‘You and Your Stupid Mate’

BRIAN MCFARLANE

WHAT I ASKED MYSELF – and him – could the editor of this journal have in mind by sending me off to see this latest Australian comedy when he knows how sensitive I am? Hadn’t I suffered enough in this cause in recent times? Too often, at least since The Castle (Rob Sitch, 1997), the very term ‘Australian comedy’ has denoted a wit-free zone, and certainly You and Your Stupid Mate won’t do much to disturb this image. But: (a) it’s not as bad as some others I could name, and, indeed, will name, and (b) it’s not as bad as those newspaper reviews might have led you to believe.

It belongs, too, in another context: that provided by the grosser reaches of youth-targeted movies from Porky’s (Bob Clark, 1982) through American Pie (Paul Weitz, 1999) and their sequels, to the home-grown Under the Radar (Evan Clarry, 2004), and by these undemanding standards You and Your Stupid Mate is just about par for the course. It’s essentially cheerful, dumb, good-natured fun, with some sense of
thematic organization that stops it from being just a ragbag of crude gags, and it ‘doesn’t descend to the depths of those other films I mentioned; I mean, no one has a meaningful relationship with an apple-pie and no one eats a turd. Call it prudish if you will.

As comedy, You and Your Stupid Mate is just about inventive enough in fleshing out its narrative framework to pass 80 minutes, and its length is certainly in its favour, without incurring too much hardship on the viewer. It thrashes about between caricature and parody, between scatology and harmless fun; and it never stays still long enough to be actually boring. It is also just strongly enough constructed to hold its jokes and japes together, and in this respect it outshines some comedies of the last few years which scarcely seemed to have thought the thing through to the end.

At its centre are the efforts of Jeffrey (Angus Sampson) and Philip (Nathan Phillips), two more or less likeable layabouts, to keep laying about in their trailer park home and to resist the efforts of employment agency boss, Rossiter (William McInnes) of ‘JOBS R US’, to place them in gainful work. The government’s notion of working for the dole is deeply distasteful to them. They insist to Rossiter that they aren’t unemployed. Jeffrey is convener of the unofficial web site for the long-running soap ‘Sons and Surf’, and sometimes his site has as many as fifty hits in a week. Phillip is in the chorus of ‘The Gang Show’ for which he keeps his scout’s uniform in good nick. Yes, Rossiter says, but these are voluntary activities, to which an aggrieved Jeffrey replies: ‘Why are you so hung up on money?’

Rossiter, the bit between his teeth, lands the boys in a series of jobs which they handle with uniform incompetence – and worse. They are sent out with a highway gang to shovel up dead animals from the asphalt, and inadvertently hurl a living one under a truck; on a community art project, their contribution to a tasteful mural is a huge dick; in an old people’s home they reveal pyromanic skills. They are eventually sacked from rubbish collection in a cemetery, where a pair of discarded Y-fronts and a condom are among the morning’s debris. The central action of the film is a matter of who will crack first: the upright Rossiter (tastefully endowed with a large strawberry mark on his left cheek) or the shambling but oddly focused lads. In this respect, it shares common ground with any number of Australian films where ‘ordinary’ folks are pitted against the bureaucracy of institutions.

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All this is quite engagingly plotted and reaches a climax on the Mt Eliza beach where the last episode of ‘Sons and Surf’ is being shot, and here both Jeffrey’s and Philip’s obsessions come together. Jeffrey has found out that the soapie lead, Emma, is to be killed off in the waves, but has signally failed to round up his web site devotees to help subvert this. Of the two who turn up neither can help: one can’t swim and the other, a dwarf in a wheelchair, says ‘And I’ve got asthma’ (a flash of wit that nearly redeems the note of disagreeable exploitation in this characterization). It’s then a matter of the Gang Show cast to the rescue while the cast and crew watch nonplussed and Rossiter is routed.

All right, we’re not talking of the intricate plotting of Restoration comedy here, but I would argue that the narrative, simple-minded as it is, is better thought through than has often been the case in Australian comedy. The preoccupations with the soap, ‘Sun and Surf’, and with the Gang Show have been parodied along the way, broadly to be sure but not without some comic insight into what makes them fodder for parody. The ridiculous soap has tacky sets and bulbous female stars all but bursting out of their bras (they make one think fondly of Barbara Windsor in the Carry On series, though the mammary display here has a satirical edge), a hunk called Todd, who has had a liver replacement, a traumatic discovery about his paternity and now needs a kidney, which a ‘character’ called Evo, with long ringlets and a signature phrase, provides. From my vestigial viewing of, say, Neighbours, it doesn’t seem all that far off the mark.

It can, I suppose, be argued that the film that accommodates this parodic soap is scarcely a significant advance in terms of subtlety, but subtlety is the last thing the film’s makers seem to have had in mind.

There are, however, some surprisingly sharper digs at the very notion of celebrity. Alf, a black dole-cheat taxi driver, has come to Australian from Somalia (there’s a droll insert of combat life there in 1997, which some may feel is misplaced) because of an inspiring glimpse of the soap’s world. Jeffrey is awestruck at seeing an episode of ‘Sons and Surf’ being shot in the cemetery: he intones ‘I wonder what the poor people are doing tonight’ as he and Phillip crack ‘a Sons and Surf’ party; and it is abundantly clear that the soap’s royalty are scarcely any brighter off-set than on. The night of the Logies presentation is the climax of this strand of the film’s intentions, and it’s good to see our lads, who have stuck in dressed as (female) cleaners before finding dinner suits somewhere, push host Eddie McGuire out of the way to make their ‘Emma Must Live’ protest. How often one had wanted to see someone do just this while waiting for him to get off the Channel Nine screen and make way for Sex and the City in years recently past.

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The trailer-park life, enshrined in this title, and under threat from a proposed free-way, is ultimately saved and transformed into a theme park. The characters who live there are given briefly comic moments but not held up to contempt, and there's genuine sweetness in the gorgeous Karen (Rachel Hunter), who, mother of five that she is, provokes some predictably phallic responses as she strolls through the park. As she passes the lads, her pendulous earrings dangling toward her handsome bosom, Phillip sighs, 'She's so fertile' to which Jeffrey can only reply, 'Like the Barossa Valley.' In Hunter's playing she emerges as comic to be sure, but not just as a nubile smutty joke.

Director Marc Gracie, who worked with Nathan Phillips in the 2003 comedy Take Away, keeps it all moving smartly enough to create a certain indulgence for its simplistic scenario with the final endorsement of the value of mates. He has his sights fixed firmly on his target audience – the undiscriminating young on the sunny side of 25 – but he doesn't patronize his material. The two young stars play together with a certain savvy and rapport that helps paper over the thinness of their characterization as it must have appeared in the screenplay; William McInnes is genuinely funny as the harassing and finally defeated bureaucrat; and the soapie stars differentiate between their on-screen vacuity and their off-screen ditto.

Probably no one in his right mind would want to claim for You and Your Stupid Mate anything more than an evanescent entertainment for the unreconstructed teenager in all of us. And I can understand many viewers feeling that they were never the right sort of teenager to enjoy it. I'd claim that its dealing with the mate-ship motif is less reprehensible than that of Strange Bedfellows, and that it is no more or less beguiling in this matter than Thunderstruck. Noël Coward it ain't, but I've had far worse times in the cinema with Australian – and other – comedies.