

The Aussie Battler: An Australian Myth or Fairytale

I visited my home country, Australia, twice in the past year. I couldn't help noticing that Australians are doing well, or rather the burgeoning Aussie waistline would seem to indicate that the economy is, to quote Australia's Prime Minister "in sparkling form, the best it has been in 50 years." (John Howard, July, 2002).

Apropos Howard's comment, 75-miles south east of Melbourne on Phillip Island, where I was staying, the luxury of a weekender or second house was as glaringly obvious as those expanded waistlines. City folk are buying up real estate outside the urban centers in droves. Australians are purchasing second homes in the country, by the beach, as if a second mortgage was analogous to an extravagant dinner out for two. As for their predilection for being food lovers, Australians are obviously knocking it back with the verve of a group of Weight Watchers dropouts. Battling Aussies? Bullshit! Indulgent Aussie life-stylers on a bender more like it.

So why, despite economic prosperity, the lowest unemployment rate in 30 years, and unabashedly enjoying the good life do Australians love to identify with the battler, the average working class bloke struggling to get ahead? Since the battler is so often represented in successful Australian films – from *Crocodile Dundee* in the outback, to *The Man From Snowy River* in the bush, to *The Castle's* Darryl Kerrigan in the urban center – it would seem Australians do align themselves with battling, blue collar protagonists.

If we think of myth as telling the story of ostensibly historical events, the narration of which serves to keep the cultural identity alive, then Australians' association with battling makes sense. This is so because the colloquialism, "Aussie battler" encapsulates Australia's ancestral struggle born out of convict beginnings, disproportionate losses to war, the emigrant ethos, and the largely inhospitable climate. However, transferred to the screen, the Aussie battler myth metamorphoses into virtual fairytale, where fairytale is a made-up story marked by luck, and or happiness.

The Castle, an idiomatic and satiric portrayal of the classic Aussie battler and his family, is one such feel-good fairytale. Darryl Kerrigan, the proud blue-collar protagonist, becomes involved in a constitutional legal battle to save his airport-side family home from compulsory acquisition by Airlink, a quasi government authority "with all the money coming from the Barlow group," ... "three blokes worth half a billion a piece." "It's a way of privatizing without privatizing," explains Denis Denuto, Darryl's lawyer mate and a battler himself.

We know that Denis, despite being a lawyer, is a battler because he rents a disheveled office space above a retail store rather than at the more expensive street level. He has a secretary but she only works three days a week. The other days Denis fails miserably to work his broken down photocopier – mindlessly bashing it with his fist and hurling superlatives at it – dictates memos and then types them up himself late into the night in the manner of someone underpaid and overworked.

In response to Darryl asking Denis for his help to fight the compulsory acquisition notice, Denis says that he only does, “conveyancing and magistrates court.” He’s not “in the big time.” But Darryl chides Denis saying he’s “lost faith.” So Denis takes on the challenge, but does not win the fight against Airlink on his own volition. At the federal court hearing Denis is, in fact, fast on the road to losing the case when as luck would have it a fairy godparent, in the guise of retired do-gooder, Lawrence Hamel, a Queens Counselor (Barrister) who specializes in Australian constitutional law comes to the rescue. Darryl, thanks to his lucky stars, meets the Q.C. outside during a break in the Federal court proceedings. Laurie listens with interest to the compulsory acquisition story and later, after Denis has lost at the Federal level due to sheer incompetence, Laurie appears on Darryl’s doorstep and grants him a wish of sorts: he offers to take on Darryl’s case gratis.

An unlikely legal outcome in the High Court ensures that the classic fairytale happy ending results for Darryl whose dream to save his castle from the corporate Goliath comes true. Denis gains some of the good tidings too. As Laurie’s assistant counsel he receives sudden notoriety – thanks to media coverage of what has now turned into a high visibility case – and in due course, Denis’ practice improves and he’s subsequently able to rent a fancier office at street level, buy a top-of-the-range photocopier and a full-size BMW. What a fairy godparent! Or is that Robin Hood?

