



SWIMMING UPSTREAM Australia 2003 color 97 minutes

Crusader Entertainment

13 points of a possible 20 points ***1/2 of a possible *****

Points

- Producers: Howard Baldwin, Karen Baldwin, Paul Pompian, Nick Morton
- 2 Director: Russell Mulcahy*
- 2 Editor: Marcus D'Arcy
- 1 Cinematographer: Martin McGrath
- 2 Lighting: Ken Moffatt
- 0 Screenplay: Anthony Fingleton, based on the book by Anthony and Diane Fingleton
- 1 Music: Johnny Klimek, Reinhold Heil and Mike Slamer
- 1 Production Designer: Roger Ford Art Director: Laurie Faen
- 1 Sound: Andrew Plain, Greg Burgmann, Peter Smith, Gethin Creagh
- 2 Acting
- 2 Creativity

Chief Cast: Geoffrey Rush* (Harold Fingleton, Tony's dad),
Judy Davis* (Dora Fingleton, Tony's mom), Jesse Spencer* (Tony Fingleton),
Tim Draxl (John Fingleton, a younger brother of Tony),
David Hoflin (Harold Fingleton Jr., older brother of Tony, John and Ronald),
Deborah Kennedy (Billie), Craig Horner (Ronald Fingleton, youngest son of
Harold and Dora, brother to Harold Jr., Tony, John and Diane),
Brittany Byrnes (Diane Fingleton, sister to Harold Jr., Tony, John and Ronald),
Mitchell Dellevergin (j) (Young Tony Fingleton),
Thomas Davidson (j) (Young John Fingleton),
Kain O'Keefe (j) (Young Harold Fingleton Jr.),
Robert Quinn (j) (Young Ronald Fingleton),
Keeara Byrnes (j) (Young Diane Fingleton), Mark Humbrow (Tommy),

Simon Burvill-Holmes* (Brother Campbell), Bob Newman (Pannol), Remi Broadway (Murray Rose, swim champion), Melissa Thomas (Dawn Fraser, Olympic Champion swimmer), Dawn Fraser (Dawn Fraser's coach), Bruce Shapiro (pool man), Raj Ryan (radio commentator)

Australia is a great location for the cultivation of swimming skills, if you live along the Queensland coast. The Fingleton family did in the 1950s. Young Tony and his brother John found the local swimming pool not only fine for refreshment and recreation, but also a haven from the violence that frequently beset their family. Their father Harold was inclined to compensate for minimal income with excessive alcohol. Fueled by liquor, he became a monster, physically terrorizing his wife and children, visiting upon them the same kind of viciousness and instability that had characterized his own childhood.

Harold's wife Dora is played with patient submission by Judy Davis. Her weary, pinched-face, spindly housewife nurses no greater ambition than to see five offspring become useful, loving adults. If Geoffrey Rush's Harold is a "damaged" wreck of a man, then Dora is little more than a shell of the tender, pretty, generous-spirited young woman who'd married him. Perhaps both spouses had once imagined conjugality and a secure home life would remove any necessity for resort to the bottle. Boy, were they mistaken. Intermittent unemployment at the shipyard where Harold labored, brutal police crackdowns on strikers, and comradely invitations by his mates at the pub would all unite to drive the family patriarch back to a homewrecking traditional habit.

One day, a sober father is amazed to discover two of his untutored children are excellent swimmers. Since neither boy showed promise as footballers, a privileged familiar Fingleton sport, dad had given them up as unrewarding weaklings and / or sissies. He'd not considered alternatives. Now, however, a recalculation would be in order. All perhaps was not lost. Maybe a Fingleton athletic champion would yet emerge, if not on land, then from the water. If the boys practiced long enough, developed an unremitting hatred of losing and accepted the grueling tyranny of a stopwatch clutched with obsessive rigor, then who could tell what the outcome might be? Forgotten was the

aspiration of Harold, Jr. to become a football megastar, leaving the oldest bother no better goal than papa's defeat in a kitchen drinking contest.

Initially the boys are trained to excel in different events: Tony is better at the backstroke, while John is unbeatable in freestyle. But such separation deprives father of the perverse pleasure derived from seeing male progeny compete against each other. As if battering Dora and frightening the children is not enough to fray natural family bonds, Harold tenaciously applies yet another corroder. His greatest pleasure seems to lie in imploding the Fingleton clan. That is one achievement he can attain, though no glory or fame will result. Does Harold care about public acceptance? Boorish behavior at sporting events suggests indifference to gossip. Yet the lure of television causes him to propose a coach and champion joint photograph. This plan is quickly scuttled by a repelled Dawn Fraser, far from enamored of Harold's personal charm. Tony is considerably more appealing.

Portrayed with youthful guilelessness and extroverted cheer by Jesse Spencer, Tony is justifiably endearing to viewers. Obvious victim status and unhesitating defensiveness in protecting mother and siblings generate considerable audience empathy. Yet there is no underdog rooting in this film. Tony is a boringly consistent frontrunner. Only once is he confronted with a need to make a comeback. His greatest rival doubles as brother and best friend, making victory over him both bittersweet and Pyrrhic. Even reimaged as a competition against Dad, their fraternal struggle is heartbreaking.

Based on the autobiography co-written by Tony and his sister, *SWIMMING UPSTREAM* graphically delineates how to destroy kinship and alienate relatives. It might have been presented as black comedy. But straightforward drama proves equally effective. Russell Mulcahy's linear presentation of Tony's story eschews visual flashbacks, ambiguity, and plot sidebars that add color but diminish story coherence. What is seen and heard is always essential. There are no detours or trimmings offered, so the film may appear old-fashioned and unadventurous. Yet its unvarnished emotional truthfulness trumps surface novelty, making the flick a rewarding experience for adults seeking more than mere entertainment.

There are no odd camera angles to enrapture film analysts here, but an abundance of daring horizontal and vertical swipes in the racing sequences generate suspense even though the audience believes their outcomes are predictable. By showing faces of family members simultaneous with lane activity and audio reportage, filmmakers thrust viewers into the midst of each competition, making psychological turmoil and maximum physical stress equally compelling. These forays into multisensory bombardment compensate for lapses in audible dialogue recording, otherwise unimaginative photography, a screenplay that lacks both humor and vividness, and merely adequate lighting.

Music provided by Johnny Klimek, Reinhold Heil and Mike Slamer is problematic. On the plus side, employing Samuel Barber's Adagio for Strings always adds piquancy to scenes depicting sadness or loss. But reliance on thinly disguised strains of James Horner's ALL THE KING'S MEN score to convey approaching menace is ham-fisted, suggesting creative failure on the part of this picture's music staff.

Marcus D'Arcy's editing is dynamic and involving, particularly in scenes pitting swimmers against each other and episodes of violent confrontations.

In addition to three lead performances already cited for superior expressiveness, special commendation should be awarded Simon Burvill-Holmes for his droll, athlete-scouting Brother Campbell who extends offers of confession and free tuition to a dazed supplicant. Also turning in a fine job of acting is Tim Draxl, who makes self-loathing, traitorous John understandable and meriting of at least some pity.

The SWIMMING UPSTREAM dvd includes a moderately informative eight and one-half minute featurette about the making of the film, thirteen undistinguished deleted scenes totaling nineteen minutes, an original theatrical trailer running two minutes and scene selections.

If not averse to motion pictures depicting dysfunctional families and amateur sports, mature viewers eighteen years of age and older will find plenty to enjoy in the interactions of Australian screen legends Geoffrey Rush and Judy Davis with newcomer Jesse Spencer. Don't overlook this film. Put it on your priority viewing list.