

ON FILMMAKERS

JEWES AND FILMS IN AUSTRALIA

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Until recently there has been a dearth of Jewish filmmakers, as well as a paucity of Jewish representation in Australian feature films. Why? This question first interested me when as a Jewish film reviewer I became aware of the role played by Jews in creating Hollywood, and the extent to which Jews have contributed to cinema in other countries of the Diaspora, particularly France, Britain and Canada.

The Jewish experience in the 'Lucky Country' has been a unique blend of the Holocaust, bagels, kookaburras and gumtrees. In an article in *The Age* (December 25, 1995), Michael Gawenda had this to say about growing up Jewish in Australia:

I can recall summers in the 1950s when my father would take me down to Dromana. We were aliens in a way, refugees, Holocaust survivors, scarred by almost unspeakable crimes. But there on the beach, in the caravans surrounded by thickets of tea-trees, by the smell of smoking barbecues, through the kindness of strangers, a form of healing took place.

By any criteria, the story of Jews in Australia has been a success story, perhaps unequalled anywhere in the world. Why, then, has no Australian feature film so far reflected the uniqueness of this experience, in all its richness and totality, the way for example *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1974)¹ tells about Jewish life in Canada?

There are, I think, three reasons. The first and most obvious is that Jewish film production has mirrored the fate of the Australian film industry, which collapsed after the war, and did not begin to recover until the renaissance of Australian cinema in the 1970s. However, on its own this is not a satisfactory explanation. It only goes part of the way in explaining why, in nearly a century of filmmaking, Australia has produced a mere 14 fiction films which feature Jewish characters.

It can be argued that as a minority group there is no reason why Jews should be more involved in films in this country than say Italians or Muslims. Yet most Jews believe that the 'People of the Book' have a talent or a cultural predilection for storytelling and entertainment, and this has been reinforced by the Hollywood experience. The Jewish involvement with motion pictures in America is not a matter of economic opportunity alone. Why the absence of a similar cultural phenomenon in Australia? The

answers to this question relate to the patterns of Jewish entry into Australia, and to the psychological mood of the post-WW2 Australian Jewish community, which contained a high proportion of Holocaust survivors - a higher proportion, in fact, than anywhere else in the world except Israel.

Jews have been part of Australian history since the arrival of the First Fleet from England in 1778. At that time, at least eight Jewish convicts, maybe more, were transported to Australia. The first Jewish free settlers arrived in 1816, and by 1933 the Jewish community in Australia numbered roughly 26,700. However, in the late 1930s, Australia's predominantly Anglo-Jewish community was beginning to be transformed by refugees fleeing Nazi Europe. This change continued after WW2.

It has been estimated that close to 35,000 Jewish refugees came from eastern Europe to Australia in the early post-war years.² By the 1960s, these survivors of the Holocaust far outnumbered their Anglo-Jewish counterparts. By 1971 the Australian Jewish community, which had taken almost 150 years to reach just under 30,000, had more than doubled in 40 years to number 75,000.

Today there are approximately 90,000 Jews in Australia, but this still only represents about half a per cent of the total Australian population. These immigration patterns, and the numbers involved, made and continue to make the experience of Australian Jews very different to those of their North American counterparts. Currently in the US, Jews number five to six million. There are two million Jews in New York alone, and more than a million in California. Australia cannot match this concentration of Jewish activity, and over the years has found it hard to provide the 'critical mass' necessary to generate our own spontaneous, creative flowering.

America's large, established Jewish community dates back to the mass migrations of Jews from eastern Europe in the 1880s and 90s. In the heyday of Jewish immigration to the US, thousands of Jews per day passed through Ellis Island. From this momentum Hollywood was created, north-east American literature was established (Miller, Bellow, Salinger, Roth, and others), and an ersatz Jewish capital was built in New York.

The post-WW2 Jews who emigrated to the US encountered a large, dynamic, established Jewish community. By way of contrast, although determined to succeed in their new country, those Holocaust Jews who fled Europe to Australia were forced to cope with feelings of displacement and desolation, largely on their own. These survivors experienced little help from the Anglo Jews who were already here, and who viewed them as

'funny', and a threat to their own assimilation in the broader Australian culture, which, while relatively benign towards Jews, had imported populist anti-semitism from Europe in the latter part of the 19th century, and again prior to WW2.

