

Four Australian movies: Van Diemen's Land, Beautiful Kate, Last Ride and Lucky Country

By George Morley
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With Australian Film Institute (AFI) annual award winners having been announced late last year, critics and others have been offering their opinions as to the merits of the country's movies. Thirty-eight Australian features, mainly low-budget independent works, were released in the 2008-09 financial year, a record number for the national industry.

Some of these have been rightly acclaimed—for example, *Samson and Delilah*, written and directed by Warwick Thornton, which won seven AFI awards, including best film and best direction; and *Balibo*, directed by Rob Connolly, which picked up three other AFI awards.

The media is predicting that only nine new Australian features will be released in 2010-11 and that domestic movie production is heading for collapse. Tax rebates are not expected to overcome the overall decline of investment in the Australian movie industry, produced by the global financial crisis and virtual US-Australian dollar parity.

Under these conditions, the demand that Australian movies be “more commercial” has become more strident, with figures such as former Sydney Film Festival director Lynden Barber recently declaring that salvation for the country's filmmakers lies in “more corn, more hype, more Australian; boatloads of escapism and showbiz; heroic journeys that end in triumph.”

This brand of philistinism was even more crudely echoed by Screen Producers of Australia Association (SPAA) president Antony Ginnane in a speech to the SPAA conference last month. Local directors and screenwriters should be studying “melodrama not social realism,” he said. “Our ability to read the markets is dulled by the [government] subsidy drug. We have completely forgotten what the market wants.... This is an industry. This is a business. It's not about art. It is not for dilettantes.”

Such is the commercial pressure on Australian filmmakers, that the AFI this year even instituted a new prize—the “Highest Grossing Film Award”. It was presented to director Baz Luhrman for his empty-headed and confused blockbuster *Australia*, which has grossed over \$US212 million internationally since its release in late 2008.

Notwithstanding the claims of figures such as Barber and Ginnane, the purpose of serious cinema, like any worthwhile artistic endeavour, is to get at the truth, not to reap a profit. The campaign to ‘dumb down’ local films may or may not bring profits, but it will certainly lead to work that is less demanding, less honest and less socially critical at a time when audiences require serious and challenging films.

There has been critical acclaim for and audience response to *Balibo* and *Samson and Delilah* precisely because both movies attempt to address important problems—the murder of journalists during the Indonesian invasion of East Timor, and drug addiction and homelessness among young Aborigines, respectively—in an artistic manner.

While *Lucky Country* and the debut features—*Van Diemen's Land*, *Beautiful Kate* and *Last Ride*—released this year are not brilliant works, they have a sense of history and honesty that is encouraging. It is difficult to imagine that these movies would have been made if the market-driven templates being proposed by Barber and Ginnane prevailed.

A promising but limited debut

Van Diemen's Land is the debut feature by writer-director Jonathan auf der Heide, born and raised on the island state of Tasmania, which was originally known as Van Diemen's Land by the first European settlers.

Remarkably, given Australia's history as a penal colony, *Van Diemen's Land* is the first film since 1927 to take convict life as its subject. It tells the true story of Alexander Pearce, an Irish labourer who was transported to Van Diemen's Land in 1819 for the theft of six pairs of shoes. After Pearce absconded and was recaptured, he was sent to the Macquarie Harbour penal colony on Sarah Island, a hard labour camp for the secondary punishment of escapees and the very worst convicts.

The Sarah Island settlement was administered so that prisoners would rather suffer death than be sent back. While malnutrition, dysentery and scurvy were rampant, the majority of prisoners died from flogging. In 1823 alone the 150 or so inmates received over 9,000 lashes.

Pearce and seven other convicts escaped from the prison in 1822. Unable to flee by boat as planned, they were forced to walk toward the nearest settlement through dense wilderness, a journey for which they were ill-prepared. When their food ran out, the men resorted to cannibalism, killing each other for food one by one. Pearce was the sole survivor.

