

Wake in Fright (1971) Kotcheff

P Michell, 2020

Director: Ted Kotcheff

Starring: Gary Bond, Donald Pleasence, Chips Rafferty, Sylvia Kay, Al Thomas, Jack Thompson, Peter Whittle, John Meillon

Screenplay: Evan Jones and Ted Kotcheff (uncredited), based upon the novel by Kenneth Cook

Synopsis:

John Grant, a teacher working in the remote Australian town of Tiboonda, is under a financial bond with his Government job. At the end of term before Christmas holidays, he plans to visit his girlfriend in Sydney. In order to catch a flight to Sydney, he takes a train to the nearby mining town called Bundanyabba (or "The Yabba"), and plans to stay there overnight before moving on further to the airport. But things go grossly out of script as he is engulfed by the Yabba and its disconcerting residents. *Written by [PipingHotViews](#)*

Overview:

Kenneth Cook's book is based on his experiences in Broken Hill in 1960s as an ABC journalist. Film made by mostly British personnel. Exteriors shot at Broken Hill, interiors in Sydney studio.

This film and *Walkabout* (1971) heralded the 'New Wave' of Australian cinema of the 1970s. This is despite both films having strong UK acting / production content. For example Peter Weir's *The Cars that Ate Paris* (1974) can be seen as a re-interpretation of *Wake in Fright*.

The film can also be seen as a change of Australian persona in future Oz films, with Jack Thompson take on the role vacated by Chips Rafferty.

From Wikipedia:

A major theme of Australian cinema which matured in the 1970s was one of survival in the harsh Australian landscape. A number of thrillers and horror films dubbed "outback gothic" have been created, including *Wake in Fright*, *Walkabout*, *The Cars That Ate Paris* and *Picnic at Hanging Rock* in the 1970s, *Razorback* and *Shame* in the 1980s and *Japanese Story*, *The Proposition* and *Wolf Creek* in the 2000s. These films depict the Australian bush and its creatures as deadly, and its people as outcasts and psychopaths. These are combined with futuristic post-apocalyptic themes in the *Mad Max series*. 1971's *Walkabout* was a British film set in Australia which was a forerunner to many Australian films related to Indigenous themes and introduced [David Gulpilil](#) to cinematic audiences. 1976's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* directed by [Fred Schepisi](#) was an award-winning historical drama from a book by [Thomas Keneally](#) about the tragic story of an Aboriginal [bushranger](#).

Another film that works because of ensemble casting – despite two leads being English.

Interestingly both *Walkabout* and this film were two Australian films to be nominated for Grand Prix at 24 Cannes Film Festival in 1971. Both films and their insight into Australia were both made by outsiders – Nicholas Roeg made *Walkabout*. The film didn't do well on release (Titled 'Outback') as the distributors didn't quite know how to handle this type of a 'harsh' Australian film.

Championed on TV by Bill Collins despite cut print. Here's an intro by him.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=on0360UZiBc>

The film garnered 'another life' as it became a 'lost film' once TV copy disappeared. A copy was in Dublin but was too damaged to transfer to video. *Wake in Fright's* editor, [Anthony Buckley](#), began to search in 1994 for a better-preserved copy of the film in an uncut state. Eight years later, in [Pittsburgh](#), Buckley found the negatives of *Wake in Fright* in a shipping container labelled "For Destruction". He rescued the material, which formed the basis for the film's painstaking 2009 restoration

In 2009 was shown at Cannes once again. A very rare event! Selected as a Cannes Classic Title. See Trivia for the Martin Scorsese connection to its re-release and subsequent re-found accolade.

At the 2009 Cannes Classic screening of *Wake in Fright*, 12 people walked out during the kangaroo hunt. After that screening the film has been re-assessed as one of the great Australian films!

Film has many famous scenes: The beginning with schoolroom and landscape, Rafferty's beer drinking, two-up scene, and the descent into hell - worse still the kangaroo hunt sequence, the rape, attack of the boys on the pub, scenes in Doc Tydon's corrugated rooms.

The hunt lasted several hours, and gradually wore down the filmmakers. According to cinematographer Brian West, "the hunters were getting really drunk and they started to miss, ... It was becoming this orgy of killing and we [the crew] were getting sick of it." Kangaroos hopped about helplessly with gun wounds and trailing intestines. Producer George Willoughby reportedly fainted after seeing a kangaroo "splattered in a particularly spectacular fashion". The crew orchestrated a power failure in order to end the hunt.

