

A glitzy promotion for Murdoch's Australian studios

Moulin Rouge, directed by Baz Luhrmann, script by Luhrmann and Craig Pearce

Richard Phillips**28 June 2001**

Baz Luhrmann's multi-million dollar musical *Moulin Rouge* premiered at the recent Cannes Film Festival and then opened a few weeks later in Australia to saturation media coverage. Newspapers owned by Rupert Murdoch, who financed the \$US50 million production at his Fox Studios in Sydney, naturally enough led the publicity juggernaut with front-page stories, glamour shots and sycophantic reviews in the *Australian* and the Sydney-based *Daily Telegraph*. The *Australian* editorialised that *Moulin Rouge* challenged the "homogenising influences that stifle creative talent in Hollywood" and represented the "coming of age" of Australian film.

Critical opinion of the movie, however, was sharply divided. Film reviewers from Murdoch's rival newspapers lambasted it as "pop kitsch", "style in search of an idea" and an "exhausting barrage of kaleidoscopic, gaudy visions". By contrast David Stratton, senior film critic at Murdoch's *Australian* and former director of the Sydney Film Festival, hailed it as "richly cinematic and consistently inventive".

Paul Shehan in the Fairfax-owned *Sydney Morning Herald* went into adjectival overdrive describing it as "the greatest Australian movie ever made", "a global, transcultural blockbuster... packed with Australian actors and suffused with Australian sensibilities" and "a brilliant extension of Australia's trademark niche in the global film industry—hypertheatre."

All the hype about Australian talent and "hypertheatre" cinema cannot disguise the fact that Luhrmann's movie is an eclectic mish-mash which breaks no new ground in film musicals, lacks any real

plot or character development and after the first 15 minutes of technical wizardry fails to interest or surprise on any level. If it is to be remembered for anything in the months to come, it will be as a long-winded and glitzy trailer promoting the technical skills and services at Murdoch's film production facilities in Sydney.

Luhrmann has candidly admitted that inspiration for the film came to him while watching a Bollywood movie in Rajasthan. The locals were drunk and fighting, "even killing goats and sheep in the stalls," he told one media outlet, but the action romance on the screen still held their attention. "A Bollywood flick is an audience participation ceremony," he continued, "[so] who needs thematic thoroughness when everyone's comfortable with high comedy, song, dance and tragedy all in one? It's the sort of cinematic style I've always been on about."

Why he wants to make films that appeal to fighting drunks or those slaughtering animals in a cinema, Luhrmann does not bother to explain. But he has managed to create a Bollywood-style movie—a mindless musical love story that is regarded as a success if it operates as a temporary anesthetic, dulling the thought and senses of the viewer to the harsh realities of everyday life.

Moulin Rouge proceeds like a children's pantomime where the villains are immediately recognisable, and to be jeered at whenever they appear on stage, and the heroes and their allies are sweet, beautiful and/or strong and mysterious. The incredibly pedestrian script has actors singing or quoting extracts to each other from an

eclectic selection of 1970s and 1980s pop songs or Rogers and Hammerstein tunes, combined with lavish sets, costumes and a cast of hundreds of actors and dancers, most of whom seem to have been directed to leer at the camera at every opportunity. All of this is thrown together in frenzied MTV-style editing.

The story centres on an unconvincing love affair between Christian (Ewan McGregor), a naive young writer, and Satine (Nicole Kidman), a beautiful but tragically ill nightclub performer and high-priced prostitute. Christian has defied his father's instructions and visited Paris to find true love. On arrival he meets up with a group of bohemians, including the artist Henri Toulouse-Lautrec (John Leguizamo) and composer Erik Satie (Matthew Whittet). They live in the apartment above Christian and secure his assistance to complete a musical play entitled "Spectacular Spectacular" they have been working on for the Moulin Rouge.

Luhrmann, who treats history as nothing but a wardrobe from which to select garish costumes and sets, gives no indication who Toulouse-Lautrec or Satie are. They are simply second-line characters carrying the same intellectual weight as the film's collection of outlandish figures such as the Narcoleptic Argentinian, Nini Legs-in-the-Air, Arabia, China Doll, Madame Fromage, Le Chocolat, etc.

The lead performer at the Moulin Rouge, which is a dance hall and brothel, is Satine. Her boudoir at the cabaret is inside the belly of a gigantic bejeweled replica of an elephant. Christian sees Satine at Moulin Rouge singing "Diamonds are girl's best friend" and is smitten. At first she confuses him for a wealthy duke but then falls for him—the two singing love songs to each other in the moonlight on top of the elephant.

The Moulin Rouge is facing serious financial difficulties and Zidler (Jim Broadbent), who runs the place, wants the wealthy but wicked Duke of Worcester (Richard Roxburgh) to finance "Spectacular Spectacular" and help transform the cabaret into a legitimate theatre. The Duke, however, will only do so if he can have Satine. She attempts to string along the Duke while maintaining her relationship with Christian.

Various high jinks between the Duke, Satine, Zidler and Christian and a frenzied tango sequence to Sting's song "Roxanne" lead up to the film's visual and audio crescendo—the performance of Christian's musical. The

show is a song and dance extravaganza starring Satine and a large cast of high camp characters. While the musical is a success, Satine dies of consumption and the film ends with the forlorn Christian left to write the story as he gazes dreamily from his Montmartre garret.

Luhrmann claims *Moulin Rouge*—the last of a trilogy of "red-curtain" films, the first two being *Strictly Ballroom* (1992) and *Romeo+Juliet* (1996)—is a "musical celebration of truth, beauty, freedom and love". But the digitalised sets, hi-tech camera footage, which propels audiences at high speed over Parisian streets to the Moulin Rouge in Montmartre, and numerous close-ups of McGregor and Kidman fail to generate any real feeling or passion for the characters or the story.

The performances and the action are so over the top and hysterical that the impact of Satine's death is nil. In any case, she, like all the other characters in *Moulin Rouge*, is so cartoonish that it really doesn't matter. McGregor, Kidman and several others, who can act, are simply wasted and character development, if such a term can be applied to this film, is limited to wistful looks or dark grimaces. The characters do things—there is no shortage of action—but Luhrmann provides no real explanation or indication of their motives.

The dance sequences are lost in the deluge of camera trickery and supercharged editing with audiences barely allowed to reflect on a single image for more than a few seconds. One suspects that Luhrmann is afraid that if his audience is allowed to study anything for more than a few seconds they will see the banality and emptiness of it all.

It is said that digital filmmaking technology is now so advanced that anything a writer or director imagines can be recreated on film. *Moulin Rouge* is a perfect example of what happens when this extraordinary technology is put in the hands of people who have nothing of any worth to say.



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