

Australian Film Season

In the last 50 years, Australian Cinema has exploded into a rich and versatile exploration of identity and the many cultures and stories of its people. Spanning genres, these films capture some of the pivotal moments in the history of Australian film.

Muriel's Wedding (1994)

Background

Muriel's Wedding explores the aspirational lower-middle class identity. It simultaneously captures the feelings of stagnation felt by Australians living in a backwater town and the desperation felt by young women who will never be the stars of their own movie. Satirical yet tender, the movie celebrates the Australian cultural cringe by focusing the narrative on the underdogs who never quite win, but never stop trying to escape.

Synopsis

Muriel Heslop (Toni Collette) is the eldest daughter of a family of underachievers. Her father Bill (Bill Hunter) is a corrupt town councillor in the northern NSW town of Porpoise Spit; her mother Betty (Jeanie Drynan) looks perpetually stunned. Her brothers and sisters are lazy, overweight television addicts. Muriel's only solace is the music of Abba, and her dream of one day having a beautiful wedding, something that her alleged 'girlfriends' tell her she'll never have. Muriel's life changes when she runs into Rhonda Epinstalk (Rachel Griffiths), a former school friend. They run away to Sydney to discover a wider world (after Muriel has stolen \$12,000 from her father), but fate keeps threatening to drag them back to Porpoise Spit. When a serious disease threatens Rhonda's independence, they make a promise to stick together and never go back.

Curator's notes

by Paul Byrnes

Muriel's Wedding took Australia by storm when it opened in 1994. Not only did it introduce two new actors of genuinely stark talent (Toni Collette and Rachel Griffiths), both of whom would become international stars, it satirised an Australian family in a way that audiences found extremely moving, as well as hilarious.

Writer-director PJ Hogan's depiction of a battler family from a forgettable north coast backwater is relentlessly bleak, but also immensely sympathetic (with more than a passing resemblance to Jane Austen's *Persuasion*). Hogan doesn't create an ironic distance, from which an audience may look down; he keeps us closely identified with his characters so that we see ourselves.

Most of this identification is through Muriel, but not all – Hogan is careful to give us a sense of desolation and disappointment that befuddles all members of the Heslop family, from the father down. Bill Hunter’s blustering patriarch is one of Australian cinema’s most pungently awful characters. Although never actually evil, he has raised a tribe of children to believe they’re ‘useless’, and that’s how they behave. Jeanie Drynan, as his wife, has become almost catatonic in her distraction – a portrait of a wasted life that is completely tragic. Critics have suggested a connection between the Heslops and the Rudd family from the silent movie *On Our Selection* (and various sequels), suggesting that Australian cinema tends toward ‘a celebration of ugliness’. Muriel is certainly an ugly duckling, and it isn’t really clear by the end that she will become a swan. Rather, Paul J Hogan’s aim, as he has said, was to celebrate the ugly duckling for herself.

‘Usually in Australian films, definitely in Australian television, definitely in American films, the central character is usually the Sophie Lee character. ... Muriel in these stories is left out or consigned to a position of best friend, one to feel sorry for ... I wanted to put that kind of character centre-stage and the beautiful best friend in the position of living horror’. Tom O’Regan, in *Australian National Cinema* (Routledge 1996), points out that this celebration of ugliness is common in Australian film, going as far back as the not-so-pretty protagonists in *The Sentimental Bloke* (1919), or the ‘daggy’ charms of Bazza McKenzie (from the 1970s). It is arguably an expression of Australia’s outpost mentality, our distance from the metropolitan ‘centres’ of culture and beauty (once London, more recently New York). This is sometimes interpreted as the ‘cultural cringe’, but in *Muriel’s Wedding* it is a statement of evolution, an escape from what the architect Robyn Boyd called ‘the great Australian ugliness’. That’s why the film has so many shots of cars and taxis driving away from the Heslop family home in Porpoise Spit. This is the Australia that once was, PJ Hogan seems to be saying, but no one has to live there any more. A film like *The Castle* makes a similar observation about the dagginess of Australian domesticity, but a different conclusion – you’d be mad to want to move!

