

## *Soft Fruit*: A missed opportunity

Gabriela Notaras  
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In recent years several Australian directors have produced movies exploring the problems and difficulties confronting working class families. *Radiance* and *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* are two such films.

*Soft Fruit*, a light-hearted first feature film written and directed by Christina Andreef and released last year, centres on the troubled reunion of a dysfunctional working class family that has come together to be with their dying mother Patsy (Jeanie Drynan), who is in the last stages of terminal cancer.

The film begins with the return of Patsy's four adult siblings to Port Kembla, an industrial city south of Sydney, notorious for its heavy pollution and high cancer rates. Patsy has decided that she is not going to quietly waste away, but is determined to enjoy her last days to the full.

Bo (Russell Dykstra) has just been paroled from jail on compassionate grounds; Nadia (Sacha Horler) has come from Sydney with her children; and Josie (Genevieve Lemon) has travelled to Port Kembla from the United States with hers. Vera (Alicia Talbot), a nurse, is already at the family home having taken responsibility for administering medications and injections to the dying Patsy.

*Soft Fruit* is not a mawkish film in which everyone moralises and weeps, but rather is an attempt to go beyond the stereotypical portrayal of how people cope with personal tragedy. A former assistant to Jane Campion (*Sweetie*, *The Piano*, *The Portrait of a Lady*), Andreef is said to have based *Soft Fruit* on her own experiences, in particular her own mother's death.

Andreef's choice of subject is ambitious and, at a time when cynicism is fashionable, entirely commendable. Unfortunately, *Soft Fruit* rarely rises above a series of loosely connected comic episodes featuring a collection of quirky characters.

Vic (Linal Haft), Patsy's gruff husband, is

disgruntled and although concerned about his wife, feels that his life has been disrupted by the arrival of his family. He regards Bo as a hopeless junkie who has brought disgrace to the family and will not allow him into the house. While the sisters share rooms in the house, Bo is relegated to the garden shed. As Patsy's health declines, the three sisters, who are all overweight, decide to embark on a diet. Patsy jokes that for the first time in her life she will be thinner than all of them.

Wacky incidents pepper the film: Josie, who is frantic about her son's exam results in America, is outraged when she finds Nadia masturbating under a blanket in her car. Nadia sneaks off to motel rooms for sexual liaisons with her ex-husband, and Vera, desperate for a baby but lacking a partner, helps herself to the sperm bank at the hospital where she works. Bo takes Patsy shopping for a coffin, but leaves to buy drugs and forgets to return.

*Soft Fruit*'s more passionate scenes involve Bo and Vic, whose built-up frustrations and resentment towards each other explode in an angry fight at Patsy's bedside. Later Bo, in a drugged stupor, walks naked at night along the highway. Vic finds him and he too strips, bringing the traffic to a standstill. They go home together and Vic tucks his son into bed.

Andreef is no doubt attempting to show that despite their hostile relationship, Vin's love for his son transcends all else. But Vic's sudden transformation into a loving father is entirely out of character and comes across as yet another incident in a pastiche of comic characters and situations.

To her credit, Andreef has steered away from melodrama, which would have been easy given the subject matter. On the other hand, her touch is too light to be effective comedy, and at times she seems to relinquish control of her characters and simply lets things happen.

Scenes with the potential to reveal more about Patsy are unconvincing. Bo reads to Patsy from a biography of Jackie Onassis, with whom Patsy feels she has an affinity. As he reads, Bo adds his own brand of exaggerated theatrical pathos, which is utterly inconsistent with his backward uncultured character. He may have been a bright kid who has gone astray, but where he obtained these dramatic abilities is never explained.

We learn something of Patsy's hopes and dreams—that she wanted to visit Paris, lunch on the Champs Elysées, and have a twenty-one-gun salute at her funeral—but how or why she identifies with someone whose life is light years away from her own remains a mystery. Patsy's cheerful and wistful outlook comes across as vacuous.

To portray the dynamics of family life without lapsing into sentimentality or cold objectivism is not easy and Andreef has great difficulty finding the right balance. Artistic inspiration is drawn from life, but the mere reproduction of events, even one's own immediate experiences, cannot guarantee the production of an emotionally convincing work. The work may be realistic, but the audience must experience this tragedy on a more profound level.

What has Patsy's death revealed about the family and each individual member? Have they become stronger or weaker by this ordeal? These questions are not answered and *Soft Fruit* ends as it begins, with no insights into the characters and no apparent changes in their lives.



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