

Sunday Age (Melbourne) 11-23-2008

Faraway Downs fantasy resonates close to home

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Baz Luhrmann's Australia offers a frank and fresh take on outback lore, writes Marcia Langton.

IN HIS fabulous hyperbolic film *Australia*, Baz Luhrmann has leaped over the ruins of the "history wars" and given Australians a new past - a myth of national origin that is disturbing, thrilling, heartbreaking, hilarious and touching. At its centre are two forbidden love stories: one a romance between the English Lady Sarah and the Drover; and the other, which carries the film and all its historical and social subtext, is the love of Lady Sarah for the mixed-race boy, Nullah.

The film sparkles and shines and, even at its most melodramatic, this eccentrically postmodern account of a recent frontier delivers a few gut punches. The predicament of Nullah's character is a credible rendition of the plight of thousands of Aboriginal children of mixed-race descent in the Northern Territory who were hounded and chased by police officers whose duty it was to remove them from their families and place them in the institutions for "half-caste" children.

The tale is layered by the surreal character King George, played by David Gulpilil. King George is Nullah's grandfather, and the uncle of Nullah's mother. He is a sorcerer from Arnhem Land who surveys Faraway Downs from his eyrie on the peak of the mountain range overlooking the homestead. Falsely accused of the murder of Lady Sarah's husband, he subverts the idea of the lurking savage made famous in much colonial literature and, as the hunted and despised ritual leader, represents the power and fragility of Aboriginal religion and culture.

The superb effect of the film, reading it through the lens of post-colonial literature, is its pride in the ingenuity, bawdiness and larrikinism of Australians of Aboriginal, British, Chinese and European descent living side by side in a complicated caste system during the period leading up to and amid World War II in the Top End of the

Northern Territory and the east Kimberley where the fictional - and symbolic - Faraway Downs is located.

The plot hinges on the competition between King Carney, a cattle baron played by Bryan Brown, and Lady Sarah Ashley, who inherits Faraway Downs from her murdered husband, each determined to get their herds of cattle to Darwin to win the contract from Australian Defence Force officers who need beef to feed the army. King Carney orders his future son-in-law, Neil Fletcher, played by David Wenham, to stop Lady Sarah from succeeding. She appeals to the Drover, a role brought to life by the superb horsemanship and physical presence of Hugh Jackman. He gathers together their unlikely team, Magarri (David Ngoombujarra), Bandy Legs (Lillian Crombie), Kipling Flynn (Jack Thompson), Sing Song (Wah Yuen) and Nullah (Brandon Walters) to drive the 2000 head of cattle to Darwin.

This long cattle drive across the plains and rivers provides the magical scenes for Neil Fletcher's treachery, the triumph of Aboriginal sorcery, and the build-up of the romantic tension between the Drover and Lady Sarah.

Luhmann depicts with satirical sharpness the racial caste system of that time. The scene in the Darwin cinema is especially delightful for me. The Wizard of Oz has come to town, and Dorothy's escape from Kansas to the dream world is a metaphor for Luhrmann's own artistic struggle with the prosaic facts of history. In his imagined cinema of the 1940s, the spatial and social shape of racism is reconstructed with such exact detail, I felt I had been transported back to my own childhood. His white townsfolk are in their designated whites-only seats in back rows under the roof and the Aboriginal and Chinese members of the audience are in the front rows under the open sky, and I found my eye drawn to the location of my own seat on a bench in the cinema of my childhood in western Queensland.

The bombing of Darwin is the setting for the crescendo of the plot in which good triumphs over evil. Whereas the Gallipoli legend captures the birth of a national myth born of the sacrifice of thousands of Australian lives in World War I in distant Turkey, the history of the Japanese bombing of Darwin in 1941, soon after the Pearl Harbour raid in Hawaii, took place on Australian soil. The threat of invasion was real. Darwin was the only theatre of war on Australian soil, a fact often overlooked.

Luhmann brings these events to life with gusto and emotion, responding to the

persistent concerns about the nation's past and how it should be represented.

The poetry that gave us the droll, lyrical and fatalistic Australia observed by Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson celebrated the people on the land, the graziers, the drovers and the wanderers. Such writing memorialised the long drought and the post-Depression poverty of rural Australia. In the '40s and '50s our film industry - often in partnership with the UK Ealing Studios - also celebrated these Australian staples in a series of "frontier" films in which white settlement progressed as intended by God and state. Baz Luhrmann's hand in the screenplay is evident. He brings a fresh, bold approach to these familiar tales, and presents a radical departure from conventional outback lore. The film provides an alternative history from the one John Howard and his followers constructed. Luhrmann's fellow writers, Stuart Beattie, Ronald Harwood and Richard Flanagan, must have had fun developing the details of this epic set in the mesmerising northern landscapes, intertwining the system of racial segregation, World War II and the cattle barons with the story of a child eventually captured by police and placed in the "half-caste" institution at Garden Point on an island off Darwin.

This adventure into the soul of the nation succeeds with powerful cinematic craft, passion and humour.

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