The Sydney Morning Herald

The double life of David Gulpilil

Byline: Story By Richard Guilliatt
Section: Good Weekend
Sydney Morning Herald
7 December, 2002

The storyline: young black dancer is discovered by famous director. Movie career follows. Twenty years on, he's still acting - and still living in a humpy. Enter whitefella journalist who goes to the Top End to unravel the enigma of David Gulpilil. Cue crocs...

One Red Blood, a documentary about David Gulpilil by indigenous film-maker Darlene Johnson, screens on ABC-TV at 8.30pm on Wednesday night.

SCENE ONE: Exterior, night-time in Arnhem Land, northern Australia...

Eerie cries and the dull thud of feet drift in on the humid November air from somewhere on the outskirts of Ramingining Aboriginal community, where sacred Yolngu rituals are being enacted tonight amid the paperbarks and palm trees. David Gulpilil has just returned from those rituals to the cluster of humpies, tents and prefab houses he calls home, a wiry, spectral figure darting around barefoot in the darkness, his ink-black skin and black shorts blending so completely with the

night that the whites of his eyes and his yellow headband are the only clear markers of his nimble movements. Gulpilil has something big under his right arm which he places on a rusty oil drum near his camp fire. He's fossicking around in the dirt muttering to himself when suddenly the object comes to life in a blaze of electrostatic light.

Apparently, we're going to watch television.

Having met Gulpilil only minutes before, I have no idea what's going on, a sensation that will become familiar over the ensuing four days. It transpires that after immersing himself in the ancient ceremonies of his people, Gulpilil wants to sit down with me under the stars and watch a 21st-century whitefella ceremony - the 2002 IF awards for Australian cinema. It was at this event on November 6 that Gulpilil was voted best actor, for his role in Rolf de Heer's film The Tracker, and given a Living Legend award in honour of his three decades of acting in films such as The Last Wave, Dead Heart, Storm Boy and

Nicolas Roeg's seminal 1971 outback odyssey, Walkabout.

Gulpilil has a videotape of the awards, but the problem is he does not own a television or VCR - or, in fact, a house in which to sit and watch them. His home is a nearby low-slung humpy made from sheets of corrugated iron lashed together at woozy angles; it has a dirt floor, no furniture, no power and no running water. Having borrowed a television and battered VCR from somewhere, Gulpilil has run a 100-metre extension cord from a nearby house, but the VCR is faulty, and after 10 minutes of tinkering and button-pushing, the television is still glowing blankly with

static, and Gulpilil is becoming angrier and more agitated, pacing around and cursing in unbroken streams of his native language as he realises that this simple wish is disintegrating, like so much else in his life, into chaos.

And so I am treated to the first of many volcanic tirades which will fill the succeeding days, as Gulpilil stands with his eyes glowering in the firelight and his greying hair awry as he rants about the absurdity of being a Living Legend with no home

and no money. "Richard, I am miserable," he says, jabbing the index fingers of both hands into his chest, thrusting his chin forward. "Do you see where I live?" He sweeps an arm in the direction of the humpy. "I am..." he searches for the word, muttering to himself in Mandalbingu dialect, "...I am homeless. Homeless."

It's a speech Gulpilil has made often over the past 15 years. Since he was first jailed for drink-driving in 1987, and throughout the lean years of the 1990s, he has often seemed a lost talent. But right now, as he approaches his 50th birthday, things should be different, for Gulpilil's career has been rejuvenated by two mesmerising performances - a supporting part as a tracker in Phillip Noyce's film Rabbit-Proof Fence, and his starring role in The Tracker. The ABC is about to screen a one-hour documentary on his life, and after snagging both the IF award and the Film Critics Circle award for best actor, Gulpilil will arrive at tonight's Australian Film Institute awards in Melbourne as both celebrity and cultural hero, nominated for both Best Actor and Best Supporting Actor. Yet when the parties are over and the tuxedo has been peeled off, our most iconic indigenous film

star will get on a plane and fly back to a life of Third World destitution.

