



Australia Peter Thompson

Australian cinema bounced back to life in 2009. So far, the global financial meltdown has had little visible effect. Audiences were in no doubt: they lifted box-office revenue to over AUS\$900 million, up 16% on 2008, which was itself a record year. More significantly, Australian-made feature films found significant support.

Leading the way was **Mao's Last Dancer**, produced by Jane Scott, directed by Bruce Beresford and featuring Chi Cao, Joan Chen, Amanda Schull, Bruce Greenwood, Kyle McLachlan, Jack Thompson and a large supporting cast. Adapted from Li Cunxin's bestselling memoir, it tells of his rise from abject poverty to favouritism as Madame



Bruce Beresford's **Mao's Last Dancer**

Mao's leading dancer and his ultimate defection to the West. An audience favourite in Toronto, the film had earned around AUS\$14 million domestically by December 2009.



Scott Hicks' **The Boys Are Back**

Released late in the year, Scott Hicks' **The Boys Are Back** was also performing strongly at the time of writing. Featuring Clive Owen as the recently widowed father of two lively sons, played by George MacKay and Nicholas McAuliffe, it's an accessible and moving story about the peaks and pitfalls of single parenthood. Emma Booth also adds lustre to the cast.

One aspect of the 2009 releases was the presence of internationally known Australian filmmakers, often more conspicuous for their absence from home turf. As well as Beresford and Hicks, Jane Campion also had a major new film. Others not so instantly recognised, but well into their creative maturity, include Ana Kokkinos, Robert Connolly, David Caesar, Sarah Watt and Sue Brooks.

The digital revolution has been hailed for burying technical and economic barriers to film production and unleashing a tidal wave of young talent. This wave is certainly under way, but the new filmmakers still have some

way to go to find their audience. Instead, people have responded more to experienced hands controlling the directorial reins. With **Blessed**, Ana Kokkinos returned to Head On territory. As with that 1998 film, the action is compressed into 24 hours as six young people face harrowing existential crises. The first half tells the stories through the principle characters' eyes, while the latter half adopts the perspective of their parents. It drew great performances from Deborra-Lee Furness, Miranda Otto and particularly Frances O'Connor, back in Australia after a long sojourn abroad.



Anthony LaPaglia in Robert Connolly's **Balibo**

Balibo, co-written by pre-eminent dramatist David Williamson and director Robert Connolly, explores the deaths of six Australian journalists in East Timor during the Indonesian invasion of 1975. The complicated flashback structure undermines the impact of the story, and the hard questions dealing with American and Australian complicity in the invasion are brushed over. However, the film received positive critical attention, inspired by its obvious passion and fine performances by Anthony LaPaglia, Oscar Isaac, Damon Gameau and others.

David Caesar has satisfied a long-held ambition with **Prime Mover**. Featuring Michael Dorman, Emily Barclay, Ben Mendelsohn and a clutch of veteran Australians, it's an intimate, surprisingly gentle portrait of lives lived under the economic hammer. Dorman plays Thomas, a country boy smitten, as most young men are, by the mystical power of the internal combustion engine. Thomas goes heavily into debt to buy his first big rig but the real



David Caesar's **Prime Mover**

hardships of the long-haul trucker's life never completely erase his romantic illusions.

The diversity of the 45 features released in 2009 is greatly enriched by three striking contributions from indigenous filmmakers. Warwick Thornton was awarded the Camera d'Or at Cannes, a brace of domestic prizes and universal acclaim for **Samson and Delilah**. The subject matter is hopelessly grim on the surface: two teenagers trapped in the vicious circle of neglect and abuse in a remote Outback settlement. Samson (Rowan MacNamara) is addicted to petrol-sniffing which still kills too many young people, while Delilah (Marissa Gibson) is ritually blamed for the death of her artist grandmother. But there is a deep bond between the two that



Warwick Thornton's **Samson and Delilah**

endures even the hardships of homelessness in the desert city of Alice Springs. No other dramatic film has portrayed this social reality so uncompromisingly, but Thornton also has an extraordinarily poetic sensibility that lifts his narrative to another level. It was the Australian film of the year and the only one so far to make back its entire budget (AUS\$1.6 million) at the box office and went on to collect seven prizes at the Australian Film Institute Awards.



