

Untempered childhood memories

15 Amore, written, directed and produced by Maurice Murphy

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15 Amore, Australian director Maurice Murphy's latest film, is set during World War Two. Based on Murphy's own childhood memories, the film is about the life and times of an Australian rural household that billeted two Italian prisoners and two German refugees during the war. Almost 18,500 Italian prisoners of war were held in Australia, with about 15,000 involved in agriculture and other compulsory rural labour schemes.

When we enter the story Murphy's mother, Dorothy (Lisa Hensley), whose enlisted husband is away fighting somewhere on the front lines, has been struggling to maintain the family farm and care for her three children. To assist with day-to-day chores and the general upkeep of the farm the government has assigned the family two Italian prisoners of war, Alfredo (Steve Bastoni) and Joseph (Domenic Galati).

As the story develops it soon becomes obvious that Dorothy and Alfredo are attracted to each other. Although these mutual feelings are never fully actualised, they constitute some of the more convincing aspects of the story and provide some tension. Additional tension is created when two German Jewish refugees, a mother and daughter, Frau Guttman (Gertaud Ingeborg) and Rachel (Tara Jakszewicz), come to stay at Dorothy's home.

This potentially interesting subject is dissipated by Murphy's preoccupation with day-to-day trivialities such as playing tennis (*15 Amore* —15 love) and carefree gold panning in a nearby stream. The house is such an Arcadia, where people play tennis, eat well, laugh in the sun, fall in love and make love, that viewers have to constantly remind themselves that a war in which millions lost their lives is taking place.

Despite Dorothy's overall warmth and attempts to accommodate to Frau Guttman's craving for the "fatherland", the German-Jewish refugee never quite

settles in. For a time she seems to integrate herself into the household routine and adopts a positive outlook towards Australia, describing it as a land of plenty. This all changes, however, when she realises that her daughter, Rachel, is in love with Joseph. Frau Guttman, who has greater plans for her daughter, refers to Joseph as the "Italian peasant". She wants Rachel to wait until the war is over but the enraptured 20-year-old girl easily shrugs off her interfering mother.

The film comes to a climax when Frau Guttman, increasingly bitter over her daughter's love affair, accuses one of the POWs of sexually molesting Dorothy's young daughter. These dramatic but unconvincing allegations are made in front of two Australian soldiers who regularly visit the farm. After some doubt, one of the soldiers believes the claims and decides that the prisoner must be punished. He is taken away, the war ends, the father returns and the film finishes.

While neither cynical, smug nor too self-conscious, *15 Amore* is an insubstantial work, one that belongs to the oft-seen category of Australian film—a quirky, neatly packaged, feel-good movie. Murphy, who previously directed the satirical television series *The Auntie Jack Show* (1972) and three features—*Fatty Finn* (1980), *Doctors and Nurses* (1981) and *Wet and Wild Summer!* (1992)—does not offend anyone. But nor does the film move anyone or offer any intellectual challenges. And it leaves one confused by its unresolved and unbelievable ending. To add to these flaws, the story simply does not develop its characters in a plausible or consistent fashion.

For the thousands of Italian POWs captured in North Africa and other battle zones during the war, their exile to Australia was traumatic and demoralising. Victims of racial and political abuse and severe social isolation,

many of these mainly young men, cut off from their families and homes for years, fell into deep depression and despondency, some developing serious mental health problems. Murphy, who is no doubt aware of all this, has chosen to concentrate on the more superficial aspects of their detainment.

Although it may be perfectly acceptable to feature the lighter sides of life from this period, we wonder why the director did not choose to temper his childhood recollections with his adult and artistic experience; to perhaps extrapolate on his more innocent and fairly superficial childhood memories.

Murphy thought, it seems, that a mere translation onto the screen of something dear to his heart would move his audience. (Of course he has, with the benefit of hindsight, omitted some things and changed others, in order to suit his own view of life and society decades later, which may account for the fact that very little in the film seems believable.) But this approach is mistaken. No childhood or even adult experience will be believable or have a strong and lasting impact on the viewer unless it is worked out artistically; unless it is rendered with images that transcend the immediate, more trivial aspects of life. The filmmaker has done the opposite; herein lies the source of *15 Amore's* weaknesses.



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