NEW RELEASE

SATellite Boy
(PG, 86 minutes). Opens Thursday.

A gentle, timely addition to the growing canon of indigenous screen successes, this feature debut from Catriona McKenzie blends a fairy tale aesthetic with the immediacy of social change to strong effect. First-time actor Cameron Wallaby stars as Pete, a young boy tiring of the wisdom imparted to him by his grandfather, Jagamarra (David Gulpilil). The harsh but enticing outback landscape has intrinsic powers, the old man tells the boy, but Pete is too busy hunting to concern himself with his grandfather’s sage advice. That soon changes when a mining company comes to disrupt their lives and bulldoze their home (an abandoned drive-in cinema in Wyndham). Pete resolves to change the company’s mind, setting off with his buddy Kalign (Joseph Padley) for the city to which his absent mother moved to find work. Before long, the pair find themselves lost in the bush of the unforgiving outback. McKenzie does well to emphasise the cultural impact of modern Australia on the lives of its original settlers, while wisely avoiding political-grandstanding. The question of mining in outback areas is a contentious one. Here, it’s woven into a narrative thread that speaks as much about family as it does the environment. Eliciting a lovely turn from Wallaby, who carries the film with his elder-statesman co-star, Gulpilil, McKenzie’s film has a lightness of touch that’s compounded by David Bridie’s feel-good score set against a visually arresting backdrop (shot by veteran director of photography Geoffrey Simpson). The juxtaposition initially threatens to jar before settling into a comfortable groove. As the boys’ plight grows ever bleaker, Jagamarra calls to the stars’ in a profound and moving way that draws emotional resonance without resorting to cliche or over-sentimentality. Satellite Boy has enjoyed an extended run on the festival circuit, premiering in Toronto late last year before screening in Berlin – where Gulpilil’s career was also celebrated – a few months ago. It’s further evidence of a blossoming film culture in which Aboriginal stories are now presented by indigenous filmmakers and storytellers. Much has changed – on screen at least – since Gulpilil appeared in Nicolas Roeg’s outback feature Walkabout more than 40 years ago.

Ed Gibbs