



# GAYLENE PRESTON

## FILM RETROSPECTIVE

Gaylene Preston has been making feature films and documentaries with a distinctive New Zealand flavour and a strong social message for more than 30 years. Join us to celebrate her work ...

**UC**  
**UNIVERSITY OF  
CANTERBURY**  
*Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha*  
CHRISTCHURCH NEW ZEALAND

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With fond memories of  
Gaeme Tetley, colleague and creative  
participant par excellence.  
1942 – 2011  
X GP

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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**Gaylene Preston** herself, the inspiration of this homage, without whom...

Mary M. Wiles

# GAYLENE PRESTON FILM RETROSPECTIVE

Sponsored by Cinema Studies and The School of Humanities at the University of Canterbury

In association with Te Papa Tongarewa, The Museum of New Zealand.

Screenings will be followed by a question and answer session with the director.

## SATURDAY 22 OCTOBER

### EARTHQUAKE

A documentary account of the devastating Napier earthquake of 1931.

**11:00am / 44mins**

**Fundraiser for Christchurch earthquake recovery**

**Gold coin donation at the door**

### GETTING TO OUR PLACE

A fly-on-the-wall documentary about the lead up to the opening of Te Papa Tongarewa, the Museum of New Zealand, in 1998.

**1:00pm / 72mins / free**

### KAI PURAKAU

A rare insight into the life of Booker Prize-winning author Keri Hulme.

**3:00pm / 27mins / free**

### LOVELY RITA – A PAINTER'S LIFE

A documentary portrait of celebrated New Zealand artist Rita Angus.

**4:00pm / 70mins / free**

## SUNDAY 23 OCTOBER

### WAR STORIES OUR MOTHERS NEVER TOLD US

Seven New Zealand women – including the director's mother – discuss their wartime experiences.

**11:00am / 94mins / free**

### HOME BY CHRISTMAS

A remarkable memoir of resilience, determination and love – based on the director's interviews with her father.

**1:30pm / 95mins / free**

**'The Film Portrait of a New Zealand Storyteller: Gaylene Preston's *Home by Christmas*'**

Dr Mary M. Wiles, University of Canterbury

**3:30pm**

### ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION: GAYLENE PRESTON AND GUESTS

A round table discussion with Gaylene Preston, Dr Bruce Harding, Dr Deborah Shepherd and guests, moderated by Mary M. Wiles.

**4:00pm**

### BOOK SIGNING

Dr Deborah Shepard will sign copies of her recent book *Her Life's Work: Conversations with Five New Zealand Women*, which features Gaylene Preston.

**5:00pm**

## MONDAY 24 OCTOBER

### GAYLENE PRESTON MASTER CLASS

Join Gaylene Preston for a discussion about the film restoration and re-mastering of her acclaimed mini-series *Bread and Roses*.

**1:00pm**

### BREAD AND ROSES

This moving epic tells the story of pioneering trade unionist, politician and feminist Sonja Davies.

**2:00pm / 200mins**

**Fundraiser for the Sonja Davies Peace Award**

**Gold coin donation at the door**

# A Decent Sense of Outrage:

GAYLENE PRESTON –  
FILM DIRECTOR

Dr Deborah Shepard  
Biographer and Life Writing Mentor

My association with Gaylene Preston began in 1990 when I first approached her hoping to write an MA thesis on her life and work. Gaylene was 'appalled' apparently, and did her best to dissuade me. When she finally had an opportunity to express how she really felt, in the foreword to my book, *Reframing Women: A History of New Zealand Film*, Gaylene explained

*This involved not returning her phone calls, then when she did get through arguing, correcting everything she said, and basically making sure she knew I thought she was on the wrong track, entirely misguided and possibly quite stupid etc etc. When none of that worked I sent her off to talk to anyone else I could think of to divert her. She made all the diversions make sense and like a delicate bulldozer just kept on going and patiently persisted. Dammit. (Shepard 2000, 9)*

A delicate bulldozer indeed! It wasn't quite the flattering epithet I was hoping for but she was right, I was determined. I had seen her on stage with a large group of cast and crew at the Auckland premiere of *Ruby and Rata* (1990) and been impressed with her acknowledgment that films are collaborative in nature, made by creative teams, not just directors. I was also fired up, following studies in feminism at Canterbury University where I had been introduced to the male bias in recordings of history. This really sank in when I began my own

research in the Film, Television and Media Studies department at Auckland University and discovered a masculinist discourse running through New Zealand film history. I found the work of key early women filmmakers, such as Margaret Thomson, Kathleen O'Brien, Ramai Hayward, Deirdre McCartin and the team who made a series of seven feminist documentaries (throughout 1975 and 1976) had been completely obscured. Something had to be done. I interviewed Ramai Hayward and wrote up my findings in a series of Masters papers. Then for my thesis I approached Gaylene, wanting to explore and document the work of a woman director who was already a major practitioner – eleven films in thirteen years – but hadn't yet been fully recognised. I'm glad I persevered because the material that emerged over that year of interviews constitutes a valuable record of an important New Zealand film director in mid-career.

