

# Strictly fanciful

- **Germaine Greer**
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THE scale of the disaster that is Baz Luhrmann's *Australia* is gradually becoming apparent. When the film was released in Australia in November it found the odd champion, none more conspicuous than Marcia Langton, professor of Australian indigenous studies at Melbourne University, who frothed and foamed in *The Sunday Age* about this "fabulous, hyperbolic film".

Luhrmann has "given Australians a new past", she gushed, "a myth of national origin that is disturbing, thrilling, heartbreaking, hilarious and touching".

Myths are by definition untrue. Langton knows the truth about the northern cattle industry but evidently sees it as her duty to ignore it, and welcome a fraudulent and misleading fantasy in its place, possibly because the fantasy is designed to promote the current government policy of reconciliation, of which she is a chief proponent.

Reconciliation is the process by which Australians of all shades forgive and forget the outrages of the past and become one happy nation. State and federal governments have pumped money into reconciliation and created a new class of Aboriginal entrepreneurs who accept the values of the property-owning democracy and are doing very well out of it.

Luhrmann's fake epic, set in 1939, shows Aboriginal people as intimately involved in the development of the Lucky Country; the sequel would probably show Nullah, the Aboriginal boy who narrates the film, setting up an Aboriginal corporation and using mining royalties to build a luxury resort on the shores of Faraway Bay.

Unfortunately for the reconciliation gravy-train and all aboard it, Luhrmann's lack of faith in his own invention is obvious. The hero, played by Hugh Jackman, is a drover, whose job is to collect cattle from the stations and drive them wherever they have to go. For the film to work at all we are required to believe that he is ostracised by his peers, simply because, years before the film begins, before the 1914-18 war, he married an Aboriginal woman, who, obligingly, died childless. The most respected drover of central Australia in this era was Matt Savage, otherwise known as "Boss Drover", a white man whose marriage to an Aboriginal woman lasted 40 years and produced many children who rode with their father.

In case that should sound romantic, Savage was known to say, "I got her young, and treated her rough, and she thrived on it."

Savage would have been considered beyond the pale by some, but not by the drinkers in a bar on the Darwin waterfront, but then no amount of

blandishment would have got Boss Drover into a white tuxedo to dance at Government House, as the drover does in this film.

Drovers are not ranch-hands, as some American reviewers of the film have assumed, but independent contractors. A drover charged with taking 2000 head from a station in the Kimberley, Western Australia, to Darwin, in the Northern Territory, would have recruited sufficient riders from the neighbouring Aboriginal camps to be sure of keeping the mob under control.

The women would not have shaved their heads so as to pass for men, as Australia's script asserts; they would simply have worn men's clothing, and bound their breasts with strips of calico, less for modesty than for comfort.

In a rare flash of reality, as Drover (Jackman's character) is driving Lady Sarah Ashley — an Englishwoman played by Nicole Kidman, who has travelled to Australia to track down her wayward husband and inspect her property — an Aboriginal girl jumps on the running board of the truck and gives him a kiss. Any red-blooded man would find her more attractive than stitched-up Lady Sarah, and Drover doesn't appear at that stage to be an exception.

Some white drivers of the roadtrains that are now used to shift cattle across Australia still consider themselves entitled to sexual favours from underage Aboriginal girls. Luhrmann's notion of a plot is the Mills & Boon staple in which unawakened junior female encounters strong, silent, senior male, shows herself to be a gel of mettle and wins his admiration and love. For no good reason, Luhrmann's female is English and apparently the daughter of an earl, for she has people address her as "Lady Sarah Ashley".

Australian girls from the suburbs have found the life of a grazier's wife every bit as challenging as any Englishwoman would, and there are plenty of memoirs by the wives of cattlemen to illustrate the point, but Luhrmann prefers his imperial fantasy. (The less said about Nicole Kidman's interpretation of the role the better.)

Faraway Downs — owned by Lady Sarah — is a cattle station like no other. Though it is said to be the size of Maryland, US, that is 10,500 square miles, it evidently has a staff of no more than eight: a disloyal manager, a drunken accountant, three Aboriginal cattle hands, two Aboriginal women and a Chinese cook, with only one house and a single bore that isn't working.

The camera does not travel to where the Aboriginal workers would have lived with their extended families in a collection of humpies — shelters made of bark and branches — with no clean water, no sanitation and no electricity. As the humpies were not intended for continued habitation they would have been verminous and filthy; the workers would have been issued with a single set of work clothes, ditto.

Despite the appalling infant mortality rate, there would have been dozens of children of various shades. The Aboriginal workers would not have been paid,

but simply given poor-quality rations, because the station owner claimed the whole community as dependents. Aborigines did virtually all the heavy work, fencing, mustering, castrating, branding, slaughtering, digging dams, making roads, gardening, washing and cleaning.

