of magazines to make his very short and for a time quite famous film, *Boobs a Lot* (1970), which simply, but startlingly, cuts together numerous short shots of women's breasts to The Fugs' pop song of that title.² Produced by Albie and photographed by David Perry was *Tobias Icarus Age Four* (1968), a short but moving film about the mother-and-child

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relationship made by my friend Clem Weight, the first of us to have a child. It actually travelled successfully to several overseas film festivals. In fact, a number of UBU films screened at overseas festivals; as Albie Thoms later observed, in those early years they were taken much more seriously outside Australia.

But filmmaking for many at that time was more like painting or acting or playing in a band: it was another expression of a rich and lively local art scene. Painter Garry Shead put together lots of home-movie footage and some especially-shot sequences to make *Ding a Ding Day* (1966), which chronicles his life as an art student, including his early involvement with *Oz* magazine, and I'm actually in it, along with many friends. Budding artists Peter Kingston, Johnny Allen and Mick Glasheen made what can be looked back on as a really early underground movie, *Who Plus Live Equals Home* (1963). Friends lived in the now legendary Yellow House in Kings Cross, where film was just one of the many art forms that were being wildly experimented with, and film screenings were held spontaneously. And practically everyone I knew was involved with Chris McCullough's *Vision for a New World* (1968), a rather enigmatic tale of a suicide that might not have happened, which went on to win an Australian Film Institute (AFI) Award.

Another friend, David Price, constructed a sort-of documentary called *Surfing Roundabout* (1965), featuring a group of surfies who, driving around to various surfie hangouts in their old bomb, rarely managed to get wet, let alone catch a wave. This sly look at the surfing scene starred Jenny Kee (later a celebrated designer), my gorgeous friend Anou Kiisler, and our favourite local band, The Missing Links, with a title song by another friend, Stephen Little. It had a breathless narration written and spoken by *Oz* editor