Candy


Director/producer/editor: Neil Armfield
Duration: MA (15+)
Classification: 108 minutes
We rate it: Five stars.

It’s my pleasure to announce that Australian cinema audiences can once again rejoice in the arrival of a sterling new Australian film. Candy, based on Luke Davies’ well-received 1997 novel, is the first big-screen feature-film effort from acclaimed theatre director Neil Armfield, and it’s a pretty stunning piece.

Davies’ harrowing, immensely moving and often brutal novel gave us vivid portraits of its two central characters, young lovers whose lives were defined by their addiction to heroin. Far from being mere grunge wallowing, Candy told the deeply-felt story of a particular kind of doomed love: love played out against the looming backdrop of an unsustainable addiction. The novel’s appearance in 1997 was quite an event; Davies was rightly recognised as a major new literary presence in Australia, and his subsequent releases have confirmed the promise his debut made to readers. With the level of interest generated by Candy, a film adaptation was a likely thing. Enter Neil Armfield, gifted director of Belvoir St.’s Company B Theatre Group, and the man responsible for some of the most visionary Australian theatre of the last twenty years. Having directed television milestones like Edens Lost in the late 1980s, Armfield has long been in the running as Australia’s “man most overdue to direct a big-screen feature”. Candy is the film that has brought Armfield to the Australian cinema.

The cast Armfield has assembled for Candy represents a role-call of our most talented actors. Heath Ledger (still rightly enjoying success for his heartbreaking performance in Brokeback Mountain), and Abbie Cornish (the girl of the moment in Australian film, whose breakout performance was in 2004’s Somersault), play the novel’s lovers. Geoffrey Rush (a long-time colleague of Armfield’s) plays the darkly angelic figure of Casper, and Tony Martin and Noni Hazlehurst (who is currently enjoying a big-screen
renaissance) play Candy’s parents. With such a text, such a cast and such a director, Candy has become an Event.

One hesitates to recount Candy’s screen plot in too much detail, because while it’s in many ways a simple story, the unraveling of the narrative is purposeful and beautifully controlled. The barest details are that Candy, a beautiful, intelligent and free-spirited girl from an eerily recognizable mid-suburban background, discovers Dan, an articulate searcher whose life seems empty until he meets and falls for Candy. Dan’s problem, we soon discover, is that he’s addicted to heroin. He tells us, early in the film, that by introducing Candy to his world “I wasn’t trying to make Candy’s life worse; I was trying to make mine better.” Just how deeply both the characters’ lives will be affected by addiction is the question the film ultimately answers.

Armfield’s film is in many ways about performances, because the human essence of the story is so painful and deeply felt. In playing Candy and Dan, Cornish and Ledger confirm themselves as two of the most preternaturally talented young screen actors in the country, and more experienced alumni like Noni Hazlehurst, Tony Martin and the brilliant Geoffrey Rush give astonishingly assured support; Rush in particular is unforgettably moving as Casper. His final moments in the film will linger in the memory for quite some time.

While most cinemagoers will have seen films about drugs before, Candy does something unusual by so vividly contrasting the brief joy that the young characters experience with the bleakness of the aftermath. Rowan Woods’ recent Little Fish, we will remember, was in part about heroin addiction, and that film gave Hugo Weaving an opportunity to present us with the most heartbreaking and harrowing ten minutes of screen time in recent memory. Ledger and Cornish do very similar things during moments of Candy; the film shows us the nastier sides of addiction in unflinching detail, and while the highs are depicted as suitably euphoric, the lows are profoundly harrowing and bleak. This is a cautionary tale as well as a terribly moving love story, and while it’s affecting and disturbing, it ends on a welcome note of hope. Davies, Armfield and their wonderful cast have made a film that is filled with both darkness and light, and it’s a very welcome addition to the growing ranks of exquisitely-made Australian films.

Nick Prescott