



Clockwise from far left: Gillian Armstrong's picks of Australian cinema include *Somersault*; *Breaker Morant*; *Strictly Ballroom*; *Picnic at Hanging Rock*; *The Piano* and *Ten Canoes*.



# Films

BY GILLIAN ARMSTRONG

This award-winning film-maker reveals her thoughts on seminal moments in Australian cinema.

The first Australian film that I saw in a cinema was *Two Thousand Weeks* (1969), directed by Tim Burstall. Strange as it seems now, it truly was the first time I had ever heard Australian voices in a cinema, and it didn't seem right. It was a black-and-white arty love story, set around Melbourne's Carlton, and while I don't think it's the best film in the world, I remember it because I was actually hearing an Australian accent in the cinema and thinking how weird, how wrong, it sounded.

We had a booming silent film industry in the 1920s and 30s, with Raymond Longford and Charles Chauvel. We even had a woman director. The McDonagh sisters, one a producer/writer, one a director and one the star, made society dramas set in Sydney. Then American exhibitors bought up the cinema chains and the Australians couldn't get their films shown. Poor old Longford ended up at the wharf, selling ferry tokens. The whole industry disappeared.

I had only ever seen American or English films, and Italian and French, as part of my film course at Melbourne's Swinburne College (now Swinburne University of Technology). I remember seeing *The Sentimental Bloke*, a black-and-white silent film from 1919 with CJ Dennis poetry read

over it, shot around Sydney's Woolloomooloo, and comedies like the English co-production *They're a Weird Mob* (1966), but there were no Australian films in the cinema when I was growing up.

I didn't ever think that I would one day have a film of my own in the cinema, either. When I finally worked out, after many years of stuffing around at art school, that I liked film-making best, I thought if I could work in drama at the ABC, being the script assistant, that would be the ultimate. I applied to the ABC after I graduated. Only 11 of us graduated, three girls and eight guys. All the boys got interviews at the ABC in camera, editing, floor management. They wrote back to me and asked: "What are your typing speeds?" So I never ever went back, and I purposely never learnt to type. That was the world then.

In 1975 *Picnic at Hanging Rock* really affected me. By that stage we had a new government-supported Australian film industry, and what I saw in *Picnic* was that we could make films that are as classy and as interesting and arty as European films. It was a breakthrough in terms of how beautifully shot it was and the mood that was created, and because it didn't follow

a conventional structure, it was so brave and so startlingly sexy. I was a young film-maker, just starting out with *Smokes and Lollies* (1975), and I thought I'd like to do something like that one day.

Another film that had a real effect on me was Fred Schepisi's *The Devil's Playground*, (1976). Fred was my mentor. He was the assessor of our final films at Swinburne, and he gave a lot of students their first breaks. In my final year, he offered me a job, on his first short drama, *Libido*. I was so terrified watching a real film being made, I spent most of the time in the kitchen making the tea. So *Libido* was my work-experience film. When I saw *The Devil's Playground*, about a young boy, played by 13-year-old Simon Burke, in a Catholic seminary, I thought it was powerful, elegant and moving storytelling. Once again it was like a European film, dealing with morality, religion and belief. I'm not Catholic, but it resonated with beautiful performances and deep moral dilemmas, and once again ▶

it was a film that I would like to make. It also captured a real sense of Melbourne. From early on I hated that everything that we pushed about Australia centred on the outback. I am a girl from the suburbs, so, for me, urban life was the thing. We were forced to read outback Australian literature at school, and I reacted against that. When I went to film school and we were studying the greats of European cinema, that's what I fell in love with, and that's what made me want to be a film-maker, so of course I loved films like this and *Picnic* that had a European sensibility.

When I think about Australian films that I've watched more than once, *Breaker Morant* (1980) comes to mind. It is solid storytelling, and it launched "our Bryan Brown". It was a breakthrough time when *Picnic*, *My Brilliant Career* and *Breaker Morant* came out.