Director [Ted Kotcheff](#), a professed vegetarian, has defended his use of the hunting footage in the film.¹

Creative Personnel:

Aborigines

School room sequence, lone aboriginal on the train. (Not sure if any in two-up gambling sequence.)

Ted Kotcheff (48 directorial credits / co-scriptwriter)

Canadian who has done a lot of work in Hollywood and UK.

Bulgarian background best friends with author Mordecai Richler, who wrote Kravitz.

Youngest director working at Canadian Broadcasting Corp. Has always strongly defended *Wake in Fright*. Began making films in 1962.

Notable films - *Life at the Top* (1965), *Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1974), *Fun with Dick and Jane* (1977), *(Rambo) First Blood* (1982), *Uncommon Valour* (1983), *Weekend at Bernie's* (1989). Some TV work inc *Law & Order SVU* (2000-05).

I am not the judge of my characters. I am their best witness.

Evan Jones – Screenplay (27 credits)

Anglo Jamaican. Considered a faithful interpretation. Worked on four films with Joseph Losey including *The Damned* (1962). *Funeral in Berlin* (1966) – second Len Deighton novel with Michael Caine.

Brian West – Cinematography (48 credits)

British. Worked with Kotcheff on *Duddy Kravitz*. Other notable films inc *Holocaust* (1978) TV mini series, *84 Charing Cross Rd* (1987), *Killing of Sister George* (1968 camera operator)

Anthony Buckley – editor & restoration. Later producer (37 credits) including - *Killing of Angel Street* (1981), *Bliss* (1985), *Caddie* (1976) and *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002)

Gary Bond – John Grant (43 credits - films & TV work)

His last film, TV work after this. Died young at 55 in 1995.

English actor and singer. This is his best film.

On television he is perhaps best remembered for his role as Lt Clive Russell in *Frontier* (1968) and for the recording made of his musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* (1972).

Donald Pleasance – Doc Tydon (238 films)

English. Popular on-screen villain. Working from the early 1950s. Described as ‘sexually depraved’ in this film. Followed this film with famous portrayal of devious Thomas Cromwell in *Henry VIII and His Six Wives*. Psychiatrist in *Halloween* (1978). Rose to fame with films like the blind forger in *Great Escape* (1963). Worked extensively in theatre too. One of his children is Angela Pleasance.

*Was known for his eye for details and authenticity, including in regards to his costumes. He arrived in Sydney for the filming of *Wake in Fright* with a beard suggestive of the kind favored by bushrangers and immediately rejected the costume that was assigned to him, opting to purchase his own clothes from a Vinnies thrift shop.*

When once asked why he kept making horror movies, the actor replied: "Because I have six daughters to support."

An alcoholic during the 1970s.

Chips Rafferty (John William Pilbean Goffage) – Const Jock Crawford (47 credits – film & TV work)

Popular actor in the 1940s and 1950s. Worked with Ealing Studios and in Hollywood. Much TV work later. Titles inc *40,000 Horsemen* (1940), *Rats of Tobruk* (1944), *The Overlanders* (1946), *The Sundowners* (1960).

Probably the first actor to really represent “Australia” onscreen, internationally as well as locally, Rafferty was more often than not called upon to personify the positive face of Australian mateship and larrikinism—and probably relished this rare chance to play its underbelly instead.

Died in May 1971 soon after completing this role. It is considered one of his best roles.

Sylvia Kay – Janette Hynes (67 credits - mostly TV)

Wife of the director, though divorced him a year after the film. Wake in Fright seem to be her major film role.

In the 1990s became a psychotherapist and practised in London.

John Meillon – Charlie (110 credits)

Acted in both Walkabout (early short scenes as the father) and this film. With Rafferty was iconic Aussie actor. Like many Oz actors worked in London 1959-65. Meillon claimed that he learnt discipline while working in theatre, and that television was not a good medium for training

Appeared in first two Crocodile Dundee films. Was in They're a Weird Mob (1966), Weir's Cars that Ate Paris (1974),

Voiced Victoria Bitter (VB) commercials until his death. After his death, his son took over the role briefly, before using computer enhanced voice of John Meillon to voice over the commercials. To this date (14 years after his death), he is still the voice of VB

Meillon had a recurring role in the television series *My Name's McGooley, What's Yours?*

Trivia

NLT Productions – Kenneth Cook, Jack Neary, Bobby Limb & Les Tinker.

