By any standards, apart perhaps from box-office takings, 2009 was a banner year for Australian films. There were *Balibo* and *Samson and Delilah, Disgrace* and *Last Ride*, but what is really impressive is that three of the most memorable entries in this memorable year were directed by women, in an industry where direction has long been dominated by men.

I don’t want to make any special, essentialist point about what’s attracting female directors: male directors have been just as often drawn to the conflicts that rend families (think of such recent Australian films as Steve Jacobs’ *Disgrace*, Tony Ayres’ *The Home Song Stories*, Glendyn Ivin’s *Last Ride*, Dean Murphy’s *Charlie & Boots*). I just want to celebrate three very significant films by female directors. On the international scene, Kathryn Bigelow’s *The Hurt Locker* has won and been nominated for numerous awards, and neither in this nor her earlier films has the family been the site of her chief interest. Perhaps film directing is no longer a male preserve, and female directors are not to be confined by the parameters of what used to be patronisingly characterised as ‘the women’s picture’.

With this sort of proviso understood, the three major films I want to highlight here—Sarah Watt’s *My Year without Sex*, Rachel Ward’s *Beautiful Kate* and Ana Kokkinos’s *Blessed*—indeed foreground family matters and do so with rigour and perception, but there the similarities end.
The three films are tonally distinct from each other. Watt’s film focuses on an urban family whose structure is threatened by serious illness, but the film, while acknowledging the seriousness of the impact of the disease, is also shot through with a potent sense of comedy and playfulness. Ward has made a powerful and affecting family melodrama, while Kokkinos’s cross-class, cross-age compendium draws compellingly and unpredictably on what tears families apart—with varying degrees of conventionality in their narrative approaches. Each gives a potent sense of a filmmaker with a clear sense of what film can do; each is marked by daring, by confidence, and by a pushing of various kinds of boundaries, whether emotional, thematic or stylistic, or all three; and each avoids cliché and sentimentality—those softenings of mind and heart—when there was scope for both.

**BEAUTIFUL KATE**

Rachel Ward’s film is the most readily classifiable: structurally, its genre is that of family melodrama, and a powerful exemplar of the mode it is. But Ward, as director and writer, has approached what might be sensational material through a seamless interweaving of past and present, and resists temptations to the gothic, favouring instead an impressive realism of observation. For the first decade or so of new Australian cinema, it seemed that local filmmakers were shy of the melodramatic mode; it was almost as if they felt this must be inferior to ‘realism’, and many films of the 1970s and 1980s lacked punch (and box-office success) as a result. **Beautiful Kate** would scarcely have been made then, and certainly not with the frankness of Ward’s film.

At the heart of **Beautiful Kate** is a fraught father-son relationship. Forty-year-old Ned (Ben Mendelsohn) arrives back, with a somewhat sulky bimbo would-be-actress in tow, at the isolated and drought-stricken farm of his dying father, Bruce (Bryan Brown). As well as finding out that the place is bankrupt, Ned is also responsible for bringing to light a backlog of painful family secrets. His father had adopted a bullying approach to his three children when their mother died, and Ned hasn’t been around for nearly twenty years. His sister Kate had been overcome with grief, and Ned’s comforting of her had led to incest between them, and tragedy relating to his twin brother Cliff. Ward treats the potentially explosive matter of incest with both delicacy and erotic tension, and the result is touching in its depiction—and, for Ned, desperately shaming to recall. The other important character in this complex family set-up is Ned’s younger sister Sally (Rachel Griffiths), who has looked after Bruce devotedly, putting up with not only his physical decline but also his often cantankerous demands. There is enough of Bruce in Ned’s unaccommodating prickliness and enough of Ned’s unspoken resentment in Sally’s stoicism to make us accept them as a credible
family, rather than as several gifted actors thrown together with no suggestion of common DNA.