I've come to Arnhem Land to try to understand how that could be, which is no small challenge, because spending any time with Gulpilil is a process of hanging on for dear life as you shoot the rapids of his volatile emotional states. He'll deride you when he's angry, weep on your shoulder when he's upset, mutter darkly about his enemies when he's suspicious and babble in hilarious hooray-Henry accents when he's feeling playful. He may even drag you out on a darkened swamp at midnight to help him hunt crocodile with a wooden harpoon while he talks to the spirits of his ancestors. And even after you've been through all of that and more, you might still not be able to fathom the strangely divided world of David Gulpilil.

SCENE TWO: Exterior, the next day, a battered ute hurtles across a plain "I'm happy, Richard, happy!" Gulpilil shouts joyously over a roar of engine noise. "I've got my car, I'm riding along, I'm taking you to my country. Everything's good!"

We are inside Gulpilil's ute - a $300 unregistered multi-hued wreck made from several 1970s Holden Kingswoods bolted together - hurtling down a rutted track through a tropical landscape of palms, paperbarks, eucalypts and spinifex towards the Arafura

Swamp. It is a sweltering afternoon, the car roars like a crop-dusting plane and hot dust blasts up into the cabin from a hole in the floor. Gulpilil could not be more cheerful. Barefoot as usual and dressed in black pants and a green shirt, he wrenches the car through its gears and throws it so fast down gullies and switchbacks that our heads slam into the ceiling.

The swamp and its surrounds, about 25 kilometres from Ramingining, are Gulpilil's traditional country, Gulpulul, where he roamed nomadically with his parents as a tribal boy in the 1950s. It's a sparsely-forested terrain of rivers, gullies and saltwater plains that Holden Kingswoods rarely traverse, and periodically we grind to a halt

and Gulpilil leaps out to machete a tree out of the way or dig our wheels out of the earth. Skinny and lithe as a crane, his blue-black skin gleaming like burnished gunmetal, Gulpilil looks as lean and sinewy today as he did 27 years ago when he danced across the sand in Storm Boy. Only his leathery hands and wizened face betray his age. The bright-eyed sparkle that lit up the screen in his younger days has given way to a deeper gravitas that the camera loves even more.

Back in the car, Gulpilil breaks into a song from The Tracker, then switches to a ululating melody in his native language. A few kilometres down the track, I hear him muttering a kind of mantra as he hunches over the steering wheel: "I am a hunter, I am a survivor, I am a tracker..." He turns to me with a huge grin, suddenly adopting an upper-class British accent as he sweeps his arm out of the window. "Sand go-ahnna over here - it's reh-lly veh-ry good!"

When Gulpilil says he learnt how to speak English from journalists, he's only half-joking. His conversation is an eccentric amalgam of favourite phrases interspersed with lines from his movie scripts and muttered self-affirmations. It's dizzying just working out where his mind is going. Today we drive for hours to pick up his aluminium fishing boat at the river, with the intention of going across to Gulpulul to catch crocodiles. Croc skins can fetch $1500, and Gulpilil has recently got his hunter's licence. As we roar to a stop at the river, he points across its muddy water to the opposite bank. "My land," he announces. "My river. My people. My blood. Welcome."

The day had not begun so well. First thing that morning, a khaki-clad council worker called Steve had arrived at Gulpilil's humpy to get his drill back, and Gulpilil had treated him to a furious spray of abuse about his living conditions. Gulpilil's living arrangements are complicated: his humpy is not in the centre of Ramingining, but among the 30-odd inhabitants of the Tank Camp one kilometre from town. He also has a house at Gulpulul, which is where we're heading today, but it is surrounded by vast swamplands which are impassable in the wet and hellishly difficult in the dry.

There's a palpable hostility between the Tank Camp mob and the "town" people that's rooted in old disputes about skin and country. However famous films like Walkabout and Crocodile Dundee might have made him globally, Gulpilil's celebrity status in his own community appears almost nonexistent. There's a small black-and-white photograph of him at the counter of the local art gallery, but otherwise no visible acknowledgement of his presence. Like many Top End indigenous communities, Ramingining is an insular place in which English is a minor dialect and the outside world seems very distant. According to several locals, many Ramingining Aborigines simply don't believe Gulpilil's stories of being a movie star, or dismiss it as balanda (whitefella) business of little relevance.

