THIS IS BEING WRITTEN BEFORE THE ‘BIG NIGHT’ — and is not essentially concerned with predictions. Its intentions are simply to look at the sort of films that are up for nomination and to wonder if there are any kinds of film favoured by the AFI and its voters. *Strange Bedfellows*, one of the most popular films of the year (if not with me), wasn’t entered for competition; I’m not sure which others weren’t but it narrows the field somewhat if one (foolishly) tries to discern any pattern in the nominees.
Among the ten features that have received nominations in one or more categories, *Sommersault* has thirteen and I can’t believe the number will prove unlucky in relation to one of the most affecting and accomplished Australian films for some years. With eleven nominations, *Tom White* is not far behind and has very much the credentials for an Award film; and *One Perfect Day, Love’s Brother and The Old Man Who Read Love Stories*, with eight, six and four respectively, are well represented. By the time anyone is reading this, the results will be known and in some areas at least they seem unlikely to be surprising. The fact that a handful of films has captured the bulk of the nominations, points less to their exceptional qualities than to the thinness of the field.

What is heartening is to find that *The Finished People*, made for next to nothing on digital video, has scraped two nominations. By coincidence, I saw *The Finished People* the day after the federal election and was struck by the incongruity of its subject matter in the light of the newly re-elected Prime Minister’s grandiose remark: ‘This nation … stands on the threshold of a new era of great achievement.’ Oh yes? Will ‘great achievement’ be in the pipeline for those lives so graphically represented in this heart-rending account, of lives lived on the edges of a society that writes them off as ‘finished people’?

It would be easy to get carried away with a film like this on the grounds of both its direct connection to contemporary social realities (and that’s not so common as to be taken lightly) and of its commercial daring. By the latter I mean it is made with little regard to what is proven multiplex fare: not just its all-but-nonexistent budget, but its air of improvisation in dialogue and the way scenes are allowed to work themselves out without recourse to raising the usual narrative expectations, whether to gratify these or subvert them. It’s as if director Khoa Do just isn’t interested in those more usual rewards of narrative cinema. I don’t know how far his young cast, credited also as co-authors of the screenplay, were given their heads in this respect, but at its best the film recalls some of Mike Leigh’s and Ken Loach’s work — and very few other Australian films since the days of *The FJ Holden* (1977) and *Mouth to Mouth* (John Duigan, 1978).

Like Leigh’s films, *The Finished People* apparently grew out of a great deal of improvisation in the planning stages, the script being generated out of workshops with the performers drawing on aspects of their own experience. But, again like Leigh, Khoa Do is not making a documentary but a fiction rooted in the indocile facts of contemporary life, and we are not allowed to forget that we are watching a consciously structured and acted piece, however much it may appear to be a matter of the camera’s prowling through the actuality of suburban Sydney. Like Loach, he has an intransigent compassion for and understanding of the difficult lives he is exploring: he knows them close up, having worked as a volunteer with homeless youth in Cabramatta, and the film grew out of a course in film and video which he taught at a welfare centre there.

It is the ‘knowing’ that ensures that the compassion never degenerates into sentimentality. These are the tough lives of flawed human beings: we’re not invited to let our eyes moisten as we consider their situations, but to see them clearly, not just as victims but also as shiftless and in some cases criminally inclined. There are three main strands to the narrative. The young Vietnamese Van (Joe Lee), who sleeps on a car-park rooftop and says on the soundtrack (and the voice-over at once both contributes to the documentary effect and reinforces the sense of the artifice of film): ‘When I wake up every morning I look forward to going to bed.’ Exuding hopelessness, he’d ‘rather be dead [than] go through the hardships of life’. His story includes stealing to survive, a strange and touching friendship with a generous-hearted girl, and a moment of extraordinary melting paths when he visits his mother.

Unemployment is central to the plight of the homeless and those in jobs are depicted (perhaps not wholly fairly, but worryingly just the same) as smug and unhelpful. Tom (Jason McGoldrick), a skinny boy on drugs, has a friend, Sarah (Mliyinh Dinh), who tries to prepare him for a job interview which founders on the superiority of the supermarket manager and on Tom’s pent-up anger. And the third protagonist, Des (Rodney Anderson), sleeps in the street with his pregnant girlfriend and gets himself involved in working with a local gangster to support her. They none of them want to be ‘finished people’, a characterization the film explicitly rejects in an opening title, but the odds are against them.

Homelessness, unemployment and crime are the symbiotically entwined phenomena that Khoa Do’s film and Oliver Lawrence’s digital camera focus on. There are some signs of amateurishness in the way the odd scene fizzles, but I found it hard to care too much about this. The actors are not professionals but they are remarkable in the grip they have on their characters, not asking for pity, or anything really, but just — complexity — being. The film takes us into aspects of the life of a large city which most of us are shamefully ignorant of, recalling Stephen Frears’s approach to the London underbelly in *Dirty Pretty Things*.

