No new insights

Japanese Story, directed by Sue Brooks, script by Alison Tilson

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Australian-based feature filmmakers produced an excess of second-rate films last year, the majority of them comedies—*The Honourable Wally Norman*, *The Night We Called it a Day*, *Gettin' Square*, *The Wannabees*, *Bad Eggs*, *Fat Pizza* and *Take Away*—to name a few. These generated little interest and were quickly forgotten. By contrast the appearance of a serious Australian feature—*Japanese Story*—won wide praise from local film writers who proclaimed it a major work.

Directed by Sue Brooks from a script by Alison Tilson, *Japanese Story* was included in the *Un Certain Regard* section of the Cannes Film Festival and won best film, director, original screenplay, editing and cinematography awards, as well as the best actor prize for its star Toni Collette, at last year's Australian Film Industry (AFI) awards.

Brooks' film deals with a brief but tragic love affair between Hiromitsu Tachibana (Gotaro Tsunashima), a visiting Japanese business executive, and Sandy Edwards (Toni Collette), an Australian geologist. Sandy, who works for a geological software company in Perth, Western Australia, is directed by her boss to be Hiromitsu's driver in the hope that it will help persuade the businessman to purchase the company's product. She reluctantly agrees and after an abrasive first meeting with the somewhat arrogant businessman, the two travel to the Pilbara mining region in northwest Australia where they witness blasting operations at a massive open cut mine.

Unaware of the dangers that lie ahead and ignoring Sandy's advice, Hiromitsu insists that they travel on into the outback wilderness where their car becomes bogged in desert sand. After a difficult and freezing night in the desert they eventually free the vehicle. This near-death experience brings them together emotionally and their relationship blossoms into a romance.

The affair ends tragically when Hiromitsu, who is married with a family, is accidentally killed. The last third of the film descends into a laboured melodrama, accompanied by a heavy-handed musical score, as Sandy reexamines her life and personal relations anew, including her previously impatient attitude towards her liberal-minded mother. *Japanese Story* concludes with a momentary but emotional encounter between Sandy and Hiromitsu's wife, who has come to Australia for her husband's body.

While some scenes have a certain ethereal beauty and Toni Collette's performance is skilled, Brooks' film is a disappointing and tedious work. Ironically, the strength of Collette's performance tends to highlight the film's weaknesses—its thin script, lack of social context and secondary character development (Sandy and Hiromitsu are virtually the only characters in the film).

Director Sue Brooks, whose first feature was *The Road to Nhill* (1997), a comedy about a rural bowling club, says that *Japanese Story* demonstrates how contemporary pressures smother human relations and reinforce cultural stereotypes. When these are somehow lifted by intense love or tragedy individuals can begin to understand their inner souls. "It's bizarre," she told one interviewer, "that we walk across this earth without stopping to think what's underneath, and the same applies to the people in this film.... We're all engrossed in our hectic lives and in filling those lives with activity and, to a degree, self-importance. We rarely take stock."

Asked what she wanted to achieve in *Japanese Story*, Brooks said, "I wanted to say that deep down we're all the same. That's the whole thing."

No doubt the director has a healthy disgust for the

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racism and anti-refugee sentiments cultivated by the Howard government and sections of the Australian media. *Japanese Story* has a couple of fleeting references to anti-Japanese prejudices, including comments by an Australian World War II veteran. But these issues are not referred to again or ever seriously explored. In fact, the film tends to reinforce various cultural clichés. As the director told one newspaper, "This was an amazing cultural clash to have the casual knock-about, she'll-be-right-mate Aussie against the respectful, contained, controlled and clean Japanese".

The vast, inhospitable, and at times spectacularly beautiful Australian outback is a major player in the film—the premise being that the harsh and silent terrain can provide the means to help one find oneself. The fact, that the two protagonists are also connected to the mining industry is another rather obvious component—a story involving people whose livelihood depends on investigating what lies beneath the surface. This symbolism, however, is transparent and artificial.

Road movies where characters are brought together by the forces of nature and fall in love are not exactly new. The alleged personality-altering capacity of the Australian outback is also a somewhat hackneyed theme. *Walkabout* (1971), *Where The Green Ants Dream* (1984) and numerous others, including the recent *The Goddess of 1967* (2000) by Clara Law, another road movie love story about an Australian girl and a Japanese tourist.

Brooks' conception that ignorance or insensitivity to national and cultural differences can be resolved by an emotional hiatus or by physically removing oneself from all the pressures of urban life is naïve and avoids any examination of the underlying reasons. Instead *Japanese Story* takes the line of least resistance, confining its characters to easily identifiable pigeonholes. By refusing to grapple with any social and political contradictions that shaped the life and outlook of its protagonists, it barely scratches the surface and provides no new insights into contemporary life or personal relations.

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