Ramingining was founded in the early 1970s by mission staff from nearby Milingimbi, and Gulpilil claims that his people were marginalised in the process. Gulpilil, who was born around 1953 (he's not sure himself), has a deep ambivalence toward mission life that may derive from childhood, when his family settled at Elcho Island in the late 1950s.

"We had promises from mission people that they would help the Aboriginal people," he tells me one afternoon as he sits plucking a duck by a billabong. "But the missionaries thought our culture was a sin - they wanted to destroy our culture. We had to go away

to do our own ceremony. I went to Sunday school every Sunday, you couldn't miss that, and they'd say: 'Where you been - the devil took you away?'" He launches into a gentle mockery of Christian mythology, with its bearded God in a celestial heaven. "Brudda, they been up there and they found Jupiter and Saturn and Mars, but I don't think they've found Heaven yet."

The spirit world and the afterlife for Gulpilil are right here in the landscape, and today he is more immersed in his traditional culture than ever. His two sons, 27-year-old

Jida and 17-year-old Jamie, have both been initiated, and Gulpilil himself has undergone the sacred ceremonies of an elder. For many years he lived with non-Yolngu women, even fathering a daughter with a white woman 10 years ago, in defiance of traditional law. Now he has taken a tribal wife, Robyn Djunginy, and the two often hunt their own food together and adhere to ancient Yolngu rituals and law. It's a world freighted with its own rules and responsibilities, the complexities of which often underpin some of Gulpilil's more mystifying behaviour.

So, for instance, the local council built Gulpilil's house on his traditional country at Gulpulul about 10 years ago, but it has rarely been used. One reason is that Gulpilil and his wife are fearful of staying alone at night there, because of their belief in the supernatural forces at large in the landscape. "That would be a lot to do with the spirits of the land and safety," says Gulpilil's ex-partner Airlie Thomas, who lived with him out at Gulpulul for several years in the 1990s. "All of that was deeply ingrained in David from childhood." Thomas recalls that she once went hunting for crocodile eggs with Gulpilil and he instructed her to walk carefully, for if she broke a branch it would activate the spirits of the place. Then Gulpilil himself accidentally broke a branch. "As we were driving back, this amazing storm blew in - trees were crashing to the ground and the wind was roaring all around us.

David just said, 'I did that.'" There's a more prosaic reason Gulpilil doesn't spend a lot of time at his house - cut off during the wet for months at a stretch, the house is equipped with a pump and a satellite telephone, but both break down regularly. Just visiting is a feat of human endurance; trying also to maintain an acting career from there is a logistical absurdity.

Ten years ago, Gulpilil was in Ramingining when a fax came through from his agent telling him to get straight to Melbourne for a location shoot of the Man From Snowy River TV series. It was the wet season, and Gulpilil's personal assistant, Wayne O'Donovan, was over at the house in Gulpulul, living rough. So Gulpilil hopped into his vehicle - the skeletal chassis of a LandCruiser equipped with two plastic seats - and somehow circumnavigated the swamp to reach O'Donovan. Having run out of petrol, the pair then trudged for 18 hours back through swamps and saltwater rivers to Ramingining, then flew by light aircraft to Gove, narrowly missing their connecting flight to Cairns. Gulpilil then hired a charter flight which got them to Cairns, bypassing a cyclone and landing just in time to taxi alongside a departing Qantas plane to Melbourne, which the two men boarded after unloading a pile of knives, bullets and other bush tools from their mud-encrusted clothes.

They arrived in Melbourne just in time to discover that shooting had been delayed for three days. Gulpilil's fee for that job was $5000, which was the amount he'd spent chartering the flight to Cairns.

O'Donovan, who's currently living with his wife and three kids in a tent next to Gulpilil's humpy, first met the actor in the late 1980s and has forged a quasi-

brotherly bond that has survived much punishment. "No-one I know has treated me like shit the way David has, and no-one I know has treated me with more love and humility," he says. O'Donovan says that people often forget Gulpilil is one of the last of the first-contact Aborigines: when he first saw a white person, he ran in fright.

Today, characteristically, we drive around for hours in the bush while Gulpilil conducts an internal debate about where best to cross the river. At one point, we drive three-quarters of the way back to Ramingining, only to turn around and head back when he spots the tracks of the vehicle Robyn is in. Eventually we end up back by the river and I realise the crossing to Gulpulul will have to wait until tomorrow. As darkness falls, we head back to Ramingining, finally arriving after 12 hours of brain-jarring driving. I collapse into bed; Gulpilil packs away his stuff and disappears into the night, to attend the ceremonies.

