

The sexual terrain of the Australian feature film - Putting the Out:back into the Ocker

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In a series of interviews with Melbourne drag identities broadcast recently on public television, one comely lass was asked to describe her ideal man. After the briefest pretence of a pause she enthusiastically opined - the creature of her fantasy would, above all else, possess the body of television super-hero Dean Cain. The head on the other hand, was a more difficult decision. Finally she yielded, "well ... the head really doesn't matter does it? After all, you don't look at the mantelpiece when you're stoking the fire, do you?"

It's a well-worn adage and an even better allegory. As a typically queenish 'quip-fix' critique, it expertly unbuttons the mysteries of Australia's notoriously flaccid screen sexuality. If anything can be said about the representation of lesbians and gay men in the Australian cinema it is that their very presence fuels the otherwise passionless flames of so many films. Irrespective of how thoughtless the depiction of gay men and lesbians might be, the mere fact that they are defined in sexual terms proves that there is some form of carnal activity lurking beyond the unflattering glare of social realism or the fashionable glitter of the quirky comedy. In this sense only, gays and lesbians lie at the very hearth of Australian cine-sexuality.

Unfortunately being a conceptual centrepiece does not necessarily translate into on-screen mantle. Over the extended length of Australian film history, gay men and lesbians have invariably received the bad end of the stick - numerically speaking. Representations of queer characters in Australian films have until relatively recently been almost entirely and

quite literally 'in the closet'. Perhaps for this very reason, transvestism has been an enduring aspect of Australian cinema.

The paradox is that despite a handful of notable and mostly contemporary exceptions, Australian films constitute a keenly homo-social if not sexual of cinemas. Time and time again the cinema presents Australia as a gender riven culture. In a social equation dominated by such apparently neat divisions, straddling the fence can look like the most consummate of queer perversions. In the last five years or so however, several films have attempted to eroticise the customary 'buddy' relationships of the Australian cinema. The low budget features, *Muriel's Wedding*, *Romper Stomper*, and *Proof*, each highlight key friendships of an intimate bent. And each fails to follow through with any anything more than a hint of sexuality.

In this context, queer readings of much Australian cinema must work 'against the grain' - leaning on prior knowledge or a heightened sensitivity to innuendo. The semiotics of cigarettes and stolen glances is a pre-requisite for any such reading of Australian film. Indeed searching for those fleeting moments of homosexuality, especially in the early years before the government sponsored 'film revival' of the 1970s, is a bit like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack. Only in the Australian scene, it was more likely to be a needle in a 'hayseed'.

Heavy Petting. The early years.

The hunt for a gay or lesbian representational history has not been helped by the general disdain held for much of the early Australian film industry's output. The nascent years of Australian cinema were dominated by didactic rural dramas delivered as gravid parables about national fecundity and wealth. Despite an evident interest in the animal romance - and certainly some of the most tender moments in those

formative years occur between a man and his merino - Australian filmmakers prior to 1970, under the strictures of excessive censorship, were unadventurous in matters sexual.

The later films of Cinesound director Ken Hall do however, offer some small glimmer of difference. His *Dad and Dave Come to Town* (1938) introduced to local audiences the character of Entwhistle - a camp 'frock shop' floorwalker drawn in the style of Franklin Pangborn's well-heeled Hollywood sissies. Entwhistle, played in full flower by Cinesound veteran Alec Kellaway, is described early in the film as a, "natural born milker" and is later addressed by a furniture removalist as 'miss' ("Miss? Miss? What do you mean, you great big bully?"). He is beloved by the fashion models he supervises and with whom he engages in all manner of camp banter:

Entwhistle: Mr Rudd's from the country.

Myrtle: (in mock amazement)
Pullin' my leg aren't you?

Entwhistle: (feigning offence and spinning on his heel)
Oooh. Wouldn't do such a thing.

