Rod Hardy’s film is dedicated to Michael Noonan, author of the novel on which December Boys (2007) is based. Not having read the novel, referred to in the publicity as a ‘classic’, and not wishing to speak ill of the dead, I’d have to say that my reading of Noonan’s other work wouldn’t have raised my expectations. And speaking of ‘expectations’, his Magwitch was no more than a melodramatically caricatured spin-off from Charles Dickens’ great original. Nor would Hardy’s name excite one: nearly thirty years ago he made the dreadful horror movie Thirst (1979) and, apart from the miniseries Eureka Stockade (1984), almost all of his work in the intervening decades has been in US television. All right, one should not hold past debacles against anyone, but in the event there is very little in December Boys to prompt one to charity.

Recently, when reviewing Romulus, My Father (Richard Roxburgh, 2007), I had occasion to recall how endemic those coming-of-age or rites-of-passage dramas were in the early days of the Australian ‘revival’. There were enough such films (My Brilliant Career [Gillian Armstrong, 1979], The Mango Tree [Kevin James Dobson, 1977], etc.) to make one ponder at the possible relationship to a burgeoning national cinema, which was trying to find its feet just as the protagonists were in these films. Comparison with Romulus does no favours to December Boys, which almost seems to belong to an earlier, naive Australian cinema.

The latest in a long line of Australian coming-of-age films, December Boys harks back to the past, and not just in its 1960s setting. By Brian McFarlane
1960s. Incidentally, one of the film’s virtues is that it doesn’t demonize this milieu and the nuns who run it. They are not depicted as the usual grim-visaged harridans who bully the hapless children into submission. The narrative gets underway when the Reverend Mother (Judi Farr) announces to the December boys that, following a financial gift to the orphanage, they are going to be sent on a holiday to the seaside. ‘Perhaps Our Lady interceded for you,’ she suggests. Prior to this, the voice-over of one of the boys grown to adulthood talks of their feeling of ‘something out of reach’, and there are shots of boys’ faces suffused with longing as the lucky ones are ‘rescued’ by couples who want to adopt them. In this respect, the film has echoes of the fine Russian film that screened in Australia earlier this year, The Italian (Andrei Kravchuk, 2005), in which the yearning to belong was observed with a clear-eyed compassion that was very moving.

The four are getting to be too old to attract potential adoptive parents, especially Maps (Daniel Radcliffe), several years senior to the other three – Misty (Lee Cormie), Sparks (Christian Byers) and Spit (James Fraser) – but, apart from the relatively pious Misty, they all take puffs at cigarettes and are fascinated by pictures of women in bras. There’s a lot of talk about the prospects of adoption and this wish governs a good deal of their behaviour. At the seaside, they are taken in by ‘Bandy’ McAnsh (a grossly bulbous Jack Thompson, booming away in a hollow display of heartiness), who calls himself ‘the Petty Officer’, and his somewhat forbidding wife (Kris McQuade), whom he refers to as ‘the Skipper’. The whole set-up, like the boys’ cute nicknames, reeks of a phoney quirkiness.

The neighbours at the seaside cove are a young couple, Fearless (Sullivan Stapleton) and Teresa (Victoria Hill), who are unable to conceive and decide they’d like to adopt one of the boys. This knowledge creates some predictable tensions among the boys as they – the three younger ones, at least – compete for the ‘prize’. Fearless is the owner of a motorbike which at first makes him the centre of the boys’ attention, believing as they erroneously do that he performs in the ‘Wall of Death’ at a nearby fair, where he actually shovels up camel dung. Maps is less interested in adoption than in sex, and a sumptuously willing local blonde, Lucy (Teresa Palmer), initiates him in her hideaway cave, recalling those boys in the 1970s and 1980s who were taught the ways of love by more experienced women.

The seaside holiday is in the complementary interests of furthering the boys’ growth as they come to terms with the outside world, of disillusioning them with its prospects, and of securing a stronger bond among them. Maybe there are nice people who will enjoy this much more than I did. For me it was as if it had been made in a time warp, with its 1970s view of growing up. It is not that the boys’ situation is without poignancy. To be adopted into a loving family is of course a wholly legitimate goal for these children, deprived as they are of the customary support in life. The problem is not in the basic scenario but in the way it has been developed, the unerringly sentimental ways in which their longings and disappointments and small glimpses of happiness are rendered. If this sounds unduly curmudgeonly, I should add that I am more than happy to be moved to tears in the cinema (I could hardly see the credits for weeping at, say, The Barbarian Invasions [Denys Arcand, 2003]), but I resent feeling...
manipulated towards such a response and I don’t want to feel that everything has been utterly predictable.

‘Predictable’ is the word for December Boys. Not just in the narrative outcomes, though one anticipates them readily enough: the oldest boy will inevitably enjoy his first sexual experience, though it must be said that this is done with a certain discretion (Harry Potter’s image is at stake after all); the chosen adoptee will, you can bet your last dollar, reject the offer of Fearless and Teresa, though the film has no sympathy or time to spare for their situation. These situations might easily have been the occasion for something tougher-minded, for some serious examination of the gap between the pieties on which the boys have been fed (if not nourished) and the realities of that ‘other world where anything was possible’. There’s even a kind of intrusive ‘Boys’ Own Adventure’ episode, replete with religious overtones, in which the oldest boy, Maps, runs to the rescue of one of the younger ones.

