Over 40 years since its disastrous U.S. release and once feared lost, WAKE IN FRIGHT, one of the seminal films in Australian film history, is now getting a long-overdue rerelease in America courtesy of Drafthouse Films. This resurrection also shines a new light on its veteran director, Ted Kotcheff (pictured).

Opening this Friday for a special one-week engagement at New York City’s Film Forum (209 West Houston; 212-727-8110) and rolling out across two dozen U.S. cities between now and December (go here for cities and dates), WAKE IN FRIGHT follows the tragic trajectory of a British schoolteacher (played by the late Gary Bond) who loses everything in a gambling-and-alcohol-fueled lost weekend in the brutal Outback. The locals include a drunken doctor played by scream legend Donald Pleasence, who delivers one of his best performances ever. The film is a career highpoint for Canadian director Kotcheff, best known for a wide variety of films since then, including action (FIRST BLOOD, UNCOMMON VALOR), comedies (WEEKEND AT BERNIE’S, WHO IS KILLING THE GREAT CHEFS OF EUROPE?), dramas (THE APPRENTICESHIP OF DUDDY KRAVITZ, SPLIT IMAGE) and sports films (NORTH DALLAS FORTY).

In this exclusive two-part interview, the still-vibrant 81-year-old Kotcheff discuses the loss and rediscovery of his film, its painstaking restoration and the (literal) shooting of its controversial kangaroo-hunt scene.

FANGORIA: This week, WAKE IN FRIGHT will be returning to New York City after 40 years; how does this “premiere” compare to its previous New York engagement all those years ago?

TED KOTCHEFF: [*Laughs*] Well, this is a much better exhibit of the film. Back then, the distributors did not believe in WAKE IN FRIGHT, and we opened it in January during a snowstorm on a Sunday night in some small New York art cinema. Of course, being in a blizzard, no one came. I said, "I told you, Kotcheff, nobody would come." It opened without any advertising or publicity whatsoever. Nothing. They really didn't believe in it, and they just went through the motions. This is entirely different now; everybody knows about the film, it's getting tremendous publicity from everybody. I'm really thrilled it now has a proper showing.

FANG: The original United Artists release was under the title OUTBACK.

KOTCHEFF: Yes, for some odd reason, they didn't like WAKE IN FRIGHT, and I said I didn't like OUTBACK; it sounded like a *National Geographic* film! And they said, "Well, it sounds like a Hitchcock film." I said, "That's bad?!" Many years ago, one of the great writers of CASABLANCA told me, "You know, you're going to be a terrific director; I'm sure you're going to fight for the integrity of your film. But there are two areas not to bother wasting your time about with distributors: titles and endings."

FANG: How did a Canadian director from Toronto wind up in Australia directing WAKE IN FRIGHT?

KOTCHEFF: It started because I was living in London at the time. And a terrific writer, Evan Jones, and I had worked together on a film called TWO GENTLEMEN SHARING, about the racial situation in London in the '60s. He handed me a book one day and said, "WAKE IN FRIGHT by Kenneth Cook. Read it. Right up your alley, kid—a lost weekend in the Outback." And I had a bit of trepidation making a film about a world I knew little about. However, when I arrived in Australia, I discovered the Outback was not that dissimilar to Northern Canada, where I came from. The same vast, empty spaces that turned out to be not liberating, but claustrophobic and imprisoning. I used to refer to Canada as "Australia on the Rocks." And so I found when I got there that it was very similar to Canada, and also that they have a male-dominated society. And Australia, of course, is also similar in other ways; they are both ex-British colonies and suffer from a kind of inferiority complex. I understood that country very well. But still, I didn't know the country, so I spent a lot of time doing research in the Outback and going to pubs and bars and talking to men and getting the feeling of what they're like out there.

FANG: How close was the screenplay to the original novel?

KOTCHEFF: It was very faithful, and Evan and I worked on that together. The novel is very spare in dialogue, but the characters—there's a tremendous veracity to the whole feeling of it. Kenneth Cook had been in Broken Hill; he worked as a journalist, so he really had first-hand experience and knowledge of the Outback. You could see this was the way it was.

FANG: Based on its title and not knowing much about the movie, many have assumed over the years that WAKE IN FRIGHT is a horror film, but it's not. This is going back to our original discussion…

KOTCHEFF: You agree with United Artists?

