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## OZ CINEMA

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By **Joshua Smith**

### Film Review: *Doing Time For Patsy Cline* (1997)

Author: **Joshua Smith**

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Leading Players: Miranda Otto (Patsy), Matt Day (Ralph), Richard Roxburgh (Boyd), Gus Mercurio (Tyrone), Betty Bobbitt (Connie).

Main Crew: prod, John Winter; dir, Chris Kennedy; writ, Chris Kennedy; dop, Andrew Lesnie; ed, Ken Sallows; mus, Peter Best; prod d, Roger Ford; cos, Louise Wakefield.

*Doing Time for Patsy Cline* is a light-hearted, almost fantastic, blend of Australian iconography and a number of classical cinematic genres and storylines. Taking the form of a road movie through which three characters develop their relationships with one another kilometre by kilometre, Chris Kennedy's latest effort is far from predictable.

While the film's plot isn't new, Kennedy strove to break free of the confines of cinematic conventions in retelling the fairytale rise-to-glory and subsequent fall from grace that has, so often, been the subject of films. As the journey progresses to the point at which each character's façade is broken down, and their weaknesses and desires revealed (to the police as well as each other), we find the two main male characters, Boyd (Richard Roxburgh) and Ralph (Matt Day) in gaol together. Now, up until this point, the film's narrative progressed in a traditional, linear fashion. In what could have potentially been a dull, boring interlude between the first and third acts, Chris Kennedy hits the audience with a surprise flash-forward that accelerates the narrative to the point in which all three main characters are again united, out of gaol, and are working towards obtaining their dreams together.

While the first flash-forward does shock, the subsequent appearance of such out-of-sequence interludes work to speed up the pace of the film, while providing humorous contrasts between the relationships that the characters share during the gaol sequence and the future relationships that they hold. The decision to arrange the scenes in a delinear fashion, similar in style to *Pulp Fiction* (1994), cleverly allowed Kennedy to deal with a "safe" plot that has seen success time and time again, while providing enough innovation to place the film in a category of its own.

This stylistic element also highlighted the sharp contrasts that Kennedy has drawn between the fast-paced, shallow Tennessee atmosphere in comparison to the laid-back Australian lifestyle in which a man has only his friends and the landscape as witness to his life. The scenes that are shot in Tennessee are predominantly shot at night, while it is raining, or shrouded in smoke (following Boyd's death in a plane crash that mirrors the real-life death of Patsy's namesake). This gives the city a dark, gritty, unforgiving feel that is lightened only by the positive reaction of the crowd to the song that Ralph and Patsy (Miranda Otto, in a brutally honest portrayal) teamed up to perform. The Australian scenes, on the other hand, are mainly shot in daylight, highlighting the bright colours and stark beauty of the landscape that is so unforgiving and yet so comforting in comparison to the hard-edged,

competitive Tennessee atmosphere.

Through this, the film's main theme arises. That is, the contrast between the comfort and congruence provided by the family and home, and the unruly, unpredictable nature of chasing one's dreams on foreign turf. Each character appears to take life as it comes during the early stages of the film. As the narrative progresses, however, it becomes apparent that each character is actually searching for security. The voyage on which the three embark becomes nothing more than an attempt to piece together the qualities of life that each person truly values. For Boyd, security means having Miranda to himself. Once he realises that this cannot happen, he succumbs to pain (as when he was beaten in the gaol following the receipt of her letter) and, eventually, death when he comes to realise that Patsy will herself be dead soon. This sacrifice provides an ironic view that in order to stay with Patsy, he must follow a similar fate to hers.

Patsy discovers that all she wants is love and health. When her health fails her, she seeks the love of Ralph. Once she realises that it is not likely that a relationship will develop between her and Ralph, she feels insecure and remains so at the film's conclusion. Ralph's discovery is that fame cannot take the place of family. Once he has become aware of this, the theme relating to the everlasting bonds that exist between family members is highlighted by his decision to return to Australia.

A predominant motif used to reinforce the emphasis on relationships as a source of strength is the health of individuals. Both Ralph's father and Tyrone (Gus Mercurio), Ralph's manager and the father of a man whose pursuit of success led him away from his family, fall ill during their sons' absence and both seem to magically gain strength upon receiving news that their families will be reunited. Patsy, in a similar vein, is diagnosed with cancer while both of the men she loves are kept from her during their period in gaol.

Patsy's seemingly unassailable vibrance and radiance are also compared metaphorically to a red rose. The rose motif indicates that Patsy's love of life, and men, blossomed prior to their arrest. The image of Boyd's Jaguar driving over her gift of roses is symbolic of the gradual decline in her state of liveliness. The impressive song "Dead Red Roses," which Patsy and Ralph perform together, indicates the tragic initiation of Patsy's declining will to live.

Andrew Lesnie's cinematography enhances the sense of isolation felt by the three main characters in Australia's sparse desert landscapes, while creating a brooding sense of claustrophobia both in the gaol scenes and in those set in Tennessee where he used telephoto lenses much more readily. Still, the film owes a great debt to Peter Best, whose score adds pace and energy to the film's diegesis. While Kennedy has avoided turning the film into a strict musical that obeys the codes and conventions of traditional musical films, the plight of the characters is told in part through the medium of music.

It to Boyd's credit that Ralph, like Kennedy, decided to create an artwork that strayed away from the generic conventions which slowed down similar works, and, similarly, it is the example that Boyd leads that enables Ralph to discover who he really is and what he really values. This example illustrates just one of many situations in which music is juxtaposed with life during the film's narrative in order to allow for a smooth narrative progression. In fact, elements of both the film's tragic narrative structure and its dynamic visual composition can, in many ways, be compared to the music that forms the centre of the film.

*Doing Time For Patsy Cline* represents a blend of the tried-and-tested road movie storyline with innovative cinematic techniques and a will to bridge generic conventions. As such, it is difficult to define the film except to say that Kennedy has superbly crafted an action-packed drama that makes up for its lack of plot originality with a fast-paced delinear sequence and a fantastic score. The clever combination of all of these elements, while avoiding excess in

any area, has allowed Kennedy to compose a visually stunning work that is as powerful, relentless and moving as the country itself.

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