



Director Baz Luhrmann reinvigorated dance films with the dazzling "Strictly Ballroom," re-imagined the Bard with the energetic "William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet" and redefined musicals with the innovative "Moulin Rouge." When word surfaced that Luhrmann wanted to pay homage to his native land with a frontier epic entitled, simply, "Australia," excitement quickly spread. His fans around the globe hoped that his passion would spark a romantic epic, and that excitement intensified after the lavish project started to be described as a Down Under version of "Gone With the Wind."

Unfortunately, that comparison fades while watching this \$130 million production, which runs painfully long, stuffs in too many plot elements and adds numerous clichés. The PG-13 picture offers some beautiful outdoor images and inserts a strong message about the horrors inflicted upon "half-caste" children (half-Aboriginal, half-Caucasian) who were cruelly segregated as outcasts by the government.

Nicole Kidman, who worked with Luhrmann on "Moulin Rouge," and Hugh Jackman ("X-Men"), both natives of Australia, jumped at the opportunity to star in the adventure tale, which they viewed as a tribute to their country.

It's admirable that Kidman and Jackman wanted so much to be involved in "Australia," but their enthusiasm for the project apparently blinded them to the shortcomings of their characters.

In the film, Kidman plays spunky Lady Sarah Ashley, a stuffy British socialite married to a two-timing Australian man. Her husband, who owns a cattle ranch, which is coveted by a cattle baron, King Carney (Bryan Brown of "Cocktail"), willing to go to any lengths to get it, is murdered and the wife leaves her comfortable existence in London to visit the faraway property.

She becomes taken by the country and by an rugged horseman, the Drover (Jackman), who agrees to help her move 1,500 head of cattle across the most brutal areas of Australia in order to sell them to the government and break Carney's iron-fisted control of the beef market. She's also has maternal feelings for Nullah (charming and talented newcomer Brandon Walters), a "half-caste" boy in danger of being sent to a remote government camp for children of mixed heritage.

The child accompanies the Drover and Lady Ashley on the dangerous drive, which brings out the youngster's mystical abilities.

Luhrmann reportedly wrote six endings for "Australia" and filmed three of them, and the one he selected follows an old-school cinematic tradition. However, the director continually alters the tone of the material, especially in the case of Jackman's character.

In one eye-candy scene stolen from "Flashdance," the Drover pours a bucket of water over his well-toned body, and the two-fisted character also receives a corny introduction that borrows from the Sergio Leone openings of the "Man With No Name" spaghetti Westerns with Clint Eastwood.

The tongue-in-cheek initial scenes with the Drover sometimes make the project seem more like a tribute to "Crocodile Dundee" than "Gone With the Wind."

The director also appears to have been obsessed by "The Wizard of Oz" while creating "Australia." The song "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" can be heard at various points and the classic film's theme of there's no place like home is often at the core of the story about three very different characters — Lady Ashley, the Drover and Nullah — bonding as a family.

"Australia" goes over the top in terms of story elements in the final section when the Japanese bomb the country

during World War II, and the main characters go on a new adventure following their blistering cattle drive.

Perhaps Luhrmann should be applauded for trying to give modern audiences an old-fashioned frontier epic, but the talented director adds needless elements that show the destruction of parts of the country during a Japanese air barrage. The military images seem like they belong in a different film, and the digitally enhanced visual effects sometimes ring false.

The real story results from the frighteningly evil mistreatment of the Aborigine people by the government and the loving relationship between the three main characters. When Luhrmann focuses on those elements, the physically imposing "Australia" becomes an emotionally charged epic, but at other times, the film registers as an overblown outdoor adventure that goes on so long some viewers may feel saddle sore as they exit the theater.

#### FILM REVIEW

"Australia"

Grade: C+

Starring: Nicole Kidman, Hugh Jackman and Brandon Walters; written by Stuart Beattie, Ronald Harwood, Richard Flanagan and Baz Luhrmann, based on an original story by Luhrmann; produced by Luhrmann, G. Mac Brown and Catherine Knapman; directed by Luhrmann.

Running Time: 165 minutes.

Parental Guide: PG-13 (violence, scene of sensuality, harsh four-letter profanity).

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