

FILM

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WHY IS AUSSIE CINEMA ROOTED?

Despite a handful of gems, the past decade of local movies has been largely one to forget, writes John McDonald.

Opening night at last year's Sydney Film Festival drew the usual crowd of special invitees, many of them unlikely to attend another session.

The film chosen to launch the festival was Rachel Ward's *Palm Beach*, which chronicles the middle crises of a group of old friends who have come together to celebrate the lead character's birthday. An Australian version of *The Big Chill*, the movie drew thunderous applause from the opening night crowd.

It was only later that the feedback turned sour and people began to say what they really thought.

A similar thing happened with David Michod's second feature, *The Rover*, in 2018. At its first SFF screening there was massive applause. The second saw walkouts and lukewarm responses.

After his debut, *Animal Kingdom* (2010), Michod was seen as the great new hope of Australian cinema, but *The Rover* was a disappointment. One presumes the first screening was packed with industry insiders, the second by members of the general public who had no stake in the movie's success.

After reviewing movies for almost a decade, I'm left with one burning question: Whatever happened to Australian film?

The industry's periods of greatest energy have been the 1910s-20s and 1970s-80s, when audiences responded enthusiastically to stories of Australian history and contemporary life. With the exception of a small number of productions, 2010-19 has been a decade to forget.

Having built up a range of observations and theories, I tested them on people with a better first-hand acquaintance with the local film business. Nobody wanted to be identified, and the replies were devastating.

One described "lots of small, grief-stricken moments" with the Australian film industry. "You say, year after year, 'Oh no, this is not going to get us out of the hole.'"

There is a conspiracy of bullshit when it comes to discussing contemporary Australian cinema. Those employed in the



bureaucracy of the industry have a vested interest in making us believe everything is brilliant. There may be as many as 1000 people employed in the administration of the sector; people with no real creative input who are fundamentally risk-averse.

This is reinforced by journalists and reviewers who feel obliged to praise the local product even if it leaves them cold.

Australia produces roughly 30 features a year, which is no great achievement for a country of 25 million people, even if the home box office is discouraging.

The Screen Australia website lists 271 movies released from 2010-2019. I've seen approximately a quarter of these, because there are limits to how much one can endure in the call of duty.

The vast majority had brief seasons at the cinemas and limited releases. The list doesn't include films that were completed but never picked up by distributors.

When we set this against the Australian box office results from 2010-19, it's depressing to find that for most years only

Australian films box office 2010-19

Lion (2017)	\$29,545,626 (5*)
The Great Gatsby (2013)	\$27,383,762 (7)
Peter Rabbit (2018)	\$26,750,712 (8)
Mad Max: Fury Road (2015)	\$21,687,465 (11)
Red Dog (2011)	\$21,475,097 (12)
The Dressmaker (2015)	\$20,284,601 (13)
The Water Diviner (2014)	\$15,869,286 (17)
The Sapphires (2011)	\$14,536,741 (20)

*All-time ranking among Australian top-earners

From top: Guy Pearce and Kylie Minogue put on a brave face in the "sustained humiliation" of *Swinging Safari*; sentimental *Lion* struck a chord at the box office; *Mad Max: Fury Road* was a worldwide smash; Rachael Taylor in Bruce Beresford's "joyous" *Ladies in Black*.

one or two local films made it into the top 50. The most successful are listed in the table in the centre column.

This list is so diverse it would be absurd to attempt generalisations. Everyone will have their favourites and pet hates, but from a critic's perspective the only items that get the seal of approval are George Miller's *Mad Max: Fury Road* and Wayne Blair's *The Sapphires*, with Jocelyn Moorhouse's *The Dressmaker* a possible addition.

The success of Garth Davis's *Lion* has always surprised me because it comes across as a well-made telemovie flavoured with a dollop of sentimentality.

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Max: Fury Road and *Peter Rabbit*—let alone big-budget fantasies such as *Aquaman* and *Gods of Egypt*, or Mel Gibson's *Hacksaw Ridge*—we need to ask: "What makes these films Australian?"

Kids' film *Peter Rabbit* is a US/Australia co-production, directed and scripted by Americans; *The Great Gatsby*, *Hacksaw Ridge* and *Aquaman* are also US/Australia co-productions; *Gods of Egypt* is a co-production between the US, Australia and China; *Mad Max: Fury Road* is credited to the US, Australia and South Africa.

The only one of these films actually set in Australia is *Mad Max*—albeit in the desert, in a bleak, apocalyptic future—and its extensive chase scenes were actually filmed in Namibia. All of them feature international stars in the lead roles, including a range of high-profile Aussies.

There is a gulf that separates these features from those such as *Red Dog*, *Kiv Stenders*' popular tale of an Aussie canine, which twanged heartstrings at home and, to a limited extent, abroad.

The Water Diviner, *The Dressmaker* (with British actress Kate Winslet in the lead role) and *The Sapphires* were more thoroughly Australian in terms of form and content.

