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Film Quarterly, Vol. 50, No. 2 (Winter, 1996-1997), pp. 41-45

Published by: [University of California Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1213422>

Accessed: 14/05/2013 10:44

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Tick (Hugo Weaving) in drag queen mode as Mitzi

The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert

Writer/director: Stephan Elliott. Producers: Al Clark, Michael Hamlyn. Cinematographer: Brian J. Breheny. Music: Guy Gross. Gramercy Pictures.

The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert features the outback trek of two flamboyant drag queens, Tick and Adam (Hugo Weaving and Guy Pearce), and an aging transsexual, Bernadette (Terence Stamp). It represents a bold departure for a mainstream Australian film, particularly for a cinema that has made its reputation with macho swash-buckling heroes such as *Breaker Morant*, *Mad Max*, and *Crocodile Dundee*. Inspired by the gay male subculture in Sydney, *Priscilla* can be viewed within a group of films from the late 80s and 90s (frequently referred to as the New Australian Film Renaissance) which have broken new ground in exploring formerly taboo subjects: female sexuality in female-centered narratives (*Sweetie*, *The Piano*, *Muriel's*

Cruising the outback



Wedding); homosexuality (*The Everlasting Secret Family* and *The Sum of Us*); and politically sensitive areas (white neo-Nazi Australians in *Romper Stomper*).

Set against a stunning backdrop of rainbow-colored sunsets and sweeping vistas—giving the Australian outback the allure that *Crocodile Dundee* gave the bush—*Priscilla* derives its name from the lavender-colored bus that transports the three to remote desert hotels to perform their drag-show cabaret. For Adam, the trip is a lark; for Tick, a means to rendezvous with his estranged wife and young son; for Bernadette, a chance to ease the pain of her husband's death. Their bitchy infighting and hilarious interactions with the locals are delicately balanced with dazzling show-stopping performances.

Significantly, *Priscilla's* raucous characters—in addition to the film's crude and raunchy humor that primarily focuses, in graphic detail, on male and female bodies and genitalia—though typical of gay drag humor, provide a direct link to the “ocker” comedies from the early 1970s. The ocker was a highly popular



Hugo Weaving as Mitzi (right) and as Tick (inset right); Guy Pearce as Felicia (left) and as Adam (inset left);

and successful genre within Australia that kicked off the film renaissance and included films such as *Stork* (1971), *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (1972), and *Alvin Purple* (1973). These films feature vulgar and uncouth males (ockers) with a resolutely hedonistic outlook, and an obsession with bodily pleasures—sex, drinking, and women.¹

The ockers were true Australian originals, part of a strong and spirited outburst of native cultural expression in defiance of “cultural cringe”; that is, the Australian sense of inferiority vis-à-vis “superior”

dominant British and American cultures that had overshadowed Australia throughout much of its history. The ockers were also the first group of films from the Australian Film Development Corporation (A.F.D.C.), the initial government film funding agency (1971–1975) that proved to be quite successful in getting the fledgling industry on its feet with a deliberately commercial product.

The Adventures of Barry McKenzie, for example, features a colonial on holiday abroad, demonstrating his Australian uniqueness in comparison to the Brit-

ish. Barry's difference is played out in a variety of comical and crass scenes that enhance his Australian virility. For example, to impress a British woman whom he is wooing, Barry dumps curry down his drawers, because he has heard that "British women like it hot." Or to show his ingenuity during a studio fire, Barry and his mates chug a case of Foster Lager, urinating on the flames in order to put them out. Throughout the film, Barry's male potency is underscored by a stream of phallic references, such as "Percy the Python" or "My one-eyed trouser snake"—the latter is even put to song!

The ocker's crude bathroom and phallic-centered humor soon led to accusations that these films were "culturally debased" and too gauche for export. For a large Australian contingent—including industry activists, film-makers, critics, and even members of Parliament (many of whom had pushed for a government-subsidized industry)—the ockers were an embarrassment. This was a particularly sensitive issue for a country interested in making a bid for international recognition with a revived national cinema.

