

**Philip Brophy: *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*.** Series: *Australian Screen Classics*, Sydney: Currency Press 2008. ISBN: 978-0-86819-821-7, AUD 16.95. **Reviewed by Mandy Kretzschmar**, Research Academy Leipzig

As the Closing Ceremony of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games unfolded, the *Parade of Icons* culminated in the entrance of the Priscilla tour bus. Headed by an adult tricycle in the form of a floral stiletto shoe, the procession was completed by the 'pit chicks', well-known Sydney drag queens, carrying oversized powder puffs, mascara bottles and lipsticks. The ambiguity of this image both celebrating Australia, her film culture, her coarse humour as well as local gay culture, but simultaneously mocking her way of self-representation, points to the continuing dilemma of being insecure about her status, her history, her image in the world. Philip Brophy's provocative reading of Stephan Elliot's 1994 classic addresses the problematic of stereotypical formula regardless of appearances. His multifaceted essay, rich in image and metaphor, questioning the "dumb semiotics" of Australian culture and film (5), adds another challenging work-of-art to the Currency Press series on Australian Screen Classics.

In the prologue, Philip Brophy, acclaimed Australian director, editor, composer and lecturer, sets his agenda in reading the film as "a meandering road-map" that "celebrates the great nothingness of white Australia" (4). Disliking *Priscilla*, his review is a straightforward assault on the conservative Australian film industry and an uncritical audience celebrating a comedy-drama that is trapped in the exhausting deployment of iconic representations. Brophy resists close textual analysis of the film. In contrast, his map reading is non-linear, rich in sidetracks, but always taking the reader back to the main road. His response is passionate, though often fierce and cynical. In addition to drawing on a wide corpus of academic writing on *Priscilla*, on Australian cinema as well as film and on popular music for his argument, it is foremost Brophy's style of writing, heavily laden with irony, similes and metaphors, frequently used in

excess, that make this monograph an enjoyable, intellectual and invaluable read.

The focus of the first chapter "Silencing Women" is on gender representations, the category of Woman and the excessive use of the inflatable sex doll as an icon for the exclusivity of male drag (13). The reader is thrust into the middle of the plot: Sydney drag queen Mitzi (alias Tick) has been offered a gig in a small casino in Central Australia, owned by his ex-wife Marion. There he will reconcile with his son whom he hasn't seen since adopting his drag queen persona. Enlisting two of his friends, Felicia/ Adam, a young gay cross-dresser and aging, transsexual Bernadette/ Ralph, to perform with him, the trio is now on their journey to the heart of the continent. In the bar of the Paradise Hotel, Broken Hill, Shirl, middle-aged, rough looking and the only woman in a crowd of locals, approaches the drag queens and openly confronts the outsiders with repulsion. Brophy compares her open mouth to a "black hole of the white void at the red centre of Australia" ( 9). When Bernadette responds to her insult, the men unite with the trio as a mob, laughing and thus affirming the humiliation of Shirl. Brophy argues that the female characters in *Priscilla* are largely portrayed in a derogatory way. Exemplary in the above-mentioned scene, Shirl signifies the stereotypical nagging wife who needs "to be shut up" ( 10). However, his argument of "repressed identification" and the silenced, "unheard woman" (11), continued throughout the essay, generalises the complexity of the female characters in *Priscilla*. Though Brophy illustrates the non-traditional construction of women in the film, he disregards their representation as a threat and source of fear and further, their ability to liberate from male hegemony (Tincknell 2002: 154). To offer but one alternative reading of the scene, Shirl is also a respected member accepted in the (male) community at the bar, participating in boozy sessions and even matching Bernadette in a drinking competition.

The strongest sections of the book are concerned with the film's soundtrack ranging from voice, popular song, opera to lip-synching and the use of the didgeridoo. As evident in Brophy's essay, music, performance and drag are central and closely interlinked in *Priscilla's* narrative. This intertwining is first encountered in Brophy's map,

when he reflects upon the use of opera aria in connection with an inflatable doll atop the tour bus. He is reading the caricature of the kite-flying female corpus played over by a passage from Verdi's *È strano! Ah fors'è lui* as an example for opera as a form of drag: A man writes the melodic sequence that is then vocalised by a trained woman bearing "his breath". She is trapped on stage, "draped with costumery and weighted with wigs" (16). The female performer is becoming a doll, "less a breathing body" (16).

