

Nick Prescott's Reviews

Jindabyne

Talent: Gabriel Byrne, Laura Linney, John Howard, Leah Purcell, Deborra-Lee Furness, Simon Stone, Chris Haywood.

Date of review: 20th July, 2006.

Writer/director/editor: Ray Lawrence

Classification: M (Mature)

Duration: 123 minutes

We rate it: Four and a half stars.

Jindabyne is the much-anticipated third feature film by Australian director Ray Lawrence, the man responsible for the best Aussie film of the last ten years, *Lantana*. Despite his impeccable industry credentials, Lawrence has had an unusual career as a director. After making the flawed but fascinating feature debut *Bliss* in 1985, Lawrence spent a decade and a half in the Australian filmmaking netherworld, working on acclaimed shorts and commercials, and trying in vain to get feature projects off the ground. When writer Andrew Bovell crossed Lawrence's path in the late nineties, *Lantana* was born. Since the release of that revelation of a film in 2000, Lawrence hasn't looked back.

Jindabyne thus hits our screens with a great many expectations attached to it. For this follow-up feature, Lawrence has turned to a story by a great American writer, Raymond Carver. The writer's short tale "So Much Water So Close To Home" was one of the numerous narratives filmed by the great Robert Altman for his extraordinary work *Short Cuts*, which was released in 1993. Altman still owned the screen rights to Carver's story, but when Lawrence met with him in order to enquire about purchasing the rights, Altman immediately recognised the Aussie filmmaker as the man behind *Lantana*, a film he admired enormously. As a gesture of respect, he reportedly sold Lawrence the rights to Carver's story for one dollar.

The story's premise is simple: a group of middle-aged male friends set off on a fishing trip, leaving their wives and girlfriends at home, and drive into quite remote country in order to unwind and fish. On arriving at their chosen fishing location, they discover the dead body of a young woman. The semi-naked body is floating in the river in

which the men planned to fish, and it is clear that the young woman was not the victim of an accident; she was murdered. Despite the horror of this discovery, the men decide not to leave immediately and alert the authorities, but to continue their planned trip and alert the police when they return. This decision, and its consequences, is what *Jindabyne* is about.

Having transposed Carver's story to an Australian setting, Lawrence and his scriptwriter, Beatrix Christian, have endeavoured to make *Jindabyne* not just a story about male selfishness and the fragility of relationships, but a narrative about contemporary Australia and its sexual and racial climate. Discomfiting, bleak and immensely thought-provoking, this is not a cuddly film; Lawrence and Christian have made of *Jindabyne* a portrait of a fraught, largely dysfunctional society wherein human selfishness and anger turn ordinary people into monsters and lovers into bitter enemies. If *Lantana* was about the complexities of love and relationships in an urban, middle-class setting, *Jindabyne* is a companion-piece about the destructive, damaging nature of alienation and emotional emptiness, played out against a ruggedly beautiful rural landscape.

Every performance is note-perfect. Gabriel Byrne is enjoying a career renaissance, and with this role and his vivid turn in *Wah-Wah*, he should be back on every director's want list. Linney is wonderfully moving and convincing as a damaged wife and mother, and Leah Purcell gives another chameleonesque performance to sit alongside her beautiful work in *Lantana*. Technically, too, *Jindabyne* is as perfect as its predecessor; tenderly shot by cinematographer David Williamson, and beautifully scored and edited, this is a masterful piece that is as beautifully made as it is painfully felt. Troubling, fascinating and haunting in the extreme, *Jindabyne* is the most mature and intelligent Australian film to be released this year.

Nick Prescott