

Because of the wonderful things he does - Baz Luhrmann's Oz.

A review essay about Australia, Australian film and the Australian people.

A long time ago in a galaxy far far away there was a cattle station known as Faraway Downs. Good people struggled against evil doers, but in the end goodwill triumphed and everyone became mates, even the women.

Baz Luhrmann's fourth film is full of many fantasy elements, and wonderful moments, and of course breathtaking Northern scenery. There are no musical numbers, but singing while droving would have been a little too much. What is this film about?

- Part romance, which is one of my problems with the film. The fanciful love development between the drover (Hugh Jackman) and Lady Sarah Ashley (Nicole Kidman) is material best for a soap opera. It reminded me of the even more ridiculous relationship between the characters played by Leonardo Di Caprio and Kate Winslett, which was the cornerstone for the epic James Cameron production *Titanic* (1997). Romance and love are of course central features of Luhrmann films. One could not watch his stunning version of *Romeo and Juliet* (1996) without realising this. *Australia* has romance as a central part as well, but I found it not as convincing, and was pleased that the obligatory love making scene in *Australia* is so short one could miss it by sneezing. In fact it would have been best cut, leaving the audience a small element of mystery.
- Part newsreel - even some of the cinematography is a form of homage to the Movietone and Cinesound newsreels of the past, including the wonderfully done credits.
- Part action film - from outback fighting, droving, to war time devastation, the images are vast and iconic.
- Part tourism commercial – ‘come to the Northern Territory’, especially in the wet and see the place come alive. Watch contemporary movies in the real outdoor theatre.
- Part Aboriginal Studies I- learn about segregated seating in the outdoor cinema, gain an understanding of words like ‘walkabout’, and hear the basis for an apology to the Stolen Generations, and a call for reconciliation and equality, with the Australian pub the symbol for future equal footing.
- Part historical treatise, raising questions about heritage, identity and the cultural values. *Australia* is a significant contribution to our popular heritage and cultural appreciation. The film also illustrates the changing nature of Australia in a period when the most profound change started, namely World War II. The attacks on Australia by Japan and subsequent defence dominated by our new partner, the United States, ushered in a new era, and the post war period became an increasingly post-colonial world. Prime Minister John Curtin spoke about ‘looking to America’, and Australia began to consider its future away from mother England simply because the USA is the pre-eminent power in the Pacific and able to confront the Japanese. *Australia* stands at the start of the influence of American culture, values and power in Australia, but has a firm message about the Australian character that the new Australia develops and enhances.

- Australia is a film that continues a rich tradition of Australian story telling with a strong visual orientation. It brings to mind pastoral and pioneering traditions highlighted by early films such as *The Overlanders* (1946), *Sons of Matthew* (1949), and *The Sundowners* (1960). I also see a significant link to the first Australian film in colour, which was the landmark Aboriginal film *Jedda* (1955). Jedda is the name of Nullah's dog and is homage to the first major film to star Aboriginal actors in their own right. Jedda was the name given to the Aboriginal woman character who became the focus for the star of the film, the warrior Marbuck played by Robert Tudawali. Tudawali came from Melville Island (one of the Tiwi Islands), but sadly did not handle his new fame well, and eventually became an alcoholic, and died from burns received in a grass fire.

Also significant for further analysis are key films of the new Australian renaissance, like *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978), *Newsfront* (1978), *My Brilliant Career* (1979), *Gallipoli* (1981), and the story of Jeannie Gunn in *We of the Never Never* (1982). All these are important films in an examination of the development of the Australian film character, and the Australian legend of mateship. Baz Luhrmann's main acting role in a film in this influential period was in John Duigan's *Winter of our Dreams* (1981), a (then) contemporary love story with Judy Davis and Bryan Brown set in inner Sydney. Duigan is a realistic, often lyrical film maker, perhaps best known in Australia for his coming of age films: *The Year My Voice Broke* (1987), *Flirting* (1991). Interestingly Duigan's most recent film, *Head in the Clouds* (2004), is a helpful comparative film in terms of a romantic war-time drama.

Like Baz Luhrmann's first film *Strictly Ballroom* (1992) the white Australian characters are mainly stereotyped caricatures. This is not necessarily a problem, as we probably all know some of these types they are based on, but it says something about his style and historical understanding. He clearly wants to capture on screen some of these characters for posterity. He also wants to show how the Australian character develops when formed by the land and interaction with the indigenous inhabitants. This is nowhere more evident than the title for Hugh Jackman's character - he is simply 'The Drover', and known as 'drover'. That is who he is and what he does. He is the everyman Australian- loyal to his mates (who include the Aboriginal workers), honest and dependable, yet harbouring some deep emotional issues which occasionally surface.

