



# CRIME

Although they occupy a marginal position in the national cinema canon, crime films have been a consistent feature of Australian screen production for more than a century. The Australian crime cinema tradition extends back to the 1900s, when locally-made bushranger and adventure films were massively popular with settler audiences. Charles Tait's 1906 film *The Story of the Kelly Gang*, arguably the world's first narrative feature, was the *Scarface* of its day – an ultra-violent glorification of a criminal outlaw. Tait's film and others like it were so popular that, in 1912, Victoria and New South Wales placed a ban on bushranger films, fearing an upsurge in anti-social behaviour. This crime cinema boom fizzled out in the mid-1910s when Australian production entered a slump that would last fifty years. Early bushranger mythology has, however, been revisited in films such as Philippe Mora's *Mad Dog Morgan* (1976), Gregor Jordan's *Ned Kelly* (2003), and John Hillcoat's postcolonial Western *The Proposition* (2005).

The guardians of the Australian cinema revival of the 1970s, assessors and officers of state and federal film funding agencies tended not to look favourably on genre cinema. Crime movies and the Australian New Wave overlapped only on rare occasions, as in Bruce Beresford's heist film *The Money Movers* (1979) and Phillip Noyce's conspiracy film *Heatwave* (1982). Commercial crime-film production did reappear in the 1980s when new government tax breaks fuelled an influx of private capital into the industry. As a staple of genre production, the crime film was seen as a suitable vehicle for investment. Minor 1980s' thrillers and action films like Mark Joffe's *Grievous Bodily Harm* (1988) and Brian Trenchard-Smith's *Day of the Panther* (1987) are characteristic of this fast-and-cheap approach.

The late 1990s saw the beginning of a cycle of mid-budget Australian crime films with broad appeal and commercial ambition. Gregor Jordan's romantic gangster film *Two Hands* (1999) offered a fast-paced tour through the Sydney underworld, featuring a typically menacing performance from Bryan Brown as a Kings Cross strip-club owner. Andrew Dominik's *Chopper* followed in 2000, establishing Eric Bana as a serious dramatic actor. Other films from this period include *Risk* (Alan White, 2000), *The Bank* (Robert Connolly, 2001), *The Hard Word* (Scott Roberts, 2002), *Bad Eggs* (Tony Martin, 2003) and *Gettin' Square* (Jonathan Teplitzky, 2003).

Released towards the end of this cycle, David Caesar's *Dirty Deeds* (2002) is a rare attempt at a big-budget Australian gangster movie. Aimed squarely at multiplex audiences, the film is set in Sydney during the Vietnam War and follows the misadventures of two foot soldiers from the Chicago mafia (played by American actor John Goodman and Australian actor Felix Williamson) as they try to expand their racket into territory controlled by homegrown mobster Barry Ryan (Bryan Brown). The film's central narrative device (a transnational criminal turf war) and generic identity (US gangster movie in vernacular mode) speak to its industrial context – namely, the local film community's anxiety about the 'invasion' of American runaway productions in the lead-up to the Australia-US Free Trade Agreement (which came into force in 2005).

The many sub-genres that make up crime cinema have been unequally represented in Australian productions. Idiosyncratic crime-comedies have been a strong suit. Films like *Two Hands*, John Ruane's *Death in Brunswick* (1991), and the two Shane Maloney telemovies *Stiff* and *The Brush-Off* (Seven Network, 2004) explore the dodgy side of Melbourne and Sydney with a deft comic touch. There are a number of gangster films that depict the workings of organized crime and chart the rise and fall of the gang boss, while many more films feature gangster characters, often in comic mode. Among the former group of films is Kevin Dobson's *Squizzy Taylor* (1982), which tells the (partly) true story of the rise and fall of the eponymous 1920s' Melbourne hoodlum. Honourable mention must also go to Geoffrey Wright's adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (2006), which transposes the action to present-day Melbourne, where crime boss Duncan is overthrown by his lieutenant Macbeth in a clear allusion to the gang war which gripped Melbourne in the mid-2000s and which is dramatized in the television series *Underbelly*. Wright might be seen to have taken a lead from Baz Luhrmann's Shakespeare adaptation *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) which is also set in the midst of a present-day gang war. Other films dealing with gangs who occasionally engage in criminal behaviour (as distinct from gangs whose sole purpose is crime) include Geoffrey Wright's *Romper Stomper* (1992), which focuses on a neo-Nazi skinhead gang, and Sandy Harbutt's *Stone* (1974), which follows an undercover policeman investigating the murders of several outlaw motorcycle gang members. Gangsters also feature as key supporting characters in a number of crime-comedies, including David Bilcock and Rob Copping's ocker comedy *Alvin Rides Again* (1974), and two films written by lawyer Chris Nyst and set on the Gold Coast: *Gettin' Square* (2003), and *Crooked Business* (2008), which Nyst also directed.

