

LEISURE

Picnic continues to win viewers' hearts

By MATTHEW MYERS

AMIDST the screeching cockatoos and buzzing cicadas, the morning mist fades to expose a huge volcanic monolithic structure. Jutting out of the ancient earth, as if time has stood still, it sits. Silent yet bold, inspiring yet foreboding.

It is Valentine's Day 1900 and though the bracken is thick and the snakes are abundant, a party of excited schoolgirls frolic, discuss art and read poetry. They are pleasantly contented yet unaware of the tragic circumstance soon to follow. This day will change their lives forever, for some of them shall vanish and never return.

This is, of course, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, the Australian cinema classic which caught the attention of the world and broke new ground for Australian movie making.

Recently voted by the Australian Film Institute as the most popular Aussie flick ever, it beat clear favorites such as *Gallipoli*, *Mad Max* and *The Piano*.

It was a milestone for director Peter Weir, became the darling of the Cannes Film Festival, and made a celebrity of author Joan Lindsay.

It also brought new fame

for Gheorghe Zamfir and his pan pipes (long before the Nescafe commercials), did wonders for Mt Macedon tourism and launched the careers of Helen Morse, Jackie Weaver, John Jarratt and Anne Louise Lambert.

Twenty years on, and this film is still as cherished and adored as ever, and there are no greater fans than those who made it all possible.

When the four famous white-faced schoolgirls disappeared into the rock crevice, they became etched on our minds forever, but when director Peter Weir yelled 'cut', reality returned, and the actresses went on to other things.

Karen Robson, who played Irma went on to become a highly successful New York lawyer, Jane Vallis, who played Marion sadly died of cancer in 1993 and Christine Schuler who played Edith, keeping with the story seems to have vanished.

However, at 19 years of age, Anne Louise Lambert who played the sensitive and mysterious schoolgirl Miranda, suddenly became one of the most sought after young actresses in Australia.

Soon to be seen in the upcoming *Lillian's Story*, Anne Louise, now a mother



and living in Sydney, reflects upon the role which brought her fame. "It was very important to me, in letting the industry know that I existed. As I made *Picnic* a long time ago, it's something that I've grown up with. It's one of those weird things that happens in one's career. It did feel special and even the hard old crew members sensed something different about this film."

Grand as it was, *Picnic* must have been filled with many magic moments, and as Anne Louise points out, some rather special memories.

"One day I was coming down the rock after a hard scene, and feeling sorry for myself. I walked off in a different direction to the others and saw a little old lady coming toward me having trouble with the terrain.

"As she approached she said: 'Miranda, it's been so long!' and threw her arms around me. That was Joan Lindsay! It was really nice, and my fondest memory of making the movie."

John Jarratt, now appearing with actress wife Noni Hazelhurst on *Better Homes and Gardens*, was another key player in the movie as the bush-wise coachman Albert.

Like Anne Louise, John also had the world at his feet, and went on to star in such screen successes as *Ned Kelly*, *Fields of Fire III* (with Anne Louise), *All Men are Liars* and the recent *Dead Heart*.

As John looks back though, it's easy to see the pride he feels for the film that gave him his break.

"It is awe inspiring to be a part of history, as far as this motion picture is concerned. It was my second film, I felt young and impressive and I want-

ed it to be a hit. This was something more than *Homicide* and we knew we were breaking new ground. I now get a slight glow when someone mentions that I was in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

My biggest buzz was playing the character and feeling comfortable with a good take. I felt my best scene was in the boat shed, where Albert talks about the bloody trappers and the bloody bloodhounds. I ad-libbed all those bloodies into the script! *Picnic* was certainly a good beginning, and I was recognised as someone who could cut it."

Picnic at Hanging Rock certainly looks impressive on John's resume, as likewise for fellow cast member Helen Morse, who has since added *Caddie*, *Agatha*, *Far East* and the popular mini-series *A Town Like Alice* to her list.

Helen will long be remembered as the soft spoken French teacher Dianne De Poitiers, a role which won her an AFI award for best actress.

"It was my first major film role and the success of the film internationally meant that my work as an actor was recognised overseas.

We were staying at a beautiful old guesthouse called Ard Rudah, in Mt Macedon. After the day's shoot, we would walk in the grounds and play croquet! I loved to read, or play the piano in the huge room which overlooked the garden. We seemed to be living in a 19th century world."

Gifted as these actors are, the biggest star to emerge from the movie was the rock itself. However it almost missed the boat, as producer Patricia Lovell explains.

"Two years before the movie, when I had just taken out the rights, Peter Weir and I were driving to the rock and on the way discussed if we should shoot in the Blue Mountains. Then the rock suddenly appeared with a single cloud sitting above it, and we knew it was the right location."

One location which did miss out was the town of Woodend. Considered too modernised to play itself in the movie, the South Australian town of Strathalbyn was used instead, and while red loam was spread across the bitumen street, local residents dressed in period costumes to appear as extras in the movie.

The Mt Macedon area, however, was not without its participation and as Helen Morse stayed at Ard Rudah (Gaelic for high place), Anne Louise and the other school girls lodged at The Christian Women's Boarding House while John Jarratt remembers well the Black Forest Motel on the Calder Highway.

Guido Bigolin, who has been park ranger at Hanging Rock for the past 14 years, has become accustomed to the affinity that the public seem to hold to the place.

"I saw the film back in 1976, but I never dreamed that one day I'd be working here. The rock formation seems to get people intrigued, you see people sitting up there for hours on end. People often ask questions about the film, though it was always a popular spot before the movie. It's always been a place for Sunday School meetings, family reunions, birthday parties and weddings."

Then of course, there is the famous Hanging Rock race meetings which always guarantee a crowd.

The rock itself seems to have somewhat of a "twilight zone" effect on people leaving many visitors dazzled by its strange, even hypnotic aura.

"There's an eerie feeling when I'm up there alone," says Guido. "Early in the morning with the mist and especially during the winter fog."

Likewise the cast and crew also remember the unusual atmosphere, as Helen Morse explains.

"When we arrived at the rock on the first morning of filming, there was a thick mist. Gradually the sun filtered through and suddenly there was the rock, literally hanging in this sea of mist. It was breathtaking. I felt an almost magnetic energy from the Rock, and there is a sense of time suspended as you climb to the top plateaus and crags. Once up there, I wanted to stay forever."

Both Helen and Pat

Creepy as it feels, wondrous as it looks, soulful as it seems, *Hanging Rock* has enough mystic quality to rival England's Stonehenge. The story has now become legend, the rock an icon and the film a classic.

The success of *Strictly Ballroom*, *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, *Muriel's Wedding* and *Babe* have finally proven to the world that Australians can make brilliantly entertaining movies.

However way back in 1975, a group of dedicated people set the early wheels in motion. Thanks to them, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* remains a national treasure.

The Telegraph, in conjunction with Roadshow Entertainment is offering five readers the chance to win their own video cassette of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

To be in the running, simply tell us what year *Picnic at Hanging Rock* was made.

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