Year of the piss take

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My initial impulse in discussing the 2003 45th Annual AFI Awards was to write about what a poor year it has been for Australian films, but there have been so many articles on this subject recently that it seems merely fashionable to put the boot in again. Instead, let’s try to understand the films as industrial objects and ask what they tell us about the current disjunctions between production and consumption in this country.

As comedy after comedy thudded to earth this year, I noticed that many of these films stemmed from the Macquarie Bank FLIC (Film Licensed Investment Company). FLICs are a part of the present funding regime that is attempting to move production toward a more commercial basis. This is a thankless task. There is a general, though undeniable, link between high production budgets and box office returns. Given that Australian films are always going to have low budgets relative to Hollywood, positioning them in the commercial mainstream is a tenuous business.

The trick is to find a type of filmmaking that can complement rather than compete with Hollywood. Blurred (director Evan Clarry), for example, marks a worthwhile effort at the teenpic, a genre that is popular, and not reliant on stars or expensive special effects.

Asian film industries are adopting horror as a staple genre, while Australia has opted for comedy. Comedies are generally thought to be a genre that represents a good defensive investment with a limited downside. While they might have small theatrical appeal and no international market, they can perform reasonably well in ancillary markets, filling the pipeline for Pay-TV, and let’s not forget that Showtime is a significant investor these days.

Director-actor Nick Giannopoulos finally follows up The Wog Boy with The Wannabes. It’s a tired critical move, but I can’t help seeing this as an allegory for Australian cinema. The central idea is that Australian entertainment industries are wasting their time worrying about talent and intelligence. If your heart’s in the right place and you can overturn Hollywood convention with enough ironic distance, then you’ll be okay. The giveaway here is the appalling and appallingly prominent score by David Hirschfelder, on other projects a composer of skill and subtlety.

Crackerjack (Paul Moloney), the only real box office success of the year, just about gets the mix right. The movie shambles around in a likeable enough way and the plot pretty much falls apart but it seems churlish to point that out. At the other end of the spectrum, The Nugget (Bill Bennett) shows how easy it is to misjudge when you’re taking the piss. This profoundly misanthropic and politically reactionary film suggests that Aussie battlers are stupid and mean-spirited. They should all thank God they aren’t called on to think for themselves too often, or all kinds of bad shit would happen. At the movie’s end we are yet again exhorted, Don’t Worry, Be Happy.

Mick Malone’s follow-up to Crackerjack, Bad Eggs (with Tony Martin), begins as a dryly ironic comedy but then starts to take its crime narrative seriously, as though someone smuggled a Shane Maloney novel on to the set and they started to think they might be able to take a crack at this type of thing too. The nationalist pay-off is in localising a popular genre that people associate with international production, converting the action protagonist into a bloke. Blokes never take themselves too seriously, even when staring down the barrel.

Any film that dares to take itself seriously invites the piss-take, with self-mockery being taken as a badge of national pride. To attempt a national epic such as Burke and Wills or Ned Kelly is to invite a Wills and Burke or, this year, a Ned, 80 minutes of NIDA pretty boys doing rape jokes.

Ned Kelly (director Gregor Jordan) was itself an attempt to test the possibilities of a high budget film with international appeal. There’s a Sam Peckinpah film in there somewhere but the story of outlaws inevitably succumbing to the establishment is itself too much of an establishment exercise, respectful of approved styles. There are some wistful Celtic pipes, some bleach bypass cinematography and
some good opportunities for the actors to do their working class accents, but alas, no hint of the shambling majesty of a Peckinpah film or even the flash boldness of Chopper.

This brings us to Gettin’ Square (Jonathan Teplitzky) which is like a night out at a casino—a mainstream pleasure for those who accept the nastiness of the world. Lots of colour, lots of cinematography, lots of soundtrack, moderate amounts of Packer money. David Wenham gets to play a character role and chews extensively on the scenery. There’s no third act, but there is enough furiously flashy energy in the framing and cutting to provide you with a pleasing distraction while Kerry takes your money—and isn’t this the main thing about being Australian these days?

At the other end of the industrial food chain, Phil Avalon plays low-budget guru with 2 entries. The Pact is the kind of movie made to be seen at 2am on cable TV. Sigrid Thornton is being stalked in some strange parallel-universe Australia where everyone has American accents and people name their kids Brittany. Still, its very existence signifies the persistence of a place for the cheap exploitation film. I have a dream, that one day we will be free of taste, and of Acting, free in a land where movies are full of disreputable energy.

Please forgive that digression. This is still Australia and the favourite this year is probably Japanese Story (Sue Brooks), a seriously worthy serious film. It is burdened with some of the clunkiest theatrical acting you’ll see. Toni Collette will win Best Actress, even though she gives one of her worst performances. While it’s about time we had a film which acknowledges that Australia might want to think about its relation to Asia, this is unfortunately limited to checking off national and racial stereotypes (Japanese men are gruff, Japanese women are inscrutable, and there is so much space in Australia).

The art cinema entries are a bit thin on the ground. Maybe Rolf de Heer’s Alexandra’s Project has some sort of a chance. It is certainly notable for sustaining a narrative in which the protagonist watches TV for the middle half of the film. As in The Tracker, Gary Sweet is again the villainous white guy whose chickens must come home to roost.

The question of winners this year is a little like being asked to choose between John Howard and Simon Crean as PM. Maybe the palpable lack of enthusiasm which will greet any winner will lead to a radical re-evaluation of feature film production in this country. Things have to get better.

Japanese Story won The Showtime AFI Award For Best Film, the Empire Magazine AFI Award For Best Direction, The Parker Pen AFI Award For Best Original Screenplay, Complete Post AFI Award For Best Editing and Awards For Best Cinematography, Best Sound, Best Original Music Score And The Jan Logan AFI Award to Toni Collette for Best Actress In A Leading Role.