Despite the comic intent of Entwhistle's effeminacy, he is also depicted as a loyal employee and is rewarded as such when the clothes store is taken over by new owners. Entwhistle finds favour with his new employers, the unrefined and candidly rustic Rudd family, who soon promote him to shop manager. This elevating moment is later summed up by Dad Rudd during a telling homily in which he declares, "Whether its poured out of a silver pot or a tin billy its tea just the same."

Hall later proudly claimed Entwhistle as an entirely new Australian screen character. He reappears in Hall's *Dad Rudd MP* (1940) and

although a less well defined identity he does play a similarly important role in the film.

Elements of Entwistle can also be found in an earlier Hall film, *Lovers and Luggers* (1937) which was retitled *Vengeance of the Deep* for release in the US but according to Hall was widely referred to on the set as as 'Lovers and Buggers'. The glamorous femme fatale, Stella Raff is accompanied to Thursday Island by her constant companion, Archie. She is planning a surprise liaison with her fiancé, the pianist Daubenny Carshott.

Archie: The captain says we'll be reaching Thursday Island tomorrow.

What's the attraction Stella?

Stella: A man. Its been a long time since I've seen a man.

Archie: I was under the impression I was one.

Stella: Because you wear trousers?

Archie: Partly. (significantly lowering his voice)

Partly because my voice is deep and I've got hairs on my chest.

Stella: Disgusting.

Archie: (recognising that he cannot convince Stella of his masculine authenticity):

You have got it bad.

(He turns to look at the waves, clutches his stomach, groans before squeaking):

I've come all over queer.

Archie's abrupt transformation, 'I've come all over queer' finds an echo one year later in Cary Grant's rather more famous leap - "Because I just went *gay* all of a sudden" from *Bringing Up Baby* (1938). The difference of course is that Cary's dressing gown improvisation has become an integral part of gay movie folklore - one of those quotable

moments that habituate trivia games and dinner parties across the gay globe. The disappointing truth of this situation is that Australian gay men and lesbians are more likely to experience or 'recognise' their visual history in the accents and inflections of the Hollywood or European cinema.

In the case of an almost entirely unknown Australian screenplay such as *Lovers and Luggers* then, these shreds of dialogue remain simply that, shreds. They constitute an impartial image of Australian gay and lesbian history. The transitory antics of the sissies and the sea-sick are replayed for the film student alone. Although no archaeological spade or magician's wand can levitate Entwistle and Archie further, nor can they be made to entirely disappear.

Watch Me Pull a Rabbit...

If early Australian films neglected gay men and lesbians in their pains to populate the celluloid landscape then they overlooked a subterranean world close beneath the textual surface. As Terence Stamp ("Bernadette") wryly noted in *The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (1994); "These days gentlemen are an endangered species - unlike drag queens who just keep breeding like rabbits."

In recent years an apparently unprecedented flurry of cross-dressing has overrun the Australian cinema. The heights of frou-frou achieved by the internationally renowned *Priscilla* were immediately followed by the unsuccessful *All Men are Liars* (1995) in which a young man impersonates a woman in order to be closer to the lead singer of a girl group. More popular but in a similar vein was *Dating the Enemy* (1996) a gender reversal comedy starring soapy heart-throb and Priscilla queen Guy Pierce. On a more reflective note, the stylish documentary

Come As You Are (1995) examined the idea of alter-ego and the performative in a variety of gay and lesbian enclaves in Melbourne.

The prevalence of cross-dressing in Australian film is not new however, as a long lineage of films will attest. In *Lovers and Luggers*, the star Shirley Ann Richards is Lorna - "I answer to the name of Jim" - Quidley. Even earlier, actresses such as Lottie Lyell, Vera James, Leslie Adrien and Jocelyn Howarth roamed the countryside replete in jodhpurs, boots and wielding those all important stockwhip accessories.

In 1925 Louise Lovely masqueraded as a boy so she could prospect for gold in Tasmania in the lost film *The Jewelled Nights*. Later, in *Bitter Springs* (1950) Nonnie Piper is loudly declaimed as "a lady in trousers" only to be reassured by her Ma, "Well, you always wanted to be a boy."