<https://aso.gov.au/titles/features/muriels-wedding/notes/>

-

Bran Nue Dae (2009)

Background

Bran Nue Day is an iconic coming-of-age story that celebrates the tangled relationships between families as well as Indigenous identity in 1960s Western Australia. Through the eyes of Willy, the audience is led to interrogate the roles of religion, country, race and love in our quest for belonging.

Synopsis

Broome boy Willy (Rocky McKenzie) must choose between studying to become a priest or following his heart and pursuing his love for Rosie (Jessica Mauboy). Rosie, an aspiring singer, loves to hang out at the bar and is invited to join Lester (Dan Sultan) and his band. Willy, influenced by his dominating Christian mother Theresa (Ningali Lawford-Wolf) and local priest Pastor Flakkon (Stephen Baamba Albert), views the activities of the bar as sinful.

Willy returns to boarding school in Perth, but runs away following an incident with head priest Father Benedictus (Geoffrey Rush). He hitches a ride home with Uncle Tadpole (Ernie Dingo) and a young hippy couple, Annie (Missy Higgins) and Slippery (Tom Budge). Along the way they meet Roadhouse Betty (Magda Szubanski), a football team (the Chooky Dancers) and Roxanne (Deborah Mailman), and are pursued mercilessly by Benedictus. On arrival in Broome, Willy challenges Lester for Rosie's love and eventually wins her heart. Surprise family connections are then revealed, bringing everyone together.

Curator's notes

by Liz McNiven

Based on Jimmy Chi's 1990 stage musical (see *Bran Nue Dae*, 1991), this film provides a light, refreshing and comical look at family relationships and the tangled web that love weaves through people's lives. Willy's journey represents the coming of age of an adolescent boy on the threshold of becoming a man. Director Rachel Perkins brings together a stunning array of outstanding musicians, dancers and actors to perform the original music by Jimmy Chi and the band Kuckles.

The musical and dance performances give this film its pulse and the actors provide fun, love and laughter. Dan Sultan gets the blood pumping as he performs 'Seeds that You Might Sow' in the company of his love interest, Rosie, and a bar full of sensual dancers (see clip one). Ernie Dingo and Deborah Mailman embody the spirit of their characters with a mix of alcohol-fuelled gaiety and mischief; Geoffrey Rush brings the eccentric Father Benedictus to life and singer Missy Higgins delights with her light-hearted representation of youthful 'hippiness'.

This happy uplifting film laces together the love story of Willy (played by newcomer Rocky McKenzie), and Rosie (singer-turned-actor Jessica Mauboy) with music, song and dance. If you want to lighten your heart and escape for a short while, watch this film.

Bran Nue Dae was released in Australian cinemas on 14 January 2010 and in the United States on 10 September 2010. It became the second highest-grossing Australian film of the year, with more than \$7.7m in box-office earnings.

Deborah Mailman won the 2010 AFI Award for Best Supporting Actress and the film also received nominations for Best Film, Adapted Screenplay, Original Music Score (Cezary Skubiszewski, Jimmy Chi, Patrick Dutton Bin Amat, Garry Gower, Michael Manolis Mavromatis, Stephen Pigram), Sound (Andrew Neil, Steve

Burgess, Peter Mills, Mario Vaccaro, Blaire Slater, David Bridie, Scott Montgomery), Costume Design (Margot Wilson) and the Members' Choice Award for Best Film. The film was nominated for Best Director, Music (Cezary Skubiszewski, Jimmy Chi and Kuckles) and Production Design (Felicity Abbott) at the 2010 IF Awards.

<https://aso.gov.au/titles/features/bran-nue-dae-2009/notes/>

-

The Castle: rewatching classic Australian films

Background

The eminently quotable classic lovingly pokes fun at aspirational, blue-collar Australia. Both self-deprecating and tender, the film follows the fight for one family to save their home from forced acquisition, proving that value lies in the priceless – family loyalty and a place to call home.

Rob Sitch's tale of blue-collar heroes with hearts of gold became one of Australia's most widely quoted comedies and catapulted Darryl Kerrigan straight into the pool room of cinematic legends

Luke Buckmaster

It's been more than a decade and a half since Darryl Kerrigan (Michael Caton) first walked his greyhounds, gazed lovingly at huge electricity poles looming over his humble family abode and successfully fought The Man to save his "castle" from compulsory acquisition.

