EUREKA STREET .com.au

13 June 2006

EDITORIAL : Football and social harmony

By Michael Mullins & James Massola

The Australian national football team has played its first game in a World Cup for 32 years. Many of us in various parts of the country gathered together in living rooms, bars, clubs, and other public places to watch the game.

Some know the team, and the sport, intimately, and have a particular set of expectations. Others are relative 'newbies', with only a vague sense of 'The World Game' as a rallying point for countries, nations and peoples. As a spectacle, the World Cup leaves every other major event, sporting or otherwise, in its wake. Not for nothing did Kofi Annan remark recently that he wished the UN could bring people together so effectively, and in such good spirits.

Peace among peoples, nations and cultures is a focal point in this edition of Eureka Street. Sushma Joshi writes from Nepal. She's travelled her country as part of the UN's efforts to bring harmony among rival factions bidding for power. She explains how fear and intimidation has brought down the country's legal system. She doesn't, but might do well to, contemplate how football could get it working again.

Anthropologist Myrna Tonkinson of the University of Western Australia looks at sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities, and says that neither blame nor attempts at quick fixes will work. She suggests it requires understanding between peoples, and that there's no substitute for careful and patient study of history and social conditions.

But it's not all bad news. Greg Soetomo is a Jesuit who edits a national print magazine in Indonesia. He looks at the tolerant face of Islam in Indonesia, something our media tend to gloss over. And online media critic Margaret Cassidy looks at how cyber communities can bring us together not only in this life, but also in life after death.

Ways of reading sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities

By Myrna Tonkinson

Recent revelations of violent crime among Aboriginal people in Central Australia, and in particular of the sexual abuse of children and women, have caused a furore. While perfectly understandable at one level, they have also induced a weary cynicism in many observers of Indigenous affairs. The problems being highlighted are all too familiar; so is the alarm expressed by politicians, journalists and others. Missing from these intermittent outbreaks of moral panic is recognition that deplorable events are connected to the circumstances in which they occur.

Every few months some kind of exposé sets off outraged calls for action; after intense interest and debate, Ministers and other political leaders make statements and establish inquiries; the media canvass the views of experts and Indigenous leaders, giving the matter a public airing for a few days, perhaps a week. More often than not, the issue then disappears from public view until it is replaced by the next crisis, or until years later, when the spotlight falls again on the same problem.

Current focus is on the sexual assault of children, an incendiary topic. Stories of appalling violence and squalor also appear often, but many other types of social trauma and dysfunction do not attract the same degree of attention. Yet they demonstrate a pattern that should engender deep shame and urgency throughout the Australian polity.

The assaults described by Nanette Rogers are at the extreme end of a spectrum of antisocial, dysfunctional, pathological behaviours that many Indigenous people endure. Many spokespersons and observers have described and decried them for years. Dr Rogers described the crimes as beyond most people's comprehension and experience. She is correct: these acts are indeed grotesque.

However, three points are worth emphasising. First, although frequent, these acts are aberrant; no Aboriginal society, indeed no known society, condones the sexual abuse of children. Atrocious as they are, such crimes occur from time to time; they are often signs of individual or social psychopathology. Second, one need only look at the statistics for Australia and elsewhere in the world to realise that child sexual abuse is not unique to Indigenous Australians. The prevalence of violence and abuse among Aboriginal people across the country is a particular tragedy. Finally, if sexual and violent crime are beyond the comprehension and experience of most Australians, so too are the conditions in which far too many Indigenous people live.

People tend to lay the blame for unacceptable behaviours simply on Aboriginal culture or Aboriginal men, ignoring context and underlying causes. Indigenous cultures have been drastically transformed in the time since colonisation. Within living memory, the frequency and intensity of violence and other antisocial behaviour have escalated. The lack of police in many communities has become a problem only in recent years; police used to be rarely needed. Even today, although many communities are not trouble-free, police presence is unnecessary for them most of the

time. It is also short-sighted to focus on men; while they are disproportionately the perpetrators, many are also victims.

Sexual abuse and violence occur across cultures, societies and classes. But considerable evidence suggests that a high incidence of such behaviours is associated with marginalised populations, living in conditions of poverty, and inequality. These conditions prevail in much of the Australian Indigenous community; they must be addressed if meaningful change is to occur. To recognise the social conditions in which crimes are committed is not to excuse or explain them away. But it is foolish to ignore the context, and pointless to apply narrow and short-term solutions. Thus, although more police in some of the most troubled locations might inhibit some perpetrators, protect some victims, or at least speed up the response time, they will not eliminate the problems. Similarly, banning alcohol would ameliorate conditions in some places (many Indigenous communities already impose such bans within their borders), but this often shifts the unwanted behaviour to other places, rather than putting an end to it.

It is not to diminish the significance of sexual abuse of children to say that there are communities where most children are safe most of the time, even though a plethora of physical and social ills are rife. Among the Aboriginal people I know best, the occurrence of sexual abuse and family violence is matched, or outstripped, by incidence of unemployment, inadequate housing, abysmal education outcomes, teenage pregnancy, low birth-weight babies, self-harm, renal failure, and premature preventable deaths (accompanied by unrelenting grief). Matters like the high rate of poor dental health among young Indigenous people seldom attract the sensational attention given to crime. Yet, tooth loss is common nationwide and is not simply a cosmetic problem: it leads to, or exacerbates, many diseases.

Aboriginal people in remote communities are often bewildered by the situations they face. They are also anxious to protect family members from shame or harsh punishment. Their reactions may be misguided, by some lights, but they deal daily with momentous issues, including the recurring loss of family members to death, prison, and hospitals.

Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough's decision to hold a summit meeting with State and Territory leaders to address the breakdown of law and order is, doubtless, well-intentioned, but unlikely to achieve lasting improvement. The new Minister is keen to do, and to be seen to be doing, something. He might begin by reviewing some of the many reports from past inquiries, notably the Underlying Issues Reports of The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, and the Bringing them Home Report. They contain mountains of data on the problems that beset Indigenous people, including violence and sexual abuse. They also contain recommendations, many of which have never been implemented. Of those that have been acted upon, many have been ineffective.

More intergovernmental cooperation is desirable. But it would be more productive to seek to trace the patterns and causes of social ills plaguing Indigenous Australians, than to focus on the current scandal. A more considered, over-arching set of solutions, that recognises the problems to be complex and inter-connected is needed. If we

address each issue as it arises, rather than approaching the root causes of problems, we can bring about only short-term solutions. (There is a multiplicity of causes and no single action will work; quick-fix approaches cannot be effective in an enduring meaningful way.

The Prime Minister says that money is not the answer. But to make things better will be costly and require time. To cite just one example: in many remote Indigenous communities, such as the ones in which I have worked, English is a second language, yet there is no provision for the teaching of English as a second language in their schools. Consequently, children begin their education with a handicap which persists. Along with other disadvantages, it leaves most of them irremediably far behind their peers in the rest of Australia. The provision of ESL programs and educational services that recognise Aboriginal children's language limitations should match what is available to immigrant children accepted into Australia. It could make an immense difference.

This would be expensive. But anything less would be inequitable, given that in Indigenous communities, limited literacy and low levels of educational achievement are the rule rather than the exception. Similarly, people often speak of Indigenous unemployment, and it is indeed a major issue. However, even if whole populations were shifted to places where workers are needed, most would not succeed in gaining employment, because they are ill-prepared owing to poor literacy, years of idleness, and dependence on welfare.

Reformists ignore the extent of chronic poverty in most Indigenous communities. Instead of encouraging increased understanding and a collaborative approach, they issue admonitions about how much money is being spent. This is a cruel response to a people who have largely been excluded from the bounties of this rich nation. No amount of blame-shifting will erase Australia's history of colonisation, dispossession, racism and discrimination. That history, including the 'solutions', policies and corrective measures that have been introduced over many decades, has included many harmful, even catastrophic errors. There is no simple and quick remedy; systemic problems need systemic solutions.

