FOR a while back in the later seventies and early eighties there was a tenacious stream of Australian films that chronicled rites of passage or coming of age. It was tempting to see them as collectively saying something about the state of the nation or at least about the state of its renascent film industry. You could have been forgiven for wondering if both nation and industry were going to hover forever on the brink of puberty.

Films as important to the revival’s critical and/or commercial health as Picnic at Hanging Rock (Peter Weir, 1975), The Devil’s Playground (Fred Schepisi, 1976), My Brilliant Career (Gillian Armstrong, 1979), Gallipoli (Peter Weir, 1981), Puberty Blues (Bruce Beresford, 1981), the moronic The Man from Snowy River (George Miller, 1982) and the evocatively named Moving Out (Michael Pattinson, 1983) represent no more than a handful of what became a distinctive genre. ‘Loss of innocence, sexual discovery, and sexual initiation are, of course, constant themes in coming-of-age narratives’ wrote one commentator,1 and this remark might certainly be applied to Sandra Sciberras’s new film, The Caterpillar Wish. But there is a notable difference here. Whereas in the films of those earlier decades one was usually invited to see the young protagonist’s progress towards adulthood as a series of watershed experiences in which grown-ups would assume structural roles as
Australians

night stand. There seems to be an
of telling the town she doesn’t much
more usefully seen as Susan’s way
realist expectations; it’s perhaps
a stretch, but don’t let’s be locked
realist terms, this may be a bit of
(susie Porter), who works as a
single mum, Susan Woodbridge
Emily is being brought up by her
terms here.

This shifting demographic matters in
settling down to basics in the winter.
of population in the summer, then a
seasonal expansion
where, with the come and go of
tourists, there is a seasonal expansion
of the seaside setting, fringed in
Australian style with graceful Norfolk
Island pines, and the sense of what
may be suppressed beneath this
surface serenity.

Very early in the film, Sciberras’s
screenplay establishes a sturdy
dramatic structure based on two
parallel but, tonally, strikingly different
family set-ups. There’s an easy,
casual openness about Susan and
Emily’s home: her mum has had a
chap in for the night and Emily greets
him in the morning with a casual
‘Hello Mr Peterson’ when he appears
in boxers and T-shirt. He’s a teacher
‘He coaches the
cricket team … [The girls] think he’s
an idiot’, and Emily warns Susan, ‘If

IT IS A WISE ENOUGH FILM TO RESIST THE IDEA
OF EVERYTHING’S BEING RESOLVED: THE MOST IT
SUGGESTS IS A MATTER OF WHAT ONE CHARACTER
IMPLIED IN ‘THINGS ARE NOT FALLING APART,
THEY’RE JUST SHIFTING’

comfort about the sense of everyone’s
knowing what everyone is up to. Well,
almost everything. And this is not just
a country town; it is a coastal resort
(shot mainly in Robe, South Australia)
where, with the come and go of
tourists, there is a seasonal expansion
of population in the summer, then a
settling down to basics in the winter.
This shifting demographic matters in
terms of plot here.

Emily is being brought up by her
single mum, Susan Woodbridge
(Susie Porter), who works as a
topless barmaid in a local hotel. (In
realist terms, this may be a bit of
a stretch, but don’t let’s be locked
into realist expectations; it’s perhaps
more usefully seen as Susan’s way
of telling the town she doesn’t much
care what it thinks.) She tells Emily
that her father was a tourist, a ‘tom
cat’ with whom she had a one-
night stand. There seems to be an

you keep giving him treats he’ll just
keep coming back for more’. There’s
nothing judgemental in this; she
wants her mum to be happy, to have
a boyfriend, but she has someone
else picked out for Susan. The other
early morning set-up involves a stilted
middle-class scene in which the local
cop, Carl Roberts (Philip Quast) is
clearly lying to his wife Beth (Wendy
Hughes) across the breakfast table
as their two sons watch on. Once
these two parallel domestic scenes
have been set up, the film moves
outdoors with Emily cycling fast in
the chilly weather but we expect the
connections between the two scenes
to be articulated further, and so
– satisfyingly – they are.

Sciberras carefully and persuasively
fixes our attention on what these two
families might have in common or,
rather, in what ways they might be
linked. Neither is the standard middle-
class family. In Emily’s home the
absence of the father preoccupies her
and she suspects Susan of not giving
her all the information she has, but
the film is too intelligent to make this
merely a racketey household. There is
real affectation at work between mother
and daughter and that is clearly absent
in the other place. Here the wife is, in
Hughes’s finely detailed performance,
wanting to believe what her husband
tells her about why he won’t be in till
late, though she knows he is having
at least one extra-marital affair. His
duplicity makes her watchful and
wretched, and their sons exist in the
tense spaces between them.

The most obvious link between these
two houses – and the production
design skilfully signals the social
gap between them – is that the older
son Joel (New Zealand actor Khan
Chittenden) and Emily are engaged in
a teenage affair. This takes the form of
snogging in the school corridors – and
of Joel’s climbing in her bedroom
window to spend the night. But this
is not all: the film leads us to wonder
if Joel’s father is also Emily’s, as
her grandparents believe to be the
case. Susan has, as a girl of fifteen,
been infatuated with Carl, who has a
predilection for young girls (‘He broke
my heart,’ she later tells Emily). So,
shadowing the film’s representation of
the young lovers is the idea of incest: it
may be that, in these more enlightened
times when ‘illegitimacy’ is no longer
a subject for gossip even in a small
town, the film needed a stronger whiff
of scandal to fuel its drama. However,
there is nothing prurient in the film’s
treatment of this possibility; it is as if
Sciberras saw this more as a matter of
betrayal by one who should have known
better and whose position in the
town makes his behaviour more
than a little hypocritical.