This formulaic ending on purpose creates a clear position so there’s some sense of satisfaction for the audience; for example, Darryl *Everyman* appears to be safe from the

instruments of capitalist power. However, in the real world where conglomerates “write the rules and own the game,” says Denis, it takes more than believing that all you have to do is, as Darryl put it, “ruck up to the administrative appeals tribunal, put me case, and tell ‘em to go get f ...”

In the real world there are no fairy godparents with the wherewithal, financial and legal, to save the likes of Darryl from powerhouse consortiums like Airlink. And Darryl’s argot threat would have got him nowhere; his house would have been decimated as a result of the Airlink Goliath bulldozing it to the ground to make way for the proposed airport extensions. But not to worry, because our working class protagonist had an alternate housing option: his very adequate kit house, a lakeside weekender in the country. For indeed, even battler Darryl has a second home – not to mention his five cars, motorboat, and several tow trucks.

Struggling to get ahead? If being a battler is about keeping your head above water, then Darryl is there – he’s won by a head *and* a shoulder. Though before we judge Dazza as too bourgeois to be an authentic battler let’s consider the location of his castle. Three Highview Crescent, Koolaroo, does overlook the outer runway of a busy city airport – not exactly prime real estate – and his fleet of five cars is noticeably absent expensive imports and gas-guzzling SUV’s. In that sense it’s not as though he’s living high on the hog. And well there’s something else, his eldest son, Wayne, is in jail on charges of armed robbery.

Within the context of *The Castle*, Wayne's failed attempt to make an illegal fast buck doesn't make a whole lot of sense, after all Darryl obviously runs a successful tow truck business, and he's "the backbone of the Kerrigan family," narrates youngest son Dale. If Wayne, who's dubbed the black sheep of the family (perhaps that explains why he made such a dumb blunder and got thrown in jail) had needed money why the heck didn't he ask his battling, but nonetheless upwardly mobile dad for a loan? Or at least earn an honest buck working for his father?

Movies tell our cultural story. So for the sake of maintaining the notion of Australia's ancestral struggle born out of convict beginnings the jailbird motif had to appear for *The Castle* to hold true to the battler myth born out of the distant past. But fast forward to that happy ending where all the loose ends are tied up: Laurie, who has now become Darryl's mate, continues on his do-gooder godparent mission and turns up at the jail, has a few words, and voila – wave of the magic wand – Wayne gets out on probation. Shortly thereafter, Wayne joins up with his dad and helps build the business from a couple of tow trucks to a fleet of tray trucks. Erstwhile criminal son turned canny entrepreneur! This is the virtual reality and as such, it better represents modern Australians than the Aussie battler, the fast-fading mythical hero of yesteryear.

In truth, the Aussie battler was at his battling worst during the depression years of the 1930's. At that time the swaggie, the definitive down-and-outer, carried all his possessions on his back (in a swag) and wandered from town to town, sleeping under the stars, and looking for a day's work and a free feed. Post Second World War, the

economy began to heal, swaggies found jobs, bought homes, and moved up the ranks to blue-collar worker. But what has withstood the changing landscape of Australia's economy over the past 50 years, and the resulting movement upward of the working class, is the battler's noble character defined in *The Castle* as tenacity and initiative in overcoming life's tests.

So if Darryl and his battler mates don't really exist anymore, in the way Australian filmmakers like to portray them, what's the point of pretending? Because we go to movies to escape reality! As a satire, *The Castle*'s character portrayals are over-emphasized in order to throw relief on the reality it's sidestepping. If there's one thing that is larger-than-life is the depiction of Darryl and his sons as 'bogans,' a term coined to describe the ugg boot, jean and flannel shirt clad, mullet-headed subculture of 1980's suburban Australia. The bogan's smokes, tinny of beer, Holden Commodore car and rough mouth (all appropriately represented in *The Castle*) were identifying accessories of this odd, but nonetheless authentic group who often reduced names like Darryl to Dazza. Dazza-types also had a reputation for being a rough bunch enjoying the likes of *Angry Anderson*, a heavy-metal rock artist of the 1980's.