Want to live to be 100?

By Tim Thwaites

Do you want to live to 100? Given the cult of youth in advertising, soaring rates of elective plastic surgery and the abiding myths of the Fountain of Youth, vampires and Faust, it's probably safe to assume that many people would say yes, almost without thinking. After all, we seem to be programmed to fight for our lives, whether it's because of a genuine lust for life or fear of dying.

On reflection, most people interested in accepting the offer of living longer would probably stipulate they wanted to be sure they had a decent quality of life—to be fit, healthy, strong and in possession of their faculties—but given that…why not?

In the developed world, it's becoming increasingly possible. In the past century, for instance, average lifespan in places like Western Europe, the US, Canada, Australia, NZ and Japan, has increased from about 55 to about 80. This trend shows no sign of slowing down, and it is now based on a lot more than better healthcare and diet.

As researchers learn more and more about how organisms work, it's becoming increasingly evident that our lifespan is programmed into us and can be reprogrammed. An astonishing range of creatures, for instance, including mammals such as mice, can lengthen their lives significantly by eating less than they normally would, but enough to stay healthy. And there's no reason to think that humans would be any different.

While no guaranteed elixir of life is available yet, there are possibilities on the horizon. Geneticists have already discovered genes in many animals, including mice, that regulate lifespan. And again, there's no reason to think that humans would be exempt.

So… Do you want to live to 100? It's actually a question we should be facing seriously. If you knew that you were going to live to 100, for instance, would you organise your life in the same way? Would you retire at 60? What about your finances and superannuation? Would it change your relationship with your immediate family?

How about medical care? It's now possible with corrective surgery to have better eyesight than that with which you were born. It may soon become possible to replace, correct or maintain lots of other parts of your body. How should such intervention be regulated? Will this lead to elderly have and have nots? How much should the public health system pay for? If you have the opportunity for your life to be extended by medical intervention, is your doctor morally obliged to recommend you do so? What about medication or surgery that you know will permanently alter your brain?

Having reached a time in life where questions of longevity and old age are becoming increasingly significant—as family, loved ones and friends of earlier generations begin to deteriorate and die—Archimedes is far from convinced that a longer lifespan is something to covet unconditionally.

Two things occur to him. One is that evolution selects the human body as a unit, the individual parts of which fit together and age together. Just like an Old Master which looks out of kilter because it has been renovated with modern pigments, maybe constantly updating body parts will lead to mismatches. How long we live is just as much subject to natural selection as anything else. Presumably, there's an optimum lifespan.

Then there's a topic with respect to longevity about which there is too little discussion—how does old age affect mental health. What happens when the world in which you are living has changed beyond your capacity to adapt? Is there a limit to what your brain can take—when you've lived through so much, and have so many memories, that you don't want to accumulate any more?

Maybe life reaches a point where, like the Flying Dutchman, new experiences become meaningless, and living forever becomes a nightmare.

Do Indonesian maids really lie as a matter of course?

By Dewi Anggraeni

'If you have an Indonesian maid, be very strict with her. Indonesian maids lie! They lie as a matter of course!'

I was quietly shocked by this outburst, uttered by a fellow guest at a friend's dinner party in Singapore. Only hours earlier, I read in the local newspaper about an Indonesian domestic helper plunging to her death from a tenth floor apartment where she had been employed.

In Indonesia, news items tend to allocate bad faith, bad intentions, and bad behaviour to the employer, then the recruitment agencies, and also to the government officials in the related bodies, the Ministry of Manpower and Transmigration, and the Ministry for Immigration. The domestic helpers themselves have been invariably depicted as victims, and as largely blameless, even in cases where they have been perpetrators of crimes. It is fairly representative of the fact.

In their country of origin – Indonesia - domestic workers are portrayed as puerile characters, easily manipulated, and hence needing to be given help and 'guidance'. In their countries of destination, they were depicted as quasi-human characters bereft of any sense of ethics or morality, who would cheat, steal, seduce their male employers, and even harm the employer's family without any compunction.

Consciously I began to encourage acquaintances in Singapore and Hong Kong to describe their experiences of employing foreign domestic helpers, especially those from Indonesia. With research funding from the International Labour Organisation, who appointed me as their external collaborator to the Domestic Worker Program in the Jakarta office, I visited Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia. There I spoke to a number of domestic helpers, employers, operators of the placement agencies, and the local Indonesian diplomatic mission. I also observed the attitudes of the community in general toward the issue.

In Indonesia I spoke informally to returned domestic helpers. With the help of the largest association of agencies that recruited migrant workers, I was able to visit some major training centres. Then in Jakarta I interviewed the relevant department head of the Ministry for Manpower and Transmigration.

From the beginning of my research, I experienced a steep learning curve. The returned helpers I interviewed told of working experiences in which they were initially overwhelmed by the urgent need to readjust their expectations, and to accommodate their pace of work to the demand. Some were more successful than others. None I interviewed had been physically abused or explicitly mistreated. But when they told of the things that had made them unhappy, fearful or physically uncomfortable, they revealed aspects of their lives which made me again and again dig deep into my memory.

One interviewee related an experience that occurred when she accompanied her employer family on an overseas holiday. 'Halfway through the flight we stopped somewhere, the passengers left the aircraft. But my employers told me to stay in it. It was hot and stuffy. I didn't know what was happening, so I was scared.'

There has been much social development affecting human resource training which, in theory at least, also includes domestic work. But the social perception of domestic helpers has not shifted very far. In society's collective psyche they are still seen to occupy the bottom rung of unskilled work. So there is very little official supervision or monitoring of their training, if they undergo training at all. This is reflected in their low pay – approximately A$50 per month.

The majority of the women who seek domestic work overseas are lured by the promise of higher salaries. The going rate in Malaysia is A$160, in Singapore A$195, in Hong Kong A$560, per month. Many of those who go to Hong Kong are fairly well educated. They may choose to be domestic helpers there because it would be very difficult for them to find better paid employment in Indonesia. Perhaps too they subconsciously believe that when they go to Hong Kong - the most geographically and culturally distant of the three nations - they will not have to contend with the social prejudice faced by domestic helpers at home. Unfortunately even though they enjoy legal protection under Hong Kong law that recognises them as formal workers, they still face similar prejudices.

In cases where abuse occurs it is fair to presume that employers expect impunity. They rely on the prevalent social prejudice. Its strength overrides the fear of legal repercussion. In other words, the abusive employer believes that the domestic helper is too scared and too clueless to do anything, and that the community is too indifferent to become involved, since the victim is 'only a maid'.

The rise of family values in Angela Merkel's new Germany

By Peter Matheson

Angela Merkel's new Germany bristles with contradictions. On the one hand it is highly secular, fiercely focused on individual freedoms, satisfactions, and affluence. Yet at Easter, all the bookshops have been show-casing, would you believe it, Confirmation! I attended two packed Confirmation services, one of a young relative from a village in Lower Saxony. The whole community was there, and the celebrations went on for days.

A visitor like myself also notes enviously the generosity of State Governments to cultural programs and research centres. Yet the universities are tottering on the edge of financial collapse, especially in the poorer, eastern provinces, and students and young academics are increasingly restive. For the last three months I've been living among an elite group of young scholars. Few have any hope of a secure job until they are forty! They have to become entrepreneurs, inventing research programs for themselves, surviving from one temporary 'project' to the next. There is virtually no 'Mittelbau'. One is either a lofty Professor or a precariously situated 'Assistent.'

Germany's schools have also registered humiliatingly low scores in a recent international study. At the Rütli school in Berlin, attended largely by immigrants, teachers were so demoralised and menaced by the total indiscipline they encountered that they went to the media and poured out their woes. And then there is the demographic crisis. Women, especially professional, academic, career women are structurally inhibited from having children. Since 1965 the number of live births has almost halved.

