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## Reviews

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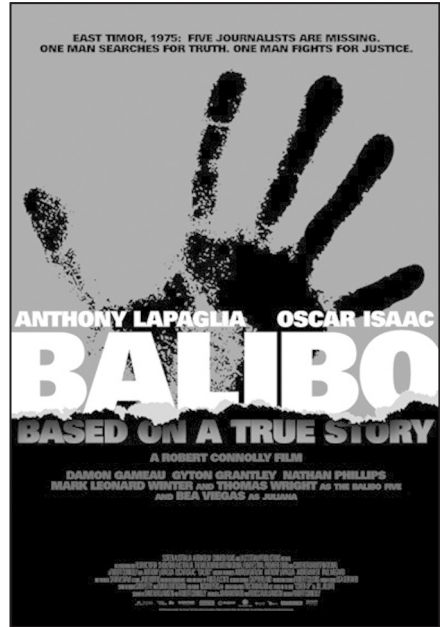
# Telling stories that nobody wants to hear

*Balibo*, directed by Robert Connolly. Footprint Films and Paramount Pictures. 2009, 111 min. [www.balibo.com](http://www.balibo.com)

MELBOURNE writer Chloe Hooper said recently of her acclaimed non-fiction book *The Tall Man* that she had wanted to write a page-turner about a subject no one wanted to know about. It was a great aspiration and a considerable challenge given the topic—the death in custody of Palm Island man Cameron Doomagee and the subsequent trial of Northern Territory policeman Chris Hurley.

She had noticed, Hooper said, that the words ‘deaths in custody’ tended to make Australians’ eyes glaze over. We didn’t want to know.

The book turned out to be an important chronicle of those events, and immensely moving, but significantly, given the gravity of the underlying



issues, it was also a compelling read. The resonance of the storytelling was underpinned by Hooper’s fine writing and her clear-eyed observation of the key players on both sides, their shared frailties and humanity, but the urgency of the dramatic narrative was laid down in the bedrock of meticulously assembled detail.

In the end, the book traversed many of the sorts of issues which, as Hooper rightly surmised, we’d rather not dwell on. Deaths in custody, forced migration, the ugly face of alcohol abuse and violence in Aboriginal communities—and thrumming away like an insistent base note throughout, the issue of racism.

What does it mean to be racist? Are we, or aren't we? A fiction writer who had got hooked on a news story and won a national journalism award for a feature exploring its backstory, Hooper had now transformed that episode into a remarkable reflection on Australia and Australians. On who we are.

Australian director Robert Connolly's aspiration for his film *Balibo*—and the challenge of bringing it to a wider audience—was similar. As was his take on our propensity for not wanting to know. Certainly the death of the six Australian-based journalists—including New Zealander Gary Cunningham—seeking to tell the truth about Indonesia's invasion of East Timor in 1975 was an episode that Australians, or more particularly their politicians, didn't want to know about. Not then, not now, and not over the intervening period, when dreadful crimes were being perpetrated in Timor and Australian governments were averting their eyes, shamefully, in our name.

'I will say no more on East Timor,' then Prime Minister Gough Whitlam is heard telling reporters in the film. 'I will not elaborate on the statement I made.' Let it lie, became the mantra. Older Australians will remember the frustration. 'Shame, Australia, shame,' as the banners read at the many protests held as

the Timorese death toll continued to grow. An indelible memory for this writer is of a lineup of ageing diggers, chests full of medals, at a protest rally outside Sydney Town Hall, speaking out about their shame at Australia's failure to help the Timorese people who had fought so bravely alongside them against the Japanese.

The shame and anger come flooding back from the opening moments of *Balibo*, as Connolly and his players sound their eloquent lament for the five reporters who died there, and for the unknown soldier of that same battle for truth, Roger East, gunned down and tossed off the end of the wharf in Dili like so much rubbish, along with scores of East Timorese fleeing the invaders.

