

## PHILIP BROPHY

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AUSTRALIAN SCREEN CLASSICS

the adventures  
of priscilla,  
queen of the  
desert

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# AUSTRALIAN SCREEN CLASSICS

JANE MILLS

Series Editor

Our national cinema plays a vital role in our cultural heritage and in showing us at least something of what it is to be Australian. But the picture can get blurred by unruly forces such as competing artistic aims, inconstant personal tastes, political vagaries, constantly changing priorities in screen education and training, and technological innovations and market forces.

When these forces remain unconnected, the result can be an artistically impoverished cinema and audiences who are disinclined to seek out and derive pleasure from a diverse range of films, including Australian ones.

This series is a part of screen culture which is the glue needed to stick these forces together. It's the plankton in the moving image food chain that feeds the imagination of our filmmakers and their audiences. It's what makes sense of the opinions, memories, responses, knowledge and exchange of ideas about film.

Above all, screen culture is informed by a *love* of cinema. And it has to be carefully nurtured if we are to understand and

appreciate the aesthetic, moral, intellectual and sentient value of our national cinema.

**Australian Screen Classics** will match some of our best-loved films with some of our most distinguished writers and thinkers, drawn from the worlds of culture, criticism and politics. All we ask of our writers is that they feel passionate about the films they choose. Through these thoughtful, elegantly-written books, we hope that screen culture will work its sticky magic and introduce more audiences to Australian cinema.

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# Prologue

## Reading Maps

Picture those seventeenth-century maps of white Australia with names like *Terra Australis* and *New Holland*. They appear ill-formed, misshapen, like an embryonic blob sliding to the bottom of a sphere. Yet at their inception, those maps were plausible cartographic tracings of how a ship would circumnavigate the perimeter of a land mass so as to deduce its continental form.

To the modernised eye of white Australia, those maps are wrong, quaintly so. Not because their cartographic impulse nullified the extant territories inhabited by indigenous people, but because white Australia has had its ratified shape burnt into its collective retina. Its fusion of continent, map and logo sums up Australia as a mass—an island to itself; an identifiable shape; an ideogram prompting recognition; a brand promoting jingoistic consumption. It encourages Australians to perceive this thing called ‘Australia’ as a whole to which one’s partial self can be attached and attributed.

By extension, anything labelled ‘Australian’ is aligned with this logoistic enterprise. Most things ‘Australian’ are pre-labelled and self-proclaimed so as to enforce cultural associations, rather than nurture discovery or allow repulsion. In this respect, Australian

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'Australiana' onscreen is a desperate recourse: Bernadette's finger on the map.

icons are like botanical and zoological specimens, categorised as being emblematic of 'Australia' in order to prove the uniqueness of the Australian continent. Australian cinema has developed along these anthropological lines. It blares its 'Australiana' to anyone within range, lest they feel beached upon a continent with which they cannot identify. Like verified cartography, corrected terminology, validated morphology and classified iconography, 'Australiana' on screen is a desperate recourse to circumnavigate an Australian consciousness and prove its whole, its mass, its collectivity.

This book is a reading of a map. The map is the 1994 film *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. The film tells the story of Sydney drag queen Mitzi/Tick (Hugo Weaving) who has been offered a gig at a small casino in Central Australia, run by his ex-wife Marion (Sarah Chadwick). She wishes to take a break, and the situation provides Mitzi with the opportunity to break free from his depressing life in Sydney—and to re-acquaint himself with their son Benji (Mark Holmes) whom he has not seen since coming out and separating from Marion. Mitzi enlists two other drag queens to travel with him and perform at the outback casino: the aging, acidic transsexual Bernadette/Ralph (Terence

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Stamp) and the young, precocious toy boy Felicia/Adam (Guy Pearce). The cash-strapped trio purchase an old bus which they name 'Priscilla Queen of the Desert', and haul themselves west into a world devoid of urban sophistication and liberal sexual attitudes. Through a series of emotional highs and lows, they forge their road trip, meeting colourful locals and encountering volatile predicaments, and therein discovering something about themselves. The story concludes with Bernadette staying in Alice Springs with a new admirer, the elderly, macho Bob (Bill Hunter), while Mitzi and Felicia return to Sydney rejuvenated. Mitzi finally bonds with Benji, who inspires his father by being comfortable with his dad's sexuality.

To some, *Priscilla* is a thoroughly familiar movie, full of uniquely Australian sentiment and perspective. They would see gay role models, moving comedy-drama, beautiful landscape cinematography, a wonderful camp sensibility, celebrated Australian stereotypography, and an international film success that, according to the 2004 DVD hyperbole, 'blitzed overseas box offices' and 'caused a near riot at the Cannes Film Festival'. To me, *Priscilla* is as alien as the landscape that greeted the first convicts, prospectors and settlers. Across its terrain, I detect quite different things. I hear the off-station broadcast crackling of David Bowie's 'Let's Dance' and Sister Sledge's 'We Are Family'. I see a host of movies whose apparition are likely to have been invisible sprites to many: *Sextette* (1978), *The Man Who Fell To Earth* (1976), *The Boy Friend* (1971), *Cruising* (1980), *The She-Creature* (1956), *Thelma & Louise* (1991). I flick the unlocked channels to pick up transmissions of actor John Meillon's Victoria Bitter television ads of the 1960s, the Opening Ceremony of the 2000 Olympic Games, the Sydney Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras, and the three episodes of

the Australian *Queer Eye For The Straight Guy*. By reading *Priscilla* as a map, I survey unlikely national formations, hidden bodily topographies and polysexual voices, sounds and images.

