



Hugh Jackman and Nicole Kidman star in *Australia*, directed by Baz Luhrmann. PHOTO: AFP

BY SEBASTIAN SMEE
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, BOSTON

Schlock on the barbie

Colonialist wrongs are put to rights in Baz Luhrmann's sugary frontier saga

For an Australian, the most delightful and provocative thing about *Australia*, the new Baz Luhrmann movie, is its title. Just saying it aloud is like delivering the punch line of one of those long-winded campfire jokes that get funnier the longer they go on.

Unfortunately, just about everything else about the movie falls flat.

Yes, *Australia* is a joke — a campy, sentimental, hyper-theatrical concoction that tastes like a tropical cocktail and should really have been a musical. The problem is that somewhere along the line its makers forgot that it was a joke. They decided it should try to be something more — “a love letter to Australia,” as one early reviewer put it; or “just the film we needed to see,” in the words of Oprah Winfrey.

It decided, in other words, to come across as all unctuous and morally earnest. In the process it became a movie so kitsch and condescending that, as an Australian (I came to Boston from Sydney in May), all I want to do is look away.

But hang on, you're wondering: What's so funny about the title?

Unlike America, a land of storytellers with outsized ambitions (think *American Beauty*, *American Pastoral*, *American Pie* and so on), Australia has tended to be shy about telling its own story.

A lot of young nations feel similarly bashful. But Australia's shyness is compounded by the circumstances of its formation.

It began, after all, as a convict settlement — a dumping ground for all the petty crooks and political prisoners who were spilling out of England's floating prisons. On its way to independence, Australia fought no nation-defining war, it endured no civil war and, even after it became independent, it continued to cling to the apron strings of Empire. (To this day, Australia still has Queen Elizabeth II as its head of state.) Its

two most cherished narratives of nationhood revolve around a bushranger (Ned Kelly) and a horrible defeat by the Turks as part of a joint British and French military campaign during World War I (Gallipoli).

None of this should matter. Australia today is an affluent country with a diverse, enviably harmonious population inhabiting a continent of extraordinary beauty and singularity. And yet there is — there probably always will be — this lingering, B-grade anxiety about our status in the world.

Australian social commentator A.A. Phillips gave the uglier side of the phenomenon a name when he coined the term “cultural cringe.” He was referring to an internalized inferiority complex, a tendency to dismiss one's own culture as second-rate.

But even as Australians live with cultural cringe, they are increasingly aware of how lucky they are, and how much they have to be proud of. A great deal of humor — alternately self-deprecating, ironically chest-thumping, and camp — is wrung from this dual awareness.

It's in this context (with special emphasis on camp) that Baz Luhrmann's *Australia* needs to be seen.

To come from a country that has always been nervous about telling its own story and then to spend US\$130 million on a movie

Film Notes

AUSTRALIA

DIRECTED BY: BAZ LUHRMANN

STARRING: HUGH JACKMAN (DROVER), RAY BARRETT (BULL), NICOLE KIDMAN (LADY SARAH ASHLEY), BRYAN BROWN (KING CARNEY), TONY BARRY (SERGEANT CALLAHAN)

RUNNING TIME: 165 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: SHOWING

called *Australia* — a movie that plays with the broadest stereotypes, nods at Hollywood epics like *Gone With the Wind* and *Out of Africa*, and employs almost every recognized actor in the Australian film industry — is to indulge in a kind of outlandish inside joke.

Having seen it, all I can say is, it's a pity they lost sight of the joke. It's a pity, more particularly, that they decided to get involved with the most sensitive moral and political issue Australia has grappled with over the past few decades: the so-called “Stolen Generation.”

Earlier this year, while Luhrmann's *Australia* was still in production, the country's recently elected prime minister, Kevin Rudd, delivered a formal apology to Aboriginal people affected by a past government policy that saw Aboriginal children forcibly removed from their families by government agencies and church missions.

Rudd's predecessor, John Howard, had for many years refused to offer an official apology, resisting what he called “the black armband” view of Australia's history, and arguing that such policies had often been carried out with the best of intentions.

Rudd's apology — one of the first actions he took as prime minister — was watched by the whole nation and greeted with a flood of emotion and relief. It was an important, and

overdue, symbolic gesture.

But it was played out against a reality less easily mended by words.

Last year, it became clear that the plight of Aboriginal communities in some parts of the country was so dire (sexual abuse of children and extreme alcoholism were rampant) that a national emergency was declared, the army was called in, and the specter of more forced removals — for the good of children being subjected to sustained sexual abuse — was raised.

The moral ironies, not to mention the underlying tragedy, of the situation hardly need emphasizing.

But what was Baz Luhrmann cooking up while all this was going on? A peppy, jingoistic movie, part tourism advertisement, part Broadway musical, full of bright color and friendly irony, with a plot line that involves — guess what? — an attempt at forcibly removing an Aboriginal child from his mother.

The mother is drowned during the attempted abduction; the boy is adopted by the film's white heroine, an English aristocrat played by Nicole Kidman, whom the child calls “Mrs Boss”; and the boy eventually returns to the culture of his ancestors.

Perhaps it's not worth taking offense at such a cartoon. But was it really such a great idea to bring the film's dominant tone of camp and high artifice to subject matter that is still so raw and real?

Now that Rudd has delivered his formal apology, I suspect many Australians want to let themselves off the hook over the “Stolen Children” issue. In this sense, Luhrmann's film has captured the national mood.

“The simplest thing to say about this [movie],” said Kidman, “is it's a celebration — for me and hopefully for this country.”

Well, we all love a celebration. But sometimes a nation is shy about telling its stories for a reason.

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

Four Christmases

A comedy opening at Yuletide with Reese Witherspoon and a cast of wonderful supporting actors (Mary Steenburgen, Jon Voight, Robert Duvall, Sissy Spacek, Dwight Yoakam)? Sounds unbeatable, but this emerges as something of an anti-holiday film and has left legions of critics mirthless. Witherspoon and hubby Vince Vaughn are forced to visit the homes of each of their divorced parents for the holidays, something they have always tried to avoid. The problem is, the couple themselves might be just as insufferable for the viewer as their parents.



Smart People

The sourness of *Four Christmases* is initially all over *Smart People*, which has cranky, widowed literature professor Dennis Quaid coping with a less-than-perfect family of smart but cheerless people — of which he is the less-than-perfect patriarch. An accident brings Quaid to the hospital and triggers a relationship with doctor Sarah Jessica Parker. Meanwhile, back home, there's redemption in store when Quaid's adopted brother (Thomas Haden Church from *Sideways*) moves in and turns the tables on everyone. Also stars Ellen Page (*Juno*) as Quaid's daughter.



The Spirit

This is an adaptation of Will Eisner's decades-old comic strip that follows *Sin City*'s stylistic lead, and is written and directed by Frank Miller, who helmed that groundbreaking film. The hero here is a policeman (Gabriel Macht) who is killed and revitalized as a crime fighting, mask-touting, womanizing vigilante. Samuel L. Jackson, as “The Octopus,” is the main villain and Scarlet Johansson is his companion in crime. *Variety* was singularly unimpressed, calling it “relentlessly cartoonish and campy” and “a work of pure digital artifice,” among other unkind words.



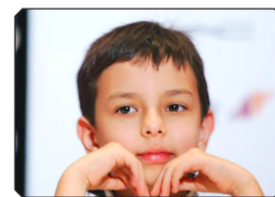
Suspect X

A theatrical extension of the award-winning Japanese TV mystery series *Galileo*, *Suspect X* pits a young and slightly eccentric physicist-cum-sleuth (“Detective Galileo”) and his policeman collaborator against an old friend of Galileo who craftily sets up an alibi for the titular suspect (or is it suspects?) who committed a murder. Smatterings of whimsy, comedy and science make this a digestible mystery for non-converts to the TV show.



The Gift to Stalin

Not many films from Kazakhstan come our way (*Borat* doesn't count). In this one, a young Jewish refugee escapes death when he is taken home by a local Muslim man. But this is the Soviet bloc under Josef Stalin, with purges and appalling mistreatment of minorities, so there's something nasty in store for the old man and his charge. Location photography and heartwarming elements will charm viewers, but there's a history lesson at the climax that will leave a bitter taste in the mouth.



Hell's Rain

The “rain” in this made-for-TV flick is a comet storm that threatens a Colorado town whose mayor is a woman with burdens of every description: work, family and a traumatic past. The setup borrows from *Twister*, and retains that movie's technique of milking drama from people battling their obsessions in the face of a natural disaster. Also known as *Anna's Storm*, this is being released briefly as a DVD promotion. Starts tomorrow.



Man, Woman and the Wall

Crossover porn star Sora Aoi stars as the girl next door in this more mainstream Japanese erotic drama, though in this case the “door” is an incredibly thin wall between apartments that leads our antihero to eavesdrop on and finally stalk the poor lady, before discovering that she suffers even rougher treatment from her boyfriend. Screening at the Baixue theater in Ximending, which ordinarily screens Aoi product that we don't bother covering. Like *Hell's Rain* and *Bangkok Dangerous* below, this is a promo for a DVD release.



Bangkok Dangerous

Two months ago, the Nicolas Cage film *Bangkok Dangerous* was released here. This movie of the same name is the stylish 1999 original, also directed by the Pang brothers Oxide (彭順) and Danny (彭發) when they were still finding their directorial legs. The film, which chronicles the trials of a mute hit man, made an international impression at the time. The Baixue theater is hosting its theatrical cameo.



Elegy

We previewed this title last week, but without notice the distributor delayed its release. So from tomorrow it's your chance to see literature professor Ben Kingsley seduce older student Penelope Cruz — without realizing that seduction can be a double-edged sword.



FESTIVAL NOTES:

WHAT: Voyage/Displacement (旅行 | 移動)

WHEN AND WHERE: Today through Jan. 16 at Spot — Taipei Film House (光點—台北之家), 18, Zhongshan N Rd Sec 2, Taipei City (台北市中山北路二段18號), Jan. 3 through Jan. 16 at Kaohsiung Film Archive (高雄電影圖書館), 10 Hesi Rd, Yancheng Dist, Kaohsiung (高雄市鹽埕區河西路10號)

ADMISSION: Tickets for Taipei screenings are NT\$170 and are available at NTCH ticket outlets or online at www.artsticket.com.tw. All screenings at Kaohsiung Film Archive are free

ON THE NET: www.twfilm.org/voyage

Among the films screening at the latest installment of POP Cinema are, from left: *Home* by up-and-coming Swiss director Ursula Meier; Wim Wenders' *Wrong Move*; cult classic *The Saragossa Manuscript* by Polish director Wojciech Has; *The Traveler*, Iranian master Abbas Kiarostami's feature debut; and renowned Malian writer and director Abderrahmane Sissako's *Waiting for Happiness*.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SPOT



On the road to adventure and self-discovery

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

In the time of the Lumiere brothers and Thomas Edison, the world's earliest filmmakers took their novel filmmaking gadgets with them when they traveled to record their experiences. This desire has generated different types of travel cinema, ranging from expeditionary and ethnographic films to home videos and road movies. The latest installment of POP Cinema, *Voyage/Displacement* (旅行 | 移動), revisits this essential cinematic form.

“We cut ourselves off from reality and the past in order to make ourselves ready for a cinematic experience,” says festival curator Wang Pai-chang (王派章). “But as a film unfolds, the noises of reality intrude ... The real and the unreal, the past and present intertwine, split and reconnect. It is a process that never ceases to repeat, proliferate and change.”

In the brooding epic *Route One/USA* (1989), American independent filmmaker Robert Kramer, one of the US' most forceful dissenters in the 1960s, returns home with a 16mm camera after 10 years of self-exile in Europe.

Traveling with “Doc,” a fictional character played by his childhood friend Paul McIsaac, Kramer embarks on a five-month journey from the beginning of Route One in Maine to its terminus in Florida. The line between documentary and fiction is blurred as Kramer uses encounters with his fellow countrymen to create a portrait of America and how it has changed during his long absence.

Between 1993 and 1996 renowned French photographer, journalist and filmmaker Raymond Depardon took a voyage of his own through his beloved Africa. In *Africa, How Are You With Pain* (1996), Depardon questions his responsibility as an image maker and confronts his own prejudices. Like Kramer he is acutely aware of the difficulties he must confront while making his film and does so with great compassion and respect.

A different route is taken by a young couple in *Lucie et Maintenant — Journal Nomade* (2007). Traveling from Paris to Marseille in an old Volkswagen bus, the pair undertakes the same journey Argentine writer Julio Cortazar and his lover Carol

Dunlop took 25 years ago and follows the same rule that requires them to stop at each service area they pass and spend the night in every second one. What is normally a seven-hour drive takes 33 days as nuanced details, small moments, humming sounds and voices are woven into a poetry piece of voyage and nostalgia.

Directed by Abderrahmane Sissako, one of the most important contemporary directors in Africa, *Waiting for Happiness* (2002) tells a tale of departure. Seventeen-year-old Abdallah visits his mother in his hometown of Nouadhibou on the West African coast before embarking for Europe. Estranged from his own community and language, the young man struggles to decipher the world around him.

Taking the road movie genre in an alternative direction, *Home* (2008) opens with a family living in a ramshackle house alongside an abandoned highway. One night, workers and their machines arrive to resurface the road and put it back into service. Facing four-lane traffic day and night, the family, unable to leave, quickly

disintegrates as its members are forced to deal with inner turmoil and eccentricity.

In 1965, legendary Polish director Wojciech Has (often compared with David Lynch) made what has now become a timeless cult movie, *The Saragossa Manuscript*. Based on the massive novel *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* by Count Jan Potocki, with its rich folkloric elements, surreal sensitivity, bawdy humor, Jewish mysticism and supernatural themes, the film follows a charming young Belgian captain traveling across 17th-century Spain. The officer becomes spellbound by an old manuscript he finds in an abandoned house, and dreamlike adventures ensue, which escalate into a mind-bending, labyrinthine narrative where characters pass from one story to another.

Other highlights by several all-time greats of cinema include Michelangelo Antonioni's *The Passenger* (1975) starring Jack Nicholson, Wim Wenders' *Wrong Move* (1975) featuring 13-year-old Natasha Kinski, and Iranian master Abbas Kiarostami's remarkable feature debut, *The Traveler* (1974).