

The Jammed—the dark side of Australian immigration

By Richard Phillips
21 September 2007

The Jammed is an effective and at times harrowing low-budget drama written and directed by Dee McLachlan about sex trafficking in Australia. While there have been numerous local movies made about Australian immigration, none investigates the plight of women sold into prostitution. *The Jammed*—a social-realist style thriller—is the first.

It is almost impossible to put an accurate figure on the numbers involved in sex trafficking internationally. But the trade is, without doubt, rapidly growing, with an estimated four million “illegal” women immigrants earning about \$6 billion annually for brothel owners and traders.

According to United Nations figures, Australia in 2003 was the tenth main international destination for girls sold into sexual servitude. The industry, where murder, death threats and rape are commonplace, is reportedly worth \$150 million a year to Australian criminals. Some local organisations estimate that about 1,000 sex workers are brought into the country each year, and at least 500 trafficked women are working in Sydney at any given time.

Officially defined as illegal immigrants, the mainly young women are trapped in a nightmare world. If they tell police or other local authorities about their plight they will be deported and likely face violent recriminations on returning home. The movie’s title, in fact, comes from a term commonly used by support groups to describe young immigrant prostitutes who are ensnared between their criminal captors and Australian government bureaucracies.

McLachlan began researching the issue a few years ago and decided to make the film after reading a tiny article on page 11 of a local Melbourne newspaper about Gary Glazner, a Melbourne criminal. During the mid-1990s, Glazner held up to 40 Thai women in

sexual servitude and debt bondage. While he reportedly made more than \$1.5 million from the racket all but one of his victims were deported from Australia before they could testify in court. In 1999, Glazner was given an 18-month suspended sentence and fined \$31,000.

The Jammed was developed from court transcripts. It revolves around Ashley Hudson (Veronika Sywak), a courageous but somewhat naïve young office worker who is reluctantly drawn into helping Sunee (Amanda Ma), a Chinese woman who has flown to Melbourne to find her missing daughter Rubi (Sun Park).

Rubi and two other young women—Crystal (Emma Lung) from Indonesia and Vanya (Saskia Burmeister) from Russia—have been forced into prostitution. Escorted to Australia, the girls have their passports seized by local gangsters on arrival. They are imprisoned in subhuman conditions and told that they must remain prostitutes until they repay massive debts.

Hudson eventually locates Rubi, helps the three girls escape, and in the process discovers that Vic Glassman (Andrew S. Gilbert), one of the leading figures in the criminal operation, is a respectable businessman. Hudson’s attempt to free the girls ends in tragedy, with one dying and Crystal detained by immigration authorities.

Performances in *The Jammed* are strong, particularly from the four actresses, and the cinematography, much of it handheld, gives the movie a documentary feel. The final scene with Crystal in detention and repeating phrases from a teach-yourself-English audiotope is powerful. Another important element in *The Jammed* is its exposure of Vic Glassman’s other life. His wife (Alison Whyte) is about to open a new art gallery and obviously has impeccable social and political connections.

The Jammed’s thriller format and its use of

flashbacks and flash forwards—interweaving Hudson’s search for Rubi and Crystal’s detention by immigration authorities—are skillfully handled. The detention centre scenes are authentic and effectively highlight government injustice against all so-called illegal immigrants. The cruel bureaucratic indifference is well captured.

Unfortunately, apart from brothel owner Glassman, most of the male characters, including one who falls in love with Rubi, are undeveloped. The movie’s soundtrack would also have been more effective had it been less intrusive. These flaws, however, are only minor.

Despite the fact that McLachlan’s film was passed over by programmers for the recent Melbourne Film Festival, her decision to tackle this important issue is receiving a growing response from local audiences. This will hopefully encourage Australian filmmakers to begin exploring other social questions that are generally swept under the carpet. *The Jammed*, which was made for just \$A600,000—a miniscule budget by contemporary standards—demonstrates yet again that socially powerful movies can be made, and find audiences, if filmmakers have the will.

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