

No place like home

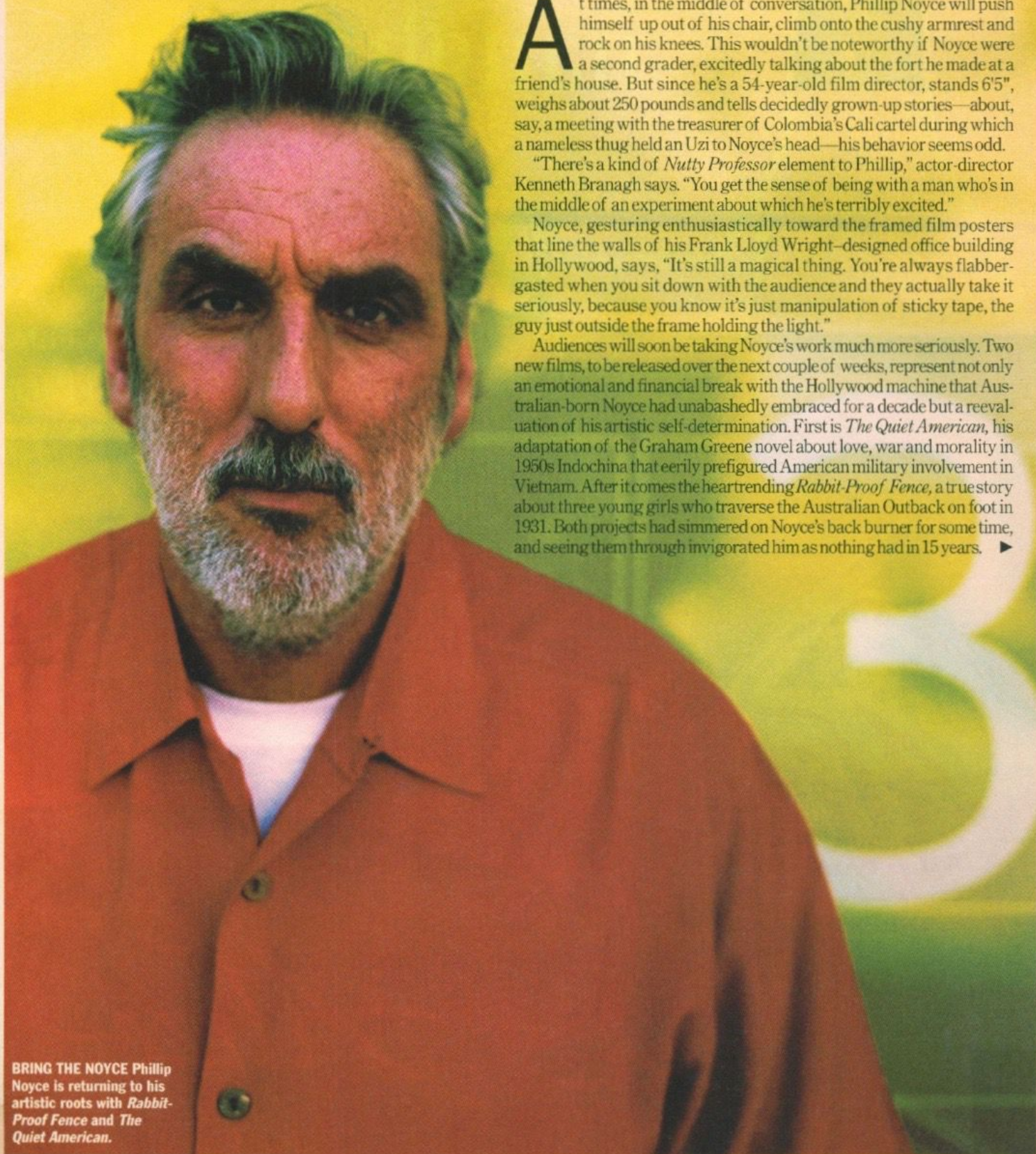
Fed up with Hollywood, director Phillip Noyce returns to his native Australia, where he rediscovers the true spirit of filmmaking **By Jay A. Fernandez**

At times, in the middle of conversation, Phillip Noyce will push himself up out of his chair, climb onto the cushy armrest and rock on his knees. This wouldn't be noteworthy if Noyce were a second grader, excitedly talking about the fort he made at a friend's house. But since he's a 54-year-old film director, stands 6'5", weighs about 250 pounds and tells decidedly grown-up stories—about, say, a meeting with the treasurer of Colombia's Cali cartel during which a nameless thug held an Uzi to Noyce's head—his behavior seems odd.

"There's a kind of *Nutty Professor* element to Phillip," actor-director Kenneth Branagh says. "You get the sense of being with a man who's in the middle of an experiment about which he's terribly excited."

Noyce, gesturing enthusiastically toward the framed film posters that line the walls of his Frank Lloyd Wright–designed office building in Hollywood, says, "It's still a magical thing. You're always flabbergasted when you sit down with the audience and they actually take it seriously, because you know it's just manipulation of sticky tape, the guy just outside the frame holding the light."

Audiences will soon be taking Noyce's work much more seriously. Two new films, to be released over the next couple of weeks, represent not only an emotional and financial break with the Hollywood machine that Australian-born Noyce had unabashedly embraced for a decade but a reevaluation of his artistic self-determination. First is *The Quiet American*, his adaptation of the Graham Greene novel about love, war and morality in 1950s Indochina that eerily prefigured American military involvement in Vietnam. After it comes the heartrending *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, a true story about three young girls who traverse the Australian Outback on foot in 1931. Both projects had simmered on Noyce's back burner for some time, and seeing them through invigorated him as nothing had in 15 years. ▶



BRING THE NOYCE Phillip Noyce is returning to his artistic roots with *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *The Quiet American*.

