

Love and anti-refugee racism in rural Australia

Marking Time directed by Cherie Nolan, written by John Doyle

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Marking Time, an Australian television drama set in Brackley, a fictional rural town, examines a year in the life of 19-year-old Hal Flemming, who meets and falls in love with Randa, an Afghan refugee. Broadcast by the ABC on November 9 and 10, the mini-series is the first mainstream Australian television drama that attempts to explore the impact of the Howard government's anti-refugee policies on ordinary people.

Central protagonist Hal (Abe Forsythe) is a sensitive and thoughtful youth who has just finished high school. He has decided to defer a university education in Sydney and spend 12 months in the rural town. He lives with his father, 45-year-old Geoff (Geoff Morrell), an economics teacher and former athlete. Hal's mother died when the boy was five-years-old.

Hal's "coming of age" and his first real love develop against the backdrop of profound changes in world politics, and he provides "direct-to-camera" commentary throughout. This simple device and the effective use of contemporaneous television news footage, help trace how key events impact on social relations and the tempo of life in the rural town.

Marking Time opens during the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. A festive and optimistic atmosphere prevails in Brackley, situated about 200 kilometres west of Sydney, and Geoff, who competed in the 1976 Montreal Olympics, is among those chosen to carry the torch through the town.

Although Geoff thinks that his son should spend the year travelling, Hal hangs around Brackley, renewing his friendship with acquaintances who dropped out of school at an early age and now spend much of their time drinking and taking drugs. While he is more mature and informed than his friends, Hal finds himself adapting to their backwardness and caught up in situations he later regrets.

An unlikely event brings Hal into contact with 17-year-old Randa (Bojana Novakovic), who attends the local high school. Randa is part of a small Afghan community in the

town whose members are on temporary protection visas and awaiting decisions on their refugee status applications. Most are employed at the local fruit cannery.

Hal is smitten by Randa but unable to summon up the courage to ask her out. He resolves, however, to find a way to win her affections. When schoolboys pull off Randa's hijab (headscarf), Hal enlists friends to retrieve the scarf and reprimand the boys. This provides another opening for the young man to make contact and eventually, after a few weeks, he receives permission from Randa's father Hassan to take the girl on a date.

Hal's friends—Bullet and Shane, Tracy and Belinda—crudely ridicule his attraction to Randa. Lacking a decent education and caught up in a cycle of alcohol, drugs and unemployment or low-paying dead-end jobs, they have little time for the Afghan refugees.

In late August 2001, in the midst of Hal and Randa's developing relationship, the Howard government in Canberra denies entry to 460 asylum seekers rescued by the merchant ship Tampa and, aided by the media, begins whipping up racist and anti-refugee sentiments. A few weeks later, terrorists crash passenger aircraft into America's World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Prime Minister Howard seizes on these issues to make "border protection" and the "fight against terrorism" its central reelection strategy. Government officials tell the media that Afghan refugees attempting to enter Australia could be terrorists.

Geoff, his future wife Gemma and Hal are outraged at the government's stance but the town is divided. Government and media propaganda shape confusion and ignorance into dark suspicions about the Afghan community and outright racism.

Tensions mount and when the US begins bombing Afghanistan, Randa's home is torched by unknown arsonists. Geoff offers shelter to the family, which is gratefully accepted. But Randa is discovered in bed with Hal the next morning. She feels humiliated, her father is angry

and hurt, and Geoff feels betrayed by his son. Randa is forbidden from seeing Hal, and Geoff refuses to speak to his son for several weeks. Hal and Randa, however, continue to meet secretly.

As the federal election campaign progresses, the Howard government, with Labor Party support, continues to play the anti-refugee card. Brackley's local DJ attempts to stir up the situation against the Afghan community. Hal and Geoff are members of a local Federation Fruit Festival committee, but resign in protest when a couple of small businessmen on the committee publish a web site with the names and addresses of all Afghan refugees. Father and son are denounced as "elitists" and "do-gooders". At the same time, Randa and Hassan's refugee status application is rejected by the Immigration Department and they are directed to leave the country by the end of the year.

Hal hopes electoral defeat of the Howard government will stop Randa and Hassan's deportation. But when the government is returned with an increased majority, Hal plans to thwart the deportation order by eloping with Randa. This scheme, however, fails and the family is deported.

The television mini-series ends with Hal deeply shocked and dismayed. In just 12 months the young man's illusions in Australia as a democracy, providing a "fair go" for all, are shattered. Angry and feeling an outcast in his own land, he resolves to travel to Pakistan and Afghanistan and find Randa.

Notwithstanding some obvious weaknesses, *Marking Time* is an intelligent and compassionate work. It represents an encouraging change from the diet of mind-numbing police shows, insular kitchen-sink dramas and cynical comedies about Australian working class families currently dominating local television. Director Cherie Nolan elicits strong performances from Abe Forsythe, Bojana Novakovic and Geoff Morell.

Some of the supporting characters, particularly Hal's friends, however, are stereotypes or cartoonish. This is not the product of weak acting, but of problems of script and character development. Hal's friends reflect the difficulties confronting oppressed rural youth, but too often *Marking Time* uses them for comic relief. This approach is tedious and typical of much Australian film and television production—a tendency to avoid any genuine probing of the complex and contradictory relationship between character development and social life.

But, overall, scriptwriter John Doyle (a.k.a., Rampaging Roy Slaven), a well-known local television comedian/sports commentator should be commended for the drama. His understanding of anti-refugee racism in Brackley is healthy and unequivocal. Doyle draws a clear distinction between the backwardness and confusion of Hal's friends and the

real perpetrators of such poison—the political establishment, the media and their local representatives.

Hal and his father Geoff are clearly alter egos for Doyle and seem to reflect changes in his own political outlook. *Changi*, a six-part series about Australian prisoners of war during WWII and Doyle's only other television drama, failed to challenge the political status quo and reinforced a range of Australian national myths.

Like the characters he has created for *Marking Time*, Doyle is clearly shocked by the cruel and inhumane social and political atmosphere created by the government and mass media, particularly over the last two years.

In comments prior to the screening of *Marking Time*, Doyle said he was inspired to write the story in protest against the anti-refugee hysteria whipped up by the Howard government and the support given to it by the opposition Labor Party.

"It [2001] was a bleak period for the government. They had to pull a rabbit out of the hat. Over the horizon bobbed the Tampa and this was seized on by the government. The election issue then became border protection and who could be the hardest, who could be the harshest against these unfortunate people.... The whole thing was orchestrated by spin doctors."

The Labor party, he continued, were "weak of heart and even weaker of stomach, who got into lock step with government policy. They weren't game to lose the election, which they were going to do anyway, on a matter of principle".

"... I hope those who watch [*Marking Time*] will see that there are advantages to being informed and great disadvantages and dangers of being ill-informed or misinformed because it makes the community vulnerable to being abused by those who would seek to govern us."

In another interview he said: "It seemed to me democracy can only work in a climate of information, where people are informed and not misguided. It is a very fragile nationalist outlook thing and when information is choked off from a community they will often make errors of judgement".

Marking Time covers a lot of ground—too much, perhaps. But better to have attempted to tackle racism and the political establishment head-on than avoid them, as other directors of locally produced films have done in the past two years. One hopes that Doyle continues to artistically grapple with these and other vital political and social questions.



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