

FILM

Iain Forsyth & Jane Pollard: 20,000 Days on Earth

From a cinematic perspective, *20,000 Days on Earth* is a semi-fictionalised biopic charting the life of rock star Nick Cave. On this level, it offers a beautifully paced day-in-the-life narrative, laced with anecdotes from Cave's turbulent past and engaging footage of his musical performances. With Cave reportedly retaining final say on the edit, the result, unsurprisingly, paints him as a talented and witty, though hardly untroubled, performer. So far, so award winning, and the film duly collected the Grand Jury and Director prizes at this year's Sundance Film Festival. Yet these prizes were awarded in the documentary category, despite the writing credits – 'Iain Forsyth & Jane Pollard, Nick Cave' – suggesting that this might be a rather more slippery cinematic beast.

Forsyth & Pollard, their practice has taught us, walk the line between theatrical effect and performative affect, the difference between the fictional narrative stagecraft beneath the proscenium arch and the supposedly more direct emotional connection between, say, a post-punk rock group and its audience. Cave, it turns out, is a perfect vehicle for this exploration; while he may acknowledge the proscenium, he also revels in the arch: 'I can control the weather with my moods,' he proclaims, 'I just can't control my moods, is all.'

The film allows Forsyth & Pollard to probe this adopted persona and examine its foundational myths. To this end, one trope they adopt is that of Cave conversing with former collaborators while driving along the rain-soaked roads of his adopted Brighton, the windscreen wiper a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* constantly distancing viewers from the protagonists. During one such ride, there is a telling moment when the passenger, professional Cockney ruffian Ray Winstone, admits that he had to reinvent himself once he reached a certain age. But Cave responds by arguing that this is not an option for him because his persona was adopted too early – he formed The Birthday Party with school friends when only 16. So if this persona has in some way entrapped Cave throughout his adult life – the film's title refers to his mid-50s age – is there still such a thing as the real Cave? A therapy session with Darian Leader is convened to answer this question, but it becomes clear



Iain Forsyth & Jane Pollard
20,000 Days on Earth 2014
production still

that the star's tumultuous early years, which involved school expulsions and the death of his literary father (which the teenage Cave was told about while his mother was bailing him from burglary charges) could plausibly lead to his current character traits. If the mythical Nick Cave is a theatrical mask, it is one that apparently fits snugly to the contours of the man underneath.

When discussing his stagecraft – Kylie Minogue in the back seat now – Cave notes his preference for selecting one front-row fan to completely freak out. Cut to concert footage of him performing *Higgs Boson Blues*, an apocalyptic song that invokes Robert Johnson, the legendary blues guitarist apocryphally granted his fretting talents through a deal with the devil, but which in Cave's telling has the bluesman ripping off Lucifer – it seems that, for Cave, no soul is worth such musical skill. The song includes a repeated refrain: 'Can you feel my heartbeat?' At this, Cave hunches down at the front of the stage and takes the hand of a young woman. He places the palm of her hand against his breast and stares into her eyes while continuing to sing, 'Can you feel my heartbeat?' What is Cave's status at this moment? Is he the character in the song? Is he a narrating performer, a Greek chorus? Is he still the Australian boy from Warracknabeal? Or is he playing God, or even Satan? Or have these fictions finally been laid to rest by the Higgs boson, the so-called God particle? Whatever, the woman in the audience is undoubtedly in a state of emotional rapture, awed by this unexpected connection with her idol. 'Can you feel my heartbeat?' Her free hand covers her mouth, shaking. 'Can you feel my heartbeat?' Welling with tears of disbelief, she finally nods: yes, she can. Cave calmly shakes his head: no, he indicates, no you can't. Whatever it is that she is feeling, it is not his heart.

The intensity of this moment and the clearly potent emotional effect that it has on this audience member are at odds with Cave's previous matter-of-fact mention of his stagecraft shtick, and this paradox is central to both the film and Forsyth & Pollard's wider practice. Emphasising this contradiction is the impassioned way that Cave and his longtime collaborator Warren Ellis discuss a performance by Nina Simone at the Meltdown Festival Cave curated in 1999. Clearly transfixed by the transformative power of Simone's stage presence, Cave argues that everyone who witnessed that performance was changed by it, and he is struck by envy when discovering that Ellis recovered a relic: a piece of gum Simone stuck to the piano as she performed. These characters, these songs, these stories, these props, this music, however staged, all perform genuine emotional affect. And for Forsyth & Pollard, artists who have previously employed tribute bands to re-perform classic gigs, this truth is axiomatic.

If limits are reached in *20,000 Days on Earth*, they are the limits of the medium itself. It is a film about experience, whereas Forsyth & Pollard's previous performances embody experience, with the contradictory emotions of the audience member – 'Can you feel my heartbeat' – played out internally. In the film, as the music rises and lifts the live crowd with it, instead we are reminded that here we are, passively sitting in row after row of cinema seats, gazing at a play of light on the wall of a darkened room – Plato's Cave, after all. ■

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