The connections between the
Woodbridge and Roberts households
is intensified by the fact that Beth’s
brother Stephen (Robert Mammone),
trapped in grief and guilt about
the death of his wife and child, is
suppressing his attraction to Susan,
and Beth, for reasons which are
mainly snobbish, tries to discourage
him from pursuing the relationship.
It’s too soon after Annie’s death

34 • Metro Magazine 149
(elliptically rendered in a brief memory sequence), she tells him, but there is a stronger social motivation at work.

The linked lives of the two families come together in a final accident, and the film ends on a montage of brief moments of muted reconciliation. It is a wise enough film to resist the idea of everything’s being resolved: the most it suggests is a matter of what one character implies in ‘Things are not falling apart, they’re just shifting’. But they are shifting in a positive direction which seems to have grown convincingly from the preceding action.

The inter-generational aspect of the film’s action – Emily trying to urge her mother into a serious relationship; Joel’s anger with his father – is intensified in two further ways. One is the schism between Susan and her religious parents, who (it is plain from our first glimpse of them when they are unaware that Emily is observing them) share a companionable life together. This makes their rejection of Susan fifteen years ago and the husband’s abrasive reception of his truth-seeking granddaughter the more shocking. The other point to make is an intertextual one: that of the film’s casting. Sciberras has cunningly cast the youthful leads with fresh young faces of Thaine and Chittenden, while the elders recall an earlier stage in Australian film history. Actors such as Elspeth Ballantyne and Bruce Myles as the grandparents, Nicholas Bell as the parish priest who has been a friend to Stephen, and Wendy Hughes (as well as the notable stage actor, Philip Quast) reinforce one’s sense of the generational gulfs that are central to the film, with Porter and Mammone poised between the extremes.

Mentioning those names reminds me that it is worth noting that this is a very well acted film. The young actors, Thaine especially, avoid teen-movie stereotypes and are of course helped in this by a screenplay that imagines them in convincing detail; Porter stakes yet more firmly a claim to be considered one of the best actresses currently at work in Australian film, imbuing Susan with a fierce honesty of aspect and a capacity for melting sympathy and affection. The rest of the cast is uniformly impressive but one might single out Hughes’ subtly nuanced work as Beth, registering, along with her own social prejudices, the daily lived-with pain of Carl’s adulteries and the ultimate explosion of rage when she can find no longer any way of pretending to believe his lies. And Ballantyne, in her brief scenes, brings a touching warmth to the grandmother who doesn’t want estrangement and bitterness but doesn’t quite know how to go about circumventing them.

Earlier in this review of the film I used the word ‘carefully’ and I’d want to stress how carefully made I think it is. In this respect, I don’t just mean the overarching structural patterns referred to above; as well, the details of the film are all allowed to make their contribution to the film as a whole. Unobtrusive images that make their point include the chrysalis which fleetingly accounts for the film’s title, and points to the emergence of Emily – and others – from cocoons of various kinds, and the glass wind-chimes that perhaps stand in as a fragile correlative for the happiness and beauty that Emily believes should be part of life. Take, also, a small reference like that to Susan’s restoring of old furniture. It gives her a reason to make contact early in the film with Stephen, who has obtained for her some varnish she needs, and later we see her at the work, recalling the earlier scene in the boatshed and a comment Emily has made about her mother’s activities. More crucially, though, the idea of restoration filters through to the end of the film when the final ‘snapshots’ point tentatively to other sorts of restoration in the dealings between people.

The word ‘snapshots’ is appropriate here because Emily’s camera is central to her search for the tourist ‘torn cat’ who may be her father, as she snaps every unsuspecting stranger who passes through town and keeps all the photos in albums, scanning them for likenesses. This is the literal point of her photography but on another level it may be seen as part of a wider quest for identity. If she can fix a facial expression or capture an angle of vision in a snapshot, she may have caught a moment that will help her to find answers. Her rapport with the taciturn Stephen is strengthened when he gives her a tripod; the camera is her way of entering lives with a view to understanding her own better. At one point, angry and despairing, she throws her camera into the sea, but in the film’s restorative last moments it is she who is seen to be snapping her mother and Stephen.

The Caterpillar Wish is not a big film. It is not hugely ambitious even within the modest narrative and affective parameters it sets itself; but it is hearteningly humane, shrewdly observed and honestly felt. That gaggle of adverbs will do to sum up how Sandra Sciberras and her collaborators seem to have gone about their business.

Brian McFarlane, an Honorary Associate Professor at Monash University, is currently preparing the 3rd edition of his Encyclopedia of British Film for Methuen and writing a book on Great Expectations (novel and adaptations) for A&C Black/Norton.

Endnotes
2 Brian McFarlane, ‘Country Towns in Australian Films: Trap or Comfort Zone?’, Metro issue 146/147.