SCENE THREE: A flashback, the late 1960s David Gulpilil was 16 years old when his elders in Maningrida, a tiny mission on the north coast of Arnhem Land, called him forward to meet a distinguished balanda who'd come in search of the community's most gifted dancer. Gulpilil performed the tribal dances that had won him a swag of prizes at the Darwin Eisteddfod over the previous few years. The balanda, an Englishman by the name of Nicolas Roeg, watched and nodded. Within a year, Gulpilil was out in the Simpson Desert performing in front of Roeg's cameras for the film Walkabout, a parable of black/white outback confrontation which would turn Gulpilil into a global movie star before he could speak more than a smattering of English.

Gulpilil got $1000 for his role, and his name spelt wrongly in the credits. Dressed in a Hong Kong suit, he was flown to London, Cannes, Los Angeles and New York on a publicity tour, and critics hailed his naturalistic presence as an actor. When it was all over, he returned to Arnhem Land, ditched the suit and spent his pay on a fibreglass boat. But life had changed irrevocably. The kid who had grown up in the communal, pre-industrial culture of the Yolngu had landed right in the maw of Western individualist celebrity worship.

By his early twenties, Gulpilil had smoked ganja with Bob Marley in Hawaii, met Marlon Brando in Germany, dined with Anthony Quinn at a film festival in Iran and worked alongside a psychotically coked-out Dennis Hopper on the set of Mad Dog Morgan. Philippe Mora, who directed that film in rural NSW in 1975, recalls that Gulpilil disappeared into the bush suddenly 10 days into the shoot and had to be located with the help of trackers. "When they brought him back, I said to David that he couldn't just walk off like that, that we had a schedule to follow. He said, 'Well, I had to ask the kookaburras in the trees about Dennis.' I said, 'Really? What did they tell you?' He said, 'The kookaburras in the trees told me that Dennis is crazy.' I said to him, 'David, I could have told you that - you didn't have to go and ask the kookaburras.'"

For a while in the early 1970s, Gulpilil lived in Sydney with Diana Murray, a Yorta Yorta woman who is the mother of his son Jida. He performed in black theatre, went to film school and appeared on television shows like Boney and Matlock Police. Peter Weir once recalled that he chose Gulpilil for his role in The Last Wave precisely because he could sense the "enormous tension" Gulpilil was undergoing at the time. "The man is torn," said Weir, "and he has broken his tribal law by moving to the city, by marrying a black girl who is not tribal."

Even today, Gulpilil's apparent ease among balanda can mask a fundamental discomfort and an overpowering desire to be back in his spiritual home. In hotel rooms he sets the air-conditioning at 35 degrees to replicate the heat of Arnhem Land; on location he'll spend hours on the telephone to Ramingining, checking on events there; left to his own devices, he can lapse into epic drinking and partying bouts to keep loneliness at bay. "Being alone can be very frightening for Aboriginal people," notes Airlie Thomas. "If David is on his own he gets really nervous, even in a crowded hotel in Melbourne." When Rabbit-Proof Fence was being filmed in the West Australian desert, Gulpilil started chatting animatedly to a tourist who'd pulled up in a four-wheel drive. In no time he had arranged for the guy to give him a quick lift back to his homeland - 2500 kilometres away. "I had to take this guy aside and almost threaten him with violence to call the trip off," recalls O'Donovan.

Gulpilil first discovered booze on the film set and, like so many of his people, he's found it

a dubious comfort. His relationship with Diana Murray broke down in the late 1970s because of grog, and he racked up his first drink-driving charge in 1981. Six years later, after a boozy night in Darwin to celebrate being awarded the Australia Medal for his services to the nation's arts, he was again breathalysed, and another offence only two months later earned him a five-month jail sentence.