Auf der Heide, to his credit, treats this material seriously and avoids the temptation to turn Pearce (Oscar Redding) into a monster. As the director explains, “[Pearce] was just a regular convict who was put through these awful circumstances and did what he had to do in order to survive.”

Auf der Heide chooses to portray the Tasmanian wilderness as the enemy—alien, dense and menacing, with every sound and movement heightened. *Van Diemen's Land* succeeds as a tale of man against nature. Ultimately it is the convicts' inability to extract any food from their environment that forces them to kill one another.

The film provides a sense of the escapees' background as they sing songs, talk about their lives back home in England, Ireland and Scotland, and the petty crimes for which they were transported. But this camaraderie gives way to ethnic tension as the food runs out. Suspicion is heightened by the fact that the Irish speak to each other in Gaelic, which the others cannot understand. The terror that descends as the men turn on each other and the first man is killed is palpable and convincing. But after this the film loses its way.

Auf der Heide and Oscar Redding developed the script from Pearce's detailed confessions, but notwithstanding *Van Diemen's Land's* brutal realism it lacks psychological insight. A terrible line has been crossed and yet there is little reflection on the consequences. How does it feel to have killed and eaten another human, and to know that you are potentially the next in line? And who is ultimately responsible for the convicts' horrible situation?

Rather than exploring this, auf der Heide has the frightened escapees retreat into virtual silence and the movie becomes predictable and monotonous. Pearce's narration—a voiceover in Gaelic with subtitles—fails

to overcome these limitations.

Proficient but unengaging

Beautiful Kate, a first feature by British-born actress Rachel Ward, who has lived in Australia for decades, was nominated for ten AFI awards, including best film and best director. Ward honed her skills directing a number of award-winning short films, including *The Big House* (2001) and *Martha's New Coat* (2003).

Ward's movie, adapted from a Newton Thorburg novel, is about 40-year-old writer Ned Kendall (Ben Mendelsohn) who returns to the family farm, a remote sheep station in South Australia, with his 21-year-old fiancée Toni (Maeve Dermody). Ned has come to say goodbye to his father Bruce (Bryan Brown) who is dying of congestive heart disease and is being nursed by daughter Sally (Rachel Griffiths, who won the AFI award for best supporting actress for her performance).

Bruce is a cantankerous old man whose wife died of cancer when their four children were young and was left to raise them on his own, a task for which he was ill-equipped.

The "beautiful Kate" of the title refers to Ned's adored twin sister Kate (Sophie Lowe), killed in a car accident 25 years earlier. Tragically, elder brother Cliff (Josh McFarlane), who was driving the car, committed suicide the same night.

Bruce blames himself for Cliff's suicide, believing that the cruel treatment he meted out to his son caused him to take his life. Returning to the homestead and seeing his father for the first time in many years, Ned realises that he too has blamed his father. With help from his sister Sally, Ned begins to see the truth about the past for the first time and is able to reconcile with his estranged father.

Interwoven with this story is a second parallel narrative, exploring the intimate relationship between Ned and Kate. The use of flashbacks allows the audience to compare the lush, green and prosperous homestead of the past with the parched, bankrupt farm of the present day. Among other things, *Beautiful Kate* effectively conveys the hardship and isolation confronting many farmers in Australia today.

Ward's film has some well-written dialogue, the performances are strong, and the movie demonstrates a genuine affection for its characters. And yet, despite these strengths, it remains a limited work. That a dying man is afraid of death and wants to be loved, or that a son would want to get on good terms with his father before he dies, is hardly new or surprising. Despite this story being emotionally charged, its insights are not that great and *Beautiful Kate* left me relatively unmoved.

In its exploration of incest between Ned and Kate, the film covered far more original ground. Ward should be congratulated on her measured handling of potentially sensational material, but this narrative is terribly underdeveloped. Telling this aspect of the story through a series of very short snippets isn't enough for the audience to properly appreciate the roots or consequences of their taboo relationship.

