Sweet dreams wear thin

DOWN TIME FOR PATSY CLINE
Written and directed by Chris Kennedy
Starring George Strait and Beverley Chappell, Cinema, Gilmorton Square Cinemark

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CHRIS Kennedy's *Doing Time for Patsy Cline* is about a young Australian country and western singer who leaves his home in outback New South Wales and takes to the road in search of a glorious career at the Grand Ole Opry. Does he make it? Maybe. Maybe not. The answer largely depends on the way you look at the Nashville sequence which crop up without warning along the rather lo-fi story line.

Of course he does, say some reviews of the film. We're being shown flashes into the future.

In some dreams, say those who've read the original script. They're just fantasy sequences.

The script, incidentally, won the 1985's AWGIE for Best Feature Film. When all's considered, it seems there's no underestimating the allure of romantic confusion. Or perhaps Kennedy, who wrote and directed, makes more sense on paper than he does on the screen.

Whatever. And does it matter? To the characters, mostly. To the rest of us, less so. The film is not many minutes old before you realise that you're not in it for the narrative thrills.

Kennedy has made the kind of film which works on a subliminal level. If you like it, it's possibly because it reminds you of something else. He's pasted together some stalwart features from favourite movie genres, written a few funny lines and applied a little sense of the poetic film, together with a persuasive simplicity. He's also cast three of the most popular young performers in Australian cinema — Miranda Otto, Richard Roxburgh and Matt Day.

It's a picture begging to be embraced, but deadpan enough not to be blatant about it.

Ralph (Day) is hitching his way to the airport when he's picked up by Boyd (Roxburgh) and his girlfriend, Patsy (Otto), two characters who shimmer with big city glamour. In fact Patsy, grown-up role, Otto emerges, swan-like, as a creamy-skinned beauty with auburn hair piled on top of her head, her comic gawkiness replaced by a fatale sexuality. The inspiration, says Kennedy, was Monroe in *The Misfits*, and there is something old-fashioned and larger-than-life about her, as if — like the film itself — she's put herself together from tips gleaned from an assortment of old movies. But there's nothing artificial about the style in which she swings into one of the highlights of the C&W score, a gloriously smooth and easy version of Patsy Cline's *Crazy*.

Roxburgh's Boyd, meanwhile, is a dangerous charmer who looks as if he faced his style in the wonderful early '50s. With his gold chains, aviator glasses and blonde quiff, he could be a leather clad what used to be called the New Hollywood. But Roxburgh, who tends to fade into the background when burdened with having to play nice, pushes him far beyond caricature with a quicksilver assurance and an emotionalism which even when, late in the most successful moments, Boyd is basically interested in Boyd, but Patsy's his weakness. When contemplating life without her, he looks distinctly desperate.

He's also about to be busted for, among other things, stealing the Jaguar in which they're travelling. Road movie becomes prison movie as this point and Patsy drops out of the picture for a scene or two while Ralph and Boyd are diverted by a nearby kick-up for some black comic interaction with the local criminal element. Previous Stanger touches are furnished by a C&W-loving convict (try, but by Tony Barry, but fall to assert characterisation. By now, the Nashville sequences running in Ralph's head — or wherever you want to locate them — are beginning to have a lot more appeal than what's going on here in the great Australian backblocks. But the script is throwing up so many weird complications that its chances of getting back on track seem as remote as Chekhov's Moscow. Even more pressing is the question of whether we can be sure we'll see Kennedy has settled so much of the story connective tissue to his principal travel through the grey clad zone his performers are trying to look tired and that saying something, given the glittering elegance of Andrew Lesnie's deep focus cinematography.

Old ideas are only worth recycling if you can use them to say something new — or at least push them into jewish strangeness — and Kennedy's chosen, sadly, to pure platitude. *Doing Time* certainly has its charms, along with a beguiling selection of movie memories, but at the risk of coming on like a seeing machinery, I'd argue that first-rate narrative may be all very well, but there's a lot to be said for emerging from a film with a reasonably accurate idea of where you've been.

Miranda Otto as Patsy . . . shimmers with big-city glamour as she sings into a gloriously smooth and easy version of *Crazy*.