It was around this time that Gulpilil began publicly complaining about his poverty and living conditions. He was bitter that he'd been paid only $10,000 for his appearance in Crocodile Dundee, a film that grossed $400 million. Of course, that's a fate familiar to many actors, but Gulpilil's typically blunt assessment ("They ripped me off") didn't further his hopes of being hired for the sequel. In the late 1980s the Hawke government finally granted him a parcel of land at Gulpulul, and several years later two small, cheaply constructed houses were built there, with a freshwater bore and solar telephone. But Gulpilil's dream of creating a community on his homeland has been bedevilled by the difficulties of getting out there; his sisters ultimately decided to stay in Ramingining.

So Gulpilil has remained at the Tank Camp on the outskirts of Ramingining, either on the dole, or working on fencing and cattle-mustering while living in a succession of humpies and feuding with the local bureaucracy. His second stint in jail - after being picked up driving erratically through Darwin two years ago - cemented the perception that he has squandered his money on booze, although Ramingining is a dry community and he drinks relatively rarely. There's been acting work in both local and overseas productions but even his bigger pay packets are quickly consumed out here.

He made $40,000 from Rabbit-Proof Fence and about the same for The Tracker, but more than half of it went on tax and a secondhand LandCruiser that lasted barely six months.

Gulpilil's ganja habit and drinking binges certainly have not helped either his finances or his mental equilibrium. "David has spent a lot of money in the pubs drinking and shouting people," says Diana Murray. But she identifies a deeper reason for Gulpilil's inner turmoil: the struggle to reconcile his obligations as a Yolngu elder with the balanda world he has glimpsed.

"He does have an internal conflict," agrees Airlie Thomas, "which centres around wanting to have a much better life ... David sees the fact that we have all these things, but he cannot see how he can get those things without removing himself from his

own culture. He struggles to understand how it all works. So he works and gets paid, but I don't think he will ever earn enough to get the lifestyle he wants because most of it disappears among his family."

Richard Trudgen, a former community worker at Ramingining and author of a book on the Yolngu people, recalls that Gulpilil once returned from a film set with $36,000 cash, which he gave to his mother. Trudgen believes Gulpilil is "severely mystified" by balanda concepts of money because he has never been advised adequately; as a result, he has let hundreds of thousands of dollars "slip through his fingers".

SCENE FOUR: Exterior, a river at midnight

A crescent moon casts silver light over the paperbarks and pandanus as David Gulpilil stands on the muddy banks staring off into the trees and talking to the spirits of his parents and grandparents in a fluent oration. He's asking them to guard over him, to help him in the task ahead, and I'm fully supportive of this sentiment because I'm about to step into a three-metre aluminium dinghy with Gulpilil and head out into the darkened swamp to catch a few crocodiles with a harpoon made from a hand-carved three-metre length of stringybark.

Okay, we also have a shotgun and rifle in case things get messy, and there are two others here - Wayne O'Donovan and Gulpilil's adopted balanda "son", Shane. But the croc skins are only worth money if the bellies are unblemished by bullet holes, so Gulpilil's spear is our first-strike weapon. Its detachable metal point is connected by a long rope to the prow of our little boat, so that, once harpooned, the croc will be pulled to the surface of the darkened swamp by the rope and subdued with a bullet to the head, at which point Gulpilil will sever its spinal cord with a knife by torchlight. That's the plan, and it's as insane as anything I've heard in quite a long time, but somehow I am here and it's happening and I have a camera around my neck so that I can remind myself later that it really happened.

It has taken us 12 hours to get here, most of it spent careening across Arnhem Land in a bone-jarring, axle-smashing, tree-felling convoy of two vehicles towards Gulpilil's house at Gulpulul. We've been bogged, we've laid bark down to cross the swamp, but we did finally reach the house at dusk, and all it took was another 90 minutes of suicidal driving through virgin bush, dragging the boat on a trailer, to get here, to the "heaven world"

of Gulpilil's ancestral spirits.

As we glide out onto the river casting torch beams across its still surface, red croc-eyes gleam like little lamps all around us. These crocs are your authentic carnivorous behemoths of the kind that ate a German tourist about 200 kilometres west of here three weeks earlier. "Over there - a big one!" hisses Gulpilil, perched spider-like on the prow of the boat with his harpoon. Energised and alert, he alternately croons encouragement ("Ah, thank you, bruddas!") and berates us for our abysmal rowing, our excessive noisiness and general balanda incompetence. I feel oddly calm in his presence.

