



The Castle:

HOME OF THE BRAVE



1931-2007



**BRIAN
MCFARLANE**

arryl Kerrigan would have been so proud – the locals cheering outside the Mildura Council offices certainly were. After a concerted community campaign they had beaten the State Government into submission and had saved their bit of ‘castle’ (well patch of land) from a toxic waste dump.¹

This comment in *The Age*, ten years after the release of *The Castle* (Rob Sitch, 1997), obviously counts on the name of its protagonist to be sufficiently well known as to need no further explanation,

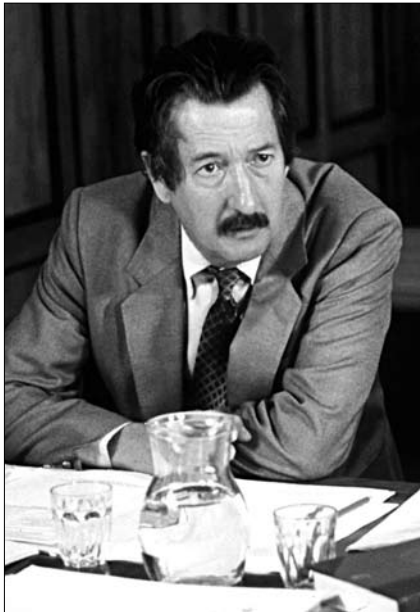
and the film’s title is alluded to only in the oblique reference to ‘castle’. At very least, this suggests something significant about the film’s status in the popular imagination.

Funny? Satirical? Affectionate? Patronizing? I should perhaps admit at the outset that, on re-viewing this well-loved Australian film, I have had misgivings about it that I don’t recall as having troubled me in the past. Whereas once I would have been happy to acquiesce in the notion that this was one of the best Australian

comedies of the revival, now – and maybe this is the result of a temperamental souring in the interim – I too often wondered what the source of the laughter was, and whether the film simply descends to feel-good cosiness at the end.

AUSTRALIAN FILM COMEDIES

The Castle has a sturdy place in the not-too-sturdy line of Australian film comedy. Certainly, it is more coherent in its comic approach than, say, such early comedies



of the local film revival as the *Alvin Purple* and *Barry McKenzie* films, with their scattergun approach to the foibles – especially the sexual foibles – of the Aussie male. But, if you think about it, not many of the most critically or commercially successful Australian films have been comedies. Certainly, there is the great exception of *Croco-*

former is, in generic terms, at least as much ‘musical’ as ‘comedy’, and the latter is a seriously painful film in several important ways, its comedy secondary to its gender-based drama. *Babe* (1995), with its talking-pig protagonist, is often funny, but is really a sweet-tempered fable about respect for individual differences.²

of sophisticated romantic comedy, of the kind Hollywood once turned out so regularly in films as witty as *The Awful Truth* (Leo McCarey, 1937) or *The Philadelphia Story* (George Cukor, 1940), and it might be interesting to ponder why Australian cinema has scarcely ventured into this sub-genre. The odd, minor attractive piece, such

one might add the modestly enjoyable likes of *Crackerjack* (Paul Moloney, 2002), *The Honourable Wally Norman* (Ted Emery, 2003) or *Take Away* (Marc Gracie, 2003), all of them, like those earlier Australian comedies are at pains to vindicate innocence and underdoggerly at the expense of better-organized cunning and corruption. What one can’t sometimes help wondering is whether our sympathy for the so-styled ‘little guys’ would be undermined if they were shown to be capable of more complex thought, but that’s another matter. The recent success of the ‘mockumentary’, *Kenny* (Clayton Jacobson, 2006), again celebrates an obscure life – that of a man who installs portaloos for big public occasions – and it manages to be both very funny and touching. Its control of tone makes it an instructive comparator for *The Castle*.

