

Australia. Australia, 2008. Directed by Baz Luhrmann. Starring Nicole Kidman and Jack Hughes. Also with David Gulpilil and Bryan Brown. **Reviewed by Adi Wimmer,** University of Klagenfurt.

In his famous study *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that a pioneer society like the American could only get excited "about itself." The same might be said about Australians. Can we imagine a German author offering a filmscript with the title "Germany"? Or a Danish writer offering one titled "Denmark"? (Supply your own choice of a European country and snigger derisively.) But in Australia, this film title raised no critical eyebrows. It did create an opportunity for Hugh Jackman at the Academy Award ceremony of February 21 to joke about it: "The whole industry is downsizing" he said, the new film in which I will star is called *New Zealand*.

The film was heavily mauled by the critics, and Baz Luhrmann must be crying all the way to the bank. To date, the film has grossed US\$ 206 mio, on a budget that was a spectacular \$ 130 mio., the highest production budget in Australian film history. DVD sales have only just begun, so the total earnings from the film seem to be set for another Australian record.

But let us have a closer look at this three-hour Nicole Kidman extravaganza. The time is 1939 and we meet Lady Sarah Ashley on her English estate, going for a morning ride (an important detail; later on her equestrian skills will qualify her to outback hero status.) Testily, she informs her butler she is taking a boat for northern Australia to force her husband to sell his financially troubled cattle station Faraway Downs. In Darwin she is met by a drover (Hugh Jackman); his film name is "Drover": But when they arrive at Faraway Downs, they find that Lady Sarah's husband has been murdered. The murder weapon was a spear, so "King George" (David Gulpilil), a local Aborigine, is suspected.

Childless Lady Sarah is captivated by the 10-year old part-Aboriginal boy Nullah, who tells her that her husband's station manager Fletcher is in cahoots with the evil 'cattle baron' King Carney (Bryan Brown) and has stolen the fattest steers for the latter's benefit. Sarah also guesses who Nullah's father is, and why Nullah's mother, a local Aboriginal servant girl, is so frightened of Fletcher. So she horse-whips and fires him. With Fletcher's help, King Carney has been trying to gain a cattle monopoly in the Northern territories so that he can dictate the price of beef to the Australian army. Resisting the bully Carney, Sarah decides to run Faraway Downs herself.

As a first step, she needs to take a herd of 1.500 heads of cattle to Darwin for sale. (In previous aerial shots we saw nothing but drought-stricken land around her station, but by a cineastic miracle a huge herd of well-fed cattle appear from nowhere.) Carney already has as many heads for sale there, but the Army's chief cattle buyer is hopeful Lady Sarah's cattle will make it to Darwin, thus bringing down the price. Sarah needs the help of good-looking Drover, a model of racial tolerance, who is for this reason shunned by most of his 'mates'. We learn he had been married to an Aboriginal woman (who would have *illegally* married them in the racist conditions of the Thirties?), but she was refused medical treatment at a local hospital and so she died. Reluctantly, Drover leads a team of five other riders including Lady Sarah, his Aboriginal brother-in-law Magarri and Nullah to drive the cattle to Darwin. Carney sends out Fletcher and two henchmen to prevent their reaching Darwin; they make the cattle stampede, and one drover is killed. However, Nullah stops the cattle from stampeding over a cliff, by using magic learned from his grandfather King George. Who then appears out of nowhere; with more magic he helps them get the cattle through the deadly "Never-Never" desert, a four-day trek. Isn't it wonderful how an Aboriginal sorcerer can make the thirst of 1.500 cattle disappear? Then, when at last delivering the cattle in Darwin, the group has to race them onto the ship before Carney's cattle can be loaded. Good has won over Bad, and we could call it a day.

But this would not suffice for an 'epic story'. Two years on, Lady Sarah, Drover and the quasi-adopted Nullah live happily at Faraway Downs. But then the menace re-appears in the form of Fletcher. After marrying King Carney's only daughter Cath he kills Carney, taking over not only his empire but also his dream of eliminating the competition by Faraway Downs. His point of attack against Lady Sarah is Nullah: he blackmails her to have him removed by the NT police. So sure is he of his success that he more or less admits he was her husband's killer. While on 'walkabout' with his grandfather, Nullah is indeed captured by the authorities. King George is thrown into a Darwin jail and Nullah sent to live on 'Mission Island' with a brace of part-Aboriginal children. We are now in 1942 and the Japanese air force attack both the island and Darwin. Lady Sarah fears that Nullah was killed. But her faithful Drover heroically purloins a boat, sails to Mission island, and snatches all the half-cast children from the fangs of the vile Japs, who have (a-historically) occupied this Australian island. His Aboriginal brother-in-law sacrifices his life for the plan to succeed and is felled by a Japanese bullet. A few loose ends need to be tied up: Fletcher has managed to make Sarah sell him her station, is cursed by Nullah, tries to shoot Nullah, his own child, but King George, who was accidentally freed when Japanese bombs fell on his jail, appears in the nick of time to spear Fletcher. All live happily ever after on Faraway Downs. Nullah completes his 'walkabout' initiation with his granddad, who says to Sarah he will show him the country: "our land" as he mutters. Curtain, and rapturous applause.

