But it doesn’t always have to be like this; it can have more going for it than that sort of in-joke indulgence. Hollywood has, for instance, created seriously popular entertainments such as Topkapi (1964, Jules Dassin), How to Steal a Million (1966, William Wyler), The Sting (1973, George Roy Hill) and The Usual Suspects (1995, Bryan Singer), as well as the recent remake of The Italian Job (2003, Gary Gray), which, whatever nostalgists insist, is at least as accomplished as the British original of 1969 (Peter Collinson). Britain’s reputation in this hybrid genre ranges from the gentle humours of Ealing’s The Lavender Hill Mob (Charles Crichton, 1951), the broad comedy of Too Many Crooks (Mario Zampi, 1959) and the cynicism of League of Gentlemen (Basil Dearden, 1960) to the visceral blackness of such late twentieth-century numbers as Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels (Guy Ritchie, 1998) and Snatch (Ritchie, 2000).

Over the years, the plots have become ever more convoluted, the violence generally more casually terminal, as digitally created imagery enables actors to meet grislier and grislier deaths, and the comedy has become darker in hue. But some aspects of the genre have persisted across the decades. Essentially, we are asked to suspend conventional moral criteria for human behaviour and to align our sympathies with characters who are more or less likeable but just happen to be interested in pursuing unlawful activities, notably theft, and sometimes a bit of good-natured murder. One sub-branch of the genre ensures that we don’t take these activities too seriously...
by focusing on the ineptitude of those involved. Think of Woody Allen’s *Small Time Crooks* (2001) where some deeply incompetent ex-cons accidentally make a fortune from the sale of cookies, no less; or the hapless gang in *Welcome to Collinwood* (Anthony and Joe Russo, 2003) bent on retrieving a stash left hidden by someone detained at the governor’s pleasure. One way or other, the films need to get a hold on the audience’s easy-going acceptance of the ‘sting’ at the heart of most of the plots, whether it’s a matter of having attractive stars, like Newman and Redford, or of a level of wit in the writing that softens any urge to censoriousness, as there was in Dearden’s *League*, where, as well, there was a degree of sympathy for those whose peacetime lives had let them down, or of a bumbling haplessness that means the gang doesn’t pose a serious threat to life as we know it. Crime, comedy and likeable reprobates are the essential ingredients for most caper films, and the pleasures along the way often distract our attention from plots of baffling intricacy.

To turn to Australian efforts in this genre is at once to be aware that the local industry has not usually been a genre-dominated cinema at all. The 1970s revival got off to a box-office start with a series of unsubtle sex comedies (*Stork*, the ‘Alvin Purple’ films), followed by what has been rather unkindly dubbed the ‘AFC genre’, exemplified by the likes of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Peter Weir, 1975), *The Getting of Wisdom* (Bruce Beresford, 1977) and *My Brilliant Career* (Gillian Armstrong, 1979), all based on popular and/or classic novels and coming-of-age experiences set in decades past. The received wisdom now seems to be that these constituted an evasion of the facts of contemporary life, though it is surely possible for films set in earlier periods to be as much ‘about’ the times in which they are produced. How else does one account for the contemporary (i.e. 1950s) relevance of a Western such as John Ford’s *The Searchers*, set far from comfortably in the conflicts of the previous century? But if genre filmmaking has something in common with the emergence of myths in distant times, in places as diverse as Greece, Scandinavia or Aboriginal Australia, then new Australian cinema has to be seen as not too preoccupied with pursuing the sorts of narratives that tap into that fanciful monolith, ‘the national psyche’. Whereas *Westerns* were a way of exploring and explaining America’s agrarian past, there is surely no comparably substantial body of films seeking to or even inadvertently ruminating on our past, rural or urban. Odd popular films, such as *The Man from Snowy River* (George Miller, 1982) and *Crocodile Dundee* (Peter Faiman, 1986), offer local variants on, respectively, the Western and the romantic-comedy adventure and, whatever their intrinsic virtues, are not insignificant commentaries on the way Australia likes to mythologize itself. *Strictly Ballroom* (Baz Luhrmann, 1992) and *Shine* (Scott Hicks, 1996) have strong affiliations with such veteran film genres as the musical and the biopic; but these are apt to be one-offs, rather than exemplars of a sturdily worked genre field.