Heist movies and robberies are the subjects, or parts of the plot, of a wide range of Australian films, including *The Hard Word* (2002), in which three brothers are 'freed' from prison to undertake a series of daring robberies culminating in a cheeky heist on Melbourne Cup day. David Caesar's *Idiot Box* (1996) follows a couple of disaffected, unemployed suburban youths who decide to rob a bank to relieve the boredom of their lives, with tragic consequences. In Craig Lahiff's *Heaven's Burning* (1997), a bungled heist provides an opportunity for a discontented Japanese honeymooner to escape the confines of a marriage she regrets

when she is taken hostage by the getaway driver. The cross-country chase that ensues is mirrored in several road movies in which fugitives try to stay one step ahead of the police, including Bill Bennett's *Kiss or Kill* (1997), Stavros Kazantzidis's *True Love and Chaos*, and most recently Glendyn Ivin's *Last Ride* (2009).

Films in which detectives or police officers are the lead characters are fewer in number. In addition to Matthew Saville's 2007 story *Noise*, about a police officer struggling with tinnitus while manning a temporary investigation office at the site of a mass murder on a suburban train, notable recent examples of the detective and police procedural film include Craig Monahan's *The Interview* (1998), which begins with a police raid on an apartment but is predominantly set in a police interview room, and Jon Hewitt's low-budget feature *Redball* (1998), which follows a group of police whose investigation into a series of child murders threatens to expose corruption within the force when a police officer is implicated in the killings. Another remarkable example of a detective-police procedural is the lesbian private-eye film *The Monkey's Mask* (2000) by Samantha Lang, one of the few female directors to try their hand at this blokiest of genres. *The Monkey's Mask* was adapted from a novel of the same name, written in verse, by Australian poet Dorothy Porter. After critics excoriated her young adult novel *The Witch Number* for its depictions of menstruation and witchcraft, Porter turned back to poetry. She later wrote:

I wanted ingredients that stank to high heaven of badness. I wanted graphic sex. I wanted explicit perversion. I wanted putrid language. I wanted stenching murder. I wanted to pour out my heart. I wanted to take the piss. I wanted lesbians who weren't nice to other women. I wanted glamorous nasty men who even lesbians want to fuck. I wanted to say that far too much Australian poetry is a dramatic cure for insomnia. But I still wanted to write the book in poetry. (Porter 2000)

The crime genre provided the perfect outlet, and the film is faithful to the book's form, intentions and confronting subject matter.

A number of Australian films of the last twenty years have used crime narratives as launching pads for social commentary and formal experimentation. At one end of this spectrum lies a series of what could be called Australian 'art-crime' films. Bill Bennett's innovative road movie *Kiss or Kill* (1997), Rowan Woods' minimalist psychodrama *The Boys* (1998), Matthew Saville's experimental police-procedural *Noise* (2007), and possibly Geoffrey Wright's acclaimed *Romper Stomper* (1992), are reference points here. Woods' extraordinary *Little Fish* (2005), starring Cate Blanchett, manages to be a crime film, a drug epic, a love story, a tragedy, and a family melodrama all at once. The most commercially-successful director in this pack is Ray Lawrence, whose humanist dramas *Lantana* (2001) and *Jindabyne* (2006) both feature multi-character network narratives structured around a mysterious death.

