

Filmic farewell to David Gulpilil is ‘his last dance, his last song’

By Paul Byrnes
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My Name is Gulpilil ★★★★★
Rated M, 101 minutes, in cinemas

This one had me at hello. In the first shot, David Gulpilil, in winter coat and mittens, walks down a country road. The camera is about 50 metres behind him and his gait is slow. Then we see why: he’s following an emu, which was obscured by his body. When the actor stops and turns back up the road, the emu does too. They move in step, as if in a duet. He just smiles, as if to say ‘of course we are’.



David Gulpilil in a scene from My Name is Gulpilil. “This is my film,” he says.

My Name is Gulpilil is the actor’s fond farewell, his valediction, his living obituary. At about 67 – he’s not quite sure of his age – he has lung cancer, and a number of other ailments. They will take him out soon, he tells us a number of times. He seems to want to say he’s OK with that: he has had a charmed life as a dancer, actor, singer, storyteller.

“My father taught me how to dance and how to sing, and how to relate to the didgeridoo and the click stick, and the rhythm of the song of culture, the song of the ceremony ... I’m the greatest dancer in the world.”

He pauses for effect – “Just for me, though ...”

The film comes from people he has worked with for more than 20 years. Molly Reynolds and her partner Rolf de Heer are producers, and Reynolds directs. There are clips of several of their powerful collaborations with him – *The Tracker*, *Ten Canoes*, *Charlie’s Country*. Other clips go right back to his first appearance in Nicolas

Roeg's *Walkabout*, made when he was 14 in 1969, an unknown dancer from Arnhem Land.

Gulpilil's career spans the whole modern history of Australian film, covering 50 years. The only other actor who comes close might be Jack Thompson, a long-time friend, although we don't hear from him, or anyone else. There are no talking heads, except one. As Gulpilil explains in one of his monologues, "this is my film". Reynolds keeps it focused on him in a collaboration that achieves a rare kind of contemplative power. This is his last dance, his last song, and it will be his alone.

Gulpilil's beauty has always set him apart from other actors in Australian film. Roeg was the first to spot that, and its recognition was a shock for white Australians, most of whom were not used to seeing Indigenous Australians in that way. Gulpilil's grace, his physical perfection, his sexual power, his humour, fitted him to become 'the national black actor', the holder of all the mythologies, but it was a heavy burden. It required him to span two cultures, both as icon and man. His excesses grew to rival his successes and he is frank about that: "I am a drug (addict) and alcoholic," he says, pulling no punches. "I've been in Darwin jail lots of times."



The film walks with David Gulpilil as he approaches death. Mary Hood is beside him.

Much of the film was shot in Murray Bridge, South Australia, where he lives with long-time friend Mary Hood, who is nurse, carer and confidant. I would like to have heard her speak about herself but her actions are eloquent. We see how important she is to his life, and he to hers. She is by his bedside as he receives chemotherapy, and holding his hand as he disappears into the radiation machine.

His physical frailty is distressing, but also beautiful in its own way. His walk to the mailbox each day becomes an exercise in will, almost another dance. His awareness of what the camera sees and what he can do with it is uncanny. Perhaps that was always his superpower. The film's structure is hidden, but clever. For much of the time, he is in repose, as if dreaming. Sometimes he really is asleep, because of the drugs he's taking.

At other times, Mary takes him for a drive into the bush, where he loves to walk and remember. It's hard sometimes to watch, because we are walking with him to the grave. He describes how his body will be treated after his death, where his spirit will

reside “at the waterhole where I was born”. The effect is unbearably moving and utterly engaging. There is no film quite like this in our cinema, just as there is no one quite like the man.

Paul Byrnes is a film critic for The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age.