Lady Sarah Ashley played by Nicole Kidman is a standard role. She is the English Rose bound to wither in Australia unless some cross breeding is introduced. Why choose an English character? I would have preferred an Australian born woman - someone of equal footing with the drover, but her character is a metaphor for the changing relationship Australia has with England. Here we have the last vestiges of the English influence coming into Australia, as the English rose is shaped and changed into an Australian native flower.

There are some excellent smaller roles, and overall anyone familiar with Australia film since the 1970s will spend their time noting who pops up on the screen. Most of the well-known Australian actors are there, including Jack Thompson as the intriguingly named Kipling Flynn,

which I presume is a reference to the English colonial basis through Rudyard Kipling, who landed in Hobart first on his visit to New Zealand and then Australia in 1891, and the Aussie playboy and film actor Errol Flynn, who also grew up in Tasmania. It is worth noting that Kipling came back to Australia from Bluff, New Zealand on a ship with General Booth, the co-founder of the Salvation Army. Kipling would later write a story 'A Friend in the Family', which has a Queensland drover as a character, who may have been part-Aboriginal.

Bill Hunter is of course in this film, and at one stage I thought Jack Thompson was playing Bill Hunter. Bryan Brown plays the cattle baron with his usual ease, and while this character is a combination of Australian figures, some critics seem to be blissfully unaware of this aspect of Australian pastoral history, and the fact Australia had these cattle baron figures just as much as the USA. This is not an American western, but an Australian outback movie.

David Wenham, as Fletcher is the main evil character in this drama, and while mostly stereotyped sometimes brings a depth to the role that causes one to reflect on his screen presence by the end of the film.

The Aboriginal characters are the realistic ones, simple, natural, and none is more natural than that of Nullah, played by Brandon Walters. He acts with the simplicity of someone who has not been a professional actor and is blissfully unconcerned about performing. His screen presence is striking. Aboriginal justice features in terms of 'payback', but also Aboriginal issues are highlighted in the family relationships and strong good characters presumably raise the issues associated with the Stolen Generations even more directly.

One of my more stringent criticisms is the portrayal of the religious figures which are more stereotyped than most. Here we have Father Benedict, and Brother Frank, the custodians of Mission Island and the overseers of the Aboriginal children taken from their families and tribes. In one of the most excruciating pieces of dialogue, having escaped the Japanese bombing of Mission Island and now wanting to leave Darwin, Brother Frank asks a digger for help with the transport. The digger replies: Well, I'm not Jesus Christ, but I'll give it my best shot."

It is helpful to have one part of Australia's history vividly portrayed - the bombing on 19 February 1942, the first of a series of 64 eventual bombings on Darwin 1942 - November 1943 and a number of other attacks on Northern towns. The real life priest Father John McGrath was able to report the Japanese planes to the Area Combined HQ, but the message did not reach the chain of command and the raid was still a surprise. The Island where the Mission is located is most likely Bathurst Island, one of the Tiwi Islands (along with Melville Island), site of the Catholic Mission, and it was certainly attacked, though these scenes lead to historical licence - no Japanese troops landed here, and there was no reason for them to do this apart from the fact that a certain scene was scripted.

It is also helpful to consider the portrayal of the irrelevance of the church and for the most part Christian faith. These Australians do not need God - in fact where is the God of the Outback of people like minister and pilot John Flynn, as opposed to Kipling Flynn? These Australian characters get by on their own strength, concentrating a theme that Australians are practical people who get on with their business and do things their own way.

The main religious elements concern the Aboriginal characters that have their 'magic' like King George, and their dreaming.

The references in the film to *The Wizard of Oz* are not accidental. As a musical, it reflects Baz Luhrmann's musical orientation and appreciation, but there are other links. *The Wizard of Oz* is the probably the most widely known and loved American musical. It was ground-breaking for its time and was part of a rich period of film production.

There are many movie homages to *The Wizard of Oz*. There is even an Australian film called *Oz* (1976 – the promotional title included 'A rock n roll road movie'). This film was made in the initial period of the Australian film resurgence, in which a variety of films appeared, many of which are colloquially part of now what is called Ozploitation. In *Oz* Dorothy is a groupie who has an accident in the rock band's van. After bumping her head she is off to see the last concert of the wonderful singer, the Wizard, along with a brainless surfer, a heartless mechanic, and a cowardly biker.