Rachel Perkins' **Bran Nue Dae**

One cannot help but be encouraged by the emergence of indigenous filmmaking, not only because the voices of the first Australians were ignored for so long, but also because their work is, like Thornton's, so distinctive. In **Bran Nue Dae**, Rachel Perkins has brought the eponymous stage musical to the screen, featuring a mostly indigenous cast alongside the likes of Geoffrey Rush. It's a wonderful, shaggy dog of a movie, full of foot-tapping, catchy tunes, moderating some of the harsh realities of Aboriginal life that intrude. Something of a companion piece, Richard Frankland's road movie, **Stone Bros.** is being cleverly billed as the first indigenous comedy in 200 years. In sharp contrast to Samson and Delilah, but similar to Bran Nue Dae, it suggests that humour can be a real and effective survival tool.

It seems more than coincidence that at least five of 2009's more notable films were directed by actors, or former actors. Again, one suspects that actual hands-on experience, even if it is in front of the camera, can serve the director's craft well. Notable in this

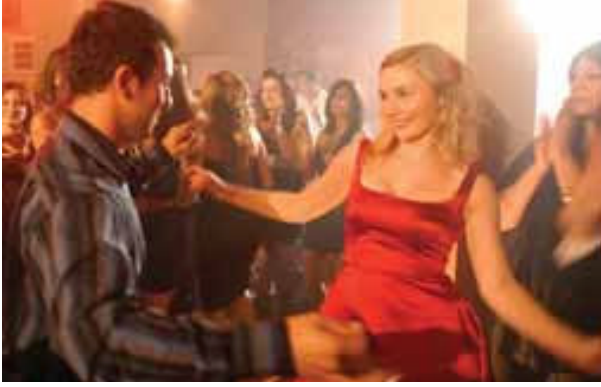
regard is Eric Bana, who has transformed his obsession with his Ford GT Falcon coupe – the same car Mad Max drives – into a meditation on a number of interlocking themes: growing up, friendship, 'hooning' around in fast cars, the temptations of money and the responsibilities of fatherhood. Like his acting, his documentary **Love the Beast** exhibits thoughtful intelligence, enlisting Jay Leno, Jeremy Clarkson and Dr Phil among others on his tour of the male psyche.

It has been a long journey for Rachel Ward, who dipped a toe briefly in the Hollywood pond but opted instead for family life in Australia with her actor/producer partner, Bryan Brown, playing in local films and campaigning for the rights of disadvantaged youths. But judging by the solid achievement of her feature-length directorial debut, **Beautiful Kate**, she has found her true calling. Patriarchy, alienation, lost love and even incest make a dangerous, if not entirely original, brew. The casting and the performances, notably from young Sophie Lowe in the title role, are particularly strong, but Ward shows other skills as well, handling the emotional tangles with conspicuous maturity.



Rachel Ward's **Beautiful Kate**

Notable character actor David Field made his directing debut with the violent, raggedly emotional **The Combination**. Drawing occasionally overwrought performances from his mostly inexperienced cast, the film is really the personal vision of the writer George Basha, who plays the central Lebanese-



David Field's **The Combination**

Australian character, released from jail and determined to go straight. Basha portrays Anglo-Australians as ignorant of and hostile towards Middle Eastern culture, which he tends to romanticise. Ultimately, the film does little more than reinforce existing stereotypes.

A much more effective film was **Cedar Boys**, another feature-directing debut, this time from actor and film-school graduate, Serhat Caradee. Younger brother Tarek (Les Chantry) finds himself drawn into a life of crime, while older brother Jamal (an impressive Bren Foster) is already behind bars. But Caradee digs deeper, delineating the longing of Tarek and his friends for entry into the privileged world they feel excluded from. As outsiders, their only shortcut is drugs, which attract the beautiful blonde Amie (Rachael Taylor), whom Tarek falls for. The film ultimately evokes sympathy rather than hostility.



