THE AFI AWARDS - AND HOW TO WIN THEM?

BRIAN McFARLANE
WELL things have looked up this year. Whereas Sommersault won in all categories, a clean sweep which indicated only the lack of serious competition and which may have imposed an intolerable burden on the film’s makers, in 2005 there are three films nominated in almost all of the major categories and three further runners-up. Little Fish (Rowan Woods, 2005), The Proposition (John Hillcoat, 2005) and Look Both Ways (Sarah Watt, 2005) have, respectively, thirteen, twelve and eleven nominations, including in each case those for Best Film, Director, Actor, Supporting Actor, Editing, Production Design, Costume Design and Sound. Trailing, but respectably, are Wolf Creek (Greg McLean, 2005) with seven, Three Dollars (Robert Connolly, 2005) with five and Hating Alison Ashley (Geoff Bennett, 2005) with four. When one considers that this half-dozen doesn’t include The Oyster Farmer (Anna Reeves, 2005), The Illustrated Family Doctor (Kriv Stenders, 2005), Peaches (Craig Monahan, 2005) or The Magician (Scott Ryan, 2005), all of which have palpable virtues, then it’s clear that there’s no cause for despair, and that 2004 may have been an aberration. Ten worthwhile Australian films in a year is probably a reasonable achievement.

Whether the spread of the awards will reflect the range of these films is another matter. One is aware of how, in certain years, the Oscars will distribute their prizes, a clean sweep which indicated only the lack of serious competition and which may have imposed an intolerable burden on the film’s makers, in 2005 there are three films nominated in almost all of the major categories and three further runners-up. Little Fish (Rowan Woods, 2005), The Proposition (John Hillcoat, 2005) and Look Both Ways (Sarah Watt, 2005) have, respectively, thirteen, twelve and eleven nominations, including in each case those for Best Film, Director, Actor, Supporting Actor, Editing, Production Design, Costume Design and Sound. Trailing, but respectably, are Wolf Creek (Greg McLean, 2005) with seven, Three Dollars (Robert Connolly, 2005) with five and Hating Alison Ashley (Geoff Bennett, 2005) with four. When one considers that this half-dozen doesn’t include The Oyster Farmer (Anna Reeves, 2005), The Illustrated Family Doctor (Kriv Stenders, 2005), Peaches (Craig Monahan, 2005) or The Magician (Scott Ryan, 2005), all of which have palpable virtues, then it’s clear that there’s no cause for despair, and that 2004 may have been an aberration. Ten worthwhile Australian films in a year is probably a reasonable achievement.

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situation, Look Both Ways and Wolf Creek exhibit, these — the excellences, that is — are all based in screenplays by people thinking in terms of cinema. The days when adapting classic Australian novels to the screen (Walkabout, Picnic at Hanging Rock, The Getting of Wisdom, My Brilliant Career, Kangaroo etc.) was the short cut to prestige seem to have passed. In the Best Adapted Screenplay category we find Three Dollars, co-written by director Robert Connolly (who, in a just world, would be up there with his four nominated compatriots) and the author of the antecedent novel, Elliot Perlman. This wry, compassionate, witty account of a man’s descent into near-penury without his losing sight of the need to love will surely take out the award: Perlman’s novel provided fine raw (very raw in terms of affect) material and he and Connolly reshaped it into a painfully rewarding two hours of film. Similarly, The Illustrated Family Doctor releases its dark, sometimes lethal instincts via a screenplay jointly written by director (Kriv Stenders) and the novel’s author (David Snell), and I’m sorry that more people didn’t respond to its startling acerbities. Hating Alison Ashley turns a popular teenage-girl’s fiction into a good-natured, spiky teen movie, and The Widower (Kevin Lucas, 2004) is on more problematic territory in adapting Les Murray’s poetry to the feature film. Not, you’ll note, a ‘classic’ among them, not even a novel which lit-critters might feel at home with (cf. Oscar and Lucinda, The Well in previous years).