In response, phrases such as 'leading norms', or 'family values' are bandied around. In part, this is a conservative reaction against modern pluralism and against ethnic, particularly Turkish, enclaves. The building of mosques can be fiercely opposed in the suburbs. Reflection about citizenship is complacent, reflecting a middle-class perspective. But the recognition is growing that neither a society nor its schools and families can exist without some integrating vision. Educationalists point out that many families have degenerated into 'well organized supply centres', with scant communication, discussion, or shared experience.

A formidable polarizing figure is the dynamic Federal Minister for Family Affairs, Ursula von der Leyen, (47) , whose seven children figure prominently in publicity photos. Legislation introduced by her, and to come into force next year, will provide couples who are both working with 'parent money'. 68% of the mother's salary will be paid by the State for 12 months. Whether the legislation will actually promote births remains to be seen. Women academics who rarely enjoy paid positions in their best child-bearing years, will for the most part be ineligible.

In mid April the debate exploded. Von der Leyen, herself Catholic, met with Cardinal Sterzinsky and the Lutheran Bishop Margot Kassmann. Both churches have a key role in early childhood education. The Minister's call for a return to specifically Christian

values in education went well beyond this reason for meeting. Predictably, outrage followed. The influential weekly, Der Spiegel, attacked the speech and meeting as a crusade for church and children that threatened the constitutional separation of church and state. Reasonably enough, Jewish and Islamic representatives felt marginalised. Many commentators, including Protestants and Catholics, asked whether the churches were being used as political tools.

Subsequently other religious groups have been assured their views will be taken into account. Yet the initiative, and the controversy that followed, are a sign of the times. The education system, from pre-school to university, desperately needs to be changed, as do prevalent assumptions about the role of women. Mothers who attempt to continue with their career can still be dismissed scornfully as 'Rabenmütter' (black crows).

Hardly, of course, a uniquely German problem! Yet if Germany can develop a genuine discussion about how communal and caring values can be reasserted within an individualistic economy, and what Christian churches might have to contribute, it may be of more than local benefit.

'Red pole' justice in Nepal

By Sushma Joshi

On 23 March last year, the Kathmandu Post ran a front-page story titled 'Red Pole reduces crime, misconduct'. According to the story, an Area Reformation Committee was tying those convicted of crime to a red pole in a public place, humiliating them in front of the community, and getting them to renounce their behaviour.

This story reflects the erosion of the justice system during the current conflict. I spent six months travelling in Southern Nepal with a team of four other researchers, interviewing formal and informal justice providers. It was overwhelmingly clear that the justice system of Nepal had come to a halt.

Referring to the 'red pole' method, the chairman of a municipal committee declared that 'such punishment has really proved to be effective compared to the ones practised by the police and other authorities.'

Humiliation as a strategy has replaced international legal standards of justice. This has been made easier since most rural police posts have withdrawn to the city, leaving almost no state presence.

If a murder is committed in a village, and people are brave enough to report it, the police will ask the villagers to bring the body to the city themselves, along with any supporting evidence. The police, poorly armed and risking Maoist attacks, are afraid of being abducted or killed. The media, preoccupied with reporting the emergencies of the conflict, have also drastically reduced coverage of civil crimes. Crimes, therefore, now take place unchecked.

Because involved parties remove evidence from a crime scene to bring it to the police, the evidence becomes impossible to verify. The public prosecutors, despite having the authority to request more evidence, are also hampered by fear of the police, and concerns for their own safety. The police then act according to the evidence brought before them, often torturing suspects during interrogation without adequate background investigation.

Because there have been no elections, there are no elected officials in the village to sign documents. Elected officials had usually adjudicated petty disputes. Even when the case reaches a Court, the Court officials may not be able to follow up because of death threats from Maoists.

Informal justice providers, including community heads, are also afraid to perform their traditional functions. Politically active individuals have fled rural areas after repeated Maoist threats. Even disputes that have already made it to Court have been halted.

Justice providers, including both police and Court officials, struggle under the psychological impact of working in a paralysed system. The lack of both trust and coordination between the judiciary and the police further aggravates the problem.

Nepal's current political stalemate is in some ways due to this resistance to working together on a common national vision. Institutions are deeply divided about how to proceed. That is perhaps why local initiatives like 'the red pole' take on such alarming popularity. The pole, seeming to promise action and justice, unites people in a way the police or the Courts never could.

The three metre long red wooden pole, which is chillingly reminiscent of the Chinese Red Army, has made its appearance not courtesy of the Maoists, but because of the absence of the lawful state institutions.

Nepal was closed off to the outside world until the '50s. Medieval forms of punishment and torture persisted till the '70s and '80s. But modern legal reforms slowly filtered into the country. A three tiered Court system - District, Appellate and Supreme - operated for decades before coming to a slow halt during the conflict. Norway provided short-lived funding to enable the Nepal Bar Association to give free legal aid. Advocates now argue that legal aid should be mainstreamed into the Constitution as part of a citizen's right to a free trial.

The Maoists and state security forces, acting with impunity, equally terrorise ordinary villagers. The Maoists use children as soldiers, force people to provide labour, execute suspected spies and enemies, extort money and food, and practice torture. The state security forces 'disappear' suspects, conduct investigations under torture, extort money and food from hapless villagers, and rape and kill suspected Maoists. Both sides practice extrajudicial execution.

The population recognises that these two competing and embattled sectors, Maoists and the state, have dismantled and debased the justice system. Justice cannot be arbitrated with a gun. The government of Nepal remains reluctant to acknowledge that a strong judiciary and independent legal system could reduce the impact of the conflict. The fact that Nepal's modern justice system has been rendered functionally useless, replaced by a medieval system of public humiliation, speaks volumes about the state of justice in Nepal today.

The emerging patterns of Benedict's papacy

By Andrew Hamilton

The directions of Benedict XVI's papacy continue to exercise commentators. But they are consistent with his gift for symbolism and his emphasis on the ethical dimensions of culture.

When Cardinal Ratzinger became Pope, astute commentators, both those who admired and those who disliked him, remarked on his intelligence. They did not believe his predecessor unintelligent, but Ratzinger's intelligence seemed quicker and more able to engage with complexity. All wondered how he would deploy this gift.

A year later, we are better able to judge. Although he continues to puzzle those who place him in simple categories, patterns, surprising to some, are becoming visible within his papacy.

Many expected that after the activism of John Paul II, he would be apolitical. Yet recently he addressed the Australian Ambassador on the need to ask forgiveness in indigenous reconciliation. Some saw his words as admonishing Mr Howard that he should say sorry. The judgment was crude.

The Pope did not look at the plight of indigenous people in terms of administration or of politics. He saw it through the lens of culture. Indigenous deprivation represents a wound in the relationship between Aborigines and other Australians. Because it so affects human relations, it is also a moral issue. To the reality of divisions between human beings, corresponds the moral ideal of reconciliation, which is realised only when people ask and receive forgiveness.

For the Pope, the business of politics is to enable and give structure to this cultural and ethical demand. So, the Pope's words about reconciliation had political implications for Australian public life. But they did not amount to a political strategy.

In being ready to reflect on aspects of national culture, and in analysing confidently the moral dimensions of culture, Pope Benedict resembles his predecessor. Both men are convinced that the Catholic Church can and should address public moral issues, and that as Bishops of Rome they have a unique responsibility.

They differ in the era of church life that is their natural home. John Paul II's world was the post-Reformation Church, seen from a Polish perspective. He interpreted Vatican II in continuity with this church. His understanding of the role of the Pope in the world also belonged to that period.

Pope Benedict is rooted in the Catholic Church before the Reformation. In his academic dissertations, he examined the church that Augustine and Bonaventure portrayed. By studying their texts, he sought to illuminate contemporary issues.

Bonaventure and Augustine were both masters in the exploration of symbols. They recognised the resonance of scriptural symbols, and developed them to engage with

their own culture. This attention to symbols, which marks many of the Pope's sermons, makes room for complexity and pluralism in the understanding of central realities like the church.

