

Radiance: Unhelpful praise for an imperfect film

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Radiance, the first feature film by Aboriginal director Rachel Perkins is the story of three women who return home to a small town on the Queensland coast for their mother's funeral. In the course of twenty four hours, the three Aboriginal women, who have lived apart for years, uncover the reasons for the family breakup and come to understand some of the complex problems that confronted their mother.

The oldest, Cressy (Rachael Maza), now a successful international opera singer, was taken from her mother and placed on a church mission when she was twelve. Mae, (Trisha Norton-Thomas) the second daughter, is a nurse who spent most of her youth and adult life trapped in the rural community caring for her mother. Mae is bitter and resentful of the fact that she had to remain in the town.

Nona (Deborah Mailman), the youngest of the three, is pregnant. She left home to join the rodeo circuit as a young teenager. Nona wants to rebuild her life in her mother's house and hopes the funeral gathering will reunite the women. The funeral however, reinforces friction between Nona, Cressy and Mae.

None of the local residents attend the funeral service and, as the day wears on, the women begin drinking. Long-simmering tensions emerge as they relive the tragic circumstances of their mother's life -- the difficulties of an Aboriginal single mother, the poverty, alcoholism and regular beatings she endured at the hands of her lovers.

Radiance reaches its emotional climax when one of the family's long kept secrets is revealed. Cressy was raped by one of her mothers' lovers. She was separated from the family after she fell pregnant. The child, which was separated from her at birth, is Nona. The film concludes with three women burning down the house in an attempt to obliterate all connection with

these dark memories.

Adapted from a play by Australian author Louis Nowra, *Radiance* is disappointing. Nowra is a prolific and skilled dramatist but the filmmakers, despite their intentions, have been unable to translate the deep-rooted anger of the play to the screen.

Perkins is without doubt sincere and has no intention of minimising the tremendous suffering endured by Aboriginal families when their children were taken from them and placed on missions or in foster care all over the country.

Unfortunately, *Radiance* lacks the emotional depth and artistic passion demanded by its subject. The actors fail to convince and the film's more dramatic moments are disrupted by technical flaws and other problems including breaks in visual continuity with the film jumping from daylight to dusk and back again, for no apparent reason.

Deborah Mailman as Nona is altogether too wholesome for a woman supposed to have spent her youth traveling around the Australian outback with rodeos riders; Rachael Maza is stiff and stilted, and never really comes across as an international opera star. Trisha Norton-Thomas only occasionally captures Mae's pent-up bitterness.

The movie's climax, when Cressy reveals that she is Nona's mother, is weak and confused. These problems are magnified when the film departs from Nowra's original ending which concluded with a bewildered Nona leaving Mae and Cressy. In Nowra's play nothing is resolved between the women.

Radiance takes a different path and ends with the three women reconciled and happy. The family has been drawn together, the traumas apparently dissolved through the fiery destruction of the house. This is altogether trite and implausible.

The Sydney film festival program guide hailed *Radiance* as a 'landmark in Australian cinema.' It was also voted the most popular film at the festival. Such praise is excessive and unhelpful.

Perhaps those who voted for *Radiance* did so in the hope that Perkins and other Aboriginal filmmakers will be encouraged and find backing for future films. Extravagant compliments however, are no substitute for insightful and honest criticism. More of the latter is needed to create the intellectual and artistic atmosphere required before deeply engaging films are produced on this subject in Australia.



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