Put Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman together in an epic Irish-American saga and the result is...a buzzard.

David Nichols reports.

The Gulf War: the skill, the expertise, the progress of it all, was once again occasion for white America to look back in wonderment. America the brave, the most excellent: where did all this magnificence come from?

Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman present million-dollar director Ron Howard’s version of American origins in the new movie Far and Away: in fact, the movie had the working title Irish Story which, typically for Hollywood, actually meant ‘American Story With Irish People’.

Cruise and Kidman’s characters are from different classes, different religions, different world views; America, the great leveller, puts them on an even footing. But wait...was it America, or was it Love? Heck, tell me the difference!

But all of this is not any sort of a subtext. Actually, it’s a given. Underneath is something which is both more personal and more revealing of mainstream America.

Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman met in a movie: no, literally. They came together in Days of Thunder, the motor-racing film Tom conceived of as an epic follow-up to his role as Ron Kovic in Oliver Stone’s rather more severe Born on the Fourth of July. Nicole played his doctor: the movie was rather crass, and the product placement (the little packets of Sweet ‘n’ Low Tom diabolically pushes up Nicole’s leg to illustrate his pursuit of perfection) didn’t help at all. Nevertheless if it didn’t break box office records, it did get the two together—and yet another fairytale Hollywood romance was born.

Who of the American audience of Far and Away would not know about Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman? They have the ‘pairability’, if not the classic quality, of Tracy and Hepburn, Bogart and Bacall. They’re both young and attractive, not to mention talented. The ascension of Tom Cruise from ‘handsome top box-office draw’ to ‘talented too’ would be worth plotting in itself. The fact, then, that Tom and Nicole don’t actually ‘get together’ for any period of time in Far and Away (they actually reveal their love for each other in the closing few seconds of the movie: there, I spoil it for you!) doesn’t seem to matter. They are, after all, married off-screen.

The movie plays with our knowledge of the couple. Where the real Nicole is only a novice in Hollywood terms, in the movie she is Shannon, a complacent, petulant, established young lady of the upper classes: daughter of a Protestant land-owning family in Ireland, 1892. Tom Cruise, Hollywood’s leading leading man, is a poor and even slightly simple young lad called Patrick. He tills the soil—back-breaking work because the soil is so bad in Ireland—and he is so unworldly it hurts. By a series of ridiculous and vaguely humorous coincidences Shannon takes Patrick under her wing and the two travel

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Low Fidelity

Cuba—last hope of socialism or a prospective banana republic that even runs out of bananas? Ray Moynihan was his own man in Havana.

José is in his late 20s. He comes up to us on the street, the day we arrive in Cuba, before we even find a hotel. The Lido. It's cheapish, there's hot water most of the time, and a fifth floor view of crumbling old Havana. You can smell the sea from the balcony.

José sniffs out a couple of sympathetic foreigners. He tells us he is very keen to meet and talk. He breaks through our first night nerves, and we end up sharing a meal at one of Havana's celebrated eating spots, the Bodeguita del Medio. Lots of photos of Hemingway. We eat rice, black beans, chicken and pork. Often they are out of bananas. The beer's good, though, and always available. It comes in brown unlabelled bottles.

Anna is 50. We meet in her home in Cerro. It's comfortable, but small, in the better part of Cerro, a big suburb in central Havana. We have a letter of introduction from an Australian friend of her husband. He is a senior bureaucrat; she is a senior academic.

Anna is passionate about the revolution, and makes us a wonderful meal. A few friends drop in and we chat about the new petrol restrictions and the reductions in the working week. We drink warm flat beer and Cuban rum, and overhear Fidel on the neighbour's TV. It's a speech about everything, the third this week. It runs for maybe two hours, prime time, no ads.

José is trained in one profession, works in another and is actively involved in the music scene in his spare time. Sooner or later he confesses to us that his sympathies lie with the Cuban dissidents. Perhaps he boasts it. I don't quite know how to react to a Cuban dissident.