And it’s interesting to note the patterns among the filmmakers. Three are first-feature writer-directors, two of them women: Sarah Watt, with a background in animation, directed husband William McInnes in Look Both Ways, a film which combines live action with book-illustrator’s animation techniques; and Anna Reeves, with a history of short films and much festival experience, made The Oyster Farmer for veteran producer Anthony Buckley. The other first-timer is Greg McLean, also with experience in short film, music videos and commercials, before embarking on Wolf Creek as writer-director-producer. The directors of Little Fish and The Proposition have in common the fact that each has had a long wait since making very striking features in the 1990s. For Rowan Woods, Little Fish is his first cinema film (he has done a lot of television, including Fireflies) since the very powerful and unsettling drama The Boys (1998), and, for John Hillcoat, The Proposition breaks a nine-year drought since the passionate melodrama To Have and to Hold (1996) — and prior to that the unnerving Ghosts … of the Civil Dead (1988). These are two very uncanny directors and what they have served up in 2005 won’t fall anyone into a sense of false genre-security. Robert Connolly, who missed out on a nomination for Three Dollars, directed the very solid thriller The Bank (2001), in which he was similarly well served by David Wenham as a man with a different mission, and was producer for Woods on The Boys. Not prolific, these chaps, but it is heartening to find that some of our best films are being made by people who have done strong work previously; that not all Australian films are made by first-time directors who will, after their maiden successes, be lost in short order to more lucrative pastures.

Another strain among the five most-nominated films is that of the angsty, contemporary, urban-set drama, utterly focused on the personal, on issues of emotional and psychological connection, or shreds of it, in the recognizable world of Australia 2005. Not, though, that their significance is limited to this time and place. The protagonist of Look Both Ways, news photographer Nick (William McInnes), learns in the opening moments of the film that he has been diagnosed with cancer. Without any loss of his particularity, the film resonates out from the individual to embrace the wider notion of: how does anyone react to what may be a death sentence? How does it affect the way one interacts with the other main players in the cast of one’s life? On the hottest weekend of the year, he meets and falls in love with Meryl (nominee Justine Clark), who, returning from her father’s funeral, and expecting disaster everywhere, fears losing her job if she doesn’t come up with the illustrations she’s meant to be providing for her publisher. These two are thematically linked by having something hanging over them as threats, and stylistically linked by the way these are introduced: she has (an illustrator’s) visions of accidents of many kinds; he has the images of his x-rays which lead into a rapid montage of his life. The third protagonist, Nick’s colleague Andy (nominee Anthony Hayes) has till Monday to come to terms with the idea of his girlfriend’s pregnancy.

The film traces with subtlety and sympathy the ways in which these lives connect. A train accident at the start of the film will prove to be crucial for each of them. Watt’s screenplay is unusually intricate in its setting up of the motif of interlocking lives and in taking on such weighty matters as: What does life mean and matter? Without being solemn about it, this is a serious film, a film for grown-ups who don’t mind being given something to think about. There are unobtrusively made comparisons between lives that seem to be contemplating a fruitful future, as in the wedding episode, while Nick contemplates the curtailment of his own life; or Andy, selfishly anxious about the effect of launching a new life when he is so utterly absorbed in his own. There’s the family of a child who may have been killed in the train crash, mute with pain, in quiet contrast with the strong happy family of Nick’s editor Phil (Andrew S. Gilbert).

There are intimations of tragedy in what is often on the edge of being a romantic comedy — and McInnes and Clark handle this latter element of the film with grace and feeling. ‘Things just happen’ says one character and perhaps this comment comes as near as any to encapsulating the film’s agenda. There are moments of comedy because these happen, just as do the rage of grief and the imminence of death which can sometimes lead to total introspection, sometimes to a heightened awareness of others and of life’s values. It is absolutely to the film’s credit that it doesn’t settle for any of the easy outcomes it might have. There’s a storm at the end of the heatwave, as there is in Chekhov’s Uncle Vanya, but that doesn’t mean (in either film or play) that everything has been washed clean. This is a major film, with a real and complex sense of the lives it depicts, of grief, and rage, and loneliness and the need for others, and I hope it will be suitably rewarded on Awards night.

