

THE BIG ISSUE



TAPPING INTO AN ENIGMA

FILM
**EDWARD
LAWRENSON**

In **20,000 DAYS ON EARTH**, Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard's compelling portrait of Nick Cave, we learn that the Bad Seeds frontman kept a weather diary for a year in the early 2000s. The journal, he explains, was an account of the sometimes glorious, mostly grey skies over his adopted home town of Brighton, and was a way for the Australian to cope with the worst the English climate could throw at him. It got to be an obsession. "You know," Cave tells us, "I can control the weather with my moods. I just can't control my moods."

It's a telling remark – a statement that at once expresses the swaggering omnipotence we might expect from a rock star of Cave's pedigree, but at the same time it is also a touchingly humble admission that he's subject to the same whims and shifts in temper as the rest of us. In an age when musicians come pre-packaged and overexposed, Cave remains an enigma – and, to its credit, this film doesn't try to solve it with single answers.

Instead this brilliant, shimmering collage of a film purports to be an account of Cave's 20,000th day alive, and follows

him on a day of writing, recording and reminiscing in Brighton. Don't expect a conventional documentary: artists-turned-directors Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard have fabricated in collaboration with Cave a series of scenarios, each intended to reveal a different aspect of Cave's working process.

The result is a fascinating play between revelation and fakery, between spontaneity and set-up. At one point he visits the grandly appointed Nick Cave archives. Speaking to the earnest archivists Cave seems bemused and ironic, until he recollects performing with Nina Simone, and finds himself floored by the force of the memory. Another time Cave visits a psychiatrist, who probes him on his childhood. Mostly Cave commands the conversation, offering the shrink colourful fragments from his youth in small town Warracknabeal. But then he's asked a question about his late father, and the singer is momentarily undone.

All credit to Cave for showing such moments of vulnerability. But the lasting fascination of the film is less on Cave the man as his approach to work. Regular collaborators turn up in his car as

he's driving through Brighton to talk about his artistic practices. Kylie, bafflingly, compares him to a tree ("Is it a big one?" Cave asks, proving his ego emerged intact from his sessions with the shrink). Ray Winstone expands on the nature of performance.

What emerges is a deeply illuminating insight into the creative process. In the voiceover that runs through the film – and which the Australian delivers with oaky authority – Cave professes an almost spiritual belief in the power of music, and live performance in particular, to make ineffable connections between the singer and the audience.

It's a definitely old-fashioned view of the charismatic rock star, but in the concert footage that triumphantly closes the film you don't doubt he deserves it. "I'm transforming, I'm vibrating," he sings during Jubilee Street to an adoring crowd, his stick-thin body making moves that most men his age would be advised against, demanding, "Look at me now!" ●

**20,000 DAYS
ON EARTH**

Directors: Iain Forsyth and
Jane Pollard (15)