I have formally interviewed Gaylene in three instalments now. The latest was for a chapter in *Her Life's Work: Conversations with Five New Zealand Women* (Shepard 2009). Each interaction was stimulating and fun. Gaylene is a gifted storyteller and an astute, intelligent thinker, whose perceptions are always on the mark. She provides the most stunning, quirky quotes a biographer could ever wish for. When she made her first feature, *Mr Wrong* (1985) she said, in reference to the high energy male action films that had so far dominated the New Zealand scene, 'I wanted to make a film that didn't have a rape scene, didn't revolve around high speed car chases and didn't have Bruno Lawrence playing the tortured neurotic man with a gun and chooks.'<sup>1</sup>

*Mr Wrong* was a feminist revision of the thriller, the film genre Gaylene considers the most disempowering to women. Adapted from a short story by English author Elizabeth Jane Howard, the protagonist – Meg – is a recognisable Kiwi woman who is resourceful rather than a victim, outwits the male predator and survives. The film attracted controversy because it ended radically – on the screams of the predator as he perishes in a burning car. Asked to explain why she introduced the ghost of an earlier victim to kill him off, Gaylene argued

*Meg isn't a superhero and she doesn't kung fu anybody and she doesn't kill anybody. She's just normal, like you and me. I probably wouldn't be able to kill anybody. What Meg does though is*

*... saves her own life. The film could have ended there, yes, but the thing is he did need to die. There are a lot of crimes against women that remain unsolved. In this society there's a big silence left by the victims. I had to empower the silent ones. (Shepard 2009, 220)*

Gaylene first encountered feminism in England in the late 1960s–1970s, when she moved there with her husband who was studying for a PhD at Cambridge University. It was fortuitous timing. She found the environment a hotbed of Feminist, Marxist, Socialist, anti-war and anti-nuclear politics and thought. She joined women's liberation group Redstockings, the London Women's Film Group, and created cartoons for feminist magazines *Bloody Women* and *Spare Rib*. Her involvement in student activism fomented the various threads that would feed into her filmmaking. She also read the work of Kate Millett (*Sexual Politics* 1970) and Germaine Greer (*The Female Eunuch* 1970), who translated feminist theory into accessible language giving her 'a new vocabulary' that helped her 'understand why we felt the way we did' (Shepard 2009, 215). The equal opportunity arguments where the rearing of children, housework, jobs and workplaces might be shared resonated too. As Gaylene says, feminism gave her 'something to fight for'. It gave her work energy and a bite and what she terms a 'decent sense of outrage' about the marginalising of so many interesting stories.

Before leaving for England, Gaylene had undertaken a diploma in painting at the Canterbury School of Fine Arts – and her art from that period displays her talent, particularly a watercolour self-portrait that is eerily reminiscent of the most beautiful of the self-portraits of Rita Angus, someone she admired immensely. Her film *Lovely Rita* (2007) reflects this admiration, and her comments provide insight into what motivates her work. 'There's usually a sense of outrage behind every film I make and that extends to Rita Angus too. I'm outraged that her work hasn't, until recently, had the same acknowledgment as say Colin McCahon and Toss Woollaston' (Shepard 2009, 228).

On her return to New Zealand in 1977, Gaylene felt alone in a ruggedly macho culture.

*For the first year or so I felt like an outsider looking in. Just being a woman without a partner, without children, living a single life and*

*having been away for seven years isolated me. I was the expatriate. And it was paradoxical because I then found myself working with a group of men, none of who had been involved with the personal politics or the rethinking I'd gone through. However, it was because I'd thought it all through that I was able to stand my own ground. (Shepard 2009, 217)*

It is staggering to hear her talk about the sexism endemic to the film culture at that time. Her first job was as an art director at Pacific Films, where in her words she was 'affectionately' given the nickname Bruce. However, when she was invited to manage the art department of the 1979 film version of Roger Hall's play *Middle Age Spread*, directed by John Reid, she felt deeply isolated on set.

