THE POOR MAN'S ORANGE

The film Romper Stomper has raised enormous controversy. David Greason tries to get under its skin.

Romper Stomper, a film by Melbourne writer/director Geoffrey Wright, chronicles the shabby and tragic last days of a neo-Nazi skinhead gang in Melbourne's western suburbs. Led by Hando (played by Russell Crowe, and Davey (the late Daniel Pollock), the gang spends its days alternately whining about the Asian hordes, getting pissed, and terrorising local Vietnamese kids. In other words, it's one big happy family. When Gabe (Jacqueline McKenzie), a disturbed young girl, enters the circle and begins an affair with Hando, the seeds are sown for the family's destruction. It is almost as if Hando's fears about outsiders are justified: it's just that the really dangerous outsiders are each other.

The unremitting violence has brought the film some considerable controversy. The Movie Show's David Stratton called it "A Clockwork Orange without the intellect" and accused it of racism. The NSW Jewish Board of Deputies also expressed concern that the film's graphic scenes of violence might incite racial hatred towards Asian Australians. Geoffrey Wright rejects these fears out of hand.

On the charge of racism, Wright is probably in the right. The racism of the film is lost in a blur of fists: only the most obtuse could miss the point that, for these lads, indignation at "being a white coolie in my own country" (as Hando says) comes a poor second to a punch-up. So is it in real life: while neo-Nazi skins are obviously racist, it's the thrill of living on the edge that keeps them in, not the theoretical minutiae of Nordic skull measurements and exegeses on the Protocols of Zion.

Most of the violence in Romper Stomper is directed at outsiders: Vietnamese, hippies, the propertied bourgeoisie. But at the film's end the inevitable happens: gang members turn on each other. In real life, however, the troops of National Action, its openly neo-Nazi offshoot, the Australian Nationalist Movement, and the lonewolf gangs didn't wait for the suspense music to start before they began culling their membership lists with a sawn-off shottie or a baseball bat.

Wright has captured this world very well: the basic cowardice, the grandiose half-baked theories, and the shabby bedroom walls covered with maps and car photos. Russell Crowe as Hando is the most believable psychotic skinhead alive. This is a world of uninterrupted chaos and we're about to be dragged into it, without explanation.

Wright has also made an issue of this. "The film is more concerned with the audience's involvement with the characters after they've reached a point of no return, rather than the liberal tradition of: 'let's turn inside out the process of how the characters got this way'," he said. "What we were doing was providing vicarious thrills with a serious theme, and that's what some people find so disturbing about the film. It's probably got more in common with a rollercoaster ride than something that is usually done. It's not so much about thoughts as about feelings, and I mean that in the most primitive way."

When one talks about primitive forms of expression in such matters, it pays to be cautious. Wright hasn't been. Cinematically, there is much to be said for Romper Stomper and, even if the storyline falls down in places, Wright's rollercoaster technique takes the audience right into the skinheads' circle. What that means, of course, is that Romper Stomper is an almost unadulterated document of Australian fascism. And presumably that isn't what Geoffrey Wright set out to make.

There is no political context for the film, which is not necessarily surprising given that, for the most part, the world of the Australian far right owes more to psycho-pathology than politics. We learn nothing from Romper Stomper. The skins bash the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese bash back. The police bash and shoot. What are we meant to do with these people? Film-makers and writers have grave responsibilities when bringing people like Hando and Davey to the world. And as their boots sink into yet another Asian, the question has to be asked: who's getting the vicarious thrills in this exchange, and why?

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