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The tragi-comedy Down Under appropriates Cronulla rather than offering insight

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Abe Forsythe’s black comedy Down Under is set the day after the 2005 Christmas Cronulla Riots and undertakes a re-processing of these events. It starts with newsreel footage that brings back this raw, racist national wound of running mob fights, the derisive calls, the cars, the drinking, the police batons, the flags and the arrests.

A group of “Leb” and a group of “Skip” men plan retaliations for this event. They are destined to meet in an inevitable car crash that tragically unravels on a dark suburban street.

“Skip” is an inventive piece of Australian slang that simultaneously delivers both the image of the kangaroo and the idea of “white trash”. The film’s archetypal characters promise the in-your-face irrational gestural and verbal violence that Paul Fenech has effectively delivered to our television screens with Housos and Pizza.

Jason (Damon Herriman) brings together the locals, the movie store employee Shit-Stick (Alexander England), Shit-Stick’s Down’s Syndrome cousin Evan (Chris Bunton) and Ditch (Justin Rosniak), a Ned Kelly admirer.
Ditch, whose head is wrapped in bandages to nurse his new tattoo, is reminiscent of those blurred heads that bring anonymity to some criminal activity in newsreel footage. (Interestingly, this is a news gatherers’ technique that was glaringly missing in the original footage of the riots.)

Lakemba’s Nick (Rahel Romahn) gathers rapper D-Mac (Fayssal Bazzi), the studious Hassim (Lincoln Younes) and the devout Ibrahim (Michael Denkha) to his group for a raid. Guns are involved, each group obtaining theirs by comical means. One is an operational family heirloom from the first world war, the other obtained through a surreal drug underworld situation.

Unlike Fenech’s concoctions, Forsythe uses the Evan and Ibrahim characters to slip in a moral voice, that somehow blunts the “irrational” violence rather than explains it. Trauma is experienced viscerally in the heat of the moment. It is not explained but felt, to be re-processed later, a struggle to bring meaning, story and context.

Yet rather than closing the wound, the film further dumbfounds it. Down Under is entertainment, after all, that appropriates these historic events to its service. It does not deliver any insights into the racism at their core.

Though entertaining, with strong acting performances, Forsythe’s characters lack the unpredictable edge of Fenech’s “working class” characters, who, with their staccato voices and body gestures, affect us before reason kicks in.

In this film we are not inside the storm, but witness an aftermath from both sides of a suburban fence. Both group’s stories are uncannily similar. The perfect storm has subsided, and these are its echoes treated through reason, morality and the “foolishness of male youth” trope of storytelling.

The inherent repetition of the title “Down Under” reminds one of the Australian preference for double negatives like “not bad” rather than “good” and “never say never” for unbridled hope.
The crossover between Australian entertainment, comedy and politics has an uneven history. There were Norman Gunston’s gesticulations on the steps of Parliament as Gough Whitlam addressed the crowd during his dismissal and Bob Hawke’s brush-off of Gunston that this was too serious for send-up.

There was the underdog humour of Nick Giannopoulos’s 1980’s Wogs Out of Work and Acropolis Now, which reconfigured the word wog as a badge of honour. This was comedy that sourced and transformed the real-life experiences of its writers and their audience. Even earlier, Paul Hogan had re-branded the Australian Ocker from the inside, to later transform it into the heroics of Crocodile Dundee.

Today, we’ve got to the point where a significant amount of our current affairs news and commentary is actually dished up by comedians on shows like The Project.

Down Under also brings to mind a 60s and 70s Melbourne radio news program on 3UZ called Newsbeat. Every Sunday morning Newsbeat documented the road accidents of the night before, with on-the-spot reportage and interviews, harvesting the impulsive “Strine” lingo of the misguided youth at the heart of many of its incidents. These documents provided a source for the raw violence expressed through Mad Max’s road culture. Indeed, Down Under’s story would not have been out of place on Newsbeat.

The power of Down Under lies most clearly as a tragic commentary on impulsive male youth car culture, where the inept behaviour of the group visits irreversible consequences on its participants.

Forsythe’s tragi-comedy effectively addresses those switches between the emotional ride and its
consequent carnage. As an engaging, deftly-structured male coming of age film it forgets Cronulla, rather than understands it.

Mischievously, I’d make the point that this is our tradition. Forgetting lies at the core of our national identity. After all, “our” foundation event was that Terra Nullius moment when the Union Jack was raised on these shores with the understanding that there was nothing here.