

VACANT POSSESSION

A film by Margot Nash

In 2020, Vacant Possession was restored from original film materials



Press Kit

© Wintertime Films & As If Productions

35mm 92 minutes 1994 Australia

Vacant Possession was produced with the assistance of the Australian Film Commission

<https://www.margotnash.com/vacant-possession>

Distributed by Ronin Films

www.roninfilms.com.au or 02 6248 0851

Synopsis

Following her mother's death, Tessa returns to the old family home, a ramshackle, dilapidated cottage in a coastal town. The visit brings personal memories that still disturb her, and also brings her into contact with a neighbouring Aboriginal family with its own story of dislocation. Her father, too, returns: a former soldier still struggling with demons from his wartime trauma and unable to communicate with his family.

A haunting film about personal and public loss, about white ownership and Aboriginal dispossession and about the difficulty of reconciliation.



'Probes the question of Australian identity, intelligently and cinematically' –
David Stratton, Variety

'A truly exciting piece of cinema' – Adrian Martin, The Age, Melbourne.

'Daring and mature ... a landmark Australian film' - Anna Maria Dell 'Oso,
Sydney Morning Herald



Year Completed 1994

Guage and Stock

Running Time

Ratio

Sound

35mm Kodak Eastmancolour

95 min

1:1.85

Dolby A Stero

Filmmaker's Statement

The great white Australian dream is to own a house but for Aboriginal people the dream is to regain ownership of the sacred land. When Captain Cook took possession of Australia in 1788 in the name of the British Crown, the land was deemed 'Terra Nullius' i.e. vacant, uninhabited. This principal was not overturned legally until the historic Mabo decision of 1992.

Vacant Possession is a film about an empty house, an inheritance inhabited by dreams and memories.

Growing up in Australia I never saw much less met Aboriginal people until I was an adult. The history books didn't tell the stories of dispossession and destruction of the land, the stories of injustice and racism. While Aboriginal people live with the devastating consequences of colonisation many of them pity white people because we have no 'place', no dreaming. We don't know where we belong.

I wanted to explore notions of house, home, land, place, family and belonging from a white point of view. I wanted to explore the image of the house as a psychological space that could be possessed and I wanted to tell a story of a dysfunctional white family ripped to shreds by alcohol and the effects of war.

The opening premise of *Vacant Possession* is the death of the mother. After years of estrangement Tessa returns home when her mother dies leaving her and her sister the family home. A house haunted by emotional memories. I started writing about the mother/daughter relationship, about grief and estrangement and the past. I saw it as a metaphor for the breakdown of relationship to land, country and place. I wanted to engage with contemporary issues such as environmental destruction and family breakdown. I ended up making a film that was also about the father/daughter relationship, about repressed male grief and the complexities of reconciliation in the present.

MARGOT NASH
November 1994

AWARDS

1998 Audience Award: La Mo-Viola Cinema Delle Donna – Torino, Italy.

1996 Speciale Mention du Jury: Films Des Femmes Créteil, France.

AFI Nomination Best Director

AFI Nomination Best Original Screenplay

AFI Nomination Best Editing,

AFI Nomination Best Sound

1995 Audience Award most popular Australian film Sydney Film Festival.

FESTIVALS and SCREENINGS

2024 Karla Grant Presents: SBS On Demand

2022 Unknown Pleasures - Thornbury Picture House, Melbourne

2021 69th Melbourne International Film Festival, *Restorations* section.

2019 University of Technology Sydney – Margot Nash Retirement conference.

2017 NITV screening in Reconciliation Week plus SBS Video On Demand

2016 [Between Past and Present: The films of Margot Nash](#) Melbourne Cinematheque ACMI

2015 The Arc Cinema, National Film and Sound Archive

2002 Buenos Aires 5th International Festival of Independent film. ARGENTINA

1999 Tribute to Australian & NZ Women Filmmakers: Films Des Femmes Créteil, FRANCE

1998 Dreaming Reels – NFSA CANBERRA

Downloading Downunder Australian Film, Video and New Media AMSTERDAM

1997 Femme Totale – Dortmund GERMANY

La Mo-Viola Cinema Delle Donna – Torino ITALY

Ist Women's Film Festival Seoul – KOREA

Australian Film Festival Johannesburg SOUTH AFRICA.