Subsequently, the new funding policy of the A.F.D.C. (soon to become the Australian Film Commission) shifted away from commercial concerns to a more serious-intentioned quality cinema of which the country could be proud. And the films that received its financial support, such as *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978), *My Brilliant Career* (1979), and *Breaker Morant* (1980), subsequently brought world attention to Australia as well as to the directors who helped to shape the 70s Renaissance: Peter Weir, Fred Schepisi, Gillian Armstrong, and Bruce Beresford. (Ironically, Bruce Beresford was the director of *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie*, as well as its sequel, *Barry McKenzie Holds His Own*.)

Twenty years later, *Priscilla* conjures up the ocker via its familiar drunk and rowdy scenes in bars on the road, as well as scenes done in deliberate bad taste: Adam, who is far more outlandish and crass than Barry, proudly shows off an "Abba turd" in a bottle to a startled Bernadette. This almost seems intended to one-up the scene where Barry McKenzie graphically vomits "chunder" on the hair of his unsuspecting psychiatrist. Tick also carries on the tradition of the ocker's phallic-centered humor through his tale of a friend "cracking the fat"—enlarging his penis.

Yet *Priscilla*'s world of gay dragsters and transsexuals is far from the blatantly heterosexual world of Barry McKenzie, Stork, and Alvin Purple. *Priscilla*'s milieu and characters would not have been possible as

a mainstream film subject in the 70s, when Australian culture was more narrowly defined by a dependable and commercial genre that initially repressed a diverse culture and history in terms of gender, class, and race. *Priscilla* represents the evolution of the film industry in the last two decades, free of censorship and shaped by film-makers able to take advantage of more flexible financing structures and willing to take risks on otherwise marginalized aspects of Australian culture.

Unlike the maligned ocker, *Priscilla* has not been an embarrassment for the industry and country. The darling of the 1994 Cannes Film Festival, it quickly achieved worldwide popularity as the first of a wave of gay drag films, earning the coveted status of a crossover film that appealed to both gay and straight audiences with its cheeky camp style and audacious yet endearing characters. Duly praised for its sympathetic treatment of gay men, *Priscilla* was also voted the most popular film at the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Film Festival. This international validation boosted the film's reception at home in Australia, for *Priscilla* grossed \$15 million (an outstanding response from a country with a population of 18 million).

However, *Priscilla*'s fame and high international profile have been at the expense of its three female characters, for the film lashes out at Ol' Shirl, the bar patron (June Marie Bennett), Cynthia the stripper (Julia Cortez), and Marion, Tick's estranged wife (Sarah Chadwick). This misogyny exceeds the frequent and irritating sexism exuded by the original ockers, which essentially reduced women to sex objects and/or nymphomaniacs.

Clearly ingrained in the ocker genre is a fear of female sexuality and women's power that can be directly linked to the larger social upheavals of the early 70s, when the women's movement gathered momentum and when feminists boldly challenged the traditional ideology and culture of sexism in Australia. Within a decade, women achieved equal status by law. Thus, the chauvinism of the ockers operated in the dual sense of the word—hyper-inflated masculinity as well as spirited and patriotic nationalism. The posturing and flaunting of Australian machismo served as a smoke screen for male fears over the loss of authority, power, and sexual prowess.

Priscilla is very telling about ongoing male anxieties over the increasing empowerment of women. What starts as a wild and rollicking ocker romp across the outback soon turns into a full-blown misogynistic and racist attack on the films's females that surpasses even the frequent misogyny of gay drag itself. (This

point of view was not lost on the organizers of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, who refused to give the film or writer/director Stephan Elliott their support.) The film denigrates Ol' Shirl and Marion, who are lesbians, as well as Cynthia, an oversexed Filipino, all of whom present specific threats to white male patriarchal society. Coupled with this misogyny is a racism specifically directed at Asian women that reveals current white male alarm over shifting ethnicities of Australia, attitudes fueled since the 1970s, when the postwar white-only Australian immigration policy changed, opening up the country to non-Europeans, specifically Australia's Pacific Rim neighbors, and thus dramatically altering the ethnic mix.

