

Arts & Letters

FILM

[Australia]

Too Big Not to Fail

By Steve Sailer

THE PREFAB national epic “Australia,” a sprawling romance set in the desolate Northern Territory during World War II, represents a risky change in subject and style for Baz Luhrmann, one of this era’s most distinctive directors.

Luhrmann might not be the most naturally talented auteur, but he’s one of the bravest, willing to carve out, through trial and error, his own cinematic language, then throw it away and try to find another one.

His first three films comprised his Red Curtain Trilogy. He started in 1992 with the dance-contest movie “Strictly Ballroom” and followed with “Romeo + Juliet,” in which Leonardo DiCaprio declaims in iambic pentameter in Verona Beach, Florida. Finally, Luhrmann drove the film fanboys insane with rage but won the hearts of young women with the lushly wretched excess of his astonishing 2001 musical “Moulin Rouge,” in which Ewan McGregor and Nicole Kidman, as the doomed lovers in 1899 Montmartre, not only break into song but into songs that wouldn’t be written for decades.

Luhrmann worked out a novel set of conventions for his Red Curtain style, the maximalist opposite of Lars Von Trier’s more celebrated but less successful Dogme 95 minimalism. Like Bollywood musicals intended to be understood by peasant audiences, the Red

Curtain rules stressed blatantly unrealistic theatrical artifice; plots that are time-tested if not downright hackneyed (in “Moulin Rouge” we quickly infer from *La Traviata* and *La Bohème* that the beautiful courtesan must ultimately die of consumption in the young poet’s arms); and shameless melodrama, all as “a device to disarm oh-so-clever, oh-so-cool people, so that you can have these very direct emotional experiences,” as Luhrmann explained in 2001.

Perhaps tired of everyone assuming that he must be gay because he made musicals—Luhrmann and his wife, Oscar-winning costume designer Catherine Martin, have two small children—Luhrmann decided to make the great Australian movie.

In “Australia,” Luhrmann and company work awfully hard to entertain us. The extraordinary lighting ought to ensure that his director of photography, Mandy Walker, becomes the first woman ever Oscar-nominated for Best Cinematography.

Still, the mixed results of “Australia” suggest that it’s better to start a national epic with a good story (Scarlett and Rhett, say) than with enormous ambition but no plot. Luhrmann and his three co-writers ginned up a scenario in which Kidman plays a starchy English aristocrat who has inherited 7.5 million acres of outback. Hugh Jackman (Wolverine of “X-Men”) is the ruggedly affable cowboy who must drive her 1,500 head of cattle to Darwin’s dock. When watching “Moulin Rouge,” you always knew how it would end, but never knew what would happen next. With “Australia,” a prolonged pastiche of famous epics, you can always guess what comes next, but never know *when* it will end.

This framework does allow Luhrmann to drag in edifying events from Aus-

tralia’s rather undramatic history books, such as the Pearl Harbor-lite bombing of Darwin by the Japanese in 1942 and the oft-lamented “Stolen Generations” of half-Aboriginal children who were taken away from their alcoholic mothers and given free educations. Luhrmann ladles on plenty of the kitschy Aboriginal spirituality that the Australian tourist board employs to distract from the appalling condition of Aborigines under today’s multiculturalist welfare state.

Despite his populist sympathies, Luhrmann remains an idiosyncratic experimentalist better suited to eight-figure than nine-figure budgets. In “Moulin Rouge,” he found a stylistic rule that organized his film. As the story turned from comedy to tragedy, the pace of the editing slowed from frenetic to monumental. In “Australia,” though, he doesn’t seem to have yet stumbled upon a mode to suit his new genre. I hope studios keep giving him \$130 million per epic until he does, although I fear they won’t.

Jackman and Kidman are fine, but they’re fairly generic movie stars. It’s hard not to wonder what Australia’s A-Team, Russell Crowe and Cate Blanchett, might have done. Of course, without better lines than “Australia” musters, Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh themselves would not have generated much movie magic.

The film is saved by the performance of newcomer Brandon Walters as the little half-Aboriginal boy who narrates. The camera loves his big eyes and dark gold hair, and he has an ingenuous way with pidgin English (“We gonna drive ev’ryonna those fat cheeky bulls allaway to da big metal boat!”) that left me calling, for perhaps the first time ever, for “less dialogue, more voiceover!” ■

Rated PG-13 for some violence, a scene of sensuality, and brief strong language.