Little Fish, nominated for everything except location catering, also invokes complex modern city living, with a troubling awareness of urban tensions and with an astute eye for several strata of suburban life. It is not, however, essentially a milieu study but a film of fraught relationships — between siblings, between children and parents, between friends and lovers. At its centre is Cate Blanchett’s sure-to-win performance as Tracy Heart, a former hero-in-user whose ‘colourful’ financial history
comes between her and the modest, unsecured loan she needs to set herself up in business. It's a new spin on the once-common Aussie battler paradigm, given far more complexity and depth by her messy dealings with the other residents of her personal world. Tracy is gradually defined by her responses to her mother (superbly played by Noni Hazlehurst, enraged by what's been done to her kids — one was an addict, one is an amputee), to her mum's ex-boyfriend Lionel (Hugo Weaving), former rugby star and supplier to Tracy's addiction, to her own ex-boyfriend, Johnny (Dustin Nguyen), who returns from overseas and wants to help, but lies to her about his own prosperity … and to others. The film's elliptic approach to narrative, recalling Woods scary manoeuvres in *The Boys*, pays off, keeping us uncertain about characters and connections. *Little Fish* doesn't settle for easy answers any more than *Look Both Ways* does, and they both emerge as more considerable films for just this reason. They are both harrowed by the pain potential in living, but both refuse to surrender some residual belief in human resilience.

So, too, in its quirky way, does *Three Dollars*, whose protagonist Eddie, balancing the claims of wife and child, integrity in his work and a more broadly-based instinct for altruism, for empathy, in a social climate that makes his goodness harder to sustain and less likely to be valued. *Three Dollars* didn't quite catch on in the way that *Look Both Ways* and *Little Fish* did, but in Wenham's bizarrely un-nominated Eddie and Frances O'Connor (up for Best Actress) it has performances to match anything seen in an Australian film this year. In a contemporary cinema too often dominated by mindless, soulless blockbusters and digitalized would-be epics, a film like *Three Dollars*, so rigorously focused on ways of being valuably human, within the small scope of anyone's life, is doubly valuable. Unlike *Tom White* (Alkinos Tsilimidos, 2004), which it in some ways resembles thematically and formally, it keeps its focus small: it doesn’t sit up and beg to be seen as being about Important Issues. It is about Eddie, his wife Tanya (O’Connor), their adorable six-year-old daughter, Eddie's former girlfriend Amanda, and the minor characters Eddie meets in his urban odyssey, in his inexplicit but instinctively felt urge to be — and do — good.

These three urban films, each with fingers on the contemporary pulse, each compellingly personal in emphasis while never losing sight of the fact that the personal always has a social context, are superior examples of the kinds of films that seem made for AFI nominations. That could sometimes be read as less than complimentary, but that's not the intention here. It's just by way of moving on to the other two most-nominated films: two ferocious films set in outback Australia, one a powerful historical melodrama, spiked with horrific tragedy, the other a genuinely frightening horror genre-piece. In recent times, neither films with the period sweep of *The Proposition* nor easily classifiable genre films such as *Wolf Creek* have been major winners. It's over twenty years since *Gallipoli* (Peter Weir, 1981) won hearts and minds and awards, and works *sui generis*, like *Lantana* (Ray Lawrence, 2001) or *Japanese Story* (Sue Brooks, 2003), have usually been preferred to, say, comedy or musical or adventure or horror. Well, as noted earlier, *Wolf Creek*, though nominated in seven categories, has missed out on Best Film, so maybe there is a feeling that genre filmmaking is somehow less demanding, less worthy of recognition, than films less easy to classify.