*I mean, they'd tell jokes about dead nuns' cunts. Over six weeks the imagery in the swearing really got to me. I didn't like it but that was the style of the film crews in those days. I'm talking about a time when you'd go to a party and someone might come up and say, 'Wanna fuck?' That's how it was then. (Shepard 2009, 219)*

At this time, Gaylene also visited the Hawke's Bay community of Waimarama, where she met Geoff Murphy and his wife Pat Robins, who would later become a drama director, actor Bruno Lawrence and production manager Veronica Lawrence, actor Martyn Sanderson, sculptor Liz Earth, and members of the Crayford family. Cinematographer Alun Bollinger had already relocated to Reefton, but she met him at Pakiri filming an explosion test for *Dagg Day Afternoon* (1977) directed by Geoff Murphy and John Clarke. These people became her friends, and some of them members of her creative teams. Alun Bollinger went on to shoot many of her films – including *Mr Wrong*, *War Stories*, *Perfect Strangers* and *Home by Christmas* – and Jonathan Crayford was her film composer for several years. In 1982 Gaylene observed Geoff Murphy making his second feature *Utū* (1983) in a fly-on-the-wall documentary *Making Utū* (1982), and Geoff co-wrote the script of *Mr Wrong* with Gaylene.

Years after Gaylene's first visit, Pat Robins directed a drama – *Instincts* (1986) – about that period. It reflected the gender politics and division of household labour and also the women's experience of 'free love' which Pat said was 'bloody nice for the blokes' but difficult for the women. 'And all of us

women sat around trying to come to terms with this one and feeling vaguely guilty as if we were failing in some way.<sup>2</sup>

Gaylene poured some of her feelings of alienation and feminist indignation into the character of Meg – who is single, financially independent, drives a second-hand Jaguar and unsettles the male characters in *Mr Wrong*. Her drama *Married* (1992), an under-recognised gem based on author Sue McCauley's screenplay, about a working-class marriage, also illustrated the problems with narrow gender prescriptions. Gaylene's second feature *Ruby and Rata* (1990), with a compelling script written by the late Graeme Tetley, continued the feminist discussion but also outlined her concern over discrimination towards Māori and the aged. The social message is never far from the surface in Gaylene's work and in this film it is deftly communicated via comedy.

In 2003, almost twenty years after *Mr Wrong*, Gaylene returned to feminist thriller territory with *Perfect Strangers* (2003), but this time her plot contained elements of fable and a decidedly bent love story. And, of course, she couldn't resist adding some black comedic moments. In this film the tormentor is not burnt but frozen in a freezer. The main character Melanie is more complex, more anti-hero, even predatory – by turns sexually adventurous, alluring, stropky, perverse and vulnerable. Shot on the wonderfully wild West Coast of the South Island, where Gaylene grew up and cinematographer Alun Bollinger lives, it was described by Australian reviewer Ruth Hessey as 'the sort of audacious, brilliantly visualised, and slightly unnerving film we expect from New Zealand filmmakers.'<sup>3</sup> *Perfect Strangers*, like *Mr Wrong* (which incidentally sold to go territories) was also popular internationally. International film expert David Stratton described it as 'an intriguing, virtually unclassifiable romantic thriller fantasy,' and as Preston's best work in film to date.<sup>4</sup>

Gaylene is one of New Zealand's most versatile film directors. She is equally at home directing drama and documentary. Her oeuvre stretches over political documentary, portrait of the artist, history and social issues documentaries, to comedy, thriller and feminist fantasy. Her sensitively crafted film *Bread and Roses* (1993), about pioneering trade unionist and politician Sonja Davies, is a feminist

biopic in the same league as Margarethe von Trotta's *Rosa Luxembourg* (1986).

*War Stories Our Mothers Never Told Us* (1995) is the documentary that defined Gaylene's career. Yet it almost didn't get made. An initial lack of interest from funding institutions left Gaylene and her producer Robin Laing feeling desperate. They finally decided to approach the Film Commission one last time and submit what, according to Gaylene was

*the film that had been turned down the most and the one that was definitely not internationally bankable or aiming for multiplexes. This was the film about seven old ladies talking about the war.* (Shepard 2009, 243)

Thank goodness they were successful because *War Stories* is one of her best works. It went on to an international cinema release and was much loved by audiences both in New Zealand and overseas, where it received special recognition at Film Festivals in Sydney, Venice, Sundance and Toronto. It combines a feminist analysis of the untold stories of ordinary Kiwi women and their experience of war, with gripping stories of danger and survival.