BOOKS

[*Hamilton's Curse: How Jefferson's Arch Enemy Betrayed the American Revolution—and What It Means for America Today*, Thomas J. DiLorenzo, Crown Forum, 256 Pages]

Centralist American

By Alan Pell Crawford

"WE PRACTICE HAMILTON from January 1 to July 3 every year," the historian James Thurslow Adams wrote in 1929. "On July 4 we hurrah like mad for Jefferson. The next day we quietly take up Hamilton again for the rest of the year as we go about our business." Today, of course, we not only practice Hamilton but hurrah for him, too. The last decade has produced a gusher of admiring looks at the ambitious upstart whom John Adams called a "bastard son of a Scots peddler," and there is much to admire about Hamilton the man. Lacking the advantages of the well-born and well-to-do Founders, Hamilton proved to be as brilliant and capable as any of them and more influential than most. Yet today's admirers—Ron Chernow, John Steele Gordon, Richard Brookhiser, and Michael Lind, notably—revere Hamilton's economic program, which they credit, accurately, for American capitalism as we know it.

DiLorenzo does not regard Hamilton's legacy in the same favorable light, and the evidence he marshals in this spirited polemic is persuasive. Hamilton is the architect of our economic, financial, and even political system, and this is indeed in many ways unfortunate. A critic of the Articles of Confederation, proponent of the Constitutional Convention, and advocate for ratification of the Constitution that replaced the Articles, Hamilton, as a pamphleteer and first secretary

of the Treasury, made no secret of his desire to create an "energetic" executive-for-life, enthroned atop an oligarchy based on a model of European mercantilism. Hamilton was a realist, who understood, though not without regret, that monarchy—which he preferred to the republican form of government his fellow Founders favored—would never fly with Americans who had just fought a war against the British crown.

Even so, Hamilton won most of his battles, especially when, as a member of George Washington's cabinet, he clashed with the more republican—we would say democratic—Thomas Jefferson, Washington's secretary of state. In Washington's councils, the foundations of the American economic system were laid, and the long-term effect, DiLorenzo writes,

reads like a catalog of the ills of modern government: an out-of-control, unaccountable, monopolistic bureaucracy in Washington, D.C.; the demise of the Constitution as a restraint on the federal government's powers; the end of the idea that the citizens of the states should be their masters, rather than the servants, of their government; generations of activist federal judges who have eviscerated the constitutional protections of individual liberty in America; national debt; harmful protectionist international trade policies; corporate welfare (that is, the use of tax dollars to subsidize various politically connected businesses); and central economic planning and political control of the money supply, which have instigated boom-and-bust cycles in the economy.

Hamilton's arguments—in *The Federalist* (1787-1788), in his *Report on Manufactures* (1791), and in his *Opinion as to the Constitutionality of The Bank of the United States* (1791)—"are repeated to this day by academics, politicians, and others who favor a bigger, more activist government with unbridled

executive powers." In almost every case, DiLorenzo, a Loyola College economics professor, declares that the programs and policies these neo-Hamiltonians support have had lamentable economic effects and woeful political consequences, which we suffer from to this day. This is all argued forcefully and, for the most part, convincingly.

Still and all, the case seems rather more complicated than DiLorenzo makes out, and *Hamilton's Curse* would have benefited from a more precise and comprehensive explanation of the real choices that Americans faced. There is far too little of Jefferson and Jefferson's alternative. And what DiLorenzo does include about Jefferson is not always accurate. In this book, the third president appears only rarely and then merely as an example of all the blessings that the nation rejected when it threw in its lot with Hamilton. Whatever objectionable policy Hamilton supported, Jefferson opposed.

But this was not always the case. The two men certainly differed in their broader visions of America's future. They were often in opposition but not always. It would surprise some of Jefferson's right-wing admirers, for example, to learn that he was not dogmatically opposed to progressive taxation. A good way of "silently lessening the inequality of property," Jefferson wrote to James Madison, "is to exempt all from taxation below a certain point, and to tax the higher portions of property in geometric profession as they rise."

Nor was Jefferson the unqualified advocate of secession that paleoconservatives and neo-anarchists like to believe. Under "Jeffersonian federalism," DiLorenzo writes, "peaceful secession was always considered to be an essential part of any genuinely federal compact." Perhaps in theory. But in practice, Jefferson denounced secessionists. At the time of the Hartford Convention, when New England Federalists, opposed to the War of 1812, threatened to secede, Jefferson also became a Hamiltonian "nationalist." He gave voice to what DiLorenzo would regard as mys-