It’s perhaps not likely that the AFI will have awards to spare for Do’s direction or for the screenplay he and his three young players (Anderson, Lo, McGoldrick). I hope I’m proved wrong about this, though Somersault and *Tom White* are obvious contenders here, and both, in their ways, are also more seriously preoccupied with social and psychological realities than most Australian films. Certainly more than the fourth film nominated in each of these categories — Jan Sardi’s feeble ‘multicultural’ romance, *Love’s Brother*. Having written in this journal about this wishy-washy sentimentalization of the 1950s, with its unpersuasive and cliched view of both an idealized Italy and an up-country Australia that seems bent on keeping grimier truths at bay, I’ll say here only that it doesn’t seem to be in the same class as the other films nominated. It is a hundred times glossier than *The Finished People*; but its professionalism is essentially of the surface and it doesn’t repay closer consideration. Moments of authentic feeling break through occasionally but, for all its technical limitations, *The Finished People* is an infinitely more serious and memorable piece of work.

Among the nominees for Best Film is Cate Shortland’s feature debut, *Sommersault*, which has been generally well thought of, and with good reason. It has in common with *The Finished People* a youthful protagonist, and, like Khoa Do’s three, she starts in a characterless suburbia but, unlike them, she heads off in search of … well, what exactly?

In some respects, it harks back to those coming-of-age films that were such a
notable part of the new Australian cinema of the 1970s and 1980s; but, whereas they seemed to be acting as metaphors for the nation and for the national cinema, this has very different sorts of resonance.

For one thing the teenage protagonist, Heidi (Abbie Cornish), is not the innocent teetering on the brink of puberty that those earlier films featured. She’s sexually more willing and more experienced, and it is her willingness to engage in sexual play with her mother’s boyfriend that sets the film in motion. Her mother reacts strongly against the girl, who leaves home and heads for the mountain resort of Jindabyne. The film is not censorious about Heidi; she is essentially a bit feckless, drifting, uncertain, and among her unformed ideas about where she’s heading is the idea that sex might be the answer. In the local pub she signals her sexual availability, and gets responses, but this doesn’t go far to helping her find direction in her life. Not that she would articulate her search in that way, and one of the film’s triumphs is to keep us interested in this none-too-bright girl without either patronizing or sentimentalizing her.

The film is gorgeously set in the high country but director Cate Shortland, who never puts a foot wrong in her handling of the players, is equally astute about the use she makes of this setting. It could easily have overpowered the human story but she doesn’t let it. There’s beauty of course, and Robert Humphries’ cinematography is often a model of lighting and composition, but there is a pervasive bleakness which has the effect of providing a sort of warning for Heidi—though she’s not about to heed warnings.

She catches the attention of Joe, the son of well-heeled local landowners, and keeps wanting more commitment than he’s willing to give. She gets a job in a service station where she has strained relations with Bianca (Holly Andrew), the other young girl working there, and the girl’s father warns Heidi against contact with Bianca out of hours. She finds accommodation in a flat attached to the local motel run by Irene (Lynette Curran), a woman whose son is in prison and who offers Heidi humane sympathy, and in a very moving scene urges her to make contact with her mother.

It is a rare Australian film that deals so openly and touchingly with feelings, albeit with insecure, unfocused feelings. All the relationships suggested above are written (also by Shortland) and directed with a sensitive regard for vulnerabilities of various kinds.

Abbie Cornish wins sympathy for Heidi without ever seeming to play for it and perhaps that’s why this somewhat foolish, self-absorbed and directionless girl does make a claim on our attention. Sam Worthington, who, as much as any actor currently in Australian films, has the kind of casual authority that stamps a star, is exactly right as the privileged, limited but not stupid guy, with whom, in other circumstances, a durable relationship might have worked. Hollie Andrew as Bianca, the other girl in the ‘server’, offers a very sharp account of the plain girl, edgy with and jealous of Heidi’s obvious greater attractiveness. And best of all is Lynette Curran as the humane motel-manager with whom Heidi shares a poignant moment of mutual understanding. All four have been nominated for acting awards; I’ll be astonished if they don’t win some. Curran, especially, decades after playing pretty Rhoda Wilson in Bellbird, and now a character actress of real distinction and warmth, richly deserves the recognition.

Somersault is a film full of slightly unexpected scenes (e.g., that between Joe and the gay neighbour of his parents or the sequence of Bianca’s home life) and of rewarding insights into human behaviour as it moves towards a denouement that is both realistic and affirmative in its muted, non-declaratory way. There will probably be little dissension if it wins the Best Film award, nor if Abbie Cornish wins the Best Actress award. If she does, this will not come as a surprise to those who recall her previous role in One Perfect Day, as the protagonist Tommy’s (Dan Spielman) sister Emma, whose drug-induced death is so crucial to the film’s narrative. Emma is not the central character here but she has a profoundly catalytic effect on the course of this accomplished and ambitious film.