All this is by way of drawing attention to what does seem to have established itself as at least a minor genre in the last few years of Australian film: the caper movie. If there are not yet any classics to rival the stature of the US or UK titles men-
tioned above, there are at least several lively and good-natured takes on this essentially urban genre, with a nice range of scruffy incompetents and corrupt smoothies going through their criminal paces more troubled by each other than by either law or conscience. Jonathan Teplitzky’s *Gettin’ Square* (2003) is the most recent and perhaps the most accomplished, cheerfully surrendering plot logic and clarity to the demands of character discrimination and engagingly comic set pieces. However, there is a backlog of films in the mode which warrants reappraisal, both individually and as constituting a recognizable generic strand: these include *Two Hands* (1999), *Dirty Deeds* (2002) *Take Away and Bad Eggs* (2003). This is a male-dominated genre, with women barely getting a look in, or if they are in evidence it’s inevitably in support of—or ignorance of—some scam the blokes have dreamed up. What’s needed, in the interests of gender balance, is a female character as enterprising as, say, Tracey Ullman’s in *Small Time Crooks*. But this isn’t a notably Australian failing. Who can, for instance, recall the women or the roles they played in *The Sting*?

Gregor Jordan’s *Two Hands* in fact offers a semi-exception to this rule. Not that Rose Byrne (it is hard to avoid her in these days, and, indeed, why would one want to?) is given all that much to do as country-girl Alex giving the city a try, but the romance between her and Heath Ledger is allowed more screen time than is usual in the caper film, and for a few moments, when they are temporarily safe from the thugs who are after him, they are even rather touching in their youth. But Jordan’s film points to one of the problems with Australian caper films: it isn’t sure enough in tone to be able to accommodate the level of violence and death that comes in the wake of its hectic plotting. Jimmy (Ledger), street promoter for a Kings Cross strip-show, is offered—by his standards—a lucrative job by drug boss and happily married family man Pando (Bryan Brown). Well, Jimmy decides to have a swim when the woman he’s meant to have hand over $10,000 to doesn’t answer the door; two kids nick the cash while he’s cooling down; and for the rest of the film Jimmy is preoccupied, as you would be, with avoiding Pando and with getting the money together again. The latter cause involves a bank robbery of more than average ineptitude and leads to a street shoot-out with police, and there’s a further shoot-out in Pando’s headquarters just after Jimmy has returned the dough. But why go on with the plot? It’s actually less complicated than caper movies are apt to be, and its real interest lies elsewhere.

Without being too solemn about it, the film draws its strength from the trajectory of Jimmy’s lurching from street Barker to wholesome boat-builder in Queensland, which is where he and Alex are headed at the film’s end. Ledger does a winning turn as an urban innocent who wants something more out of life, mistakenly views Pando’s offer as the opening he needs, gets into a more dangerous league than he can handle and painfully (and the script is really not too convincing about this) gets himself out of it. Even behind a balaclava in the botched bank robbery, he keeps our attention on his worried eyes. Director/writer Jordan generally, though, keeps the plot line straightforward, and rewards us with a sense of the texture of lives lived like this. Bryan Brown, now a weathered icon (as they say) of Australian cinema, who can trace his film lineage back to the likes of the 1970s heist film, *The Money Movers* (1979), makes a tasty meal of the role of gang boss who one minute is ordering some very nasty retributive action and the next playing scrabble with his young son, while his bimbo wife wafts around the living-room in a flimsy lime-green ensemble. There are genuinely funny moments (a killing fails because one thug has accidentally put the bullets through the washing machine) and these keep the tone from becoming as black as its bursts of bloody violence threaten to make it. It starts dark and brutal and ends sunny, and in between it is a savvy local version of the comedy-crime-caper. If it is too leisurely to be wholly exhilarating, it on occasion offers a compensating rumination on the genre: the character glossings seem less merely jokey appendages than acknowledgment that caper chaps may have more in their lives than just capers.

Bryan Brown is at it again in David Caesar’s *Dirty Deeds* (2002). In the film’s opening roundup of its three main characters, he (Barry) is seen at breakfast with his son, prior to a sortie to smash up some one-armed bandits at a gambling club. Before this, the film has introduced Barry’s nephew Darcy (Sam Worthington) in Vietnam 1969. Vietnam looks for all the world like a Wimmera wheat crop, and soldiers appear in the waving corn as a helicopter circles above. In a nicely anti-climactic touch, its function proves to be no more dangerous than the delivery of pizzas to the troops. The second of the protagonists is Chicago gangster Tony (John Goodman), who, with offsider Sal (Felix Williamson) is about to board an international flight with huge cabin luggage. Then the sight of Brown at home reassures us that we are going to be on familiar territory; the strands come together when Barry meets his nephew at Sydney airport, and Tony and his mate arrive at their Sydney hotel. Uncle Barry sends young Darcy off to make contact with them and to see what sort of co-operative deal might be set up in relation to the city’s pokies trade.

