

Australian season

Animal Kingdom

“...Melbourne's answer to America's Ma Barker of the Dillinger era or Britain's Violet Kray, mother of the notorious Reggie and Ronnie.”

Notes compiled by Ann MacInnes

Film-making started early on in Australia, and some claim that *Soldier of the Cross*, made in Melbourne in 1900, was the world's first full-length feature. But what we now think of as Australian cinema began in the early 70s with "the last new wave," the title of an important 1980 book by the Australian critic and broadcaster David Stratton. The movies that initially made an international impact dealt with the shaping of national identity, cultural exchanges with the aboriginal population and the mystical relationship with the country and its vast, empty interior. One thinks especially of movies with period settings such as Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, Fred Schepisi's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, Bruce Beresford's *The Getting of Wisdom* and Gillian Armstrong's *My Brilliant Career*, which in 1979 was the first Australian picture to be shown in competition at Cannes.



Eden Court Cinema

Tuesday 7 October 2014 at 7.15pm

2009, Australia, Colour

Running time: 108 mins.

Genre: Crime drama

Cast: Ben Mendelsohn, Joel Edgerton, Guy Pearce, James Frecheville, Jacki Weaver, Sullivan Stapleton

Director: David Michôd

Screenplay: David Michôd

But there has also been a different, parallel tradition about urban or, more particularly, suburban life, harsh demotic prose to the poetry of Weir, Schepisi, Beresford and Armstrong. By the late 80s, these films had become the dominant tendency and are altogether less beguiling, less exotic for foreign audiences. This stream has two contrasting currents: the seductively amusing, semi-satiric celebrations of the cosy suburbs (*Strictly Ballroom*, *Sweetie*, *Muriel's Wedding*), and tougher, more realistic psychological dramas of middle-class frustration (*Lantana*) or working-class despair, often involving drug-taking (*Candy*, the last film Heath Ledger made on home ground). *Animal Kingdom*, the highly promising feature debut of writer-director David Michôd, belongs in the latter category and is one of the most striking Australian pictures to reach this country over the past couple of years.

Based loosely on actual events, *Animal Kingdom* is a psychological crime story set in 1980s Melbourne and begins in a matter-of-fact way with a woman appearing to be asleep



while watching an inane quiz show on TV. In fact she's just died from a heroin overdose, and an efficient pair of paramedics arrive to take her away. Her 17-year-old son, Joshua, an ungainly, mumbling, taciturn lad, calls his long-estranged grandmother, Janine (Jacki Weaver), who rushes over to welcome him back into the family.

She's a warm, all-loving nan, around 50, a bleached blonde, heavily made up. It soon becomes apparent, however, that she's Melbourne's answer to America's Ma Barker of the Dillinger era or Britain's Violet Kray, mother of the notorious Reggie and Ronnie. She's devoted to her three sons, the charismatic psychopath Andrew, known as Pope (Ben Mendelsohn), the drug-dealing Craig, and the dim Darren and their friend Barry. All are career criminals and she won't hear a word against them. Love and family loyalty transcend morality and the law, and young Joshua, who acts as not so much an unreliable narrator as an uninformative one, is inducted into a world his mother was clearly fleeing.

To the Cody family, crime is a way of life, the only one they know, and Michôd makes their milieu hideously and comically convincing. Reformation is not an option, though two options to armed robbery suggest themselves: working the stock market, which Barry believes to be an easier way of making money, or, as Craig is doing, peddling drugs: marijuana, cocaine and heroin. While they're considering these choices the police take the law into their own hands and kill a member of the gang. This invites extreme vengeance, with the hapless Joshua drawn in, bringing with him his lower-middle-class girlfriend and her bewildered parents. It is at this point that one of the city's more honest cops, Detective Senior Sgt Nathan Leckie (Guy Pearce), enters the scene, attempting to save the dithering Joshua by getting him to testify against his uncles.

Michôd handles the moral and psychological undercurrents adroitly and the casual violence with circumspection, and one is reminded of TV series such as *The Wire*, the gangster pictures of Scorsese, and George V Higgins's novels of criminals, cops and lawyers in Irish-American Boston. The film's title suggests an ethological aspect, and indeed the Cody family stalk around their rather cramped house like caged animals, and Detective Leckie makes a neat little speech about the weak and the powerful within the natural world. But equally important is the Melbourne setting. This is a city that, like Boston, has a sedate, civilised surface and a turbulent, aggressive underworld. When a safe place is needed for Joshua to meet his duplicitous lawyers, the location chosen is Victoria's quiet, infinitely civilised National Gallery.

The criminals, however, are not recent immigrants. Violence was there from the start, when Australia was settled by convicts accompanied by their jailers and exploiters. Just to the north of Melbourne is the area once dominated by Ned Kelly and his bushrangers, who fought the Victoria state police in the 1870s. Kelly became a folk hero, as more recent Melbourne criminals have apparently been, and he was hanged in Melbourne jail on gallows now preserved as a tourist attraction. His last words – "Such is life" – are echoed by the Cody family.

Animal Kingdom is skilfully lit and edited and the performances are remarkable. Particularly good is Guy Pearce, who started out as a juvenile actor in the Melbourne-set soap opera *Neighbours* before demonstrating his versatility in a succession of films ranging from a drag queen in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* to his brilliant turn as the arrogant Edward VIII in *The King's Speech*. His portrait of the decent, driven, despairing detective sergeant is what gives *Animal Kingdom* its hopeful vein of humanity.

Philip French, The Observer, Sunday 27 February 2011

Our next screening...



An Autumn Afternoon

Opening our
Japanese season

on Tuesday 2 September 2014 at 7.15pm

Ozu's final film is his most visually beautiful, and among his most somber. Aside from "Tokyo Story," "Late Spring" and "A Story of Floating Weeds," this is my favorite Ozu film. There are several stories at work - the primary involves a middle-aged father whose adult daughter is reluctant to marry. This film is a serene, graceful masterpiece.

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