Australian Rules

A comparative review by Anita Jetnikoff (QUT) for Australian Screen Education.

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The title may mislead some viewers, as this is not a film about a football code, anymore than Bend it with Beckham is about soccer. This powerful, brave and rather brutal feature is the debut of Paul Goldman, who co-wrote the screenplay with the novelist Phillip Gwynne. Both the storylines and characters from Gwynne’s award-winning novel Deadly Unna? and its sequel Nukkin Ya, have been combined in the film, which was commissioned by South Australian Film Corporation for the Adelaide Festival of Arts 2002, and caused a furore with the local Aboriginal community. The film was screened after much deliberation over the objections against depictions of a character resembling a member of the Penninsular community. This certainly suggests collaboration with Indigenous communities could have been sought at earlier stages of the project. In my reading of the film, however, it is the white community who emerge the more brutal, bigoted and shameful. The Aboriginal community, on the other hand, represent solidarity, and sharing. The film was released and promoted by Palace, with the slogan ‘live by the rules play by the rules’. There is, however, an almost apartheid divide between the black [Nunga) and white [Goonya) communities in this film and the central character’s personal navigating between the two, means he must break unwritten rules.

The film is based on aspects of two novels, the partly autobiographical novel Deadly Unna, and its sequel, Nukkin Ya, Nunga expressions for ‘Great hey’ and ‘See you later’. Both novels were easy to read and full of humour in spite of the serious subject matter of racism, interracial relationships, adolescent angst, death and revenge. The novels belong to the adolescent problem or coming-of-age genre and are being studied in secondary schools. The film has little of the novels’ lightness and the narrator’s ability to laugh at himself and his community’s foibles. This sometimes disturbing film’s tone is brutal, the landscape stark, sordid and in decay. Most of the characters occupying the saline, arid coastal town are nasty. The adult men are barflies, maggot breeders, fornicators and losers and the women are victims or sluts. This hopeless adult world offers nothing for the young in this fishing town. Viewers are invited to identify with the young, for whom hope lies in escape.

The central figure of Blacky (Nathan Phillips), is an intelligent 14 year old caught between the literary world of his imagination and the literal world of his small towns’ bigotry. His mother, who encourages him to play football and to do well at school, is a battler, a victim of his father’s brutality. The dilapidated house the Black family occupy oozes poverty and neglect. These are white fringe dwellers. In the novel Blacky refers to what kind of chops the family will consume as indicative of the ‘pov metre’. They shop at the local op shop. Like many small rural Australian towns, this coastal community struggles to survive.
The black and white communities in the region are divided, separated physically by a stretch of coastline, whites at the port and blacks at the point. Even the local pub segregates the Aboriginal drinkers from the white ones. The irony is that the local football team is only viable when the Aboriginal boys come over from the point to play. The sporting fixture allows the communities to merge, but the union stops there. Blacky crosses the racial divide to befriend Dumby Red (Luke Carroll) a talented Aboriginal Australian Rules Player from the Point and to romance Dumby’s sister Clarence (Lisa Flanagan).

Whereas book built up the friendship through Blacky’s doubt and hesitation about Dumby, this is not dealt with in the film. The film opens with the two characters already mates, sitting together in the dilapidated shed of the red dirt football field, commiserating over the ineffectiveness of their coach, Arks (Kevin Harrington). Dumby’s spectacular football prowess has been spotted by a city talent scout, which sets up the need for him to win best Player in the final against a much stronger team. A contract to a city football team would mean a possible escape from the bigotry and emptiness of the Peninsula—his chance to be a sporting success. Blacky finds himself an unwitting hero and awarded best team man for winning the premiership game. He unwittingly collides with the toughest star player on the opposing team and is knocked unconscious, along with his gigantic opponent. The shooting sequences of the match were not especially riveting, but this was in keeping with the importance of the game to the story. The film is not about winning or losing, but the personal integrity of the play or the journey in the ongoing process of discovering identity. The medal for ‘Best on the Ground’, rightly belonged to Dumby Red. His ticket out of the hopeless community, however, was denied to him, because rather than kicking a sure goal, he had passed a ball to a cousin who had not handled the ball all day. The cultural code of sharing was stronger than the competitive need to win.

In the film, the loss of the award to the coach’s son paves the way for Dumby’s tragic demise. He joins Pretty (Tony Briggs) in an armed robbery of the pub, perhaps to extract an alternative prize to the one he’d been denied. The publican, Mac, laid out in a drunken stupor on the pool table, is beaten even more senseless by Pretty. The noise rouses Blacky’s father (Simon Westaway) who shoots and kills his son’s friend Dumby Red in revenge for the publican’s beating. In the novel the publican was the murderer, but the film’s central villain is Blacky’s father, Bob, who represents fear, loathing and menace. His violent rages left his own family in fear of him. In one memorable scene they escape his menacing torment of their mother behind closed doors by escaping through the window and sleeping in the chicken coop. The feeling is that this experience was not new to them.

