

# Atmospheric, but lacking substance

## Beneath Clouds, written and directed by Ivan Sen

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9 October 2002

*Beneath Clouds*, a first-time feature by young writer/director Ivan Sen, is about two young rural Aborigines—Lena and Vaughn—hitchhiking to Sydney in search of a better life. The film, one of several recent Australian productions, including *Yolngu Boys*, *One Night the Moon*, *Rabbit Proof Fence*, *The Tracker* and *Australian Rules*, which explore different aspects of life for Australia's indigenous people, won the Premiere First Movie prize and Best New Talent award at this year's Berlin International Film Festival.

Lena (Danielle Hall) is a half-Irish, half-Aboriginal teenage girl, who wants to escape the drudgery of the isolated town in which she was born and raised. If she remains in the tiny roadside settlement, her likely future is unemployment, teenage pregnancy and a life of poverty. Determined to escape this grim prospect, she jumps a bus to Sydney in the hope of rejoining her estranged Irish father. A few hours later, the bus accidentally leaves her behind at an isolated roadside café where she meets Vaughn (Damien Pitt), who is travelling to Sydney to see his dying mother. Vaughn is on the run from the police, having just escaped from a nearby prison farm.

The teenagers decide to hitchhike together but their relationship is tense for several days. Vaughn does not realise that Lena is Aboriginal and Lena does not care if it stays that way. She tells Vaughn that personal flaws have led him into a life of petty crime and he should give himself up to the police.

But during the course of their journey the tension between the two mellows as they begin to learn something about each other's background and hopes for the future. Along the way they come across a small farmer, a wealthy grazier, a group of low-paid Aborigines working in the fields and later, some of Vaughn's cousins in a souped-up car. Just before they

reach Sydney, and the film's melodramatic end, the teenagers become involved in a violent altercation with the police.

*Beneath Clouds* provides a glimpse of the endemic racism and constant police harassment of Aborigines. Skillful cinematography by Allan Collins ensures that depictions of the dismal township where Lena lives and Vaughn's prison are stark, gritty and accurate.

Sen has genuine sympathy and humanity toward the plight of rural Aborigines who suffer appalling levels of unemployment, poverty, substance abuse and other grave social problems. Unfortunately, insufficient plot and character development and a lack of any new social or emotional insights by the director/scriptwriter prevent the 90-minute movie rising beyond a series of visually interesting moments but largely disconnected events.

Without the road journey template there is little to hold the various incidents together. In fact, Sen, who made his name with a number of short films between 1998 and 2000 (*Vanish*, *Tears*, *Wind* and *Dust*), does not seem to have made the transition from the short film genre to features.

The difficult relationship between the teenagers is effective for the first half-hour but as soon as the couple begins to establish some rapport, their monosyllabic dialogue becomes contrived and the film descends into numerous close-ups of angst-ridden facial expressions and disjointed events.

There is an angry altercation between Vaughn and the small farmer, who chases the teenagers from his property, and a confused discussion on religion between Lena and Vaughn in an abandoned church in which Vaughn uses Bible pages to start a fire to keep warm. It is not clear what Sen is attempting to establish in these scenes. Vaughn angrily denounces the white

farmer for the dispossessing the Aborigines and demonstrates his disdain for Christianity in the deserted church. But these issues are not explored in any way and audiences are left to draw their own conclusions.

*Beneath Clouds* is best when it is understated. At one point on their journey Lena and Vaughn accept a lift from a wealthy farmer in a Mercedes Benz. The quietly spoken man seems genuinely concerned, at least until he reaches the entrance to his property where he leaves them on the side of the road, miles from the nearest town. Although the five-minute sequence has no virtually no dialogue, it cleverly demonstrates the social divide between the farmer and the penniless teenagers.

Sen has demonstrated his technical mastery but still lacks the artistic and story-telling ability to engage audiences on a deeper level. Hopefully future work by this young filmmaker will be underpinned by an appreciation of the need to develop these skills. The subject matter of his next film, however, does not look promising—a comic thriller about a group of UFO watchers in New Mexico.



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