

Article by Sue Sherman

PARADISE ROAD

Directed by Bruce Beresford

Bruce Beresford first gained wide critical success as director of *Breaker Morant* (1980), a landmark film about three Australian soldiers wrongfully executed for alleged war crimes during the Boer War. Like *Breaker Morant*, *Paradise Road* (1997) is based on a true story. Beresford again takes up the theme of Australians' involvement in war – this time during World War II. This film, however, is not about the exploits of soldiers; it's about the resilience of women prisoners of war. Beresford researched the story extensively, studying the diaries of prisoners and Japanese historical material to understand the events from both points of view.

On *The Movie Show* (<http://www.sbs.com.au/films/movie/3156/Paradise/Road>) in June 1997, Beresford explained that there were many 'prison camp' films about the heroism of men. What he wanted to convey in *Paradise Road* was the heroism and resourcefulness of women, and he wanted also to celebrate their ability to create beauty in the dreadful conditions of the jungle prison camp. After the film's release, some American critics accused Beresford of being anti-Japanese and argued that these things were best forgotten, but Beresford insisted that the story needed to be told. He tried to play down the atrocities and to portray events as he believed they had happened.

Encountering Conflict in Paradise Road

Paradise Road explores ideas about conflict and examines the many ways in which people encounter conflict. For example:

- The historical setting of the film is the **global conflict** of World War II.
- This conflict is a military one, fuelled by **political conflicts** which, in 1939, finally erupted into the violent conflict of global warfare.
- The geographical setting is the tropical island of Sumatra, where the prisoners

are often in **conflict with the hostile physical environment**.

- Compounding the political conflict are deeply embedded **cultural** and **racial** tensions. As Mrs Tippler points out, the people the Japanese most dislike are 'Europeans, prisoners and women'. The guards' treatment of the women highlights the cultural divide between the Western female captives and their Asian male captors.
- **Inner (personal) conflict** is also encountered by the women who are often pushed to breaking point by the cruelty of the Japanese soldiers, such as when they are forced to witness the injustice of Wing's execution in silence.
- The prisoners sometimes find themselves experiencing **interpersonal conflict** as the hardships they encounter make them edgy and vulnerable.

Discussion questions

- What are the consequences of conflict for individuals, communities and society as a whole?
- Can conflict be the catalyst for positive social or individual changes?
- Does inner conflict lead to external conflict?
- Will cultural differences always result in conflict?
- Why do acts of cruelty seem to be part of wars that arise from political conflicts?

Conflict can have tragic consequences for ordinary people

The women in *Paradise Road* are quintessentially 'ordinary'. The characters in the film are based on real people: nurses or wives of prominent officials and civilians. These women are caught up in the global conflict of World War II and those who manage to survive are, despite any positive outcomes, dreadfully damaged by their encounter with conflict. Beresford makes the point that innocent people too often become caught up in, and suffer from the effects of, conflicts that are not of their own making.

The audience is strongly positioned to identify with the three main characters, Adrienne, Margaret and Susan, as they come to terms with the harsh and often tragic conditions of their situation. In the film's opening scene, we see a glimpse of

the sheltered and ordinary lives led by women who were somewhat peripheral to the conflict of war. Now, plunged into a frighteningly violent and unfamiliar world, they encounter the tragic consequences of the conflict. On the journey to the camp, Beresford highlights the ordinary qualities of the women as they struggle to retain their meagre possessions or endeavour to help each other endure the long walk. Fearful, hungry and exhausted, the women are herded like cattle. On their arrival in Sumatra they see the severed head of a political prisoner displayed on a pole in the public square. The victim, a local man accused of spying, was also an ordinary person. His wife, Wing, is perhaps the film's most tragic figure. Having risked her life to procure black-market quinine tablets for Mrs Roberts, Wing is caught. She is set alight and burns to death as the assembled prisoners are forced to watch in horrified silence. The effect on them is profound; nothing in their previous experience could have prepared them to cope with such utter cruelty.