One Perfect Day achieves a fluid concurrence of past and present as well as an effortless mobility in spatial terms. In the key scene in which Tommy’s girlfriend Alyssse (Leanna Walsman) tries vainly to revive his sister Emma after the fatal overdose she’s taken at the TranceZenDance club, the film cuts confidently and meaningfully between the European concert platform where Tommy’s work is being performed and the park where Emma is dying. This has been preceded by an acutely written and played scene between the two girls in which they discuss their longing for Tommy to be there: for Alyssse, ‘I know that he feels like home even though he’s 10,000 miles away’, but for Emma, ‘He just feels like 10,000 miles away to me’. Tommy plays on at his concert while his sister dies and his girlfriend is left bearing an intolerable guilt, and the emotional resonance of this scene will be felt throughout the film. The intercutting of Emma’s ECG reading in hospital and the strings of Tommy’s violin may sound jejune but the actuality of it is not, and Gary Woodyard’s editing is both sharp and subtle. The resonance of this moment is painfully felt when Tommy, who has been elusive in the girls’ attempts to track him by phone, is briefly comforted by Alyssse on his return to Australia, but rejects her when he learns her part in Emma’s death.

This is another film about young people and their pains and quests, the difference this time being that Tommy finds some kind of catharsis and reconciliation of the tragic conflicts that have engulfed him in his music. He has made frantic efforts to save Alyssse from the cruelly manipulative club-owner, Hector (Andrew Howard), recalling Alyssse’s attempts to save Emma. Hector is part of the adult world that sees youth as ripe for exploitation, but the film is not simple-minded about such a viewpoint, and balances Hector’s vile self-interest with the sympathetic characterization of Tommy and Emma’s mother, Caroline, played with fine tact and precision by Kerr Armstrong, gaunt with suppressed pain and (barely warranted) guilt.

Dan Spielman, nominated for a leading actor award for One Perfect Day, is also nominated for a supporting actor award for his role as Matt, the young gay who takes the eponymous protagonist in Tom White into his home but needs to get rid of him when he wants to install his lover Paul. Spielman’s Matt is a performance of sly charm and wit, subtly blending kindness and self-concern and creating a memorable character study in the process. Colin Friels seems almost certain to win the leading actor award as Tom, the draughtsmen who abandons his comfortable but harried middle-class lifestyle for that of a homeless zero and ultimately finds something
The early scenes of Tom’s family life, with wife (Rachael Blake, supporting actress nominee, making something telling of a not very substantial role) and two kids, intelligently offer an uncliquéd account of the suburban scene. The subsequent sequence in his office, where his boss makes plain that he, Tom, must take time off, that his work has been slipping, follows this admirably low-key sense of everyday frustrations. Not everything in the film is as convincing: Friels’s early bright-eyed, workaholic approach avoids stereotype, and he suggests cleverly the tight control that has allowed Tom to function. As he vanishes from the sleek contours of this life into the world of the destitute and the homeless, he doesn’t shy away from the unattractive aspects of Tom’s character that now come to the surface—the readiness for verbal and physical violence, for instance—but the crudities and semi-literate locutions seem at odds with the details of cultural background that the film also builds into his characterization. It’s an over-simplification to say that his rebellion is articulated through his saying ‘Fuck’ at every turn, but it is true to say that Friels has some difficulty, in the interests of a convincing coherence, in accommodating all the manoeuvres of the screenplay. The eruptions don’t all seem to belong to the same person, and that’s even allowing for the life-changing decision Tom has made.

The film shares with The Finished People a concern for the homeless, but not exclusively for the young homeless. Those whom society hardly notices have been abandoned for a range of reasons and across a wide age range, from the young boy, Jet (named for Jet Li) whom Tom returns to his thief father—’Kids need lookin’ after’, Tom admonishes the father who steals because ‘It’s all we know how to do’. The social welfare people have been trying to separate him from his father, and this perhaps strikes a chord in Tom who has wittingly separated himself from his children. Tom’s experiences with Jet, Matt, the carnivg girl Christine (Loene Carmen, supporting actress nominee) who takes him in, and the elderly Malcolm (Bill Hunter, in a somewhat actress nominee) who takes him in, and the restless, indulgent camera work, along the lines of ‘Let’s chill for a second’.

In a meagre field, the film deserves its Best Film nomination. Its fluidity in time and place, its willingness to use the theatrical device of soliloquy, its suggestion of sensual passion sliding into love, and its moving sense of a man’s respect for the otherness of other people and cultures: these are some of the indices of the film’s ambition, and this is what makes it stand apart from most recent Australian films. Lack of ambition is precisely what characterizes Ted Emery’s mild, dim comedy, The Honorable Wally Norman, in which the film’s makers seem content to make predictable swipes at corrupt politicians and the foolish media.

