“What’s necessary is a vibrant film culture not just a formula”

Lucky Country scriptwriter Andy Cox speaks with the WSWS

By Richard Phillips
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In January the World Socialist Web Site reviewed several low-budget Australian movies released last year and now available on DVD (see: “Four Australian movies—Van Diemen’s Land, Beautiful Kate, Last Ride and Lucky Country”).

Lucky Country, which is directed by Kriv Stenders and set in 1902, just after Australian federation, is about a small farmer and his family struggling to survive on their isolated, dirt-poor property. While the newly-founded nation proclaimed freedom and equal opportunity for all, life for the family is grim. It worsens after they provide temporary shelter to three former Boer War soldiers.

The WSWS recently spoke with Lucky Country scriptwriter Andy Cox, who explained some of the film’s themes. Cox has worked as a writer, editor and script consultant in theatre, feature film and documentaries in the UK, US, Europe and Southeast Asia. He also commented on increasing demands by local critics and media commentators that Australian filmmakers should be animated by commercial considerations.

Former Sydney Film Festival director Lynden Barber, for example, suggested last year that filmmakers needed to produce “more corn, more hype, more Australiana; boatloads of escapism and showbiz”. Screen Producers of Australia Association president Antony Ginnane told a producers’ conference that filmmakers’ “ability to read the markets” was being “dulled by the [government] subsidy drug”. “This is a business. It’s not about art,” he declared.

I began my discussion with Cox by asking how the idea for Lucky Country had emerged.

Andy Cox: It came out of a camping trip to northern New South Wales when I stumbled on an old settler’s cabin. I’d been trying to write a story about the appropriation of national myths in the here-and-now, but it wasn’t working. After I came across the old cabin I began thinking that if I set my story in 1902 and placed my audience in a different cinematic and genre space, then the ideas I wanted to explore might emerge more powerfully.

I did some research and read some speeches by politicians from that period and lo and behold all their arguments about so-called Australian values were the same as the political commentators today. It was fascinating that so little had changed. So I set the story in 1902, just after federation and a period of great distress, a time when there were a lot of grim things going on in Australia.

Richard Phillips: What particular issues did you want to explore?
AC: What it meant to be an Australian and things like mateship and the fair-go. I wanted to probe these myths, which have been transformed into truths so sacred that it’s almost taboo to question them today. Mateship and the fair-go, of course, are not specifically Australian phenomenon but commonplace values—human values, in fact.

RP: That’s right. What precipitated this examination?
AC: I don’t know but I found it really curious and unfortunately symptomatic. This unwillingness, this fear of turning the light on oneself, is worrisome. And yet this is what stories should really be about. They should be tools to challenge us to observe and to question.

RP: Why do you think there was such a response?
AC: I don’t know but I found it really curious and unfortunately symptomatic. This unwillingness, this fear of turning the light on oneself, is worrisome. And yet this is what stories should really be about. They should be tools to challenge us to observe and to question.

RP: Nationalism is on the rise internationally. Do you see any connection in some of critical responses to Lucky Country?
AC: I’d be disinclined to use the word nationalism but there is a fear of breaking taboos. But why is it so wrong to question national myths, why is it a taboo? And if it is becoming stronger, and it seems to be, then it’s a real cause for concern. In this day and age any notion of having self-protected enclaves is absurd.

RP: Can we discuss the comments of some critics and industry figures like Antony Ginnane that Australian filmmakers have to learn to “read the market”? We quoted some of their remarks in our review.

AC: I understand Ginnane’s point of view—he’s interested in producing genre flicks and makes a lot of money from them—but there’s another agenda there. There were similar comments from Louis Nowra [Australian playwright]. Their approach is that if it’s not black, then it must be white.

The problem, they say, is there’s not enough money being made out of local movies and this has to change.

The financial imperative and commercial pressures on filmmakers are obvious but these voices of dissent miss the point entirely. Independent pictures are not going to be overnight box office successes.

You don’t pick up your newspaper and have commentators talking about the fact that the government gives subsidies to olive growers, and yet it takes 15 years for olive trees to bear fruit. It should be the same for the filmmakers.

Take the Coen brothers, for example. They hardly make any more money at the box office here than Australian movies and yet they are lauded by people like Ginnane as being great. Coen brothers’ movies have a longer tail on them, which is over five or ten years, and then they break even.

The countries that seem to have it right have three or four tent-pole films a year and the rest are widely varied. It’s no good just doing remakes of the Tooth Fairy, even though that’s valid in its own right as a money-making tool. You need something else. And it’s this “something else” that’s important.

The way our critics layer their argument over the entire swath of cinematic experiences is fallacious and won’t solve anything. The real issue is generating a strong film culture and I strongly believe that the startling output of films from Australia in the past year—from genre flicks to melodramas, gritty thrillers, comedies, romances—was remarkable.

The interesting thing about Avatar is how widely it has appealed, and not just for its special effects. It may be glib, derivative storytelling but it’s also very simple and effective. The Dongria Kordh tribe in Eastern India have been battling the British mining firm Vedanta with bows and arrows over the company’s intention to build a bauxite mine on their sacred land. Due to Avatar’s broad appeal as a story and its subsequent wide global reach, the tribe have now taken it upon themselves to promote their cause via the film and it’s already having more effects than any of their tactics thus far.

Ginnane is correct in one way in that there is a prevalence of social realism in Australian cinema. There’s a tendency to call a spade a spade in this country. In cinema the most effective and powerful story conceits do the opposite. They are Cocteau’s “beautiful lie that tells the truth” and this is where clever and inventive use of genre is vital in cinema if it’s to have wide appeal.

RP: If filmmakers are entirely driven by commercial considerations and “reading the market” then their work is inevitably superficial and unconvincing. These pressures, of course, are not specifically Australian problems.

AC: No, they’re not but there has to be a different approach and