This occasionally puzzles commentators, who judge Pope Benedict by simple oppositions, like liberal and conservative, authoritarian and democratic. In the sermon he gave at his installation, for example, many believed that in referring to the many sheep and the one flock in his introductory homily, he called on other churches to return to Rome. But this interpretation imposed a 19th-century style of reading on a richly symbolic homily. The argument was more subtle and more personal, based on a multi-faceted exploration of the image of sheep and shepherding.

Similarly, when the Pope surrendered the traditional Papal title, Patriarch of the West, commentators puzzled at the significance of the gesture. Some thought the gesture represented a more limited understanding of the Papacy. Others thought he wanted to highlight it by downplaying the importance of Patriarchs, a key symbolic factor in the understanding of the Eastern churches. Set within the context of the early church, the Pope's gesture simply placed the Papacy in the ministry of Peter and Paul in Rome, which saw his role as Bishop of Rome to confirm all his brethren in faith. It was of a piece with his preference on his coat of arms for the Bishop's mitre over the papal tiara.

Pope Benedict has not forgotten his own theological formation or convictions. Nor has he imposed them. His understanding of contemporary culture continues to reflect the negative Catholic account of the Enlightenment that he inherited. But this is counterbalanced by his familiarity with Christian symbolism and adeptness in using it. It lends itself to relate Christian faith to culture in a strong but relaxed way. It also provides more space than was left by the more assertive style of John Paul II.

Indonesian Muslim-Christian relations: a story of harmony

By Greg Soetomo

A helpful way to examine the relationship between Christian and Muslim communities in Indonesia is to examine the way the mainstream media have treated the issue. Articles published over the past 40 years offer a fluid and confusing picture.

The Christian community would have been delighted in 1962, when Soetedjo Dirjosoebroto, a Muslim, wrote for an Indonesian Catholic Magazine. In his article, 'The Role of the Catholics in Freeing West Irian from Dutch Occupation', the author recognised the significant contribution made by the Catholic Church to the cause of independence.

The article reflects the generally good mutual relationship between the two religious communities. The expression of Islam in Indonesia has been conspicuously moderate, tolerant, and progressive.

But the harmony was not uninterrupted. Conflicts between the two communities occurred periodically. In January 1970, for example, we read that a Catholic school in Jakarta was attacked and burnt down by Muslim radicals. Despite this disturbance, however, Cardinal Justinus Darmojuwono on 30 March 1970 was reported as welcoming Muslim clerics to discuss the responsibility of both the Christian and Islamic communities to create peace in Indonesian society.

Most Indonesian Muslims say, 'We don't live like Middle Easterners. Jamaah Islamiah – an Indonesian extremist group – does not represent the majority of Muslims in our country.' This is largely true. But the relationship in Indonesia between Christianity and Islam, which some have described as love-hate, has continued to be marked by tension.

This conundrum leads Christians to be perplexed about how to respond to Islam. They feel that they have tried to be generous, but that they have often been treated in hostile ways. On the other hand, Muslims have also expressed their concern about Christians. The popular presumption that Christians are rich and exclusive, and that churches are mainly composed of Chinese-Indonesians, complicates Muslim attitudes. Moreover they have grounds for suspecting that some Christian denominations try unceasingly and aggressively to convert Muslims into Christians. Ordinary Muslims are unable to recognise the differences between Christians and churches. They generalise that all Christians are engaged in efforts to make Muslims Christian.

Theologically speaking, Christians accept Muslims as their companions in the same journey to the one God. As a minority, Christian communities have been liable to attack. But for the most part they recognise that in conflict their main defenders have been Muslim leaders.

Islam in Indonesia is not monolithic. But it has generally engaged with other faiths, adopting and adapting the cultural traditions of the various people who practise Islam.

In addition, Indonesian Muslims have had no problem coping with the demands of the modern world.

Indonesian Muslims, too, are unique in tolerating without outrage the conversion of their people to Christianity. In some other countries, to renounce one's Islamic faith is a crime, one that is even punishable by death. Still, churches in Indonesia have rarely accepted adult converts.

A reading of the history of the last 40 years has not produced a uniform picture of Christian-Muslim relations in Indonesia. Indonesian Islam reveals itself as unique. It invites reflection by those who wish to understand contemporary Islam. A Christian theology of religions, in particular, has the opportunity to explore more deeply the connections and differences between the Christian and Muslim faiths.

Online social networking beyond the grave

By Margaret Cassidy

Interacting with other humans ultimately exposes us all to major life events - births and inevitably death. Since social networking has moved online, death has inevitably followed.

Probably the most famous online networking site is MySpace.com – particularly since Rupert Murdoch purchased it for $US580 million a year ago. This site claims to have over 73 million registered users – mostly young and impressionable.

While MySpace has many security features to deter commercial exploitation of its young users who frequently bare their souls to electronic passers by, it has not been able to deal with death.

This inability to remove the sites of the dead has received worldwide publicity since Deborah Lee Walker, a 23-year-old from Georgia in the United States, died in a car accident in February of this year. Her father logged onto her MySpace page to alert her friends a few hours after the accident, only to discover a number of tributes already online.

Since then, the flow of online tributes to mostly young people cut down in the prime of their life has become a focal point for some cyber communities.

MyDeathSpace.com is a much newer site that has created a directory of deceased MySpace members. This American site effectively publishes obituaries of MySpace members, who have become more famous in death than life.

A quick look at the site reveals a long list of mostly young males who have mainly experienced violent and unexpected deaths. Car crashes predominate, as well as murders - some very gruesome. There are also gunshots, alcohol related deaths, suicides and drug overdoses – perhaps deaths that reflect the ages of the victims. Some of the obituaries are graphic in their detail, and lift slabs of text from other online news sources.

Armand (AJ) Marin, a stuntsman in the movie industry, died of accidental strangulation on a movie set in May 2006. While in a stunt hanging scene, he had a sudden asthma attack and was unable to free himself, despite the noose having a safety knot.

Like all MySpace sites, his site - http://www.myspace.com/project_27 - lists 138 online MySpace friends who have permission to post comments on his site. By late May, nearly 200 had been posted since his death. These comments are an outpouring of grief, many from people who never physically met Armand. Others talk about their only encounter in person with him.

Armand's site reveals his interests and attitude to life. Among these it includes 'stuntwork, anything dangerous, acting … bartending, anything extremely dangerous'.

His site, now a shrine to his brief but action filled life, includes a video from YouTube.com, another online networking site. It is based on video sharing.

Strangely, almost voyeuristically, after his death I can still read all about Armand, his age, his interests, that he was straight and in a relationship. His heroes included his dad, 'he always supported my dreams', and his mom for 'helping getting me started in life and giving me a foundation'.

MyDeathSpace.com also led me to the website of Kaitlyn Druckreier who died after a lifetime of heart disease at the age of 18 on 3 February this year.

Growing up in New Milford, Connecticut, her MySpace site - http://myspace.com/jtcarter_05 - reflects the life of a very normal adolescent girl, highlighting her musical and other tastes, and endless detail about her life. But, the saddest aspect is the long list of comments posted by her boyfriend Anthony in the months since her death. He very publicly continues to post tributes, declaring his long-lasting love, and tries to come to grief with her death.

As a predominantly American site, MyDeathSpace includes some deaths of military personnel: two airmen - Lance Corporal Nicholas Sovie, who was 20 (http://www.myspace.com/sovie) and Senior Airman Alecia Good, who was 23(http://www.myspace.com/aleciasogood) - and eight marines. Although both site-owners were in the military, there is little in common between the sites.

Sites reveal greater or lesser social networks. Only 20 MySpace friends are listed on Alecia's site, and there have been very few postings since her sudden death. Had she really developed an online social network? What does this say about her? Had she just joined MySpace?