Blacky is torn in the novel between his initial attraction to Clarence in Deadly Unna, which he conceals from his white ‘friends’ in order to attract the attention of a rich white ‘camper’ girl. In the sequel this relationship between Blacky and Clarence and Blacky and his father represent two kinds of coming of age. His masculinity is tested early on in a storm at sea and later when he was caught in the shed stealing paint to cover a racist slogan in the local boatshed. His intelligence means little to his father, and his good grades and scholarship to Kings College in Adelaide are ignored. In the sequel Nukkin Ya, the filial relationship seems almost mended when his father takes on the renovation of a ‘windjammer’ to bring potential tourism to the town. His father’s project becomes obsessive at the expense of putting food on the family’s
table, but the male relationship seems to be temporarily repaired along with the boat, which becomes symbolic of rebuilding strength, unity and hope around the fantasy of the future.

In the novels we experience Blacky’s angst at discovering his father’s infidelity to his mother. Blacky and his friend Pickles, stumble upon their adulterous fathers visiting the Aboriginal women at the point. The irony of this is that the entire community seemed set against the burgeoning love relationship between Blacky and Dumby’s sister Clarence. The fact that the cross-race relationship of the father is not dealt with in the film makes his violent reaction to finding Clarence innocently sleeping alongside Blacky in his bedroom connected more with his hatred of Aboriginal people, than it is to do with his guilt over murdering Dumby Red. It is a response reduced to racism alone, rather than his own guilt and hypocrisy, which in the novels is built up subtly through the two volumes.

The antagonist in the second novel, having moved away from the father, is embodied by the figure of Lovely (Pretty, in the film) who menaces Blacky over his relationship with Clarence. Lovely sports a hate tattoo on his fingers and is a violent instigator in both book and film. The disclosure of the white men’s infidelity at the expense of the black women, who remain nameless and faceless, leads to the climax of the second novel. The boat is set alight, which symbolizes the death of the relationships between Blacky and his father and his community. Lovely is framed, Blacky absolves Lovely in court by taking the blame, but Pickles (Tom Budge) was the real arsonist. This false confession, leads to Blacky becoming a cipher in his own town, where boats and the sea are peoples workplaces. He becomes a ‘boat burner’ in the cultural imaginary and is forced to leave. In the film this purging is less powerful and seems to emerge from some kind of corporate malice rather than revenge. Pickles manically sets alight rival maggot breeder Darcy’s breeding drums, which has less symbolic poignancy than the boat burning in the novel.

Blacky’s central challenge in the film is to reaffirm his masculinity by standing up to his father, through the relationship with Clarence. Blacky is constructed by his father as a ‘gutless wonder.’ Blacky’s painful journey to manhood, is much harsher in the film than the book. In the novel the father is a violent adulterer, but in the film, he kills Blacky’s best friend. Blacky’s attendance at Dumby’s funeral represents a betrayal of familial solidarity in the eyes of the father. The relationship was not strong enough however, for Blacky to take his father’s side. At this point, Blacky abdicates from identifying with his father. He has begun to flee the emasculated self constructed by his father, towards a more potent, sexual self, embodied by his attraction and identification with the other through the literal ‘body’ of Dumby and the physical, sexual body of Clarence. What is morally worrisome is that the father, who both Blacky and the viewer see as a murderer, continues to live in the community with impugnity, the ‘common sense’ gap we fill is that he claims he shot Dumby in self-defense. Blacky courageously resists his father’s imperative to stay away from the funeral. In the film’s powerful and moving climax, the battered, but united family in the background witnesses the final stand off between father and son. Blacky literally stands up to his father, not by competing in battle of fists, but resisting by sheer will and strength of character. The father leaves in a vicious rage and we can’t help feeling that the family will be better off with him gone.
The second novel *Nukkin Ya* begins with hope of Blacky taking a scholarship at Kings in Adelaide. His girlfriend Clarence achieves a scholarship to art school and Blacky has a reason to follow her. The film ends with the two young lovers romantically swimming in the clear waters, symbolically cleansing themselves of the grime and grease of prejudice, which had tainted their relationship until that point. The film treats the romance in a much lighter way than the books. There is no stand off between the characters; in fact Clarence becomes Blacky’s bridge between the two cultures.

In the film it is Clarence who stands up to Bob Black in Blacky’s bedroom with dignity and silent resistance. Lisa Flanagan’s performance was elegant and dignified. It was Clarence who gently cut through the wall of hostility from the Nunga boys at her brother’s funeral- allowing Blacky to mourn his friend’s death. It was Clarence who understood Blacky’s poetic allusions to dying stars- these two are cosmically connected and there is an almost Shakespearean sense of their fate. The love scenes provide the film’s only softness and the resolution, although moving, is not sentimental. The young people must leave the still-divided community, to survive together.

References