The tragedies that befall the prisoners become part of their daily lives, as some succumb to the effects of untreated illness. The scene with the two children making simple wooden coffins for dead babies clearly highlights the tragedy of war in the lives of ordinary people, and suggests that no cause could justify the terrible consequences of violent conflict. Children are a symbol of innocence in the film. The death of the child whom Adrienne tries to protect on the Prince Alfred encapsulates Beresford's key contention: that the innocent suffer most in situations of extreme conflict. The camp cemetery, with its rows upon rows of white crosses, is shown as the camera pans across the prison compound during a performance of the vocal orchestra, revealing the large numbers of prisoners who died during the course of their internment. In deliberately avoiding a heroic narrative about death in battle in defence of 'king and country', Beresford asks us to be aware of the shattered lives of ordinary people caught up in violent global conflict.

Rosemary Leighton-Jones is another of the film's tragic figures. Her kindness and beauty evoke the audience's sympathy and we see, in Singapore, her love for her husband Dennis, as they discuss their plans for a future together. This sustains Rosemary through her ordeal in the camp and gives her the strength to support others. When she sees that Dennis has been captured whilst trying to escape from the men's prison camp, and realises that his execution is inevitable, Rosemary loses

the will to live. The tragedy of Rosemary's death is rendered all the more bitter as it occurs during the removal of the women prisoners to a more remote camp where she glimpses Dennis under heavy guard. Ironically, the women are moved because of the advance of the Americans and the impending defeat of the Japanese in the Pacific. Mrs Roberts and Margaret also die – tragically – just as their liberation is imminent.

The damaging effects of conflict are also evident in other relationships. Rosemary's supportive relationship with the shy Dutch girl, Helen, crosses the cultural boundaries that divide some of the other prisoners, and the friendship strengthens Helen. Her grief at Rosemary's death reinforces Beresford's condemnation of war on the grounds that too many innocent people become its tragic victims. Adrienne is similarly devastated by the death of her friend and fellow-musician, Margaret. In a relationship that crosses class boundaries, Margaret and Adrienne unite and inspire the other women. In doing so, they convey another of Beresford's central messages – that in times of conflict, ordinary people can do extraordinary things. This positive outcome, however, does not significantly diminish the tragic consequences of war; the ultimate deaths of such characters as Margaret and Rosemary are rendered the more poignant for the strength and wisdom they demonstrated in an extreme situation.

The film also shows how extreme conflict situations place ordinary people under unusual pressure, provoking and exacerbating conflicts on a personal level, both between and within individuals. Stressed, sorrowing and deprived, some of the women in *Paradise Road* find themselves placed in a morally and politically compromised situation when confronted with the choice as to whether to remain at the Japanese 'officers' club', providing sex in return for food and comfort, or to return to the camp. Those who elect to accept the bribe of the officers are not only prostituting themselves but are also consorting with the enemy. Similarly, Adrienne is placed in a compromising position when she's asked if the orchestra will perform a Japanese folk-song for Colonel Hirota. She refuses, risking severe punishment. While she makes a different choice to that of the women of the officers' club, Beresford emphasises that war, and the struggle for survival, places severe and unusual pressure on individuals, which can cause them to behave in ways they

would not ordinarily behave; as Sister Wilhelminia wisely acknowledges, it is not fair to judge the actions of others in times of extreme conflict.

Similarly, the extreme conditions under which the women must live also results in interpersonal conflict. Mrs Tippler, the outsider, tries to undermine the solidarity of the group through criticism of the orchestra. There is also tension between the Dutch and the English-speaking women, which erupts in an argument over soap. This incident illustrates the corrosive effects of conflict on ordinary people, who can be not only physically harmed by violent conflict, but who are also prey to subtler damage. Beresford positions us to consider how we ourselves might respond in circumstances of similar hardship and, while he celebrates the general resilience and courage of the women, he ultimately condemns the brutality and the futility of war.