With all the obituary postings, there is a strong sense of the presence of the deceased. Among the personal information provided by the site owners is their religion. However, the postings all talk to the deceased as if they are still present in some heavenly form. Apart from the declarations of love, many speak of knowing that the deceased has 'gone to a better place' and that they long for that time of reunion when death comes to them as well.

Social networking beyond the grave is alive and well online!

Grass roots amongst the rubble

By Rebecca Duffy

This semester I am studying at Gadjah Mada University (UGM), Yogyakarta. Early last Saturday morning, I was woken by a long deep rumble and a shaking bedroom. My first thought was 'Merapi'. (For several weeks our attention had been focused on heightened volcanic activity at Mount Merapi). My neighbours rushed out onto the street, shaken, confused, trying to see if the mountain had erupted. But the plume of smoke and ash rising from the volcano didn't match the intensity of what we had experienced.

With images of Aceh so fresh, it is not surprising that an hour later we heard cries of 'tsunami!' Although Yogyakarta is too far from the coast to be at risk from a tsunami, trucks full of wounded people began fleeing towards the mountain. They feared a second wave of destruction. As panic spread, the main streets heading north became congested with cars, trucks and motorcycles. Eventually police vehicles with loud-speakers helped spread the message that there was in fact no tsunami. A kind of order returned.

During the day, information accumulated. As every hospital quickly filled to overflowing it became clear that a major disaster had occurred. Groups and networks began to mobilise – those with first aid or medical skills immediately went out with medical teams and local rescue workers.

At first I, like many others, felt completely helpless. No skills, no transport. But people had already started to do whatever they could. They gave blood at the hospitals, and distributed water to people waiting hours for medical attention in hospital car parks. On the second day, we bought packages of cooked rice for injured people who had already waited more than a day outside hospitals. The few stores that were open were packed with shoppers, so stock quickly ran out. People feared further earthquakes, and were stocking up on supplies. But already groups were getting out to affected areas which desperately needed medics, medical supplies, basic food and shelter.

By Monday, an awesome array of spontaneous relief efforts could be seen on nearly every street. Mosques, church groups, community organisations, and scores of small informal networks were at work. Small groups pooled their resources to donate, collect and buy supplies, and somehow to get them out to places damaged by the earthquake. Vehicles of all descriptions plied the routes out of the city.

Despite this massive effort, the overwhelming scale of the disaster was now becoming apparent. Along any southerly or south-easterly road from the city you could see for kilometer after kilometer piles of bricks and wooden frames that were once houses. Children with plastic cups lined all the main roads leading from the city. They took donations from the aid vehicles that filed continuously back and forth from Yogyakarta. The media pictures of flattened homes tell the story, but not of its extent. On the ground, those images stretch virtually unbroken from the outskirts of the city

to more remote villages. A few homes remain standing, but most of these are structurally unsound and sodden. They will have to be demolished.

The further out we went, the less aid anyone had received. Many had received none at all. The needy, especially, received little. Even by the fourth day, some marginal villages relied entirely on spontaneous community enterprise for what aid they received. It was a difficult challenge to balance efficient with fair distribution. Because government aid had to follow poorly organised bureaucratic structures that link local government to village heads, it was slow to reach the outer areas – if indeed it reached them at all. Community initiatives bypassed some of these structures, delivering aid quickly and directly to some of the most remote villages and families.

The number of relief initiatives and a lack of coordination, however, made the work less effective than it might have been. People who lacked skills in managing disasters did whatever they believed useful, rather than what was strategic. At the same time, however, tens of thousands of people all needed urgent help. No centralised effort could have matched a grassroots response in mobilising skills and resources, and in bringing them to so many places in a rapidly changing situation. It was awesome to see ordinary people responding so directly and quickly to what they saw.

Well organised local groups, too, brought their local knowledge and effective networks to groups like Médecins Sans Frontières. They met together each night. Such groups as WALHI (Indonesian Forum for the Environment) coordinated the efforts of their wider networks and smaller member groups, which fed back new information from the field. They were already making plans for the longer term, while continuing to offer emergency relief in an increasingly effective and strategic way.

I have been deeply impressed that so many in the community responded so quickly and worked so hard. It's Saturday morning now, and it seems much more than a week since the quake. Most ad hoc groups are winding down their efforts. Unfortunately, we students now have to write end of semester assignments and sit our exams! Though recovery from the tsunami is likely to be complicated and difficult, I am inspired by the thinking of some permanent groups about work for the longer term. For example, friends at WALHI and the Centre for Peace and Security Studies (CSPS) have noted that in such situations local people often lose their voice. They will work to ensure that people are made central in decisions that are taken. They hope to lessen the dependency, conflict and ineffective distribution that so often follow emergencies.

In the pressure of this last week, it was hard to give time to listen to people, or to reflect on the difficulties that accompany relief work. I hope that longer term redevelopment will reflect the spirit of groups such as WALHI and CSPS and of the spontaneous community response that was so very effective in the days after the earthquake.

Town and country parish life

By Margaret Cody

I belong to two Catholic parishes, one in the city and one in the country. They offer a striking contrast in liturgical experience and congregational demographics.

The city church is late 19th-century Victorian and built of brick and stone; the interior space is a rectangle with seats facing the altar in traditional formation. It is unheated and cold and I wonder if it is part of Australian Catholic culture for city people to endure wintry churches. Small congregations and small parish incomes may also be a factor.

The country church, by contrast, is a simple rectangular building with a pine and plaster interior, heated against the Blue Mountains winter cold. The interior space is a cruciform, with many people sitting in the side wings close to the altar. The warmth is welcoming and enhances the liturgical experience.

In city churches it is a common experience to see mostly grey heads as young families tend to live in the more affordable outer suburbs or the country. This demographic also affects the liturgy we experience. In an ‘older’ parish, the space is quiet, the singing more subdued, and the church does not hum with the sounds of children. Not many of the families with children at the city parish school attend church.

However, in an old inner city parish there is sometimes celebration of a very different kind; that of a historically long life and experience .

Mary has just celebrated her 90th birthday in the city suburb and parish in which she has spent her life. She went to the parish school until she was 14 and then left to work, like many working class young people. I asked her what she remembered about the church then:

'It was strict; you had to be quiet or you got the cane, and you had to genuflect until you touched the ground. Everything had to be done properly and the mass was all in Latin'.

She particularly remembered the celebration of St Patrick’s Day with maypole dancing at the Sydney Showground. The mothers, she said, made the dresses out of crepe at sixpence a yard, all in pastel colours like pink, green and blue.

‘We couldn’t wear red – that was the devil’s colour the nuns said!’

So what does she notice now?

Well, the church is a more friendly and informal place, and she can understand the language. Mary has lived in her worker’s cottage for 70 years, 65 of them married. She was married at 18 to her 19-year-old husband; they lived in the house owned by his parents, later purchased by her son. Now widowed she lives there still. Three generations of one family have lived in that cottage, which holds the memorabilia of

their history, including service in the Light Horse Regiment and photographs from World War Two.

For her birthday celebration many of the senior members of the parish gathered, some on walking frames or in wheelchairs. There was a festive air as priest and people honoured her faithful life, probably the longest lived in this parish.

At the Blue Mountains country parish, the space and the liturgy are very different. This parish has a wider demographic including elderly as well as many young families. Small children crawl in the aisles and older children attend Sunday school during the Liturgy of the Word. There is great energy provided by musicians, singers, lively music and a gathering which sings almost as well as their Protestant friends. The space is colourful with banners and flowers appropriate to the season. There is no resident priest, another sign of the times, so a roster of visiting priests preside over the eucharist. During the week other forms of prayer are led by lay people. The parish is led by a religious sister and pastoral team.

Both of these parishes struggle financially, but both realise that liturgy is at the heart of parish life and commit as much as they can to offering a rich experience of community celebration.

