

Passionate, epic sweep of lush, beautiful 'Australia'

Contributed by Tim Riley
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AUSTRALIA (Rated PG-13)

Director and writer Baz Luhrmann has a reputation for bold, audacious work, where his dreams are realized in grand cinematic fashion. If anything, the lushly photographed musical "Moulin Rouge" was daring and visionary, even though it was the type of film that invited high praise or disdainful scorn.

His latest brilliant stroke of filmmaking genius may be less likely to stir divided passions. In a very conventional way, "Australia" is a grand epic which combines melodrama, adventure and romance against the backdrop of the early stages of World War II.

One of the film's interesting conceits is that it is narrated by an 11-year-old boy named Nullah (Brandon Walters), a poster child for the racial conflicts in the Australian Outback. The engaging Nullah is a half-caste, or a half-Aboriginal, half-Caucasian child, who is victimized by the segregated society of Australia in the 1930s and 1940s. He understands his role as an outcast and becomes a central figure in the story that unfolds with the arrival of Lady Sarah Ashley (Nicole Kidman), a prim, uptight British socialite who has a stake in a cattle ranch.

Back in England, Sarah, lost in a superficial life, becomes convinced that her husband is cheating on her during his trip to Australia to sell Faraway Downs, their struggling cattle ranch. Dressed in her finest clothes, Sarah travels from London to the rugged wilderness of the Northern Territory to confront him. Instead, she encounters tragedy upon discovering that her husband had been murdered. This turn of events raises the stakes on what to do about the crumbling Faraway Downs, particularly when devious cattle baron King Carney (Byran Brown) is eager to snag the property.

Lady Sarah's first take on Australia is formed by her meeting with the Drover (Hugh Jackman), the rough-hewn cattleman whose specialty is running herds of cattle across the unforgiving terrain of the Outback. The Drover becomes Sarah's reluctant guide from the port city of Darwin back to the ranch. Their profound mutual dislike is tempered by another tragedy when Sarah suddenly finds herself caring for Nullah when he's orphaned by the accidental death of his mother.

Now, mutual dislike between Sarah and the Drover may be a harsh assessment, but we all know how it will play out in the end, given that this movie has romance as a key element and that the two of them feature prominently in an embrace in the film's advertising. Before we get to the romance, there's the serious business of saving Faraway Downs from the evil King Carney and his scheming station manager Neil Fletcher (David Wenham). To save the ranch, Sarah must join forces with the Drover and drive 1,500 head of cattle across Australia's breathtaking yet brutal landscape.

During the cattle drive to Darwin, the movie takes on the feel of a Western, except Indian tribes don't materialize out of nowhere. Instead, Nullah's mystical grandfather King George (David Gulpilil) magically appears on the outskirts of the action, as if he were some sort of guardian angel. There is, however, an ambush from King Carney's thugs, trying to fulfill a plot to hasten the demise of the Faraway Downs operation, which leads to a terrible stampede fraught with plenty of danger.

Then, as the misfit band of ranch hands led by Sarah and the Drover achieve success in their cattle drive, the action shifts in a completely different direction. The Western adventure gives way to a war movie, as the Japanese launch an aerial attack on Darwin, causing massive destruction and upheaval. Meanwhile, Nullah is snatched by the authorities and spirited away to Mission Island to live with other banished half-caste children. For good measure, racial politics is thrown into the mix.

Almost an endurance contest, "Australia" is a long movie by any classic standards. Evidently, Luhrmann put his heart and soul into this ambitious work, and though the results are somewhat mixed, there's no doubt as to the rousing, passionate nature of this sweeping epic.

Full of beautiful imagery, "Australia" captures our attention with its glorious visual treats. But like most Luhrmann films, this one is an acquired taste, which works best if you allow yourself to be swept away by its mesmerizing pull. At the very least, Hugh Jackman delivers with his usual charm.

DVD RELEASE UPDATE

I am not that big on science fiction, and if I never see another "Star Trek" movie, that's just fine.

On the other hand, I know I will be seeing the new version of "The Day the Earth Stood Still," starring Keanu Reeves and Jennifer Connelly. It's simply a matter of showing up for work. On the other hand, it might be a good idea to take a look at the Special Edition release of the original 1951 classic story of hope and peace, which was widely acclaimed as one of the most influential and thought-provoking science-fiction films of all time.

Hey, it's hard to imagine Keanu Reeves could be in the same movie. However, the original "The Day the Earth Stood Still" starred Oscar-winner Patricia Neal and Michael Rennie. And now, you can buy the original in Blu-ray or DVD, wherein you'll find some special bonus materials like a "Making Of" featurette.

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