In *War Stories*, Gaylene refined her approach to the interview format, allowing the individual to tell the story in what appears to be real time, but was in fact seamlessly edited by Paul Sutorius. Each woman is featured against a simple, black background enabling the viewer to concentrate on the story, to scan and appreciate the softly lit, wonderfully lined and richly expressive, beautiful faces. This film revolutionised the presentation of 'talking heads' and has influenced documentary makers throughout New Zealand – including Annie Goldson, who invited Gaylene to co-produce *Punitive Damage* (1999) and Brita McVeigh, who adopted the style for her interviews with female flight attendants in *Coffee, Tea or Me?* (2002). More recently, Paula McTaggart has replicated the format for her interviews with people who witnessed the 1967 Strongman Mine explosion and she has commissioned Gaylene to direct the dramatic content for her film *Journey Into Darkness – The Strongman Tragedy*.

All of the seven women featured in *War Stories* were stars, but the riveting story belonged to Gaylene's mother, Tui Preston. Tui's was the untold



story referred to in the film's title. It stunned Gaylene when she first listened to the interview tapes. Her mother discusses a romantic attraction that flourished while her husband Ed was at war and during the six-year gap between the birth of her eldest child, Ted, and the arrival of Gaylene. Tui talks openly to camera about the difficulties when Ed returned, how they were both depressed and it was a terrible time ... but the relationship survived and gradually their appreciation grew, 'Ed and I became great friends – he was my mate and I was his'. Gaylene agrees. 'I grew up in a household that got happier and happier and my parents seemed to have more and more fun as time passed. Most people probably grow up with the opposite situation, interestingly' (Shepard 2009, 239).

This affair and Gaylene's father's war experiences became the subject of *Home by Christmas* (2010), a multi-layered family memoir starring Gaylene's daughter Chelsie Preston-Crayford as the young Tui. Reviewers have been unanimous in their praise of this film because it satisfies on many levels. It is formally complex, splicing archival war footage and stills with dramatised sequences that reconstruct what might have happened to Tui – who is played remarkably intuitively by her granddaughter – and it draws on earlier personal interviews where

Gaylene questioned her father about the war. Actor Tony Barry is disarmingly understated and convincing as the down-to-earth Ed Preston and Gaylene plays herself as interviewer. To complete the family involvement, Gaylene's sister – Sydney composer Jan Preston – wrote the score. The content is multilayered too. Ed's story was recorded before his death and before Tui's revelations in *War Stories*, but because Gaylene didn't know about her mother's affair when she interviewed her father she doesn't ask and he doesn't tell – giving the story added pathos, because the viewer knows more than what appears in the father's narrative strand. The tension builds as the audience awaits his homecoming wondering what will happen.

One of the strengths of *Home by Christmas* was that Gaylene persuaded her father to talk honestly about the war – and the resulting material is incredibly moving. As film critic Graeme Tuckett says, Tony Barry's performance 'put the lump in your throat and the smoke in your eye.'<sup>5</sup> The film has beautiful aesthetics. The cinematography by Alun Bollinger is visually romantic and the production artistically recreates the period in intimate detail. Chelsie as Tui is a luscious vision, poised and pensive, a great young acting talent on the way up. The enduring legacy of this film is, I believe, the



*Princess Te Puea, Sonja Davies and Patricia Grace – Princess Te Puea because she was a person who seized every opportunity to further the greater good of her people; Sonja Davies for doing the same in the trade union movement; and Patricia Grace for writing deeply political works that are complex and uncompromising ... Anne Salmond is another inspiration because she is truly bicultural. In her early books Amiria and Ervera, she put equal weight on written history and oral history – both Maori and Pakeha – and that was quite revolutionary.* (Shepard 2009, 209)

When I asked filmmaker Ramai Hayward whether she thought her success was a result of serendipity – being in the right place at the right time – or ambition, she thought it was both. You need to be persistent in searching for opportunities and then you have to make the most of them. The same is true for Gaylene Preston.

Some might say Gaylene landed on her feet with her first film *The Animals and the Lawnmower* (1972) issuing from her work as an art therapist at a psychiatric institution in England, or again when her sister recommended her to John O'Shea at Pacific Films and her first job as an art director rapidly evolved into a directing opportunity for magazine-style television series *Shoreline*. But Gaylene has talent and tenacity and John O'Shea recognised her ability immediately. He liked the way she interviewed a group of Toheroa diggers at the beach, which gave *Toheroa mania* (a short film for *Shoreline*) colour and character. Her first documentary *All the Way Up There* (1978) was the result of creative teamwork, the intuitive editing of Dell King, the camerawork of Warwick Attewell – and she had a great subject in Bruce Burgess, a man with cerebral palsy who had a dream to climb a mountain with the help of mountaineer Graeme Dingle. The film sold to *Encyclopaedia Britannica* for \$22,000, a vast windfall for an apprentice film director. This knack of finding and interviewing interesting people, and giving them a voice would become a signature of many of Gaylene's documentaries. She has an easy friendly manner and enjoys getting alongside people and having a yarn. She could relate to the school leavers in *Learning Fast* (1980); interviewed whitebaiters at Okarito in *Kai Purakau* (1987) about writer Keri

Hulme; engaged with dairy owners Dennis and Norm who kept a protective eye on the elderly poet Hone Tuwhare, the subject of *No Other Lips* (1996); and managed to create a safe environment for breast cancer survivors to talk about their experiences in *Titless Wonders* (2001).

