

AUSTRALIAN SCREEN CLASSICS

the boys

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FLASH FORWARD

Brett Sprague, a man in his early thirties perhaps, is talking to his younger brothers, Stevie and Glenn. They sit in Stevie's childhood bedroom—clouds-on-blue-sky wallpaper, toy cars lined up on bookshelves, old paperbacks nestled together, covers curled and filthy. Brett's face is a pallid frame for cold eyes that regard his brothers with calculated detachment. Something inside him has soured, but now it is time to act—to regain to his pride and his manhood. They arm themselves with a sharpened screwdriver. It's time to leave. The brothers no longer resist. Brett is in control. It is, as he will soon say, as God himself planned it...

Anita and Beyond

I was turning 24. It was a Saturday—1 March 1986. What to do to celebrate? All my close friends, even my girlfriend, were out of town. But there was still hope for a big night. My friend Catherine was organising a party for me. 'Just come around to my place at 7pm', she'd said a few days before, 'it'll be great!' Her enthusiasm was always infectious. Catherine was someone who made you feel as though you were part of her gang, a bunch of bad kids who'd

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no doubt smoked at the back of the school bus, but who were now semi-grown up artists and dancers and filmmakers and would-be poet-philosophers. To have a party with Catherine was to have a great time. I was set.

But what to do with the rest of the day? I always get caught by indecision when I have nothing planned—I stared out the window and watched the clouds. I decided to go out for the day to Paddington Markets in Sydney’s eastern suburbs—a groovy-fashion-designer-bargains-cheap-records-and-paperbacks-type thing that ran every Saturday. My plan was to catch the bus from Glebe, across the inner city to Paddington, and visit friends who sold their homemade t-shirts from a stall; I’d spend most of the afternoon with Mary and Romana.

I sat in the market watching the shoppers come and go. We ate hot chips and eventually, inevitably perhaps, our discussion turned to the recent murder of Anita Cobby. The details of the crime were slowly coming out in the press and they were horrifying. She was a nurse who had been waiting at a bus stop outside a train station. Somehow she’d been wrestled into a car, taken to a field, raped, and then...

The thought of it was too horrible to hold in the mind. Mary and Romana didn’t want to talk about it much. I decided it was probably time to go home. After saying farewell I caught a cab back home to Glebe. The cab driver was listening to the news on the radio and again the conversation turned to Cobby. The cab driver said that five guys were being held, three of them brothers, and they’d ‘fucking cut her up mate, bit by bit’. The driver was appalled. He wanted them dead.

At home I showered and changed for the birthday party, gelled my hair, put on my heavy dark overcoat—standard inner-city issue

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of the day—and took a cab to Surry Hills, arriving at Catherine’s right on 7pm. I knocked. Nothing. I knocked again. The door opened and Catherine was in a towel. She was annoyed I’d made her come to the front door from the shower. ‘What?’ she asked.

Catherine had completely forgotten about her promise of a party. She invited me in, gave me a glass of red wine and ushered me into the living room. She went upstairs to get dressed. I sat alone until her flatmate, Graham, arrived home with Udo, a Finnish sailor he’d just picked up in Hyde Park. Graham put on a record—Cabaret Voltaire’s *Red Mecca*—as Udo clunked his biker boots down on the coffee table. In the kitchen for a refill of wine, Graham told me that Udo had approached him in the War Memorial, suggesting it might be possible to defecate near the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and that no-one would know.

Catherine eventually returned to the living room wearing her black leather biker jacket, leather skirt, knee high boots and fishnet stockings. She stood at the mirror in the lounge room touching up her makeup and fussing over her bleached blonde hair. Udo and Graham sat silently staring at me. Catherine announced that she was going out to dinner with her friends and, as a consolation for the forgotten party, I could come along.

The restaurant was just around the corner. As we walked down the street, her high heels clicking on the concrete, Catherine strongly advised me—*insisted*—that it was probably best if I didn’t talk about Cobby at dinner. We were going to meet a group of women that Catherine had first met while she was doing Fine Arts at Sydney Uni. They were hardcore new wave feminists and they wouldn’t tolerate my bullshit. I’d met some of those women before and I was a little afraid, a little in awe, and so I agreed that I wouldn’t say anything.