Kerrigan hired an attorney so incompetent he couldn't operate a photocopier told the big guys "ta get stuffed" and – to use Kerrigan-esque vernacular – rocketed himself and his family straight into the pool room of Australian cinematic legends. Blue-collar heroes with hearts of gold and zero-bullshit attitudes.

One of our best-loved and most widely quoted comedies, this wonderfully unprepossessing crowd pleaser is the jewel in the crown of Working Dog, a production company whose small-screen successes such as The D-Generation, The Late Show and The Hollowmen usually outweigh their occasional cinematic forays in quality and quantity.

What was it about The Castle that connected so strongly with critics and audiences? The wonderful thing about Rob Sitch's magnum opus (he also directed The Dish, a pleasantly fluffy soufflé of historical recreation, and Working Dog's shamelessly American-brand romcom Any Questions For Ben?) aren't the jokes, which flow thick and fast, but the way in which the film manages to balance deprecation with tenderness and warmth.

"My name is Dale Kerrigan, and this is my story," intones the opening words of Stephen Curry's narration. With a mullet, fringe, freckles and an awkward direct-

to-camera gaze, Curry's look resembles the kind of daggy high-school photo we put in a drawer and try to forget about. "Dad bought this place 15 years ago for a steal. As the real estate agent said, location, location, location. And we're right next to the airport!"

The all-important castle is introduced: we see a shot of a tidy suburban house pan left to reveal an airport runway directly over the fence. "Dad still can't work out how he got it so cheap. It's worth almost as much today as when we bought it," Curry continues, and after that gently mocking insinuation we see Darryl Kerrigan for the first time, watering his garden with a big smile plastered across his face.

The Castle could easily have played as a down-the-nose ridicule of lower-middle class suburban Australia. But Sitch avoids ridiculing his characters despite sending up the way they talk, the things they cherish, even the food they consume. (Sponge cake is considered a delicacy; medium-rare steaks are burnt to a crisp.)

This was likely achieved intuitively rather than engineered – Sitch has spoken about how his father inspired Darryl's character – and the secret can be found in the proverbial pool room. It is not the gaudy mugs and tacky souvenirs it contains that are important, but the sentimental value they hold. Likewise, it is not the characters' plebeian behaviour that holds the film's focus but the sincere place from which it emerges.

There are the quibbles with authority, the greyhounds, the regular scrutiny of deals in the Trading Post, but essentially the Kerrigans are good people who are good to each other. Inside the family unit there is no dramatic conflict. Not even in the story of Wayne, imprisoned for armed robbery, who could so easily have been drawn as the bad egg creating friction with his parents and siblings. He misses his family and is effusive in praise for his father. Darryl returns his love unconditionally.

Beyond gags about pools tables, behavioural patterns and material possessions, The Castle reminds us of the value of small gestures, assuming the best in people, picking your fights and being fiercely loyal to those you love. When offered a tidy packet to sell his home, Darryl responds with a line that distills the film's emotional essence: "You can't buy what I've got."

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/australia-culture-blog/2014/apr/04/the-castle-rewatching-classic-australian-films>

-

Young Einstein rewatched – a genius's work of nonsense

Background

Young Einstein retells the story of Einstein, bizarrely recasting him as the son of a Tasmanian apple farmer, a true-blue Aussie. Throughout the outlandish plot,

Einstein invents carbonated beer, the electric guitar, and surfing, rewriting history to suit the most obvious Australian stereotypes. Ultimately, the nonsensical yet addictive film is richly packed with an examination of the oft-quoted Australian inferiority complex and awkward, naïve charm.

Rewatching classic Australian films: the box office hit that welcomed us into the outlandish universe of the high-powered, rubber-faced Yahoo Serious

Luke Buckmaster

Year after year, decade after decade, generation after generation, certain everlasting mysteries remain synonymous with the human experience. How were the pyramids created? Is there an afterlife? Will time travel ever exist? Who was Jack the Ripper? Was Stone Henge constructed by Neolithic inhabitants? And how can the existence of Yahoo Serious be explained in any remotely rational way?

