

Film Reviews

May 09, 2018

Gurrumul

PG*****

If only he would watch this documentary, the PM would surely reconsider his arrogant dismissal of the Uluru Statement. This film by director Paul Williams not only enlightens us about the late, great Gurrumul Yunupingu and his music but also about the Yolngu people of Elcho Island in far north-east Arnhem Land. It presents an incisive insight into their philosophy of life, their knowledge about the land and their traditions.



With the help of Gurrumul's family and community, especially Aunty Susan Dhangal Gurriwiwi, Williams has assembled footage of Gurrumul from 12 months old and tells his story from childhood, then as a member of Yothu Yindi and Saltwater Band, and finally as a solo performer. Michael Hohnen and Mark Grose, Gurrumul's close friends, personally and professionally are his "co-stars" in this profoundly informative film about the blind musical genius, who sought to bridge the gap between the balanda (whitefella) and Yolngu cultures through the classical music of both. It is beautifully shot by Katie Milwright. If only **Gurrumul** could be seen by every non-Indigenous Australian.

Cargo

MA****

In consultation with Indigenous writer Jon Bell, [writer-directors Yolanda Ramke and Ben Howling](#) have effectively reworked the basic premise of their acclaimed 2013 Tropfest short film *Cargo* into a feature-length film.

Andy (Martin Freeman), Kay (Susie Porter) and one-year-old Rosie initially appear to be enjoying an outback boating holiday. However, it soon becomes clear that they are desperately fleeing some post-apocalyptic horror. Although a capsized boat yields life-saving supplies, Kay is attacked and becomes infected.

Having taken his family ashore in a futile bid to get medical assistance, Andy finds the town deserted and the hospital long gone. "They cut our funding years ago," lone survivor Etta (Kris McQuade) tells him. She effectively blames the white man for poisoning the country. Andy realises that the only hope for his daughter's survival lies with the Indigenous community, who have fled to their country to escape the fatal virus.

He seeks help from young Thoomi (Simone Landers), who is trying to find Cleverman (David Gulpillil) in the belief that he could save the spirit of her infected father, Willie (Bruce R. Carter), whom she is shadowing and trying to protect. Wearing kadaitcha shoes, she is evading the zombie "virals" and her mother Josie (Natasha

Wanganeen). Further danger lurks in the form of Vic (Anthony Hayes), a gas company worker with grandiose plans of profiteering from the pandemic.

The depiction of a dystopian future Australia is impressively realised. The tension is effectively sustained throughout Andy's quest to save his daughter, which yields some genuinely touching moments. This engaging film has a distinctly Australian voice. Conservationist alarm bells ring loud and clear about the consequences of contemporary government policies that serve to protect big business and the mining industry at the expense of Indigenous affairs, health, education, welfare and the environment. Just as time is running out for the characters, so too is time running out for our country, our world.

Cargo looks magnificent, thanks to Geoffrey Simpson's cinematography, Jo Ford's production design and Heather Wallace's costume design, while sound designer Liam Egan has collaborated with Daniel Rankine and Gurrumul Yunupingu to capture the spirit of country and the tension of the narrative.

All the characters are well drawn and portrayed. The four infants who share the role of Rosie are delightful.

Breath

M ****

Based on Tim Winton's coming-of-age novel by the same name, *Breath* is about two teenagers, Pikelet (Samson Coulter) and Loonie (Ben Spence), growing up in a small rural town on the coast of Western Australia in the 1970s. Despite the disparity in their backgrounds, the boys become firm friends. While Mr and Mrs Pike (Richard Roxburgh and Rachael Blake) are conservative, undemonstrative folk who love their only child unconditionally, Loonie lives in the local pub with his volatile dad Karl Loon (Jacek Koman).

The boys' fascination with surfing starts with them simply watching local surfers, "... so pointless and elegant, as if dancing on waves was the best and bravest thing a man could do". Inspired, they set about earning sufficient money to buy their own boards, which they carry to and from the coast on their little BMX bikes. Not an elegant sight!

When Sando (Simon Baker) suggests that the boys leave the boards in the shed of his rustic "off the grid" house, they begin to spend time there, with him and his enigmatic partner, Eva (Elizabeth Debicki). Despite Loonie's initial wariness of these "hippies", Sando becomes the boys' surfing mentor.

They learn that he had been an international surfing star, while Eva was a champion aerialist skier until a devastating accident abruptly terminated her career.