It may nevertheless be true that a sturdy film industry is more likely to be built on genre successes than on one-off exercises in the unclassifiable. Just look at Hollywood's conquest of the cinema screens of the world by just this means (among others): if something (e.g. science-fiction) works in one film, then quickly make another, or another dozen. I’m speculating here but maybe, of all genres, horror is the one least likely to attract voters. Maybe it smacks too much of the comic book, of exploitation filmmaking, though in recent years it has been the subject of much serious academic writing.3 Whatever the explanation, I’d say that *Wolf Creek* is one of the best of the genre, and one of the best Australian films, of recent years, much more genuinely frightening than George Romero’s extravagantly praised *Land of the Dead* (2005), with its crude shock effects and its even cruder allegorism.

‘Based on true events’ and its release delayed while the Northern Territory trial for the alleged murder of an English tourist in the outback proceeded, it gets off to a slyly promising start with young holiday-makers in northern Australia lurching between vacation inertia and having a good, mindless, noisy time. Director–writer McLean knows exactly how to create a creepy feeling that this hedonism can’t last and isn’t safe, that the two English backpackers Liz and Kristy (Cassandra Magrath and the nominated Kestie Morassi) who join Australian Ben (Nathan Phillips) on a car trip to Wolf Creek National Park, are surrendering themselves to dangerous possibilities. As the road slices its way through magnificent country and outback towns, there is a growing sense of menace in the vast empty landscape and sky, and cinematographer Will Gibson is deservedly AFI-nominated for depriving the scene of neutrality. It’s even more threatening than the bubbling sexual tensions in the car and in the nasty roadside pub, or than the way their watches stop (recalling the more genteel horrors of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* [Peter Weir, 1975]) and their car won’t start after they leave Wolf Creek. Coming, it seems, to their rescue is Mick Taylor (John Jarratt), who tows them to his camp, where … But that’s enough plot. Suffice to say that from then on, horror and terror take over, so well orchestrated by McLean as to keep one seriously alarmed for the second half of the film, and the final capitation offers no consolation. It is a horror film, and really horrifying things happen before our eyes, but these are alarmingly and convincingly rooted in the mind of the brutal Taylor — and in the unsuspecting guilelessness of the laid-back young people.

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If *Wolf Creek* is viscerally confronting in the interests of scaring us witless (and succeeding), *The Proposition*, a sort of Australian western, is more overtly serious. Director John Hillcoat's previous film *To Have and to Hold* was described by Geoff Mayer as "a powerful anti-colonial image of European exploitation and entrapment." It has taken Hillcoat nearly a decade to get his new film made and released but *The Proposition* shows that he has not lost his power to disturb profoundly, both in terms of his imagery and the ideas that inform it. Set in outback Queensland in the 1880s, it tells a story of crushing violence and racial relations, set in motion when English police captain Stanley (Ray Winstone) puts a proposition to bushranger Charlie Burns (Guy Pearce). He will pardon both Charlie and his 14-year-old brother Mikey (Richard Wilson), if Charlie will hunt down their brother Arthur (Danny Huston) who is wanted for rape and murder and is believed by Stanley to be the leader of the gang.

The film is headed for a bloody climax but there is nothing gratuitous about this. This is a story of all-too-probable violence in a setting of fierce hostility to everyday human life, overlaid with profoundly uncomfortable issues of race and gender and the harshness of a repressive law, that is taxed to the uttermost by appalling human action. But screenwriter Nick Cave is right when he says: ‘it is about an inhospitable environment ... The violent episodes are necessary for the thrust of the story’. It may be less easy to concur with his next sentence: ‘They were really just punctuation points between [sic] a fairly meditative, slow kind of film.’ The narrative is set in motion by a brutal rape and murder, which is over before the film begins, and which gives rise to the eponymous proposition. There are certainly long-held shots of disturbing beauty, but though they may point to a ‘meditative’ tendency they never null one into forgetting the ferocity of the initial events or expecting anything other than a dreadful retribution. This comes at the Stanleys' Christmas dinner table: the film is intelligent enough not merely to make Stanley an undifferentiated figure of British oppression and is able to spare some acute sympathy for him and his wife (Emily Watson) living in this demanding terrain. Attempts to maintain echoes of decorum in such a place and time recall John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), and the comparison by no means diminishes *The Proposition*. Winstone and Guy Pearce as Charlie are both nominated for Best Actor, and it would be hard to quarrel with the idea of either as winner. With McNees and Weaving, they constitute a formidable quartet, bringing sensitivity and complexity to roles that need such qualities. *The Proposition*’s director of photography, Benoit Delhomme, must also be a very strong contender for the Best Cinematography award. He is on record as wanting to capture the texture and the heat of outback Queensland, adding: ‘One of my other obsessions was to try and increase the violence of the landscape, to show how hard it really was to live and survive there.’ He’s achieved this aim of rendering the landscape ‘non-neutral’ just as Wil Gibbon did in *Wolf Creek*.