Serhat Caradee's **Cedar Boys**

The most accomplished work from a former actor is **Disgrace**. It's the second collaboration

between Steve Jacobs and his actress/writer wife, Anna Maria Monticelli. Essentially a meticulous adaptation of J.M. Coetzee's prize-winning novel about the unravelling of white dominance in South Africa, it yields a career-best performance from John Malkovich as David Lurie, an academic whose rigidly blinkered arrogance drives him to the brink of annihilation. He retreats to a remote, desolate farm where his daughter Lucy (a riveting performance from Jessica Haines) is immersed in the tragic repercussions of apartheid. Her rape and its aftermath finally rupture Lurie's shell.



John Malkovich and Jessica Haines in Steve Jacobs' **Disgrace**

There were some feel-good films aimed directly at the mainstream. Writer-director Dean Murphy teamed up Paul Hogan and Shane Jacobson in his entertaining and intelligent father-and-son road trip, **Charlie and Boots**. When curmudgeon Charlie's wife dies, his alienated son Boots (Jacobson) plucks him out of his grief and takes him on the fishing trip Charlie promised him as a child. But their destination is Cape York, 3,000 kilometres away, so there's plenty of time for these two very popular identities to explore their contrasting styles. Less sure-footed but no less rooted in the Australian vernacular is **The Marriage of Figaro**, another debut from a writer-director (sadly, most only ever get to make one film, so there tend to be a lot of debuts). Chris Moon has made a charming, gentle comedy out of the predicament of his hairy biker hero, Reginald Figaro, a piano tuner, Harley Davidson disciple and loving father. But Figaro has long resisted marriage and his

partner Sheree (the delightful Jacqueline Cook) has waited long enough. As a bonus, first-time actor Tony Hill actually plays piano.

It's important not to lose sight of the wider dimensions of the moving image. There is a storm of activity in short films, as well as music videos, commercial production and the whole non-theatrical arena. Some of the best work is screening on television. There is also constant replenishment from the younger ranks. Michael and Peter Speirig are just the latest to migrate to Hollywood, earning good reviews for their vampire thriller, **Daybreakers**. And let's not forget that James Cameron's return to the big (3-D) screen, **Avatar**, rests on the shoulders of yet another Aussie export, Sam Worthington.

It has been 16 years since *The Piano* dazzled the cognoscenti at Cannes and went on to win popular success and Oscar recognition. Since then, Jane Campion has made it abundantly clear that her heart beats to no one's drum but her own. Her output has been uneven but she's back on track with **Bright Star**, a story of tragic young love which will doubtless help with romantically inclined audiences. The film also demonstrates the essence of Campion's genius for images charged with feeling and meaning. It tells of the two-year, unconsummated love affair between 23-year-old John Keats, played by Ben Whishaw, and his neighbour and muse, 18-year-old Fanny Brawne. Keats died in 1821 at 25, leaving behind a body of work that still astonishes the world with its beauty and depth. Campion



Jane Campion's **Bright Star**

focuses on Fanny, a triumphant performance from Abbie Cornish, but Keats's poetry meshes so perfectly that he is a constant presence, even when he's not on screen. Their love is chaste but sublimely sensual. So is the film.

The year's best films

Bright Star (Jane Campion)

Samson and Delilah (Warwick Thornton)

Disgrace (Steve Jacobs)

Mao's Last Dancer (Bruce Beresford)

Cedar Boys (Serhat Caradee)

Quote of the year

'Australia used to have 500 languages. It's only got 120 left... We all have indigenous languages, we all have true languages, and we have to fight to keep those languages alive.' WARWICK THORNTON *at the 2009 APSA Awards*.

Directory

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Film Australia, 101 Eton Rd, Lindfield NSW 2070. Tel: (2) 9413 8777. Fax: (2) 9416 9401. www.filmaust.com.au.

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