There are echoes of other films here, not necessarily Australian. There are tales of people going home (Mendelsohn came home and caused disruption in *Mullet* (2001); in *Junebug* (2005) a son returns to different effect; others include *The Hanging Garden* (1997), *Garden State* (2004), and, in a different vein, life is sent wildly askew for the protagonist of *A History of Violence* (2005), when the past threatens his family’s stability). Sometimes, as in *Beautiful Kate*, the purpose of the return may be specific but the effect can also be to lay ghosts to rest and exorcise guilts, and that certainly happens here. There are also echoes of other dramas of families engaged in internal conflicts, either tacit or explicit (think of the recent hit play here, *August: Osage County*, or on stage or screen, *Long Day’s Journey into Night* or *Death of a Salesman*). In *Beautiful Kate*, the revenant Ned, trailing a lifetime of suppressions and frustrations, stirs the simmering pot of family secrets and lies, and Ward knows exactly how far to lift the lid before letting the brew boil over.

I wish she’d avoided the final shot of birds in flight as a symbol of liberation from the past and hope for a freer future—this invites too easy a response—but the film is undoubtedly moving as it makes its way towards its inevitable denouement. There is a persuasive sense of reconciliation, as Bruce’s old fingers reach for the head of the weeping Ned, and both Bryan Brown and Ben Mendelsohn are responsible for the emotional impact of the scene. Mendelsohn, in particular, has matured very interestingly as an actor and gives a perceptive account of early middle-age disillusion, of a man clutching at sexual straws while avoiding emotional openness and commitment. Brown, on the other hand, has shaken off any sort of leading-man charisma and offers a wholly convincing character study as the patriarch laid low. At the graveside, with members of the black and white community present, Ned pays tribute to his sister Sally as Bruce’s ‘greatest achievement’, and Sally is a touching study in selflessness in Rachel Griffiths’ performance.

Though the actors are so striking, *Beautiful Kate* is really a director’s film at heart. Ward manages the complex interaction of past and present and the several narrative strands with impressive control, and the look of the film—its design and cinematography—creates a memorable sense of place. The run-down farmhouse and sheds bear convincing testimony to the detritus of the decades and the landscape around them seems just to regard the painful and tragic events of these lives with an impassivity that recalled for me the way this worked in *Disgrace*. This effect is surely the result of a director who knows how much weight to give to place in a drama that is essentially the result of human interactions—and Ward’s considerable experience as an actor may account for the unhurried scope she seems to allow her actors to register.
their complexities. In sum, she has made melodrama and realism work productively together to disturb and reward her viewers. Jim Schembri, reviewing the film in the *Age*, was right to say that it illustrated ‘how fully developed, emotionally driven, three-act stories result in films that immerse you in their visions’.

*MY YEAR WITHOUT SEX*

*My Year without Sex* too is essentially a director’s film. If you remember *Look Both Ways* four years ago, you may recall that it too was written and directed by Sarah Watt. Both of these are urban films and are concerned with people having health crises, but above all they are both immensely accomplished films, original, even audacious, in the way they approach their subjects. Watt impresses again and again with the sharpness of her realist observation, but it would be wrong in either case to label her films ‘realist’.

Her latest reinforces one’s sense of a risk-taking filmmaker in that Watt is willing to break out of the straitjacket of realist representation; it’s as if she doesn’t regard such generic purity as of much interest. Watt certainly doesn’t adhere slavishly to the classic Hollywood narrative pattern in which the director suppresses all overt sign of the ‘apparatus’, as a result of which suppression the viewer is meant to be sucked into the world of the film as if it were a variant of the ‘real’ world. She insists on breaks from the realist illusion, almost as if to give us a pause in which to reflect on what we have just seen. More specifically, the film’s narrative is divided into the twelve months the title leads us to expect and each month is announced with a playful monthly report, complete with cartoonish image and caption, often with wry sexual overtones. None of this ever seems strained or overly cute. Instead, it suggests that Watt is determined to find and maintain a sort of balance, a saving humour in the presence of the rigorous demands that Natalie’s (Sasha Horler) illness has made on everyone. These demands will ask a good deal of her and husband Ross (Matt Day), but this doesn’t mean that everything else in their lives will disappear. These inserts remind me of the use Watt made in *Look Both Ways* of the silent animated drawings, reminiscent of illustrations from a children’s book, to punctuate and comment on the main thrust of the film’s action.