By reading *Priscilla* more than merely watching it, I forthrightly accept all the wrong mapmaking which locates the film—and every other successful Australian film—within a triangulated perspectival plane formed by Australian identity, Australian culture and Australian cinema. Australia particularly celebrates the celestial alignment of those three axes from which vantage point the nation can lay territorial claim to ‘getting it right’. For some, my reading of *Priscilla* will be as woefully wrong as those early maps drafted by Janszoon, Cook and Flinders. And hopefully so, for my intention in this reading is to get as much as wrong as possible.

What you are about to encounter is less an analysis of the film’s dramatic script and its visual narrative, and more an assessment of the signs circulating within the movie. I leave others to discuss director Stephan Elliott as an Australian auteur, the film’s performers as gay icons, and the overall artistry and popularity of the film’s production. In as much as *Priscilla* is accepted as indelibly Australian, my reading will follow the film’s nation-building road-trip as a meandering road-map leading to colonised, territorialised and localised incidents of this thing called ‘Australia’. I take you on no journey—only a series of disjointed passages; some interconnecting, some regenerating, some negating. For rather than championing *Priscilla*’s undisputed international success across 1994 and 1995 and its consequent enshrinement in the living museum of Australian iconography, my reading of *Priscilla* celebrates the great nothingness of white Australia and all the heady delusions and spindly neuroses which atmospherically circulate around its engorged mass.

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If my reading is deemed contentious, it is only because such a low threshold persists for critiquing Australia's nationalistic neuroses—particularly in its movies. A 'dumb semiotics' has been fostered in Australian cinema wherein 'Australia' seems bent on seeking itself out, fawning over its cosmetic make-up, and supposedly discovering its identity. Yet the 'reading' of Australian remains illiterate, ignoring the multi-layered levels of signification enlivened by semiological analysis and its linguistic practice of multiple readings and lateral associations. In cinema, this dumbness has been shaped by envelopes of pressure born of legislation (economic, sociological, political, ideological) and myth-making (the undying journalistic championing of any base-level success Australia enjoys on the international platform). The result is a national cinema that frightfully—indeed, viciously—directs iconic representation and symbolic signification toward a funnel for extracting an 'Australianism' whose elixir supposedly informs, entertains and engages by producing Australian stories for Australians.

By virtue of its substantial success, *Priscilla* is a drop formed by that elusive elixir. My purpose is to re-ambiguate *Priscilla* by pondering the atmospheric conditions which determine its audiovisual signage. My map-reading is thus derived from sensing, sounding and tracing the semiotic verticality and iconic stratification distributed throughout the film. By getting wrong all the directed signifiers that drive the film toward its affirmation of Australian identity, a refluxive momentum will be established from which the film's sounds and images can be connected to a larger cultural terrain which does not automatically honour Australia. This reading, then, is irrefutably un-Australian. It is less concerned with how the film reflects local concerns and

national aspirations, and is more concerned with how the film can be connected to international and transnational concerns. Not to be confused with 'Aussie-bashing', my reading of *Priscilla* yearns for an escape from this thing called 'Australia'. In place I suggest ways in which Australian cinema can be interpreted so as to open up ways in which Australia reflects itself and refracts all beyond its shores.

And beyond the film's shores we shall go. We will be sent uncontrollably to—among other things—screaming queens and silenced hags; chrome-plated buses and chrome-plated logos; rotating mirror balls and flying ping-pong balls; the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme and Watarrka National Park; wog boys and gay boys; lip-synching and post-synching; ABBA and Kylie; Rolls Royce's Spirit of Ecstasy and bad pup XTC; vaginal expulsion and colonic propulsion; Isadora Duncan's flowing scarf and Al Pacino's leather jacket; smelly fish and fragrant women; Asian brides and Aussie battle axes; slabs of XXXX and abs like 6-packs; ugly Australians and New Australians; bad house music and bad film music; transculturals and transsexuals. We will encounter self-loathing, self-hatred, self-immolation and self-annihilation.

For those who want to see themselves on the screen—you are likely to find yourself here. By the busload, like strangers in your own strange land, you can gawk at the image Australian cinema continually projects to you. Consequently, my reading forms itself into a palindromic text, playing *Priscilla* backwards to you in its celebration of being Australian. Yet not once will I debate the film's professionalism, execution, craftsmanship, success and popularity. Bypassing such conservative chauvinistic criteria which qualifies Australia cinema's success, my close reading will be responding to *Priscilla's* tonality: the weight and porosity of its audiovisual

texture. It will lip-synch its own soundtrack which will not be a menu option on the DVD release.

If petty thief-cum-pre-gay philosopher Jean Genet had been time-warped and sent to a penal colony in Australia, then jettisoned to a far future on the eve of *Priscilla's* lauding at the 1994 Cannes Film Festival, he may have written a book like this one in order circumnavigate *Priscilla's* mapping of the gendered body, the sexualised voice and the eroticised corpus. Mind-fucked by transcultural historiography, Genet too would have been woefully out of synch with all sense of Australian cultural propriety bent on idolising the film's salacious 'bent'. In the spirit of Genet's self-degrading recoding of the obvious, my reading 'drags' *Priscilla's* appropriation of drag, and honours the film as an apotheosis of a unique brand of nihilistic glory in which white Australia excels.