Bernadette's scorching remarks to Ol' Shirl in the first town where she, Tick, and Adam perform makes the film's position toward lesbians quite clear. Ol' Shirl has an unbecomingly slovenly and masculine appearance. With her unkempt short hair and her garb of undershirt and trousers, she is coded as butch or lesbian, which in Australian culture is linked to the unnatural, even the perverse. Further, Ol' Shirl's rough demeanor, as well as her broken English, suggests a low-class white trash, conjuring up a "bulldagger," which carries with it a grotesque and very real threat to masculinity. As if to "unsex" Ol' Shirl, Bernadette quickly bombards her with an openly hostile and vicious outburst which also implies a violent rape: "Why don't you just light your tampon and blow your box apart, because it's the only bang you're going to get!" Shocked and humiliated, Ol' Shirl hangs her head in shame as the men in the bar break into guffaws of laughter.

If Ol' Shirl is attacked as an awesome and offensive sexual deviant, Cynthia's raunchy and outlandish burlesque act codes her as obscenely sexual. Cynthia's main claim to fame is a trick with ping-pong balls: she seductively inserts them into her vagina and then pitches them at the bar's frenzied male audience. Poured into a provocative and tight-fitting black satin bustier and thong with electric black-and-white spiraled stockings, Cynthia conjures up the "damned whore," a historical male-defined Australian stereotype for women coined during the early days of the country's settlement in the late 18th century, when all female convicts were categorized as objects of sexual gratification whether or not they became prostitutes. By deeming all women damned whores, men could relegate them to an inferior status, yet maintain the power dynamic, still reaping the benefits of using them for sexual gratification. This attitude clearly

sums up the perspective of the ocker toward women. Like her ancestors, Cynthia must be controlled and punished for her aberrant sexuality. Indeed, she is roughly dragged off the stage by her husband Bob (Bill Hunter), and painfully held against her will.

Significantly, Cynthia's excessive sexuality and lewd behavior are linked to her Asian heritage. Thus she is a female incarnation of what is perceived as a very real threat to the purity of white Australian society. The growing number of Asian immigrants has been perceived by white Australians not only as competition for decreasing jobs, but also as a drain on the social system in the areas of welfare and unemployment benefits. In fact, within the past few years, anti-Asian sentiment has fueled tensions in urban areas, and spawned openly racist groups such as the neo-Nazi National Movement.

Adam's parody of a geisha girl (one of his drag outfits on the road) seeks to diminish the Asian "menace." His silly, cartoonlike costume, adorned with pastel-blue rubber hair, matching pink-and-blue fur, and satin bodice and G-string, blurs all diverse nationalities into one Asian-Pacific stereotype, just as the film reduces all Asians into a grotesque female type. Adam's outlandish appearance is non-threatening because his Asian-ness and feminine appearance are a masquerade, whereas Cynthia's is uncomfortably real. This *new* Australian is disruptive, inappropriate, and clearly out of place.

Accordingly, Bernadette and Adam banish "Cynthia" from the film altogether. The life-size inflatable plastic sex doll which they use to signal for help after their bus breaks down clearly alludes to her: "Cynthia" disappears into the sky over the outback, and after the film's conclusion and final credits, she lands in an unnamed Asian country, suggesting that this is where Asian women really belong—certainly *not* in Australia.

With Ol' Shirl and Cynthia ousted from the film, Bernadette takes center stage as the film's ideal woman, or "God's Police." Coined at the beginning of the 19th century, this other male-defined stereotype deemed women a civilizing role within family and society. As the young nation grew out from under convict status into social respectability, these "good and virtuous women" (usually wives and mothers, and clearly delineated from the damned whores) were expected to look after the moral interests of the nation under the paternal metaphor. Moreover, their duties frequently included the policing of other women, a job that Bernadette undertakes with great relish upon setting her sights on Ol' Shirl and Cynthia. It's as if

Bernadette has realized her calling, transforming from a brooding widow and lackluster performer to a zealot, as she recivilizes this “intemperate social environment.”²

If God’s Police functioned in the 1840s amidst the dramatically changing male-dominated society where women were defined according to the needs of the nation as the foundation of the patriarchal family unit, then Bernadette is the 1990’s rendition of God’s Police, with an evangelical furor fueled by racist white male anxiety over deviant women—lesbians and oversexed foreigners—who have threatened the traditional social status quo.