Discussion questions

- Ordinary people can respond in surprising ways to conflict situations. What factors do you believe can affect the way we react to conflict?
- In order to survive conflict, we need a reason to live. Do you agree?
- Does self-interest determine people's actions when they encounter conflict?
- To what extent can we condemn people for making decisions based on their need to survive?
- Is it ever justifiable to sacrifice your principles in order to survive?

Conflict can bring out the best and the worst in people

The responses of the women prisoners to their encounters with conflict are very different. The character of Adrienne Pargiter is the main vehicle for the exploration of ideas about courage and resilience in the face of conflict. Adrienne emerges as a natural leader in the prison camp. Her response to conflict is to maintain her dignity and to resist, as far as possible, the unjust authority of the Japanese guards. In forming the vocal orchestra, Adrienne responds to the tragedy of Wing's death through her belief in the healing power of music and her desire to draw the women together. They have all been traumatised by Wing's execution and the racial and class boundaries which divide them lead to conflict with each other, which must be resolved if they are to survive. Adrienne is determined to assert something of her own Western cultural heritage at a time when it is under attack. She is also

courageous enough to defend herself from a physical attack by a drunken Japanese soldier, despite the fact that striking him is an offence punishable by death. Conflict brings out the best in Adrienne and, through her courageous challenge to unjust authority, she emerges as a symbol of hope for oppressed and disempowered people everywhere.

In the midst of conflict Adrienne forms a close relationship with Margaret Drummond, recognising the humane qualities they share. Margaret draws strength from her religious faith and provides a focal point for the group when they need spiritual comfort. Her words at Wing's funeral help ease the shock and pain they all feel. Margaret's quiet determination is evident when she stands up to 'The Snake', whose terrifying visit to their quarters to recruit volunteers for the officers' club is met with her calm and polite question: 'What can we do for you, Sergeant Tomiashi?' She also defies the authority of Colonel Hirota when she attempts to take water to Susan. Margaret's encounter with conflict strengthens her capacity for Christian charity – as she explains to Adrienne, she can't hate the Japanese, only pity them. Margaret epitomises the comfort and strength drawn by many from religious belief during times of bitter conflict.

Susan Macarthy finds an unexpected inner strength in response to conflict. She stands up to Mrs Tippler, the destructive and divisive presence among the prisoners, and angrily accuses Colonel Hirota of human rights violations. She also finds the strength to endure a horrifyingly cruel punishment and unites the other women in their support and admiration of her. These three characters embody the most positive ways of responding to conflict.

Sergeant Tomiashi also ultimately discovers inner reserves of compassion as a result of his experience of conflict. Despite his cultural predisposition to despise women, foreigners and prisoners, he is so moved by the music of the vocal orchestra that he humbles himself before Adrienne, singing to her alone in the forest. Tomiashi's encounter with conflict, and the opportunity it gives him to observe and understand a group of people he has been conditioned to dislike, changes him for the better, as demonstrated by his respectful removal of his cap as Margaret's funeral procession passes.

By contrast, a highly negative response to conflict is exhibited by Mrs Tippler, who becomes even more critical and pessimistic as the women's stay in the camp goes on. She grows spiteful and resentful, exacerbating racial tensions with her accusations against the Dutch, and accusing Adrienne of endangering their lives with the vocal orchestra. Mrs Dickson and Mrs Pike initially side with her but eventually see how destructive her attitude is. By the end of the film, her negativity has completely isolated her. Her eating of potentially toxic snails reveals a self-destructive impulse, exemplifying her refusal to make positive changes in the face of conflict.

Through the unsympathetically constructed character of Mrs Tippler, Beresford shows us that if conflict situations can bring out the best in some individuals, for others the strain induced by high conflict situations can be corrosive, provoking anger and resentment, to the detriment both of the individual and those around them. While Beresford suggests that Mrs Tippler's negative attitude ultimately harms herself more than it does others by his unflinching portrayal of the horrors of the prison camp, he also positions the viewer to understand how extreme situations can provoke extreme reactions in people.