Instead of any such sustained attention to intra- and inter-personal dynamics, the filmmaking processes at large are executed with a numbing insistence that entirely defeat their ends. Take the camera work. There is an absurdly unsubtle approach which ensures that virtually every intimate moment will be followed by a sweeping panorama of, say, the ‘wide brown land’ of the outback (someone actually quotes Dorothea Mackellar’s famous poem) or of the grandeur of the coastal setting to which they are taken. There is an abject meaninglessness, a studied picturesqueness, about cinematographer David Connell’s images of rock and sand and sea and sky and rolling cliff: beautiful enough in themselves, they are simply not imbued with any kind of dramatic purpose. This is not because Connell is incompetent but because Hardy has not sought to edit these bursts of natural beauty to mean something in relation to the boys’ experience. Do these vistas offer visual correlatives for that mysterious outer world to which they have hitherto had no access? What about the early shots of the carnival? Is it invoked to suggest a freeing-up of constrained lives? (You don’t have to be, or to read, Mikhail Bakhtin to wonder about this and the disillusionment implied in the later sequence at the fairground.)

Along with this fatuous visual style that stakes everything on the effect of easy contrast is a musical score of unusual portentousness. I don’t just mean the several uses of Creedence Clearwater Revival’s ‘Who’ll Stop the Rain’: if you’ve forgotten its opening lines (or, like me, never knew them), they are:

> Long as I remember the rain been comin’ down. Clouds of myst’ry pourin’ confusion on the ground.
> Good men through the ages, tryin’ to find the sun;
> And I wonder, still I wonder, who’ll stop the rain.

All right, that’s just about acceptable for lives that haven’t had great cause for celebration, though a reprise of it seems heavy-handed, but almost throughout it’s nearly as if the music director had been instructed to beef it up to be on the safe side: that is, so that we didn’t miss a point already made in image or editing or dialogue. This is most notable in the sequence where one of the boys tries to land a huge fish, ‘Henry’, that has been eluding the chronically (and inexplicably) grumpy old-timer Shellback (Ralph Cotterill). The soundtrack at this point wouldn’t be out of place in Moby Dick when Ahab goes for the great white whale.

This kind of misjudgement of effect makes one distrust the film at key moments, and so do those visual effects of, say, Bandy and the boys walking along the beach in silhouette at sunset or the shots of a snorting black horse which rears up symbolic-ly from time to time. ‘Symbolically’? But of what? It is seen again at the end, after the boys have said their goodbyes, so presum-ably it is meant to have some significance. Visual symbols can work powerfully in films, but they need more attachment to the life of the film than this one gets.

As to what the film means us to make of the Roman Catholic background, it is hard to be sure. There are fantasy inserts of the Virgin Mary surrounded by aureole, including one at the moment when Maps saves a younger boy from drowning and they agree that each has ‘seen’ Her. Where does the film stand in relation to this epiphanic moment? The nuns are not universally depicted as whiskery harpies out to make the boys’ lives miserable; and the pietistic Mrs McAnsh is severe but also kind and stocial in the face of her term-inal illness. The priest, Father Scully (Frank Gallacher), is depicted humbly enough and allowed a moment of humour when he calls a sudden halt to a confessional in his truck: ‘Save it till next time. I’m cooked.’

Further, there is a mock confessional between Maps and Lucy after they’ve had sex. So, the film appears not to be in that fierce-ly censorious mode in relation to the church that one finds in such films as Evelyn (2003, Bruce Beresford) or The Magdalene Sisters (Peter Mullan, 2002). What then does the religious content of the film signify in the pattern of the boys’ growth? When it looks as if Misty is going to be adopted by Fearless and Teresa, one of the others shouts out to him, ‘Just remember, Misty, no matter what, you’re still a December boy.’ Does this mean anything? Is it any more than the solidarity of living in the same demanding place? Has it any sort of religious affiliation? At least with those other films named, one could get a sense of the filmmaker’s point of view on these presumably central matters. The very last scene, with the throwing of ashes and a rallying call, has a sound of celebration, but again one asks: of what?

What can one salvage from so many mis-calculations? Presumably, the Harry Potter aficionados will all want to see what Daniel Radcliffe is up to Down Under. The an-swer is: not very much. His presence will no doubt boost overseas sales, but, as far as the role of Maps goes, anyone could have done it. There’s nothing wrong with his per-formance, except the occasional Anglo vow-er, but the film hardly needs him. The oth-er kids are likeable enough and among the adults Kris McQuade makes the most inci- dential impression as the ailing ‘Skipper’.

It is no pleasure to write so harshly about an Australian film, especially in a year that has so far been marked by such venturesome genre reworkings as Noise (Matthew Saville, 2007) and Razzle Dazzle (Darren Ashton, 2007), to cite but two. Sadly, though, December Boys goes perfunctorily through its dramatic moves, which it underlines with pumped-up stylistic vacuities.

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*Endnotes*