Seemingly fearless, Loonie embraces the challenges of riding the wildest waves. Conversely, it heightens Pikelet's awareness of his own limits. He recognises that fear is something to heed in order to survive. "It's how you live with fear that makes you who you are." As well as the vagaries of his intense friendship with Loonie, Pikelet also experiences the highs and lows of romantic relationships over the course of the film.

Winton's incisive depiction of his characters and the complexity of their relationships translate smoothly from page to screen. The water cinematography by Rick Rifici is breathtaking, while Marden Dean's land-based cinematography is as impeccable as all aspects of the art direction and production design.

Chappaquiddick

M***

On July 18 1969, Senator Ted Kennedy — the fourth, youngest and only Kennedy brother still alive — drove his car off Chappaquiddick bridge. With him was Mary Jo Kopechne former secretary to Bobby Kennedy. She did not survive. The precise details of the accident have long been subject to surmise. In their screenplay for John Curran's film *Chappaquiddick*, Taylor Allen and Andrew Logan piece together what apparently happened from the transcripts of the 1970 Edgartown, Massachusetts, court inquest into Mary Jo's death.

In the latter stages of a post-regatta party for the female staffers who had worked on Bobby's presidential campaign, Ted (Jason Clarke) and Mary Jo (Kate Mara) leave in Ted's car. Although he was driven to the party by a minder, Ted takes the wheel. Somehow he manages to escape when the car plunges off a bridge and into the river. Whether or not he has tried to rescue Mary Jo is unclear, but he does not report the accident to the authorities until ten hours after the event.

Ted appears to care only about himself, his Presidential aspirations and his father's approval. The reaction of his father, the redoubtable Joseph Kennedy (Bruce Dern) and the subsequent cover-up launched by his political henchmen are appalling, as is their callous treatment of Mr and Mrs Kopechne, Mary Jo's bereaved parents.

No wonder that Joe Gargan (Ed Helms), Ted's cousin and "fixer" subsequently splits with the Kennedy clan, who had raised him after he was orphaned. Gargan is portrayed as having more integrity than all of them. However, he is no match for Joseph Kennedy's influential associates, who have the hearing brought forward so that the press have no time to investigate the holes in Teddy's story.

Consistently excellent characterisations serve to make this film convincing. It is a clear indictment of a society where money buys power, privilege and protection. The only fleetingly light moment in this sorry saga is a brief argument between an undertaker and a doctor at the accident scene. *Chappaquiddick* should also dispel any lingering romantic beliefs about the Kennedys.

Tully

M****

Marlo (Charlize Theron) has worked right up to the birth of her third child. The older two go to St Vitus Elementary, where her brother Craig (Mark Duplass) has influence thanks to his generous donations. However, Jonah (Asher Miles Fallica) has learning difficulties and his behaviour is deemed disruptive.

Eight-year-old Sarah (Lia Frankland) wears glasses and is already concerned about her appearance, which worries her mother. Their father Drew (Ron Livingston) worries that Craig despises him for not being financially successful. Craig's wife Elyse (Elaine Tan) worries that Marlo considers her fatuous and so it goes ...these are normal, complicated sibling and in-law relationships.

Although she initially resists her brother's offer of a "night nurse" to watch the baby overnight in between feeds, Marlo succumbs. Enter Tully (Mackenzie Davis), whose assistance transforms Marlo's life. Not only does Tully cook and clean overnight, she befriends Marlo and encourages her to practice self-care.

Diablo Cody has drawn upon her personal experience to write a screenplay that depicts motherhood as it actually is, warts and all. Theron gives an extraordinarily convincing and accessible central performance. She and her co-actors totally embrace their roles and present us with characters that we really care about. Although Cody's screenplay is laced with wry humour, she and director Jason Reitman manage to gently satirise social trends and personality types, while maintaining respect for the characters.

This is definitely a film for anyone who is, or hopes to be, a parent. Partners of women who are about to, or who have just given birth should take very careful note of the final "message" in *Tully*.

Loveless

MA****

Although this Russian film was released late March, if you get the chance, do see it. Directed by Andrey Zvyagintsev, it is about a couple who are so caught up in their divorce that they ignore the impact that this is having on their 12-year-old son — until he goes missing. As well as this central heartbreaking and confronting narrative, *Loveless* is a revealing commentary on contemporary Russian society. It's utterly enthralling.

Tricia Youlden is currently on long service leave and looking forward to the upcoming Sydney Film Festival