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The entrées might have arrived by the time the subject of Cobby came up, but it didn't take long, and thankfully it wasn't me who'd mentioned it. Catherine glared at me from across the table anyway but I just shrugged. I was the only male at the table of seven, and although the women didn't hold me personally responsible for the murder, I certainly felt complicit. I argued that even if the death penalty *could* be specially reintroduced for the murderers it might be prudent to have a trial first, *and then* hang them. The opposing views were divergent and vigorously argued. Patriarchy and misogyny were the root cause, with phallogocentric capitalism aiding and abetting. The volume of the conversation grew louder. The owner of the restaurant came over and asked us to keep it down. The argument—and the meal—ended in a tense silence.

The restaurant was nearly empty by the time we left. Catherine grabbed my arm as we stepped out on to Crown Street and took me to the Taxi Club, a late night drinking venue for taxi drivers, their friends and 'guests'—meaning a lot of Tongan and Fijian transvestites and their boyfriends, straight looking, Westie guys in flannel shirts and jeans who played the club's poker machines. The first floor bar sold hot food that slowly baked in bains-marie under squalid yellow lights. The room glowed like a sickly 3am sunset.

Catherine surveyed the motley crowd and said, 'Fuck art, let's dance'. On the way up the carpeted stairs to the disco we were blocked by square-headed bouncers who held back the crowd. Two other uniformed guys were beating a man's face to a bloody mess. We quickly retreated downstairs. We found John L. and Kristina at the bar. We drank more beer. Kristina said she'd read that Anita Cobby was a nurse and was a beauty queen when she was younger. Time passed as I beat the sober feeling of dinner

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into submission. John L. gave me a lift home.¹ On the way out to the car we saw the man beaten by the bouncers hanging on to a pole, the man's girlfriend tearfully urging him to call the police, the man, his face contorted and swollen, saying repeatedly, 'Nah, it's not worth it, *it's just not worth it...*'

I awoke with a blistering hangover. My sister called and asked if I'd like to go for a drive in the country and receive a belated birthday present. The only problem was I'd have to catch a train out to the 'burbs. Sue was house-sitting my father's place way out in the north-western suburbs while he was away on holiday. Sure, I said, and slowly got myself together, showered, and dressed. Just before I left the house Catherine rang to apologise for the terrible night out and the verbal savaging I'd received at dinner. We both laughed. Yeah, it had been full on. She promised she'd take me out again, only we'd do things properly the next time.

We—me, Sean and Nick and Rowan—were supposed to be making a new movie and I had intended on writing some ideas down in my notebook during the long train journey along the Epping line. But I couldn't concentrate. I was too hung-over, and a family of four—two daughters, a mother and father—sitting in the seats next to me were talking about how Anita Cobby had been such a nice girl, and how horrible it must be for her parents.

I looked out the window and tried not to be sick. The only event that had been as big as this—an event that had dominated everything from the newspapers and television and talk-back radio to everyday people talking on the streets—had been the disappearance of a baby named Azaria Chamberlain at Uluru in 1980. The murder of Anita Cobby was something no-one seemed to be able to understand except in the same sort of Biblical terms—revenge, justice. Blood.

The train rocked slowly as it climbed a cutting outside Strathfield Station.

Exceptional Moments

As I was growing up in the suburbs of Sydney in the 1960s and '70 my favourite type of movies—*genre* is an unknown term when you're a kid—were war films and science fiction. I would search for those incredible moments of organised violence in stories set in World War II, or for those transcendent moments in SF when the very rules of space and time are distorted with spectacular special effects.

Drama requires that something happens, producing a pivotal moment when things change and people react. The exceptional moment, or set of circumstances are the core of drama. That's the basis of a story. Over the years, as my tastes became a little less detailed in their requirements, I was drawn to movies set in what could be loosely termed the 'real world'. But stories set in the real world, the recognisable one that seems more like day-to-day life, are themselves abstractions. I think of movies where 'nothing' happens—films like Andy Warhol's *Sleep* (1963) or *Empire* (1964), films that run for hours and present just one thing, slowly changing—and know that these are not *dramas* in the classic sense. They're thought experiments with a very particular aesthetic. What the mainstream audience is looking for are stories elegant in their structure, emotionally satisfying, and which provide a diverting entertainment. That's what a drama is, and to a large extent, it's the definition of what it is when we talk about a 'film'.