At the other end of the market is a trio of recent low-budget digital films which rework aspects of the crime genre. Khoa Do's *The Finished People* (2003), Dee McLachlan's *The Jammed* (2007), and David Field's *The Combination* (2009) received minimal theatrical exhibition but found an audience on DVD and online. In different ways, and with varying results, all three films use black-market trade in people and drugs as an entry point to explore marginalized ethnic communities in contemporary Australia, drawing on the iconography of crime but using it in the service of social analysis. Films such as these are indicative of new directions in crime cinema as the Australian film industry makes the transition to digital production and distribution models.

## Ramon Lobato

# Jindabyne

**Country of Origin:**

Australia

**Director:**

Ray Lawrence

**Producer:**

Catherine Jarman

**Screenwriter:**

Beatrix Christian

**Cinematographer:**

David Williamson

**Editor:**

Karl Sodersten

**Production Designer:**

Margot Wilson

**Duration:**

123 minutes

**Genre:**

Crime

**Cast:**

Gabriel Byrne  
 Laura Linney  
 Chris Haywood  
 Deborra-Lee Furness  
 John Howard  
 Simon Stone

**Year:**

2006

## Synopsis

A young Indigenous woman driving through a deserted brown landscape, singing as she goes, is, unknown to her, being pursued by an enigmatic and oddly-alarming man in a truck. This cryptic encounter – Who is the girl? Why is this grizzled truck-driver pursuing her? – gives way to an early morning sequence in Claire and Stuart's house, which appears to establish a close, loving family, with hugs for young son Tom, and talk of the upcoming fishermen's weekend away. Then the film moves to another household in which an older couple, Jude and Carl, are concerned that their granddaughter is not in her bedroom. Quite quickly it is clear that neither of these households is quite what it seems, that there is lurking unhappiness and less-than-perfect trust at work among the occupants. There are two other couples involved in the network of intersecting lives that will be traumatically disrupted by the events of the fishing weekend.

Stuart, Carl, and two other friends set off on a fishing trip deep in the wilderness of a national park. Soon after they start to fish they find a body, that of the young Indigenous woman seen at the start of the film. What the four fishing friends in *Jindabyne* are required to do is to consider their priorities and they signally fail to recognize these, or, if they do, they put them to one side. Billy, the youngest, reports that he is 'not getting any reception' on his mobile phone, and this seems reason enough for the friends to go ahead and enjoy the weekend and report the body in the water upon their return a few days later. The men are unprepared for the rage that is unleashed in the town. 'It's about all of us,' Claire tells Carmel, girlfriend of Rocco, the fourth of the fishermen. Claire determines to come to a kind of reconciliation with the Indigenous community, even at the risk to her own marriage.

## Critique

New Australian cinema from the 1970s depended quite heavily on pre-existing stories. At first, national 'classics', and, more recently, less-reverentially-regarded modern fictions such as *Candy* and *Loaded* (filmed as *Head On*, Anna Kokkinos, 1998) have been adapted for the screen, but almost never have Australian film-makers of the modern era taken on literary works whose roots are other than Australian. *Jindabyne* is derived from US-author Raymond Carver's minimalist short story, 'So Much Water So Close to Home', which has also been the inspiration for songwriter Paul Kelly's song of the same name. The source of the story alone would make the film a matter of interest, exhibiting a pleasing anti-parochial turn of mind among its makers. Director Ray Lawrence relocates the story to the Snowy Mountains. The moral dilemma at the story's core is retained, while at the same time Lawrence and screenwriter Beatrix Christian give it a powerful local inflection. There is surely no reason why Australian film-makers should feel limited to adapting Australian literature; and there is no point in adapting *any* literary work to the screen unless the film-maker has something new to say about it. This is where *Jindabyne's* real distinction lies.



*Jindabyne*, April Films.