Lisa Simpson spoke for many of us when she said, looking at a sign for the "Yahoo Serious Festival" in the Bart Versus Australia episode of *The Simpsons*, "I know those words but that sign makes no sense."

Indeed, Serious' story never seemed to make much sense. Even writing his surname in conjunction with other words feels weird, like you've become an unwilling participant in a bad joke.

It's not his sudden accumulation of fame in the late 80s that doesn't make sense. Yahoo Serious (born Greg Pead) cuts a high-powered, rubber-faced, naturally entertaining presence, like a proto Jim Carrey or the host of a Nickelodeon game show where somebody always gets covered in slime. Which is to say, the attraction of watching him gallivanting around is obvious. The mystery is how he managed to face plant onto popular culture so quickly and so impressively, and what force decided to take him away from us so quickly.

Serious' legacy is etched in three screws-loose comedies. *Young Einstein*, which recasts the inventor as a young fair dinkum Tasmanian with an appetite for beer and music, brought his name to the masses in 1988. It was a breakthrough hit he wrote, directed, produced and starred in – quite an achievement for an unknown. The second, 1993's *Reckless Kelly*, which also coasts on the idea of reinventing a famous historical character and loading them up with Australianisms, cemented his name as a brand.

Mr Accident (2000) was his last, but not due to critical or financial failure. The *Age's* Adrian Martin called it "superbly accomplished" and "disarmingly novel." According to *Film Victoria* it grossed over \$1.6m locally, not a bad result for an Australian movie. Comparatively, the recently released *The Rover*, starring Guy Pearce and Twilight heartthrob Robert Pattinson, won't make half that.

Serious soared to international fame, featuring on the cover of both TIME and Mad Magazine in 1989. The Young Einstein soundtrack went double platinum. For a while he even had his own MTV show. Then, after Mr Accident, nothing. His biography stops a decade and a half ago. His website is a gaudy relic, frozen in time.

Young Einstein was released only two years after Paul Hogan doffed his shark tooth Akubra hat and compared knife sizes with a New York ruffian in Crocodile Dundee. It explores a broadly similar premise – fish out of water comedy focused on an endearing and seemingly naive Australian – but with infinitely more flair and creativity.

Australian culture is sometimes considered in the context of cultural cringe, a feeling our creative communities are like the train that could, chugging through a landscape dominated by overseas product. Here is a film that takes that inferiority factor and runs with it, rewriting history to fit a ludicrous Australian perspective. Serious "set up comic situations that appeal to the vast and inexhaustible fascination the Australians have about their own isolation and gawky charm," wrote famed film critic Roger Ebert.

"Tasmania was just about the best place to grow up and we lived on an apple farm. I had plenty of time to listen to music and think about the universe," Einstein's voiceover narration begins. That, along with an early shot of Serious sitting naked in a bucket holding a violin, establishes the protagonist as an unconventional outside-the-box type, which the remainder of the film riffs on.

Young Einstein's scientific creations - and perhaps more importantly, the motivations behind them – paint him as a true blue creature from down under. Einstein splits the atom in order to add carbonation to beer ("the secret to brewing beer is an Einstein tradition," says his father) and invents the electric guitar by tilting a violin on its side. He relocates to the big smoke, where his ideas are stolen and Einstein rubs up against the daily grind of metropolitan life while offering some wink-wink nudge-nudge comments to the audience on the way.

"Every day without fail you've been late for work," says his boss. "There are two eight o'clocks," Einstein retorts. "One in the morning and one at night. So therefore time is relative to the observer." Not exactly side-splitting comedy, but nor is he lazy or complacent; it works best visually, packaged full of colourful oddities.

The genius of Young Einstein – perhaps, also, the genius of its star – lies in the way it behaves visually. When Einstein returns home victorious, Serious frames a scene that, literally signposted, could have been made for the pre-talkies. "Science Academy Award," reads one trophy caught in the frame. "Winner 1906 Albert Einstein," reads another. Serious cuts to a sign that says "Tasmania welcomes home Albert Einstein" then to "World Hero." A man breezes by in the background on a horse waving a mini Australia flag; we see a giant tank with a sign above it: "The World's First Bubbled Beer."

