

The Sound of One Hand Clapping written and directed by Richard Flanagan
 The Boys directed by Rowan Woods, screenplay by Stephen Sewell

Two Australian films

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Two recently released films, *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* and *The Boys*, are an important departure from the generally vacuous and tiresome movies produced in Australia over the last five years, such as *Strictly Ballroom*, *Muriel's Wedding* and *Priscilla: Queen of the Desert*. Both films attempt to deal with serious social and psychological questions.

The Sound of One Hand Clapping, written and directed by Richard Flanagan, sensitively portrays the conditions, experiences and difficulties confronting immigrants to Australia from war-torn Europe.

Against the backdrop of fascism, war and industrialisation, the film deals with family breakdown, alcoholism and other social problems impacting on a Slovenian family that migrates to Tasmania in the early 1950s.

The film, much of it set in the stark and desolate beauty of the Tasmanian highlands, centres on the complex and difficult relationship between Bojan Buloh (Kristof Kacmarek) and his daughter Sonja (Kerry Fox), following the suicide of his wife soon after their arrival in Tasmania.

The story begins in the winter of 1954. Bojan is a labourer employed on the Butler's Gorge hydro-electricity dam construction project. Like thousands of immigrants employed in similar projects at that time, Bojan, his wife Maria and daughter are living in primitive wooden shacks, forced to endure the harsh conditions of the Tasmanian highlands.

During the World War II Nazi occupation of Slovenia, Maria witnessed her father's murder and the rape of her mother. She was then raped by the Nazis. Unable to cope with these traumatic memories and disoriented by the isolation of the Tasmanian construction camp, Maria

commits suicide. The distraught woman tells Sonja as she leaves her for the last time that "to have a future, you have to forget the past."

Bojan attempts to establish a decent life for his daughter, but the loneliness, war memories and economic difficulties facing a single parent in a new country gradually overwhelm him. He seeks solace in alcohol, which ultimately destroys his relationship with his daughter, who leaves home.

The film proceeds through a series of flashbacks as recalled by Sonja who, after 20 years absence from her father and Tasmania, decides to return. Rather than "forget the past," she attempts to understand and therefore come to terms with the traumas and multifarious difficulties that faced her parents.

Director Richard Flanagan has been able to elicit strong performances from Kristof Kacmarek and Rosie Flanagan as the eight-year-old Sonja. Importantly, the film challenges the official government lie that post-war Australia was a "lucky country" for immigrants.

One particularly vivid episode is a naturalisation ceremony in the desolate Tasmanian work-camp just days after Maria's suicide. An odious and insensitive government bureaucrat, standing in front of the Australian flag, declares that all should be grateful that they have been granted citizenship. Bojan, overcome by his wife's suicide, and clutching his young daughter in his arms, sobs loudly through the ceremony.

Another poignant scene, over 30 years later, takes place in Bojan's tiny backyard bungalow, referred to colloquially as a "wog flat." Bojan's work-mate reads a letter from Sonja to her father explaining that she is pregnant. Bojan's friend urges him to patch up his differences with his daughter.

Flanagan uses this simple event to illustrate that the psychological scars produced by the war, fascist occupation and family dislocation can be healed.

The Sound of One Hand Clapping is Flanagan's first film, and not without its weaknesses and disappointments, including some rather irritating cinematic clichés. It is, however, an honest and compassionate film with moments of intense pathos that will resonate with thousands of immigrant families and workers. Unfortunately, the film has only received limited distribution.

Flanagan told the press following the release of *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* that he was disillusioned with filmmaking and wondered whether he would make another movie.

"It's a savage and brutal industry, labouring under the obligation of money. I got the film I wanted in the end, but at a great personal cost. I love the process, but not the politics," he said.

This recognition of the destructive market pressures on filmmakers is an important observation and one rarely publicly admitted by Australian filmmakers.

Released at the same time as *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, the aggressively marketed and more widely available *The Boys* is a bleak and essentially nihilistic film.

Set in a poverty-stricken working class suburb, *The Boys*, directed by Rowan Woods, is the story of three brothers and the 24 hours leading up to their vicious rape and murder of a young woman in suburban Sydney, sometime in the early 1990s.

The central character is Brett Sprague (David Wenham) who has just been released from jail after serving a year's sentence for assault with a deadly weapon and grievous bodily harm.

Bitter over the fact that neither of his brothers, Stevie (Anthony Hayes) and Glenn (John Polson), visited him in jail, Brett is determined to reestablish his authority within the family home. He explains to his brothers that the only way to survive in today's world is to "screw them, before they screw you."

The homecoming degenerates into a day of drunken violence and psychological and physical bullying. Brett cruelly rejects his girlfriend Michelle's sexual advances, and throughout the day clashes with his brothers and their respective girlfriends. He then assaults Michelle and later bashes George, his mother's new boyfriend.

The three brothers, drunk and high on drugs, are rejected by their mother and girlfriends. They leave the

house and drive aimlessly round the local suburb. Just before committing the brutal murder of a young girl, Brett explains that he has brought them all together again in "peace and serenity."

Local critics have praised *The Boys*, with one reviewer describing it as "one of the most powerful, observant and artistically satisfying Australian films ever made." This is unwarranted.

While there are some strong performances from the cast and better than average documentary style camera work, the film is fairly predictable. The only question posed throughout is how far will the bullying by the dehumanised Brett Sprague go.

Woods recently told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that there were "no simple answers" to the social problems confronting society and that his film attempted to steer a course between the sentiments of talk-back radio, which argues for the death penalty, and those who sympathise with the perpetrators of crime.

This apparently dispassionate but fatalistic outlook is artistically and politically hazardous. The inevitable result is an insubstantial work with few, if any, intellectual or emotional demands. At best, no one is changed by the experience. At worst, the dominant and generally retrogressionist conceptions can be reinforced.

The Boys makes no serious attempt to probe how and why society produces individuals such as Brett Sprague. Brett and his brothers are seen in isolation, their actions those of flawed individuals, with no connection revealed to the poverty-stricken and vengeful environment that surrounds them.

The film therefore never rises above a competent presentation of the psychological state of those involved in a savage crime. Moreover, *The Boys* runs the risk of simply providing sustenance to those who clamour for more police, increased jail sentences and the death penalty as the answer to crime.



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