Last film of Chips Rafferty and first film of Jack Thompson (31years), though he'd done TV work before.

Chips Rafferty was born in Broken Hill.

The novel's author, Kenneth Cook, based the fictional town of Bundanyabba on Broken Hill in New South Wales, where much of the movie was filmed on location. The train is seen arriving at "Bundanyabba Sulphide St" station, and Sulphide Street is a genuine station in Broken Hill. Broken Hill is one of the most isolated inland towns in Australia.

The sudden eerie silence and dimming of the lights in the bar portrays a ritual that still occurs most evenings in Returned & Services League (RSL) clubs across Australia. Each evening the lights are briefly dimmed and patrons are expected to stand in quiet remembrance of fallen service personnel. Usually the ceremony will coincide with the recitation of the 'Ode of Remembrance', a stanza of Laurence Binyon's 'For the Fallen', through the club PA. It reads: "They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old. Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn. At the going down of the sun and in the morning, We will remember them." This is followed by one or two minute's silence, and then the spoken promise by all: "Lest We Forget". [According to Wikipedia NSW RSL's still have this each night at 6pm, when 'The Ode' is read – Paul]

Final theatrical film of Gary Bond. After this movie, his other projects were mostly TV works. Though Film debut of Jack Thompson.

Charlie's line "Got snakes in yer pocket, have you?" (when John Grant doesn't immediately pay for his drink) and Tim Hynes quip "I was just checking your oil" (when he bumps into a

bar patron with his pool cue) were both improvised by [John Meillon](#) and [Al Thomas](#) respectively.

[Michael York](#) was [Ted Kotcheff](#)'s initial choice to play John Grant, but (in Kotcheff's words) "after a lot of dithering" turned down the role because of the hunting scenes. Years later, during a chance encounter with the director, York admitted "To my dying day I will regret not doing that wonderful picture".

The Australian crew were hugely impressed by English-born [Donald Pleasence](#)'s Aussie accent. Director [Ted Kotcheff](#) was familiar with his talent for accents: in 1958 he'd played a pitch-perfect US President in [Armchair Theatre: The Greatest Man in the World](#) (1958) for him.

Among the directors in attendance during the film's screening at the 1971 Cannes Film Festival was a young man who sat directly behind [Ted Kotcheff](#). The director noted that throughout the screening, the man excitedly made commentary on the onscreen action, such as "Wow. Wow, what a scene. Boy, I didn't expect that. This is great". His remarks reached their zenith during John and Doc's homosexual encounter, during which he said "This director, he's going to go all the way. He's going to go all the way. He's going all the way! Oh my God! He went all the way!" Pleased by his reaction, Kotcheff asked the film's PR manager to identify the eager young man for him: [Martin Scorsese](#), an unknown in the industry whose only film, [I Call First](#) (1967), had flopped (ironically, Scorsese's [Taxi Driver](#) (1976), which premiered at Cannes five years later, would win the Palme d'Or, the prize this film was in competition for and lost). Scorsese championed the film during the restored version's screening at the Cannes Classics program (which he curated) during the 2009 Festival; part of his laudatory quote on the film - "It left me speechless" - was used in much of the advertising campaign for its re-release, as well as for several the trailers of the TV miniseries remake ([Wake in Fright](#) (2017)).

During the interim between the film's failed initial release and its restoration, it was notably championed by famed critic and presenter [Bill Collins](#). In his introductions to the movie for its TV screenings, he declared it to be one of the best ever made in Australia, despite stating that he received more hate mail for it than any other film he had ever shown, with one viewer's letter stating that "I like films on television which give me something to think about, and I turned that dreadful "Wake in Fright" off after ten minutes!".

For the music theme that plays when John Grant has a mental breakdown after returning to Bundanyabba, [John Scott](#) created the high-pitch noises by having a string section playing pizzicato (plucking) at the high end of their instruments, and cut the recordings into improvised loops.

TV mini series in 2017.

Reviews:

Insightful and compares to the novel. Think the film's better.

