

DOING TIME FOR PATSY CLINE (M).

(NewVision) Director: Chris Kennedy Stars: Matt Day, Richard Roxburgh, Miranda Otto, Tony Barry, Kiri Paramore, Laurence Coy, Annie Byron, Roy Billing, Gus Mercurio, Betty Bobbitt, Frank Whitten, Tom Long, Wayne Pygram, Jeff Truman Running time: 95 minutes.

Chris Kennedy's quirky comedy about the pitfalls of pursuing your dreams is easily the best Australian film of the year, even though **Bill Bennett's** disappointing road movie *Kiss Or Kill* seems to be gathering all the critical plaudits. **Kennedy**, best known for the hilarious *This Won't Hurt A Bit!*, imbues *Doing Time For Patsy Cline* with a genuine warmth that lifts the material above most of the local dross released this year.

This charming and entertaining film centres around a naive young farm boy who leaves his home in rural New South Wales, hoping to pursue his dream of becoming a famous country and western singer. While hitching rides with a passing parade of strangers, Ralph Smith (**Matt Day**, recently seen in *Kiss Or Kill*) gets side-tracked by the enigmatic Boyd (**Richard Roxburgh**) and Patsy (the ubiquitous **Miranda Otto**), a pair of drug runners. Before long, Ralph and Boyd are arrested by the local cops and imprisoned, while Patsy manages to slip away.

Whilst the pair languish in prison, Boyd tries to persuade Ralph to take the fall for him. Ralph soon discovers that his experiences will provide him with a wealth of material perfect for country songs that typically deal with stories about love and loss and hardship. In a parallel plot, **Kennedy** contrasts the sobering reality of Ralph's situation with his romantic fantasies of achieving stardom in Nashville.

Kennedy obviously has a passion for country music, and he enhances the film with many wonderful songs, including some new material written especially by **Pete Best**. Both **Otto** and **Day** do their own singing in the film, and they are surprisingly good.

Kennedy directs this wonderfully written script with confidence and assurance, drawing marvellous performances from a solid cast, that includes veteran performers like **Gus Mercurio** and **Betty Bobbitt** in small roles. As the innocent Ralph, **Day** is superb, with a freshness and charming naiveté that is perfect. He also seems much more comfortable working under **Kennedy's** firm direction than he did with **Bennett**, who preferred a more improvised approach. **Roxburgh** brings energy to his performance as the laconic, roguish Boyd, and he provides much of the film's earthy humour. **Roxburgh's** performance also manages to create a more complex character, suggesting that Boyd's gruff nature hides his vulnerability and insecurity. **Otto** brings emotional depth and honesty to her role as the tragic Patsy, a character who is tougher and more self-reliant than most of her other roles. As three prisoners in the adjoining cell, **Tony Barry**, **Kiri Paramore** and **Laurence Coy** offer some broad humour and play a sort of Greek chorus as they ply Ralph with unsolicited advice.

Kennedy suffuses the film with a generous streak of droll humour, and he also manages to wring some hilarious moments of slapstick comedy out of the activities of Ralph's parents (**Annie Byron** and **Roy Billing**), as they await word from their son. One of the main strengths of this charming film is that **Kennedy** explores universal themes, and *Doing Time For Patsy Cline's* appeal is not merely limited to fans of country music.

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