

Kenny and Suburban Mayhem from Australia: two sides of the same coin

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Kenny, directed by Clayton Jacobson; *Suburban Mayhem*, directed by Paul Goldman

In its treatment of working class characters in the past couple of decades, Australian cinema has favoured one of two extremes. The first depicts such figures as violent and backward, with few redeeming features. The second provides an idealised portrayal of the “quintessential” quirky and endearing Australian worker. Whatever the differences, the approach is too often the same—oversimplified and one-dimensional, resulting in semi-caricatures rather than living, complex characters.

Kenny, co-written by Shane Jacobson and Clayton Jacobson, is a first feature by actor Clayton Jacobson, with most of the Jacobson family involved. *Kenny* was nominated for six Australian Film Industry Awards, with Best Lead Actor award won by Shane Jacobson. It was one of the most popular feature films released in Australia in 2006. Despite the director’s sympathetic attitude toward his main character, he has produced a simplistic portrayal—more accurately, a dumbing down—of Kenny’s life that fits the director’s own stereotypical notions.

Kenny is shot mostly in a mockumentary style as the camera follows Kenny Smyth, the eponymous working class hero of the film. Kenny is a porta-a-loo plumber in his mid-thirties, overweight and virtually permanently clad in his green work overalls. The film captures the minutiae of his day-to-day work and social life, with Kenny being the only character who speaks directly to the camera while all the others appear as props intended to highlight his affability. Acrimoniously separated from his wife, he has a warm relationship with his young son; a difficult father who lives in a caravan park; a brother—rarely seen—who seems to mix in a middle-class milieu; and workmates who have their own problems that they insist on sharing with him.

His work takes him to rock concerts, the Melbourne Cup horse race and car racing rallies where he encounters uncouth behaviour, as well as derision and ridicule. A slight dig at middle class hypocrisy is attempted in a couple of scenes, but these are largely ineffectual.

Kenny is a likable character, but that is the extent of the depth and complexity attributed to this individual. If such a person

epitomises the qualities of the ideal Australian worker, surely he must be worthy of representation in a more serious and complex manner. Kenny’s every triumph over adversity just doesn’t ring true in the Australia of the present. There is, instead, a sense that Kenny somehow miraculously rises above everything, not even through sheer force of personality, but because he is a “decent bloke,” someone who lives and lets live.

Portraying Kenny as a simplistic, benign individual reveals the small ambitions of contemporary Australian filmmakers for the working class. In an interview with ABC TV’s Margaret Pomeranz, Shane Jacobson explains the inspiration for *Kenny*: “And life is small victories, I think. It’s not about winning Tattslotto. If we all wait for that and it doesn’t happen, should we be disappointed? But if you can sit on the beach with a partner or your children and have a wine or a picnic with the kids, I mean that’s as good as it gets, you know? And the people who get bedridden with illness, or people who find themselves on death’s doorstep, you know, or people who find themselves in jail, they soon realise the things they missed are the things they ignored, which is all the simple stuff around, you know?”

The Jacobson brothers intended to pay tribute to their family and what they represent about Australian working class life. Clayton Jacobson explains in the production notes that his father came from a large carnival family, which endured hard times. He notes that his family, often the target of “mean-spirited locals...used comedy, wit and resourcefulness to weather the constant condescension and aggression of others—a major theme in our film *Kenny*. Much of the film’s humour comes directly from sayings and conversations my brother Shane and I overheard between our uncles, father and grandmother at family gatherings.”

As well intentioned and sympathetic as the filmmakers may be—and this is not unimportant—*Kenny* barely rises above an amalgam of clichés in the form of a full-length feature film.

Suburban Mayhem, directed by Paul Goldman, seems inspired by the Tarantino school of filmmaking and is a poor attempt at subverting the so-called family values that are constantly peddled by the media and politicians. The film was nominated for twelve AFI awards with Emily Barclay taking

Best Lead Actress, Nick Harvey winning Best Original Music Score and Anthony Hayes the Best Supporting Actor award.