*Jindabyne*, in Christian's elegant and eloquent screenplay, is essentially a study of individual lives and relationships, how these resonate in the community at large and, here, beyond the community to touch on a vein of sensitive national feeling. The lives of the four men are shaken up by the suppressions of their weekend, and Claire gradually emerges as the film's moral voice. Unstable as she has been regarded, it is she who cannot let the men's feebly self-interested prevarications rest. And, in her attempts to reach the Indigenous girl's people, in her unwanted collection of money for the funeral, asking the priest to pass it on for her, she runs herself into danger from the murderous Gregory (in a sequence that parallels the opening) as she goes to

attend the outdoor burial ceremony. What, by unobtrusive metaphoric extension, she is doing here, by comparison with her community at large, is to critique the national negligence of its Indigenous population and the official unwillingness to effect real reconciliation. The film is not in the least preachy about this or anything else, but it is so richly textured that such wider meanings ripple out from the specificities of the plot. The film does not end on a note of unrelieved bleakness, any more than Carver's story does. 'I want you to come home, Claire,' says Stuart who has come to the ceremony, as a mourner sings one of Susan's last songs.

Director Ray Lawrence is a strange, maverick figure in Australian cinema; his sparing output makes Terence Malick look prolific. In 1985 he directed and co-wrote (with the novel's author Peter Carey) the maddeningly-pretentious *Bliss*; maybe it was ahead of its time but certainly *in* its time it was hard to bear, though it did win AFI awards for film, screenplay and director. One can only surmise that this was a dud year for Australian films; unruly Cannes audiences left noisily, and the failure of this stylistically-incoherent black comedy-cum-fantasy probably accounts for Lawrence's not filming again for sixteen years. In 2001, he made *Lantana*, arguably one of the finest films ever made here, an absorbing account of interlocking suburban lives. In *Jindabyne*, he has again adopted the omnibus approach, exhibiting a real capacity to understand and represent what is going on in a relationship, and to suggest how communities, because they are never anything but relationships, are always fragile.

In relocating Carver's story to the Snowy Mountains, Lawrence has resisted the temptation to mere pictorialism. Whereas Carver can do without filling in the physical setting of America's mid-West, the mimetic demands of film mean that Lawrence does not have this choice. He creates a powerful sense of community – both that of the town's white inhabitants and that of the Indigenous settlement at its edges – and of how they interact with the physical ambience. Though the film makes valuable use of its diversity of natural setting, Lawrence and Christian have focused very firmly on the strands of the community, with the affiliations and undercurrents, and, very importantly, the Indigenous community just outside Jindabyne. In this latter respect, the film, as I have suggested, has a significance that ripples beyond the specificities of place so sharply drawn.

The film was nominated for nine AFI awards and inexplicably won none. Given that the two top-billed actors, Laura Linney and Gabriel Byrne, both nominated, were imported from overseas, one would hope that xenophobia was not involved. However, the ensemble cast behaves as an ensemble should – that is, without any sense of straining towards star delivery at the expense of the sense of interaction and of community under threat which are at the heart of the film's meaning. *Jindabyne* sets its characters some tough moral challenges, some dodged, some met and others in the process of being worked through. From start to finish, it is a film made with grown-ups in mind; if it asks a lot of its characters, it is also a demanding and rewarding experience for its viewers.

## Brian McFarlane

# Macbeth

## Country of Origin:

Australia

## Director:

Geoffrey Wright

## Producer:

Martin Fabinyi

## Screenwriters:

Victoria Hill  
Geoffrey Wright

## Cinematographer:

Will Gibson

## Editor:

Jane Usher

## Production Designer:

David McKay

## Duration:

109 minutes

## Genre:

Crime  
Gangster

## Cast:

Sam Worthington  
Victoria Hill  
Steve Bastoni  
Matt Doran  
Lachy Hulme  
Gary Sweet