The paradigmatic relationship between the aging hard man and the tyro recalls *Two Hands*, as does Barry’s home life (Toni Collette is sharp and funny as his tough, gum-chewing, bouffant wife) and his treacherous thuggish associate, resonantly named Hollywood (William McInnes). Again, the young man can’t bring himself quite to the criminal sticking-point: Heath Ledger’s Jimmy heads for the far north; Worthington’s Darcy can’t carry out Barry’s instructions to kill Hollywood. Further, and this is also part of the template for these caper movies, the young man fails for a pretty young woman, in this case unfortunately Barry’s mistress Margot (Kestie Morass), and in this (predictable) structural ploy we are meant to see some kind of positive. Perhaps Darcy will follow Tony’s advice about not wasting his life and will take up pizza-making, just as Jimmy in *Two Hands* is last seen heading north to become a boat-builder with his girl-friend’s uncle. In both films, one has to wonder whether these brief hints of moral reclamation really do work affirmatively or whether they sentimentally undermine
the films’ caperish toughness. What has gone before, in each case, has been some bone-crunching violence of a kind that goes well beyond the comic-strip demands of the action—Dirty Deeds, in particular, is so visually and aurally taxing that it seems more like an onslaught than entertainment—so that one wonders if the filmmakers are having last-minute anxieties about whether, perhaps, they’ve gone too far. Neither film has that sure grasp of a light-hearted tone that characterizes the best caper films; neither, equally, seems prepared to forgo the savagery of some of its encounters, so that the ray of hope held out for the fresh-faced youngsters seems not much more than a sop.

After another failed caper, involving the pulling away of half a shop in Marc Gracie’s Take Away (2003), the young romantic leads are left at the end of the film, literally, to mind the store. They are Sonja (Rose Byrne again) and Dave (Nathan Phillips), trainee managers for rival stores in a country-town shopping strip. These stores are owned respectively by control freak Tony (Vince Colosimo) and slobbish Trev (Stephen Curry), and most of the film’s fun comes from the contrasts of style between them. Tony instructs Sonja in the arts of ‘Drink-fridge can-rotation’ whereas Trev tries to excite the none-too-bright Dave with the prospect of ‘Fish finger kebabs’. Tony and Trev’s rivalry is clearly headed for Ealing-type solidarities when the food chain ‘Burgie’s’ sets up next door to Tony and a couple of doors from Trev, under the managementship of a young tycoon (Matthew Dyktynski) who announces, by way of encouraging his protégé Tarquin (Tom Budge), ‘Those who stand in our way will be crushed’.

The scenario of little guys up against a big corporation invokes not only the spirit of such Ealing ventures as Passport to Pimlico (1949) but also that of the recent local success, Crackerjack (2002), in which a suburban bowling club resists a big-business steamrollering. There’s a Memorial Hall meeting for the citizenry to air its views and for Burgie’s to counter protest with ‘A Burgie’s chicken is a happy chicken’, in sharp contrast to the manager’s later terse reply to Tarquin about Burgie’s food, ‘I don’t eat that crap’. A strategy meeting of Tony and Trev, Sonja and Dave, leads to a trip to Sydney to put the case and finally to the caper element which takes over the film’s last third. Dave has infiltrated Burgie’s as the gang’s mole and Trev’s mate Ken (Brett Swain) lends his truck’s pulling services. The caper is entirely in comic mode and as the manager drives to work next morning he’s forced off the road by his own building coming towards him. The caper kicks in late in the narrative, and the film suffers from this: it takes a dawdling long time to get down to business, relying on incidental comic pleasures (like the bit about Tony and Trev’s father’s having fallen out years ago over the place of pineapple in a burger), and the romantic pair are unlikely on the surface and the plotting doesn’t do much to make their alliance more convincing.

Again, though, an Australian caper film looks to young love for a positive—and overlooks the genre’s chief narrative and character strengths which lie elsewhere. ‘Elsewhere’ is where Tony Martin’s Bad Eggs (2003), tonally more coherent than any of the foregoing, locates its strengths. Instead of pretty kids as romantic and moral focus, here we have the appealingly shopworn team of Mike Molloy and Judith Lucy (Crackerjack co-stars), who spar so well together and, to the tune of the Rogers and Hart classic, ‘Where or when’, captivate wittily. The film is off to a very funny start when a middle-aged guy in a suit gets into his Merc, takes out photos of himself with a scantily clad girl, tosses off a whisky and commits suicide, falling on the park brake and causing the car to careen down hill through crowded streets until it comes to rest in the fountain of a shopping mall. To add to the mayhem, Ben (Molloy) and Mike (Bob Franklin), two members of the Victorian Police elite Zero Tolerance Unit, empty their revolvers into the dead magistrate at the wheel. The film follows their (mis)fortunes as they are demoted to uniform work again, but are determined to uncover the mystery surrounding the magistrate’s death.