The main characters of Australia are all individual dreamers. Kansas is like the North in Australia – isolated, open spaces, pastoral places, and distinctly nationalistic. There are even twisters in *Australia* to remind one of the dreaming of Dorothy.

Much like each of the characters on the yellow brick road – the Australian characters have a personal journey in the film as well. Nullah finds the film captivating, and no doubt it fits with his growing interest in the dreamtime and storytelling. There is a wonderful scene of him sitting mesmerised watching the film in the Darwin outdoor cinema (he has to put on black face to be 'fully Aboriginal' as half-castes are not allowed at this screening). He already has a connection to this film, as earlier Lady Sarah sings the only words she can remember in telling him a story (which is the only story she can remember). This highlights the 'rainbow', and he connects instantly with the rainbow serpent.

While one should not read too much into the symbolic identification, I could not help to speculate that the three main characters all had an association with those on the yellow brick road. Lady Sarah Ashley has a bit of the scarecrow and the tinman about her. She needs to find a (practical) brain and a heart for the land so she can truly become part of Australia. She is transformed by the end of the film and also clearly in touch with the 'spirit of the land.'

The Drover is also a bit like the tinman, or scarecrow- he is a one identity person as he has one job to do in life and that is drove. He also has to find his own heart again, and recognise his love for his first wife and more, to learn that it is okay to show your love as a man for a new woman. Nullah has common characteristics with Dorothy the dreamer, and also the Lion. He has to find the courage to begin his own journey as an Aboriginal boy becoming a man, and the start of this is the walkabout.

The pivotal King George character played by David Gulpilil is like the Wizard of Oz. People are drawn to him and he is able to help them on their journey. This is a very different journey to the one Gulpilil was involved in as the star of the fascinating Nicholas Roeg film *Walkabout* (1971).

While there are questions constantly arising in Australia, there is also much to reflect on in simple amazement - this is a film that will be studied, along with other seminal Australian works that attempt to delve into the Australian psyche.

In a way I always find it difficult to review an Australian story as I am still working out what it means to be Australian, even though I was born in country NSW. I think this is partly because being born in the 1960s, meant growing up in an Australia in a state of rapid modern change, and a move from an allegiance to a British heritage to eventually an international type US oriented culture, brought on especially through the advent of television and American film in the 1970s. Baz Luhrmann also grew up in this time, with a strong broad cultural influence through film, music (ballroom dancing competitions - his parents), coupled with an evident appreciation for Australian family values which are often perceived to be more fully present in rural and regional Australia.

It is not surprising that this movie has not been as successful in the United States of America. Why would Americans bother to see a movie called *Australia*, especially in a period of economic downturn? After three Crocodile Dundee films, and countless Crocodile Hunter episodes most Americans probably think they know all they need to know about Australia, and yes, a crocodile features in *Australia*.

On the other hand, I believe this is a movie that Australians will want to see and it will cause significant reflection as the debate continues in Australia about our national heritage and foundation, and future. I saw the film at the intimate Bandbox Theatre in Kempsey, NSW (interestingly not too far away from where Baz Luhrmann grew up), and I was intrigued by the positive reception and animated conversations that arose as soon as the credits came up. It is certainly having an impact on older Australians, partly because of the war references, but also because it provides a nostalgic view of Australia during a time of uncertainty, and we know that Australia came through the war to victory and prosperity.

John Curtin told the Australian nation during World War II that:

“Our generation will have left its mark before we hand on the torch to our sons and daughters. Our remaining task is to think and plan so that their world may in truth be a new world. There can be no going back to the good old days. They were not good days and they have truly become old. We have to point the way to better days.” (John Curtin, 1944 Prime Ministers Conference JCPML00603/1). For excellent material on John Curtin and this period see: <http://about.curtin.edu.au/history/johncurtin.cfm>

As many critics have concluded, *Australia* is not the Australian epic, but what would an Australian epic look like? What is our modern history compared to that of the USA, with its defining moments like the civil war. Can the bombing of Darwin really be our Pearl Harbour, even if supposedly more tonnage in bombs were dropped in Darwin? At least *Australia* towers above the latest Hollywood remake on *Pearl Harbour* (2001), which is probably one of the most boring overblown films ever produced. Can Australians make lasting melodramas like *Gone with the Wind*? Will *Australia* be watched in seventy years with the same love and respect that *The Wizard of Oz* produces? Perhaps it will, somewhere over a rainbow?