There is a long and honourable tradition of films in this vein. Frank Capra’s celebrations of ordinary decency (i.e.,

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dile Dundee (Peter Fairman, 1986), followed by Yahoo Serious’s *Young Einstein* (1998), and the early 1990s successes – *Strictly Ballroom* (Baz Luhrmann, 1992) and *Muriel’s Wedding* (P.J. Hogan, 1994) – had strongly comic elements, though the

At heart, Australian film comedy has been, it is probably true to say, a matter of the little guys, with their simple guile, outwitting urban smart alics, faceless corporations, assorted authority figures and other Goliath stand-ins. There is virtually no tradition

as *Thank God He Met Lizzie* (Cherie Nowlan, 1997), only highlights the sparseness of this vein of comedy so popular elsewhere. To return to the Australian comedies that have emerged, and to adduce more nearly up-to-date titles than those named above,



James Stewart) in the face of corrupt power or threatening authority, in such films as *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) and *It's a Wonderful Life* (1947), or Ealing comedies such as *Passport to Pimlico* (Henry Cornelius, 1949) and *Whisky Galore!* (Alexander Mackendrick, 1949), are but a few among many. Actually the predecessor most closely approximating *The Castle's* scenario may be a long-forgotten British comedy, *The Happy Family* (Muriel Box, 1952), in which a London family refuses to be bullied out of its home so that the Festival of Britain organisers can take over their site. This latter film was known in the US as *Mr Lord Says No*, and its transatlantic title underlines its affinity with *The Castle*, which might have been subtitled *Mr Kerrigan Says No*. Darryl Kerrigan (Michael Caton) is the tow-truck driver of 3 Highview Crescent, which abuts on to the airport. The Kerrigans' house has been bought cheaply, because, we assume, of its location, with

the flight path almost in their backyard. It's been a great bargain, son Dale (Stephen Curry) tells us in direct address to the audience, and 'It's worth almost as much as it was when we bought it.' This remark, and the simple pride with which it is uttered, sets the tone for much of what follows: business ineptitude is one thing but family feeling is another.

'A CLOSE-KNIT FAMILY'

The first movement of the film is dedicated to setting up our sense of this family, and this is filtered through thick-as-a-brick Dale, who acts as a sort of commentator on the action. Dad, he tells us proudly, is 'the backbone of the family', and Mum, Sal (Anne Tenney), is into crafts (the items displayed suggest she probably won't open the shop Darryl reckons she's good enough for) and serving meals to her adoring family. Dale tells us that Darryl says brother Steve (Anthony Simcoe) is 'an ideas man',

then Darryl says it; Steve's main preoccupation is scanning the *Trading Post* for likely bargains, such as a set of jousting sticks for only \$150. Oldest son Wayne (Wayne Hope) is unhappily (for him and his loyal family) in gaol for armed robbery, but Dale visits him every Friday and gives monosyllabic replies to questions ('We can just chat for hours,' Dale says). Pride of the family is daughter Tracy (Sophie Lee), who, as the first member of the Kerrigan family to go in for tertiary education, has a diploma in hairdressing from Sunshine TAFE, and once nearly won a big prize on *The Price Is Right*. She's married to kick-boxing Greek Con (Eric Bana), utterly accepted into the Kerrigan family circle.

They are, as Dale with summarizing intention opines, 'a close-knit family' who love each other, their greyhounds, and their holiday house in Bonny Doon, set in a dry valley with graceful power pylons (these remind Darryl of 'man's power to gener-

ate electricity'). And their home, with its unfinished extensions, the granny-flat that became a kennel for the dogs, the planned patio, the pool room which houses Dad's private museum. Just as the family is showering Dad with gifts on Father's Day ('This will go straight to the pool room', Darryl says fondly of one), just as it seems as if this home is indeed a castle strongly fortified by the mutual affections of its occupants, there is a knock at the door – and the film's plot is under way. A man from the local council has come to give them a valuation of their house, and Darryl takes him round the property, pointing out its desirable 'features' (a non-functional chimney, plastic replica of Victorian verandah-lace, etc). Then, shortly afterwards, the bombshell falls: the airport is expanding and the property is to be 'compulsorily acquired' ('That means they're acquiring it compulsorily', Darryl explains).