By the time Bernadette, Adam, and Tick reach their final destination in Alice Springs, Bernadette has taken Cynthia’s place as Bob’s very chaste paramour, a role consistent with the puritanical aura associated with God’s Police. We wonder how Marion, Tick’s (estranged) lesbian wife will fare. Will she be a damned whore like Cynthia, or designated as perverse like Ol’ Shirl? To our surprise, she typifies God’s Police. Not only is she a model mother, having raised her son on her own (while developing a successful career as entertainment director in a large hotel), but a saintly and tolerant wife, open-minded about Tick’s gay lifestyle and vocational choices.

However, in a dramatic shift, the film quickly demonstrates that Marion is completely fickle and unworthy of the title; she is not only a bad mother, but also a deceitful wife. (It’s as if Elliott conceived of Marion only to chart her “regression.”) Marion’s most serious misstep is her sexual orientation, which has distracted her ability to mother, a fact not lost on her son, Benj, who strongly implies that he felt in competition with his mother’s lover, and unfairly shunned. Further, Marion betrays Tick, causing him to be publicly humiliated in front of this son, as if she were threatened by Tick’s presence. She deliberately lies to Tick, telling him that Benj will not be present at his drag performance, then she brings him anyway—much to Tick’s embarrassment. His distress is so great that he faints and ruins the show. Marion further undercuts Tick’s attempts to be a good father by ostentatiously and inappropriately trying to pair him up with the hotel busboy, when an embarrassed Tick is clearly not interested in taking on any lovers. Marion’s punishment for her aberrations is the loss of her job as entertainment director, replaced by none other than Bernadette. Marion is also ousted as mother, for Tick and Adam will serve as the new parents and heads of household back in Sydney, where they take Benj. With Marion, Ol’ Shirl, and Cynthia out of the film,

Bernadette stands as the new standard for Australian womanhood—the bastion of reactionary “family values” that privilege the male. There is no room for lesbians or Asians.

In speaking of *Priscilla*, Australian historian/sociologist Chris Berry has commented, “The misogyny of the [transsexual and] drag queens in *Priscilla* . . . [allows] filmmakers and audiences (implied to be white, heterosexual and patriarchal) to hide behind someone else. ‘We didn’t say that, . . . it was the drag queens.’” Recall Adam’s snide solution for the “Cynthia problem”—to “sell her off” before he and Bernadette send her off—as well as his contemptuous assessment of Marion—“She could sandbag the holes of old tankers with that tongue.” Thus Bernadette and Adam are used as vehicles, suggesting a homophobic (and transsexual-phobic) strain in the film.

Priscilla dresses up the once embarrassing and gauche ocker genre for international consumption, using the alluring and exotic flamboyance and spectacle of drag and transsexuality to vent hostilities toward women who challenge traditional male ideals of womanhood and singling out Asian women in particular as scapegoats for all those Pacific Rim immigrants who “taint” white Australian society. Just as the ocker revealed male anxieties over women’s empowerment in the early 70s, even as it celebrated (and countered with) aggressive male prowess as part of a wave of spirited Australian nationalism, *Priscilla* unveils current white male fears in Australia—fear of female sexual freedom, aberrant Asian women, single mothers, women in the business sector—as women continue to make critical strides in Australian society, and as the country becomes more ethnically heterogeneous.

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Notes

My thanks to Sue Scheibler and Joseph Lee who made helpful comments in earlier versions of this review.

1. Though frequently grouped with the ockers, Alvin himself is not an ocker at all, but a shy, repressed boy-man who does not resemble the more rambunctious Barry McKenzie or Stork.
2. Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God’s Police* (Sydney: Penguin Books, rev. ed., 1994), p. 347.