The Jewish writer Morris Lurie has described the numbed grief experienced by post-Holocaust Jews as 'shell-shock', and this phase describes the survivor community's state of mind very well, although today it would be called 'post-traumatic stress disorder' on a grand scale.

The immediate impact of the Holocaust on this traumatised community was manifold. It drove unendurable memories of the past underground, while bringing to the fore obsessive concerns for the safety and well-being of their children. It also imported into the minds of these Jews, some of the 'victim mentality' that had been produced by European anti-semitism.

Most especially, their fear and suspicion of gentiles and their shame at being Jewish led many Jews to adopt a low profile, and exhort their children to do the same. Most Jews craved for their children to 'do well', particularly in the professions or in business, which were seen as safe, stable, and independent of government. These attitudes were reinforced by both Jewish grief at the end result of European high culture and intellectualism (Auschwitz), and the materialism and philistinism prevalent in the wider Australian culture of the time, which in the 1950s and 60s placed a low value on both art and the artist.

Thus it seems to me that the collapse and slow revival of the Australian film industry, the small size of the Australian Jewish community, its composition and its psychological dysfunction after the cataclysm of the Holocaust, are all reasons why few films with Jewish content featuring Jews were made in Australia prior to the mid-80s and resurgent 90s.

Of the fourteen feature films that include Jewish characters or themes, six were produced before 1935, all of them by non-Jews. These pre-WW2 films were followed by a hiatus of almost fifty years before Henri Safran, a Paris-born director, made *Norman Loves Rose* in 1982. Of the eight post-WW2 films, six were produced, directed or written by Jews, and two by non-Jews. I hope a brief look at some of these films will illustrate my argument, and in the process reveal the way that Jews have been perceived by others, and how Jews have seen themselves, in the 'Lucky Country'.

Regarded by many as the first Australian 'film', *Soldiers of the Cross* (1900), made by the Salvation Army Limelight Department in Melbourne, was in fact an illustrated lecture comprising over 200 slides and 15 short 60 second films. One of these films was *The Stoning of Stephen*. The first Christians were Jews, and the film depicted in graphic detail Stephen's arraignment before the Sanhedrin (Jewish court), and his execution.

Australia's attitude towards Jews was, and still is, relatively benign. Populist anti-Semitism was imported from Europe in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and again prior to World War 2. This translated into crude cartoons published in *The Bulletin*, *Smith's Weekly*, and *The Melbourne Punch*. There is no way of knowing how the Jews in *The Stoning of Stephen* were depicted physically, as the film no longer exists, but the restraint of the reviewer in the Salvationist paper *The War Cry* is worth noting. Assiduously avoiding the value-laden word 'Jew', the author writes that Stephen was 'cruelly beaten to the earth and killed by the fiendish fanaticism of the formal religionists of his day'.

In Raymond Longford's *The Sentimental Bloke* (1919), 'Steeny' Isaacs, who runs a two-up school and a stall at the Victoria Market, is no imported stereotype but a short, nondescript man wearing a cloth cap. He would not have looked out of place in London's Petticoat Lane. This matter-of-fact acceptance is in sharp contrast to the pumped up fear and suspicion of Gerald Hayle's *Environment* (1927), in which 'Abe Halstein', the 'evil Jewish friend' of one of the characters, is depicted as an agent provocateur. Lascivious and grasping, 'Abe' is single-mindedly intent on corrupting the integrity of the Australian 'body politic', represented by a pure young woman called Mary. Despite its 'nationalism', the film failed badly.

The most interesting film of the pre-war era was *Strike Me Lucky*, directed by Ken G. Hall in 1934. Made at a time when anti-Semitism was on the rise everywhere, and Hollywood's Jews were turning their backs on the subject, *Strike Me Lucky* was conceived as a showcase for the Jewish comedian Roy Rene, known to millions of Australians as simply 'Mo'. Rene made his career in Vaudeville by adopting the mask of a Jewish clown. Without the feed-back of a live audience, Mo's performance in *Strike Me Lucky* was stilted, and the film bombed.

To many of today's Jews, *Strike Me Lucky* seems unfunny and offensive. Mo not only pandered to the latent anti-Semitism of his audience, he also catered to their homophobia by adopting lewd and mincing mannerisms. As such, Mo can be seen as exploiting the stereotype of the Jew

as weak, female, and sexually deviant. Nonetheless, Mo turned prejudice on its head by transmogrifying the vicious, centuries old European stereotype of the grasping Jew, into the paradigm of the 'little Aussie battler' - Australia's answer to Chaplin's 'little tramp'. In this regard, *Strike Me Lucky* has much to say about pre-war Australian tolerance, and the belief in a 'fair go'.