The rich manner with which *Young Einstein* visually conveys information feels anachronistic, as if it were created 80 or so years too late. Serious himself seems like a product from a different time, as if he fell through one of Jerry O'Connell's portals in *Sliders*. He moves like a lumbering, slow-footed Chaplin. Virtually everything about his presence feels exaggerated: that wild head of hair and weird swagger matched with the wide-eyed mannerisms of somebody who acts like he's just been zapped on the buttocks with a cattle prod.

Serious constructs a universe so outlandish the audience doesn't blink when, in the process of escaping a mental asylum, Einstein saves a bunch of kittens from being put in an oven and baked in a pie. During a chaotic and deliriously entertaining finale in which the man who pilfered Einstein's knowledge inadvertently creates an atom bomb, our (sort of) hero emerges from smoke wielding his proto-electric guitar. He rubs an apple against his shirt, takes a bite, plugs himself into the bomb and rocks out until he absorbs its power and saves the day, sparks flying from his instrument like a rendition of Hendrix's *Star Spangled Banner* from a bizarro alternate universe.

Like its oddly named creator, the film doesn't make much sense.

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/australia-culture-blog/2014/jun/27/young-einstein-rewatching-australian-classics>

-

The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert (1994)

Background

The iconic film challenged stereotypes of Australian masculinity, undermining the hyper-masculine ideal of *Crocodile Dundee* fame. Both high camp and quintessentially Australian in its aesthetics of drag queens and deserts, *Priscilla* showed us the outback – and Australian men – in a completely different way, redefining our preconceived conceptions of the people you might encounter on an outback road trip.

Synopsis

'Tick' Belrose, aka Mitzi Del Bra (Hugo Weaving), a Sydney drag artist, accepts an invitation from his ex-wife (Sarah Chadwick) to bring his stage show to the outback. Tick recruits two friends – a brash young drag queen called Felicia (Guy Pearce) and an aging transsexual called Bernadette (Terence Stamp). They set off

for Alice Springs in a second-hand bus they dub 'Priscilla, Queen of the Desert'. They turn heads in Broken Hill and get in a fight at Coober Pedy; they are rescued from break down in the desert by an open-minded mechanic (Bill Hunter). In Alice Springs, Tick meets the young son he barely knows (Mark Holmes). The three performers climb Kings Canyon in full drag, before making their stunning debut at the Alice Springs casino.

Curator's notes
by Paul Byrnes

Australian cinema in the 1990s was somewhat obsessed with attempts to broaden depictions of Australian society, to redefine 'who we are'. The masculine stereotypes of the 1970s and 80s were a particular target in films such as *Strictly Ballroom* (1992), *Muriel's Wedding*, *The Sum of Us* and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. These last three all came out in 1994, and although *Muriel's Wedding* has no gay characters per se, it fitted into the new camp aesthetic that *Strictly Ballroom* had begun to explore.

The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert went further than any of these in attacking the *Crocodile Dundee* mythology of the essentially harmless heterosexual outback male. These same types of men, usually depicted in bars in *Priscilla*, can be suspicious, violent, vulgar and extremely intolerant, especially when confronted with alternative definitions of masculinity.

The film's cultural masterstroke was to impose an extreme aesthetic of artificiality (the drag queens) on a natural desert landscape of equal extremity. The surprise discovery for audiences was how well they matched. The film is intended as a rebirth of the musical, a road movie comedy, but its most unforgettable scenes work off the incongruity of seeing excessive costumes, on incongruous characters, in vast, humbling spaces. That's why the film's real climax is the climb up Kings Canyon in full drag, rather than the debut act at the casino. That's also why the most welcoming response they get on tour is from a group of Aborigines, having a party around a campfire.

The film insists upon the naturalness of its characters, despite their 'unnatural' appearance, even more than the obvious idea that this is a union of two groups with a common oppressor. The demand for tolerance wasn't uniformly applied though: the film was controversial for the way it depicted an Asian woman. Bill Hunter's character may be the generous and open-minded face of the ocker male, but his mail-order wife, a Filipino prostitute given to drunken lewdness for the blokes in the bar, was denounced as a hideous stereotype, with good reason. She was never really a character to begin with – simply a way of suggesting the craziness of the men she entertains, who'd rather look at a heterosexual humiliation, than a homosexual exaggeration. Given the film's fantastic sense of fun throughout, defining one character by racial stereotype was a blight on an otherwise broad sense of humanity. The film was a phenomenal success around the world, and particularly in Australia. The costume design, by Lizzy Gardiner and Tim Chappel, won an Oscar.