The film begins and ends with Juliana (Bea Viegas), a Timorese widow testifying after the liberation about the mayhem of the invasion, a useful device to anchor a narrative that necessarily moves across three decades. Her story starts with a childhood memory of the arrival of the troops in Dili. And with the benefit of multiple eye witness accounts, the film slips back through time to recreate the scenes that have never been writ large in the history books. Warships moored off the coast, skies filled with parachutes, terror on the streets of Dili as scores of fleeing locals are mown down by gunfire, the

first of the thousands who would perish in the violence and starvation that ensued under the brutal occupation.

The ‘kind man’ Juliana’s memory singles out is journalist Roger East, who had been urged to come to Timor by the young José Ramos Horta. As the film backtracks further, we see the personable Horta (Oscar Isaac) imploring East (Anthony LaPaglia) to work for his government’s news agency. Indonesia is about to swallow them up, he tells East, and they need someone to get the word out, so the world will stand up for the small former Portugese colony trying to establish its independence.

LaPaglia gives us the middle-aged East as slow moving but savvy, alternately engaged and irritated by the silver-tongued Horta, pudgy and sweating in the tropical heat but increasingly dogged as his conviction grows that five missing journalists have come to grief, and no one seems to care. The film cuts between East retracing their steps and the reporters themselves chasing the invasion story, taking them ever closer to Balibo and what we know will be their last stand, inside the hut on which we have seen them cheerfully daubing an Aussie flag.

It is agonising to watch the fate of the young reporters unfold. One of the most memorable things about Connolly’s film is the way it

breathes life into these figures we have mostly known as a collection of passport photos under the tagline ‘the Balibo Five’. Sticking closely to what is known of their movements, and carefully recreating scenes from their surviving footage, the film paints a likeably down to earth portrait of the journalists, getting just right the bravado with a dash of poetry that is so often the hallmark of good young reporters on the make. The aching heart of the film is the sequence from their final days, where they sit talking with Timorese villagers and journalist Greg Shackleton (Damon Gameau) files an eloquent piece to camera—his last—saying how moved they felt to be made so welcome as Australians, and how all the locals wanted to know was, simply, why was no one coming to help them.

There is inevitably debate over the fictionalising of real—and controversial—events. Criticisms have been made of the fictional elements in Connolly’s film, but for the most part the variants are minor—educated suppositions to sustain the story’s flow. It is certainly a crowded narrative, and some will perhaps wish that as well as Horta’s triumphal return to Dili after liberation there was room for more than mention of the courageous East Timorese resistance that preceded it, with up to 200,000 lives lost during the occupation. Material enough there

for another film perhaps, or several.

But the fact that the film is grounded in fact can hardly be disputed. Outright denial and prevarication may have characterised the political response, but over the same period journalists and experts in Indonesian politics and intelligence matters have produced a range of thoroughly researched accounts that provide a searing indictment of successive Australian governments, including James Dunn, former East Timor consul and author (1983, 1996), Hamish McDonald and Desmond Ball (2000) and Jill Jolliffe whose *Cover Up* (2001, 2009) was a primary source for the film. There was no shortage of well-documented evidence on the record for the filmmakers to access, notably the damning findings of the report of the NSW coronial inquiry (2007).

For Deakin University's Damien Kingsbury, a longtime commentator on East Timor, 'Balibo raises the issue of the distinction between "fact" and "fiction"' (interview with the author, September 2009). While there are some factual inaccuracies, he says, mostly because events are compressed and changed for purposes of narrative, 'the movie is "true" in the sense that it conveys the truth about the murder of the journalists (all six of them) and what happened to the people of Timor-Leste at the hands of the Indonesian military. It is also

true in the sense that the Australian government knew about Indonesia's intentions, and what happened to the journalists at the time, yet covered this up for years, and that the US and UK were also complicit'.

Connolly's passionate film makes us look at these events squarely in the eye. And it makes no bones about its outrage. Viewers are likely to share it. Outrage that these events have been shrouded in secrecy for so long, outrage that an appalling litany of lies has been perpetuated to keep them so, and outrage that such unconscionably shabby treatment has thereby been afforded to the memory of the lost citizens of Timor and the six courageous journalists who died trying to tell their story.

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