Surprisingly, *The Widower*, set among the craggy peaks and mountain-ash forests around Marysville, Victoria, was not nominated for Kim Batterham’s ravishing images of sky and water and tree and mist-shrouded ridges. *The Widower*, a film about memories, elegiac in mood, looks wonderful but succumbs to some very self-conscious stylistics. In telling its minimalist tale of a grieving, then dying, widower whose son quite touchingly comes to care for him in the lead-up to his death, it can’t resist all manner of split-screen effects, odd fades to black and disconcerting stop-start techniques. And all this is accompanied on the soundtrack by a singer intoning some of Les Murray’s poems. It is on this account that this obdurately art-house film (it has had only the most limited release) is nominated for Best Adapted Screenplay. However much one may admire the poems and their commitment to the simple lives they explore and celebrate, lines such as ‘I’ll go outside and split some kindling wood’ sound merely banal when portentously sung. Most of the sung commentary seems to me to misfire, too often merely repeating the visual information. However, there is real affection and poignancy in the grown son’s saying the opening stanza of Murray’s ‘Evening Alone at Bunyah’ as he contemplates his father’s preparation to go dancing.

The other nominees for Adapted Screenplay are *Three Dollars*, *The Illustrated Family Doctor* (its only nomination) and *Hating Alison Ashley*, the latter also receiving a nod for Best Actress. I’d have expected _Hating Alison Ashley_ to find a young audience for its lively, if ultimately sentimental, teen-movie manoeuvres. Plain girl Erica (very smartly played by nominated Saskia Burmeister, who had some droll moments in last year’s *Thunderstruck*) eventually finds that seemingly perfect Alison (Delfa Goodrem) really just longs to have a family that loves her as Erica’s scatty mum and kooky family love her. Along the way to this not very surprising revelation, though, there are some genuinely funny moments of comic invention, especially those involving comedienne Jean Kittson as a teacher who takes no prisoners. She should have been nominated for Best Supporting Actress rather than Tracey Mann, who as Erica’s Mum has little to do but beam benignly.

Though one may detect this or that trend among the nominated films (contemporary dramas, first-time women directors, other directors returning to the fray after several years absence from the big screen, etc.), the most encouraging aspect of the list of films up for awards is their diversity and the kinds of quality achieved within that diversity. To conclude this round-up of the nominated films, it would be good to be able to report a spread of awards if that were a way of acknowledging a year in which several quality products were Josling for attention. At least, I hope there will be no temptation to add a footnote to this article saying: ‘And the winners is …’ as would have been apt last year.

_Brian McFarlane’s Encyclopaedia of British Film is now available in its 2nd edition (2005). He is writing a book on Great Expectations, both the novel and various film versions, for New Mermaid, UK._

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Endnotes

3. Barbara Creed’s _Phallic Panic: Film, Horror and the Primal Uncanny_ (2005) is perhaps the latest example.
6. Quoted in Production Notes, p.19.
7. I wrote at some length about this idiosyncratic film in ‘Signs of Health: The Illustrated Family Doctor’, _Metro_, No. 144.