

FULL CIRCLE REPRESENTING THE NATION

Mat Trinca



photo: George Serras

A photo of Geoffrey Rush after his Oscar win for *Shine* in 1996 is the centrepiece of the exhibition *Australians in Hollywood* at the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra.

Rush is caught in a moment of rumpled glory, sitting on a low wall in the garden of a Hollywood hotel, the gold statue at his feet. The accompanying label argues that the photo has captured Rush's essential Australianness. Who else but an Aussie, it says, would watch a lightening sky after an endless night of celebration, with this rare trophy just sitting there by his feet? This is a 1990s update on our fondest Australian archetype — Rush is pragmatic, beery and laconic all at the same time.

But it is the image of another Oscar winner, Peter Finch, that lies at the heart of the show for me. Finch gazes heroically from the frame but has still managed to inject a hint of complexity with the wistful quality of his eyes. A faraway look to another place and another time.

It is a good metaphor for the story told in the label. Born in England in 1916, Finch lived in France and India, before coming to Australia at the age of 10. After stitching jobs together through the Depression, he took a turn on the stage as a straight man for a vaudeville comedy act.

Through the late 1930s and 1940s, Finch worked on radio and in Australian films before famously being discovered by Laurence Olivier during his tour of the antipodes in 1949. Finch moved to London and never looked back, appearing in a string of movies such as *The Sins of Rachel Cade*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, and *Sunday Bloody Sunday*. Sadly and uniquely, he won his Best Actor Oscar posthumously for a remarkable performance as anchorman Howard Beale in *Network* in 1976.

When I read Finch's story years ago, I tended to discount his Australian credentials. He wasn't a real Australian, I thought. After all, he wasn't even born here. And similarly, I have been annoyed at the redoubtable pride we show in claiming the successes of those from elsewhere who have some relationship to this land. Just in terms of Australians in Hollywood, for instance, you can compile an impressive list — Annette Kellermann, Sam Neill, Russell Crowe and Greta Scacchi, among others.

Yet in truth the stories of passages to and from this country are just as Australian as any other. And they are worth remembering in our work at the National Museum of Australia as it searches for ways to represent this country's unique experiences and history.

The stories of Finch and Kellermann, Scacchi and Crowe, remind us that the Australian past is marked by encounters and intersections. Some of these meetings, such as those between Europeans and Indigenous Australians, have been more like collisions, fracturing established ways of life and causing hardship and distress.

Despite it all — and sometimes as a result of these collisions — the waves of people arriving on these shores have developed something specific; particular ways of being and living have emerged from the encounters of people and the places of this continent. This means that the Australian past is distinctive, and that it has produced a spirit and temper that is often quite different from what you find in other parts of the world.

However, turning inward to find the wellsprings of Australian experience in Australian landscapes should not deflect us from remembering how connected and universal Australian history is, too. We may be living at a time when national boundaries are again being described more emphatically than before, but we cannot cut ourselves loose completely. Nor can we avoid the fact that other places — London, certainly; maybe Hollywood too — have furnished us with compelling Australian stories.

This nation has always been one whose history is inevitably tethered to other parts of the world. In a sense, Australia is the most modern nation on Earth, if one thinks that the condition of modernity can be defined at least partly by the phenomenal growth in the movement of peoples round the globe. We were connected to the rest of the world long before market and media globalisation.

In the aftermath of the recent review of its exhibitions and public programs, the National Museum will need to measure a delicate approach to these issues. It will search for new ways to balance impulses to looking inward — to the character of domestic conditions — or outward across the seas in defining Australian experience and offering keys to understanding our past.

This should not be a question of choosing one or another frame for reading the past, but rather how to incorporate both these perspectives in representing Australian history. As we do this, we will need to remember Peter Finch just as much as our stay-at-home stars. 📌

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