



## MABO

### Teacher Notes – The Arts

#### Included in this document:

- Overview
- Classroom Discussion Topics
- Short Synopsis
- Mabo Story Background
- About The Production

#### OVERVIEW

In 1973 Eddie Koiki Mabo was shocked to discover that the land on Murray Island passed down by his ancestors for over sixteen generations was not legally recognised as his own. Rather than accept this injustice, Eddie began an epic ten-year fight for Australian law to recognise traditional land rights. Eddie never lived to see his land returned to him, but the name 'Mabo' is now one of the most significant names in Australian history. In 1992, at only 55, Eddie died of cancer. Five months later the High Court of Australia overturned the doctrine of *terra nullius*.

MABO is a poignant, factual drama ideal for teaching Media Arts. The film is steeped in social messages to help identify and signify our 'living communities'. MABO allows students of all backgrounds to witness and appreciate 'country, place, peoples and culture'. MABO pays homage to the activism and legacy of Eddie Koiki Mabo whilst endearing us to the character of the man, his life and loves. MABO immerses us in an emotional narrative based a true historical event.

'In the Arts, intercultural understanding combines personal, interpersonal, cultural and social understandings, skills and dispositions. Students learn about their own languages and cultures, and those of others, as they explore and experience the Arts subjects and works of art from diverse cultures, considering the historical, cultural, social and political contexts.

The Arts subjects offer opportunities for students to consider and represent their own beliefs and attitudes in different and new ways, gaining insight into both themselves and others, developing their abilities to empathise with others and to analyse intercultural experiences critically.'

## CLASSROOM DISCUSSION TOPICS

FILM PRODUCTION	ART APPRECIATION THROUGH MABO
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concept</li> <li>• Development</li> <li>• Research</li> <li>• Consultants</li> <li>• Writing</li> <li>• Directing</li> <li>• Casting</li> <li>• Locations</li> <li>• Set design</li> <li>• Wardrobe</li> <li>• Hair and Make-up</li> <li>• Scheduling</li> <li>• Storyboards</li> <li>• Shooting Script</li> <li>• Camera</li> <li>• Sound</li> <li>• Lighting</li> <li>• Music</li> <li>• Editing</li> <li>• Titles and Credits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Story</li> <li>• Narrative Texts</li> <li>• Colour Palettes</li> <li>• Oral History</li> <li>• Historical accounts</li> <li>• Cultural Identity</li> <li>• Singing and Song</li> <li>• Exclusion</li> <li>• Traditional Culture</li> <li>• Connection</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Visual Tradition</li> <li>• Expression of Ideas</li> <li>• Diversity of Audiences</li> <li>• Representational Practices</li> <li>• Thematic Interpretations</li> <li>• Patterning of Language</li> <li>• Sense of Affinity</li> <li>• Cultural Contexts</li> <li>• Audiences</li> </ul>

### SHORT SYNOPSIS

Eddie Koiki Mabo is exiled from Murray Island in 1953. This decision culminates in a life-long struggle for equality and land rights which eventually sees Eddie Koiki Mabo challenging *terra nullius* in the High Court of Australia. This ruling for the first time gave legal recognition to the fact that Indigenous land ownership existed in Australia before European settlement. This is the story of Eddie Koiki Mabo and Bonita Mabo who, together, proved that anything is possible.

### MABO STORY BACKGROUND

Murray Island is not a place many white Australians would have been familiar with in 1953. The inhabitants of this island speak in Meriam Mir, a language not spoken on mainland Australia. Legends are a way of passing on cultural stories on Murray Island. The culture of the island is rich in local legend. One such legend is the story of Malo, the Octopus God, who created eight clans in his name.

Eddie Koiki Mabo belonged to the Piadaram Clan and the songs and dances of the Piadaram people are an integral part of his family's heritage and culture. Singing is a means by which traditional values and island spirituality and rituals are passed from one generation to the next.

Eddie Koiki Mabo believed the laws that governed Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders were wrong. Eddie spent his adult life trying to change them.