How to measure corporate social responsibility

By John Sweeney

A joint parliamentary inquiry is about to release a report on Corporate Social Responsibility in Australia. It will address issues including obliging companies to attend to the interests of stakeholders who are not also shareholders. The report will also raise the question of the need for legislation to enforce such care, in the form of compulsory corporate social responsibility.

Corporate social responsibility is not the same as ethical behaviour, but it is an important component of such action. It is therefore important to measure companies' social responsibility and work out how their performance can be improved.

A SOCIAL LICENSE TO OPERATE

There are two key aspects of this inquiry from an ethical point of view. We can say that a business is good - or ethical - if it contributes positively to human welfare. The problem is, 'whose welfare?' A company may benefit the owners of the company's capital, but damage the workers, the community, or the suppliers.

How do we decide what behaviour is ethically correct? While ethics may be of concern to the radical individual, ethics usually begins with the fact we are social beings requiring social relations and services in order to survive and thrive. As such, the ethical frame of reference is the relationships individuals have with others. One very basic ethical principle is 'Do good, avoid harm .. to self and others'.

In our society, corporations are treated as if they were persons, with many of the rights and duties of the human person. Societies have extended these rights to corporations on the understanding that the duties are also fulfilled and that the activities of the corporation are of benefit to that society. In this sense, corporations have a social license to operate.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES, SOCIAL FOOTPRINT AND SUSTAINABILITY

Unfortunately we do not know the extent to which corporations currently have a regard for non-shareholder stakeholders because there is no systematic measurement of what companies are doing

Some companies report on their contributions to social and community projects, while others give accounts of their social and environmental impacts. But all tend to stress the positives. Many companies do not report at all. In fact, Australian companies report social and environmental impacts far less than their OECD counterparts.

A KPMG survey states that 23% of the top 100 in Australia publish 'sustainability reports' which the survey defines as non-financial reports on environmental, social and economic performance. This figure compares to 81% in Japan and 71% in the UK [link - pp. 3f).

KPMG claims the low rate is offset by rapid uptake of this sort of reporting. in 1995 only 1% of the top 500 Australian companies offered sustainability reports, in 2005

that figure stood at 24%. An August 2005 study of 98 of Australia's leading corporations by Professor Michael Adams of the University of Technology Sydney concluded that being a good corporate citizen was not generally seen as central to companies' core business (link).

This lack of clarity is itself a strong argument for moving towards a common and comparable reporting scheme such as that offered by the Global Reporting Initiative. Good decisions by consumers, stockholders, and democratic governments require accurate information that aids comparison. This alone is a good case for government bodies such as ASIC to determine a common standard, and encourage businesses to report accordingly, either by regulation, guidelines or some other mechanism. It promotes less, rather than more, regulation.

Under Australian Corporations Law, executive officers and board members have a legal obligation to maximise returns. This requirement is independent of any other goals stipulated in a company's articles of association.

Currently, corporations making socially or environmentally based decisions must justify them based on shareholder interests. It is better in the long run. By behaving in a socially responsible manner, a company can earn a good reputation. The company can increase profitability while the community recognises that the company is acting responsibly.

LAWS THAT REQUIRE UNETHICAL BEHAVOUR

But it remains for the company to decide what to do if there is some legal but unethical behaviour that is in the shareholders' interests and is unlikely to be discovered by the public or risk the company's reputation. By virtue of current legislation, the company may be bound to commit the unethical act, harming the community in the process.

The justification of maintaining the firm's reputation remains conditional on maximising profit. Further, there is potential for this situation to undermine the reputation of all companies claiming to act responsibly, because the community knows that profit remains the only real bottom line. For this reason, the law needs to be relaxed to allow company directors to make decisions based on social and environmental grounds without having to justify them also on fiduciary grounds.

BOOK REVIEW:
Political thrillers expose corrupting personal ambition

By Tony Smith

Dead Set
Kel Robertson, Text Publishing, 2006. ISBN 1921145048, RRP $29.95

Morning's Gone
Jon Cleary, Harper Collins Publishers, 2006. ISBN 0732282624, RRP $32.95

There are two schools of thought on the connection between politics and literature in Australia. One view is that all novels concern politics in the broad sense of power in personal relationships, whether these occur between individuals or within families or any other social institution. The second view is that novelists have tended to ignore the 'profession' of politics as practised in parties, election campaigns, parliaments and the machinery of government. The connection matters because fiction reflects reality, defines what is possible and prompts serious questions about what should be.

In this context it is interesting and somewhat disturbing, to discover how readily popular novelists regard politics as an appropriate background for crime stories. In Dead Set, by first time novelist Kel Robertson, and Morning's Gone by the prolific Jon Cleary, the practice of politics in Australia has been corrupted by personal ambition and politicians are regarded with suspicion if not contempt.

Both works suggest that politics places intolerable strains on some individuals, and especially on those with active consciences. Neither work suggests that politicians are innocent victims of social pressures. Rather they show that other social institutions such as the family and the justice system are forced to deal with the mess created by politicians. In Dead Set the drama and farce are created by people with evil intentions subverting the political process. In Morning's Gone, a politician with good intentions encounters difficulties when he meets an insurmountable obstacle. Both novels suggest that certain features of the system are vulnerable to manipulation by powerful forces and the result is that we are deprived of the very people who would be our best representatives.

Dead Set is a mostly very readable crime thriller set in Canberra, Sydney and the New South Wales Central Coast. Kel Robertson introduces a likeable and believable character, Inspector Brad (for Bradman) Chen of the Federal Police. Throughout the tale which is told in first person, Chen is on crutches and relies on painkillers, alcohol and the support of his driver, detective Kate Malone. Chen is recalled to duty because the Immigration Minister has been murdered. Chen noted the crowds outside her house and observes that not so long ago, a dozen Ministers for Immigration could have been murdered and there would have been no need to keep the public away. Tracey Dale was a Labor Minister noted for her generous policy towards asylum seekers, despite pressures from within her own party. Indeed, opponents of her Compassionate Australia Program are immediate suspects. Dale had strong Left credentials, having been active in the Vietnam Moratorium movement and the Age of Aquarius with the legendary Jim Cairns. In her will she left some property to

Women's Electoral Lobby. Chen even approves of her taste in crime fiction when he sees she has been reading Peter Temple's Black Tide.

Robertson captures public cynicism pretty well. Asked about enemies, the Minister's Chief of Staff Dr Garner, says that 'In the Australian Labor Party we all have enemies. On an average day some of them may even be from the other parties'. However, she rules out political enemies because they 'prefer character assassination, public humiliation and electoral defeat to violent death. Murder isn't usually slow enough for enemies you make in politics'. Journalist Terry Priest tells Chen of Dale's rumoured relationship – 'playing hide the sausage' – with the Leader of the Democrats, David McNiece. McNiece's lawyer wife Athena Stellios knows of the affair, but believes he has ended it, because 'for a politician he's an astoundingly bad liar'.

Chen gives Malone a rundown on political assassinations, a history Malone seems to find this 'about as exciting as period pain'. Chen mentions 'Newman' but does not think it necessary to explain that John Newman was the Cabramatta MP shot down outside his home in 1994. Politics can become an all consuming passion. When Dr Garner says that lately the Minister did not seem interested in the longer term, Chen asks 'personal or political longer term?' Garner replies 'Is there a difference?'

While there are some disappointing aspects to this novel, these mostly arise from the need to conform to the dictates of the genre, including some grizzly murders and a steamy bedroom scene. Both of these are tolerable but the denouement unravels into extremes of violence too long to be effective parody. Overall however, the characters, the settings, the plot and Robertson's snappy style make for a compelling read.