Monique Schwarz's *Bitter Herbs and Honey* (1996), about the Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe who fled Nazism during the 1930s and recreated *shtetl* (village) life in Carlton, an inner suburb of Melbourne, is one of several documentaries made about the impact of the Holocaust on Jewish emigration to Australia. However, the first feature film to refer to the Holocaust, albeit obliquely, was Safran's *Norman Loves Rose* (1982). This film owes more to Philip Roth and Richard Benjamin (*Goodbye Columbus* 1969, *Portnoy's Complaint* 1972) than anything coming out of Sydney, where the film is set. Yet within the comic stereotyping (the dominating Jewish mother, the womanising father, 'my-son-the-dentist' who would rather have married a *shiksa* and become a musician), there are some pertinent observations being made about the Holocaust and dysfunctional Jewish families.

More significant and groundbreaking on two scores, was the television mini-series *The Dunera Boys*, written and directed by Ben Lewin and produced by Bob Weis. Later edited for video, this was the first Holocaust story told in film from an Australian perspective, and the first Australian film made by Jewish film-makers which captured the unique quality and texture of the Australian Jewish experience. It was also the first film after *Strike Me Lucky* to mirror the peculiar mix of tolerance and latent anti-Semitism that was a characteristic of the Australian attitude towards Jews.

Scripted by Morris Lurie, Ted Robinson's *Two Brothers Running* (1988) was unfortunately never released theatrically. In this, Tom Conti plays Moses Borenstein, a writer ruminating on existential angst and the end of his marriage. Characteristically, Moses' response is to tell stories, a universal Jewish solution to the human predicament.

In John Power's *Father* (1990), Max Von Sydow plays a doting father and grandfather brought to trial for war crimes. Despite an excellent cast (Carol Drinkwater, Julia Blake, Steve Jacobs), this is an outsider's view of the Holocaust. In a clumsy attempt to contribute to the debate about war crimes trials in Australia, Auschwitz is conflated inappropriately with Vietnam and such massacres as occurred at My Lai.

Especially interesting is *Shine* (1996), Scott Hicks' inspirational film about the early life of concert pianist David Helfgott. Whatever the truth about Helfgott's overbearing father, *Shine* argues in much the same way as Sidney Lumet's *The Pawnbroker* (1965), that many Holocaust survivors suffered debilitating psychological dysfunction. The film suggests that in Peter Helfgott's case, the Holocaust contributed to him behaving brutally to his son.

Emma-Kate Croghan's *Love and Other Catastrophes* (1996), co-scripted by Jewish writer Yael Bergman, is about young love on a university campus in the 90s. It is only incidentally Jewish, but it vanquishes Jewish shame by the inclusion of a character called 'Ari'. His name not only conjures up the blue-eyed hero (Paul Newman) of *Exodus* (1960): it resonates with the power conferred upon it by the Jewish state.

The Holocaust is the defining experience of the 20th century for Jews everywhere. But in Australia it is doubly so. It has determined the composition of the Jewish community, coloured its thinking, and in large measure shaped the way we see ourselves. This is nowhere more evident than in the features, television dramas, and documentaries made by Jews and non-Jews after Australia's film revival in the 70s and 80s, in which the children of survivors, and recently their children, have attempted to come to terms with both the Holocaust, and the special nature of being Jewish in Australia.

Because Australia's survivor community was in a state of shock, they were unable to be confident with their Jewish identity. This fear associated with proclaiming Jewishness has been largely dispelled by the confidence that Zionism was to impart to Jewish identity, and the aggressive display of orthodoxy demonstrated by ultra-religious Jews in Australia is another reflection of this new found confidence. Australia's post-war Jews were too preoccupied with the camps to make movies. This was left to their children and their grandchildren. Slowly the films are coming, and perhaps before long a profound and definitive film, complete with gum trees and kookaburras, will be made about being Jewish in Australia.

REFERENCES

¹ The cinema experience is also mirrored in literature. So far only a handful of writers, which include Judah Waten, Morris Lurie and Serge Lieberman, have encapsulated the Australian Jewish experience.

² W D Rubinstein, *The Jews of Australia*, Bureau of Immigration pamphlet.