Kevin Harrington (Best Actor nominee) is a very likeable actor who could have done more with the title role than the easygoing script encourages him to. In fact, his very brief supporting role in Tom White, as one of Tom’s mates who is genuinely concerned for him, cuts deeper and does more with less.

The fact that Olivia Pigeot and Chloe Maxwell are nominated in the Best Actress category (for A Cold Summer and Under the Radar, respectively) is a clear sign of how little is available. It’s not that they are especially poor; they’re simply unremarkable in films devoid of distinction. Pigeot, as Tia, is apparently running away from a relationship in Paul Middleditch’s A Cold Summer, quickly gets into some heavy sex with Bobby (Teo Geert), a fashionably stubbly young man ‘in advertising’, and takes up with an old school friend, Phaedra (a name that presumably is meant to be charged with resonance). There’s a great deal of hip talk along the lines of ‘Let’s chill for a second’ and the restless, indulgent camera work only underlines the emotional clichés that constitute the plot which lurches towards a couple of tack-on feel-good gestures at the end. If improvisation was involved, as I gather was the case, then it brings in its wake all the worst possibilities of this approach: a credit informs us that the ‘Original concept’ was Middleditch’s and that it was ‘Created and developed’ by the three leads. As an example of a production strategy, it is not a patch on The Finished People, which, rough-edged as it is, looks and sounds as if it knows where it is going.

Under the Radar, second feature for director Evan Clarry (the first was the ‘Schoolies’ Week’ piece, Blurred, 2002), has a very confusing time frame. It’s one thing to fracture temporal sequence in the interests of telling a twisty tale; it’s another to induce the tedium of ‘here we go again’ as another
an explanatory bit of back-story is introduced to account for why characters are suddenly where they are and doing what they’re doing. There is a jokey underpinning to the film’s tone as the narrative clatters through a series of wild chases and brutal encounters with rival gangs bent on dealing summarily with the four young people at the film’s centre. Nathan Phillips is an un-engaging hero whose opportunism we seem meant to find endearing, as he uses two intellectually disabled young men to get him out of the community services establishment to which he has been sent as a punishment for ‘surf rage’. His plan to get out and compete in a surfing carnival goes badly astray, and involves meeting up with a hitchhiker, Jo, played acceptably but unexceptionally by the model, Chloe Maxwell.

It has become a cliché to say that many Australian films seem to have gone into production prematurely, that they start with a potentially inviting premise but don’t have a clear goal in sight, and that the screenplays too often seem ragged and careless, as if they needed several more drafts. Like Under the Radar and Thunderstruck, they seem to offer a kind of reckless energy as a replacement for rigorous development, as if the latter might somehow be the enemy of spontaneity. Thunderstruck is nominated for Best Sound and Best Musical Score, and that is probably reasonable, but the film as a whole never realizes the full potential of its initial concept. Having written in the last issue of Metro about this sometimes likable tale of four AC/DC fans and their vow to bury the first to die by the grave of Bon Scott, I won’t say more here than that it runs out of the steam it so promisingly raises in its first half-hour, and settles for hit-or-miss road-movie larks.

If this were a good year, of the ten films nominated, only Somersault and Tom White would warrant serious attention; coincidentally, both dramatize lives that seem to be rocketing out of control but which also have learnt something by film’s end, and both benefit greatly from fine central performances. One Perfect Day and The Finished People are attractive minor pieces in which one can admire the sympathetic observation of youthful anomie and the formal strategies through which this is articulated; and The Old Man Who Read Love Stories reminds us that a national cinema doesn’t have to be parochial in theme or stance. The other five films simply don’t belong in this company, offering at best fleeting pleasures and at worst the half-baked results of faulty recipes.

Postscript: ‘… and the winners are’

It’s no doubt exciting for those connected with Somersault that, nominated in all thirteen categories, it took out the awards in them all, but it is surely bad news for the Australian film industry. The nominations pointed to a poverty-stricken year; the results to utter penury. As a sign of the times perhaps, The Australian didn’t bother reporting the awards until page three; The Age didn’t get around to it until page six. Let’s hope for serious competition next year.

Brian McFarlane is now preparing the 2nd edition of The Encyclopedia of British Film for 2005 publication, co-authoring a book on the British ‘B’ movie of the 1930-1970 period, and has edited The Cinema of Britain and Ireland for Wallflower Press, 2005. •

Endnotes
1 Think of Leigh’s Naked (1993) or Secrets & Lies (1996) or All or Nothing (2002); or of Loach’s devastating Sweet Sixteen (2003).
3 ‘Australian Comedy: What’s That’, Metro, No. 141.