Discussion questions

- Do you agree that people's response to conflict reveals who they truly are? Is this what the film shows us?
- Why do some people choose to be outsiders in times of conflict?
- Why are some people able to make positive changes as a response to encountering conflict, while others are not?

Conflict can unite families and communities

As a response to conflict, the community of women prisoners is very much united by the vocal orchestra (with the notable exception of Mrs Tippler). The orchestra firstly unites Adrienne and Margaret across the divisive boundaries of class, which have previously prevented women from the upper ranks of colonial society (like Adrienne) from associating with missionaries, like Margaret. Through her encounter with conflict, Adrienne becomes aware and ashamed of her snobbery and apologises to

Margaret. Adrienne is distraught when Margaret dies, recognising her as a genuine friend and a woman of strength, courage and integrity.

Mrs Roberts is another snobbish woman who expresses concern about the kinds of people she might be mixing with if she joins the orchestra. Her racial prejudice against the Malayan prisoners is condemned by her daughter, Celia, who bluntly informs her of the reasons for Wing's black market dealings. Mrs Roberts is mortified and reassesses her values – a very beneficial outcome of her encounter with conflict which enables her to develop in positive ways. She joins the orchestra as a sign of her participation in the community of prisoners. The Dutch and the Anglo-Saxon prisoners initially regard each other with suspicion that sometimes erupts into hostility. The conflict over the soap shows how easily something trivial can ignite a conflict when underlying tensions have not been resolved. It takes the intervention of Sister Wilhelminia (the voice of wisdom and tolerance) to defuse the conflict and restore order. However, it is the participation of Dutch prisoners such as Mrs Cronje in the vocal orchestra that most effectively breaks down racial barriers and diffuses residual tensions.

Susan's reluctance to join, based on her dislike of classical music, is overcome by Adrienne's gentle persistence, showing that generational boundaries can be dissolved by music, and also by uniting in a worthwhile common purpose, whatever it might be. The smiling, shining faces of the singers as they perform works by Dvorak and Ravel amidst the squalor of the prison camp show not only how strongly they are united by their participation in the orchestra, but also how the beauty of the music can transcend the appalling conditions of prison life. The music also symbolically unites the living and the dead, as suggested by the camera panning across the graves in the cemetery as the orchestra sings. Even some of the orchestra's strongest critics have, by the end, joined and become part of the community. Mrs Dickson, a supporter of the unpleasant Mrs Tippler, admits that joining the orchestra was the best thing she'd ever done.

As well as establishing strong bonds between the prisoners, the vocal orchestra goes a long way towards making tentative connections between the prisoners and the guards through their shared appreciation of classical music. Sergeant Tomiashi's wistful expression as he listens to the orchestra, and his angry dismissal of an

interruption from another soldier, suggest his feelings of connection with the music, and thus with the women who provide it. Colonel Hirota, too, enjoys the music. Despite the ban on congregating or writing imposed on the prisoners, the vocal orchestra is permitted to continue practising and performing and the Japanese officers attend as guests. This is an endorsement of the music (and, implicitly, of Western culture). Colonel Hirota's gift to Adrienne is an affirmation of her creative spirit and her courage, both of which have been instrumental in forging bonds in the community of which all the characters are inescapably a part. The one exception to this is Mrs Tippler, who resolutely distances herself from the orchestra and all it represents. She is perhaps the only character who gains nothing positive from her encounter with conflict.

Discussion questions

- Are groups able to resolve conflict more effectively than individuals?
- Does the strength of a group always depend on excluding those with differing values?

