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***Author/Byline:** Tony Moore **Edition:** 5 - All-round Review **Section:** Review **Page:** 006 **Readability:** >12 grade level (Lexile: 1600)*

Not Quite Hollywood salutes Australia's maverick cinema of the 1970s and '80s, writes Tony Moore

LAUNCHING his film Kill Bill in Sydney a few years back, Quentin Tarantino paid tribute to one of his favourite Australian directors, Brian Trenchard-Smith. The assembled bigwigs from what's left of the local film industry were shocked.

This little-known director's high-camp action movies, with titles such as The Man From Hong Kong, Dead-End Drive In and Turkey Shoot long had been discarded on the rubbish tip of Australian film history, where they would not pollute our hard-earned international reputation for sophisticated, tasteful cinema such as My Brilliant Career and Picnic at Hanging Rock.

But that night Tarantino warned those who did not appreciate Trenchard-Smith's car chases, explosions and kung-fu kicks to leave the theatre right away because Kill Bill sped down the same fast lane of high-octane thrills and spills. ``I just live to stick a weed up the ass of snobs,'' the American auteur of cool declares in Not Quite Hollywood, a startling and very funny new feature-length documentary exploring the outrageous Ozploitation cinema made in Australia in the 1970s and '80s.

Ozploitation (short for Australian exploitation) is director Mark Hartley's original term for the genres -- gross-out comedies, sex romps, action and road movies, teen films, westerns, thrillers and horror -- embraced by a rogue's gallery of maverick directors, producers, actors, technicians and hustlers during the golden age of government funding and the notorious 10BA tax concession. The label is elastic enough to include beer-swilling innocent abroad Barry McKenzie, the eerie ``nature fights back'' thriller Long Weekend, brutal biker expose Stone and the thinking person's road rage fantasy, Mad Max.

A cinematic Dr Frankenstein, Hartley has brought back to life an alternative Australian movie-making tradition that will be a revelation to younger people spoon-fed the official canon of art-house and historical films.

``As a kid my parents and teachers insisted I see quality films like Picnic at Hanging Rock,'' he explains. ``Then I saw this movie Patrick, about a telekinetic coma victim, on commercial TV late one night and it thrilled, excited and downright scared me, just like the horror films made in the US but with our voices, faces and places. I didn't know we could do that.''

Hartley does not want to be perceived as a lover of trash, fetishising films just because the critical establishment hated them. ``I have an interest in Australian cinema overall. We have such a diversity of films and it's a shame more people don't know them.''

A graduate from Melbourne's Swinburne film school who has directed music clips for the likes of You Am I and Powderfinger, Hartley is equally fond of the canon and made a documentary about Picnic at Hanging Rock to accompany that film's DVD release. But rejecting the prejudice that has seen well-made visceral cinema wither on the vine of popular and critical memory, he has put his talents where his mouth is and packaged more than 30 Australian genre films for DVD as well.

Now, Not Quite Hollywood asks whether these Ozploitation films deserve to be sneered at and forgotten as Americanised drive-in fodder or if they show that Australians can make movies that are exciting, exportable and surprisingly evocative of the culture that produced them?

Without a word of narration, Hartley persuades us of their merit. Instead, he immerses us in the films and the self-deprecating, behind-the-scenes confessions of the people who made and starred in them. With a soundtrack from thegolden age of Oz rock, Not Quite Hollywoodevokes fond nostalgia for the roaring daysof flares, lairs, waterbeds and long lunches. But its rapid-fire editing, split screens, digital animation and irreverence jolts the tired art of Australian documentary into the 21st century.

Checking today's tut-tutting political correctness at the choc-top counter, Hartley opens with a salute to the era of ``ockers, nockers, pubes and tubes'', a risque roller-coaster ride through the pioneering, R-rated Stork, Naked Bunyip, The Adventures of Barry McKenzie, Alvin Purple and Petersen. When I was a kid in the '70s desperate to see these flicks, we thought R stood for rude, and on that score these cheeky parodies about Aussie blokes disoriented by the sexual revolution do not disappoint.

Notorious for their colourful slang, naked flesh (refreshingly dimpled, pale and pre-Brazilian) and obsessions with bodily fluids, the ocker and sex comedies might have outraged wowsers, but they also kick-started the film revival of the early '70s. Barry McKenzie made more than $1 million, while Alvin was seen by 10 per cent of the population and grossed $4.7 million (about $35million today).

This was because of a cross-class appeal to the young urban sophisticates rooting for the permissive society and suburban drive-in audiences who enjoyed a bit of slap and tickle.

Reviewers were less impressed. Ron Saw moaned in the Daily Mirror that had Barry McKenzie ``not been quite so tasteless

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I might have been ill''. Predictably, The Age condemned the ocker films for their use of the low arts of burlesque, farce and tasteless ribaldry, and reviewer Colin Bennett mocked them as ``Carry on Aussie''.

But much more was going on. The filmmakers responsible for the ocker craze -- Tim Burstall, Bruce Beresford, Barry Humphries, David Williamson, Graeme Blundell and Phillip Adams -- were cosmopolitan artists consciously using traditional comedic forms enjoyed by Australians to hurl a few tinnies at the new nationalists, swingers, hippies, sex therapists, admen and women's libbers who had seized the spotlight.

An anti-authoritarian **larrikin streak** satirising the pretensions of the ``Australian cultural renaissance'' bestows an ironic intelligence on these films, missed by the curmudgeon critics.