During my post-teenage years I thought that my tastes had 'developed'. I knew what genres were. Among my friends there

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were cults around certain movies, films like the hallucinatory multiple-identity-gangster-flick masterpiece *Performance* (Donald Cammell, 1970), the Vietnam war-bad-acid-trip-cum-road-movie *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979) or the extremely violent, ironically hilarious cocaine-80s version of *Scarface* (Brian De Palma, 1983). I could have quoted you whole swathes of dialogue from these movies and I thrilled to be part of the communal celebration of stories where men went beyond the limits of the acceptable, to act boldly, and bloodily, in demanding situations.² This was a different order of drama, still exceptional, but somehow more plausible in my mind.

I don't think it ever occurred to me then that I had simply shifted my pre-pubescent set of entertainment values to a different type of movie. My friends were all male, all 'boys' in the sense that we liked to get together, smoke pot and watch these films over and over, discuss them endlessly and when, at parties or on the street, or chatting on the phone, we'd drop into a line of dialogue from one of these films and use these exceptional stories as ironic counterpoints to our own very dull and standard lives. Yet I did know that I was bonding with my male friends through these absurdly inflated versions of masculinity, that while socially abhorrent—killers, soldiers, murderers and drug dealers—there were within these archetypes a tantalising hint of wish fulfilment.

Preview

It was a Tuesday morning in Sydney in early-1998—overcast, humid—and I was at an early morning preview screening of *The Boys*. The event had been hastily organised so that Australian film

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critics could see it before its official premiere at the Berlin Film Festival. After some perfunctory welcomes from the director, Rowan Woods, and the film's producer, Robert Connolly, the lights went down, and the movie began.

It's odd recalling how one felt after seeing a film for the first time. Most leave you with nothing but the occasional film is so remarkably different that even as you're watching it you know that it's something special. I recall sitting in a cinema and, at about the three quarter mark of Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas* (1990), I was thinking, 'this is a masterpiece'. I had the same sensation during Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood* (2007). These films transcend the medium, their emotive power seems to eliminate the distance between the viewer and the subject on the screen and, while the emotions are fully engaged, there's a reflexive acknowledgement that a story is being told, that risks are being taken with the form of film itself, all feeding back into the full experience of the movie. This was happening in *The Boys*. I felt as though I couldn't breathe—the tension of the film was unrelenting.

Afterwards on the street outside the cinema with the screech of Sydney's comical monorail grinding overhead, I wandered in a daze back to work, knowing that I had just seen something amazing. Sitting at my computer in the office I wasn't really working—I was lost in the memory of *The Boys*, sifting through its parts, piecing together in my mind its boldly fractured narrative structure, considering its stunning performances, the dark humour that appeared at odd moments, and trying to come to terms with the fact that someone I knew had directed a debut feature that was easily one of the best, if not *the* best, Australian film ever made.

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I hadn't spoken to Rowan in years. We'd met at City Art Institute in the early 1980s and we'd become friends.³ Rowan hooked up with Nick Meyers and Sean O'Brien, old friends of mine who I'd first met in the '70s.⁴ We'd all been very close. We collaborated on films and hatched grand plans to make masterpieces and luxuriate in the fame and wealth enjoyed by superstar directors. It had all come to nothing—or at least well short of my short-term ambitions—and we slowly drifted apart, disappointed, and although Rowan and I were never on bad terms, his distance was still painful.

Seeing *The Boys* put all that personal history aside. I knew that what I wanted to do was to pick up the phone and congratulate him. I tracked down his mobile number and called him the moment I arrived home from work. The film is great I said, it's incredible, a masterpiece. Rowan was suitably modest but he was proud of it. And so was I. It felt as though he had scored goal for the home team, one for the true believers—for those who had travelled together.

Australian Movies

It was probably around 1974 and I was on holidays with my cousins in the small rural town of Moree in north-western New South Wales. The backs of my thighs were stuck to the clammy surface of the vinyl leather-look couch in Uncle Neville's lounge room. A potted plant stood next to a faux-wooden sideboard arranged with his various awards for service from the local council and a decanter of sherry with its matching but incomplete set of glasses. There was a single armchair, a coffee table, a framed picture of a beach scene on the wall and an empty magazine rack.