From there, Brophy proceeds with the literal staging of gender and sexuality in the second chapter "Synching lips". He argues that *Priscilla* should be classified as a musical, and generalises: "all musicals are drag revues as they feature lip-synching" (18). Although it can be agreed that *Priscilla* like other films of the early 1990s such as *The Full Monty*, draw on conventions of the genre (Tincknell 2002:147), Brophy stretches the idea to make his point. In his view, the focus is upon the embodiment of gender via the visual spectacle rather than the song and its meaning. Thus, the visual image is but a deadly silent foreword, only coming to life in the technical process of post-production through audiovisual juncture (18). In drag, however, all songs exist prior to the performance. Brophy states that in accord with the "Musical's 'breathing of life' into the already-recorded song", drag similarly "creates the ghostly aura of a human presence" (19). In short, while drag performers like Mitzi and her friends visually shape themselves as mannequins of anthropomorphic form, their actual performing on film (or live) stages through lip-synching lays claim to the performance being the locus of the song (19).

Indeed, Brophy's rich poetic writing style in approaching the deadly compulsion of *Priscilla* to make use of familiar Australian tropes and icons is advanced to its climax in the following chapter "Drinking fire". His criticism relates to the representation of male Australian identity and sexuality in the film through the consumption of alcohol. Pondering on the stereotypical celebration of Australian drunkenness, Brophy reveals the hidden symbolism: the sexual aura of beer that is "the constitutional elixir of Malestralia" and "fuel for masculation" (24/25). Further, he claims that both drinking and

urinating are acts of men bonding. Amongst many, one moment of wonderful linguistic excess summarizing what in his view is an Australian icon is but the following:

Beer is the atomised mist of the rough outdoors; the sweat of humungous men who toil under the sun. Like salinated water seeping underground, beer overcomes the water table of the male corpus, constituting him as a hulk bronzed on the outside and jaundiced on the inside (25/26).

In contrast, the drag queens resist the foaming liquid. However, they are also dependent on the alcoholic spirits, mainly in the form of cocktails. Brophy's comparison of Mitzi, Felicia and Bernadette to female torch singers that due to the loss of their love and their awareness of their plight drown their sorrows in alcohol, then guides the reader back to the central characters of the film.

Brophy's bias against *Priscilla* is based on its deployment of national symbolism, its sweeping window dressing, often to a level of exhaustion. In other words, like many Australian films, he blames *Priscilla* in failing to consider alternative voices. For him, the Australian desire to control its self-representation and image in the world, penetrating its national film industry as well, is meaningless. It is an expression of both insecurity and subordination. To make his point, Brophy contrasts the images of Australia as produced by its citizens to similar images of Australia produced by European visitors in the fourth chapter "Staging Reality" (36). Exemplary, he draws a unique and out of the common comparison between the film and David Bowie's 1983 video clip "Let's Dance". In contrast to *Priscilla's* overload of archetypes and icons, Bowie's "opaque blancmange of indigenous assimilation, racial tension and cultural isolation" (37) reads counter to the ambition of the Australian cinema to propagate certain national self-images.

In addition to challenging the use of cultural signifiers of Australiana, Brophy is aware of *Priscilla's* mobilisation of oppositions, in particular a differentiation between good and bad communities of belongings: town and country, inclusion and exclusion (Tincknell 2002: 150). While Sydney represents the cosmopolitan cultural space, where a

gay lifestyle is possible, Tick, Adam and Ralph are confronted with aggression and rural homophobia on their journey across Australia into the outback. In "Doing Landscape", Brophy's reading is most attentive toward the representation of the encounter between the drag queens and a group of indigenous people in the middle of the desert. The trio stages a lip-synched performance of Gloria Gaynor's disco anthem "I will survive" for them. Again, Brophy joins the dots between drag, music and standardised Australian signs to question what kind of Australian consciousness is celebrated in the visual narrative of *Priscilla*. As the song swells, the music is suddenly marked by the sound of a didgeridoo, while the camera swings back to capture the two marginalized groups, the drag queens and the Aborigines, dancing together. In biting tone, Brophy criticizes the "white" employment of the indigenous instrument for national promotional topography (46), referring to similar instances in Australian TV shows and advertisements. There is no deeper understanding of indigenous space:

It's fractured covering of an assimilation fantasy is an awkward attempt to mock, frock and cock what is a sono-molecular fusion of black and gay culture. The didgeridoo is the tell-tale sign of this operation (44).

