



Australian Film

by Deborah Hunn

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Over the last decade there have been a number of Australian films that have, either overtly or implicitly, been informed by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and queer themes. However, this vibrant, sometimes controversial contemporary queer flowering--now recognized by many critics as an integral part of Australian national cinema--must be placed in the context of a film industry that, prior to the 1970s, was characterized by a combination of social conservatism and strictly codified censorship.

The Early Years

Despite, or perhaps because of, its repression, early Australian cinema did yield some of the queer traces identified by Vito Russo in *The Celluloid Closet*, although the relative paucity of local film output resulted in fewer examples than the Hollywood product. For example, in *Dad and Dave Come to Town* (1938)--part of K. G. Hall's nationally beloved country bumpkin "Dad and Dave" series--the Rudd family meet Entwistle, a limp-wristed shop floor walker who, despite his effeminate demeanor, becomes a family confidante, and appears again in *Dad Rudd MP* (1940).

Cross-dressing--specifically female to male--appeared via the masculine attire of the pioneer or squatter girl, producing some interesting ambiguities in films such as *Jewelled Nights* (1925), *Lovers and Luggers* (1937), *The Squatter's Daughter* (1933), and *Bitter Springs* (1950).

Ironically, however, the most notable gender bender was a classic Australian war film--Charles Chauvel's *Forty Thousand Horsemen* (1941), a celebration of the heroic masculinity of the Australian soldier that features a plot development involving a beautiful female French spy disguised as an Arab boy! Needless to say, all of these queer traces were strictly subtextual, and sealed with satisfactory heterosexual resolutions.

The 1970s and 1980s

In the 1970s a growing drive for cultural self-definition, along with increased government funding resulted in a greater quantity and quality of Australian films. This combined with the loosening of severe censorship laws to facilitate the exploration of "adult" themes.

For example, Bruce Beresford's *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (1972), a crude yet funny "innocent abroad" tale, exposes naive hick Bazza and Auntie (later Dame) Edna Everage to various sexual perversities, among them lesbianism and homosexuality, while visiting the United Kingdom.

Meanwhile, the arrival of the permissive society in Australia was celebrated in *Felicity* (1978) and *The Guide to Australian Love and Sex* (1978), forgettable sex romps with sophisticated pretensions, which nevertheless extend some tolerance to same-sex desire.

More challenging (and perhaps surprisingly so), *Number 96* (1974), a movie version of a popular television

night-time soap, featured both camp stereotype Dudley ("ever so nice") Butterfield and "average guy/gay" Don Finlayson, a lawyer who, surprisingly, is the film's ethical center.

Serious films of the period saw only tentative, sometimes troublesome, explorations of queer themes. While Fred Schepisi's *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (1978) and George Miller's *Mad Max II* (1981) include demonizing caricatures of the predatory older male, Canadian director Ted Kotcheff's still controversial *Wake in Fright* (1971) offers a more complex account of Australian masculinity through an uncompromising study of the victimization--and eventual rape--of a "sissy" schoolteacher by the macho menfolk of a country town.

In Schepisi's visually stunning *The Devil's Playground* (1976), set in a repressive Catholic seminary in 1950s Australia, it is unclear whether adolescent homosexual experimentation is the object of repression or the (regrettable) product of it.

In *Lonely Hearts* (1982), by avant-garde director Paul Cox, a sympathetically portrayed gay male friend plays a key role in facilitating the heterosexual romance plot. Cox's explorations of troubled, off-center heterosexuality might well fit him in the category of "queer," although traces of lesbianism in his *Man of Flowers* (1983), might, for some, seem little more than standard voyeuristic fare in a study of male (hetero) sexual obsession.

Little represented in the period, lesbian desire does, nevertheless, play a crucial, if seemingly tangential role in two important historical dramas, both set in girls' schools. Traces of lesbian eroticism underpin Peter Weir's haunting *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), while Bruce Beresford's *The Getting of Wisdom* (1977) gives greater specificity to the teenage protagonist's sapphic crush than Henry Handel Richardson's turn of the century novel.

The 1970s also saw the beginnings of a lesbian tradition in independent, experimental film. Often informed by feminist debates and academic gender theories, it includes fiction shorts such as Megan McMurchy's *Apartments* (1977) and Ann Turner's *Flesh on Glass* (1981), Digby Duncan's documentary *Witches, Dykes, and Poofters* (1979), and Leone Knight's confrontational, queer theory inflected *In Loving Memory* (1992) and *The Father Is Nothing* (1992).

The 1990s and After

The explosion of queer Australian films in the 1990s was, arguably, heralded by the stunning success of Baz Luhrman's *Strictly Ballroom* (1992). The romance plot may be straight but the film is saturated with camp and kitsch, and is a forerunner of Luhrmann's later international extravaganzas, *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1996) and *Moulin Rouge* (2001).

Ann Turner's feature length *Dallas Doll* (1992), starring American comedienne Sandra Bernhard as a bisexual adventuress let loose on an "ordinary" Australian family, was a patchy yet intriguing venture that failed to find mainstream cinema release.

In 1994, however, three seminal films, all comedies, and all with serious thematic underpinnings, were released to critical acclaim and commercial success: P.J. Hogan's *Muriel's Wedding* (1994), with its friendship between two young women on the loose in Sydney, saturated in camp and grounded in an (unrealized) lesbian subtext; Stephan Elliot's exuberant *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), the story of three Sydney drag queens (one transsexual, one homosexual, and one bisexual) who embark on a bus journey to Ayers Rock, scandalizing the local yokels on the way; and Geoff Burton and Kevin Dowling's *The Sum of Us* (1994), starring Russell Crowe as a working-class gay plumber, living with his sympathetic straight father.

The comic vein continued with Emma-Kate Croghan's *Love and Other Catastrophes* (1996), a witty take on

the screwball genre focusing on the romantic misadventures of five young students in Melbourne, two of whom "just happen" to be lesbians.

Yet towards the end of the 1990s a more serious tone began to emerge. Lawrence Johnson's *Life* (1996)--acclaimed by critics but too confrontational to attract the crossover success of *Priscilla*--offered a searing, timely study of relationships between men in an HIV division of a state prison.

Ana Kokkinos's *Only the Brave* (1994), a sometimes scrappy, yet engaging, short film about the lesbian awakening of a working class Greek-Australian girl, paved the way for Kokkinos to direct and co-write *Head On* (1998), a technically impressive adaptation of Christos Tsoilkas' grunge novel *Loaded*, featuring a striking performance by Alex Dimitriadis as the antihero Ari.

Novel to film adaptations have also provided the impetus for the work of Samantha Lang who, with Kokkinos, heads the vanguard of younger queer-focused directors. *The Well* (1997), a visually stunning version of Elizabeth Jolley's story of closeted lesbian obsession, stumbles a little, perhaps due to uncertainty about the veiled homophobic strains of the original, but *The Monkey's Mask* (2000) works creditably to capture some of the intelligence and eroticism of Dorothy Porter's complex verse detective novel, eliciting powerful performances from Suzie Porter and Kelly McGillis.

Conclusion

Australia's diverse and distinctive contribution to queer film has secured increasing international recognition. While the halcyon highs of 1994 have yet to be matched, the tradition is, it is hoped, sufficiently solid to withstand the strands of social conservatism and fiscal restraint that mark Australian life in the new millennium.

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