

The Making of

Dead Heart

The Australian film, my first documentary, was made in 1982, one year after I started my studies at the University for Television and Film (HFF) Munich. I was enrolled in the fiction film department, but my professor, Wolfgang Längsfeld, approved and supported this non-fictional project. Further (technical) support came from the Australian Film, Television & Radio School, in Sydney. In addition, I obtained a short film grant from the FFA, the Federal German film funding board, based on my earlier feature film, *The Proud and Sad Life of Mathias Kneissl*. (The latter film – qualifying as a short film, being just under the FFA feature-film limit of 79 minutes – had received a "Highly Recommended" rating.)

Dead Heart had a total budget of € 20,000; of which 60 percent was financed. The "Kleines Fernsehspiel" film department of German public broadcaster ZDF had shown great interest, so I travelled to their Mainz headquarters, only to learn that their annual budget was already exhausted. I came away with an oral co-financing commitment for the following year. Having finished the screenplay for *Wodzeck* and submitted it to various film boards, I was waiting for grants. Deciding to shoot *Dead Heart* at this stage and pre-finance it with borrowed money, I set off on the long journey to Australia with cameraman Lupo Weyer, assistant Lisa Kalz, and sound recordist Gerd Metz. Our location manager Gerda Gensberger had already flown ahead.

During shooting in Birdsville, we were quite surprised to suddenly run into a ZDF television crew, in the middle of the Australian outback. We learned that they were reporting on the horse race, for a ZDF sports magazine. From a sports point of view, however, this horse race is completely insignificant – primarily offering an excuse for a gigantic party, with lots of alcohol and horse bets. That's how I had described it in my treatment. And it came as no surprise that a phrase from my treatment turned up in the commentary of the ZDF reportage – however, the ZDF feature was broadcast at prime time, making the topic "spent" for public television – and leaving me sitting on a heap of footage and a heap of debt.

While the ZDF reportage was shot in only two days, we stayed in Birdsville for two weeks, to also look behind the scenes of the locality and its residents. A large part of the film is dedicated to Birdsville, before the thousands of tourists arrive on small aircraft for the horse race. Thus it depicts the remoteness, the isolation of the settlement, and the resulting living conditions.

When we boarded the plane in Brisbane, we noticed that the flight did not even list "Birdsville" as its final destination. It simply named "Charleville and ports *beyond*". Once the plane had finally landed on the sandy runway of Birdsville, we had to help push aside the passenger stairway, so it could take off for its return flight.

The shooting before the "invasion" of civilization-weary tourists went well, even if extreme heat and a sandstorm affected the team and our equipment. Once the party began, we were increasingly targeted by drunks showing off for the camera or trying to attack us. Our shooting was again filmed, by a team from Australian television, who viewed us as European cultural critics.

However, I refused to allow the constant hostility and vulgar behavior, which soon made filming really difficult, to become the film's subject. Although my aim was to reveal the "essence of human existence", nobody in the film was to lose his dignity or be portrayed in a voyeuristic way.

The winner of the horse race was Brashleigh, a horse from the stable of the Brook family, who were in charge of all of Birdsville. Father Bill Brook once rebuilt the village, after it had become a ghost town. His son David now ran virtually all the businesses, with a near monopoly: from the hotel and bar to the shop and workers' homestead. As giant stock farmers (spotting grazing cattle by plane), the family was furthermore the only employer in the town.

The film was edited at the HFF film school in Munich, where "my" editor Romy Schumann was now employed. Andreas Hofer composed and recorded the musical score, so for the first time we had our own film music.

We made an English and a German version and premiered *Dead Heart* at the seventeenth Hof International Film Festival 1983. Some cinemas screened it as a double feature with *Searching for El Dorado*, my next documentary. Three years later, in 1986, it finally aired on German public broadcaster SWF.

(Oliver Herbrich, 2016)