

54th Sydney Film Festival—Part 5

Australian reflections: Boxing Day, The Home Song Stories and Lucky Miles

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This is the fifth in a series of articles on the 2007 Sydney Film Festival, held June 8-24. Part 1 appeared on July 4, Part 2 on July 10, Part 3 on July 11 and Part 4 on July 12.

Local film critics shower almost every new Australian feature with praise, justifying their response on the grounds that it will encourage audiences to see and support the home-grown product.

Unfortunately few Australian features made in the past two decades match the sensitivity and intelligence of Australian works from the late 1970s and early 1980s, such as *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, *Sunday Too Far Away*, *Breaker Morant* or *Gallipoli*. There have been some exceptions, of course—Scott Hicks’s *Shine* (1996) and Philip Noyce’s *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *The Quiet American*, both made in 2002—but these only serve to prove the rule.

Explanations from critics and filmmakers alike for the artistic weaknesses of contemporary Australian movies range from the difficulties in gaining finance for ambitious and intelligent projects to the lack of courageous Australian distributors prepared to promote local work. Another common argument is that audiences are only interested in light-weight entertainment, with box office figures held up as proof.

Obviously audiences want to be entertained, but there are also growing demands for more sensitive and subversive films. In any case, why can’t movies be entertaining, as well as insightful and challenging. The problem is that too many Australian filmmakers fail to recognise this fact, and adapt themselves to so-called “market realities”.

Such “realities”, however, are largely dictated by the giant media and entertainment corporations that control the film production industry. These conglomerates typically view ordinary people as ignorant and are keen to contribute as much as they can to ensuring that this is the case. Directors and writers can only combat the pressures if they begin firstly with the understanding that profit margins have little

to do with guaranteeing artistic truth and secondly, trusting their audiences to respond to works that demand a thoughtful response.

Two of the three Australian features I saw at the Sydney Film Festival—*Boxing Day* and *The Home Song Stories*—indicate that there are some local directors attempting to produce challenging films. While their efforts are still somewhat tentative, they should nevertheless be acknowledged.

The best of the two was *Boxing Day* by Kriv Stenders, a low budget drama about a day in the life of Chris Sykes (Richard Green), a recovering alcoholic and former criminal who is trying to restore ties with his family and avoid being dragged back into the criminal underworld.

Without revealing too much about the plot, it is the day after Christmas and Sykes is serving out the remainder of a prison sentence in a sparsely furnished suburban home, being visited each day by a probation officer. He has invited his deceased brother’s ex-wife, Donna (Tammy Anderson), and their daughter Brooke (Misty Sparrow) for lunch. Donna’s latest boy friend Dave (Syd Brisbane) comes along.

Just before they arrive, Owen (Stuart Clark), a friend from Chris’s criminal past, arrives with a stupid and dangerous proposal that the house be used to hide drugs. Chris rejects the deal. Owen eventually leaves, but not before accusing Dave of being a pedophile and precipitating an emotional and potentially fatal crisis in the family.

Stenders is an audacious local filmmaker and one of a handful exploring aspects of life for urban Aborigines. Stenders’s skilled use of non-professional actors, light-weight digital cameras and editing equipment, and dramatic improvisation is particularly effective.

Boxing Day was assisted by Aboriginal Prison Offenders Support Services and produced quickly on a shoe-string budget—about \$175,000. The film has some technical and dramatic rough edges, but these are secondary when compared with the authenticity and emotional intensity the

film generates.

Stenders provides another important demonstration that powerful work can be made with few resources. Hopefully *Boxing Day* will get a theatrical release in Australia and elsewhere (see interview).

The Home Song Stories is by writer and director Tony Ayres. It explores the difficulties Ayres and his family, in particular his mother, encountered as Chinese immigrants to Australia in the early 1970s. The story is told in flashback form, from the author's standpoint and as a young boy.

Rose Hong (Joan Chen), a former Shanghai nightclub singer with two children—Tom (Joel Lok) and May (Irene Chen)—falls in love and marries Bill (Steven Vidler), an Australian sailor visiting China. She and her children migrate to Australia, but the marriage quickly falls apart. Bill is away with the navy for lengthy periods, and his mother Norma disapproves of the beautiful and vivacious woman who refuses to conform to Australian suburban life.

Relations with Bill's mother eventually become impossible, so Rose takes her children and moves out. Over the next seven years she becomes involved in a series of short-lived romances. Rose tells her children that each new lover is their uncle.

The most enduring but emotionally difficult of these affairs is with Joe, a Chinese cook in a restaurant where Rose has been working. Joe, however, is much younger than the highly-strung Rose and eventually finds himself attracted to May, Rose's daughter.

Rose begins to drink heavily and falls into a spiral of despair, making life traumatic for the children as they watch their mother's increasingly erratic and self-destructive behaviour.

Ayres's movie has some affecting moments and Joan Chen's performance as Rose is particularly strong. Steven Vidler, as kind-hearted Bill, and Kerry Walker, as Bill's mother Norma, struggle with their roles, but this is not their fault; they are simply not given enough to work with. Bill's character is under-developed and bland and Norma is a bit cartoonish.

Some critics have described *The Home Song Stories* as "self-indulgent", comparing it with television family dramas. This is unfair. Ayres is not a particularly ground-breaking director, but the story of his mother's life in Australia examines many of the cultural and emotional difficulties encountered by thousands of newly arrived immigrants, issues that are largely ignored by Australia's mainstream entertainment industry. It deserves to be seen by wider audiences.

The weakest of the Australian features that I saw was *Lucky Miles*, a comedy/road movie written and directed by Michael James Rowland about asylum-seekers.

Set in 1990, the movie, which is an amalgam of several true stories, follows the plight of a group of asylum seekers, from Cambodia and Iraq, who are smuggled into Australia by Indonesian fishermen. The men are put ashore on the desert coastline of north-western Australia—thousands of kilometres from any sizeable city.

The mainly young men have no idea where they are or the dangers they face. "Welcome to paradise," the fisherman cynically shouts as he dumps the men on the shore and tells them that a local bus to Perth, the Western Australian capital, is on the other side of the sand dunes. The movie follows their desperate efforts to find a way out of the desert and hopefully to Perth and a better life.

Lucky Miles is not a cynical film and its characters puncture the image of refugees painted by the tabloid media. Likewise, those sent to find the refugees are humane and provide some whimsical moments. The Australian desert scenes are visually spectacular and the naïve and sometimes ingenious efforts of the refugees to find their way to civilisation are interesting. Overall, though, *Lucky Miles* never really succeeds because it lacks the tragicomedy pathos and depth this sort of movie requires and background on why asylum seekers are forced to risk their lives and come to Australia in the first place is rather limited.

By setting his film in 1990 Rowland, moreover, avoids any comment on today's reality—that the greatest danger facing asylum seekers entering the country is not the harsh desert conditions, but the Howard government's repressive and anti-democratic laws, which treat anyone seeking refugee status as a virtual criminal.

This legislation, which was first introduced by the Keating Labor government in 1992 and violates international human rights laws, has seen the mandatory detention of hundreds of men, women and children in soul-destroying immigration prison camps for years at a time. The prisons are located not only in isolated deserts, but in offshore islands in the South Pacific, thousands of kilometres away.

Lucky Miles certainly attempts to sensitise its audience to some of the problems facing refugees trying to enter Australia. Its primary weakness is that it only tells half the story.



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