Like many caper films, Bad Eggs is none too clear from moment to moment about who is after whom or what, but it offers plenty of entertainment along the way in the form of set pieces, like that in which a suavely coiffed and courted Premier (Shaun Micalleff), in league with corrupt cop brass Pratt (Bill Hunter), is spirited out of Parliament House by Ben and Mike and taken to a Calder Highway rendezvous with a vanload of gunmen. There’s a touch of Western showdown, intensified by Dave Graney and Clare Moore’s score, in this sequence in which the Premier and Julie (Lucy)—journalist, ex-cop and by now Ben’s girlfriend—walk towards their respective rescuers. Bad Eggs engages in some satire about corrupt police methods and venal politicians, but its real success lies in the way it establishes its central pair as a viable comedy combination. Ben has to try hard to be a match for the sardonic Julie; Mike has a wife who has introduced him to the joys of tantric sex; but essentially the comic appeal of Ben and Mike is that of inept characters always thinking they’ve outwitted the seriously dangerous chaps. Ineptitude may well be a key ingredient of caper film protagonists: it doesn’t preclude genuine excitements but it keeps us comfortably on their side. Arguably the toughest-minded capers couldn’t care less about this; you can’t imagine Tarantino caring where our sympathies lie in Reservoir Dogs (1992).

The most recent Australian entry in the genre is Teplitzky’s Gettin’ Square (2003) and it brings together several key recurring elements of the caper film. The police force is corrupt; there’s a nice young romantic couple; there’s a sardonic big-time crim; and the caper, set on the glitzy Gold Coast and involving the three recently ‘out’ ex-cons and bent, as it were, on goin’ straight, is messily complicated. Teplitzky’s triumph is to make the familiar ingredients seem new, or at least stir them around in unexpected directions. Like Welcome to Collinwood, it opens with a very incompetent gang which turns out to be in the wrong place, after which the film switches to ‘6 months earlier’, for the first of several very funny scenes involving David Wenham as Spat. A drug-addicted dimwit, accoutred with thongs, floral shirts and stubbies, he has a way of reducing solemn assemblages to tatters. In his dealings with a parole tribunal, he is asked what he’s learnt inside
and offers such wisdom as: ‘If you can’t do the time, you can’t do the crime’ and how you should get to the scene of the crime on time, etc. Later on, his incapacity to keep to the subject and his fretting about lunch vouchers, drives the court in which he is a witness to incredulity and distraction. Wenham’s is a great comic performance and would alone justify a much less dextrous piece of work than Gettin’ Square.

The other two just ‘out’ are Barry (Sam Worthington, doing his likeable young lead again, as in Dirty Deeds, and finding tentative romance with his younger brother’s social worker) and Darren (British actor Timothy Spall), obsessed with weight loss but so chronically venal he can’t resist cheating the weight-watchers. Sympathy is solicited for Barry who’s been released because his mother has died and he wants to provide support for his brother—and keep clear of the criminal clutches of Chicka (a lethal comedy sketch from Gary Sweet), but as in the other films discussed here it’s hard to care much about this young crime vet. Dave Hoskin is right when he says ‘Worthington is surrounded by more flamboyant characters and struggles to make an impression’. 3 Certainly with Wenham on one side and Spall on the other, and with Sweet and David Field (a deeply corrupt cop) hovering, there’s not much scope for fresh-faced juveniles. But it’s not just Worthington; it’s the function of this character in the caper genre. It’s as though we’d think the filmmakers lacked any sort of moral perspective if they didn’t suggest some sort of ‘square’ hope for youth and young love’s dream. Most often, it lowers the temperature of films that would be better off following their baser instincts.

For a cinema that has often seemed to hold itself above generic traditions, though, these recent Australian ventures in the caper mode have scored more hits than misses. You’d think a culture that prides itself on a laconic unsentimentality would take to it like a duck to water and wouldn’t need to reassure us about the innate goodness in human nature. Especially when all the best cards have been dealt to the picturesque thugs and the devious lawmen who sometimes pursue them, sometimes collude with them, and sometimes do both.

Brian McFarlane, an Honorary Associate Professor at Monash University, has recently compiled The Encyclopedia of British Film (Methuen/BFI, 2003), now reprinting. He is co-authoring a book on the British ‘B’ movie.

Endnotes


2 This concept and, indeed, a remark very like it were the work of someone I can no longer remember or find, and would be glad to be reminded of.

3 Dave Hoskin, ‘Lookin’ for credit in the straight world’, Metro, No. 139, p.17.