



THE LAST WAVE is an October, 2017 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. What follows is Kino Ken's review of that Australian film.

18 of a possible 20 points

******1/2 of a possible *******

**Australia 1977 color 104 minutes live action feature horror drama
The Australian Film Commission / Ayer Productions / Derek Power /
McElroy & McElroy Producers: Hal McElroy and Jim McElroy**

**Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance
(j) designates a juvenile performer**

Points:

- 2 Direction: Peter Weir***
- 2 Editing: Max Lemon**
- 2 Cinematography: Russell Boyd***
- Still Photography: David Kynoch**
- 2 Lighting: Tony Tegg***
- Special Visual Effects: Monty Fieguth*, Bob Hilditch***
- 1 Screenplay: Peter Weir, Tony Morphett, Petru Popescu**
- 2 Music: Charles Wain***

- 1 **Production Design: Goran Warff**
Art Direction: Neil Angwin
Set Maker: Phil Worth
Set Decorator: Bill Malcolm*
Costume Design: Annie Bleakley
Makeup: Jose Perez*
 - 2 **Sound**
Sound Editing: Greg Dell*
Sound Recording: Don Connolly*
Sound Mixing: Phil Judd*
 - 2 **Acting**
 - 2 **Creativity**
- 16 total points**

Cast: Richard Chamberlain (David Burton), Olivia Hamnett (Annie Burton, David's wife), David Gulpilil* (Chris Lee), Frederick Parslow (Rev. Burton, David's father), Viveann Gray (Dr. Whitburn), Nandjiwarra Amagula* (Charley), Walter Amigula (Gerry Lee), Roy Dara (Larry), Cedrick Lalara (Lindsey), Morris Lalara (Jacko), Athol Compton (Billy Corman, thief), Peter Carroll (Michael Zeadler), Michael Duffield (Andrew Potter), Wallas Eaton (Morgue Doctor), Jo England (Babysitter), Richard Henderson (Prosecutor), Penny Leach (Schoolteacher), Merv Lilley* (Publican), Jennifer de Greenlaw (Zeadler's Secretary), Guido Rametta (Guido), Katrina Sedgwick (j) (Sophie Burton, sister to Grace), John Meagher (Morgue Clerk), Malcolm Robertson (Don Fishburn), Greg Rowe (Carl), John Frawley (Policeman), Ingrid Weir (j) (Grace Burton, sister to Sophie)

Peter Weir's apocalyptic THE LAST WAVE was released in 1977. In spite of formidable special visual effects and the same kind of uncanny native music which made PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK so memorable, its similarly inconclusive and ambiguous termination mystified audiences and left critics less than satisfied. Richard Chamberlain portrays upper-class lawyer David Burton. Customarily handling only corporate law cases, he suddenly finds himself

dreaming about an unfamiliar Aborigine. This nightmare figure holds in his hand a rock upon which an enigmatic circular emblem is inscribed. What does it mean? Why has this man from another culture and his mystical stone appeared in an obsessive nightmare?

Part of the answer traces back to David Burton's ancestry. The drama's protagonist is informed by his preacher father he was born in South America. Supposedly the design evident on the rock in David's vision traces back to art identical to that left behind by Pre-Columbian natives in the New World. Travelers who somehow transported themselves to New South Wales and created prophetic cave drawings in their second homeland, mingling with or superseding pre-existent Aboriginal culture.

Uncanny events occur in David's contemporary world, all relating to water. A freak hailstorm in the Outback sends schoolchildren and their teacher scurrying for cover on a cloudless summer day. It's almost Christmas, the hottest time of Australia's year. Typically also one of the region's driest seasons. Yet rain keeps coming. And coming and coming. Not the usual stuff, either. Black rain splashing down petrol. With accompaniments of rainbow, thunder, and lightning. Streets become canals. There are interludes of sun. But they are as unpredictable as alternating cloudbursts.

Just before these irregularities begin in Sydney, a youthful Aborigine has boasted to tavern revelers in some rural hamlet about a skin and chunk of rock he stole from an unspecified location. Their sale will soon make him rich. His nocturnal celebration is interrupted by the entry of a group of dark-skinned youths intent on sobering him up. They haul the belligerent optimist out of his preferred haunt into a rain-soaked nightscape of derelict cars and depopulated plank sidewalks. Breaking free from their grip, Billy Corman runs away from buildings and street lights into comfortless darkness. Until he perceives a waiting taxi containing a bearded man who stares out at him, then begins chanting words whose significance can only be guessed at by non-Australians. The singer points a stick at Billy as he continues what now resembles a ritual cursing. It has the desired effect of causing a young hearer to panic, his fear increasing with each repetition of the older man's utterance until he fatally buckles.

Bizarre though the situation is, clearly a crime has been committed. The only participant observers alive to talk about it are the five Aborigines who accosted Billy in the pub. They refuse to divulge any information beyond the obvious facts Billy had been drinking and subsequently died.

