



Transcript

Arts, Literature and Music A Good Read

Cinema Review - The Boys are Back

John J McGowan

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Who would have thought it – this is my second review in a row in which the subject is an Australian movie. And what’s more, the movie, *The Boys are Back*, is quite a charming piece. This is cause for some degree of astonishment given the low level of regard in my estimation, and, indeed, in the estimation of the paying public, to which the local product has declined in the past twenty or so years.

Do two good movies in a row – *Mao’s Last Dancer* and now *The Boys are Back* – represent a long-awaited renaissance of the local product? Is the local industry heading back to the glory days of *Storm Boy*, *Gallipoli* and *Breaker Morant*? It would be nice to think so but perhaps – despite these two recent successes - this is not the case.

The issue is that while both *Mao’s Last Dancer* and *The Boys are Back* have a great deal of local input at all levels of the production process they are both, essentially, *international* movies. They both connect into a world which is much wider than Australia. The stories they tell have a universal reach and should appeal to a universal audience.

Does it matter that movies such as these are *international* rather than purely *local*? I don’t think so. Surely it’s enough if the basis of the movie is a good story and the story is effectively brought to the screen by a creative team in which there are many Australians. To make movies in this way is, I think, a *genuine* coming of age for Australian filmmaking. It’s probably unrealistic to expect that these two current “swallows” will herald some kind of glorious summer of Australian movie making. Once again, I don’t think this matters.

Is the production of lots of low-budget, largely experimental, movies that audiences choose not to see the best way of “reflecting our culture on film”? Surely, if one or two movies of high calibre are made in Australia, or largely *by* Australians every so often, then perhaps we should take pleasure from that and be content that this is an adequate-enough reflection of our culture on film. After all, when we look at the totality of all movies produced globally in any given year only perhaps a dozen or so are really good. If Australian movie-makers can get a movie into this group every so often then, I think, that’s a truly great achievement indeed.

The Boys are Back, we all know, was directed by Scott Hicks who we like to think of as South Australian because he spends a fair amount of time here – when he’s not making movies in some other part of the world. The story told in the movie is based on a memoir written by an expatriate British journalist who came to live in Australia. The actor who plays the role of the journalist is British – Clive Owen – and the actress who plays his wife – his *Australian* wife – is Laura Fraser a Glasgow-born Scot who has spent a number of her mature years living in the United States and

Ireland. Most of the movie is located in South Australia but a good deal of it also takes place at various locations in England.

This is an *international* movie – and there's nothing wrong with that. As South Australians, we can be proud to see parts of the Fleurieu Peninsula revealed as never before in the golden glory of its summertime beauty. My only complaint about this was that we didn't see *enough* of it. But then, I guess the director has also got to get on with telling the story.

And this story needs to be unfolded with great sensitivity and at a gentle pace. It's a story about a father and son who are each trying to come to terms with the sudden death of the boy's mother. The story is complicated by the unexpected arrival of another son from the father's previous marriage. The plot is a tragi-comedy and this is a difficult horse to ride for any director. However, Scott Hicks is up to the challenge and he steers us through a mixture of sequences which sometimes capture elements of heart-wrenching sadness and, at other times, explode into zany fun and games.

The plot does sell us, the audience, a bit short in one quite significant sequence. I won't go into detail here because of the risk of spoiling the story for you, but I'll just say that the situation depicted seems out of character for the boys' father and the sequence has the effect of jerking us out of the otherwise smooth – and, crucially, believable – narrative flow. I was irritated by this and left wondering why a more believable solution could not have been found to achieving this crucial turning point.

My one other major grizzle is with the presentation of some of the dialogue. The screenplay sparkles with good lines but the effect of a number of these is diminished by allowing the actor to either mumble the crucial last words in a line or even, on occasion, to turn away from us while delivering their words. This is a problem which clouds many run-of-the-mill Australian movies and it was disappointing to find it in a movie of this calibre.

However, despite these niggles, I found *The Boys are Back* to be an engaging movie with landscapes that linger in the mind's eye for days after you have left the theatre. I gave it three and a half stars. Goodbye for now. I'll see you in the back stalls.