But we laugh at daggy, bogan Darryl and his sons, who are a chip-off-the-mullet-headed-block, because their superficial appearance and antics seem simplistic and harmless. However, jailbird-son Wayne alludes to the fact that members of this subculture tended to act out their mean-streak. But let's face it, would *The Castle* be considered one of those great Aussie genre films if Darryl was mean to his dimwitted sons? Instead of feeling

proud of Wayne, despite his jail sentence; proud of Dale for digging a hole in the backyard, and proud of Steve for being an idea's man, Darryl's invective in turn, made his sons mean. Can you imagine caring about Darryl if he'd beaten up his mate Denis for losing the Federal court appeal due to incompetence? And what if Wayne had got out on probation and in blind rage blew away the Barlow group for 'acquiring' the family home, and subsequently got thrown back in jail? Sounds like the plot of a box-office flop.

Make-believe movies like *The Castle* don't flop precisely because they *are* unreal, and because they provoke a sense of nostalgia for the way things were, in the same way *Leave It To Beaver* invokes family-values of 1950's America. But battling doesn't seem to be such a great thing to be nostalgic about, in which case perhaps the nostalgia has more to do with the character traits of the battler, rather than the activity of battling itself.

Darryl is a "man of principles" his wife Sally tells us on several occasions. "He wouldn't cut another's man's lunch," she says, referring to Darryl backing off rather than stealing Sally's attention when first they met while Sally was on a date with another man. She also references his "principles" when offering a reason to sons Dale and Steve for their father's refusal to accept Airlink's financial compensation: "I don't want to be compensated," Darryl vehemently says of the seventy-five thousand dollars offered for the family home, "You can't buy what I've got." And on Airlink's additional enticement cash check of an extra twenty five thousand, he says, spitting mad, "They can shove their twenty five grand."

As a man of values, Darryl has enormous appeal because he represents not just the fight against the evil injustices of a global corporate economy, but the right of the individual to be heard. “You know why people like them get their way,” says Darryl to Denis in reference to Airlink, “coz people like us don’t stand up to them.” Darryl sees himself as an example of “how the individual, if he has the guts to stand up, can shove it right up those people who think they can stand on top of ya.”

For Australians, who as a nation embrace their political right to defy authority and express their strong views without fear of retribution, Darryl is a role model and hero. His character represents a guidepost on how to live one’s life: with courage, integrity and a very loud vernacular. As an ordinary bloke who finds himself in a situation where his back’s against the wall, Darryl exhibits the traits needed to come out on top. And because film has the effect of being vicarious, we want Darryl to triumph for the very reason that when he triumphs, we believe that we too can tackle the Goliaths in our lives and win.

The Castle, like most Australian film, is character driven, where character is given greater value over plot and pyrotechnics. If one cares about the protagonist, what the protagonist stands for, then involvement and enjoyment are procured despite fairytale happenings and endings. Happy endings have a habit of imposing a pattern on chaos. With the global corporate economy ensuring the battler is becoming obsolete by affording the likes of Darryl a place in the more-is-better stakes of commercialism, consumerism, and capitalism, chaos is inevitable since the natural result of the new

economy of ism-ness is that like the Ouroboros (the ancient Egyptian symbol of transformation) it eats its own. With this in mind *The Castle* illustrates that mythical heroes of the past don't travel well into the present and onto the screen. By necessity they have to change with the times, and sometimes transform to the extent that they die out completely. But not so their character traits such that if we follow Darryl's example, "Bugger it, I'm not giving up," then the qualities we most admire in our cultural heroes, never die out.