<https://aso.gov.au/titles/features/priscilla/notes/>

-

Crocodile Dundee (1985)

Background

This wildly successful film could also be considered the quintessential Australian international advertising campaign, particularly targeted towards Americans. *Crocodile Dundee* establishes an ideal of Australian masculinity whilst simultaneously undermining that same ideal. This self-awareness also encompasses Australian political issues including land rights and race, expanding these to an American context to establish solidarity between the two countries and an ongoing conversation about identity, culture, and solidarity.

Synopsis

A glamorous American reporter, Sue Charlton (Linda Kozlowski), goes to the Northern Territory to interview a man who survived a crocodile attack. Michael J 'Crocodile' Dundee (Paul Hogan) charms her with his bushman's humour and toughness. He is both more complex and more mysterious than she expects. She invites him to New York, a city that expands his horizons and tests his survival skills.

Curator's notes

by Paul Byrnes

Crocodile Dundee is not just the most commercially successful Australian film ever made, it is one of the most successful non-Hollywood films of all time. The reasons for its success are complex. Paul Hogan was already a well-established star of television comedy in Australia, but he was also becoming well-known in the US, because of an extraordinarily successful tourism campaign in 1984.

For most Americans, before the movie came out, Hogan was that funny Aussie bloke who told them he'd 'put another shrimp on the barbie' if they visited Australia. In a sense the movie is a continuation of the campaign. The first half of the movie showcases both the beauty of the Northern Territory and the cultural quaintness of the Territorians. John Meillon's character, Wally, acts as Sue Charlton's guide to this odd, but friendly, masculine world. Wally knows about the rest of the world and tries to spin her the kind of yarn he thinks she wants, for her news magazine. Mick Dundee, though less worldly, is also more truthful, capable of telling tall stories himself, which often turn out to be true.

The film both constructs and deconstructs an idea of Australian masculinity. That is one of the main preoccupations of Australian cinema, going back to the silent era – but few films have done it so cleverly, or with so many layers. Mick Dundee is all things to all people – self-made man, tough guy, bush philosopher, romantic lead, old-fashioned knight, defender of women, tamer of wild animals, and wandering free spirit. As a pioneer frontiersman, he appeals specifically to the foundation mythologies of both Americans and Australians – but he goes further,

as a fully initiated member of an Aboriginal clan. Indeed, he's 'blacker' than some other members of his clan, notably his mate Neville (David Gulpilil), who's described as a real city boy who finds his cultural obligations 'a drag'.

The film's attitudes to colour and Aboriginality are central to its meaning and preoccupations. Far from being 'unpolitical', Mick has firm views about the question of land rights, as 'two fleas fighting over the same dog'. In New York, his reactions to and interactions with people of colour are a clue to the film's awareness of American unease with issues of race. The film's most famous joke – 'That's not a knife' – is a gesture to mainstream anxiety about both New York and young black men. The fact that Mick is saved from a beating by Gus the chauffeur, another black male, is no accident. The film is constantly creating 'solidarities' across cultural, or colour, lines.

The cementing of a sense of community between Australians and Americans is what Hogan's tourism advertisements also set out to do. *Crocodile Dundee* continued that process, in spectacularly successful and non-threatening fashion. The debate about whether that was an act of cultural assertion, as many Australians believed, or the ultimate demonstration of Australian subservience, is still going on.

<https://aso.gov.au/titles/features/crocodile-dundee/notes/>

-

Strictly Ballroom (1992)

Background

Baz Luhrmann's debut film is filled with flamboyance and colour. A classic tale of a young couple's victory over conservative ideals and the older, set-in-their-ways generation, this exploration into the competitive ballroom dancing scene is a testament to lowbrow Australian humour, buoyed by a classic love story.

