



Publicity still from 'the Proposition'.

The Proposition

Review by Megan Spencer 2005

The Proposition is the third feature by [John Hillcoat](#), the London-based Australian director who delivered as his very first the devastatingly great prison movie, *Ghosts Of The Civil Dead* (1988).

Violent, poetic and spell-binding, it was also a scathing indictment on the dehumanisation of prison life and the privatised prison industry so many governments around the world at that tellingly bought into.

Songwriter and musician [Nick Cave](#) featured as one of the inmates in *Ghosts*, also contributing to the script in what he considers a "minor" way. But there is nothing minor about his script for Hillcoat's *The Proposition*. This time the director was able to talk his longtime mate into taking care of the whole kit and caboodle. The yield of these two artists has produced film of the year.

Plunging straight into 1880s colonial Australia, *The Proposition* portrays 'the lucky country' as a frontier: lawless, harsh, and rife with brutality and bigotry. After a fierce shootout outlaw brothers Charlie and Mikey Burns (Guy Pearce and Richard Wilson) are captured by ruthless police officer Captain Stanley (Brit acting legend, Ray Winstone). He offers Charlie a deal; hunt down and execute his murderous older brother Arthur (Danny Huston) to save the fate of his younger one.

It is an impossible situation for Charlie, one which breeds further impossible situations for all concerned, not the least of which is Captain Stanley himself who unwittingly drags his wife Martha (Emily Watson) into a state of siege and a bloodthirsty payback. As a good 'western' goes, each character is not only 'put to the test' but confronted by their worst fear - and nightmare.

What follows from the explosive start is stunning; a film made much in the vein of a tough-minded Sergio Leone western (see *A Fistful of Dollars*.) The cinematography by French cinematographer Benoit Delhomme (*The Winslow Boy*) is shadowy and breathtaking, perfectly capturing the brutality and beauty of the Australian landscape. And so is the musical score, composed by Cave and his now-regular music compadre, Warren Ellis (The Dirty Three). Their music whines and moans, beseeches and haunts. It's perfect.

The performances too are brooding and brilliant, especially Pearce's as Charlie, who, drenched in sweat and grime, cuts as fine an existential figure in the landscape as Clint Eastwood in *Unforgiven* (1992).

Pearce makes palpable Charlie's torment, equally as repulsed by the psychotic behaviour of his

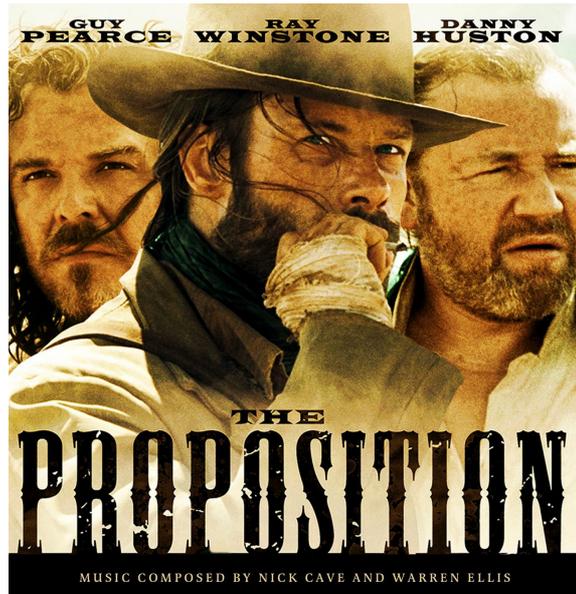
older brother Arthur as he is at contemplating killing him. It is classic Nick Cave; the story of a bad man who has to kill an even worse man.

And while I'm not what you might regard as a Nick Cave 'acolyte', his script is simply amazing, operating much like an extended version of one of his very best songs.

It is filled with uncompromising violence, compromised morals and an unflinching look at the racism and class exploitation - the horror if you will – on which Australia was much in part founded.

That makes it a rare 'local' film indeed.

There is no romance in *this* frontier landscape, and I for one couldn't be more grateful.



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