Forget *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *My Brilliant Career*, says **Tony Moore,** the landmarks of Australian film are ocker comedies such as *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* and *Alvin Purple*

TRUE BLUE

Ocker oeuvre: From left, Barry Crocker hams it up in *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie*; a scene from *Picnic at Hanging Rock*; Graham Kennedy with John Hargreaves and Ray Barrett in *Don's Party*; Bruce Spence and Jacki Weaver in *Stork*; the man behind love god Alvin Purple, Graeme Blundell; Jack Thompson and Weaver in *Petersen*

THE Australian cinema renaissance of the 1970s has valuable lessons for today's struggling industry, if we can move beyond the good-taste films that are continuously recycled on television and DVD and rediscover the forgotten gems of the era.

These forgotten gems include ocker comedies (*The Adventures of Barry McKenzie*), thrillers (*End Play*), gothic horrors (*The Long Weekend*) and action flicks (*Man From Hong Kong*).

Considering why these films were not just intelligent but also popular, pleasurable and profitable might allow us to dispense with the crippling notion of Australian film as worthy but uncommercial. They can also teach us to appreciate a new wave of local genre movies wowing young audiences.

The canon of Australian films eulogised today excludes many others of the era, perhaps not so tasteful, that have tremendous creative value and won huge audiences. The accepted canon begins in 1976 with *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and includes *The Devil's Playground*, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* and *My Brilliant Career*.

These films were judged to be the equal of European art house, and therefore superior to the first wave of the revival, dominated by comedies such as *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie*, *Stork* and *Alvin Purple*, and other genres that emerged in their wake.

Despite, or because of, their commercial success, these movies were frequently disparaged by critics, especially after the so-called sophistication of Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, as vulgar examples of the Australian industry's gauche adolescence.

But the people behind these movies — Bruce Beresford, Barry Humphries, Tim Burstall, David Williamson, Philip Adams — were far from mere commercial showmen, and they smuggled all sorts of critical insights and visceral pleasures into their work.

Rather than as venerable icons, the '70s film-makers should be appreciated for the iconoclastic, subversive and frequently vulgar young people they were.

Ocker cinema emerged at the beginning of the film revival as both a celebration and critique of the Australian masculine national character. It included the Williamson-penned films *Stork*, *Petersen* and *Don's Party*, and the *Alvin Purple* and *Barry McKenzie* movies.

Of all the films in this genre, the two *Barry McKenzie* films, starring Barry Crocker, are most emblematic. Arising from a creative collaboration between Humphries and Beresford, *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (1972) and *Barry McKenzie Holds His Own* (1974) satirise a host of anxieties confronting Australians in a time of rapid social change, over sex roles, race, colonialism, national identity, suburbia, philistinism and politics.

The first movie was a commercial smash, earning more than $1 million and proving that an Australian film could hold its own at the box office against Hollywood and British imports. It also broke records for an Australian film in Britain.

Why remember this film today? As the first feature funded by the new government film bank, AFDC, *Barry McKenzie* became a flagship of the "new nationalism" and the Australian cultural renaissance it mocked. Bazza, sporting his "one-eyed trouser snake" and the new R certificate, also played his part in the permissive sex'n'sin atmosphere of the early '70s media as a leading boundary breaker, helping to free up what could be said and shown as public art.

But these films should not be framed simply as nostalgia. The movies are important because they interrogate key tensions in our culture, between provincial Australia and the British metropolitan centre, the artist and the working-class larrikin, the wowser and the libertine, authority and unruliness, cosmopolitanism and white Australia.

Bazza was not alone in the '70s. Williamson pillaged his bohemian networks for stories and characters that gave his plays an edgy authenticity. *Stork*, starring Bruce Spence and Jackie Weaver, and *Petersen* dissected the plight of socially mobile young men from the wrong side of the tracks thrust into bohemian milieus through tertiary education.

Williamson sympathised with working-class aspirationals, depicted in characters such as Jack Thompson's Petersen, whose movement from tradesman to university graduate was threatened by the cynical dilettantes of the academic world.

His *Don's Party*, directed by Beresford in 1976, looked at ageing radicals dispirited and bitter in the mire of suburban compromise, disorientated by the individual freedom promised by the new counter-culture.

Burstall created the libidinous everyman Alvin Purple, a typically suburban Australian male, portrayed by Graeme Blundell, who for no apparent reason was irresistible to all women. Alvin Purple wanders child-like through Melbourne's bohemian and professional subcultures reducing female artists and career women alike to nymphomaniacal frenzy.

Here the unsophisticated ocker is foil to have fun with the implications of sexual and women's liberation. While Alvin would not be out of place in the contrived slap and tickle of contemporary British *Carry On* films, Burstall's insight into cosmopolitan subculture lifts the film's horizons. A sequel and ABC TV series followed.

Why did audiences flock to films such as *Barry McKenzie*, *Alvin Purple* and *Petersen*?

In my view, what made audiences applaud the theatre, films and writing of the early '70s was the injection of a sense of play that originated within the young artists' irreverent and permissive bohemianism.

Burstall argued that "one of the best ways of getting an Australian audience to accept itself, one of the things we're fondest of, is the send-up. We're prepared to look at life and laugh at it in a way that we're not prepared to look at our life and be serious about it."

Running through the ocker films is an immensely entertaining, visceral and subversive style of Australian comedy I call the larrikin carnivalesque. This form of dissent has deep roots in Australia's folk memory, where it's often referred to as our "larrikin streak", going back to *The Bulletin* and Roy Rene, and is apparent in popular TV comedies such as *Kath & Kim*.

Through the ocker films of the early '70s, both the federal government and the film-makers came to recognise that Australian films could be popular, and that commercial and "quality" were not mutually exclusive.

But the ocker trend was criticised by an older generation who could not read the social satire in the new nationalism, dismissing it as dumbing down. For some, a film's very commercial success condemned it as low entertainment aimed at the masses.

Conservatives were duly outraged. What would people overseas think of Australia now? *The Age* fretted that films such as *Barry McKenzie* "would only serve to confirm the world's suspicions that we are a *Wake in Fright* nation of Bazzas and Storks".

Modernist artists and critics from an earlier generation, notably the ubiquitous cultural commentator Max Harris, despaired that "we thought we had won the battle in the decades since the 1940s. But clearly we lost the war. Now we're back where we started. Mr Adams, Bob Hawke, Barry Humphries et al have taken advantage of the so-called new nationalism. Ocker is celebrated. Ocker is phoenix. Ocker is king."

Adams gleefully replied that Harris may have once been an Angry Penguin but he was now a muddle-headed wombat. The avant-garde art of the Angry Penguins in the '40s had explored nationalist themes, but in an elitist way.

The new-nationalist artists of the early '70s