At the latest, it is at that point that the Brophy map unfolds before the eye of its readershi The reading of *Priscilla* seems to serve but only as a possibility to call attention to this self-distorted mirror image of Australian culture.

Clearly, one of the shortcomings of Brophy's passionate response is his disinterest in assigning *Priscilla* to a specific film genre or trend. Only once does he mention that it is an Australian version of an American road movie (Wimmer 2007: 108). Even more, *Priscilla*, like *Strictly Ballroom* (1992) and *Muriel's Wedding* (1994) is part of what Emily Rustin has termed the "Glitter cycle", a sub-genre of Australian film, criticizing national narrative traditions (Craven 2001:9). The protagonists of these films are able to change the circumstances of their lives and to liberate themselves from social conditions that restrict them (Rustin 2001: 133). Through making use of a camp aesthetic, the possibility of sexual and gender fluidity

is mediated (Tincknell 2002: 151), denouncing a celebrated (and constructed) white, male heterosexual Australian national identity.

In "Being Gay" and "Making Monsters", Brophy concentrates upon the post-*Priscilla* effect on Australian gay culture and how the film presents the identity shaping of Mitzi and his friends. Here, Brophy is looking for allies in his criticism, recalling an episode from the 1995 Sydney Mardi Gras, where drag queens protested the celebration of the Australian film's industry's unreconstructed projection of gay stereotypes. Once more, Brophy reflects upon the appalling inability to portray subcultures and diversity of sexuality on the screen. Exemplary, he refers to the periodic flashbacks in *Priscilla*, intended to explain so-called gender-turning points of Mitzi, Bernadette and Felicia to the audiences, and concludes:

Each back-story is a textbook explanation from the mouldy couch of psychoanalysis here given insincere lip service for the sake of character explication. The explanations are unconvincing. The queens are not made by others: they make themselves as monsters. (...), their performance remains nothing but inhuman, as they shift their representation of Woman to a series of animalistic, reptilian and monsterised figures (61 passim).

Returning to music and gender representations in the last chapter "Sounding ABBA", Brophy reviews the Australian cinema's embrace of ABBA and *Priscilla's* exploitation of the same. But he is quick in generalising, when interpreting Felicia's showing off of her most precious possession, the bottled turd of Agnetha: "Women-are-shit, pop-is-shit, gays-like-shit" (70). In such moments, his provocative generalisations slip, depressing the level of his reading without taking into account the complexity of female representation and inter-gender relations in the film. Further, the chapter is a rare moment in his essay when comparing *Priscilla* to another Australian feature film, *Muriel's Wedding*, of the same decade. The chapter concludes with his argument that as a result of the film and its exhaustive use of their songs, exemplary referring to Mitzi and Felicia's drag to "Mamma Mia", ABBA has "insinuated itself into iconic codings of Australian identity" (77).

In the epilogue, subtitled "Burning Maps", Brophy summarizes his concerns and again, explains his proceeding in reading Priscilla against its affirmation of a consciously constructed Australian national identity. If reading his map correctly, the message is to break the self-distorted portraiture of Australia into pieces and critically reflect on the *Other's* images of Australia:

Australia's self-image has never evolved from contact with a looking lass, it only sees itself through logos, brands and icons streamlined and stylised rather than impressed or reflected (81).

Despite minor criticism, his reading of Priscilla, pulsing with striking associations connecting the dots of a detailed, colourful map, is an exceptional contribution to and critical view upon Australian screen culture.

Thus, Brophy's essay is a valuable and most needed read that will both leave a sour taste in one's mouth about the "dumb semiotics" (5) of Australian film and culture and further, nourish hope for a more critical audience and an Australian screen culture that is not "pre-labelled and self-proclaimed", but "nurture(s) discovery and allow(s) repulsion" (1). In the light of the most recent success of Baz Luhrmann's *Australia* (2007), however, I can see Philip Brophy throwing up his hands in horror.

### **Bibliography**

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