

# Footy Legends: Australian suburban comedy recycles old myths

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*Footy Legends*, directed by Khoa Do, written by Do and Khoa Do

Australian comedy *Footy Legends*, directed by Khoa Do—who also co-wrote the film with his brother Anh and sister-in-law Suzanne Do—is a disappointing work. Set in the working class western Sydney suburb of Yagoona, where the director and his brother lived after his parents arrived in Australia from Vietnam as refugees in 1983, the movie’s humour is predictable and provides no real social insights.

Luc Vu (Anh Do), *Footy Legend*’s central character, has been unemployed for six months after being made redundant from a nearby factory. With virtually no income, he attempts to look after his 11-year-old sister Debbie (Zoe Houghton). Their difficulties are dramatically compounded when a social welfare official threatens to put Debbie in a foster home unless Luc can get a job.

Out of desperation Luc decides to enter his football team of mainly old high school friends in the Holden Cup, an amateur rugby league competition. First prize is a Holden utility vehicle and a job modelling for Lowes’ clothing catalogue. The Sydney clothing retailer regularly features rugby league players in its promotions.

Against all odds and lots of football training, Luc’s team wins the final even though the opposition team is made up of former professional star players. Having secured the winning prize, Luc and his sister live “happily ever after.”

Notwithstanding the Do brothers’ aim of creating a “feel-good” comedy, *Footy Legends* is a failure and simply recycles hackneyed claims that anyone with right mix of determination and good humour can overcome all adversity, if only they try hard enough.

Media comments by Khoa highlight some of the

movie’s essential problems. Khoa has claimed that the film is a “kind of an antidote to negative headlines about rugby league, about Sydney’s west, about people from different backgrounds.” Or “I hope every kid from Yagoona to Penrith to Kalgoorlie will watch this film and think that all his hopes and his dreams are possible.” And finally, “*Footy Legends* is in many ways a celebration of the suburbs, of Holden cars, sausage sizzles, Lowes.”

Leaving aside his assertion that people should “celebrate” the suburbs, Khoa and his brother Anh are clearly sympathetic to the most oppressed and underprivileged layers. And while the brothers, having experienced racial bigotry and other difficulties facing working class youth, obviously know their subject matter and have a likeable and unpretentious sense of humour—Anh made his name as a stand-up comedian—their film is formulaic. In fact, it never rises above the typical sports metaphor story, where the struggling but determined and likeable underdog rises above his or her immediate social circumstances and achieves personal and financial success.

Crude placement ads and plugs for “Australian” sport and industry also mar the film as rugby league personalities, commentators and former star players provide positive comment on Lowes, Holdens and other products. At times, the movie feels more like an extended segment of “The Footy Show,” a prime time local television sports show hosted by football commentators and players that includes comedy sketches, than a feature film.

*Footy Legends* fits into a specific category of local film and television shows. With almost one third of Australia’s population born overseas, there have been numerous local television shows and movies released in the past two decades attempting to deal with the

“immigrant experience.” These include *Acropolis Now*, *The Wog Boy*, *Fat Pizza*, *Take Away*, *The Craic* and *The Wannabes*, to name a few.

Most of these are lightweight works with some occasional moments of comedic invention. Others, however, reinforce racialist stereotypes, portraying immigrant workers as funny, loving, but lazy and somewhat simple. While the Do brothers reject these falsehoods, they replace them with another set of clichés—attempting to portray immigrants as “more Aussie” than everyone else—and therefore never transcend this approach or genuinely challenge the typecasting on which much of the genre is based.

Khoa’s first film, *The Finished People* (2003), showed some promise and integrity. A warm, albeit limited work dealt with the problems of homeless youth in the predominantly Vietnamese Sydney suburb of Cabramatta, it emerged from Khoa’s voluntary work teaching “at-risk youth” a six-week course about filmmaking at a charity called Open Family.

Normally, the youth involved in this project would make a 10-minute video at the end of the course. Khoa, however, decided that the best way to teach these disadvantaged youth was to collaborate with them and make a feature in which they would star. The end result was a compassionate examination of the tremendous difficulties facing homeless youth.

After the success of *The Finished People*, Khoa was voted Young Australian of the Year. Asked by local media about the significance of this award, he said that it gave him the opportunity to tell young people in Australia that they could still “make it.”

*Footy Legends*, unfortunately, is infused with this false and simplistic outlook.

If the Do brothers really believe this to be the case, then life as depicted in *The Finished People* has undergone an extraordinary transformation for the better. As the filmmakers know full well, life for working class youth and especially those from immigrant backgrounds has worsened dramatically, with the growth of low-wage casual jobs and unemployment and poverty in southwestern Sydney amongst the worst in Australia. Any film that glosses over this reality with the promotion of individualism and variations on “Australia—the lucky country” theme denies the tremendous difficulties facing young people today.

Good comedy, and especially that which aspires to uplift its audiences, should surprise, provoke and offer some challenge to existing social relations. The Do brothers’ movie, however, is ponderous and predictable, and its vision of working class life is terribly naïve. *Footy Legends* could have been a better film if its creators had used their comedic skills to examine more deeply the real lives of its characters rather than try to squeeze them into some “feel-good” template.



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