Robertson uses flashes of background and the cynical observations of his narrator to good effect, mainly because the background seems accurate and the cynicism is in touch with contemporary standards. Jon Cleary writes in third person, and his central character is himself a politician and so less likely to be critical of his occupation. Cleary also uses a broad brush approach rather than providing succinct snapshots of events and so the background is sometimes blurry. It is never quite clear why the author chose to mention some background events and omit others, nor why he avoids naming prominent politicians such as Prime Ministers, given that the reliance on recognisable context leaves no option but to imagine the period from Fraser to Howard. For readers who remember the nineties, a small slip such as having the Rwanda disaster out of sequence is disconcerting. Robertson avoids this difficulty by placing his drama in a parallel political universe where only Parliament House and the political parties are 'real'.

Despite causing some discomfort with context, Cleary has devised a superior plot and his main character Matt Durban is an interesting study. Durban is caught between the grand Labor goal of 'the Light on the Hill' and his own longing for the peace of 'the light on the porch'. Durban grows up in the small town of Collamundra and returns there as a young teacher where he lives with his father, also a teacher. He has a relationship with Ruby Rawson, widely regarded as the 'town bike', but he has ambitions and decides to move to the city. When he tells Ruby that their relationship

is over, she is bitter. Ruby is found stabbed to death, and although Durban is not suspected of responsibility, her death returns to haunt him later.

Durban is fully aware of his ambitions and acknowledges that there are 'no angels in politics'. He follows a fairly typical career path, becoming a secretary to the local Member of Parliament, then adviser to a Minister, then a backbench MP and then a Minister. Meanwhile, he marries Carmel, who is equally ambitious for him, but says that she will not 'follow' him to Canberra' but will go 'side-by-side' with him. She has no intention of becoming a 'political widow' minding the children and keeping house, but remains his best critic, reminding him when his talent is overwhelmed by his 'bonhomie'.

In order to make his mark as a backbencher he adopts the neglected issue of security along the remote northern coastline, and attracts the attention of June Herx, a Coalition backbencher from North Queensland, and consequently of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, which regards her as a person of interest. Durban is recruited to become closer to Herx, but the mission is terminated when she is murdered. Suddenly, Durban's close connection with two murdered women suggests more than a coincidence.

Carmel reckons that if ever Australia had a woman Prime Minister, she would need to be 'tougher than any man, a sports lover and as chaste as the Virgin Mary'. In Dead Set, an ex-policeman suggests that most of the 'sheilas in this country' should be suspects in Tracey Dale's murder because 'it's OK for a woman to be successful and over forty-five, but it's unforgivable for a woman to be successful and over forty-five with great knockers'. Both Cleary and Robertson seem to be hinting at something tragic about politics for women in particular. Durban's push for the party leadership is ended by a revelation about Carmel, and Chen's case ends as he loses Malone. Nor are these isolated phenomena. In John Misto's The Devil's Companions (Hodder Headline 2005) all the female characters suffer. A politician's daughter is kidnapped, nuns are suspected of the crime, and the protagonist's partner Nikki is killed by a car bomb.

It is not clear exactly what these crime writers want to tell us, but it could be that they are observing the hypocritically stringent standards we place on ambitious women. There is ample evidence in the treatment of Carmen Lawrence, Cheryl Kernot, Kerry Chikarovski, Natasha Stott-Despoja and Franca Arena to suggest that politics remains more dangerous for women. Nor can these themes be attributed solely to the fact that the authors are male. In 1995, former MP Robyn Read set a murder mystery The More Things Change in the NSW Parliament, and Camilla Nelson in Perverse Acts (1998) explored the links between sex and power. Perhaps what Robertson and Cleary show most clearly is that in politics, he who wins is very likely to have abandoned any pretence to principle, and is willing to do anything in the pursuit of power.

FILM REVIEW:
Strong performances with no cultural cringe

By Donald Russell

Candy: 116 Minutes, Rating: MA15+

Director: Neil Armfield, Starring: Heath Ledger, Abbie Cornish, Geoffrey Rush

Based on Luke Davies' acclaimed best-selling novel, Candy tells the story of lovers Dan (Heath Ledger) and Candy (Abbie Cornish), whose lives are completely absorbed by their addiction to heroin, and passion for each other.

In an attractive opening sequence Candy and Dan ride the Gravitron at an amusement park while Tim Buckley's Song to the Siren plays on the soundtrack (Buckley famously died of a heroin overdose in 1975, at the age of 28). The scene is a beautiful yet foreboding commencement to the film as Buckley's anguished voice soars over the image of the spinning lovers. It is an indication of the inevitable descent into addiction that is to follow. This is the high point of the characters' relationship and of the film.

From the outset, Candy and Dan are heroin addicts. The audience is never shown the two characters' lives before their addiction to heroin. The result is that neither character is all that likeable and throughout the film as their situation becomes grimmer it is difficult to feel empathy for them. This point is evident in the film when Candy's mum, Elaine (Noni Hazlehurst) laments the corruption of her daughter, when she screams that Dan ruined her beautiful child. At this point in the story the audience only knows Candy as a junkie and prostitute, so it is all too simple to sit back and think 'what beautiful child?'

It is easy to feel sorry for Dan and Candy and hope that they can sort out their lives, but the connection between the audience and the characters is a superficial one. It is informed more by the awareness of heroin as a highly addictive, life-ruining substance than the individual circumstances of the characters in the film.

This is not to say that Candy is a bad film. It's just not a great film. It is an Australian story with no hint of cultural cringe, there are some genuinely humorous moments amidst the tension that inhabits so much of the film, and the performances are strong; Ledger and Cornish are fine, and there is a good chemistry between them. Noni Hazlehurst and Tony Martin are excellent as Candy's parents and Geoffrey Rush is flamboyant as the drug-dealing professor of chemistry, Casper.

There are so many scenes in Candy that have become staples of the 'heroin-film': The Score, The Hit, The Overdose, The Withdrawal, The Family Fight. Candy also has a three-act structure with the titles 'Heaven,' 'Earth,' and 'Hell,' which recalls the four-season structure of Darren Aronofsky's brilliant film of heroin addiction, Requiem For a Dream. Ultimately, there is too great a sense of déjà vu apparent while watching

Candy. There are many reasons to watch Candy as a piece of Australian cinema, but audiences have been on this ride before.

FILM REVIEW:
Fractured narrative glosses over ethical dilemmas

By Donald Russell

X-Men: The Last Stand: 104 Minutes, Rating: M
Dir: Brett Ratner, Starring: Hugh Jackman, Ian McKellen, Patrick Stewart, Famke Janssen, Anna Paquin, Halle Berry, Kelsey Grammer

X-Men: The Last Stand is the conclusion to the trilogy of X-Men films based on Marvel comics' mutant superheroes who fight for tolerance in a future society of discrimination. After Bryan Singer's excellent first two X-Men films, expectations were high for X-Men: The Last Stand. However, this film is not only a massive let down and awful conclusion to the series, but also an example of much that is wrong with Hollywood cinema.

The plot of X-Men: The Last Stand concerns the development of 'The Cure,' which is designed to reverse mutation and turn mutants into 'normal' human beings. When 'The Cure' is turned into a weapon in the humans' war against the mutants, battle lines are drawn. Professor Charles Xavier's (Patrick Stewart) team of X-Men desire peace between humans and mutants, while Magneto's (Sir Ian McKellen) Brotherhood believe mutants are superior to humans and seek to exterminate the unevolved race. Complicating matters is the reincarnation of Jean Grey as The Phoenix (Famke Janssen), the world's most powerful mutant, who can be used as the ultimate weapon by the side that wins her allegiance. Along for the ride are mutant favourites Wolverine (Hugh Jackman), Storm (Halle Berry), Rogue (Anna Paquin) and many more.

To the enormous detriment of the X-Men series, Bryan Singer was replaced as director of the third instalment due to his conflicting schedule working on Superman Returns. He has reportedly maintained that he would have directed X-Men: The Last Stand had 20th Century Fox given him more time, however, they chose instead to replace him with Brett Ratner (Rush Hour 1 & 2, Red Dragon). Singer took his entire team including writers, production designer, editor, and cinematographer over to the Superman project.

