

Sydney Film Festival

A sympathetic look at the complexities of old age

Innocence, written and directed by Paul Cox

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Paul Cox, who has written and directed more than 25 documentaries and features over the past three and a half decades, is one of Australia's few genuinely independent filmmakers. Unlike Bruce Beresford (*Breaker Morant*, *Driving Miss Daisy*, *Black Robe*) and Peter Weir (*Gallipoli*, *Dead Poet's Society*, *The Truman Show*), two well-known Australian filmmakers of his generation, Cox has doggedly refused to be lured to Hollywood or elsewhere by promises of financial success.

Born 1940 in Holland, Cox immigrated to Australia in the early 1960s and worked in various jobs before establishing a photographic studio in Melbourne. He became a part-time photography lecturer and was later appointed head of cinematography at the Prahran College, one of the city's leading art schools. In 1976, after making several documentaries, he wrote and directed his first feature, *Illuminations*, and followed this with *Inside Looking Out* (1977), *Kosta* (1978) and several acclaimed short films.

Cox achieved international recognition in 1981 for *Lonely Hearts* and followed this with a number of award-winning films: *Man of Flowers* (1983), *My First Wife* (1984), *Cactus* (1986), *Vincent: The Life and Death of Vincent Van Gogh* (1987), *Island* (1989), *Golden Braid* (1990), *A Woman's Tale* (1991), *The Nun and the Bandit* (1992), *Exile* (1994), *Lust and Revenge*, (1996) *The Hidden Dimension* (1997) and *Molokai: The Story of Father Damien* (1999).

Lonely Hearts and *A Woman's Tale* are probably his best-known and most influential films. *Lonely Hearts* is a romantic comedy about a lonely middle-aged piano

tuner who joins a dating agency where he meets and falls in love with an extremely shy 30-year-old woman. The film documents the clumsy and difficult courtship.

A Woman's Tale is an extraordinary portrait of Martha (Sheila Florance), a proud and feisty 78-year-old dying of lung cancer who refuses to “go gently into the night”. Martha, who takes on all comers—her son who wants to move her into an aged care home, the landlord who wants to push up the rent—provides love and inspiration to those closest to her. Cox wrote the film for Florance, who was dying of cancer at the time. The film was shot in four weeks and collected several national and international film awards. This included the Australian Film Industry best actress prize for Florance, who died six months after the film's completion.

Innocence, the director's eighteenth feature and latest work, which was premiered at the Sydney Film Festival, is a typical Cox film—restrained, intelligent and ironic.

In his short 1998 autobiography Cox wrote that he wanted to restore humanity to filmmaking: “Most films I see take me away from the art of humanity. I like to believe that life must be an act of love, and despite all the disappointments, I still fervently love people. I'm interested in people, not only for what they say and how they behave; I'm interested in their silences.

“In films, the ‘inner’ rarely comes to the surface, yet film is the very medium that can penetrate and then project one's inner side. The most obvious problem is that film has become larger than life; leaving no room for life's realities. That's why I don't like ‘stars’ who

project larger than life characters. Each thinking, feeling, struggling individual is much bigger than any of them.” [Reflections by Paul Cox, Sydney 1998, page 120-1]

This approach forms the core of *Innocence*, a tragicomedy set in suburban Australia about the social complications produced when two over 70-year-olds, one trapped in a 44-year-old but now passionless marriage, meet and fall wildly in love.

Andreas Borg (Charles Tingwell), a retired organist and music teacher, discovers that Claire (Julia Blake), a woman that he fell in love with 50 years ago in post-war Belgium, lives in his city. A widower of 30 years, Andreas writes to Claire and suggests that they meet. She reluctantly agrees and the two discover that the love they once shared has not died, in fact, their sexual passions are rekindled and they begin an affair that enriches and greatly complicates their lives.

Claire is married to John (Terry Norris) but has been deeply unhappy for a very long time. The couple no longer has sex and John is so impervious to Claire's emotional needs that when she eventually tells her husband about the affair he thinks she is joking. John later contacts their adult son, telling him that it is impossible to fall in love at the age of 70, Claire must be suffering delusions and needs psychiatric help.

As the reality gradually dawns, John is overcome with jealousy, anger and bewilderment, and becomes deeply afraid that he will be alone in the last years of his life. He tries to make amends, but everything he does seems to alienate him further from his wife. Claire's spirit and passions have been reawakened and although she is afraid of the consequences for her family, she eventually decides to leave the marriage and follow her heart and the allure of exploring her first love again. As one of the film's characters explains, “Love becomes more real and fulfilling the closer you come to death.”

But while Claire is making this difficult decision, Andreas discovers that he has terminal cancer. He rejects chemotherapy treatment, decides to keep the bad news from Claire and his family and swears his doctor to secrecy. Claire has filled his life with meaning and so he decides to live what remains of it to the full. Claire, who has resolved the emotional issues in breaking with her husband, has a weak heart, however, and dies whilst listening to Andreas playing the organ.

The film concludes with her funeral and an apparent reconciliation between the two old men.

Innocence, which will be released in Australian cinemas in December, is not a mawkish film but a celebration—with moments of great comedy—of life and the healing power of real love and companionship. Although Blake is a little forced during the final moments of Claire's life, performances by the three main protagonists are natural and convincing. Terry Norris is remarkable as the estranged husband, deftly moving from raw jealous anger and self-doubt, to dry understated comedy.

Cox's decision to explore the emotional issues confronting old people—their sexuality, their passions and their complex fears and doubts—is commendable and sets him apart from most filmmakers. Although films about those in their last years are not uncommon, *Innocence* challenges the usual cinematic clichés, which portray the elderly as figures of mirth, or pity, with few emotional requirements. Such insensitivity is not restricted to mainstream cinema.

In the hands of most other filmmakers, *Innocence* could be a real disaster, a soft-focus sentimental story for the midday movie or some romance cable channel. Directed by Cox, the film is an artistic success—a joyful work that will sensitise its audience to the complexities of the inner life of the elderly.



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