But perhaps the most whimsical use of transvestism occurs in Charles and Elsa Chauvels' wartime saga *Forty Thousand Horsemen* released in 1941. Set amongst the Middle Eastern dunes of the First World War the film screams costume drama from the outset. As the opening credits roll away a German officer sneers over a captured Australian uniform - "Mein Gott!" he exclaims, "A woman's hat, trimmed with bird feathers. And these are the men you would have me worry about."

Meanwhile, three young Anzacs literally beat the pants off the locals in a game of two-up. Their newly won apparel is applied to an intriguing end or two; coyly concealing the tails of the soldier's 'asses' (their donkeys that is). But that's not all. Even the romantic lead is in on the act. Juliet Rouget, a beautiful French spy deceives not only the Germans but the ingenuous allies by cloaking herself in Arab robes.

Highly praised by audiences and critics, *Forty Thousand Horsemen* received particular praise from the *New York Times*, which waxed in uncertain terms, "Those earlier Anzacs were men's men, all of them,

and when they rode towards battle with a full throated 'Waltzing Mathilde' [sic] they were fearful folk - fearful and gay."¹ Which only goes to show that there were queens in the desert long before Terence Stamp ventured onto the sand.

Perhaps the single biggest boon to drag in Australian film occurred in the early seventies as the industry re-established a foothold. Barry Humphreys ruled the Australian stage as Dame Edna Everedge and so boggled the minds of a nation with her suburban satire that a museum of memorabilia is soon to be completed on her home turf in Moonee Ponds.

In a period of theatrical experiment and innovation Dame Edna taunted Australians with her immoderate parodies. However although a drag icon, Dame Edna remained cloistered from considerations of homosexuality. As she herself once put it in *Barry McKenzie Holds His Own* (1974), "Lesbianism has always left a nasty taste in my mouth."

Take one annually - the ocker

The image of the slobbering, beer swilling ocker looms over much discussion of Australian screen sexuality in the post-revival period. Films such as *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie*, *Alvin Purple*, and *Stork* have collectively become known as the 'ocker films'. As an initial attempt to figure an on-screen sexuality the ocker films were steeped in a colloquial and deliberately vulgar humour. Although loved by the masses, they were loathed in equal measure by industry experts. However, accusations that the genre was merely soft-core porn were undone when home-grown sexploitation films began production soon after.

¹ Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper, *Australian Film 1900-1977*. Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1980. p253.

With the introduction of the R censorship certificate in the early 1970s, Australian filmmakers snatched their moment of unprecedented liberation with, not entirely gay, abandon. Several exceptional films did however, in their attempts to create a progressive environment for the representation of sexuality, include mention of gay men and lesbians. The extent to which this interest in homosexuality served the ends of straight titillation differs from film to film and audience to audience.

The project that perhaps started the ball rolling was the semi documentary *The Naked Bunyip* (1970) which used the investigative figure of a market researcher to string together a series of interviews with Australian personalities, experts, drag queens and sex workers on the topic of alternative sexualities. The ensuing publicity around the film contributed to moves to reform Australia's extreme censorship standards. In addition, the idea of a naive central character in search of 'experience' was to become a central theme of both the 1970's ocker and sexploitation genres.

Most often though, gay sexuality appears in these films as a moment of high het anxiety as in *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (1972). This film follows the fumbling fortunes of a sexually inexperienced character who must 'carry on' through a mire of misunderstandings and entendres. There is an educative purpose to Barry's adventures that can be traced in other films of the period, such as the soft-core *Felicity* (1978) in which a schoolgirl's lesbian experiments eventually lead her to Hong Kong and the international sex set where she is taught the true meaning of pleasure. *Felicity* was brought to the screen by same team that produced *The ABC of Love and Sex Australia Style* (1977) an alphabetical cultural reading 'lesson' which includes the following entry, H for Homosexuality -

Homosexuals cannot be blamed for having different sex lives. The same love, tenderness and warmth that exists in a satisfactory heterosexual relationship can exist in a homosexual relationship. And of course, there will always be a problem with homosexuality as long as an intolerant attitude to it exists.

