

The 2-disk DVD set of MY BRILLIANT CAREER is the April, 2013 LVCA donation to the Hugh Stoupe Memorial Library of the Heritage United Methodist Church of Ligonier, Pa.

MY BRILLIANT CAREER Australia, 1979 color 100 minutes
The New South Wales Film Corporation Margaret Fink Films Pty, Ltd.
Greater Union Organization (GUO) Blue Underground DVD set

Rating: 16 of a possible 20 points **** of a possible *****

*indicates outstanding performance or technical achievement

POINTS

- Producers: Margaret Fink, Jane Scott
- 2 Director: Gillian Armstrong*
- 1 Editor: Nicholas Beauman
- 2 Cinematographer: Donald McAlpine* (THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA: THE LION THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE)
- 2 Lighting: Brian Bansgrove*
- 1 Screenplay: Eleanor Witcombe from the novel by "Miles Franklin"
- 2 Production Design: Luciana Arrighi* Art Direction: Neil Angwin*
- 2 Music: Nathan Waks (original score) and Robert Schumann (adapted from his KINDERSZENEN and PIANO QUARTET IN E-FLAT) for theme music
- 1 Sound: Ned Dawson and Phil Judd
- 2 Acting
- 1 Creativity

PRIMARY CAST: Judy Davis* ("Sybylla Melvyn"), Sam Neill* ("Harry Beecham"), Wendy Hughes* ("Aunt Helen"), Robert Grubb ("Frank Hawdon"), Max Cullen ("Mr. McSwat"), Aileen Britton* ("Grandma Bossier"), Peter Whitford* ("Uncle Julius"), Patricia Kennedy* ("Aunt Gussie"), Alan Hopgood ("Sybylla's father"), Julia Blake ("Sybylla's mother"), David Franklin (juvenile)("Horace, twin brother to Gertie Melvyn"), Marion Shad (juvenile) ("Gertie, sister to Sybylla Melvyn"), Sue Davies (juvenile) ("Aurora Melvyn, younger sister to Gertie, Sybylla and Horace") and Simone Buchanan (juvenile) ("Mary Anne McSwat")

Judy Davis explodes like a feminist firecracker in the Australian biodrama MY BRILLIANT CAREER, equally entertaining and frustrating viewers with a career-

launching performance as scathingly sarcastic, egocentric Sybylla Melvyn. When the film story opens we see Sybylla at home on a dust-besieged dairy farm in Possum Gully. It is 1897. Victoria still reigns in England. Overseas, a majority of the Australian female population remains resigned to entrapment in their own domiciles. They are permitted to cook, wash, sew, dance, milk cows and feed chickens, but not to pursue careers that would generate any independence. With few role models for inspiration, the continent's maidens have nothing more attractive on the horizon than marriages to financially stable men and procreation of loving, respectful broods of children.

Sybylla has other dreams. At the age of sixteen, neither sweet nor beautiful, she's determined to win respect for intelligence and artistic accomplishments without assistance from condescending masculine admirers.

While the rest of her family struggles frantically to find shelter for themselves and their livestock from an onrushing squall of choking dust, Sybylla is voluntarily detached from this reality, existing in a fantasyland of aristocratic refinement and luxury. It is out there in the world's great metropolises, just waiting for exploration and appropriation. Like her American counterpart, Dorothy of Kansas, she is certain that beyond the gritty agricultural homeland a better and more gracious way of life awaits.

No one else in her family understands this philosophy. Not even the twins, Horace and Gertie, likewise dependent teens of an alcoholic father and overtaxed mother.

When a letter arrives from Grandmother Bossier requesting a visit from Sybylla, everyone is relieved. The rest of the Melvyns can enjoy one less plate at the dining table, a coda at last to Schumann's overfamiliar melodies, and a cessation of profane defiance of authority. It seems the prayers of both mother and daughter have been answered.

But Sybylla is equally out of place at Mother's childhood home. Caddagat is supervised by Grandmother with a conventional piety reflecting that of Victoria. Aunt Helen, mother's sister, is sympathetic. However, she can provide no better counsel than to marry a stable, financially sound suitor from the Outback.

Grandmother is only concerned to see her granddaughter wed to a Bush farmer like her dad, of marginal fortune and disposed to find solace in a bottle. Perhaps the feckless Frank Hawdon, a vain gentleman emigrant from England, might be a suitable mate, since he appears unaccountably charmed by Sibylla. This despite blunt rejection by her houseguest, who disposes of his unwanted posies with a toss into a nearby pond as soon as he departs. She has no intention

of becoming a farmer's wife like her mother. That kind of meager subsistence, isolated in the Bush and centered on children and livestock, is utterly repugnant.

Matters seem to be headed for a stalemate until an invitation intervenes providentially. The recalcitrant, unmannerly teen is dispatched to reside with her Aunt Gussie at Five Bob Downs, located conveniently near the property of Mr. Harry Beecham.

Once childhood playmates, the older versions of Sybylla and Harry meet in awkward non-recognition one day as the girl is perched in the fork of an apple tree, singing while collecting fruit in her apron. Harry focusses on her visible petticoats. An uncharacteristically embarrassed Sybylla attempts to preserve some semblance of modesty. Thinking he has discovered a newly-hired servant, Harry takes the liberty of preventing the girl from pushing down her skirt. His brazen banter suggests he's accustomed to compliant tenant daughters with whom he can do as he likes. Well, Sybylla is no blushing wallflower, being more of a tomboy than a flirt at this point, and she verbally castigates him. Stunned, Beecham starts to form a curious attachment to his mettlesome prey. When the two are presented formally to each other later, he endures more nettling from her scathing tongue. Undaunted, Harry continues flirting with the girl, unable to keep his eyes off her. A determination to overcome her inexplicable resistance to his charms is replacing casual interest.