At the conclusion to my MA thesis in 1991 and again nearly 20 years' later in *Her Life's Work* (Shepard 2009), Gaylene described her filmmaking choices and life direction in terms of zigzagging from one genre and one project to another. In 2009, she remarked ruefully that zigging and zagging 'can also mean up and down' and underpinning everything was always the fear that she might have made her last film. 'It's the film-maker's paranoia.' At that time, though, she had established a film studio in her own home and was enjoying a fantastically productive year with three films – *The Time of Our Lives* (2007), *Lovely Rita* (2008) and *Home by Christmas* (2010) – in various stages of production and post production. She was also thinking about a film on peace.

Recently, I caught up with Gaylene and asked for an update. She began by thinking she'd had a bit of a zag, but really it has just been the necessary incubation time between projects, something familiar to all artists. She spent much of 2010 touring *Home by Christmas*, which is one of the top fifteen highest grossing New Zealand films ever at the local box office and received five-star reviews from every major New Zealand film reviewer, a response that genuinely delights her.<sup>6</sup> For Anzac Day 2011, Gaylene edited a 30-minute silent movie on women in wartime, selected from footage stored at the National Archives. The film was projected on the walls of the Auckland Museum and, as she remarked, 'Once you remove the out-dated, ridiculous commentary – "the women are doing their bit for the war effort and needing their cups of chatterwater" – you get silent images of extreme poignancy and gravitas.'<sup>7</sup>

Currently, Gaylene is writing the foreword for a book about her friend and screenwriter the late Graeme Tetley and working on the dramatised sequences for *Strongman*. She says she is happy to be working on other people's projects because there is satisfaction in completing the companion films on her parents – two projects she had always wanted to make – and because it takes time in the film game to develop a

new project. Her peace film is in development. The beat goes on.

## ENDNOTES

1. Shepard, Deborah. 2011. Interview with Gaylene Preston. Auckland, 20 August.
2. Worth, Heather. 1986. 'An Interview with Pat Robins.' *Illusions*, Issue 3, Spring.
3. Hesse, Ruth. 2003. Review of *Perfect Strangers*. *InsideFilm*, October.
4. Stratton, David. 2003. Review of *Perfect Strangers*. *Variety*, August.
5. Tuckett, Graeme. 2010. 'Stunning Achievement.' *The Dominion Post*, 1 May.
6. *Home by Christmas* was selected for Film Festivals in Australia and was third most popular film at the Sydney Film Festival, received rave reviews at the London Film Festival, was a Finalist in the History Makers award, New York, and has been selected for screening on the Knowledge channel in Canada.
7. Shepard, Deborah. 2011. Interview with Gaylene Preston. Auckland, 20 August.

## REFERENCES

- Shepard, Deborah. 2000. *Reframing Women: A History of New Zealand Film*, Auckland: HarperCollins, 2000.
- Shepard, Deborah. 2009. *Her Life's Work: Conversations with Five New Zealand Women*, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2009.

personal reflective quality of the director/daughter's enquiry and that it was so obviously made with love and respect.

To survive as a creative artist anywhere in the world requires enormous dedication. Over the years Gaylene Preston has demonstrated a consistent level of commitment to her art and produced a solid body of work. So where did her energy and self-belief come from? Gaylene thinks it began in childhood, inherent in her self-confessed contrary personality. 'My second name is Mary and I always related to the nursery rhyme, "Mary, Mary, quite contrary." The family always said I was just contrary' (Shepard 2009, 227). She remembers her mother saying, '... you can't just do what you like, and I would think to myself that might be true for you but not for me. Even as a small child I can remember thinking that way' (Shepard 2009, 226). She also credits her father for offering her unconditional, steady, unwavering love. 'He was the epitome of total approval. He was the "love you whatever you're doing" sort of dad' (Shepard 2009, 203). Having a fair degree of 'stubborn bloody-mindedness' helped as well.

Artists also need mentors, but initially Gaylene felt 'mentor-less,' as she was unaware of the female pioneers in New Zealand film. They were still 'hidden from history.' So Gaylene looked outside the film world to other inspirational women.