1996 Portland International Film Festival, Seattle International Film Festival

Films Des Femmes CRÉTEIL, Cannes Film Festival - Tribute to Australian Cinema

ADELAIDE In Spaces Unsuspected Telstra Film Festival

Strictly OZ USA – UCLA and WASHINGTON (opening night film)

SYD Travelling Film Fest, Australian Day Film Festival Maleny

Dealing With Difference New Australian films KOREA Seoul, Pusan & Kwangju

Australian Identities, history and culture – DUBLIN Arsenal Film Forum – LATVIA

Cinema Tout Ecran – GENEVA, OLDENBURG.

1995 CHICAGO International Film Festival

HAWAII International Film Festival

ASIA PACIFIC Indonesia

Jump Cut International Film Festival PERTH

BRISBANE International Film Festival

SYDNEY International Film Festival

MELBOURNE International Film Festival

Theatrical release: 1996 Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, London

Cairns, Noosa, Darwin, Adelaide, Hobart

Broadcast: SBS Australia Day 2001; NAIDOC week July 2001, SBS, NITV 2018-2019



RESOURCES

Vacant Possession is a useful resource for schools, libraries, universities and TAFE. Clips can be viewed on the Australian Screen website. <https://aso.gov.au/titles/features/vacant-possession/>

MAIN CAST

Tessa
Frank
Joyce
Kate
Aunty Beryl
Millie
Gracie
Thea
Teenage Tessa
Mitch
Young Tessa
Billy
Mrs Costas
Estate Agent

Pamela Rabe
John Stanton
Toni Scanl
Linden Wilkinson
Rita Bruce
Olivia Patten
Barbara Wyndon
Phyllis Baker
Simonne Pengelly
Graham Moore
Melissa Ippolito
Tom E. Lewis
Tessa Mallo
Bill Young

KEY CREW

Director, Writer
Producer
Director of Photography
Editor
Production Designer
Composer
Casting
Aboriginal Consulatat
Sound Recordist
Sound Design
Sound Mix
Wardrobe
Stills
Production Manager
Production Company

Margot Nash
John Winter
Dion Beebe
Veronika Jenet
Michael Philips
Alistair Jones
Faith Martin
Kathy um-Sing
Bronwyn Murphy
Audio Loc
Tony Vaccher & John Dennison
Clarissa Patterson
Corrie Ancone
Caroline Bonham
Wintertime Films



REVIEWS

The Age 9.6.95

CRITICS' CHOICE

Vacant Possession

MARGOT Nash's *Vacant Possession*, premiering at the Melbourne International Film Festival, is one of the most striking and assured Australian feature debuts of recent years.

The plot resonates uncannily with that of *Hotel Sorrento* — a woman (the superb Pamela Rabe) returns to her home in New South Wales, fights with her sister (Linden Wilkinson) and tries to come to terms with a deeply disturbed father (John Stanton).

But *Vacant Possession* takes a broader social perspective than *Hotel Sorrento*. For the heroine of this film, exploring the past includes facing up to the Aboriginal legacy in Australian history.

Fortunately, this is not a gingerly "politically correct" movie. Vivid elements of racial and sexual and melodrama bring it powerfully alive.

Above all, it is a surrealist-inspired "dream film" that evokes a history of women's cinema running from Maya Deren to Susan Dermody's *Breathing Under Water* (1991). Rabe confronts the ghosts of her history in a haunted family house; past and present experiences freely intermingle. The emotions stirred within her are complex and ambivalent.

Often brilliantly directed — with superb cinematography from Dion Beebe and a compellingly atmospheric soundtrack — *Vacant Possession* is a truly exciting piece of cinema, and certainly the best Australian film to have appeared so far this year.

— Adrian Martin

The Melbourne International Film Festival, Astor,
Mon 6pm.

VACANT POSSESSION

(AUSTRALIAN)

A Wintertime Films/As If Prods. production, in association with the Australian Film Commission. Produced by John Winter.