## Year:

2006

## Synopsis

In contemporary Melbourne, gangland rivalries are running dangerously hot. Macbeth, acting on the orders of mob boss Duncan, destroys Macdonwald's drug-trafficking gang. With his ally, Banquo, Macbeth kills Cawdor, whose club he takes over. When three young witches foretell the drug-fuddled Macbeth's ascendancy in the gangland hierarchy, his ambition is fired. Encouraged by Lady Macbeth, he kills Duncan and sends two thugs to murder Banquo and his son Fleance because the witches had prophesied that Banquo's children would succeed the sonless Macbeth. Banquo is murdered but Fleance escapes. Macbeth, now irrevocably embarked on a murderous career to secure what his ambition has led him to grab, orders the unmotivated slaughter of Macduff's wife and children. Finally, Macduff and Duncan's son, Malcolm, lead a mob which surrounds Macbeth's house and, in the gunfire that ensues, Macduff tracks Macbeth to the cellar of the house and stabs him. He dies by the corpse of Lady Macbeth, from whom he has become remote and whose sanity has collapsed under the strain of her complicity in Macbeth's rise to power. As the witches had foretold, Fleance now assumes leadership of the mob and in the film's last moments he walks off with Macduff.

## Critique

Australian cinema has shown little interest in adapting Shakespeare to the screen – or, indeed, non-Australian works of any kind. It is interesting to speculate why this should be so. Surely it cannot be because they think Shakespeare irrelevant to antipodean life? It surely cannot be anything as narrow-visioned as that, when you consider all those other non-British countries that have filmed the very greatest plays: think of Russian Grigori Kosintzev's stunning black-and-white *Hamlet* (1964), or the Japanese *Throne of Blood* (1957), Akira Kurosawa's savage samurai version of *Macbeth*, or even the MGM sci-fi reworking of *The Tempest* as *Forbidden Planet* (Fred M Wilcox, 1956). I draw attention to these merely to suggest that there is no reason why an Australian film-maker should feel daunted by the prospect of Shakespeare, any more than Russian, Japanese, American, and many others have, and also no reason why a film adapted from Shakespeare cannot be relocated not just to another country but also to another genre.

In addition to Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), which was shot in Mexico with a largely non-Australian cast, Neil Armfield's *Twelfth Night* (1986) is the only other modern Australian film derived from Shakespeare, and that was more or less a filming of his own stage production and received only very limited screening. Geoffrey Wright has relocated Shakespeare's *Macbeth* from the warring clans of long-ago Scotland to the underworld of present-day Melbourne, with rival gangs seeking ascendancy in the local drug trade. Whereas Edward Dmytryk's *Broken Lance* (1954) transferred *King Lear* to an American-western setting, drawing on the iconography and narrative motifs of the western genre, Wright has accommodated the drama



of Shakespeare's swift and complex tragedy to the generic mode of urban action thriller.

In one key sense he has been more daring than Dmytryk: he has retained Shakespeare's blank verse in this new time and place. This is a major problem confronting the film-maker who aspires to 'capture' Shakespeare on screen: the plays belong to a non-realist category of drama, and film has so accustomed us to a level of realistic depiction of the actual world that it demands quite a lot of its audience to accept characters speaking in iambic pentameters. Wright has had the cheek to do this. And not only to retain the verse but, further, to have actors speak it with a range of Australian accents which are convincing in the context of the relocated drama. Perhaps some of the poetry is lost in the transfer but, by compensation, its essentially low-key delivery works well enough in realist vein. The actors give the verse a conversational quality that helps to effect the transition from the conventions of the drama to those of the screen's greater and easier naturalism. In view of this one can forgive the odd improbability of, say, thuggish types addressing each other as 'My lord' or Macbeth's wife somehow answering to the title of 'Lady Macbeth'.

What essentially matters in the film, as in the play, is the personal drama of the corrupting potential of powerful ambition and this seems as much at home in the night streets and by-ways of Melbourne as in twelfth-century Scotland, the predominant darkness and bloody deeds articulating in realist terms the play's insistent images of night and blood. Wright's and actor Sam Worthington's Macbeth is – like Shakespeare's – a nature divided against itself. From the graveyard opening where Macbeth's sonless state is announced, there is a thread of allusion to fathers and sons which goes some distance to explaining the rift in Macbeth's nature. The feeling between him and Lady Macbeth (Victoria Hill) is intensified by this opening image of shared grief, and there is pathos, if not perhaps tragedy, in the way they draw apart. Unusually for any performance of *Macbeth*, one of the scenes that stay in the mind is that between the doctor (Kim Gynge) and Lady Macbeth's housekeeper/maid (Katherine Tonkin), who give us necessary glimpses of lives not caught up in the pervasive bloodshed and darker impulses, as they attend her decline towards death. Their professional solicitude strikes an aptly realist note in a film that also aims to make the supernatural figures of the witches believable as figments of Macbeth's increasingly-disturbed mind.