The film is set in a working class suburb of Newcastle, Australia's sixth most populated city, which used to be a major steel production centre, located approximately 150 km to the north of Sydney. The story is told through a series of fast-paced flashbacks and documentary-style interviews with the town's people. Katrina is a 19-year-old single mother who lives with her working class father John (Robert Morgan) and has an unnatural attachment to her older brother Danny (Laurence Breuls).

The film opens with Danny and friend Kenny (Anthony Hayes) robbing a seven-eleven store, which ends with Danny beheading the store attendant with a samurai sword. Katrina is devastated when Danny is arrested, but is convinced he will be released soon. Her character is a composite of "bad-girl" clichés and stereotypes without any endearing or redeeming qualities; she terrorises her neighbours and friends, is foul-mouthed and self-centred, and uses sex as a weapon to manipulate. Emily Barclay as Katrina, the central character, is quite engaging, but the role is so terribly limited in its emotional and psychological range.

The filmmakers revel in this aspect of her rather limited, arrested emotional development. When Danny is refused bail, or a retrial, Katrina hatches a plot to murder her father—who in the meantime has threatened to cut her off financially and get custody of her daughter—so that she can inherit the modest home and sell it to finance a renewed legal battle to release Danny from jail.

She sleeps with Kenny—who is something of a simpleton with morbid fantasies—and then enlists him to carry out the murder, but while listening to her father's screams in the next room, she discovers that the murderer is Rusty (Michael Dorman), her devoted boyfriend. Rusty is unable to complete the grisly act, and in the meantime, Kenny, unaware that Rusty has pre-empted him, arrives to fulfil his promise to Katrina. He is arrested for her father's murder, and Rusty and Katrina find domestic bliss, more or less, in a kitsch seaside cottage replete with pink flamingos in the garden.

All this is supposed to constitute, according to director Paul Goldman and screenwriter Alice Bell, some sort of rebellion against suburban mores and conventions. Inspired by family murderers such as the Menendez brothers in the US and Sef Gonzales in Australia, Bell began attending murder trials as a hobby and the screenplay emerged out of that. On creating the character, she says: "I took characteristics from different murderers and I took away all of society's boundaries and any concerns for consequences, and that's how I created the idea of Katrina. Once I had the character, I threw her into the middle of suburbia, I gave her a baby—because it was such a nice contrast to what she was about to do in the film—and then Katrina wrote herself. She's a character who just doesn't stop."

Director Paul Goldman says "I loved this strong,

transgressive female character that tears up the rule book, trashing the suburban streets of my childhood (our great Australian heartland), trashing all those phony, sentimental, oppressive family values everyone is trying to peddle us...." This is typical undergraduate fascination with the supposedly "sinister" or "dark" underside of ordinary suburbia.

How is Katrina rebellious? Against whom or what? Her helpless father or her rather ordinary neighbours? Her vacuous boyfriend or her gossipy family-oriented aunt? Goldman states that he wanted to make a film that was "provocative and troubling. And hopefully, beguilingly subversive." This is rather puerile, since the objects of Katrina's wrath are pretty easy targets. And what does Katrina "get away with" if her triumph lies in acquiring the domestic and conservative lifestyle she supposedly rebels against? Subverting society's most visible manifestations of acceptable conduct is not new and hardly profound. The director is merely showcasing extreme symptoms, and barely scratches the surface to reveal the cause. In her desensitised and brutalised state, Katrina does not subvert, but conforms to the present climate that promotes the very characteristics she exhibits.

In these difficult and complex times, it's all too easy to stir up interest in sociopaths and homicidal halfwits. It is much more difficult, but necessary, especially for younger artists and writers such as screenwriter Alice Bell, to grapple with the difficulties, complexities and contradictions with which life challenges people on a daily basis.

Director Paul Goldman had made two feature films prior to *Suburban Mayhem*: *Australian Rules* and *The Night We Called It a Day*—and was also well known for his work in music videos and television commercials. His first feature, *Australian Rules*, is a sensitive film, dealing compassionately with the consequences of racism in a small town.

After *The Night We Called It a Day*, a movie about Frank Sinatra's banned concert tour of Australia for calling female journalists "two-dollar hookers," he returns to the suburbs with *Suburban Mayhem*, unfortunately with very poor results.



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