Fantasm (1976) like *The Naked Bunyip* uses a documentary excuse to invent a sexualised story line. Although filmed with American porn stars and narrated by the fictional Dr. Jurgen Notafreud *Fantasm* purports to represent the twenty most common sexual fantasies of Australian women - one of which is a lesbian sauna scene.

Gay and lesbian relationships, as distinct from sex scenes, also make their debut in the 1970s. There was the tragic homosexuality of *The Set* (1970) - in which an artist, Paul, becomes the lover of a student, Tony. Paul, of course, attempts suicide and eventually goes straight in a 'wild' poolside party that featured a television personality in the nude - the latter incident provoking more broadsheet column inches than the gay content. Within a couple of years however, television also cashed in on the spirit of liberalisation with a spate of risqué programs that introduced nudity, homosexuality, bisexuality and transvestism to Australia's nightly diet of not so current affairs.

The beacon of Australian sexual tolerance in the seventies would have to be the popular television sex serial *No 96* which was committed to the big screen in 1974. In depicting the various troubles and triumphs of the tenants in a Sydney apartment block, the film incorporated a gay couple and a camp cameo in the character of Dudley. Dudley, almost as dizzy as the 70's wallpaper that decorated the apartment interiors, likens all situations to famous film scenes, calls everyone 'dear' and is a whizz in the kitchen where he minces his words as much as his meats -

on mishandling a rissole or two he squeals unashamedly, "Ooh, I've dropped my balls."

Fellow tenant, Don Finlayson, is an upstanding solicitor who 'just happens to be gay'. He meets the sexually confused Simon and the two men become happy lovers. Don and Dudley were an enduring if unrepeated achievement in Australian film and television and Don was one of the most popular characters in the series. Producer Peter Bernados noted, "We were daring I suppose... But we didn't have him teapotting around the studio. He was a very butch homosexual."²

As an endearingly effeminate character, it was Dudley who really worked against the mainstream of Australian gay images in this period. His openly fey postures and the evident absence of recrimination recall the successes of Ken Hall's *Entwhistle*.

For the most part, the ocker films represented male homosexuality as an aberrant departure from an interest in 'men's business'. Contact with women was tantamount to a form of infection - and the disease was femininity. Take a sample incident from *Sunday Too Far Away* (1974), perhaps the most highly regarded and self analytical of the ocker genre. Beresford, a shearar, is invited by his mates to inspect the next day's sheep. He is writing a letter and politely declines.

Foley: What's wrong with you Berry?
Beresford: What do you mean what's wrong with me,
 nothings wrong with me.
Foley: I mean, are you queer or something?
Beresford: I'm not queer
Ugly: All he ever does is write letters. Who do
 you write letters to?

² Quoted in Hilary Kingsley, *Soap Box: The Australian Guide to Television Soap Operas*. Sun Books, Melbourne 1989. p262.

Beresford: My wife.
Basher: God bugger me!
Foley: (shouting)
What in the bloody hell's wrong with you?

In a curious perversion the demonstrably straight Beresford is accused of engaging in homosexual behaviour because he writes letters to his wife instead of admiring a flock of sheep. In exasperation, Basher invokes the grandest insult of all, calling for divine buggery in his dismay. It's a tangled scene that was to find an even greater historical twist some twenty years later with the release of the gay 'love story', *The Sum of Us* (1994).

Different folks? Foley gets a family

...Australians almost never make any effort to actually stop people being different: verbal abuse is usually as far as it goes. Thus, for example, while homosexualists [sic] are verbally treated with derision, very few Australians will march against them or mobilise political forces in an attempt to suppress their activities.³

June 1994 was a period of some upheaval in the struggle for gay rights in Australia. Following the Federal Government's decision to overrule Tasmania's anti-sodomy legislation, a series of violent demonstrations were held in the island's northern township of Burnie protesting the granting of 'privileges' to gay men.