A coroner confirms death by strangulation. What's unusual is neck choking didn't prove lethal. No, an accumulation of water internally led to a heart attack. But what triggered an inexplicable increase in hydrodynamic activity?

Since David Burton is on the roll of attorneys offering pro bono assistance to indigent clients, Sydney legal aid calls upon his services to defend the Aboriginal quintet jailed for a murder they insist was neither planned nor executed by them. David is stonewalled as completely as the preceding charitable associates. He is certain the four confronting him are determined to keep something hidden, yet cannot penetrate their insistent taciturnity .

Possibly the key to discovering the truth can be obtained from Gerry Lee's missing brother Chris. When David finally meets that man of mystery, he's shocked to recognize him as the same figure first encountered in his nightmare. This time no rock is in Chris's hands.

Menace awaits David at home. Water overflows an upstairs bathroom, although no one in his family claims to have left a tap on. Frogs cluster and croak noisily in the Burton front yard, preparing for a long stay, their sounds replacing the more relaxing chirps of crickets.

David learns through books Sydney once was home to Aboriginal tribesmen. While his partners at Legal Aid insist no Tribal Aborigines following old ways remain in the city, he remains unconvinced. The Lee Brothers and their comrades certainly look and act more like outsiders than assimilated apostates.

Seeking to assist David while retaining a reserve about the significance of his nightmare and circumstances surrounding Billy's demise, Chris not only comes to the Burton home but brings along unannounced Charley, the man seen before in the Outback taxicab. David, as a child, had experienced nightmares about cab drivers hauling away corpses. He doesn't know at this point about Charley's presence at the scene of Billy's final breaths but audiences do. So for them, Charley already communicates a whiff of mortality in his initial appearance at the Burton residence. He will return there several times,

sometimes as hallucinations of Annie Burton and one of her daughters, once as an owl, another time as an ominous, possibly spectral embodiment lurking about outside as trees come jabbing into David's house while water cascades down its main stairway.

Every clue that surfaces indicates a connection to water. Slowly David realizes – through proddings from Chris, information about his mother's death divulged by her husband, and a series of unnerving incidents such as those cited in the previous paragraph – what he dreams has a nasty way of later coming to pass. Be careful what you imagine, indeed! David's subconscious is uncontrolled, however, and inescapable.

Charley and Chris have stressed and insisted people were of less import than law when law and tradition are identical. As they are in Dreamtime. Anyone violating tradition must die. Even mulkurul from a different continent. Such as David.

Chris, more merciful than elder advisor Charley, resolves to show his legal defender just what Billy's trespassing threatened to reveal to the non-Aboriginal world: prophetic paintings in subterranean caves depicting cycles of history lucidly for anyone fortunate or unfortunate enough to unearth their secret display.

After a struggle with Charley, who is intent on acting as guardian of the past and preserver of foreseen future, Chris has one culminating revelation. More burden than illumination, he must deal with it alone. Somehow. Or not.

Suspense keeps audiences enthralled from the very beginning to the inconclusive end of this production. Russell Boyd's roving camera displays detailed grounded reality time and again, only to track into phantasms that resolve and then dissolve in watery streakings and smears of pitch-black shadows.

Which part is the dream?

The mundane world of solid substance? Or the encroaching imagination? So much is only suggested, rather than graphically disclosed.

Additional strengths of the film are stunning makeup achievements by Jose Perez, remarkably suggestive use of locations in and near Sydney, nerve-racking didjeridoo music, and terrifying employment of natural sounds coupled

with what appear invasions of domesticity by nature. As in **PICNIC AT HANGING ROCK**, the natural world is indecipherable, hostile to civilization, bent on following an independent path to a goal destructive and irrational by human standards.

Peter Weir crafted a horror classic in **THE LAST WAVE** which could only have been lensed and realized in his native Australia. David Gulpilil's impassioned, angry performance and Nandjiwarra's unshakeable stoicism, underpinned by tacit aggression never directly communicated verbally and hidden inferred violence wind the film's coiled tension to an almost unbearable degree of apprehensiveness. This works well despite a screenplay hinging on stereotypical behaviors and ambiguous confidences. Nature rules. Not words or deeds of impotent men, insignificant dots in the grand tapestry woven by time as it moves through relentless, preplanned cycles. Cycles which can only be observed. Never subverted.

The wonderfully diplomatic characterization of Merv Lilley as a pub owner inclined to distance himself as far as possible from a distasteful crime committed regretfully close to his business is another asset which shouldn't be overlooked.

THE LAST WAVE is a fine Halloween treat for adult audiences. It's far too intense for teens, let alone younger children, containing some nudity and heaps of inferred aggression.

Criterion's bonus materials include a pervasively ominous two-minute theatrical trailer and ten minutes of Peter Weir's reminiscences about making the film from the vantage point of some thirty years' hindsight, focusing on researches into Aboriginal culture which lent persuasive authenticity to his production.