

Baz Luhrmann's Australia: a superficial jumble

Richard Phillips
18 December 2008

Director Baz Luhrmann claims that his latest film, *Australia*, a 165-minute romantic adventure set in far north-western Australia and the Northern Territory during the early years of World War II, is a “transformational work” that will “make you laugh, make you cry, make you swoon”.

These lofty claims are never realised. In fact, for the first half hour it is difficult to determine what this long-winded and eclectic movie is—a musical comedy, historical drama or Bollywood-style fantasy.

The story, which is set in Darwin and northern-western Australia during the early years of World War II, is a bewildering jumble. It concerns Lady Ashley (Nicole Kidman), a wealthy English aristocrat and the owner of Faraway Downs, an Australian cattle station; the Drover (Hugh Jackman), a handsome, noble, but poor cattle herder; and Nullah (Brandon Walters), a beautiful mixed-race Aboriginal boy, who is orphaned early in the movie when his mother accidentally drowns.

Nullah lives in constant danger of being seized by the authorities under the long-standing government policy of removing mixed-race Aboriginal children and placing them in missions or the foster care of white families. More than 30,000 part-Aboriginal children were forcibly separated from their parents in the first seven decades of the twentieth century.

Lady Ashley is a self-centred and rather prissy Englishwoman on arrival in Darwin in 1939 but soon after falls in love with the Drover and the Australian outback and is transformed. The couple become Nullah's adoring de facto parents, despite attempts by the police to take the mixed-race boy from them.

Without disclosing *Australia's* plot, Lady Ashley, the Drover and Nullah are separated and the movie climaxes with the Japanese bombing of Darwin in February 1942, three months after Pearl Harbor. After harrowing ordeals amid the bombing, all three are reunited in the ruins of Darwin and make their way back to Faraway Downs.

Australia's final titles explain that the government policy of removing mixed-race Aboriginal children from their parents did not officially cease until 1973 and that it was not until this year, 2008, that an Australian prime minister made an official apology to the still-living members of the Stolen Generations.

Stylistically, *Australia* is a blend of Luhrmann's trademark pantomime theatricality with various cinematic epics and genres, including *Gone with the Wind*, *The African Queen*, *Out of Africa*, *Red River* and others. This approach, and the wild fluctuations in tone that accompany it, ensures that nothing is explored.

Luhrmann flits from one story thread to another without any real attention to plot or character development. The romance between Lady Ashley and the Drover is unbelievable and lacks emotional chemistry; and the portrayals of the racial oppression of Aboriginal people—a major element in the movie—are patronising.

Nicole Kidman has been singled out by a number of critics for her performance. The problem, however, lies not with Kidman, or any of the other actors, but with the movie's poor script and cartoonish characterisations. Co-written by Luhrmann, Stuart Beattie (*Pirates of the Caribbean*), Ronald Harwood (*The Pianist*) and Richard Flanagan (*The Sound of One Hand Clapping*), the story is dripping with banalities about love, rediscovery and the power of family and belonging.

Likewise, the soundtrack is overloaded with saccharine orchestrations. Luhrmann manages to weave in “Waltzing Matilda” and several versions of “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” from *The Wizard of Oz*. Lady Ashley even sings the latter to Nullah to comfort him after his mother's tragic death.

Australia is littered with implausible characters and more than its fair share of historical inaccuracies, including a fictional Japanese invasion of a non-existent “Mission Island” where Nullah and other mixed-race Aboriginal children are taken just prior to Darwin's bombing.

Luhrmann obviously has the right to create whatever he likes, but this, and his generally unserious attitude to history, undermines the movie's credibility. This is most apparent in the director's attempts to deal with the oppression of Australia's Aborigines and the plight of the Stolen Generations.

It is unlikely, for example, that Australian police would have dared take a mixed-race child from a white family during the period in which the movie is set, let alone prevent Lady Ashley—a wealthy aristocrat with a huge cattle station—from becoming the foster parent of an Aboriginal orphan.

Nullah's response to the tragic death of his mother is also highly problematic. She dies early in the story, a convenient plot device that allows Lady Ashley to “bond” with the boy and become his de facto mother. Nullah grieves for a short period and then, without any visible emotional strain, simply accepts Lady Ashley

Luhrmann's pastiche

as his mother's replacement.