Synopsis

Scott Hastings (Paul Mercurio) has been trained from the age of six to become a ballroom dancing champion. His ambitious mother, Shirley (Pat Thomson), sees a golden future for Scott with his partner Liz (Gia Carides). But Scott's desire to bring his own steps into traditional dances finds his career in danger. Liz breaks the partnership to take up with Ken Railings (John Hannan), and Scott is warned by conservative dance officials Les Kendall (Peter Whitford) and Barry Fife (Bill Hunter) not to break the rules. Fran (Tara Morice), a shy student at the academy run by Shirley Hastings and Les Kendall, tells Scott she wants to dance with him at the Pan Pacific championships. She takes him to meet her father Rico (Antonio Vargas) and grandmother Ya Ya (Armonia Benedito), who inspire Scott with lessons on how to dance the paso doble. Shirley insists that Scott partner the accomplished Tina Sparkle (Sonia Kruger) at the Pan Pacific Grand Prix. Scott reluctantly agrees before realising his error and asks Fran if she will partner him. When Barry Fife disqualifies them during the competition, Scott's father, Doug

(Barry Otto), steps forward to support the couple. Barry's lone handclap turns into a thunderous ovation. Scott and Fran thrill the audience with their interpretation of the paso doble.

Curator's notes
by Richard Kuipers

Strictly Ballroom is one of the most popular Australian films ever made. A smash hit on home soil and a considerable success everywhere else it was released, Baz Luhrmann's debut ranks 6th on the all-time box-office chart for Australian movies with a domestic gross of \$21.76 million (March 2008 figures). Evolved from a 30-minute play Luhrmann first devised and staged in 1986, the story of a young rebel triumphing over conservative old fuddy-duddies is nothing new but the execution is so colourful and eccentric it hardly matters. With the crucial contributions of costume designer Angus Strathie, production designer Catherine Martin, choreographer John 'Cha Cha' O'Connell and cinematographer Steve Mason, Luhrmann creates a universe in which only dance exists.

From the mockumentary-style opening scenes to the final curtain there is not the slightest hint of what lies beyond the rehearsal studios and championship ballrooms inhabited by these obsessed characters. It is a fairytale land complete with a handsome and troubled prince, his regal and manipulative mother, an ugly duckling commoner and a wicked old autocrat desperately clinging to power. Everyone apart from Scott and Fran falls into the realms of comic grotesquerie, yet *Strictly Ballroom* still has the magic ingredient of authenticity. Luhrmann attended dance competitions in his youth and brings his inside knowledge to the screen with exaggerated but always believable depictions of the politics and flamboyant personalities involved in the competitive ballroom dancing scene. Balancing the delightfully unrestrained melodrama and kitschy décor is a love story that presses all the right emotional buttons.

In his screen debut, Paul Mercurio proves not only a superb dancer (he was Principal Dancer with the renowned Sydney Dance Company from 1982–92) but also a likeable and natural actor in a role he seems born to play. Fellow debutant Tara Morice, who almost didn't get the part because she was not a trained dancer, is a perfect match in the Cinderella role. A wallflower at first, but no shrinking violet once she has Scott's attention, Fran is a feisty young woman who's not afraid to call him a 'gutless wonder' when it looks like he'll cave in and conform. Sweet without ever becoming sugary, the romance is firmly founded on dedication to dance (see clip two) and flourishes once Scott is led out of his stifling environment by Fran. Perhaps the most entrancing and passionate scenes take place in the almost surreal house-cum-tavern-cum-open-air dance studio where Fran's family and friends congregate. The thunderous tattoo of handclapping and boot stamping as Rico and Ya Ya teach Scott how to 'feel' the paso doble is a spine-tingling prelude to the show-stopping finale.

Strictly Ballroom rejoices in cheerfully vulgar (but never mean-spirited) Australian humour and is buoyed by wonderful supporting performances. Pat Thomson, who sadly died before the film was released, is a riot as Scott's manic

mother, Bill Hunter is a splendidly hissable villain and John Hannan hams it up wonderfully as boozy, bottle blonde dancer Ken Railings. *Strictly Ballroom* won eight AFI awards including Best Film and Best Director and instantly catapulted Baz Luhrmann into the top rank of Australian filmmakers. Like Scott and Fran at the Pan Pacifics, Luhrmann won the hearts of audiences by putting on a dazzling cinematic display of the 'crowd-pleasing moves' Barry Fife warned Scott about.

