The choice fruit of *The Mango Tree* (Kevin Dobson, 1977)

It's not as though there was nothing else going on in Australian cinema in the 1970s, but the combination of period piece, eye-catching locations, literary adaptation and coming-of-age theme surely conjures up a good deal of that crucial decade. Even in that climate, though, Kevin Dobson's *The Mango Tree* (1977) wasn't very popular. It was securely set during World War One, picturesquely located in Bundaberg and surrounding cane-fields, was derived from Ronald McKie's award-winning 1974 novel and its ostensible concern was the rites of passage undergone by young Jamie Carr.

The film version, produced by Michael Pate, former actor who had had a sturdy career as actor here and in the US, certainly looks great as the camera tracks through waving cane-fields or the dusty streets of Bundaberg. But the film, easy as it is to watch, just can't seem to keep its mind on any one thing for long enough and this may well be because Christopher Pate, Michael's then 25-year-old son, simply can't command the attention needed for us to see the narrative's grab-bag of events as contributing to his emergence from adolescence — and it doesn't help that he looks as if he's well past school age.

So why have I remembered this film so vividly? Essentially because it enshrines one of the most luminous performances by an actress in Australian film. She is the celebrated Irish-American Geraldine Fitzgerald, here playing Grandma Carr who has raised orphaned Jamie. The sequence of her death has stayed with me for the truth of feeling?

Grandma Carr has become ill after helping to nurse casualties of the 1919 flu epidemic, but has recovered sufficiently to announce that she and Jamie will have a formal dinner, telling him to see to sherry and port. The sequence lasts only a few minutes but its potency derives in part from the way it is fed by our recalling the capacity of this woman to imbue whatever she did with a profound sense of inner belief and wisdom.

The sequence is not without its flaws, of course. Jamie is played as diverse as Our Town and Long Day's Journey into Night. In 1974 she had a heartbreaking few minutes in Paul Mazursky's *Harry-and-Tonto* had the casting director for *The Mango Tree* seen this and registered the capacity of this woman to imbue whatever she did with a profound sense of inner belief and truth of feeling?

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