FANG: No, no, I don't agree with United Artists. But a lot of people today assume it's something horrific, but it's more of a dark, psychological drama.

KOTCHEFF: That's right—that's exactly what it is. What attracted me to it originally was that first of all, he's an outsider. He's a teacher, he hates the Outback and he doesn't wanna be there. And also, I sometimes felt out of my element; what's terrifying about it is our central character has no idea who he is or what he's capable of, except when he's put under the extreme circumstances he does endure, and he sees a whole dark side of himself that comes up, so there is a kind of horrific element to it.

FANG: Right. Much of what happens in the film is profoundly disturbing and frightening as we watch John Grant descend into drunken madness after everything goes wrong. Is that what you mean in terms of the horrific elements?

KOTCHEFF: Yes, exactly right. Had he gone onto Sydney like he was supposed to… Instead, he lost all of his money and got stuck in this horrific, horrific town. He never would have discovered what he was like and what he was capable of. That's what the picture's about: a man put in extreme circumstances, and suddenly, he discovers dark sides to his character that he never knew existed, and that horrifies him. He's the one who's horrified.

FANG: When you did your research and went to Australia and lived amongst the locals, was the Outback really as hopeless as depicted in the film?

KOTCHEFF: Well, I really liked the men of the Outback, because they're working and living in the most inhospitable circumstances in the whole world. The dust and the flies and everything else… No wonder they drink a lot and shoot kangaroos for fun! And also, it comes with the nature of the Outback—there's a tremendous camaraderie amongst the men. They support each other, they're very generous. It forces the people to behave in ways perhaps they wouldn't ordinarily. What was striking was the lack of women. In the town of Broken Hill, the men outnumbered the women three to one. And there were no brothels. So sometimes there was a lot of fighting going on with the men. It wasn't fighting just to hit somebody, it was kind of desperation for human touch.

In fact, a couple of times when I got involved, men wanting to fight me, I felt they didn't want to hit me, they wanted me to hit them! They needed the human touch, and they wanted to get touched, and hitting was the easiest way of getting that. If I said the word homoerotic, people would get the wrong idea. That's not homosexual at all; it was just because there were no women out there. And also, the women were not allowed to go into the pubs; they were forbidden. So the suicide rate amongst women in Broken Hill was five times the already-high average in Australia. When they were home by themselves, their lovers or husbands went out drinking, fighting, shooting and the women sat there, until one day they turned the gas on and put their heads in the ovens.

My then-wife Sylvia Kay played the picture's female character. It was quite an extraordinary performance, and all the critics took note of it. And she said to me, as a woman, "This place is so horrible. I don't know how women take it." It has changed, but then it was really a totally masculine society. The women didn't figure at all into the social life.

FANG: The movie pushes the envelope in so many ways. Was that your intention?

KOTCHEFF: Well, that's always what a director wants to do. When you're making a film, you want to make something that the audience has never seen before, without violating reality too. You want to offer something fresh. Otherwise the audience says, "I've seen this all before, I know how this is going to turn out." And the film suffers. I always set out to make it new if I can,

give the audience something they haven't seen before, take them into a world they haven't been before, create characters they've never encountered before. But then, I also didn't work deliberately to do that and shock the audience. The whole Outback and the people in it were so extraordinary that I didn't have to struggle hard to give the audience something they hadn't seen before.

FANG: How did the locals react to the way the film depicted them?

KOTCHEFF: Jack Thompson told me a wonderful story—he's one of the kangaroo hunters in the film, a tremendous actor. At one screening, a man got up and yelled out, "*This is not us!*" Jack yelled back, "It *is* us, sit down!" [*Laughs*] In Australia in '71, the critics gave WAKE IN FRIGHT tremendous reviews, but the popular reaction in Australia was a bit lukewarm. People were a bit affronted by the depiction of the Aussie male; they considered the film a harshly critical take on the national character. It had a tremendous fan loyalty and following in film circles there. And that's what ultimately saved it, because they lost the negative, and it was only the people who said, "Hey! This was a great film! We can't allow this film to disappear! Let's find the negative." Ten years were spent tracking it, and that was mostly to do with the film's editor, a wonderful Australian called Tony Buckley. He spent years going everywhere: New York, London, Dublin. He was all over the world trying to find it! A lot of other people gave up; they said, "Hey, it's gone, they dumped it somewhere…"

Finally, they found the negative after 10 years of searching, in a warehouse in Pittsburgh, of all places! And there were five big boxes full of soundtracks, music tracks, interpositives and internegatives, and on the boxes it said, "FOR DESTRUCTION"! These five boxes that contained everything about this film—its picture and its sounds—had they arrived a week later, they would've been incinerated, and WAKE IN FRIGHT would've disappeared. They said, "Does this happen very often?" And I said, "Yes, it does happen very often!" If a film is not a huge success, no one is interested in its survival. It just disappears, and they ditch it in dumps or burn it.