<https://andyoucallyourselfascientist.com/2019/11/13/wake-in-fright-1971/>

The Hunt: *Wake in Fright* (Ted Kotcheff, 1971)

Andrew McCallum

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Senses of Cinema - Key Moments in Australian Cinema

Producers' Note: Photography of the hunting scenes in this film took place during an actual kangaroo hunt conducted by licensed professional hunters. No kangaroos were expressly killed for this motion picture. Because the survival of the Australian kangaroo is seriously threatened these scenes were included with approval of leading animal welfare organisations in Australia and the United Kingdom.

Although these words were intended to soften the outrageous scenes of slaughter included in Ted Kotcheff's rediscovered 1971 classic, *Wake In Fright*, the reality of the savage kangaroo hunt is actually the most unsettling aspect of the film. By including what is essentially documentary footage of the unrelenting destruction of Australia's most recognisable icon, Canadian Kotcheff undid a decade or so of largely sunny touristic commercial cinema and government documentary and aided in ushering in a grittier, bolder and more daring era of Australian film.

Kotcheff's uncompromising depiction of Australian outback culture came at a time when Australian cinema was still (re)developing. With limited resources, Australian cinema had primarily focused on promoting the Australian lifestyle as rough and rugged, but with an endearing charm. The Hollywood-financed *The Sundowners* (Fred Zinnemann, 1960) painted the rural Australian landscape as beautifully untamed, while 1966's *They're a Weird Mob* (Michael Powell) lovingly represented our larrikin culture. The TV series *Skippy the Bush Kangaroo* was still fresh in the minds of the Australian public as they sat down to watch the scenes of barbarity in *Wake In Fright*, Kotcheff breaking down the sunny stereotypes in one swift blow of iconoclastic brutality.

Wake In Fright follows schoolteacher John Grant (Gary Bond) as it takes the audience on a ride through the alcoholism, misogyny and violence of outback culture. As an outsider, John is assimilated into the hedonistic culture of Bundanyabba. At first as an observer and eventually as a participant in the culture of the town, John and the audience become lost in the madness of "the Yabba". The point of no return – the moment where John completely succumbs to the savagery of the town – comes when John joins a posse of locals on the now the infamous kangaroo hunt.

After an afternoon of heavy drinking, an intoxicated John and three locals take a truck, four rifles and a stash of liquor out into the desert for a bout of recreational hunting. What ensues is the final dent in John's veneer of morality. The gang proceeds to ruthlessly slaughter a pack of kangaroos, using a spotlight attached to the truck to stun the animals before haphazardly butchering them. The soundscape is stark, the *mise en scène* barren and the men boisterous as they fire their rifles, kangaroos dropping left, right and centre. The scene is the enduring image of the film – the point where uneasiness crosses into full-blown terror.

What makes this scene so deeply affecting is the truly unsettling nature of the footage of the kangaroo hunt. To capture the footage Kotcheff and his crew joined an actual session of kangaroo culling that played out similarly to the events in the film. Members of the crew

were shocked to find the hunters drinking during the hunt and described the event as an “orgy of killing”, eventually staging a power failure to put it to an end (1).

The resulting footage is raw. Perhaps the most haunting image is the reflection of life in the eyes of wounded kangaroos as they collapse to the ground. The realism afforded by this footage is unbearable to watch for some (there were reportedly 12 walkouts at a 2009 screening of the film at the Cannes Film Festival [2]), but as an unrelenting portrayal of Australia’s hideous cultural underbelly, it is hard not to acknowledge its effectiveness.

While critically acclaimed by such legends of the industry as Martin Scorsese and Roger Ebert, the film found little commercial success within Australia. Perhaps the deterioration of Australia’s laid-back and stress free lifestyle into a mess of gambling, heavy drinking and wanton violence hit too close to home for local audiences. After all, Australia’s affiliation with alcohol has generally been thought relatively harmless, associated with our boisterous international perception, yet *Wake In Fright* depicts it as demonic, forced upon John until it strips him of his morals and eventually his sanity.

Despite the film’s ugliness it has gone on to influence countless other movies, in particular those in the subgenre that can now be defined as “outback survival”, such as *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Peter Weir, 1975), *Mad Max* (George Miller, 1979) and, more recently, *Wolf Creek* (Greg Mclean, 2005). The film has experienced somewhat of a revival since its restoration in 2009 and can count itself as only one of two films to be screened at Cannes twice; once in 1971 and again when it was selected as a “Cannes Classic” in 2009. The enduring images of slaughtered kangaroos have made their way around the world, inspiring praise and outrage in equal measures. This is however not for their gratuitousness, but for what they represent – a film unafraid to dissect a national psyche in such a way that the villain of the film becomes the setting itself.