The David-and-Goliath syn-



drome now begins to assert itself. Dad rallies the neighbours, including Lebanese Farouk (Costas Kiliadis), who is grateful to have planes going overhead and not dropping bombs as they did in his old country. Darryl then applies to

[Bud] Tingwell), who takes the case to the High Court, using a point of constitutional law that hasn't been tested. Lawrence's case (he is of course called 'Lawrie') rests on the phrase in the constitution: 'on just terms', a ploy that

a "house", this is not the same as allowing it the right to acquire a home with all its memories and emotional associations. This appeal to the humane interpretation of the constitution wins the day at the High Court. This

between him and Darryl in the tow-trucking business. The whole is summed up by Dale's confiding to us: 'My name's Dale Kerrigan and that was my story.'

WHO DOES IT REALLY SATIRIZE?

Perhaps you should wonder why this is particularly *Dale's* story? A character who addresses the viewer directly, whether his voice is simply heard on the soundtrack or even more emphatically, as here, when accompanied by his image on screen as he faces us/the camera, is in a peculiarly privileged position. It is not that the audience is required to accept his point of view unquestioningly, but that it certainly cannot be ignored. Dale's deadpan, literal commentary is often very funny as it draws attention to what either is or is about to be perfectly clear. As the family makes its way to the Bonny Doon retreat, Dale tells us that Dad 'loved the serenity of the place'; there is a brief cut to Darryl saying 'I

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lawyer Dennis Denuto (Tiriel Mora), who had defended Wayne prior to Wayne's incarceration for eight years, not perhaps the happiest augury for the successful outcome of the action Darryl is contemplating. Unsurprisingly, their case is thrown out of court, but by very lucky chance Darryl scrapes acquaintance with retired barrister Lawrence Hammill (Charles

fleetingly reminds one of the way the case in *The Winslow Boy* (filmed 1948, 1999) was won by invoking the resonant phrase 'Let right be done'.

The plot then works out in simple, predictable terms. Hammill secures a victory on the grounds that, while the Airports Commission, or any other corporation, may be able to 'compulsorily acquire

is followed by a big party at the Kerrigan home, attended democratically by Lawrence and his lawyer son, as well as the neighbours, and by a montage of events which includes Steve's marriage, Con and Tracy's baby instructed in the art of kickboxing, the completion of the patio at 3 Highview Crescent, Wayne's release from gaol and a booming partnership



love the serenity of the place'; and then Dale's follow-up comment: 'The one thing he loved more than serenity was a two-stroke element going full throttle', quite innocent of any sense of irony. The effect is undeniably droll, but it does make one wonder where the film's makers, the smartly satirical, sophisticated Working Dog group, led here by director Rob Sitch, stand in relation to their material. Are they being clever and funny at the expense of the simple people at the centre of their film, and at the expense of some rather easy targets? They were famous for their television successes with *Frontline* (1994-97) and, post-*The Castle*, with *The Panel*, audiences for which were no doubt a good deal more knowing than those which made *The Castle* such a hit locally. They (co-screen-writer Santo Cilauro, to be exact) are on record as saying 'I hope people don't think that we're laughing at the family', but it is hard not to share writer Peter Malone's concern:

One of the difficulties with this

*kind of comedy is whether the audience is laughing at the characters or with them. Sitting at a preview in South Yarra and enjoying the comedy is a different experience from watching it at the multiplex at Airport West near where the Kerrigans live. The danger is that the filmmakers and the audience are patronising the battlers.*³

