

## Opinion

# An Aussie love story that strays far from fact



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As a love story, the film *Australia* is pretty good. If only Baz Luhrmann had left it at that. But with a grandiose title like *Australia*, you are trying to say something much bigger than boy meets girl and falls in love. It means you intend to say something grand – definitive – about a nation and its history. And that is where the film goes wrong.

The basic story is a prissy English aristocrat Lady Sarah Ashley (Nicole Kidman) falls in love with a romantic-but-footloose drover (Hugh Jackman) in the remote Northern Territory. Together they overcome great obstacles in a vast country.

It also wants to tell the story of the stolen generations. It is out to make a statement – not one that will interfere with the box office receipts, but increase them – and show it is more than just a romance. The filmmaker wants to show a conscience, and make a healthy return. Everyone wins.

The key to financial return is the American market. Conventional wisdom says Americans are mostly interested in their own history and culture. So the movie opens by telling us about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, meaning America is at war. Australia is at war and beef producers are competing to supply military contracts. Except by now we are back in 1939; America is not in this war, not at this time.

Luckily, our English rose has seen Judy Garland in *The Wizard Of Oz*. She can therefore sing the show tunes, allowing the movie to intersperse (quite humorously) American culture into the Northern Territory. It's just like Kansas.

And it's a little like *Crocodile Dundee* where a Northern Territory crocodile hunter (Paul Hogan) meets a beautiful woman and goes to New York, producing an American box office hit.

But *Australia* has loftier ambitions. It will tell the story of indigenous Australia through its real star – Nullah – a half-caste Aboriginal boy who Northern Territory police conspire to make part of the stolen generations. Nullah's mother is tragically drowned and his white father wants to shoot him.

If a child has only one parent who is a homicidal maniac, the authorities should be looking to take the child away from that parent – for his own protection. It can hardly be called stealing.

Nullah has come under Ashley's care. If you want to get technical, Ashley has done some child stealing herself, taking the child without any legal authority. But she really cares for Nullah. The hard-hearted authorities don't, because they put him in a mission on an island off Darwin. And now we are about to learn a new revelation of Australian history.

The Japanese aircraft fly over the island on their way to bomb Darwin, while a priest frantically tries to give a radio warning. It is obvious the island is meant to be Bathurst Island, where Father John McGrath of the Catholic mission saw the aircraft which attacked Darwin on February 19, 1942. He radioed Darwin, but was ignored. Although most women and children had been evacuated, the attack killed about 250 people and created widespread panic.

In the movie, Japanese troops invade the mission island and come looking to kill the half-caste children. In reality, no

Japanese troops landed anywhere near the Tiwi Islands or Darwin. If the Imperial Japanese Army had invaded, they wouldn't have worried too much about indigenous (or indeed any other) children. But they didn't land. It just didn't happen – not in Australia, the history.

It is OK to invent things in movie fiction. But this movie wants to look historical. It ends by telling us that the policy of assimilation ended in 1973. (Nobody ever explained what that policy was.) It tells us the Government apologised to the stolen generations in 2008 (which solves the indigenous problem).

But it doesn't give us much other historical information, such as what happened when the missions closed and the welfare system started, or what happened to the Aboriginal stockmen. Why were they put out of business?

As a piece of social analysis, it offers few insights. The most remarkable thing is the stolen child turns out to be stolen from a white woman! As a historical piece it is ... a good romance.

Our Government is spending a large sum to promote tourism on the back of *Australia*. It is long – 2<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> hours – although that's much quicker than travelling here from the US.

But when you get here, the reality is not much like the movie. I think the viewers will figure that out. They know this is not a documentary and not a travelogue. Better to see it as a nice romance: boy meets girl in the Top End and they live happily ever after.

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