

Film review

# Jindabyne

5 stars (Cert 15)

Peter Bradshaw  
Friday May 25, 2007

Guardian

Gabriel Byrne deserves some serious silverware for his performance in this outstanding Australian film from director Ray Lawrence (who made *Lantana*) and screenwriter Beatrix Christian. The movie is beautifully shot, and succeeds in being deeply disturbing and mysterious, with richly achieved nuances of characterisation. I have seen it two or three times now, and each time it gets better.

It is based on Raymond Carver's short story *So Much Water So Close to Home* - also in fact alluded to in Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* - but here the action is transposed to the vast landscape of New South Wales. Here Byrne plays Stewart, a former racing driver, now reduced to running a shabby old garage, brooding on former glories and dyeing his hair. He basically lives for one weekend a year: a male-bonding fishing trip with three buddies, away from the querulous and demanding womenfolk, in a rugged wilderness where they can forget the petty quarrels and disappointments of their lives and brusquely reclaim their manhood.

At the beginning of their precious weekend, they find the corpse of young Aboriginal woman in the river - the victim of a serial killer. Rather than spoil the trip, they decide to leave the dead woman where she is, heartlessly tethering her by twine to the riverbank, and delay reporting the body until Sunday night. Although notionally shocked and sorry for the victim, something in the woman's brutalised subjection excites a secret, unnamable sense of satisfaction, survival and even euphoria in these respectable blokes, which they can admit neither to themselves nor each other. When she discovers what went on, Stewart's wife Claire (Laura Linney) is horrified at the abyss that has opened beneath her feet. The man she thought she knew is capable of an act of insensitivity amounting to a kind of bourgeois barbarism.

There is so much going on in his movie, not least in the intriguing figure of Claire herself, a woman whose authority is undermined by the fact that she had a breakdown after the birth of her child, and who now feels eternally undermined in her own home by the overbearing mother-in-law Vanessa (Betty Lucas) who has moved in to help look after the children. The interior, domestic drama of Claire's troubled personal history is a brilliant complicating factor. She demands that the complacent Jindabyne folk make some reparation to the Aborigine community, and is rewarded with indifference and hostility.

Jindabyne addresses a gulf between articulate women and moody silent males, between the whites and the patronised Aborigines, and between scared humanity and the vast and frightening landscape of Australia itself, a landscape in which one may so easily lose one's bearings of Anglo-Saxon normality, and in which violence or loss are so terrifyingly possible. Jindabyne has the disquieting quality of *Picnic At Hanging Rock* and indeed the horror film *Wolf Creek* - which, like this film, transforms the real-life Falconio murder case. But Lawrence makes of his story something quite different: more serious, more complex, with moral shades of grey. In his boldly idealistic final scene, moreover, Lawrence ends the film on a note not of irony or despair or alienation, but forgiveness and hope. This is the kind of film to see and then talk about endlessly over dinner afterwards. It's real cinematic nourishment.

Guardian Unlimited © Guardian News and Media Limited 2007