

Work of grief

A harrowing new film and album about creativity, family and loss

MIKA ROSS-SOUTHALL

ONE MORE TIME WITH FEELING
Various cinemas

Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds

SKELETON TREE
Vinyl and CD: Bad Seed
iTunes, Spotify

In the summer of 2015, Nick Cave's fifteen-year-old son Arthur fell from a cliff near their home in Brighton and died. He had taken LSD. None of this is ever explicitly stated in *One More Time With Feeling*, a black-and-white documentary that follows Cave recording his new album *Skeleton Tree*. Instead, Cave refers to it as the "tragedy", "trauma", "event", "chaotic mess", "it" or "this", which they've put a "ring" around; things either came before or after, and everything after snaps back to it like an elastic band. What began as a way of Cave showcasing the new album, without having to engage directly with the media and the public, has turned into a complex and important film: a nuanced and moving account of grieving and re-harnessing creativity. The result is surprising and deeply human.

Before, at a performance at the Royal Albert Hall last year, Cave was his usual oddball, darkly comic self, mesmerizing us with his haunting music and anarchic charisma, touching people's heads in the audience as though god-like, granting absolution; and just before that, in *20,000 Days on Earth* (2014) – a documentary that ostensibly charted the 20,000th day of his life – Cave, as expected, came across as slick, self-absorbed and over-egged, but knowingly so. In this new film, however, we see Cave, and those close to him, staggeringly altered. His ego is all but absent. Now vulnerable and workmanlike, he sits at a grand piano in the recording studio in an early scene, while his voiceover tells us "I don't know what the chords are . . . I should've strengthened my voice, sung more before I came to the studio. I think I'm losing my voice. Just file it under lost things . . . my voice, my iPhone, my judgement, my memory maybe". He intimates that his son is another. Cave's lack of self-belief is palpable. And at this moment we see him physically split, as the camera frames his face and its reflection on top of the piano; the next shot shows Cave with the sound mixers in the control room, as though staring through the window at himself playing in the studio.

The scene turns into a performance of "Jesus Alone", the first track of *Skeleton Tree*, which also serves as the stand-alone music video for this agonized single: the whole film is partly an extended performance of the album. Here a distorted, uncomfortable bass slowly drones below an intermittent high-pitched animalistic wail, as Cave opens with the line "You fell from the sky, crash-landed in a field near the River Adur", supplemented by the sorrowful strings of Warren Ellis, a long-time collaborator and member of the Bad Seeds. Cave's voice is unusually withheld and desperate, jumping in front of the beat as the track's intensity increases. That's not to say the song doesn't contain some of his fanciful and perverse lyrics ("You are an African doctor harvesting tear ducts"), and indeed the rest of the album has similar instances: in "Magnet", Cave's ethereal incantations give us "The umbilicus was a faucet that fountained rabid blood"; and amid the frenetic drums and beautifully elegiac chords of "Anthocene",

"the animals pull the night around their shoulders". Hanging over the entire album is a feeling of isolation and heartrending disillusionment, especially with religion ("They told us our dreams would outlive us / They told us our gods would outlive us / But they lied"; "Nothing really matters / when the one you love is gone"). At several points in the film,

the film's director, "I don't believe in narrative [songs] anymore, life's not like that. Fractured narrative, time compressed, events stuck on events, or distressing logic is much more real". Dismissing the prophetic nature of his lyrics, he admits that the anxiety and dread they have always featured can seem as if they foretell "certain events". (Cave wrote most of the songs on *Skeleton Tree* in 2014.)

Back in the studio, making music again, carrying on with life – "it's really difficult . . .", Cave says in his voiceover, while we watch him scratch his head with a pencil, tinker with amps and instruments. After a pause, this unsettling confession is tugged into something practical and seemingly pointed: ". . . doing an overdubbed vocal is some kind of torture". He's talking about the process of recording his singing, but he's also

Cave share wry, tender exchanges with Ellis ("does my hair look alright?"; and, plucking Ellis's new aluminium violin, he asks "does it sound good?" "Nah, but it looks good", Ellis replies), and bear-hug his wife Susie and their son Earl (Arthur's twin brother) in the corner of the studio when they drop in. But then, just after Cave tells us there's no such thing as accidents – referring to his jamming method with Ellis, though it could just as much be about creating the film and his son's death ("I'd fucked up bad", he says at one point) – the cameraman knocks over a take-away coffee cup and tracks its fall to the floor. You're never quite sure whether these things are as off-the-cuff as they seem. The film is certainly a controlled presentation – with each performed song, for example, the visuals are enhanced and more obviously set up: "Distant Sky" ends with a strange zooming-out from the city at night that, although a sweet nod towards some sense of comforting eternity, doesn't fit with the raw tone of the rest of the film – but somehow it's still astonishingly intimate and hard to watch.

One such difficult moment occurs when Susie holds up a framed painting by Arthur aged five. It depicts the windmill near where he died. Standing next to Cave, who sits at the dining-room table, Susie tells the camera that she recently came across it in storage and didn't know what to do with it. She wonders why, all those years ago, they had it framed in black. And then trails off, "I don't really know what else to say about it". Cave takes the painting from Susie, rests it against a chair, guides her to sit down and holds her hand under the table in silence. The camera cuts to arresting stills of Arthur's bedroom, children's shoes in the hallway, a figurine of Jesus looking downcast, a photograph of Cave and Susie arm-in-arm walking down a country road; all of this could have turned into sentimentality, but it doesn't. Dominik gently builds a formidable feeling of emptiness, especially towards the end, where we see high-contrast shots of cliffs (the scene of "the trauma"), Bill Brandt-esque, while we hear a crackled home recording of Cave on the piano and Arthur and Earl singing Marianne Faithfull's "Deep Water".

At the beginning of the film, Ellis tells the interviewer that he never discusses Cave's private life – it is a step you can't take. But it seems like this film does take that step, and we're often left wondering why Cave and his family agreed to do it – perhaps as a kind of memorial to Arthur. Cave's voiceover accuses "the media and its complicit reader" for "blowing it out of all proportion", then at home, he reveals that "I don't know why I'm sitting in front of a camera saying all these things, I wouldn't have done this before". It's a way of dealing with what happened; yet sometimes it feels as if we are listening in to things we shouldn't. Cave nevertheless goes on to reassure us: "everything is okay. If anyone's interested, the records still go on, the work goes on". For us to be concerned about his musical output – and for him to be thinking about other people – after all this, is sobering.



Nick Cave in *One More Time With Feeling*

meanwhile, Cave's voiceover delivers spoken-word renditions of his lyrics – or do we call them poems? – that show him invincible ("On Saturday night I walk on someone else's stomach lining"), as well as crippled ("mostly I curl up inside my typewriter . . . and wish that I could die"). The need to express himself through words is pervasive, and yet he goes on to reveal later that "I have a fear about words, what they can expose about you".

In a black cab – the film cuts between four settings: the taxi, the studio, the Caves' house and Brighton – he tells his interviewer, whom we never see but assume is Andrew Dominik,

referring – in the voiceover – to making this voiceover, and to making this film: even though some moments appear serendipitous, Cave (and Dominik) remind us that there is staging. There's often a crew member shouting in the background to check that the camera is rolling; there are 2-D and 3-D cameras – we see them catch each other in shot, especially when they encircle Cave on a rig built around his piano as he performs "I Need You". And Cave tells us that "everything . . . is taped, unless we pull out the plug", followed by a Cheshire-Cat smile held too long for us to think that he's merely joking around. We see