No attempt would have been made to educate Nullah or his mates. With his own people he would have spoken “language”; with whitefellas, pidgin, nowadays called kriol, a rudimentary language specially devised by the colonialists for top-down communication. Unforgivably, Luhrmann has Nullah express himself in a cutesified stage version of pidgin. Nullah has no community beyond his mother and his grandfather and uncle, King George. He loses his mother, in an astonishingly contrived piece of business, so that he can follow the higher destiny of bringing two white folks together in their shared love of him. If white Australians had shown parental feeling towards mixed-race children, generations of them would not have had to be removed from Aboriginal communities by successive governments.

Lady Sarah is no more likely to raise Nullah herself than she is to do her own housework, which is done for her by an older Aboriginal woman given the contemptuous whitefella name of Bandy Legs. Though Bandy rode alongside Mrs Boss when they drove the cattle to Darwin and did at least as well as she, it’s back to the kitchen sink after that.

The station owner who might have wanted to treat his Aboriginal workforce halfway decently was likely to find that he had no such option. Without what was virtually free labour, he couldn’t afford to farm at all. Beef cattle shipped through Darwin in the 1930s were known to be of very poor quality. Because with an inferior product and insecure market conditions, banks were reluctant to invest, central Australian cattle farmers were unable to improve their properties sufficiently to produce a better yield. If the worst came to the worst, a grazier’s widow was less likely to inherit than his bank — if the enterprise hadn’t already been bought out.

The only history Luhrmann seems to care about is the history of movies, but every now and then there is a fizzing flash of fact, as when the station manager Neil Fletcher, who is also Nullah’s father, gives vent to his rage at having to work for his English boss for peanuts, claiming Faraway Downs as rightfully his. Langton congratulates Luhrmann for his version of the bustling multiracial city of Darwin, as if you could see through his lens that Aborigines were a third of the Darwin population, that those who were in work received wages that were an eighth of what whites could expect for comparable work, or that the authorities were running a system of veritable apartheid.

From 1913 to 1938 Aborigines in Darwin were required to return every evening from the places where they worked as labourers and domestic servants to Kahlin Compound, a collection of windowless tin huts three kilometres outside the town. Chinese employers paid their Aboriginal workers in opium ash, which could be repeatedly resmoked; the workers could also deaden their pain with methylated spirits and homebrew supplied by

bootleggers. Leprosy had been brutally controlled but respiratory and venereal diseases were rife.

In 1938, Kahlin Compound was closed and the inhabitants relocated further from the town centre in the Bagot Reserve, only to be evacuated again in 1940 to make way for a military hospital. Reconciliation requires that in place of memory we accept confabulation, so Luhrmann builds a more salubrious Darwin in the pleasant town of Bowen on the north Queensland coast.

Langton tells us that the history wars between the black armband and white blindfold versions of Australian history are over. When black filmmakers finally come on stream, we may find that they haven't started. The 1942 bombing of Darwin by the Japanese was bad enough, with 197 dead and more than 400 injured out of a population of little more than 2000, but Luhrmann's fatuous plot demands not just the bombing that did happen, but an invasion that didn't. Nullah has to be stolen, because no film about a mixed-race child could fail to invoke what is now a cliché, and so he must also be rescued, and by Drover.

Luhrmann's Japanese ground forces don't just shoot up the beach of Mission Island. They also shoot Drover's faithful Aboriginal sidekick Magarri, played by David Ngoombujarra, a Tiwi name you won't find on the awnings. As Drover is the new Lone Ranger, Magarri is the new Tonto, only more so. Tonto doesn't give his life for the Lone Ranger, as I recall. Australia cost the Fox Corporation about \$90 million, minus a hefty tax rebate. The other \$40 million was contributed by the Australian Tourism Export Council, in the sanguine expectation that the film would do for Australian tourism what Schindler's List did for Kazimierz, the Jewish district of Krakow.

Kimberley station owners were trying to cash in long before the film was finished. A mere \$2950 will get you the Bindoola Experience Package, three nights at Home Valley Station, which was used for a cattle driving sequence. Other Gibb River Road resorts are following suit, all using the slogan "The Kimberley is the Star of Australia". However, Carlton Hill Station, where the Faraway Downs homestead was built, is owned and operated by the Consolidated Agricultural Company and not open to the public. There is no desert between the Kimberley and Darwin, and no region in Australia called the Kuroman. Oh, and if you drive cattle through a desert they'll be in pretty poor condition when they get where they're going, if they get there at all. And they won't be droughtmasters, a breed of cattle that had yet to be developed in 1939. And Drover wouldn't be using an Oral B toothbrush.

Disappointing as it is that none of the Aboriginal characters in Australia is at all developed, and none seen to be a person in his or her own right, the treatment of Nullah's full-blood grandfather, who is also his uncle, known only by the contemptuous whitefella appellation King George, is in its way worse.