The relative popularity of these movies, along with the success of the banal *Ride Like a Girl*, shows there is an audience for Australian-themed stories.

The Sapphires deserves special mention as a breakthrough movie for an Indigenous director and a largely Indigenous cast. Instead of the usual bleak portrayal of the lives of Aboriginal people, it presented a vibrant, utopian story in which the social commentary never overwhelmed our feeling for individual characters.

Russell Crowe's *The Water Diviner* is a patriotic homage to the Anzacs that incorporates a little too much Hollywood into the mix. The plot devices are so cracky and overstated that the director's honourable intentions are buried in a field of corn.

The Dressmaker is more successful in its evocation of a narrow-minded Australian country town and the prodigal daughter who returns to infect the citizens with fashion-mania.

For me, the most significant movies of the decade stand out clearly. Along with *Mad Max: Fury Road*, *The Dressmaker* and *The Sapphires*, there's a lot to admire in David Michod's *Animal Kingdom* (2010), Justin Kurzel's stunning debut, *Snowtown* (2011); Jennifer Kent's intelligent horror movie, *The Babadook* (2014), and her second feature, *The Nightingale* (2018); Mel Gibson's devastating war drama, *Hacksaw Ridge* (2016); and Bruce Beresford's *Ladies in Black* (2018)—one of the most joyous films ever made in this country. There's also much to like in Jeremy Sims' *Last Cab to Darwin* (2015) a melancholy, character-driven drama, and Rodd Rathjen's debut feature, *Buoynancy* (2019).

From 270 films, one might hand out lots of honourable mentions

to feature-length documentaries such as *Red Obsession* (2013), *Gurrumul* (2018), *Hotel Coolgardie* (2017), and now, *Suzi Q* (2019).

Indigenous filmmakers such as Wayne Blair, Ivan Sen and Rachel Perkins also made a series of confident, assured films, although I much preferred the gritty realism of Sen's *Toormelah* (2011) to his excursion into outback noir in *Mystery Road* (2013) and *Goldstone* (2016).

Perkins' signature piece was *Bran Nue Dae* (2010), but this ludicrous musical comedy is a hard film to love. Her later movie *Jasper Jones* (2017) is a solid but undistinguished effort.

While we can applaud the evolution of Indigenous cinema, it must be admitted that some themes are far more attractive than others when it comes to securing official funding.

In the French film industry, the producer is a key figure. It is a two-tiered system that includes commercially minded producers who know how to appeal to popular audiences and those with artistic aspirations who know how to win awards.

In Australia, producers are marginalised in their importance. Instead, we have largely anonymous gatekeepers that look at film treatments being considered for funding and decide who will get the cash.

Sometimes a film academic will suggest that a script needs to be altered to make it acceptable and the filmmaker has very little option but to agree to the changes.

The kind of movies that get funded have led me to imagine the process like this: A film academic is given a treatment to read. He or she doesn't feel comfortable handing over a large sum of money to someone they don't actually know, or for a project that has nothing to do with Indigenous people, climate change, refugees, or any other major political talking point.

Sadly, they decide the only people who can be trusted with funding are their friends or former students, or those directors making the most politically correct product.

This may be why Australian cinema has become so resolutely humourless and grim over the past decade.

It's as if directors have never seen a movie by the Coen Brothers or Quentin Tarantino—directors who know the value of a shot of deadpan humour. But when a director sets out to make a comedy, the results can be even worse, as in Stephen Elliott's *Swinging Safari* (2018), which felt like an exercise in sustained humiliation for the cast.

Fortunately for Elliott, the decade was dominated by an even more embarrassing blockbuster in Baz Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby*. It made me realise the only thing worse than a travesty is a big-budget travesty that wastes an excellent group of actors.

It's an irony that Coalition governments that profess such contempt for all things PC, are cheerfully funding an industry that is steeped in ideological rectitude and contemptuous of commercial potential.

Governments don't really care about the quality of the films that are made. They want only to see the machine continuing to run smoothly, buoyed by the occasional award handed out to an Australian actor—usually for a role in a foreign film.

Bureaucracy is a great leveller and it seems that Australia's film funding bodies are just as happy to hand over money to first-timers as to experienced directors.

Every year a large percentage of films is by first-time directors who rarely seem to make a second film. It would make a lot more sense to be proactive in assisting filmmakers with a proven track record, whether one is thinking of Jane Campion, Rolf de Heer or even Peter Weir.

Meanwhile, we continue to pour money into the creation of tawdry, industrial artefacts that merely keep the machine ticking over, giving the pleasing impression of movement and activity.

The level of local support has remained desultory for so long that it has settled into a comfortable rut. No one has any great expectations of quality, box office revenue or public acceptance. Nothing is ventured, nothing is threatened.

So long as we see our first priority as being "supportive" to this state of affairs, Australia will continue to make a tidy, annual set of movies that nobody wants to watch. ❧

John McDonald also writes on visual art for The Sydney Morning Herald.