

Movie Review: Australia

Written by {ga=mitch}

Wednesday, December 03 2008 7:00 PM -

Starring Nicole Kidman and Hugh Jackman, "Australia" is drawing strong reactions from critics on both sides of the ledger. The film is set, fittingly, in northern Australia at the beginning of World War II and is centered around Nicole Kidman's character. When evil cattle barons plot to take her land, she reluctantly joins forces with Hugh Jackman's character to drive 2,000 head of cattle across hundreds of miles of the country's most unforgiving land, only to still face the bombing of Darwin, Australia, by the Japanese forces that had attacked Pearl Harbor only months earlier. Mitch reviews it for our readers.



An Epic is a movie term that is more from a bygone era. Huge, sweeping movies where the landscape is as much of a character as the leading man and woman, largely orchestrated, often covering many years of the characters lives.

The list of the most important/impressive films of all time is littered with Epics. "Gone with the Wind" is always the first that comes to mind, but there are so many others.

"Dr. Zhivago", "Giant", "Lawrence of Arabia", and "Cleopatra" all conformed to this formula of grandeur.

What you will notice is that the "newest" of the films I just mentioned was from 1965.

Audience tastes changed, and the costs involved became prohibitive.

In the past 40 plus years, there are probably only three successful movies that might qualify; "Gandhi" in 1982, "Out of Africa" in 1985, and "Dances With Wolves" in 1990.

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And I supposed you might be able to include back-to-back-to-back Oscar winners "Braveheart", "The English Patient", and "Titanic", but I don't quite think they are in the same vein as the ones I mentioned earlier.

They were more "Extravaganzas", closer to "Lord of the Rings" or "Gladiator", than "Gone with the Wind".

Australian auteur director Baz Luhrmann has been obsessed for years in making an Epic about his native country. The culmination of all of that money, time, obsession, and labor is called, aptly, "Australia". The movie has been out for a week now, and it still has critics torn right down the middle as to whether they like it or not. (51% positive on Rottentomatoes.com).

I'm not going to be able to break the tie, as after watching it...I can't really tell you if I liked it or not. There were parts of it that I thought were outstanding, and other parts that were absolutely horrible; and often they came within five minutes of each other. It's not that the film is a mishmash per se as Luhrmann manages to stay on-task and consistent on those points throughout the film (after the first 30 minutes, that is).

Rather, there are aspects to the film that are done incredibly well, and other aspects to it that are rotten.

When Luhrmann focuses on the former, the film soars.

When the camera's eye is on the latter, it can approach M. Night Shyamalan bad.

One thing this movie is...is VERY long, at two hours and forty-five minutes. That's nowhere near as long as "Return of the King", but unfortunately, with some of the scenes being as bad as they are, it felt much longer.

And that starts almost right off the bat, as I was ready to leave the theater after the first thirty minutes, I thought it was that putrid.

After an OK, but slightly confusing introduction of the character who will be the "eyes" of the movie, half-white/half-Aborigine boy Nullah (newcomer Brandon Walters), Luhrmann seems to think he's back on-set of the unbelievably campy 2001 musical "Moulin Rouge". He treats everything and everyone as a joke and a farce. Romantic leads Lady Sarah Ashley (Nicole Kidman) and herd drive Drover (Hugh Jackman) are

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introduced as near clowns.

Lady Ashley is a snobbish, uptight shrew, and Drover is a brawling Crocodile Dundee without the charm.

The dialog, facial expressions, and near slapstick action sequences were polar opposites of what I was expecting, and embarrassingly stupid.

Just when I was perhaps fifteen minutes away from slipping out and getting my trusty Spergeon Wynn grade ready...the movie changed, and fortunately, never went back to the silliness, which also allowed the incredible cinematography to garner the attention and respect it deserved.

We find out more details about the characters. Lady Ashley traveled to the Northern Territories of Australia from England to force her husband to sell their cattle ranch there, as it appears to be losing too much money, and they need it as WWII continues.

But what she finds is something completely different.

The husband she thought was spending time down-under philandering with local women has actually been dealing with a ruthless cattle-baron, and she arrives to find him recently murdered; the blame pointed at a local Aborigine witch-doctor called King George.

