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Directing might behind Mabo movie

- by: Ross Brundrett
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Jimi Bani as Eddie Mabo and Deborah Mailman as his wife, Bonita in a scene from the ABC drama 'Mabo'. Picture: ABC

Source: Supplied

THE tale of native title victor Eddie Mabo has become movie gold, says Ross Brundrett.

SHE survived the nerve-jangling pressure of directing a multi-million-dollar movie, so you'd think nothing much would faze Rachel Perkins. Wrong.

As the talented indigenous moviemaker explains, her latest directorial effort, the ABC telemovie *Mabo*, comes with its own set of expectations and pressures guaranteed to have the nerve ends dancing madly, like a hyped-up Fred Astaire, when it screens tomorrow.

"It's different than *Bran Nue Dae* where there was pressure about how it would be received, but it was spread over (its box office run)," Perkins says.

"With this, it's one night, and it's all about the ratings which come through so quickly, so it's immediate and of course that's on your mind."

That pressure hit home when the telemovie was originally slotted for last week, until programmers realised that was also the return date for *Downton Abbey* "which was just about the highest-rating show on television last year".

"We originally planned it to coincide with the 20th anniversary of the Mabo decision, but putting it back a week just made more sense in the end," she says.

"The upside, as one journalist reminded me, was that as a nation we get to see this story unfold at the same time, and that's a tremendous opportunity, to share something like that."

Nerves aside, Perkins has tremendous faith in the story of Eddie Mabo, the Torres Strait islander who took on the Australian Government and won a historic High Court decision on native title. It's a story she first dealt with in documentary form but always felt deserved the wider audience that a movie would attract.

"We had the idea for a while and always thought it would appeal to a large audience. I found that many people aren't aware of the story ... one of the actors even thought that Mabo was a place, not an actual person -- so telling the story became important."

Despite the numerous hurdles that Mabo confronted in his lifetime (the most heart-breaking, being when authorities wouldn't allow him to return to his native home on Murray Island to see his dying father), the tele-movie manages to remain upbeat and humanise his struggles over four decades and incorporates his love affair with wife Bonita and their family of 10, some of whom pop up in cameos.

Perkins says whenever the production ran into problems, the crew took inspiration from Mabo. "I really think it helped, after what Eddie went through, it inspired everyone on the set and the lead actors (Jimi Bani and Deb Mailman) are such class acts," she says.

"It's a real test to have people age so much in roles, just the make-up is a nightmare ... and one bad beard can ruin the whole thing ... but it all came together thankfully." For Perkins it represents another labour of love from her production house, Blackfella Films, with her next project being a TV series that includes the writing skills of gritty Englishman Jimmy McGovern, though she says she is keen to do more movies.

The daughter of pioneering indigenous activist Charles Perkins, she says she is still learning, even though she has been in the industry for more than half her life. "I was 18 when I started and now I'm 42, so it's been a long time, but I feel I'm still learning ... even making this movie I realised I knew very little about the life of people in the Torres Strait ... I think that is one of the most satisfying aspects of this job, there is always more to learn.

"I sort of fell into this business to begin with, I got a traineeship (with Imparja Television, an Aboriginal-owned TV station in the Central Australian Desert), but it didn't take long for me to realise this was what I wanted to do."

Since then Perkins has forged a career as a writer, producer and director though you get the idea she prefers the creative process to producing. She says there will come a time when she will not focus solely on indigenous stories but for now is happy in that role "because there are so many stories to tell".

One movie idea that keeps surfacing is a biog movie of her larger-than-life father, the former firebrand black activist who also was good enough as a soccer player to be trialled by Manchester United in the late 1950s, before he returned to Australia and led protesters on the Freedom Ride of 1965. He later became the first Aboriginal permanent head of a federal government department (Aboriginal Affairs).

"I get asked about that from time to time," she says. "And it is a big story to tell; I'm sure there is a movie in it. But for me, I just don't feel up to it right now." Whether it's the emotional investment she would have to make Perkins didn't say but did not rule out the possibility of revisiting the idea.

> Mabo, ABC1, tomorrow, 8.30pm