Violence is never an effective means of resolving conflict

The Japanese prison guards and officers exemplify the violence wielded by the powerful in order to assert their authority. The physical violence in the film is very explicit and deliberately shocking, from the violent deaths of innocent children to the savage beatings inflicted on Rosemary and Mrs Dickson. Indeed, the film opens with a scene that quickly becomes violent, with the sound of exploding bombs disturbing the festive atmosphere of Raffles Hotel. The violence escalates with further explosions as the evacuees hurriedly board ships bound for safety. The response to the violence of the Japanese is retaliatory violence from Britain and America and their allies; the women are caught up in this conflict as their ship is attacked and sunk. The suggestion is that responding to violence with more violence only worsens the situation and increases the likelihood that innocent victims will become caught up in the escalating conflict.

At the camp, the guards' use of violence effectively intimidates the prisoners but it does not resolve conflict; indeed, tensions are exacerbated by the brutal suppression of basic rights and freedoms. The prisoners respond to their captors' brutality with

resistance, subversiveness or bitter resentment. The vocal orchestra is a symbol of resistance, while the black-market dealings are acts of subversiveness. The deep resentment engendered by gratuitous and brutal violence is not always made explicit in the film, except perhaps by Adrienne, whose conversation with Margaret implies her hatred. She says, 'You don't hate them, do you?' to which Margaret replies that she pities them. It is perhaps Adrienne's hatred of the brutality of her oppressors which drives her to defy them by establishing the orchestra. Her hatred is again suggested in the final scene and is directed at the most unsympathetically constructed character in the film, the sadistic Captain Tanaka, who seems to take pleasure in the fact that there is no music from the women at Margaret's funeral. Adrienne's defiant response conveys her deep dislike of the man and reinforces Beresford's point about the destructive effects of violence. The inability to forgive is testament to the unresolved conflict that results from extreme violence.

With his depiction of brutal violence and his unsympathetic portrayal of many of the Japanese soldiers, Beresford encourages the audience to empathise with the bitterness engendered in Adrienne and some of the other women by the violence of their captors. When Adrienne hits the guard who attempts to rape her, it is presented as a justifiable act of self-defence. However, ultimately Beresford suggests that responding to violence with violence can never resolve conflict. While acknowledging the discrimination experienced by the Japanese by the Western world, Beresford implies that the violent response of the Japanese soldiers to the women and children in their care only increases the distance between the two groups. The film shows that genuine connection between people of different races, genders and backgrounds is possible as, for instance, when Sergeant Tomiashi sings for Adrienne in the forest. But violence inhibits the possibility of such connections. Instead Beresford invites us to contrast the violence of the guards with the peaceful and positive responses of the women, and to admire the latter. Music, for instance, is shown to have the power to unite disparate groups and individuals, and to (at least temporarily) bring about a truce between enemy factions, in a way that continued violence never could. Likewise, we are encouraged to celebrate the non-violent protest led by Adrienne at Margaret's funeral, which is both an expression of defiance against the soldiers and a demonstration of the genuine love and regard for

Margaret felt by the women. Such moments affirm the possibility of an effective, non-violent response to violence.

Discussion questions

- Is violence ever justified as a response to conflict?
- Is violence used more often by men than women to resolve conflict?
- Can you think of a conflict which had the potential for violence but which was resolved peacefully?
- Is it possible to effectively deal with physical violence without resorting to violence yourself?

SAMPLE SCENE ANALYSIS

This section shows you how to identify Context ideas in a key scene from *Paradise Road*.

Raffles Hotel, Singapore: scene summary

The opening scene is set in the majestic ballroom of Raffles Hotel, an extravagant monument to British imperialism. The conversation of the guests reveals racial prejudice against the Japanese, who are described as needing thick glasses because they ‘can’t see’ and being unable to fight because they can only make ‘tin toys and cameras’. Adrienne Pargiter denounces the racist sentiments as a ‘load of poppycock’ and points out that the Japanese have conquered most of Asia. Key characters are introduced in order to highlight the dramatic effects of their subsequent encounters with conflict.