Last Ride

Last Ride, Glendyn Ivin's first feature, focuses on Kev (Hugo Weaving), a career criminal on the run from the law with his 10-year-old son Chook (Tom Russell). Kev has committed a violent crime and tries unsuccessfully to hide out before fleeing with Chook—in a succession of stolen cars—deep into the Australian outback.

Last Ride explores the question as to whether Chook is condemned to become a criminal like his father. Its approach to the question, however, is artificial—isolating Kev and Chook in the middle of the desert—and over-simplistic, implying that if the young boy breaks from his father's influence he can thereby avoid a criminal existence. Life is much more complex than indicated here. The boy's behaviour cannot be understood solely as the product of parental influence; numerous other social factors are at work, none of which *Last Ride* seriously attempts to consider.

Weaving has been highly praised for his performance, but Kev always feels like a caricature, an actor impersonating a criminal. Weaving says that he was attracted to the role because his character was "clearly conflicted", but this conflict expresses itself in a schematic, binary manner: one minute, tender, on other occasions, appallingly violent and cruel.

Director Ivin clearly feels that Kev is to be reviled, not someone with whom to identify. The brief platitudes concerning the cruel way Kev's father raised him don't begin to explain how he came to be as broken as this. When Kev tells Chook, "We can be whoever we want," it is cruelly ironic, as well as untrue. On some level, Ivin understands (or should understand) that Kev never had a chance.

Trying to do too much

Director Kriv Stenders' latest feature *Lucky Country* is set in 1902, just after Australian federation, and treats the fate of Nat (Aden Young), a pious small farmer or "land selector", driven by his belief in God to work the land. The recent death of his wife has made it all but impossible for him and his children Sarah (Hannah Mangan Lawrence) and Tom (Toby Wallace) to survive on their small isolated plot in the South Australian bush. Nat's attempt to deny this reality and cling to the belief that "God will provide" is destroying him physically and mentally.

Three armed strangers arrive at this desperate homestead one night—former soldiers from the Boer War, Henry (Pip Miller), Carver (Neil Pigot) and the deliriously sick Jimmy (Eamon Farren)—who have been gold prospecting. Nat reluctantly agrees to let them stay until Jimmy recovers. Sarah, who is forced to nurse the handsome young man back to health, soon falls for his clumsy advances. She sees him as a means of escape.

When Nat catches sight of Sarah and Jimmy together, he not only discovers their relationship, but also that Jimmy has gold, a fact the latter concealed from his travelling companions. This sets in motion a deadly series of events. Nat lures the three men into an ambush in an attempt to kill them and steal the gold. From this point onward, the film becomes increasingly violent and far-fetched.

Like *Van Diemen's Land*, *Lucky Country* accurately depicts the brutal hardship of colonial Australia, but director Stenders should have concerned himself more with historical truthfulness. Both the gold rush and the "land selection" process were well and truly over by 1902 when the movie takes place. The film, moreover, fails to make this history comprehensible and gives the impression that Nat's farming failure is self-inflicted, the product of bad fortune and poor preparation. In reality, most of the small-farmer selectors ended up in dire poverty, despite their best efforts, because the land they were offered was barren and uneconomic.

In *Lucky Country*, however, Nat's story is just one strand of the narrative. Stenders' movie tries to do too much, and ultimately fails. Sarah's sexual awakening is not convincing. Nor is Tom's assuming the role of man of the house, necessitated by his father's mental disintegration. These are enormous character transformations for the young cast members to convey. Each could be the subject of a separate film in its own right.

Stenders has told the media that his two previous features—*Blacktown* (2005) and *Boxing Day* (2007), which deal with the lives of contemporary urban Aborigines—were "festival films" and "not a practical way to make a living". *Lucky Country*, he said, was an attempt to make "something that was entertaining with a capital E" and would reach beyond film festival audiences.

Stenders' latest effort, unfortunately, is not as successful or convincing as his previous movies. His work and that of the first-time local feature makers reviewed above, however, should be encouraged, by being given the freedom to experiment with their efforts and not determined by the

crude demands for “market-driven” products.

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