Endnotes

1. Peter Galvin, “The Making of *Wake In Fright* (Part Three)”, *SBS* 22 March 2010: <http://www.sbs.com.au/films/movie-news/345787/the-making-of-wake-in-fright-part-three>. ↑
2. Kotcheff in an interview with David Stratton, “*Wake in Fright* Interview”, *At the Movies* 24 June 2009: <http://www.abc.net.au/atthemovies/txt/s2590395.htm>. ↑

“Wake In Fright”: Prepare to Be Disturbed, Mate | The New Yorker

By James Guida October 4, 2012

In a two-building town in the Australian desert, a young schoolteacher in suit and tie lights a cigarette and orders a beer in an otherwise empty hotel bar. He’s waiting for the afternoon train that will take him on to the next town, from which he plans to fly home to Sydney for the holidays. The surly, rifle-wielding bartender, who turns out to be his landlord, sets down the drink, not bothering to remove a significant head of foam. The teacher raises the glass, eyes the size of the head, and says nothing, while the bartender pours a beer for himself. His own drink, of course, is perfect.

The scene is from “Wake in Fright,” a film directed by Ted Kotcheff, and released in 1971. It is routinely and very justifiably described as “disturbing.” The novelist Peter Temple has joked that it probably set the course of tourism in the country back twenty years. There are culinary horrors, packs of grunting, shirtless frontiersmen getting blotto, and genuine kangaroo-hunt footage. But the film is as subtle as it is brutal, and it was largely the accumulation of casually eloquent little details (like the one above) that left me stunned after a first viewing.

The movie is based on the Kenneth Cook novel from ten years earlier. Cook was from Sydney, but the director of the film, Ted Kotcheff, is Canadian, and its scriptwriter, Evan Jones, is an Anglo-Jamaican who had never been to Australia. The film, starring Gary Bond in the lead role, was well-received by critics abroad, appearing in the U.S. under the generic title “Outback,” and running in Paris for five months. When a young Martin Scorsese first saw it at Cannes, where it was nominated for the Palme d’Or, he is reported to have continually erupted, unable to contain his delight. The response in Australia at the time, though, was much less enthusiastic. For decades the film’s original negative was missing, only to be discovered in Pittsburgh a week before a scheduled incineration. The restored print, completed in 2009, will screen this week at New York’s Film Forum.

The film follows a few days in the life of John Grant, a refined young teacher from Sydney. Grant is indentured to his job in the outback for another year—he must pay off a thousand dollar bond before he can leave—and loathes everything about

life in the plains. His stopover in the intense and insanely proud mining town of Bundanyabba is supposed to be for a night, after which he’ll fly home, to embrace the comforts of a big city, the soul-cleansing sea, and an impossibly alluring girlfriend.

Alas, “the Yabba” gets its claws into him. (“Yabba” stems from a Koori word for “to talk,” something the town’s locals do a lot of, but Aussies will also think of the small nipping crayfish called yabbies.) Winding down at a massive pub that by law should be closed, Grant is approached by a policeman (the veteran actor Chips Rafferty in a last and bravura performance). The cop serves as a sly and hospitable Charon, giving off just a whiff of threat. He tells Grant about the town (wonderful place, just a few suicides), and introduces him to two-up, an old game where pennies are thrown in the air and which can make a person a lot of money very quickly. Tempted by the thought of buying his way out of debt and the outback itself, Grant gets sucked in.

When he wakes the next day, Grant has enough cash left to afford some hair of the dog, but little more than that, and must devise some new way to get to Sydney. In a pub he meets an amusing bow-tied little man, Tim Hynes, who sympathizes, buys him drinks, and invites him round to lunch. In short order, Grant’s introduced to Hynes’s mysterious, hard-shelled daughter Janette (pointedly, the one real female player in this microcosmos), two strapping, vaguely menacing miners named Dick and Joe, and Doc Tydon (Donald Pleasence), who is an alcoholic doctor and the town’s resident deviant-philosopher-madman. Following a mess of a night, the men go hunting for kangaroos—a largely useless and unsporting slaughter—and continue to knock back staggering quantities of alcohol. I won’t go into the rest, except to say that Grant unravels, pays heartily for his sin of pride, and comes out a different person.