In many respects the people of Murray Island live an idyllic existence. They live in a small but tight community and are governed by Malo tribal laws that have been in existence for many generations. The laws of Malo must be adhered to as these laws are what bind the community and keep the culture alive. Drinking alcohol and sex before marriage is prohibited.

As a young man, Eddie is accused of indulging in both alcohol and sexual misdemeanours and, as a result, has to face the tribal council. When the tribal elders find Eddie guilty he faces sentencing by the protector, Paddy Killoran. Whilst it is clear Killoran believes the crimes are exaggerated, Eddie is found guilty and must pay the price. He is bound by two laws, the tribal Malo Law and the Queensland Government's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Act. This is where the crossover of traditional culture and Australian law and politics comes into play and is the crux of this film's greater thematic discussion.

Regardless of whether Eddie is innocent or not, he is ultimately punished by a law enshrined to '*protect the people from themselves*' – a comment made by Killoran in one of the early scenes in the film. As protector on Murray Island Killoran is the representative of the Queensland Government. The film makes it clear that this indictment demeans the Murray Island community as it makes a clear distinction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

There is also an undercurrent of Christianity running through the film's early sequences. It is a reminder of the time when Christian missionaries were hoping to convert Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders to the Christian faith.

We soon discover Eddie is headstrong, with a strong sense of cultural identity passed on to him from his adoptive father, Benny Mabo. Eddie won't accept Killoran's offer to work on the garbage truck on the island and so he is exiled to mainland Australia for a period of twelve months.

When Benny Mabo adopted Eddie after Eddie's mother died prematurely, he treated Eddie as a son and brought him up believing he would one day own the land and the seas that had been passed down for generations. Leaving Murray Island was hard, but getting back would prove harder. Eddie moved to Townsville and began working on the railways. He met his wife, Bonita Nehow, and together they became a force to reckon with.

"My wife is the most important person in my life, has stuck by me over many hardships and hurdles in life but somehow we made it, perhaps better than others. To me my wife has been the most adorable person, a friend closest in my life, a most wonderful lover, and we loved every minute of our lives together."

Eddie Koiki Mabo

Eddie Koiki Mabo was shocked to discover the Murray Island land, passed down to him over sixteen generations, was not legally his.

So began the immense battle to get Australian law to recognise Indigenous land ownership. The ten-year struggle came at great personal cost to both Eddie and his family. This is a story of a man on a journey. A journey that would take him to the High Court of Australia and see him enshrined in Australian history.

### **ABOUT THE PRODUCTION**

An ABC TV and Blackfella Films telemovie, MABO was shot on location on Murray Island, Townsville, Magnetic Island, Brisbane and Canberra.

MABO features an outstanding ensemble cast including:

Jimi Bani (The Straits, RAN) as Eddie Koiki Mabo

Deborah Mailman (Offspring, Rush, The Secret Life of Us)

Colin Friels (The Eye of the Storm, Bastard Boys)

Miranda Otto (The Lord Of The Rings: The Return Of The King)

Rob Carlton (Paper Giants, Underbelly: The Golden Mile, Chandon Pictures)

Ewen Leslie (Love My Way, Kokoda)

Leon Ford (The Pacific, Beneath Hill 60)

Tom Budge (Bran Nue Dae, The Pacific, East of Everything).

Written by Sue Smith (Bastard Boys, RAN, Brides of Christ), MABO is directed by Rachel Perkins (Bran Nue Dae, First Australians, One Night The Moon) and produced by Darren Dale and Miranda Dear with David Ogilvy, Carole Sklan, and Sally Riley, as executive producers.

In making the start of production announcement, Carole Sklan, ABC TV Head of Fiction said “At the heart of the struggle is the tender love story of Mabo and his wife, Bonita - the woman he met as a teenager, loved for 30 years and with whom he raised 10 children. It tells of the deep love and partnership that sustained their fight to change the face of Australia forever.”

Director Rachel Perkins said “This is an iconic story in the tradition of great Australian tales – how a man and his wife and mates profoundly changed the nation with the bloody-minded belief that the truth would prevail.”