

Film of the week

When fishermen catch a corpse...

... they just carry on fishing. Their callous decision outrages their wives, and makes for the finest Australian movie in years

Philip French
Sunday May 27, 2007

Observer

Jindabyne
 (123 mins, 15)

Directed by Ray Lawrence; starring Laura Linney, Gabriel Byrne, Deborah-Lee Furness, Chris Haywood

'So Much Water So Close to Home' was one of the nine Raymond Carver short stories that Robert Altman turned into his mosaic movie *Short Cuts* in 1993. It's a 24-page first-person narrative by Claire, a lower-middle-class housewife, whose marriage to Stuart has been in a fragile state since postnatal depression drove her to leave him for a while after the birth of their son. A major climax comes in her life when her husband returns from a fishing trip with three chums and discloses that they found the corpse of a raped and murdered girl in the river but didn't report it for two days because that would have interfered with their weekend's sport. Altman condensed the tale and transposed it from the Pacific northwest to Los Angeles, with Anne Archer and Fred Ward as Claire and Stuart.

In **Jindabyne** Ray Lawrence has expanded the story and transposed it to the mountainous area of New South Wales that abuts the Kosciuszko National Park, with Laura Linney and Gabriel Byrne as Claire and Stewart (as his name is now spelt).

This is the best Australian movie since Lawrence's *Lantana* six years ago, which was also a psychological thriller about the way a variety of troubled people react to the discovery of a female corpse. Both pictures have titles that are real and metaphorical. *Lantana* is a tropical weed that runs rampant in Australia and is a metaphor for something introduced from abroad and for the film's tangled relationships. *Jindabyne* is a real small town, drowned under a reservoir and rebuilt on higher ground. Metaphorically, it stands for imposing foreign ideas on nature, for burying events of the past and feelings of the present.

Stewart is an Irish immigrant running a garage, a macho guy dedicated to motor sport and fishing, Claire is a hypersensitive American working in a pharmacy, and frightened by her pregnancy, which she conceals from her husband. On hand to stir up trouble is Stewart's sharp-tongued possessive mother, brought over from Ireland when Claire briefly bolted. She thinks Australia 'a godforsaken country', and intervenes when Claire tries to discipline her small grandson for the dangerous games he plays with the orphaned granddaughter of Claire's best friend. There is no formal exposition in the movie and audiences are left to infer and work out the relationships within the ensemble.

There are faint echoes of Hitchcock's *The Trouble With Harry* in *Jindabyne* and strong ones of John Boorman's *Deliverance* as Stewart and his friends drive out to a remote and magical fishing spot, reached after a long hike from the car and (a necessary touch nowadays) incapable of receiving a mobile phone signal. This is a macho mystical trip, a male-bonding affair that puts them in touch with the land and primeval things. They are shocked by the discovery of the 19-year-old girl's body, but we are persuaded that it is their weird, elevated state that leads them to postpone reporting the body rather than simple callousness.

The vital change Lawrence and screenwriter Beatrix Christian have made is to identify the murder victim as a young Aboriginal, whom we see in the opening sequence being pursued and attacked on a deserted outback

road by an elderly, white-bearded loner (veteran actor Chris Haywood). It's close to a sequence in *Zodiac*. The rapist (who is, or has the makings of, a serial killer) moves quietly through the town unnoticed, his path crossing those of the major characters. He's a manifestation of evil but it is the four fishermen who bear a greater burden of guilt for their culpable negligence and their ignorance of, and lack of respect for, Aboriginal culture. In moving and then leaving the body they have offended the propriety of white society and insulted Aboriginal lore that dictates that the girl's spirit remains in the body until certain rituals have been performed.

The girl's family are up in arms and express their disgust through acts of violence. The fishermen and their families are wracked with guilt and deeply divided. Claire is the one who understands that various rituals and forms of identification and self-understanding must be gone through to achieve reconciliation with the family. And equally that these involve a change in the relationship between men and women and a reassessment of what it means to be Australian. This handsome movie is a trifle overlong and its end, though moving, slightly glib. It is, however, a work of ambition and depth. Like *Lantana*, it is immaculately acted and Linney and Byrne are at their considerable best.

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