The film opens with a small girl (Portia Bradley) making greeting cards, then going in to her parents’ bedroom to wish her father a happy birthday, and interrupting them while they’re having sex. It is a great opening, and the scene is set for a film that gives an acutely and charmingly observed sense of family life which is suddenly placed under huge strain when Natalie collapses as a result of an aneurysm. The nice, ordinary Ross weeps, only partly for Natalie: Watt also knows and renders astutely his bleak sense of having, from here on, to manage everything on his own. Natalie now can’t
work, so it’s not just a year without sex; it’s a year without all the kinds of support—
financial and practical as well as emotional—he’s always relied on Natalie to provide.
Further, his own job is in jeopardy and each month seems to bring new problems. Come
December, how are they going to afford Christmas presents for the kids? By March,
there’s an increasing fractiousness between Ross and Natalie over who should be doing
what household jobs. The film doesn’t flinch from the mundane difficulties that come in
the wake of serious illness.

Despite all this, My Year without Sex is not a depressing film. It is lit by humour.
When the little boy (Jonathan Segat) weeps, they think he’s upset about his mother
but it proves to be because his football team has lost. The little girl, Ruby, wonders
if she can take her mother to school as a show-and-tell item. Natalie investigates
the possibility of religious solace, and this brings her in touch with a woman priest,
Margaret (a very endearing performance by Maud Davey, from Summer Heights High),
who confides to Natalie that though God is her great comfort she still has ‘feelings’ and
tries a dating service, then ends up playing the pokies with Natalie. She says, ‘I want
to share my life with someone as well as with God’, but it is characteristic of the film’s
generosity that Margaret’s situation is not just played for comedy and her vocation is
treated with respect.

This is a film full of things to praise, including the marvellous performances
of Horler and Day as Natalie and Ross, putting before us, in matters trivial and life-
changing, how they cope with the banalities as well as with the crises. These are not
‘star’ turns: they are the result of the most detailed observation, of internalising this and
acting from within. They had of course an unusually adroit screenplay to work on and a
director responsive to the rhythms and dislocations of everyday life.

_BLESSED_

Both films I’ve been discussing here have elements of daring about them, but it is
ture to say that Ana Kokkinos’s _Blessed_ is the most daring and the most ambitious
of the three. This will not be surprising to those who saw Kokkinos’s previous two
films, _Head On_ (1998) and _The Book of Revelation_ (2006). These were about as
confrontational as Australian films get. The first, derived from Christos Tsiolkas’s
novel _Loaded_, is about a young Greek guy coming to terms with his gay sexual
orientation and meeting head on, as it were, the cultural conflicts this produces for
him and his family; and the protagonist of the second is a young male dancer who is
sexually abused by three hooded women. These films plunge their characters into all
kinds of darkness, where a sense of ultimate self may be found or, more disturbingly,
lost. Audiences prepared to meet such daunting challenges would be right to think
they are in the presence of a major talent, one that offered insights of a kind not common in commercial cinema.

*Blessed* is as powerful as either of its predecessors and its emotional courage is matched by its stylistic intrepidity. It spreads its emotional interests over a large cast of characters, including seven children and five mothers, with assorted husbands, boyfriends, welfare officers and police. To maintain control over so large a cast—almost Altmanesque in its range—without confusion is in itself an achievement of great narrative control. The film has been deftly adapted for the screen from the multi-authored 1998 play *Who's Afraid of the Working Class?*, by its four original authors (Andrew Bovell, Melissa Reeves, Patricia Cornelius and Christos Tsiolkas). Five diverse plot strands, with no more than vestigial connections and the fact that all the stories involve children at odds with their mothers, are woven rigorously together by the coherence and compassion of Kokkinos’s vision.