Blackfella society has no monarchs or chieftains; it was the white man who dubbed one Aboriginal elder or another a king, and usually gave him a brass

plate with the spurious title engraved on it, expecting him to wear it round his neck like a label on a brandy decanter.

King George is allowed neither his own name nor anything like a personality. Instead he is shown to have superhuman powers, which, inexplicably, Nullah shares. King George has nothing better to do than to hang about, performing bits of ritual and singing, evidently living on nothing but air. He is suspected of being the murderer of Lady Sarah's husband, until somebody realises that the spear was not an "Arnhem Land" spear but a "Kimberley" spear from the homestead at Faraway Downs. Why an elder from Arnhem Land, in the north-eastern corner of the Northern Territory, is in the Kimberley is not explained, let alone how he comes to be the grandfather of a child born in the Kimberley, but, hey, who cares? Yolngu, Larrakia or Gurindji, it's all the same. DAVID Gulpilil, who plays King George, is from Arnhem Land, and Luhrmann could argue that the introduction of an Arnhem Land motif is a tribute to Gulpilil's cultural heritage as a fully initiated senior law man.

Luhrmann has the temerity to use him as a cigar-store Indian, standing on one leg, the other foot propped against his knee, silhouetted against the skyline, spear and spear-thrower in hand. To the few viewers who will know that this motif has been used repeatedly as a trademark, it does seem that Luhrmann is making a tasteless joke.

Perhaps because Gulpilil was going to have to speak language and sing magic in a half-convincing semblance of Aboriginal ritual, Faraway Downs has to turn into a hybrid of Arnhem Land and the Kimberley, but the result is confusion and, ultimately, a disrespect bordering on contempt.

Australians flocked to see the film when it was released in November, but the word of mouth has been bad. Some of the reviews have been worse. Luke Buckmaster, writing in *Film Australia*, wrote despairingly: "There is only one rational explanation capable of explaining the existence of Baz Luhrmann's obese outback epic *Australia*: it's an elaborate joke. A ruse. A jape. A gag ... Some drunken nut challenged Luhrmann to break box-office records by making the most astonishingly bad Australian film of all time."

It takes courage to let rip like this. Given the size of the public investment in the movie, damning it is like starting a run on the banks. As well as money, a good deal of hope was invested in the stolen child's story as a narrative of reconciliation. The mixed-race boy connects his two inheritances, the white and the black, loves and respects Drover and Mrs Boss, and his grandfather King George, equally. How he will reconcile these irreconcilables is beyond the scope of any movie.

Racism did not disappear when Drover made the publican let Magarri drink at the bar, or even when he made sure he was given a glass instead of a tin mug. Aborigines were still being served their drinks in plastic cups in the 1980s. Throughout the film alcohol is presented as enhancing every kind of human pursuit. The two alcoholics in the film are presented as sympathetic characters, and getting to drink with whitefellas has the status of a privilege.

Langton has been agitating for the removal of alcohol from Aboriginal communities for more than 20 years, and yet cannot see that depicting access to alcohol as a privilege in a movie is pernicious. Luhrmann could have censored the alcohol motif; he certainly censored nicotine. Nobody in the film smokes, which quite obscures the crucial role played by tobacco in the enslavement of Australian Aborigines.

The film's greatest asset is Brandon Walters, the 12-year-old who plays Nullah, who has already appeared in the two TV commercials Luhrmann has made for Tourism Australia. The production notes are vague about his background, but it seems that he comes from the Bidyadanga Aboriginal community on the north coast of Western Australia. Bidyadanga, originally a cattle station, was taken over by the Catholic Church to become La Grange Catholic mission.

At last count, Bidyadanga, home to members of five different language groups, had 70 houses for up to 800 inhabitants, who struggle with the usual complex of problems affecting Aboriginal communities, including high rates of chronic renal and heart disease, as well as diabetes, and low resistance to infection as a consequence of poor diet. If the Walters family returns to Bidyadanga, they will be expected to share their new-found wealth with their less fortunate neighbours. If they don't, young Walters is likely to lose everything that has made him what he is.

We can only pray that Walters will escape the fate of other Aboriginal stars. Gulpilil starred in his first movie, *Walkabout*, when he was not much older than Walters; he is now 55, with a dozen films to his credit, and living in a tin shack in Ramingining, a village in the Northern Territory. For his part in *Crocodile Dundee*, the highest-earning Australian film ever made, he was paid \$10,000. For years he has struggled with alcoholism and depression, and has done time in prison.

Robert Tudawali, star of Charles Chauvel's 1955 film, *Jedda*, did not live long after his moment of glory. Twelve years after the success of the film, Tudawali was badly burned when he lay by the campfire in a drunken stupor, possibly because people he had been brawling with rolled him into it, but nothing was ever proved. Already weakened by years of alcoholism and tuberculosis, he did not survive.

We can only hope that Luhrmann's production company has grasped the complexity of the issues that will now face their child star, but the omens are not good.

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