The prospect of a bantering friendship with Harry Beecham, who is young, supposedly rich, and dashing handsome, is not totally repulsive to the unattached Miss Melvyn. It's comforting to be wooed by an eligible bachelor who could more profitably be chasing debutantes in Melbourne. But neither of the pair is ready to commit to marriage. Sybylla is too young and selfish. Harry is fickle, laden with debt and conscious of social concessions required to maintain an active presence in upscale society. They enjoy each other's casual company. It allows them to mutually flaunt taboos imposed by their elders.

Will this pair of social misfits ultimately settle down to marital bliss? You'll have to watch the rest of the film to find out.

MY BRILLIANT CAREER is directed with verve and discipline by Gillian Armstrong. This was her first film and a very successful one. Despite novice status, Armstrong was savvy enough to allow characters to look meaningfully at each other for prolonged wordless scenes, something usually executed only by screen veterans. There are numerous shots of the Australian countryside with no leads in view, something which would send most Hollywood producers dashing to the phone for immediate cuts. That would be a huge mistake, since such scenes

underline both the remoteness of the Outback from anything suggestive of manufactured Art or Culture and the beauty of its landscapes. They serve ably in the creation of atmosphere and as supports for the lead character's drive to escape into another world.

Donald McAlpine's cinematography won him a merited Australian Film Award from the Australian Film Institute. Each composition is crafted with impeccable framing and attention to timing, allowing viewers to enjoy a leisurely inspection of pastoral scenes or stately interiors. Drama unfolds in Victorian-era strolls and trots rather than dashes and gallops, with the notable exception of the totally transgressive pillow fight, which begins within a house and erupts unchecked into an adjoining garden. Here the beckoning 20th century intrudes with lack of restraint, informality and rampant hedonism. It's all about instinct and personal desires. Society can only scold bootlessly on the sidelines.

Whether in dazzlingly bright sunscapes or lamplit, mote-flecked interiors, the lighting of Brian Banskroft imparts a lovely patina of remembered pastimes. He reminds us silently we are watching the visual memories of an adored rebel, artificially harsher when focused back on restrictions and barriers, idyllically attractive during recollections of uncurbed sensual pleasures, such as the skin of an apple, or raindrops pelting exposed hair and clinging garments.

The screenplay by Eleanor Witcombe is rather a mixed bag. On the one hand, it usually manages to lucidly communicate verbal exchanges of principal characters. Yet it does so at the expense of jettisoning much native language that makes the Miles Franklin novel upon which the film is based original and picturesque. For instance, in Chapter 31 of the original book, you can find Horace declaring in a letter "I'm about full of him, and I'm going to leave home before next Christmas, or my name ain't what it is." Here I am indebted to www.fullbooks.com for access to the text of MY BRILLIANT CAREER. This book is often termed an Australian parallel to the works of Jane Austen, but as you can discover from this excerpt, it is nothing of the sort. The writer is more in the mold of Mary Ann Evans, attempting to reproduce rustic idioms as faithfully as possible, convinced that truthfulness to them will render her work both authentic and memorable.

Luciana Arrighi was responsible for the utterly convincing production design which brought to vivid perfection the manors of the aristocracy and the filthy ramshackle hovels of Outback dairy farmers. Assisted by costume designer Anna Senior and makeup expert Jill Porter, the visual recreation of 1897 Australia seems beyond reproach. Plush textures of period dresses are reproduced with tantalizing effectiveness, as are elegant draperies of the estate houses. And who

is likely to forget the crisp-looking white sports attire worn in the punting scenes? Australian Film Institute Awards were won by Arrighi and Senior for their work on this film. Jill Porter should have won also, if only for the superbly grimy rendering of the McSwat children as youthful barbarians more akin to Stone Age cave dwellers than pioneer youngsters.

Both the original score by Nathan Waks and the Schumann adaptations enhance period atmosphere, reminding us that for Bush dwellers in Gilded Age Australia midcentury Romanticism still held firm sway, untouched by Wagnerian chromaticism.

Sound recording by Don Connolly is as finely modulated as one could possibly wish, but the mixing occasionally causes words to disappear from auditory discrimination. Considering the foreign filmgoer is already battling unfamiliar Australian dialect, this is a serious flaw. Sound Editor Greg Bell displays formidable skill in matching noises to scenes, but less aptitude for balancing speech mix with background noise and music cues.

There are no serious missteps in Nicholas Beaman's film editing, but neither is the viewer hooked and led suspensefully from one episode to another. Film cutting and scene sequencing here is satisfactory, but not extraordinary.

MY BRILLIANT CAREER is a formidable achievement of the Australian cinema and is by no means recommended only to hardcore feminists. Anyone seeking better understanding of Australian frontier society, or just an outstanding unconventional coming-of-age romance, should consider taking the time to view this film. Recommended for teens and adults, due primarily to the salty language of Sibylla and a scene of blasphemy.

DVD extras include an insightful audio commentary by Director Armstrong and interviews with Producer Margaret Fink and Director Gillian Armstrong. There is a featurette on Miles Franklin, author of the novel MY BRILLIANT CAREER, titled THE MILES FRANKLIN STORY that can be found on Disc 2. Chapter selections, photo and still galleries, and two theatrical trailers are also provided there in this special 2-DVD Edition of MY BRILLIANT CAREER.