Directed, written by Margot Nash. Camera (Moviela color), Dion Beebe; editor, Veronika Jenet; music, Alistair Jones; production design, Michael Phillips; art direction, Nicholas Bonham; costume design, Clarissa Patterson; sound, Bronwyn Murphy; aboriginal consultant, Kathy Kum-Sing; assistant director, Charles Rotherham; casting, Faith Martin. Reviewed at Australian Film Commission screening room, Sydney, April 4, 1995. (In Melbourne and Sydney film festivals.) Running time: 92 MIN.

Tessa Pamela Rabe
Frank (Father) John Stanton
Joyce (Mother) Toni Scanlon
Kate Linden Wilkinson
Auntie Beryl Rita Bruce
Millie Olivia Patten
Gracie Barbara Wyndon
Thea Phyllis Baker
Teenage Tessa Simonne Pengelly
With: Melissa Ippolito, Graham Moore, Tom E. Lewis, Tessa Mallos, Tony Barry.

"Vacant Possession," a first feature from writer-director Margot Nash, probes the question of Australian identity in the mid-'90s intelligently and cinematically, and should stir up enough critical kudos to perform well in niche outlets on its home turf. Internationally, fests should take a look at this fully funded Australian Film Commission low-budgeter, with specialized theatrical and TV exposure also a possibility.

Against the backdrop of the ongoing debate about the status of the continent's original inhabitants, Nash cleverly plays out an ironic story of sibling rivalry and the return of a long-absent expatriate, themes that are, coincidentally, similar to those of Richard Franklin's current "Hotel Sorrento."

Tessa (Pamela Rabe) left Australia as a teen when her father discovered she was pregnant by an Aborigine youth; she had an abortion, and has been living in an unspecified country since. Upon her mother's death, she returns to the old family home on the shores of Sydney's Botany Bay.

VARIETY

JULY 10 - 16, 1995

Tessa and her sister, Kate (Linden Wilkinson), clash over ownership of the house; their unstable father (John Stanton) has relinquished control.

Pic's title has a dual meaning, referring not only to the vacant house but also to Australia itself, falsely claimed as uninhabited by the British when they colonized the country. Further ironies lie in the fact that polluted Botany Bay was the first place on the continent visited by Capt. Cook, who named it for its abundant foliage; it was traditionally the home of aboriginal people, some of whom still live there.

Rabe, one of the femmes in "Sirens," gives an intelligent reading of the role of Tessa, and is backed by a strong supporting cast, especially Toni Scanlon, who plays her mother in the numerous flashbacks; and by Olivia Patten, as Millie, the Aborigine child Tessa befriends.

Production designer Michael Phillips deserves special mention for evoking, on a small budget, the specific look of the bayside cottage. Clarissa Patterson's costumes also add to the film's impact. Alistair Jones' score deserves commendation.

"Vacant Possession" will perform modestly at the B.O., but it will appeal to thoughtful filmgoers willing to embrace its philosophies and insights.

—David Stratton

TAKING POSSESSION

Throwing tomatoes at the camera was one of the first things Margot Nash did when she became a film director. Now, 20 years later, she recalls that exuberant assault on male ways of seeing, which were represented in her early film, *We Aim To Please*. "It was very experimental," she concedes with a grin.

After years spent editing and directing documentaries, Nash wanted to challenge cinematic tradition. But when it came to her first feature, *Vacant Possession*, starring Pamela Rabe, Nash opted to explore narrative and seduce a mainstream audience, without using tomatoes. And she did. Out of the 250 films screened at this year's Sydney Film Festival, *Vacant Possession* polled in the top 10.

This elegant, brooding story of a woman, Tessa, who returns to Australia and her family home near Botany Bay, has seamlessly interwoven sequences from the past and present that haunt the central character's journey into her own past. Tessa's dead mother, her war-scarred father, her teenage self and the Aboriginal family down the road are all part of a family history distorted by fear and amnesia.

The process of writing and making the film was both a personal catharsis and a political minefield. "I felt that it was important to tell a story of a dysfunctional, white, alcoholic family. We salute *Once Were Warriors*, but what happens when we turn the camera on ourselves?"