They all had very successful releases around the world, and that absolutely changed not only the way that people saw Australian film, but also how they thought about

Australia. I can remember as a backpacker being in New York and somebody asking me to speak Australian to them. Others still thought Australia was Austria, or else they would ask: "Haven't you all got kangaroos?" So after they saw *Picnic* or *Breaker Morant*, there was a sense that it's not just a place with desert and kangaroos, but we are actually a sophisticated and stylish country.

Another favourite is *Strictly Ballroom* (1992). It is exciting to see first films that show an original voice, and Baz Luhrmann had that from the start. It was made for hardly any money, in hardly any time, and he took such a risk with a dancer who had to act and an actor who had to dance, and he pulled it off. He had a wonderful visual flair, and already there was that sense of theatricality, style, flashiness and fun, as well as the heart.

I was blown away by Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993). She has such an incredible eye and you just knew that this was someone who was going to be a great, great world film talent. Everything about it: the look, the photography, the costumes ... there was a strong director's voice, with real bravery in the storytelling and in the story itself. There was a lack of sentimentality about the woman and also her child, which, in some ways, was great coming from a woman. It was also wonderful that the person receiving

"I saw *Lantana* at my local cinema: it was wonderful sitting with an Australian audience who wanted it to be good, and it paid off brilliantly"

accolades around the world was another female director. I'm also a great admirer of her producer Jan Chapman (who produced *The Last Days of Chez Nous* for me) so it was fantastic that it was not just Jane, but Jan getting the recognition. And it was after I saw that film that I worked with Janet Patterson, the designer who did *Oscar and Lucinda* (1997) and *The Last Days of Chez Nous* (1992) for me. She's also a world talent.

Jan also produced Ray Lawrence's *Lantana* (2001). I saw it at my local cinema on the very first night it was on, and it was packed. It was wonderful sitting with an Australian audience who wanted it to be good, and it paid off brilliantly. It was very sophisticated storytelling by a director with

a strong voice, and it was about adult relationships with a nail-biting undercurrent. When you see something that's so well crafted it can be quite inspirational. It was great the way he dealt with contemporary Sydney, and I'd love to do something again using Sydney in a really filmic way, so I probably came out of the movie feeling that. And I like the psychological thriller element.

Then there's *Somersault* (2004), Care Shortland's film, which had a haunting beauty. She walked an amazingly fine line of tension and darkness, and there was a wonderful sense of impending tragedy. Every time there was a dawn over the lake, I thought: "Oh God, the red hood will be in the water." She has a really unique visual eye, and it was extraordinary film-making.

Of recent films, I liked *Look Both Ways* (2005). I ran a masterclass for the Victorian College of Arts about 10 years ago, and the director Sarah Watt was one of the students. She had done animations but hadn't moved into working with actors yet. She had made a really powerful animation about a woman losing a baby, with beautiful, very painterly images (like the ones in *Look Both Ways*). And she was incredibly shy and humble. Of all the people in the group, she was the most self-effacing, and I think she is the only one who went on to direct a feature. I thought that her film was brave, insightful and funny.

I have to say I laughed myself sick at *Kenny* (2006). The thing I really liked about it was it had a lot of heart, but also Shane and Clayton Jacobson were so smart because they had no money, and yet they got big crowd scenes because they could shoot thousands of people at functions with these loos. I was surprised how much I enjoyed it. Another favourite is *Ten Canoes* (2006) because Rolf de Heer is so brave and eccentric.

My most recent pick would be *Samson and Delilah* (2009). I saw one of director Warwick Thornton's shorts, *Nanna*, which opened the Sydney Film Festival about three years ago, before the main film. It had a strong underlying message, but was very funny. *Samson and Delilah* is much more serious. It showed a real film-maker who told the story visually. It's quite poetic but haunting and tough, and he has the ability to make you walk a mile in someone else's shoes. You actually come out of the cinema feeling like you are covered in grit. It's great to see Thornton's talent recognised around the world. Like all the films I love most, he has got something to say and has done it through brilliant storytelling, through the images and through the actors. May it be the start of another great Australian cinema revival. ■



From top: *Samson and Delilah*; *Look Both Ways*; *Lantana*.