

# NELL SCHOFIELD

Nell Schofield presents films on the subscription television channel *Showtime* and writes about classic movies for Melbourne's *Sunday Herald Sun*. A graduate of NIDA, she has worked as an actor as well as reporting on the arts for organisations such as ABC TV, ABC Radio National and CNN International. She is the female voice on ABC TV's *Media Watch* and is contemplating writing a film script tentatively titled 'The Revenge of Freda the Moll'.

AUSTRALIAN SCREEN CLASSICS

# puberty blues

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NATIONAL SCREEN AND SOUND ARCHIVE

# AUSTRALIAN SCREEN CLASSICS

JANE MILLS  
Series Editor

Our national cinema plays a vital role in our cultural heritage and in showing us what it is to be Australian. But the picture can be blurred by unruly forces including 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.

Screen culture, of which this series is a part, is the glue needed to stick these forces together. It's the plankton in the 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

## AUSTRALIAN SCREEN CLASSICS

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.

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# CONTENTS

Australian Screen Classics v

Acknowledgments viii

1

Surfie Scrag 1

2

Aussie Beach Movie 11

3

Dickheadland 24

4

Out of Bounds 29

5

Rooting Machines 45

6

Pubes 64

Notes 77

Bibliography 80

Filmography 82

Credits 84

I

## SURFIE SCRAG

It's something I'll never live down. Practically every week over the past two decades or so somebody comes up to me and mentions it: 'You were in *Puberty Blues*! Oh my God! That film changed my life!' Not only that. These freaks know all the best lines, like 'fish-face moll', 'rootable' and 'you're dropped'. And it's not just women of my generation who flip out over the film. I recently interviewed an all-male rock band with serious street cred and the guitarist could hardly answer my questions because he was so busy raving about how cool he thought the film was. The other day, a fifteen-year-old girl went all weak at the knees when she met me and her mother had to explain that the kids regularly hold *Puberty Blues* parties. As do older folk.

It seems that dear old *Pubes* has even become something of a fashion statement. Not long ago I was walking past one of those trendy street wear stores, and did a double take when I saw a silhouette of myself and co-star Jad Capelja printed on a sexy little T-shirt with a handbag and wallet to go with it. I went in immediately to buy the matching beach towel as a souvenir. Twenty years on and a photo of two girls in the sand dunes, one



Retro Surfie Scrag: the look du jour

carrying a surfboard, is the height of teen chic. *Retro Surfie Scrag*, it would appear, is the look du jour.

So why does this particular Australian film continue to strike such a resonant chord with so many diverse people? Is it the fact that it presents a youth sub-culture that they can all relate to? Is it the language, raw as a radish and unashamedly Australian that people find so endearing? Perhaps it's just a time capsule of Australian life in the late 1970s that people both embrace and are repelled by at the same time. Or maybe it's the triumph of the under-dog that ultimately wins them over, that classic story arc which sees the protagonists reject peer group pressure in favour

## PUBERTY BLUES

of individualism? Here are a couple of factoids to mull over: *Puberty Blues* is listed number 41 of the top Australian films and number 17 (along with *Gallipoli* and *The Sum of Us*) on the list of Top Rating Australian Feature Films screened on television.<sup>1</sup> But it seems the film has moved beyond these statistics into a realm that borders on cult.

Obviously there are creative technical factors that contribute to the movies' durability too, not the least of which being the crafty direction by Bruce Beresford and lensing by his acclaimed colleague, Don McAlpine. These two men had worked together on *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* and the follow up, *Barry McKenzie Holds His Own*, both celebrations of bad blokey behaviour and peculiar Aussie vernacular. The pair also collaborated on *Don's Party*, *Breaker Morant* and *The Club*, more iconic films revelling in Australian manhood. For almost a decade before embarking on this teenage surfer saga, Beresford and McAlpine had been developing a visual language that often worked in counterpoint to the earthiness of the scripts, adding touches of poetry where on the page there was only gritty realism. For these two 'New Wave' filmmakers, *Puberty Blues* was a major departure from their usual fare. They were plunging head on into the chick flick genre and with all that oestrogen pumping about they had to keep a steady grip on the viewfinder.

*Puberty Blues* is a story about two Sydney teen babes muscling their way into a top surfer gang then busting out of it again with renewed confidence and independence. In essence, it is feminist tale; the girls initially try to fit into the narrow, stereotypical roles assigned to them but eventually realise that the whole scene 'sucks'. In defiance, they do the unthinkable and take to the waves, invading a strictly male dominated space. The honesty of the