I'm aware of sounding a bit po-faced and censorious on this matter, and gladly admit to finding quite a lot of the film very funny, and I'll come back to this conflict of responses. What seems to me less easy to rebut are charges of sentimentality. The Kerrigans and neighbours take their case to court where it is at first rightly thrown out by the presiding Federal Court judge (a witty sketch from Robyn Nevin), who understandably is not to be moved by Dennis Denuto's 'plea' that it's 'the vibe', rather than any specific argument, on which the case is based. From here on, the drama gathers some momentum, comic and

otherwise, as Darryl and family and neighbours deal with a hard man sent to threaten them, and then the fortuitous meeting with the retired QC. Along the way from here to the eventual triumph of the Kerrigans against the bullying forces that want to push them to one side, the film skates on some perilously thin ice. There is a reference to the Mabo agreement, when Darryl says his case makes him understand how the Aboriginal people must have felt when they've had to struggle to have their land rights recognized. Leaving aside whether this is the kind of issue we'd expect to have registered very strongly with Darryl, given the nature of his preoccupations, the reference seems almost dragged in to give the film some political resonance. (Compare this with the way that *Jindabyne* [Ray Lawrence, 2006] works more naturally towards such inclusiveness. All right, I know *Jindabyne* is a 'serious' film, but the best comedy is also serious, and shouldn't need to import its claims to

seriousness in so explicit a comment.) However, at least one overseas critic felt the matter was worth drawing attention to, claiming that, though the Mabo references were 'never fully explored or explained in the film', 'the story of the Kerrigans and their home parallels that of the Aborigines and their land, which was also compulsorily acquired'.⁴

SENSE AND SENTIMENTALITY

More important in an analysis and assessment of the film is to query whether the old aphorisms about a home being more than a house and a man's home being his castle, both cited several times, offer a strong enough underpinning for this story of the triumph of the ordinary guy. 'This is an example of the individual ... if he has the guts to stand up and shove it right up those people who think they can stand on top of you,' is Darryl's own summary of the legal battle. He is a simple, straightforward,



limited enough man, but as played by Michael Caton he has enough strength and dignity, as well as a very Australian sense of humour (in court after the victory, he turns to the prosecuting counsel and says, apparently being 'noble' in Dale's words, 'Bad luck... ya dickhead'). One doesn't expect the subtlety of, say, Henry James in weighing up the moral values involved, but it is possible still to question whether the film offers much more than a predictable reliance on sentimental bromides, as it displays this modern urban version of David and Goliath. You might also consider how far Anne Tenney's wry deflating way with some of her dialogue goes to offer a mild critique of Darryl's boundless optimism and enthusiasm. 'What's this?' Darryl asks at dinner. 'Ice-cream,' she

says. 'Yes, but what did you do to it?' 'Took it out of the punnet'. This kind of matter-of-factness balances out the film's insistence on her terrible handicrafts.

The film was generally well received, in critical and certainly in box-office terms, in Australia. Made in just a few weeks and on a very modest budget, it took over \$10 million in Australia, obtained release in both the US and the UK, where it fared moderately well with critics, though some felt its references were too obdurately Australian for wide international appreciation. In such reservations, the critics were probably justified, as the film didn't generate wide public interest overseas. The American distributor, Miramax, bought the US rights for US\$6 million, but it has to date earned less

than US\$1 million. In terms of awards, it won four at the 1997 AFI (Australian Film Institute) ceremony: for Best Original Screenplay, Best Actor (Caton), Best Supporting Actor (Tingwell), Best Supporting Actress (Lee). In fact, the cast seem to work so well together that one might wish it had been eligible for one of those joint awards that some festivals and institutions offer. The performances, indeed, are one of the film's great strengths, filling out the amusing but one-note characterizations the screenplay offers with the sort of detail that persuades the viewer of the credibility of these people.

I'm aware of sounding equivocal about *The Castle*, though I don't apologize for this. Some films resist clear-cut responses; sometimes a film will evoke different

responses on successive viewings. Writing this piece has led me to ponder the disparities between the generally middle-class critics and the lives depicted in the film, and what the implications are for this in their reviews. I suspect that sorting out your view of the film will require you to decide whether you feel fondly disposed towards the Kerrigans or whether you're ready simply to laugh at them, whether you're willing to suspend disbelief at their victory or whether you feel you've been manipulated. It's at least a film worth arguing about, as well as just enjoying.

Brian McFarlane's Encyclopedia of British Film will be published in its 3rd edition this year. He has recently completed his book on Great Expectations (novel and adaptations). •

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