In the same month, *The Sum of Us* premiered at the Melbourne Film Festival. On stage to introduce the film were co-director Geoff Burton and producer, Hal McElroy. As McElroy described it, the film was a

³ Scott Murray, "Australian Cinema in the 1970s and 1980s" in Scott Murray (ed) *Australian Cinema* Allen and Unwin in association with The Australian Film Commission, Sydney. 1994, p 71.

belated tribute to - indeed the untold story of - Australia's unfairly yet much maligned 'Ocker'. Both men wanted to celebrate what they perceived to be the characteristic tolerance of Australian (read 'Ocker') culture.

Perhaps the most revealing depiction of Burton and McElroy's intention occurs in the dying moments of *The Sum of Us*. Jeff (Russell Crowe) wheels his incapacitated Dad (Jack Thompson as the not-paralytic-enough Harry) across the lawns of Sydney's Botanic Gardens. The camera pulls back to show them in microcosm before panning across the Harbour and in one final magisterial flourish coming to rest on the Opera House. It is as if those tolerant ocker values we kept hearing about were one and the same thing as the national creative impulse that spawned such a majestic monument to the achievements of Australian Culture - a nation's home to Opera. But it's a facetious finale - and one based on an opportunistic forgetting of the circumstances of that building's very construction. Surely, if nothing else, the disrespectful treatment of the Sydney opera house architect, Joern Utzon, who left Australia vowing never to return, stands as testimony to the evident intolerances of Australian popular opinion in the late sixties.

But the delusive conclusions of *The Sum of Us* are actually signalled earlier and at even more fundamental levels. For despite all the talk about tolerance towards homosexuality, *The Sum of Us* is really rooting for acceptance of the 'Family'. Just like Hitchcock's revelations about the psychopath who finds himself in a family way in *Shadow of A Doubt*, it is now clear that Ockers come from families too - and not only that, they occasionally have them as well. And so, yet another mystery of cultural continuance solved forever!

Perhaps for this reason, the question of the domestic features heavily in the film. Much dialogue revolves around the making familiar of words,

particularly those pertaining to relationships and sexuality - "He's what you might call cheerful - can't bear that other word". This process of familiarisation appears to have succeeded as a strategy for producing a type of audience intimacy, particularly given how many filmgoers (critics included) found the film to be 'natural'. And this despite the amount of work the directors put into producing 'alienation' and distraction at a stylistic level. Narrative discontinuities (direct asides to the camera in the 'nudge nudge, wink wink' tradition for instance), doubled visual references (the gratuitous breadstick and other entendres) and disruptive spatial organisation only seem to intensify the experience of 'the natural' that many viewers describe on seeing the film. Take for example the comments of this correspondent writing to complain of a negative review in a gay community newspaper;

...Having recently seen *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, I consider *The Sum of Us* to be of equal quality, to be very entertaining and funny. In fact, I preferred the Australian film because I found it more human and natural, less contrived than the other. In fact it is one of the most enjoyable films I have seen. The script was remarkably complete, the cinematography excellent, the acting generally terrific and the story a believable and natural one that did not seem to me to have been created merely to entertain. A number of issues were tackled in a very realistic way (yes, there are parents of gay young men and women who accept their gayness and want them to meet an appropriate partner and to be happy), yet at no time did I feel the film was actively trying to get a message or messages across...I recommend this film very highly as a "must see" and wonder whether the reviewer is just a cynical queen or whether he saw it when he was having a bad day.⁴

The paradox in all this is that any audience the film speaks directly to cannot answer back. They are, within the confines of the cinema, an

⁴ Scott Howard, "Let the Sum of Us Decide" Letters to the Editor, *Melbourne Star Observer*, No. 230. p6.

identity restrained. Not unlike the post-stroke Harry, the audience sits as if a mute and incapacitated body and any intimacy established with it is conditional on this. What I hear when gay men and lesbians applaud *The Sum of Us* is a pitiable moment of identification that assumes we are a 'disabled' community, comfortable with the charity of those more culturally adept than ourselves. Interaction with the mode of address proffered by *The Sum of Us* provides the soothe and solace that comes with being spoken to as if we are the 'deserving disabled'.

