

Zach's Ceremony review – an affecting portrait of growing up Indigenous in two worlds

3 / 5 stars

Observant and low-key, Aaron Petersen's coming-of-age documentary follows one boy's journey through Indigenous and non-Indigenous rites of passage



In documentary Zach's Ceremony, Zach Doomadgee faces the challenge of becoming a man in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia.



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When I spoke to renowned Australian choreographer Stephen Page in January last year about [his sublime movie musical, Spear](#), our conversation broached a small but significant character in the film known only by the ominous moniker Suicide Man. Page described him as an urban Aboriginal, “probably similar to me”, driven to madness after failing to reconcile a torn culture: his ancient heritage on one hand and place in mainstream western culture on the other.

Just as we saw Spear explore that challenge in lush metaphysical detail, we see it play out in lower key in director Aaron Petersen's touching documentary Zach's Ceremony. The film was shot over six years and captures the coming of age of subject Zach Doomadgee, who is 10 years old at the beginning and 16 at the end.

The fair-skinned Zach is called white in far-north Queensland Aboriginal lands and black in his inner west Sydney high school. “Not black, not white, sort of in the middle,” is how he describes himself, adding: “I feel like I don’t know myself.”

The structure of Petersen’s documentary is like a concert recital film ([the recent Wide Open Sky](#) comes to mind), with life lessons learned en route to a musical finale that has profound significance for its participants. “I want to be a man, not just a little boy that thinks he knows everything,” says the bushy-tailed little Zach at the start – not the only time he exhibits a beyond-his-years knack for self-examination.



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Zach is called white in far-north Queensland Aboriginal lands and black in his inner west Sydney high school.

Most coming-of-age films involve subjects who crave the spoils of adulthood but reject (at least initially) the idea it comes with obligations. This film plays along slightly different lines. Guided by his father, Alec (also associate producer), Zach is keen not just to take part in an age-old rite of passage, but to wear the responsibilities that come with it. Alec encourages Zach’s journey to connect with his ancestry partly to counter issues with his behaviour, including experimentation with drugs and violent reactions to racism.

Petersen, a white director, was granted rare access to the titular tribal ceremony. It’s quite a sight: a rich, vibrant, sensuous affair infused with ancient relevance. There are dances connected to the land and animals; beautiful and peculiar makeup and costumes; a sense of community stretching well beyond conventional notions of togetherness. What would the equivalent event for a 16-year-old in Anglo-Australian society be? A house party piss-up, with chips and dip and stubbies in an ice-filled bath?

As I was contemplating this, Petersen segued to Zach’s western-style birthday bash. And indeed: there’s dancing, techno, plastic cups and a river of booze, the shenanigans capped off by a sudden “party’s over” wrap-up from the old man. To draw a comparison between rites of passage, if you can call the latter that, the director (who also edited the film) doesn’t need to put too fine a point on it; just to place the scenes side-by-side in the running time.



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Zach's Ceremony unfolds in observational style, affecting as a portrait of Zach's growing age and maturity, the customs he embraces and the spirit with which knowledge is passed on from elders. It is less compelling as an essay incorporating broader historical and cultural issues such as alcoholism and suicide in Indigenous communities; these subjects are complicated, and Petersen assigns them only cursory attention.

At times, the modest look and feel of Zach's Ceremony errs towards a well-scrubbed home movie, oscillating from exotic to urbane as the subject maintains his foot in both worlds. For Zach, the challenge of becoming a man in both societies is about more than culture or heritage; it comes down to the question of what it means to be an Indigenous Australian in the new millennium. The film gets better as it goes along, as if the subjects became increasingly comfortable with the presence of cameras and crew. By the end I didn't want to say goodbye to Zach, imagining [a 7 Up!-style program](#) intermittently returning to his life.

The tagline for Spear was "A foot in each world. A heart in none." The former is true of Zach Doomadgee, but perhaps not the latter: his heart is in both. And like the film, his presence is warming and tender.