This is clearly absurd. Interestingly, however, it dovetails with racist attitudes depicted in the film. At one point a Darwin socialite tells Lady Ashley that the bonds between Aboriginal children and their parents are "not as strong" as those in white Australian families. While Luhrmann may not have intended it, Nullah's relationship with Ashley is just one of the movie's many troubling elements.

Australia makes numerous references to the "singing ceremonies" of Aboriginal people. (Aboriginal hunter-gatherer society had no written languages and so their "songs" not only contained mythical stories but information about their immediate, and harsh, environs and the skills needed to survive in it.) But instead of trying to portray the complexities of these ceremonies, Luhrmann depicts them as a kind of easily accessible "Harry Potter"-style magic that works wonders in difficult situations.

Likewise, King George (David Gulpilil), Nullah's grandfather and a key figure in the movie, is depicted as a mystical character, frequently standing on cliff-tops, yoga-like, with one foot on his knee—an iconic and heavily retailed tourist image of Aboriginal hunters. No serious attempt is made to show anything about his life or the squalid, impoverished conditions in which he would have lived. The dispossession and horrendous problems afflicting Aboriginal people at the time are entirely absent, as is the fact that they had no democratic rights and those with jobs on cattle stations were not paid wages but rations—flour, sugar, tea and tobacco.

The underlying sub-text of *Australia* is that the oppression of Aboriginal people is a "thing of the past"—that today, Australia is a country of "reconciliation"—a myth, assiduously promoted by the Labor government and its apologists, and reinforced by the closing reference to Labor Prime Minister Rudd's official apology to members of the Stolen Generations.

Inflated praise

Movie trade journals, such as *Variety* and the *Hollywood Reporter*, have applauded *Australia*, as have publications owned by Murdoch's News Corporation. Given that Murdoch owns Twentieth Century Fox, this is not unexpected. The praise, though, borders on the ridiculous, with the director described in some quarters as a "visionary".

Murdoch's *Australian* newspaper, for example, editorialised on November 14 that Luhrmann's new film could "usher in a brave new era in home-grown cinema". (The newspaper published an almost identical editorial in June 2001 when *Moulin Rouge!* was released.)

Despite these claims, most critics have attacked the film in scathing terms, describing it as a derivative hodgepodge and a multi-million dollar failure. Box office receipts in the US—the movie's principal market—have been far below studio expectations. Some Australian critics have denounced the fact that the movie was given almost 40 percent in taxpayer subsidies, while independent, low-budget filmmakers receive little or no

government support.

Luhrmann is not devoid of talent—his opera stage productions of Benjamin Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Puccini's *La bohème* during the 1990s were rightly praised. So why is this movie such a failure?

One can point to the lightweight character of his previous films—*Strictly Ballroom* (1992), *Romeo+Juliet* (1996) and *Moulin Rouge!* (2001). These movies, however, were multi-million dollar profit-takers—the measure of success for the corporate entertainment industry. Luhrmann has thus become a "celebrity filmmaker"—a director of big budget products that never challenge prevailing conventions or push emotional comfort zones.

Various titles were originally suggested for the movie, including *Great Southern Land* and *Faraway Downs*. Why *Australia* was chosen in November 2006 is not entirely clear. What is apparent, however, is that millions of dollars were riding on the production, with substantial promotion of the movie by the government agency, Tourism Australia. Luhrmann was also hired to direct \$A40 million worth of tourism ads piggy-backing on the film's global release. The agency hoped that the movie would replicate what *Lord of the Rings* did for New Zealand tourism.

There were also high expectations that Luhrmann's \$190 million film—the most expensive production in Australian history—would help revive the local movie industry, hence the Australian government's massive tax minimisation deal.

Under these conditions, *Australia*'s rather superficial story began morphing into something like an extended version of the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games opening ceremony—and pitched at what Luhrmann, Tourism Australia and the studio heads thought would be popular in the US, a key market in the global entertainment industry and an important source of tourists.

All in all, *Australia* is not simply a reflection of Luhrmann's artistic limitations, but another manifestation of the sorry state of the popular entertainment industry, where genuine historical context and emotionally convincing characters are secondary to product placement, merchandising and profits.

Those looking for serious and deeply felt movies about the treatment of the Aboriginal people should watch some of those produced in Australia during the past three decades. These include Nicolas Roeg's haunting *Walkabout* (1971), Fred Schepisi's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978) and Philip Noyce's *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002).



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact