



Australia

Nicole Kidman, Hugh Jackman, and Brandon Walters star in a film written by Baz Luhrmann, Stuart Beattie, Ronald Harwood, and Richard Flanagan and directed by Luhrmann.

By Josef Woodard

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When Baz Luhrmann makes a movie, he thinks big. He loves pomp and sweep, and taking the message of post-Modernism's manic cross-referencing to the large screen. He did it all with ironic, winking style in *Moulin Rouge!*, the anti-original musical, and he does it again, minus the ironic winking, in *Australia*. This dazzling film about northern Australia on the cusp of WWII is told in enchanted, semi-fairytale style, with a winsome Aussie couple (Hugh Jackman, Nicole Kidman) at the center. It acts and feels like an epic; Luhrmann goes for three hours, aerial shots

galore, and an attempt (mostly muffed) to make a grand statement about Australia herself, with its rogues and dreamers and status as a global frontier.

Australia also feels like a Disney movie for grownups. Bad guys are boldface bad, and the good are so clean you could eat off of them. In the margins is the film's most important message to its international audience—airing the dirty laundry of Australia's assimilation policy, repealed only in 1973, whereby cross-breed aboriginal children essentially were “kidnapped” by the church and pressed into servile work for the “white fellas.”

Along those lines, the film's real show-stealer is Brandon Walters, a remarkable and warm-eyed young actor who plays the half-aboriginal Nullah. His character, threatened by cruel Aussie law and representing his grandfather's ancient cultural connection to the land, is the story's saving grace. In the cross-referencing department, *The Wizard of Oz* is a constant source of ideas, and David Hirschfelder's musical score keys off of Bach's “Sheep May Safely Graze” in distracting ways.

Despite the shameless and highly caloric sentimentality that keeps knocking *Australia* off its otherwise sensorially impressive course, it's hard to resist its manipulations. Such is the power of stories built on empowered and affirmative children and the lure of hope. And yet, when the sentimental soup has beautiful adults as the meat, we feel less empathetic. Suddenly, right when resolution is supposed to be ringing bells in our heads, we see only hyper-close-ups of Kidman and Jackman, mugging for the camera and hoping for Oscar nods, doing their best to invest intelligence in a would-be Disney movie.