After an hour of seeing those little red lamps slide silently underwater upon our approach, we glide up on one set of eyes that stay fixed in the beam of the spotlight I'm holding as I stand behind Gulpilil's upraised harpoon. Suddenly he lets it fly from five metres away, and there's a thrashing in the water, the wooden harpoon bobbing there for a moment as Gulpilil grabs it and tugs, cursing that he's hit a log. But the

log comes alive, the jagged spines of a croc tail suddenly surface in the moonlight, and Gulpilil is yelling for O'Donovan to grab a rifle as he pulls the harpoon free and grabs the rope just as the pale, scaled belly of a croc breaches the milky green surface of the river. The croc disappears and resurfaces upright, and O'Donovan points the rifle at the back of its head and pulls the trigger.

There's a soft click, followed by a groan from Gulpilil, who suggests to O'Donovan that he put a f...in' bullet in the f...in' breech, and 10 seconds later the rifle goes off and Gulpilil is suddenly hauling the croc's razor-smiled snout over the side of the boat and O'Donovan is frantically lashing its jaws together with rope. "Take a photo!" Gulpilil shouts at me cheerfully, then plunges his knife into the back of the croc's neck and starts hacking through its spinal cord like a man chipping through rock with a chisel. The croc thrashes violently, utters one deep prehistoric growl, and passes into the realm of the spirits.

Two hours and one more dead crocodile later, perhaps sensing an impending mutiny among the balanda, Gulpilil finally calls it a night. The boat is now laden with four men and two dead three-metre crocs, too heavy to get through the shallow waters we came from, so Gulpilil announces we'll moor it to a tree and walk back to the vehicle. It is 3am, and I'm tempted to decline this offer of a stroll through the darkened swampland, until Gulpilil leaps to the shore and enacts the night's pièce de résistance: pulling out his cigarette lighter, he walks up to a paperbark tree and ignites its soft bark, and as the flames lick swiftly upwards they cast a dancing orange and yellow light over the river and our surroundings. The whole landscape is suddenly aglow.

Snapping off a two-metre stem of pandanus, Gulpilil jams a flaming wad of paperbark in its end and strides into the dark undergrowth, igniting dead palm fronds and paperbarks as he goes, leading us to more solid and open ground, where it's possible to look back and see the fires crackling behind us like a row of giant ragged candles. We're moving fast now through stringybarks and white-limbed eucalypts, and Gulpilil is darting onwards torching trees and palms, urging us to stick with him, for there are snakes and buffalo and crocs and wild boars everywhere here, but it's impossible not to stop and look on in awe at his graceful, slim black silhouette dancing against the glow and crackle of the fires, which have now lit up the whole landscape with the mad and merry light of some other immutable time. He looks completely at home.

SCENE FIVE: Exterior, a camp fire the next morning "Were you scared, brudda?" asks Gulpilil, as he sits skinning the croc under a beating sun. He cackles delightedly. "Because I was scared." Later he points to the two crocs and tries to explain their spiritual significance. He points to the smaller one, with a deformed front claw, and says: "Okay, some of my grandfather's people gave me the short arm." Then he points to the larger croc and says: "This one my mother."

There's a gulf of incomprehension I can't bridge here, just as I don't really understand why Gulpilil breaks down in tears as I'm leaving Ramingining, sobbing and telling me he loves me. I feel a futile urge to offer some sort of help, when in fact I'm still not sure what it is Gulpilil wants - the spiritual comforts of his Yolngu homeland, or the material comforts of a balanda house.

One evening, Gulpilil had spoken fervently about wanting a house like the balanda lived in down in the city, with gleaming appliances and a kitchen, and maybe even one of those robots they have in Star Wars that can bring your food right to you in

your armchair. It was an absurdist joke, of course, because a Star Wars robot would certainly not last long in Ramingining.

But it occurred to me that perhaps the house Gulpilil dreams about is a symbol as much as anything, a means by which he can show his own people that his work in the balanda world has value and meaning.

As I head off to the airstrip, he's standing beside his humpy dressed in the same clothes as when I arrived.

I can't see his Living Legend statuette anywhere, but the plan seems to be that he'll send it back to Sydney, to be kept with all his other trophies and memorabilia until the day he finally has a home to put them all in.