



Production manager Tony McKay (left) and director Rob Watson (right) chat with (from left) Gerard Culican, Julian Welsh and Chris Stoney after the special screening at Merrijig. The three all have significant roles in the film.

Locals breathe life into high country documentary

THE involvement of Mansfield district identities provides much of the appeal of *Horsemen of the High Country*, an ambitious documentary film which had its premiere earlier this month.

After being launched in Bendigo on July 2, it was shown at Merrijig the following afternoon to an appreciative audience of about 50.

The guests were made up largely of people who helped in some way in the making of the film, including a number who are interviewed.

Rob Watson, the director, and Tony McKay, the production manager, both acknowledged before the screening the considerable contribution of local individuals and the community to the production.

Horsemen of the High Country sets out to capture the beauty of the Victorian high country, the impor-

by Ian Blair

tance of horses in opening it up and the excitement of mountain bush racing.

In that it generally succeeds, through some splendid cinematography, a haunting music track and the contribution of local horse men and women in telling much of the story.

In the opening sequences, local member of parliament and mountain cattleman, Graeme Stoney, sets the scene with an account of the history of the Howqua Valley that reflects his own deep attachment to the region.

Mountain cattleman Jack Purcell talks about cattle mustering and Gerald Egan, a three-time winner of the Great Mountain Race, about training horses for film stunt work and horse racing.

Later, in an entertaining episode,

Graeme Stoney, Jack Lovick and Stan McKay swap yarns around a camp fire.

Julian Welsh, Gerard Culican and Chris and Kate Stoney are other district people who do an accomplished job playing themselves.

The climax of the film is a coverage of the Great Mountain Race of 1991, won by Peter Faithfull. (*Horsemen* has been that long in the making.)

The race action, of course, is stirring stuff, and is brilliantly captured both at full tilt and in slow motion by strategically placed cameras.

If there is a criticism of the film, the script linking the cameo appearances of local people is somewhat trite and repetitive.

This is no fault of the narrator, Leonard Teale, who does his usual professional job in what proved, sadly, to be his last film.

As well, more anticipation in the finale would probably have been stimulated if the film had concentrated on the participation of one rider - no matter where he or she finished - rather than taking a more general approach.

For all that, the documentary has much to recommend it. It is to be hoped that it will be shown on television so that the wider community is exposed to the beauty and traditions of the high country.

The Merrijig audience at the special screening was certainly impressed, breaking into spontaneous applause at the end.

Horsemen of the High Country is the first major production of the Bendigo-based company, Creative Image Film Corporation.

The 47-minute video is available for sale from the Mansfield Visitors' Information Centre.