There is daring in requiring audience involvement with so many sets of relationships, but there is even more in the way Kokkinos and her writers have structured the film. Its first half focuses on children at large and at risk in various urban settings. A brother and sister sleep in a skip that acts as a receptacle for used clothes; another teenage daughter and her friend are into truancy, drink, cigarettes and shoplifting; a fifteen-year-old boy, Daniel, tries his hand at theft, having been wrongly accused of it at home; an older teenage boy, Roo, oppressed by his mother’s smothering love, gets himself involved with a pornographer; and James, a young Aboriginal man, feels a lack of connection to his white adoptive mother. The narrative links between these characters may be tenuous, but they are held together vividly in our minds because of what these young lives, seemingly alienated, have in common. This is not a polemic that preaches about society’s ills: it asks us to take in these sometimes appalling situations and think about them—think about them, that is, until the sheer dreadfulness of the perils these young ones face overwhelms us emotionally.

Kokkinos’s daring is reinforced in the second half of the film when she switches to the mothers’ perspective on the day that’s just been, the women now first seen asleep at day’s start. The five key actresses—Frances O’Connor, Deborra-lee Furness, Monica Maughan, Miranda Otto and Victoria Haralabidou—give a series of wonderful performances that make it impossible to dismiss any of the mothers as just the bitch or slut their children consider them to be. O’Connor brings astonishing intensity to the role of Rhonda, whose need for sex and her hatred of welfare dependence make her seem an irresponsible mother. Monica Maughan has died since she completed the role of Laurel (her last); in its stillness and utter internalisation of this elderly left-wing woman’s situation, her performance stands as a remarkable tribute to a career. But all these women stay vividly in the mind: as Blaise Pascal once said, ‘The heart has its reasons
of which reason knows nothing.’ As with the children, we are not invited to judge these women, merely to understand them.

There is real pain, some despair and a fragile but oddly tenacious capacity for loving in the mothers and their children as Kokkinos traces the contours of these lives. The film can sometimes be hard to watch; there are moments as excoriating as anything in recent cinema; it is never less than emotionally demanding; there is nowhere to relax in it. It is, I believe, a great film, and it is not often one would risk that degree of praise.

Three women, three films, three experiences that ask a great deal of their audiences, but each of them rewards effort with a degree of aesthetic and humane enrichment not common in Australian—or any—cinema. I have focused on these three because, individually impressive as each is, their appearance in the one year emphasises more strongly the collective importance of their achievement. I began by reference to the overwhelmingly male-dominated industry, especially among directors; however, it should be noted that there has been, over several decades, a tenacious group of female directors determined to make themselves heard in these unpropitious circumstances. In the 1970s revival, there was Gillian Armstrong’s tender, luminous version of My Brilliant Career; in 2004, Cate Shortland scooped the pool at the AFI awards with Somersault, an affecting study of youthful questing; and, nearer the present, Elissa Down offered a shrewd antipodean take on the teen-movie genre with The Black Balloon (2008) as Rachel Perkins did on the conventions of the musical in Bran Nue Dae (2009). These and others (such as Sue Brooks and Cherie Nowlan) have persisted in the face of difficulties one can only guess at—issues of financing, locations, distribution, for instance—and have created a body of work that commands respect in its own right as well as for the tenacity involved in getting it made.

If the subjects of films don’t come labelled ‘men only’ or ‘women only’, what is crucial is that women may bring to these subjects a perception, an attitude, a backlog of experience, that will enable us to view those subjects with fresh eyes. The three women whose work I have chosen to examine here have required just this of their audiences. Given their relative numbers, it must be said that they are punching above their weight.