Not Quite Hollywood hits its stride as it moves into the later '70s and '80s, to reveal a lost cinematic landscape populated by psychopathic bushrangers, lusty (and busty) heroines, marauding yobbos, vigilante cops, edge-of-the-seat car chases, grisly slashers, breathtaking stunts and scary bush encounters with marsupial werewolves, killer crocs, vampires, giant feral pigs, spooky dugongs and loonies with spear guns. Many of these were produced by dealmaker Antony Ginnane under the 10BA tax provision that had turbo-charged the industry by providing investors with a 150 per cent tax write-off.

Reviewers, including Adams, who admits ``many of us were very snobby about genre films'', attacked them for selling out Australia to Hollywood forms, and for hiring American actors such as Dennis Hopper and Jamie Lee Curtis to enhance export appeal. But there was always something not quite Hollywood about these films, something weirdly Australian.

Sometimes it takes an immigrant, such as US expat Everett De Roche, who penned Road Games and Patrick, to see the exotic strangeness in Australia, as he did when crass city-slickers tore through the wildlife in Long Weekend.

George Miller explains the genesis of Mad Max in his confrontation with ``autocide'' as a doctor in emergency wards stitching up the carnage of car accidents. Adams wanted Mad Max banned for its Hollywood-style violence. From the convict gulags to the Cronulla riots, however, a seam of random biffo runs through Australian culture that cinema cannot ignore.

Hartley shakes up the customary divide between art house and drive-in by revealing a border happily breached by actors such as Sigrid Thornton and Wendy Hughes, Academy Award-winning cameramen John Seale and Russell Boyd, and directors Beresford and Peter Weir.

Academic and commentator Catharine Lumby argues in her book on Alvin Purple that the distinction between arty and genre cinema always said more about the class prejudice of critics than the value of the films. Thus Max Harris warned that ``Barry McKenzie, Alvin Purple are merely surface reflections of a backward shift to uneducated attitudes, a reversion to proletarian tribalism''. Burstall fired back in defence of ``the disruptive anarchic entertainment values of the cinema-going public''.

New audiences who discovered these films on late-night television or video relished them from a position of greater cultural confidence.

Hartley, 39, represents a sensibility widespread in genX that sees beyond arbitrary and easy labels of good and bad taste to find value in unexpected places. Sure, some of the genre films were half-baked, but even when a film is bad there is often a scene that confounds expectations and lifts it on to another plain of enjoyment.

Jane Mills, editor of the Currency Press Australian Screen Classics series, promotes the idea that an essential ingredient of movies' magic is their capacity to give pleasure. She worries that ``in recent years too many filmmakers don't realise that art can include pleasure that isn't necessarily morally uplifting in the way that art cinema usually mandates''.

Hartley understands this pleasure principle instinctively, and unapologetically treats us to a succession of what industry insiders call the money shots, those sequences into which directors pour blood, sweat and budget to stun their audience, such as the motor bike-off-a-cliff-into-the-ocean stunt from Stone and the chopper chase over Uluru in The Man From Hong Kong.

These films did well overseas. In 1975, The Man From Hong Kong smashed box-office records for the highest opening week in London. Patrick wowed buyers at Cannes in 1978, leaving competitors The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith and Newsfront in its wake with sales of more than $500,000. It was the highest priced Australian film sold to Canada and Asia.

Mad Max replicated its Australian success in the US and catapulted its star Mel Gibson into the international A league. Yet there is little celebration of this export success in the Australian film industry.

Ignorance of our screen history condemns the public film commissars to reject winning ideas as un-Australian. Hartley's youngest interviewees, James Wan and Leigh Whannell, found it easier to raise the cash for their creepy splatter thriller Saw in the US and left local financiers scratching their heads in bemusement as it became a worldwide hit spawning two sequels.

In an echo of the disdain that greeted genre movies in the past, Not Quite Hollywood met with incomprehension at the top of the national film funding body. Producer Michael Lynch says he was buoyed by ``consistent support from the Film Finance Corporation at a project level'', but that ``its board continued to miss the cultural and commercial potential of the film''.

``We had so many knockbacks and, as months turned into years, some of the older people we had lined up to interview, like Tim Burstall, passed away,'' a still smarting Hartley reveals.

Not Quite Hollywood had come up hard against the bourgeois taste barrier it wanted tocritique. Lynch recalls, ``The ABC just didn't get it, at least back then.'' Then, just like a feel-good Hollywood ending, huge American and British presales came to the rescue, meaning the FFC could no longer say no, lifting the documentary's horizons into the big budget league ($1.7 million) and cinema release. To cap it off, SBS proved a lot hipper than Aunty ABC and will televise Not Quite Hollywood next year.

The times may suit Hartley's film. In recent years there has been a revival in local genre filmmaking thanks to the success of outback fear fest Wolf Creek, vulgarian portable toilet comedy Kenny and gothic outback western The Proposition. This time, the critics have backed popular taste, recognising that these films have more to say about living in Australia than film school meditations on alienation and getting laid in inner-city Newtown and Carlton.

In this climate, is it too much to hope that Arts Minister Peter Garrett might appoint a couple of genre-savvy stalwarts to the board of the new Screen Australia so future Hartleys don't have to go offshore to fund our stories?

Tony Moore is author of The Barry McKenzie Movies (Currency Press). Not Quite Hollywood will be released nationally on August 28.

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