The graveyard opening prefigures the theme of parents and children, which Wright's film stresses: through the resurgence of Duncan's son Malcolm, through Macduff's child brutally killed, and implied again in the final moment in which Macduff and Banquo's son Fleance walk off into the dawn, suggestive of fragile hope for a future in which familial bonds may be more secure. Of course, not everything in this venturesome film works – some of the main action sequences, for instance, lack clarity – but Wright has shown again the feral talent at work which made his feature debut, *Romper Stomper* (1992), so properly unnerving an experience.

**Brian McFarlane**

# The Square

## Country of Origin:

Australia

## Director:

Nash Edgerton

## Producer:

Louise Smith

## Scriptwriters:

Joel Edgerton  
Matthew Dabner

## Cinematographer:

Brad Shield

## Production Designer:

Elizabeth Mary Moore

## Editors:

Nash Edgerton  
Luke Doolan

## Duration:

105 minutes

## Genre:

Crime  
Melodrama

## Cast:

David Roberts  
Claire van der Boom  
Joel Edgerton  
Anthony Hayes  
Bill Hunter

## Year:

2009

## Synopsis

Ray, the site manager of a new housing development (The Square of the title) fixes a large contract in order to receive a kickback from concreter Barney, to pay for a new life with his mistress Carla. Carla, meanwhile, has discovered a bag full of money – the proceeds of an unspecified crime – that her partner Greg has hidden in the roof of their house. The windfall emboldens Carla to press Ray to leave his wife. Ray hires arsonist Billy to set fire to Greg and Carla's house so that Greg will think the money has been destroyed, but unbeknown to the plotters, Greg's mother is asleep in the house and is killed in the blaze. After the fire, Ray receives a card from a blackmailer. He suspects Leonard, a mechanic who has been working on The Square, after Leonard witnesses one of Ray and Carla's assignations. Ray accidentally kills Leonard, and hides his body under an area of The Square which is about to be concreted, but torrential rain and a freak workplace accident delay the cover-up. Ray continues to receive cards from the blackmailer. He breaks in to Billy and Lily's flat, now believing Lily is the culprit, and confronts her. Ray's foreman Jake suspects that Ray has caused some unexplained damage to the site and secretly inspects the area where Leonard is buried. But Ray has followed Jake to the site, and realizes that the scale of his deception is about to be uncovered. After a scuffle, Jake drives off at high speed. Ray chases him, calling out for a chance to explain what has happened. Ray swerves to avoid a tree and accidentally knocks Jake's car off the road. Ray saves Jake's baby from the wreck, but Jake dies in hospital. Ray goes to meet the blackmailer, but is intercepted by his boss, Gil, who has been tipped off about the arrangements. Together with the local police sergeant, they apprehend the blackmailer, who turns out to be the concreting contractor Barney who had earlier paid Ray the kickback. Ray hurries to meet Carla, only to find that Billy is holding her at gunpoint. Billy confronts Ray with one of the blackmailer's cards that Ray had dropped when he accosted Lily; Billy believes that the arson has been discovered. Ray and Carla try to explain about the kickback, and tell Billy about Greg's bag of money. Greg unexpectedly arrives, and a brief shootout ensues. Billy shoots Greg, but is wounded himself. Ray tries to wrestle the gun from Billy but, in the struggle, the gun goes off, fatally wounding Carla. Billy escapes with the money. Ray stumbles out to the street in a daze as police sirens approach.

## Critique

*The Square* is the feature film debut of director Nash Edgerton, well-known in Australian film circles not only for his award-winning music videos and short films *Deadline* (first prize winner at Tropfest in 1997) and *Spider* but also for his work as an actor, editor, producer, writer and stuntman on countless Australian films and television programmes. The film was co-written by Edgerton's regular partner and brother Joel, who also plays the arsonist Billy. Joel is familiar to Australian and international audiences for his television work in *The Secret Life of Us* as well as numerous film roles.