Noyce came of moviemaking age Down Under as part of the burgeoning late-'70s Aussie film industry, alongside colleagues Bruce Beresford, Peter Weir and Gillian Armstrong. He burst onto the international stage in '87 with the arty thriller *Dead Calm*, then moved to Hollywood, where he would churn out a decade-long catalog of star-driven studio fare: *Blind Fury*, *Patriot Games*, *Sliver*, *Clear and Present Danger*, *The Saint*, *The Bone Collector*. Then, two years ago—at the end of a yearlong struggle with yet another adaptation of a Tom Clancy novel, its unwieldy budget and a star (Harrison Ford) who would not commit—Noyce had his epiphany.

"It was the \$100 million projected budget of *The Sum of All Fears*," he says, shivering with the memory. "Saving the world is definitely an under-fifties job. Oh my God, 100 million headaches! I just woke up one morning and said, Fuck this! I'm in the wrong place, on the wrong movie." In what might amount to the fastest turnaround Hollywood's ever seen, Noyce got on a plane for Australia that afternoon.

Once home, he sequestered himself and began work on his passions. *American* was a story Noyce had been trying to tell for six years, ever since reading the book on a train trip through Vietnam and joining up with Oscar-winning director Sydney Pollack, who owned the rights. *Fence*, which Aussie screenwriter Christine Olsen based on Doris Pilkington's book *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, came to him three years ago, literally in the middle of the night: Olsen had miscalculated the time when she phoned him in L.A. to ask him to look at her script. Noyce planned, rehearsed and shot the pair of films on a combined budget that likely wouldn't have covered special effects on *The Sum of All Fears*. His latest creations are vastly different from his past work and from one another, but *Fence* and *American* share two traits: controversial, true-to-life historical resonance and Noyce's driving desire to see what he was capable of as a director. "In part," he says, "the reason for getting out of Dodge and doing these pictures was to answer the questions, Can I do this? Or am I just lucky?"

The Quiet American should certainly decide the issue. The story traces the intersecting paths of a cynical British journalist (Michael Caine) and an idealistic American medical-aid worker (Brendan Fraser), who desecrate their friendship over a taxi dancer in 1952 Saigon, at the height of the Vietnamese fight for independence from the French colonialists. It had been filmed once before, in 1958 (by writer-director Joseph Mankiewicz), and it bore the signposts of box-office death (period drama, Vietnam)—but Noyce was undeterred. Shot in 2001 on a \$28.5 million budget, his *American* is the largest film project ever completed in Vietnam. Though it was filmed under the watchful eye of local government, Noyce kept control. "He's the brigadier general," Fraser says. "He can go into Vietnam and lock down Lam Son Square, which is



BAD TIMING Although it's set in Vietnam in the 1950s, Noyce's adaptation of *The Quiet American* (starring Michael Caine) has sparked controversy with its harsh criticism of American foreign-defense policies.

the equivalent of going into Times Square and saying, 'We need this for three days, and we're going to explode cars in it.'"

Noyce's determination became crucial when it looked as if the finished film would be shelved. Initial screenings, which took place in the weeks following September 11, 2001, didn't go over well with shell-shocked audiences unwilling to swallow criticism of American policy. Miramax removed the film from its release schedule. At Noyce and Pollack's pleading, Harvey Weinstein entered it into 2002's Toronto International Film Festival as a last-chance litmus test. Though the film played just days before the 9/11 anniversary, critics were raving when they emerged from the Toronto screenings. Miramax capitulated.

"Whereas last year it was seen as sacrilegious, unpatriotic and insensitive, a film encouraging the audience to ask themselves whether America's foreign policy in the past may have emboldened those 19 [hijackers], because they felt justified in doing what they did, was suddenly part of a necessary debate," Noyce says.

Debate has raged around *Rabbit-Proof Fence* as well. Made for \$6 million, it lays bare

the Australian government policy followed throughout most of the 20th century of taking half-caste Aboriginal children from their homes. (They were trained as servants in hopes of keeping them from being "marginalized" by the white and black populations—with the nefarious goal of preventing further dilution of their white blood.) The film follows three girls who escape from a training camp to walk the 1,500 miles home. The story, enriched by gorgeous cinematography and a haunting soundtrack by Peter Gabriel, makes a powerful statement.

"I met a man seized with passion," says Branagh, who plays the bureaucrat charged with effectively orphaning these children, now termed the Stolen Generation. "What impressed me was his determination, with a story that could simply be polemical, to offer balance."

As Noyce concedes, what historians have unearthed over the past 15 years is an ugly mix of shame, imperialism and racism too complicated to be explained by a movie. Just the same, he's enjoyed the public discourse (and subsequent box-office success) resulting from *Fence*'s release in Australia, writing responses to editorials whose rejection of the story's authenticity rivals the vehemence of Holocaust deniers. "We have a tortured relationship with black Australia," he says. "We think we are nature's gentlemen, like Crocodile Dundee—tough but soft, too. So it came as a shock to a lot of people. 'We couldn't have done that! Bullshit!...' It's like a kid who suddenly finds out the real family history."

Most of all, *Fence* gave Noyce the nudge he needed to forgo lighter Hollywood fare in exchange for something heartier, more nutritive—at least for the time being (he's leaving his options open). "It wasn't like I was having a bad time," he says, pondering his departure from Hollywood. "I was like a kid in a candy shop. Except the kid ate all the candy. He started to turn green. And eventually, on the point of throwing up, he left."

A WALK TO REMEMBER *Rabbit-Proof Fence* tells the story of three seized Aboriginal children who trek more than 1,500 miles to their home.



The Quiet American is out Friday 22. **Rabbit-Proof Fence** is out November 29.