Suddenly a bomb falls nearby and an Australian officer arrives to announce the imminent fall of Singapore. Bombs continue to fall as women and children are hurriedly loaded onto ships. The urgency of this ‘last-minute’ departure highlights the arrogance of the British, whose notions of their own cultural and military superiority have left them vulnerable to attack.

Questions for exploring ideas

- Is violent conflict the most effective way for the powerless (such as pre-war Japan) to challenge the powerful (such as Britain)?

- Can a lack of understanding lead to conflict?
- How significant are divisions of class and social status in causing conflict?
- Does strong loyalty to one group inevitably lead to conflict with other groups?

Focus on text features

As well as drawing on ideas from *Paradise Road* in your writing about Encountering Conflict, remember that the language and style of your writing may also be inspired by the structure and features of the film. For example, the following aspects of *Paradise Road* may influence how you respond to ideas in the text.

- **Settings** (physical, historical or cultural) can be used to place characters in situations of conflict, such as the prison camp where the women are in direct conflict with their captors, or a natural landscape which is (at times) a temporary refuge from conflict.
- **Dialogue** is instrumental in revealing a character's state of mind and a useful way of 'showing' (rather than telling) the effects of conflict. In the opening scene, Adrienne's comment that the stereotyped views of the Japanese are a load of 'poppycock' shows that she is a straight-talking and independent thinker, well-informed on current political events. Her common sense and outspokenness, which set her apart from the other women in her social group, exemplify her attitude throughout the film.
- **Contrasts** such as peace and war, and the past and the present, are built into characters and settings. They are an effective way for the creator of a text to sway audience approval or disapproval. The elegant setting of Raffles stands in strong contrast to the bombs falling outside and even stronger contrast to the squalor of the prison camp, suggesting a step-by-step descent into hell for the women.
- **Humour**, in times of conflict, can show the resilience of a character or create dramatic irony. For example, Margaret's comment about Thomas Beecham being unavailable to conduct the vocal orchestra and Topsy's complaint about the inadequate room service in the camp show how effective humour can be in lifting people's spirits in times of conflict.

- **Recurring motifs** work in subtle but powerful ways. 'Showing' something significant through character, theme or music can be an effective vehicle for conveying ideas about resistance, resilience and hope. Significantly, the film opens with beautiful music in the ballroom of Raffles Hotel and its continuation, despite the bomb, makes a clear statement about the capacity of music to transcend the effects of conflict.

Points of view on the Context

These discussion questions and activities are designed to help you reflect on and refer to ideas raised by the Context in your chosen text.

For further discussion/writing

- In times of conflict, ordinary people can do extraordinary things.
- Conflicts are only resolved through compromise.
- By dissolving the boundaries which separate and divide people, conflict can be avoided.
- Conflict is sometimes necessary to bring unresolved tensions to the surface so they can be dealt with.
- Forgiveness is necessary to satisfactorily resolve conflict.
- Differences between people will always lead to conflict.

Activities

- Write a diary entry for one of the characters who has returned home and is reflecting on the importance of the vocal orchestra in helping her to survive the conflict.
- Sergeant Tomiashi gives an interview on Australian television ten years after the end of the war. He reflects on what he learned from his encounter with conflict. Write down some questions the interviewer might ask and the answers that Tomiashi might give. Consider the ways in which conflict might provide the opportunity for growth and reflection.
- Construct a scene for a film script that extends the narrative of one or more of the characters to include their return home. Has the encounter with conflict changed them? Can they readjust to a normal lifestyle? What does this suggest

about the lasting effects of conflict on ordinary individuals?

- In a small group, research and prepare material for a blog or wiki on the reasons for Japan's involvement in World War II, focusing on the historical and cultural factors which contributed to the conflict. Explore the main crises and turning points (especially involving relations between Japan and countries such as Russia and the US) to show an awareness of how the conflict developed. In your piece, reflect on what your research suggests about common causes of political conflict and what factors seem to aggravate it.

The text

Paradise Road 1997, dir. Bruce Beresford, Village Roadshow.