The Sum of Us uses domestication as a tactic for the elaboration of a user-friendly representation of gay men and lesbians for mainstream audiences. Jeff (Russell Crowe) is as racist, misogynist and homophobic as any fair dinkum bloke could aspire to be. He can swill it with the best of them. He revels in his football prowess playing lock forward (at the rear of the scrum, nudge nudge) for a local club. But he isn't really the film's problem. The subject the film really wants to harness is Harry (Jack Thompson). And it eventually does in truly spectacular style complete with fireworks and flashbacks.

Different strokes? The 'Jane Eyre Syndrome'

It's no more about homosexuality than Oedipus Rex is about blindness. It's a really funny, moving and touching story about love.⁵

Harry, as it has been widely noted, functions as a sort of updated nineties interpretation of Thompson's earlier Ocker incarnation, Foley, of *Sunday Too Far Away* (1975). Indeed Burton, who also shot the earlier film has included a sly reference to it. Apron-wrapped Harry washes the dishes in his suburban home in a manner that recalls

⁵ Jack Thompson quoted in Kirsty Simpson, 'Jack's gay abandon' by *Herald-Sun* (Melb) Thursday 14/7/94. Thompson repeats this observation in a number of other interviews.

Foley's competitive ablutions in the sheep station laundry. Broadly speaking the two references could scarcely be further apart.

Sunday Too far Away, a rural drama set in the midst of the 1950's shearing strikes, links Foley's personal fulfillment with his political actions and allegiances. *The Sum of Us* on the other hand, seems to suggest that Harry's 'political' tolerance is premised on his desire for personal happiness. But that search for personal satisfaction, curiously enough, is distinctly agricultural.

To say that *The Sum of Us* lays the sentiment on with a trowel would follow the film's lexical reliance on gardening references. The 'natural' has another, more narrative presence in *The Sum of Us*. Several times the film equates 'desire' with the more pastoral practice of 'planting'. References to seeds and seeding abound and the expression of personal sentiment or honesty occur at those places where trees are found - the Christmas fir stall and of course the Botanic gardens. Jeff's love interest, Greg, earns a crust by laying pansies to rest in neat garden beds (yet another of those nudge nudge moments). His secret dream (I'm not kidding here) is to sow an entire forest, to go and stand in the middle and declare with all the profundity he can muster, "I planted this - I made this". Harry despairs that his gay son will never know the joys of "planting his seed and watching it grow". Conversely, there is no room for contrition over Jeff's sexuality, "How can I be ashamed of what my seed's become?"

Harry's tolerances are premised on his ability to turn a blind eye to difference - rather than to accept it. The film is unable to see this contradiction (no doubt for the trees). Jack Thompson's comment about Oedipus becomes all the more interesting in this filmic field of conceptual blindnesses, reproductive anxieties and castration/domestication motifs. Too easily does blindness turn to

blandness. The quest of *The Sum of Us* revolves around this tragic transformation.

As in the famous final moments of *Jane Eyre*, Harry is crippled and dependent before his son has the freedom to act as a sexual 'equal'. This certainly doesn't say much for what the film really thinks of gay desire. The 'almost there' gay couplings of *Proof* and *Muriel's Wedding*, which also feature infirmity as a same-sex necessity, simply extend the insult. In these films the threat of same sex eroticism is sublimated into the socially measurable and sexually benign activity of ministrations.

We can only hope for a well-fleshed future in which the point is certainly not the dispersal of equality in the guise of banality or metaphorical injury. Unlike so many other endeavours, Australian gay men and lesbians are yet to seize the initiative in terms of our cinematic pleasures. Like the cartoon featuring an elderly couple in their kitchen during the Mardi Gras party ("God - the noise of that Mardi Gras Party - I can barely hear myself complain!") I want to be the film critic that is silenced only by the sheer verve and energy of our own entertainments.