

# The State of the Australian Film Art

With his eyes slowly returning to normal from their celluloid state, PETER BENTLEY reports on the latest film festival staged by the Australian Film Institute.

Anyone can become a member of the Australian Film Institute.

Among the benefits of membership is the right to attend the screenings of films which have been entered and then nominated for the various AFI awards (certain reptilian films are not entered).

Members can only vote in the categories for which they are accredited, e.g. actors vote for Best Actor, except for the several general awards which all members can participate in. These general categories are the Members Prize for Excellence, Best Short, Documentary, Experimental Film, and Animated Film.

To vote in any of these categories a member must view all the films nominated in that particular category.

This year since I missed some of the films in certain categories I will only comment on the Features section (Members Prize for Excellence). For most people the features would be the only films they would come into contact with, either through general release (and they do not all achieve this) or video distribution.

Nineteen films were nominated in the 1988 features section. In many ways the major difficulty at the screenings is coordinating the viewing of all the films. For some films it is a painstaking achievement just to have sat through the whole picture.

I have found that usually about one third of the features are terrible, one third are acceptable and one third are reasonable. Occasionally a couple are quite good.

This year this ratio continued. Rather than list the films according to my probably biased rating, I have decided to make a few comments about the themes evident at this year's screenings and also about the presentation of religion in some of these films.

The Australian film industry has often been criticised for being obsessed with period films. This year's screenings revealed that over three quarters of the features were set in the contemporary arena and only a couple of films were classic period films (*The Man from Snowy River* and *The Lighthorsemen*).

The development of or lack of rela-

tionships provided the basis for most of these contemporary films. The situations displayed proved quite encompassing, ranging from the 'separated, but united in the end family' in *Boulevard of Broken Dreams* to the homosexual society in *The Everlasting Secret Family* (see John Meillon in a very different role).

Obsessive attraction proves to be fatal for many in *Grievous Bodily Harm*. John Waters contends with Colin Friels, but only one survives. Guess who?

*Afraid to Dance*, *Fever* and *Jilted* provided examples of the theme of instability within relationships. *Afraid to Dance* contains some interesting exchanges of feelings between the male and the female, but their interaction with a stereotyped Queensland Christian type couple was a bit hard to take.

*Fever* vividly illustrates a shameful lack of trust between the even more stereotyped characters of the seemingly honest country cop, his loving wife, her lusty lover and various drug runners.

*Jilted* lives up to its title for most of the film, though at the end the theme of instability makes way for perhaps the beginnings of commitment.

Wendy Hughes and Norman Kaye are back together again in *Boundaries of the Heart*. This time Kaye plays her widowed father and thankfully their desires are for other people. The father's romance with a much younger woman and the end of her 'Summer of the Seventeenth Doll' relationship provides Hughes with the impetus to leave the stifling country town where they run the local pub.

One film worth looking out for is *Mullaway*. Though it features a few stereotypes there are some encouraging attempts to realistically portray life within an ordinary family who are coping with their dying mother. The portrayal of religious belief in *Mullaway* reflects the view that religion is a crutch for those trying to cope with difficult situations.

The father who finds his religion a great comfort also finds the bottle again when his wife dies. One of the children becomes a religious fanatic, but his reaction is not followed up very well after the mother's death. The church

scenes are quite well done, though I was left wondering which denomination was actually being portrayed. Note the important tirade from the pulpit against homosexuality for later scenes in the film.

As usual many of the Australian films this year featured a setting away from the city or urban life. One was appropriately titled *Where the Outback Ends*. *Jilted* was aptly set on a tropical Queensland island resort.

Strange things happen to people in the outback. In *Incident at Raven's Gate* the presence of a totally unidentifiable something causes problems with machinery, water levels and eventually helps to turn a loving husband into the deranged attempted killer of his wife and brother. Admittedly his wife and brother were beginning an affair, but the cosmic forces allow this to blossom by frying the husband with apocalyptic special effects.

In *Spirits of the Air*, *Gremlins of the Clouds*, a brother and sister continue their life in the desert after the death of their religious father, who left the world of people because they would not come around to his message of love and peace. His son has become obsessed with flying like a bird and his daughter continues his religion by placing as many crosses as possible in each scene she appears in.

In *Rikky and Pete* the religious stereotypes continue in the form of a painful wandering prophet in the desert. Hymns are sung and scripture quoted, but not much else.

You may be wondering if there is a reasonable portrayal of religion in any of this year's films. One which would fit the bill is the Australian/New Zealand co-production *The Navigator*. This film is a strong contender for Best Film and the Members Prize. A child who sees visions leads five 14th century miners on a mission to place a spire on the tower of a cathedral. Their quest takes them to a 20th century city. This act of sacrifice is supposed to affirm their faith in God and save their village from the plague.

This is a very different film about a very different time and culture. A time perhaps of simple faith when a spire meant more than a sign of the male clergy's dominance of the institutional church.