□

Ruth Hessey

Elle Magazine Aug '95

Film review

'Vacant Possession'

By David Hunter

A well-made character study of a woman coming to terms with her difficult past when she returns to the memory-haunted family home, writer-director Margot Nash's "Vacant Possession" is an evocative, powerful experience, an Australian import in the same serious vein as the films of Gillian Armstrong and Jane Campion...

The 1995 film unspools locally tonight as part of "Strictly Oz," UCLA Film and Television Archive's comprehensive history of Down Under cinema. Unlike to travel far beyond the festival circuit, Nash's film is a natural for video, where it will find a small but appreciative audience.

Pamela Rabe is excellent as Tessa, the younger of two sisters scarred from growing up with an unstable father and weak mother, whose death leaves their aging Botany Bay home unattended. With their troubled dad in and out of hospitals and long gone from

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 Writer-director Margot Nash
 Producer John Winter
 Director of photography Dion Beebe
 Editor Veronika Jenet
 Costume designer Clareesa Patterson
 Production designer Michael Phillips
 Music Alistair Jones
 Casting Faith Martin
 Color/stereo
 Cast: Pamela Rabe, John Stanton, Linden Wilkinson, Toni Scanlon
 Running time — 95 minutes
 No MPAA rating

the scene, the two siblings clash over who gets the house and the windfall from its sale.

In a dreamy, lyrical way, with numerous flashbacks, the film unfolds as Tessa follows her grief over the loss of her mother into the most intimate, painful recesses of her youth. As she sorts through belongings and is spooked by the house's vibes, she befriends an aborigine girl and recalls her ill-fated love affair with an aborigine local as a teen-ager.

Her father's long-ago war trauma
 See "VACANT" on page 66

'Vacant'

Continued from page 20—

mas and racism drove Tessa from home to a career as a professional gambler and presumably a dismal romantic life. Eventually she learns more about his mean-spirited control over her life and is forced to confront him in person.

Even when a powerful storm makes a wreck of the house and reconciliation brews among all parties, Nash's film avoids sentimentality and easy solutions. Dion Beebe's cinematography is superbly attuned to the shifting moods of Nash's story line, while Alistair Jones' score is likewise excellent. □

MARGOT NASH Writer/Director - BIOGRAPHY

Margot Nash is a filmmaker, photographer and academic. Her film credits include the award-winning feature dramas *Vacant Possession* (1994) and *Call Me Mum* (2005), the experimental shorts *Shadow Panic* (1989) and *We Aim To Please* (1976) and the feature documentaries *For Love Or Money* (1983) and *The Silences* (2015). She has worked as a consultant and mentor for Australian Indigenous filmmakers and worked in the Pacific running documentary workshops for Pacific Island women producers. Her 2015 personal essay documentary *The Silences* screened nationally and internationally and in 2016 she won an Australian Writers' Guild AWGIE Award for the screenplay. Margot worked as a Senior Lecturer in Communications at the University of Technology Sydney teaching screenwriting from 2000 – 2018. In 2019 she collaborated with performance artist Victoria Hunt to make the award-winning short film *Take* and in 2021 she exhibited a series of photographs called *Songs for Gaia*. In 2023 she made the short film *Undercurrents: meditations on power* which screened at the Warsaw International Film Festival, MIFF and the Adelaide Film Festival. She is currently a Visiting Fellow in Communications at UTS. See: <https://www.margotnash.com>

JOHN WINTER Producer - BIOGRAPHY

John's numerous producing credits include the AFI winning *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *Paperback Hero* (Hugh Jackman), Berlin entrant *My Mother Frank* (Sinéad Cusack and Sam Neil), Sydney Film Festival opening night film, *Doing Time for Patsy Cline*, and Script Producer on the first series of the ABC's high-rating *SeaChange*. Now writing and directing, John's short films include *Apartment 1911* (Byron International Film Festival) and *Mirror Mirror* which screened at 27 festivals including *Frameline32*, the San Francisco International LGBT Film Festival and opened the Melbourne Queer Film Festival. His ATOM award winning feature film, *Black & White & Sex* screened at the International Film Festival Rotterdam, was in competition in Taipei as well as screening at the Sydney & Brisbane festivals.