Anyway, Tony finally tracked it down, but the negative was in very, very, very bad condition. It was torn, scratched, faded, and what I discovered is that the colors of a negative fade at different speeds—red is faster than blue is faster than yellow is faster than… What's left is a

horrible pink. However, there was an angel named Anthos Simon from Deluxe in Sydney who spent two years using the latest digital techniques to save it. Working frame by frame, he restored the negative to pristine condition, to its original form. And the print that was made from it is absolutely astonishing—there are colors, details, patterns I'd never seen before in the original 1971 photochemical print. It captures with amazing fidelity the color of the Outback. This is the print that Americans are going to see when the film opens this month.

FANG: So the film dropped off your radar while you were off working on other movies?

KOTCHEFF: I was working on other films. They didn't tell me they couldn't find the negative. I would've been scared. I did FIRST BLOOD, and then I did WEEKEND AT BERNIE'S and comedies. I did a lot of other films, so I didn't know about this drama that was going on.

FANG: Of course, you couldn't get away with the kangaroo scene today.

KOTCHEFF: Well, it always was a problem for me. Some 50 years ago, I saw a French film about these three veterans from WWI and it stuck with me. In order to show how war had degraded and dehumanized them, they get drunk and pour gasoline over a dog and light it. You could see that it was for real. Those veterans were degraded runts, and the director's a degraded runt that he would do such a totally immoral thing to harm or kill an animal, for the sake of a film. You've gotta find some way of doing it; I didn't know what to do in our sequence.

I was very lucky on two counts; one of the crewmembers said to me, "You know, Ted, they kill

hundreds of kangaroos every night in the Outback." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "They have these large refrigerated trucks, and hunters go out in pairs in these big trucks and they shoot the kangaroos and they bring them back, put them in a refrigerator, go out and kill some more. Their tails are used for those nice, cuddly toys that you give your kids at Christmas, and the meat is sent to the pet-food industry in the United States. Why don't you put your camera in the back and go with these hunters; they kill hundreds anyway."

I was not going to kill one kangaroo for my film, so I went out with the hunters, and it was quite an experience. It was grueling to watch them shooting, but I just photographed exactly what they did. They had a spotlight at the top of their truck and a reversible windshield, and they lifted their guns on the dashboard and the light hypnotized the kangaroos and they were able to shoot them without any problem. The most horrific thing in the film was the way the kangaroos' eyes were red as they stood there waiting for death. My film was done under the auspices of the Royal Australian Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and the film received its seal of approval.

Now listen to this: So many people did not know what was going on in the Outback, and because of my film, there was a tremendous protest and uproar about shooting Australia's national animal so American dogs and cats could be fed. As a result, they stopped that practice! So my film had an unexpected effect on everybody.

FANG: The scene is so controversial. If you had to go back in time or if you had to make the film today, would you shoot that scene?

KOTCHEFF: No, I'd have to find some other solution. But some of it I also faked. Remember when one of the roo hunters gets bored of shooting kangaroos so he goes up and challenges it, wrestles it with a knife? That was Lord Nelson, the fighting kangaroo, and that was my joke, because he was a wild eight-footer. He was amazing. He had been shot in the eye, which is why he hated human beings. Kangaroos are very passive. If you challenge them, they'll just lie down. They're like followers of Gandhi, passive resistance. But this eight-footer, he hated human beings for what they had done to him. He maliciously charged after the extras. I was able to do the whole sequence, but that kangaroo was not hurt at all. It looked like we cut his throat, but we didn't. At the end, I looked at him in his pen and told him he could leave, and everybody applauded him for his great performance. He looked at me, and I said, "Yes, we mean it! Go ahead, you can leave now."

And if I shot [that scene] today, I'd have to find some other way, obviously, to do it. They do

have other ways now that they didn’t have then—they have animatronics and all those techniques, CGI, which didn’t exist then. If I did it today, I would not photograph real killings.

TO BE CONTINUED