Strictly Ballroom was released in Australian cinemas on 20 August 1992.

<https://aso.gov.au/titles/features/strictly-ballroom/notes/>

-

Red Dog Review

Background

A true story of a kelpie dog that appears in a Pilbara mining town in 1970s Western Australia, this modern classic is both heart-warming and tragic. The film is appealing in a multitude of ways, as the narrative travels through the experiences of the different people helped in some way through Red Dog's presence, uniting them despite their differences in isolated country Australia.

The true story of a charismatic Kelpie who united a mining community in North West Australia in the 1970s and '80s.

Craig Mathieson

Fun family film mines the middle ground.

To the already extensive list of star-making turns from Australian actors that includes Judy Davis in Gillian Armstrong's *My Brilliant Career* and Russell Crowe in Geoffrey Wright's *Romper Stomper*, you can now add Koko the dog in Kriv Stenders' *Red Dog*. A four legged thespian he may be, but this feel good outback flick is enhanced considerably by the performance of the lead canine, who has the laconic personality and quiet charisma that's been a trademark of Australian screen stars all the way back to Chips Rafferty; the last redhead we produced this talented was Nicole Kidman.

With credit to trainer Luke Hura, who prepared the Kelpie for the nine week shoot in the dusty north of West Australia, Koko is in the majority of scenes in this fictionalised account of the dog whose traveling exploits around the iron ore hub of the Pilbara in the 1970s were enshrined after his death in 1979 with a statue in the port town of Dampier. That statue inspired British author Louis de Bernières, whose 2002 novella was adapted by screenwriter Jonathan Taplitz, who added back elements of Red Dog's story to balance out a story that moves freely, and sometimes too swiftly, between comedy, romance and tragedy.

First seen calmly sitting on the road into Dampier – like all screen stars, Red Dog takes in everything the supporting cast has to offer before making his move – the

titular star hitches a ride with new publicans, Jack and Maureen (Noah Taylor and Loene Carmen, reunited a quarter century or so after *The Year My Voice Broke*). More empathetic than the average miner, Red soon becomes the best friend to the local workers, a masculine collection of immigrants and boofheads who all need some understanding.

His story is told in flashback, as Red Dog lies dying in 1971 after ingesting strychnine (cause or fault is never pursued). Truck driver Tom (Luke Ford, nodding a great deal) arrives in town on the fateful night, and one after another the distraught locals share their memories with him. Tom hears, with the easy charm of many an Australian tall tale, about Red Dog and the man he finally chose as his master, American bus driver John (Josh Lucas).

I felt for Rachael Taylor, who as the mine's new secretary has to compete with Red to be the love of John's life, but it turns out that Taylor, a starlet not always challenged by her previous performances, gives a charming, open-hearted performance that defers to her lead instead of trying to outshine him. The story doesn't miss an opportunity to extract sentiment from proceedings, and the cast smooth out these bumps, particularly John Batchelor as the beefy Peeto and Rohan Nichol's sombre Jocko.

A PG-rated mining town in the 1960s is something of a conundrum, and aside from some wrestling and the evil caretakers of the caravan park, who hate dogs and love cats, there's not a great deal of upset. (Everything featured in Tim Burstall's 1979 classic *The Last of the Knucklemen* is genially excised here.) Still, just with his presence and intuition Red manages to cheer up a potential suicide and introduce a homesick Italian miner to his future wife. There are no super-powers, just a cheeky demeanour and a quick bark.

Having previously worked in low and even micro-budget filmmaking, Kriv Stenders combines the disparate cast and the vast landscape well. The last thing a film like *Red Dog* needs is showy technique or overt heavy-handedness. Instead, like the wandering canine, it passes through various emotional states without ever being too taxing. This is the most widely appealing Australian film since *Bran Nue Dae*, complete with a lovely Bill Hunter cameo, and hopefully Koko gets a chance to work here again before he's whisked off the luxury kennels of Hollywood.

<https://www.sbs.com.au/movies/review/red-dog-review>