*The Square* is reminiscent of Sam Raimi's film blanc *A Simple Plan*, not only in the terrible consequences that flow from the chance discovery of a bag full of cash, and the tragedies that befall characters who make questionable moral choices, but also in the blank-visaged, vapid intensity of the lead characters Ray (*The Square*) and Hank (*A Simple Plan*). For both of these characters, survival is ultimately a greater punishment than the terminal fate so many of those around them suffer as a consequence of their actions. David Roberts' Ray is uncharismatic and difficult for viewers to connect with: for someone engaged in an affair with a much younger woman he is oddly passionless, but given the various deceptions he is practising it is perhaps fitting that his facial expressions and manner give little away. Like the shark-infested river that separates Ray and Carla's houses, on the surface Ray is equable and unremarkable, but below the surface deadly forces lurk. The theme of hidden dangers is literalized in the unfortunate demise of Carla's dog that we first encounter in the opening scene locked in Carla's car, watching her tryst with Ray in his car. The dog regularly swims across the river to be with Ray's dog until one day he disappears half-way across, a victim of the unseen shark.

This contemporary immorality play deploys familiar cinematic energies – greed, infidelity, serendipity – to great effect in its cautionary tale of respectable people brought to ruin by ethical transgressions and the deadly, seductive power of large sums of money. Both the deliberate and the fortuitous interventions in the circulation of capital in the film have disastrous consequences for the main protagonists and all those around them: Ray's request for a kickback kicks off the blackmail plot, while Carla's chance discovery of Greg's bag of loot indirectly causes the chain of accidental deaths culminating in her own farcical demise. As in *A Simple Plan*, the ill-gotten gains magnify Ray and Carla's duplicity; the money and all it promises takes control of them and ultimately destroys their lives.

Claire van der Boom in her first feature film role makes Carla immensely likeable, despite her complicity in the series of criminal acts that punctuate the film. On one level, her attraction to Ray is hard to comprehend, and we are given little insight into the origins of their affair, but her desire to escape her relationship with violent bully Greg is ultimately the only explanation we need for her actions. Anthony Hayes as Greg demonstrates once again a remarkable screen presence; his air of quiet menace and imminent potential for savage violence is reminiscent of Oliver Reed at his most threatening.

## Ben Goldsmith

## The Jammed

### Country of Origin:

Australia

### Director:

Dee McLachlan

### Producers:

Sally Ayre-Smith  
Andrea Buck  
Dee McLachlan

### Screenwriter:

Dee McLachlan

### Cinematographer:

Peter Falk

### Editor:

Anne Carter

### Art Director:

Emma Wicks

### Duration:

89 minutes

### Genre:

Crime  
Thriller

## Synopsis

An illegal immigrant, Crystal, is interviewed by federal agents investigating the trafficking of women to Australia to work as prostitutes. A series of flashbacks reveal that she arrived from Indonesia expecting to find work as a dancer to pay off family debts, only to be forced into working in the sex trade. Crystal's story is intercut with that of Ashley, who, while picking up a friend from the airport, meets an old woman, Sunee, who has travelled from China in search of her missing daughter. Unwillingly at first, Ashley is drawn in to Sunee's search. After being raped and beaten by a man who collects her at Sydney airport, Crystal is taken to Melbourne with two other women, Rubi and Vanya, to work in a brothel run by Vic Glassman. One night, Rubi passes out in the brothel. Vic orders his henchmen to dump her 'anywhere', but Vanya manages to take Rubi to hospital. Vanya finds one of Sunee's posters, and realizes that Rubi is the woman she is looking for. She telephones Ashley with the location of the brothel. Ashley discovers that the building is owned by Glassman's wife; Ashley contacts Glassman, and arranges to buy Rubi back. Ashley and her former boyfriend Tom secretly follow one of Glassman's henchmen, Lai, as he transports the women from the brothel to their accommodation. Ashley distracts Lai, enabling Crystal and Rubi to escape, but Vanya is caught by Lai. The escapees are taken to a hotel, where Sunee is reunited with Rubi. Rubi is apoplectic, shouting that her mother sold her to a trafficker in Bangkok. The next morning, Crystal awakes in the room to discover Rubi has jumped to her death from the window. Crystal is taken to immigration detention, where the interview that begins the film takes place. Ashley forces her way in to the brothel to rescue Vanya. Together they go to the opening of Mrs Glassman's art gallery. Ashley confronts Mrs Glassman, saying 'Tell your husband Vanya wants her passport back'. Outside the gallery, Vanya gives Ashley Vic's notebook that she has stolen from the brothel, and runs away. In the detention centre, Crystal waits to be deported.

