



NUMBER 120

DOING TIME FOR PATSY CLINE

DIRECTED BY CHRIS KENNEDY. PRODUCER: JOHN WINTER. SCRIPTWRITER: CHRIS KENNEDY. DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDREW LESNIE. PRODUCTION DESIGNER: ROGER FORD. COSTUME DESIGNER: LOUISE WAKEFIELD. EDITOR: KEN SALLAWS. COMPOSER: PETER BEST. CAST: RICHARD ROXBURGH (BOYD), MIRANDA OTTO (PATSY), MATT DAY (RALPH), GUS MERCURIO (TYRONE), BETTY BOBBITT (CONNIE). AUSTRALIAN DISTRIBUTOR: DENDY. AUSTRALIA. 1997. 35MM. 95 MINS.

Director Chris Kennedy's latest film adds to the current crop of similar-themed Australian movies. *Doing Time for Patsy Cline* is a mélange of road movie, amour fou, prison flick and cautionary tale of dreams and ambition amidst the backdrop of the country-and-western tradition.

Matt Day plays Ralph, a clean-cut, naïve, outback farm boy, who fancies himself as a country-and-western star in the making. His plans to make real his dream, by going to Nashville, USA, are waylaid by the arrival in a new jag of handsome Boyd (Richard Roxburgh) and winsome Patsy (Miranda Otto). Flashing by like some surreal dream, they pluck young Ralph from the side of the road and carry him

into their skewed and wild backroads journey.

Boyd is a wired-up Casanova, and his "puss", Patsy, is a fey but warm-hearted glamour queen. Ralph is instantly smitten with the latter, and understandably cautious with the former. Boyd and Patsy are on their own sketchy journey – Boyd claims a hedonistic and wealthy lifestyle befitting his expensive clothing and wheels, Patsy his ornament of affection. She seems happy in his obnoxious company, and there is clearly a deep bond between them which perplexes Ralph. Ralph's attempts to explain his dreams of singing in Nashville are met with derision from Boyd, although Patsy clearly feels sympathetic, and she takes him under her wing. Ralph and Patsy later bond over her rendition of her namesake's swan-song, "Crazy", and she reveals a fetching voice and an inner sadness.

Miranda Otto plays Patsy like some kind of young Tennessee Williams heroine – minus the booze and pathos. Breathily and sassy, she mothers rather than seduces Ralph with her charms. Richard Roxburgh makes Boyd a

compelling and sexy charmer, at turns both likeable and obnoxious. A sense of *déjà vu* is felt particularly strongly in this section of the film, a sense that we've covered this terrain before, seen these situations, characters and locations, with the same half-hearted attempt at genre filmmaking with a twist.

The usual Australian outback road movie iconography is flashed by, until the threesome stop at a cheap motel for the night. The freedom and recklessness of the outback road trip which constitutes the first part of the film is suddenly replaced with the confines and psychology of a prison, as Boyd's past catches up with him, and our heroes find themselves with a week in a country gaol, after helping Patsy make her getaway. Ralph and Boyd are forced to negotiate their relationship – and in the process find out something about each other and the nature of their dreams. Ralph is set up by Boyd, who turns out to be a liar and a drug runner – and not a very good one either. Boyd is attempting to make Ralph take the fall. Tensions are high in their shared cell, a fact

not helped by the interference of their next-door neighbours, a trio of hard-bitten outback rednecks who act as a kind of country-and-western Greek chorus.

As Boyd's tough and sarcastic outer shell takes a beating – literally by the three rednecks, and metaphorically by his imprisonment – Ralph starts to find a little inner courage and strength. As the cracks show in Boyd's armour, Ralph develops a kind of kinship with him, helped by the arrival of a letter from Patsy and the need to join forces against the other gaol inmates. But it is Patsy's second letter that becomes the glue to bond Boyd and Ralph together – she reveals that she had collapsed and saw a doctor, who asked her when her periods had stopped.

When Patsy finally comes to visit them, she drops the bomb: she's not pregnant, but instead has some kind of cancer. She refuses treatment, and begs Boyd tearfully to forget her, and for Ralph to look after her. After she leaves, Boyd breaks down, and Ralph makes his decision – he is going to take the fall, so Boyd can be released and look after Patsy.

The film attempts an interesting – although not entirely successful – refiguring of this linear structure by starting and interspersing the flow of the story with scenes from the future, when all three find themselves in Nashville. Ralph had actually fulfilled his dream, and we find him auditioning at a country-and-western recording studio at the beginning of the film, when his session is interrupted by the arrival of Boyd and Patsy, who are there for the same reason. The irony of this situation is gradually revealed as it is played against the development of the Australian scenes – the past.

As the three characters' pasts are revealed, their 'present' Nashville existence takes a 'Star is Born' turn when Patsy and Ralph team up to perform a song Ralph had written while in gaol, "Dead Red Roses", about his feelings for her. Helped by the management of Tyrone (Gus Mercurio) and Connie (Betty Bobbitt), and the aggressive marketing of Boyd, Patsy's voice and Ralph's guitar playing and song-writing make for a sudden hit. Just as they are about to leave to live the apex of every country-and-

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western singer's dream – playing the Grand Ole Opry – Boyd is killed in the classic music legend method – a plane crash. Ralph realizes that he has lived his dream, and it didn't leave him satisfied. He had overlooked that he had everything he needed back home, so he makes the decision to leave Nashville, fame and Patsy, in a grand romantic, *Casablanca*-style gesture.

While this method of interspersing the Nashville story with the Australian story often creates the most pleasurable moments of the film – the rise of Patsy and Ralph, the irony of Boyd's cruel but 'honest' criticism of Ralph's talents being flung back in his face, the sadness of living a dream and having to let it go – it also creates a problem. Instead of getting a feel-

ing of characters developing, and story ideas unfolding, the structural interweaving of the two strands instead plays like the same story being told at the same time, but in different locations.

The story drags also, the film plays overlong, and this is not helped by the inclusion of scenes cutting back to Ralph's parents on the farm, which don't seem to contribute much except for more typically-iconic Australianiana.

It was disappointing to find that the ultimate and revealing scene in the gaol was held back for so long, with such little dramatic effect, when it could have been played through more in the beginning scenes in Nashville in order to impart some mystery and tension to the relationship between the three characters.

The film is shot beautifully, and an interesting choice has been made to emphasize lush colours and contrasts in landscape and

sets. It has an almost hyper-real luminescence which is flattering to the actors and the surrounds, and keeps faith with the fairytale element of the story. The art direction works in well with this approach, and the line between realism and a slightly exaggerated sensibility is confidently-held. Even the potentially stifling and boring setting of the gaol cell is inventively covered.

Mention must be made of the music, which probably should have played a more important rôle than it did. While Peter Best's score gently underplays the action – and his song "Dead Red Roses" does impress (as does Miranda Otto's singing) – there was a sense that the classic country-and-western tunes weren't given their own 'rôle', and that their lyrical strength was lost.

Ultimately, the film doesn't quite conjure up the pathos and bittersweet humour embodied in many of the great country-and-western songs, although it is an admirable attempt to mix character, genre and classic storylines into an entertaining brew.

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