The story is told by Nullah in a series of VOs. This is a clever move that raises Nullah's status in the story and directs our political gaze onto the discourse of the 'Stolen Generation', to whom the film is dedicated. White attitudes to blacks are consequently used as a litmus test to decide who is good and bad: Drover is good because he chose an Aboriginal girl as his partner. Lady Sarah is also good because she likes Nullah and respects his grandfather. Fletcher of course is evil because he routinely forced station Aborigines to have sex with him, caring little for the offspring of these relationships. In one of the early scenes we see a publican named 'Ivan' (a Russian immigrant) refuse entry first to an Aboriginal drover then to Sarah

(she is a woman); at the end of the film Ivan has dropped his double whammy of sexism and racism. And before the final credits begin to roll, we get a series of educative texts amounting to a potted history of the 'Stolen Generation'. So Baz Luhrmann cleverly positions himself on the side of Reconciliation, which will not harm the film's sales figures. The final sentence refers to Kevin Rudd's famous 'Apology' in February of 2008. You can't get more topical than that.

But this appropriation of the discourse of Reconciliation isn't my only gripe. The film is clichéd beyond belief: in the early stages of the story Lady Sarah is portrayed as a typically spoilt, irritable and fickle British lady. Some fun is got out of a scene in which Drover gets into a fist-fight, accidentally using Lady Sarah's many suitcases that she brought from England as missiles. When Sarah surveys the dusty street that is littered with the all-too feminine contents of her suitcase, she is reduced to British whimpers. Cut to the next scene and she is in a beat-up truck travelling her to her station, fitted out in an absurd tropical helmet and veil – and suddenly, three kangaroos turn up outside, merrily bouncing along, and this reduces her (again) to incoherent babbles and squeals of delight. Why would kangaroos choose the company of a noisy truck? To make my point, one of the truck's fellow travellers fells a roo with a single shot, and that of course produces more incoherent sounds from Lady Sarah. However, in the course of the film she is thoroughly reformed and Australianized. In the end she defers to the greater wisdom of Drover on the one hand, and King George on the other. She has even dropped her English accent.

'Drover' meanwhile only communicates in monosyllables. He is the typical outback mate, stoical, independent, laconic and *chaste* (we never see him and Lady Sarah in an intimate scene.) He drinks, but never during driving, and when Lady Sarah (in her British ignorance) refuses to take his advice on Nullah's needs as an indigenous boy, walks out on her! Yip, Aborigines were *that* important to Australian drovers in the 1940s!

The film has been compared to *Gone With the Wind*, a similarly appalling movie. (Baz Luhrmann, according to a German journal

article was trying to create the Australian equivalent to *Gone With the Wind*.) The 'romantic' hero of Margaret Mitchell's novel is called 'Ashley', like the heroine of this film. A coincidence? *Gone with the Wind* is insufferably condescending to the few Blacks in it, while *Australia* veers off in the opposite direction, attempting to erase some of the country's racist past. In 1942, would an Aboriginal warrior accused of murdering a white farmer have survived several months in a Darwin jail after his capture?

The script has borrowed from another US film, the Western *Shane* (1956). This film, set in Wyoming of the 1890s, treats the conflict between a cattle baron and a group of newly arrived farmers. The cattle baron employs a gunslinger named – Fletcher! In the end both are killed. Another coincidence? And finally, there is a parallel to an Australian period film of the 1980s: *We of the Never Never*. Baz Luhrman quotes extensively from this film, particularly the long aerial shots of the seemingly never-ending land, and he borrows "Never-Never" for the name of the desert that Drover and Ashley (and their 1500 cattle) have to cross.

In Charles Chauvel's landmark film *Jedda* (1955) the narrative is punctuated by a series of wild locational changes: In one scene, stockmen are hunting water buffalo in open grassland, in the next we are in the middle of a desert, in the next we find ourselves in a tropical jungle, while the final scene uses King's Canyon for its setting. The same charge can be laid against *Australia*. A major irritation is that Faraway Downs must be located several 100 kms south or east of Darwin, but there is no sandy desert in that region. Also it takes the cattle about a week to get there, but when Carney sends Fletcher out to prevent the herd from reaching its destination, he seems to make the ride in just one day. Or how about the location where Ashley and Drover plus their herd strike camp for the first time: it is at the edge of the Bungle Bungle range, an iconic location well known in its appearance to friends of Australia – and of course the range lies about 2000 km away, in Central Western Australia. This may appear to be mere nit-picking, but a film which takes such liberties cannot be expected to be taken seriously.