

Signs of life

Two new Australian films: Look Both Ways and Little Fish

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Look Both Ways, a debut feature written and directed by Sarah Watt, won the Discovery Award prizewinner at the recent Toronto International Film Festival. Watt's multi-faceted film has obvious warmth and appeal, although this may appear to be a contradiction, given that the movie's central subject matter is death and grieving. The 100-minute multi-character movie examines how ordinary people come to terms with mortality.

Watt's film traces the intersecting paths of a small group of individuals—a news photographer, an artist, a train driver, a journalist, an editor and others—who are brought together by a fatal rail accident on an especially hot weekend in an Australian city.

Nick (William McInness), the photographer and the film's principal character, has just been told that he has cancer but has to wait until the following Monday before he receives a more detailed prognosis. Meryl (Justine Clark), an illustrator and artist, is returning home from her father's funeral. On the way back to her small studio apartment, she witnesses the death of a pedestrian who is killed by a passing train.

Nick is assigned to cover the tragic story and meets Meryl. While both are deeply affected by the tragedy, they are preoccupied with their own mortality. Nick visualises cancer spreading through his body; Meryl sees catastrophes around every corner. Watt, a veteran short film animator, innovatively illustrates these imaginings through stop-frame photography, animations and other visual techniques.

Nick and Meryl accidentally meet the next day. There is an obvious chemistry between them and they sleep together that night. *Look Both Ways* then follows their awkward but affecting romance, while intercutting back and forth between the dilemmas facing the film's other characters: Andy (Anthony Hayes), an ambitious young journalist trying to deal with a failed marriage and his long-suffering girlfriend who has just discovered that she's pregnant; the distraught train driver who accidentally killed the pedestrian; and the dead pedestrian's wife and grieving family.

Watt skillfully reconciles these apparently disparate strands, and although the film probably has too many characters and plot lines, she has an obvious depth of feeling and empathy for her characters that resonates throughout the film. In fact, one feels that all the protagonists are drawn from life and that we somehow know them.

Justine Clark as Meryl is particularly appealing and perfectly captures her character's strange combination of constant premonitions, quirky humour and perceptive personal insights. William McInness' self-deprecating humour and generally deadpan delivery, even as he is worrying about his own cancer, is effective and entirely believable.

This is not a major work. But its underlying message—that death, grieving and day-to-day concerns about mortality should be openly discussed and understood as part of human existence—is obviously an important subject for artistic exploration.

Perhaps Watts could have attempted to relate her characters' preoccupation with death and destruction to the current political climate? In any case, the movie's appeal is that these questions are examined from the standpoint of ordinary, complex human beings, not larger-than-life caricatures, and not used to bolster religious belief or some hope in an afterlife.

Overall, *Look Both Ways* is a healthy and genuinely optimistic work. Although not deeply-probing, it deserves a wide audience.

Little Fish, written by Jacquelin Perske and directed by Rowan Woods, examines the life of Tracy Heart (Cate Blanchett), a 32-year-old working class woman and former heroin addict from Cabramatta, a suburb in western Sydney with a large Vietnamese immigrant population.

Woods is obviously not the first director to deal with the problems of suburban crime, drug abuse and its pitiless subculture, but his approach is compassionate and a positive departure from previous work.

His first feature, *The Boys* (1998), is a nihilistic and deeply pessimistic work about three brothers from the western

Sydney suburbs. One of the brothers has just been released from prison and the three men spend a day of drinking and drug taking before committing a brutal murder of a young woman. Elements of the film, which was acclaimed by local critics, indicate a fascination for criminal elements (see “Two Australian films”).

By contrast, *Little Fish* attempts to carefully explore and dramatise some of the underlying factors behind drug addiction and, unlike many contemporary features, does not sensationalise the issue.

Tracy, who lives with her single mother Janelle (Noni Hazelhurst), manages a small suburban video rental store. She has applied for a bank loan to become a partner in the business and expand it into an Internet café. With the assistance of her mother and a girlfriend, who try to keep her away from her old associates, Tracy has not used heroin for four years. But the social and economic pressures of the past are ever-present and seem to be closing in.

Unknown to her mother, Tracy still maintains a friendship with Lionel Dawson (Hugo Weaving), her mother’s former boyfriend and the individual who first introduced her to hard drugs. Dawson, a former professional football star, has been unable to kick his habit and is sexually involved with a local crime boss (Sam Neill), who supplies him with heroin.

Jonny (Dustin Nguyen), Tracy’s ex-boyfriend and also a drug user, has just returned to Sydney after four years in Canada where his family sent him to try and end his drug taking. He wants to reestablish his relationship with Tracy and claims to have worked as a stockbroker in Canada and to be preparing to take up a job with a Sydney broking firm. At the same time Ray (Martin Henderson), Tracy’s disabled brother and a drug user, is attempting to set up a drug-peddling partnership with Jonny. The two young men start organising a scheme with another small time criminal.

Tracy’s attempts to secure a business loan ultimately fail—the banks are not prepared to ignore her criminal record and bad credit rating. Having previously told the video store manager and her friends that the money had been approved, she is thrown into crisis. Increasingly desperate and confused, she resumes her relationship with Jonny and is drawn into his and Ray’s dreams of a lucrative drug deal.

Blanchett gives an energetic and sincere performance, but the strongest work is by Hugo Weaving as the former football star. Weaving captures the footballer’s tragic self-pitying bitterness. Once healthy, rich and famous, he now lives in a threadbare apartment, forced to sell his sporting trophies to feed his drug habit.

Without revealing *Little Fish*’s conclusion, the drug deal is a catastrophe but Tracy, Ray and Jonny somehow extricate themselves from a bloody denouement. The film ends on a vaguely optimistic note with the three characters

swimming at a local surf beach as dawn breaks and Tracy visually reminiscing her childhood innocence. This is rather simplistic and unconvincing, because it glosses over the tough future they now face.

Woods tends to view life in working class suburbs as dark and mysterious, almost alien, and tries to give his settings an enigmatic appearance, with obtuse camera angles and other techniques. These atmospherics become a distraction. More effort could have been productively expended on character development. Weaving is compelling precisely because his ex-footballer character is the most complex figure in the movie.

Despite this and other limitations, *Little Fish* has some insightful and unsettling moments. Woods demonstrates a degree of understanding and real concern for his characters.

The movie, notwithstanding its “positive” ending, makes clear that recovering working class addicts confront almost insurmountable odds. In the absence of ongoing medical treatment and counseling, the only real support they have is from immediate family and friends. And, if this is not available, the task becomes virtually impossible, because the underlying social and economic dynamics that engendered the addiction in the first place, remain.

Some local film critics have responded to *Look Both Ways* and *Little Fish* with claims that they constitute a “renaissance of Australian cinema”. This reaction is somewhat exaggerated and primarily driven by concerns about the parlous state of the Australian feature film industry, whose 12 features last year only earned a total of \$11.9 million, the worst result for the industry since 1978.

While *Little Fish* and *Look Both Ways* will not single handedly overcome the problems facing the local film industry, they do indicate that there are some Australian directors prepared to go against the grain of the prevailing commercial moviemaking culture. These tentative steps should be encouraged.



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