IAN SHARP

Tracker - Director's Notes

A script like this lands on one's desk about every ten years. With the overwhelming number of adaptations of well-received books or musical successes, it is rare these days to find an original screenplay, and TRACKER is all the more remarkable in that it is the writer's first full screenplay. Sadly he died before I had a chance to meet him and talk it through.

On the surface TRACKER is a good old Western. Our hero is a farmer whose family, land and stock have been destroyed, and out of life's debris he makes his lonely progress across new frontiers, burying his humanity as he turns to Bounty Hunting. His first job is to pursue a Native of the "Old World", now on the run after being accused of the murder of a "White Man". Having succeeded in tracking him down, he becomes convinced of the innocence of his quarry, and sets about restoring justice.

It was for this reason that on the very first reading two ideas shot to the surface. Firstly, I decided that I would shoot this as a Western, with the backdrop of vast landscapes shot in Cinemascope (2.40: 1) and letting the powerful story unfold simply, within the frame. Secondly, with the powerhouse Maori actor Temuera Morrison already on board, there was only one actor for the part of the Boer Farmer – Ray Winstone. I discussed this with the Creative Producer on the film, David Burns, who had nursed this project from the start, and continued to be an absolute tower of support for me throughout the preparation and making of this film. He was naturally enthusiastic about Ray and equally happy with my "western" approach, which he embraced wholeheartedly by writing a magnificent score!

However, I am oversimplifying a complex and extraordinary piece of writing. From my perspective, as the film's storyteller, TRACKER works on a multitude of levels; emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and physical, and explores the great themes of alienation, isolation and survival in a world in which man is doomed to suffer. It is a profound comment on the human condition, which traces a coming-together in the lives of two great souls, whose deep roots have been ripped from the earth by the merciless slaughter of their loved ones, in the wake of the ruthless ambition of an expanding Empire. Thrown back into a world totally disinterested in their plight, the two deracinated characters confront their existence in a courageous struggle to find meaning in their lives. Initially antagonistic and coming from cultures literally worlds apart, their journey in the film explores their developing recognition of a common humanity and how we speak to our Gods. This is all played out on a stunning canvas that is the wilderness of the South Island of New Zealand, and beautifully photographed by my old friend and collaborator on several projects, Director of Photography, Harvey Harrison.

One of the most exciting experiences for me as a Director when working with actors, is when they do something that you could never have asked them to do...particularly when it's wrapped in their very own emotional charge. There were several such moments on this film. Ray and Tem are supremely creative actors, who in spite of their on-screen tough guy images, are sensitive and highly intelligent artists, and who put an immense amount of thought into their performances. Portraying deeply felt and convincing emotions in front of a camera without actually experiencing those emotions is the extraordinary achievement of great screen acting, and I am deeply indebted to both of them for their creative contribution to this story. But the Director's responsibility to his actors does not end there, and I am indebted to my editor Sean Barton for his sensitive decision making, as he meticulously examined the various takes, selecting and shaping the story out of the wonderful raw material of their performances.