In contrast to Singer's deliberate storytelling and coherent pacing, Ratner's X-Men is a complete mess. There is no build-up of tension, long-serving characters are treated with contempt and disappear from the film, the dialogue is often weak and occasionally laughable (though not funny), and the climax is a cacophony of special effects with actors serving only as props. X-Men: The Last Stand's biggest problem though is its fractured narrative. Ratner seems to forget about the ethical dilemmas of 'The Cure' and themes such as discrimination, intolerance and genocide early in the film. Instead, the film moves onto the war between good and evil mutants where each character gets to use their powers and there are fireworks and explosions aplenty. Characterisation and story are almost completely absent.

20th Century Fox's X-Men: The Last Stand had the second largest opening-weekend box-office ever when it opened in the US last week. Which is exactly what the

company wanted when they chose to rush out this film and not include the makers of the first two X-Men films in the process. It is testament to the smash-and-grab style of filmmaking that is Hollywood at its worst. This is most disappointing for fans of the X-Men films and comics, as well as people who enjoy quality action and science-fiction cinema, who are completely left out of the equation.

POETRY:
Memories of Beograd

By Adrian Lane

Of bulky ramparts, lit up, commanding
a Danube in flood;
Of communist concrete dirty and drab;
Of boulevards spacious and rubbished streets;
Of luxuriant marble and metalled glass
amidst filthy beauties from an Icarus past.

Of teeming bus stations and trolleys grunting
humphing hot from distant eras
packed with old Australians eking out their welfare checks, dinar by dinar;
Of lawnmower Yugos scooting round sleek Mercedes;
Of an empty airport
graveyarding remnants of heroic fighters
glorying in American bits and pieces,
trophies from a war of lost pride.

Of scungy hotels with threadbare carpets
reeking of smoke;
Of veal with a view
and paprika peppers with cream cheese -
drinking M beers, cherry yoghurts and raspberry frappes
so fresh you can taste this morning's market.

Of toothless toilet minders in stinking holes;
Of wrinkled medieval peasants blackscarfed carting their vegetables;
Of Albanian beggars clutching babies to the breast;
Of longlegged Nike lads cool in their sweats,
their swarthy uncles oozing a well-groomed masculinity:
burnished stubble and impeccable hair.

Of an unreadable Cyrillic script
distancing one empire, drawing another -
named for her evangelist
whose hope is history
archived with Roman relics,
museumed for the tourist trade.

Of a National Theatre young and alive
producing classics, searching to make sense,
reinventing, wondering
who and where we are;
Of borders in fertile fields
so new even the guards use builders' huts;
Of war graves in no man's land
so no man owns;
Or is it so both own, and watch,
and neither will dare dig up pretending
others have never tilled this soil
which longs for a settled future
and tries to forget its past.

April 2006

PHOTO ESSAY:
Those among us: Three stories

By John Laurie

For reproduction of photographs, go to:
http://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?aeid=850

GUNTHER LAWS (1930 – 2005)

Born in Hamburg in 1930, Gunther moved to Australia 50 years ago to pursue a career as a joiner/carpenter during a time when the Australian Government was recruiting tradesmen to build public housing in Geelong. Upon arrival, Gunther worked as a builder in Geelong, sleeping in an abandoned hospital with other foreign tradesmen. The hospital had dirt floors, and often flooded with water. Gunther found living in Australia difficult. He struggled to make friends, missing the sense of community and especially the food from his hometown.

He was married after placing an ad in a German personal column stating: 'person living in Australia and wanting a female.' With such obvious charm, Gunther was quickly wed, and the blushing bride returned with him to Australia. Gunther was once passionate about Scientology and I pressed him as to why he no longer believes. He replied: 'I am no longer interested,' with a bland matter-of-factness. Just prior to his death, Gunther surrounded himself with small objects of personal nostalgia. During my visit, his cook brought him some Bratwurst sausages as the interview came to a close. Outside, his beloved caramel Volkswagon Beetle sat quietly under a makeshift carport. Inside, old telephones dotted around the house created a link to his much-loved homeland.

NASSAR AND ALAWEEYA ELSHEIK

Nassar was born in Sudan, Africa. The son of a high-ranking military official, Nassar was named by his father when the British and their Allies were fighting the Germans on the Libyan Front in the Battle of Allemaigne. Nassar's father won the Victorian medal for bravery, and gave Nassar his name as it is the Sudanese word for 'Victorious.' Nassar was destined for great things in the eyes of his father.

He quickly moved up the army ranks and became a Sudanese Army General. His position has since seen him work both in England and the United States of America as a Defence Attaché. His position became compromised when his moral beliefs conflicted with the beliefs of the Sudanese political party then in power, and he was subsequently thrown into jail. Realising the severity of the punishment, and due to Nassar's high-ranking status, he was offered exile to another country. In 1991 Nassar went to Egypt to establish a business that quickly failed. Egypt was a difficult place for Sudanese. The Egyptians were shrewd and savvy businessmen and made business deals difficult and confusing for foreigners.

In 1995, Sudanese living in Egypt were finally recognised by the United Nations as refugees. The choice for Nassar and his wife Alaweeya then lay between Canada and

Australia, with the warmer climes of Australia being the deciding factor. In 1998 Nassar, his wife and two sons arrived in Australia and immediately embraced the Australian way of living. Having just come from Egypt the difference was dramatic. He found fairness in the social security and medical systems, but having a highly conservative Sudanese heritage found some of the differences in this new land quite confronting.

Nassar has not returned to Sudan since he left. Australia is home now, for him and his family, but he is hopeful that his two sons do not lose a sense of their African heritage. I left the interview as Nassar began his Ramadan prayers. The Australian sun drifted through his living room curtains.

NOE BONNICI

Noe (pron. Noah) was born in Malta in 1932. Noe remembers life in Malta as being poor and hard. He remembers being on a fishing trip off the coast of Sicily and seeing machine gun holes in the prickly pear leaves. He remembers seeing his friend gunned down in the street by a sniper during the war. He was only a teenager, but he remembers feeling helpless as a priest ran over to his friend's body and gave him his last rites: 'so I think the machine gun shoot him in the back. Vella I remember, poor thing you see. I was small but I remember.'

Noe immigrated to Australia in June 1952 on board the SS Austurias after being told Australia was the lucky country and there was plenty of work. Noe remembers this first trip taking three months. He felt like a stowaway, conditions were bad, and he slept on a canvas sack on the floor. But there were cheap cigarettes, interesting people and ports to stop in so he didn't mind the passage so much. Upon arriving in Australia, Noe abandoned his love for the sea, and did not work as a fisherman as he had done in Malta. 'The sea is too angry,' as he said to me. Instead, he worked at the timber mill and during this time he lived with an elderly Maltese man, Mr Fava and his wife. They lived on the Esplanade in Altona, Melbourne when there were only a few houses and Altona was a seaside village. Noe remembers reading to Mr Fava as he was blind.

Noe returned to Malta after three years as the promise of work was not met. After spending eight years in Malta, Noe returned to Australia in 1963 bringing his wife Catherine and their two young children on the ocean liner The Sydney. This time Noe got stable work in the steel-mill and was part of the scheme installing 700 miles of gas piping from Gippsland to Melbourne. He was away from home a lot initially, but in 1964 he built a home in Altona (where the family still lives today) and Noe got a job with Newport railways where he stayed for 30 years until his retirement in 1997. In his retirement, Noe has been able to spend time on his passions. He loves boats, classical music, painting and reading.

Noe is a very proud man. Proud of his wife and his family. After suffering a stroke two years ago, his family must assist him with reading and other tasks. One hand is gloved in what appears to be a mitten made by his wife and it sits here shaking silently. We talked at length of his adventures and of Lampedusa's Leopard of which I

apparently reminded him of. His eyes still twinkle with the salt of the sea and a life well lived.