Jackman's character has no other name than Drover, which appears to be his profession, not his real name, as he is a contract "driver", one of the best in the country at making sure herds of cows or horses get to where they need to be. Which is very convenient, as Lady Ashley needs someone to get 1,500 head of cattle to Darwin for the British Army in order to save the ranch.

King Carney, the cattle baron, is played by former Aussie heartthrob Bryan Brown ("Thorn Birds" and "F/X"), and it's good to see him back up on the big screen. Regrettably, his character is about as predictable as they come, although he at least gets to interject a touch of rascally charm into the snake.

That puts him way above Fletcher, (David Wenham, Faramir in "Lord of the Rings"), King's lackey, spy, henchman, and prospective son-in-law. Fletcher is so one-dimensionally evil that I was waiting at certain points for Luhrmann to have him twist his moustache after tying

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Lady Ashley to a railroad track. |

don't mind having evil villains, and as long as they are done well.

I don't even have a problem with them not having any inklings of decency in them; Anton Chigurh from "No Country for Old Men" and Amon Goeth from "Schindler's List" come to mind.

But that's not the case with Fletcher, as there is nothing remotely interesting about him.

He beats women and children, steals, lies, cheats, commits arson and murder...all with the same blank smirk he has when he's drinking a cup of coffee.

Consequently, when the focus is on Fletcher, or the ridiculous plots he undertakes to foil Lady Ashley and Drover, the movie sputters and almost stalls out.

Where it soars, however, is in the magnificent set pieces constructed by Lurhmann that show us a land and people both familiar and foreign at the same time. The cattle drive over a landscape that looks like a surreal combination of Arizona, Texas, and the Bonneville Salt Flats was breathtaking, as was the Japanese attack on Darwin, which led to the best scene, a daring rescue attempt to a nearby island where missionaries had been caring for young boys of mixed race.

One of Lurhmann's objectives to this film was to call attention to a black page in the Australian history books, the forced seizure and "re-education" of children of mixed race, almost always being a child with an Aborigine mother and a white father who would not acknowledge the child. The government took these children away up until the mid 1970s, training them to be servants to whites, attempting to "breed the black out of them".

Nullah becomes the face of this "Lost Generation", and 12 year old Brandon Walters shows that he has quite a future in front of him as an actor.

A complete novice hand-picked by Lurhmann for the role, he amazes throughout the film as a boy who knows he doesn't fit into any one group, but still desperately needs to be loved.

The other surprise from the film was in the chemistry between Nicole Kidman and Hugh Jackman. Both have made terrible films over the past few years, resulting in Kidman getting the rap of being a cold robotron actress and Jackman being considered a lightweight.

Those misconceptions should be quelled a bit now, as both do an excellent job of bringing their

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characters to life, and they play off from each other with a comfort and ease that shines through clearly.

If only Luhrmann could have left it more with just following those three people as they dealt with their struggles against the Australian environment and the oncoming involvement of Australia into WWII. But he didn't, and the inclusion of all the subterfuge of the most cardboard villains I've seen since the terrorists battling Schwarzenegger in "True Lies" drug this movie out to near interminable lengths and spoiled what could have been something very special.

It may have had the ingredients to be an Australian "Gone with the Wind", but due to the shortcomings, it's more like a more expensive mini-series. Maybe that's appropriate, as Bryan Brown was one of the stars of the ultimate Aussie mini-series; "The Thorn Birds"...and this movie is much closer to that Richard Chamberlain chestnut than to Scarlett and Rhett.

Because of that, I can only give this movie a grade befitting of my ambivalent feelings.

My Rating - Kelly Holcomb: 2 footballs

Review Key:

Otto Graham: Over 4 Footballs. HOF quality movie

Bernie Kosar: 4 Footballs. Excellent

Brian Sipe: 3 ½ Footballs. Very Good

Frank Ryan: 3 Footballs. Good

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Bill Nelsen: 2 ½ Footballs. OK. Well worth seeing.

Kelly Holcomb: 2 Footballs. Disappointingly inconsistent but some bright spots.

Tim Couch: 1 ½ Footballs. Poor. Had potential, but lack of support led to an overall stinker.

Derek Anderson: 1 Football. Horrible. Teased into watching due to potential, we are angry at the reality of mediocrity.

Mike Phipps: ½ Football. "We gave away Paul Warfield for THIS?" level of suck

Sperguson Wynn: No Footballs. UberSuckitude personified.