

DAVID PUTTNAM

'The Killing Fields' War in Human Terms

David Puttnam is the energetic young producer behind some of the most successful films to come out of Britain in the last few years. It started with 1981's *Chariots of Fire* and his latest, *The Killing Fields*, a study of friendship and loyalties set against the Cambodian struggles of the mid-70s, has garnered unanimous acclaim from the Press on both sides of the Atlantic as well as Academy Award nominations for best film, director, actor, supporting actor, screenplay, editing and cinematography.

Michael Ventura of the *L A Weekly* encapsulated the impressions of many when he wrote, "You walk out of *The Killing Fields* in a state of strangely exhilarated shock, as though a bomb had just gone off nearby. And I doubt if it's possible, after seeing *The Killing Fields*, to think about the word 'war' without feeling its aftershocks — the picture is *that good*."

I asked Puttnam how he had come to film this real-life story of New York Times journalist, Sydney Schanberg and his Cambodian friend Nith Pran:



David Puttnam



"I had read a piece in *Time* in October, 1979. It had a wonderful narrative spine from which good scenarios can be wrought, because if you've got something as strong as that you can embellish it, play with it, bend it and it still holds good. I contacted Schanberg. We got on very well and I explained why I wanted to do the film. He made the point that he didn't want anything that set him up as a hero figure — the white man shouldering the Asian man's burden.

"I put in a bid for the film rights. Luckily I knew the agent and he advised Sydney that, although my bid turned out to be the third highest, he thought we would get on well together and there was a chance Sydney would be happy with the results. Based on that, Schanberg agreed. Ironically, I acquired the rights on the first day of principal shooting of *Chariots of Fire*."

What effect has the success of *Chariots of Fire* had on Puttnam's subsequent projects and British cinema in general? Puttnam was emphatic:

"A tremendous one ... I'll never know whether *Killing Fields* would have been funded without *Chariots* but I suspect not. I was on the board that agreed to fund *Ghandi* and I can say for sure that *Chariots* was already looking good when he agreed to go into *Ghandi*. It was prior to the Academy Awards, so I can't claim that *Ghandi* required *Chariots*' success, but certainly Dickie Attenborough has always been very generous about it. I think they helped each other. Certainly *Killing Fields* benefited from *Ghandi*'s success, and British cinema has become very much a baton-passing situation with none of us wanting to let the side down!"

Much of the effectiveness of *The Killing Fields* lies in its ability to present its dauntingly complex political canvas in human and personal terms. Puttnam found the film had a special appeal for him in its subtext:

"I had always wanted to make a film about male friendship. It seemed to me that we had got hung up in our Post-Freudian age in a terrible and dangerous confusion between male friendship and homosexuality. The two are distinct: homosexuality existing on one plane, friendship between two men on the other. I've always been fascinated by bonds between men, especially under stress and it seemed they were worth re-examining."

"I thought I would find the theme in the First World War, those amazing stories of soldiers going into battle hand in hand, to give each other mutual support. Schanberg's and Pran's relationship was precisely this, although the time and place turned out to be different to what I had always conjectured."

One remembers all the brouhaha about the gargantuan budgets and shooting problems of Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* and I asked Puttnam about the pressures of a fourteen-week shooting schedule divided between Thailand and Toronto:

"It was a nightmare on paper, logistically, but I had a brilliant assistant producer who did an extraordinary job. We negotiated with the Thais for eight months, and created a very effective infra-structure. They behaved immaculately in fulfilling their side of the bargain and we didn't lose one hour through production problems."

The casting of the new film is intriguing. Sam Waterston, who plays Schanberg, is an actor with a fairly low profile — some may remember him as Nick Carraway in Jack Clayton's 1974 film of *The Great Gatsby*. Haing S Ngor, who plays Pran, is a total newcomer to films:

"We made the decision very early on to use a Cambodian and, at one point, we had four people out looking in different parts of the world. We reached the point where, if two Cambodians met at a restaurant, we would have someone there to check them out! We came across Haing at a wedding party in San Diego. He was very reluctant to do a test — he was a doctor and didn't think much of this acting lark — but, after tests with the director, Roland

Joffe, he turned out to be the best person by a mile."

The Killing Fields is in the running for seven Academy Awards in April. Puttnam is angry about the omission of Mike Oldfield's score from the nominations list:

"It was a brave score and an amazingly accomplished piece of music. We needed someone who could score to machinery, someone who dealt in noise and sound as well as someone who was decently skilled in hitting a melodic line and writing for humans. I approached Mike, he was excited by the challenge, climbed into bed with us and worked jolly hard."

The music is a very central part of *The Killing Fields*, whether it be Oldfield's brilliantly evocative writing or the effective use of Puccini's 'Nessun dormi' as Schanberg watches television replays of Nixon talking about Cambodia, the clever use of 'Band on the Run' during the scenes in the bombed city or the very apt appearance of John Lennon's 'Imagine' in the final minutes of the film. Using these numbers created its own problems:

"All three pieces were on the original script. After all, we were trying to remind people of what the date was, and the two rock songs do that perfectly. Paul McCartney did me an enormous favour. We were having problems affording to use 'Imagine', so McCartney gave me the use of 'Band on the Run' and I was able to pay for the other song. Mind you, I'm still fighting on the videocassette rights as they want £18,000 to use 'Imagine' and the Puccini. Ludicrous!"

The observant viewer will notice some familiar names in the cast credits of *The Killing Fields* — South African playwright, Athold Fugard, that fine American actor Craig T Nelson last seen in Sam Peckinpah's *The Osterman Weekend* and Australian actor, Graham Kennedy. Puttnam had no idea of Kennedy's status in the Australian film world when he approached him to be in *Killing Fields*:

"I watched the film of *Don's Party* which I enjoyed very much and saw this middle-aged, chubby man and thought he held the film together. We needed just that sort of Aussie."

Here we were, sittin in Logan Park on a drizzly Auckland afternoon. The conversation had moved as far as Australia so I thought I would ask Puttnam for his impressions on the potential of the New Zealand film industry. He had been impressed by Roger Donaldson's *Smash Palace* and thought Vincent Ward's *Vigil*, which he had seen at Cannes last May, to be "very accomplished".

"I would hazard the guess that what you need for your cultural base is film-makers that work from here and who may, from time to time, use New Zealand as a locale or make stories that emanate from here. This creates the workshops and cultural influences of the future. Unfortunately you have problems here which I hope are not as bad as they are in Australia or Ireland, the habit of trashing local talent as soon as it reaches any sort of international reputation. It's very unfortunate, and, in the case of Australia, it isn't done in the case of sport, but only in the arts and crafts field. I find that utterly bizarre."

I suspect that *The Killing Fields* will make a big impact in this part of the world. As one British critic said of Puttnam in connection with *Chariots of Fire*, "David Puttnam has already demonstrated his skill at taking unlikely subjects and, working entirely within existing conventions, producing films which strike a neglected chord in the public imagination". April 16 sees Puttnam back in the jungle, this time in South America. Roland Joffe is again directing, Robert Bolt wrote the screenplay and the cast is headed by Robert de Niro. *The Mission* is set in 1716 and takes as its subject the revolt of a group of Jesuit priests against a Papal Edict in order to defend the rights of a tribe of Guarini Indians. For all its eighteenth century setting, I suspect that *The Mission* will be a revelation about the state of South America in the 1980s.

William Dart

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