**Cast:**

Emma Lung  
Veronica Sywak  
Saskia Burmeister  
Sun Park  
Amanda Ma  
Andrew S. Gilbert

**Year:**

2007

**Critique**

One of the strengths of Dee McLachlan's shocking and moving film is the extensive research undertaken in pre-production, which grounds the film in a reality of which many Australians are unaware. The film opens with a caption stating that it was inspired by court transcripts and closes with an intertitle stating that, in 2001 and 2002, two sex-trafficked victims died in Villawood Detention Centre. The film makes it clear that human trafficking and the coercion of women into prostitution are as much problems in Australia as anywhere: Project Respect, an organization that acts on behalf of trafficked sex workers, has estimated that about 1000 women are illegally brought to Australia to work as prostitutes each year. The film's title is taken from the term used by support workers to describe how the women are 'jammed' between their captors and the authorities: their illegal status and often heavy indebtedness, coupled with their innate fear of authority figures and the captors' threats to their families back home, deter them from escaping or going to the police. The latter course of action may only lead to incarceration and deportation, as it does for Crystal in *The Jammed*. They are also deterred from speaking out by the implied (and often real) collusion between the traffickers and the authorities. While she is held in an apartment shortly after she arrives in Australia, Crystal threatens to call the police, only to be told by her captor 'my best friend is the police'.

*The Jammed* joins a growing roster of feature films and documentaries from around the world that take this sordid trade as their subject. Like Amos Gitai's *Promised Land* (2004) about the trafficking of Estonian women to Israel, and Marco Kreuzpaintner's *Trade* (2007) about the kidnapping and sale into sex slavery in America of a young Mexican girl, but unlike higher-budgeted thrillers on the same subject like Pierre Morel's *Taken* (2008) and David Cronenberg's *Eastern Promises* (2007) or the American television miniseries *Human Trafficking*, there is no happy ending in *The Jammed*. While some of the perpetrators may face justice, the trafficked women in *The Jammed* die (Rubi), are incarcerated and deported (Crystal), or face an uncertain future on the street (Vanya), while the trade simply moves on. This lack of closure and avoidance of the temptation to end the film positively was a deliberate strategy by the film-makers to reflect the fact that prosecutions are rare in Australia – and successful prosecutions even more so – and laws to counter sex trafficking remain manifestly inadequate. The inaction and ambivalence of the authorities also explains the choice of an ordinary person – office worker Ashley – to lead the investigation, rather than making the film a police procedural with a detective as a main character.

Although *The Jammed* marks a departure from her previous work, which includes *The Second Jungle Book: Mowgli and Baloo* (1997) and *Born Wild* (aka *Running Wild* 1992), both of which were directed under her birth name, Duncan McLachlan, Dee McLachlan's film is a stylishly and skilfully-executed ultra-low-budget thriller. Peter Falk's cinematography – the film was shot on HDV – deserves special note, with many scenes taking place outside at night or in cramped spaces,

each of which present challenges in lighting and framing the action. The score, by acclaimed South African composer Grant McLachlan, is hauntingly beautiful. The cast consists of largely unknown actors, who collectively are pitch-perfect. Serendipity and strong word-of-mouth helped overcome the film's struggles with distribution, which are well-documented in interviews with director McLachlan. From a short run on a single screen in Melbourne, positive audience reaction propelled the film to a national release and widespread acclaim as one of the finest Australian films of 2007.

### **Ben Goldsmith**