The outdoor Bundanyabba scenes in the film were shot in the western New South Wales mining town of Broken Hill. Sulphide Street, advertised with nicely odorous symbolism when Grant steps off the train, is no invention, and Kotcheff drew from his own eventful experiences in the town. At the same time, to attain his vision, he had the inspiration of shipping in more red dust, and even actor-flies expressly generated for the purpose. While it all looks convincing enough, even Australians can be unsure of when exactly the mirror being used is warping. It's standard for pub-going men down under, as in the rest of the world, to push one another to keep up, but was or is it normal in such isolated places to shout people beers while they're obviously working on nearly full ones, as happens every other minute in "Wake in Fright"?

That exaggerative forces are at work, though, is clear in a number of ways. The semi-legal details of towns like Bundanyabba are a fact of history; nevertheless, the stunning gambling and bar settings in the film double as caverns of the underworld, scenes for a metaphysical wager. The main people Grant meets are types, just as he himself is a sacrificial city-lamb. Surprisingly, the distortions don't detract from the film's accuracy: they're part of it. The movie's precision consists of isolating and hugely magnifying just one side of life, the better to dissect it. I haven't lived in the outback and wasn't alive when the film was made, but there are all sorts of things about Australia in the movie I've never seen portrayed so well.

Perhaps most eagerly discussed by critics is the film's take on mateship, the camaraderie that genuinely exists in the country, yet is often mythicized. In the film it appears as comically ambiguous, a life-giving spring of easy fellowship and hospitality, but also a crutch for men acting up, an excuse for whatever happens while legless. Throughout the story, it requires all of Grant's strength to decline offers of booze from friendly acquaintances or downright strangers; I lost count the number of times he's told to drink up, or given a dirty look (what's known as a "greasy") whenever he doesn't immediately slug down his glass.

Further, and even though the film is a fever-dream, it's uniquely shrewd about real patterns of aggression. There's the obvious violence done to people and nature, yes, but this is connected to more everyday forms, the subtle, easily missable animosity that can lurk in talk and gesture. Kotcheff and his actors—especially Dick and Joe, the mining pair played respectively by Jack Thompson and Peter Whittle—are masters at pregnant silences, Schadenfreude grins, and the grown-men play-fighting that can suddenly ignite. When Dick slowly addresses Grant by his first name, it's with a similar underlying sense of threat as when strangers call each other "mate" just as a fight is about to boil over.

While it's tempting to say that it required a foreigner to see such traits so clearly, it should be noted that the film is extremely faithful to Cook's short novel. Kotcheff's few narrative departures are quietly decisive, and generally work to accentuate the story's elements of nightmarish fable. He's partly explained his uncanny feeling for the culture by observing that both Canada and Australia are nations where, instead of liberating, space imprisons. My guess is that just one of his additions could only have come from an outsider: the cruelly funny moment when, in the RSL club, the lights dim, and everyone hushes and stands as a speaker on the wall honors the fallen. The "Lest we forget" is said, and all instantly resume yakking, drinking, and playing the poker machines.

Given everything above, it's not much of a surprise that "Wake in Fright" wasn't immediately welcomed at home (it enjoys cult status now). Audiences generally don't like being hit with the dark side of their national culture, especially not when it's by outsiders.

Yet, all told, the film's uncomfortable spotlight is pretty fairly manned. A few of the locals in the Yabba may resemble devils, but there's an innocence to them, too, and Grant, the stand-in for modern civilization, makes for a poor angel. An arrogant visitor and bumbling guest, Grant's lack of center is shown in the fact that, whether he refuses or accepts hospitality, he can rarely meet the offer graciously and remain his own person: in keeping with his rash gamble, it's all or nothing. The script makes clear that he's more than a passive onlooker, and that he participates in the ghastly things that happen to him. In fact, his very involvement with the town is what ends up redeeming him to us; it's the start of an education. When they first meet, the doc checks him: "It's death to farm out here. It's worse than death in the mines. You want them to sing opera as well?"

It would be a shame if the movie, forty years on, be thought safely historic or inapplicable to today—its ambiguous and grotesque dance still rattles. Don't act like you're better than those in hell, it tells us. At some point you may have to pass through.