BUFFY POWER

The Last Days of Chez Nous (directed by Gillian Armstrong, written by Helen Garner); Buffy the Vampire Slayer (directed by Fran Rubel Kuzui, written by Joss Whedon). Reviewed by Jenni Millbank.

It's hard to imagine two films more different in style, theme and genre than The Last Days of Chez Nous and Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Chez Nous is a deliberately small-scale personal drama set in inner-city Sydney, based around the relationship between two sisters, Beth (Lisa Harrow) and Vicki (Kerry Fox). It is filled with familiar images, from the loving shots of Glebe to the scenes where Beth (having just had a tantrum) is down on her hands and knees sweeping up plates she's broken, because no-one else is going to. In contrast Buffy (Kristy Swanson) is, as the title suggests, a cheerleading LA rich girl whose unexpected mission in life is to save her home town from vampires. The whole production is a sly parody of American teen-horror flicks, full of lots of nicely choreographed action, plenty of great one-liners and probably not one jot of reality. The most bizarre conclusion from comparing these two films (I saw them within two days of each other) is the feeling that it is the lightweight Buffy, not the complex 'women's relationships' Chez Nous, which provides the more positive portrayal of women, and the more feminist underlying message.

To all appearances Chez Nous is a 'women's film'. Helen Garner (Monkey Grip) wrote the script; Jan Chapman (who worked with Garner on the ABC telemovie Two Friends, about teenage girls' friendship) produced it; and Gillian Armstrong (My Brilliant Career, High Tide and Mrs Soffell) returned to Australia from the US to direct it. It's about how a household composed of fortyish feminist, Beth, Beth's husband JP and Beth's teenage daughter Annie) is disrupted when the precocious younger sister Vicky returns from a disastrous trip overseas. It is filled with the detail of women's everyday lives, and complex, interesting characterisations. The warning bells sounded for me when, on the eve of the screening, Helen Garner described it as a 'post-feminist' film—a statement which immediately brought to mind a postcard on display in a Sydney bookshop which responded: "I'll be post-feminist in post-patriarchy".

The story sets up Beth as a long-time feminist who is strong, independent and a successful writer. It then proceeds to demolish her life in a quietly understated way, with little sympathy for her niggling suggestion that it's all her fault because she's too tough to be truly lovable. Her independence is a brittle facade, she's too controlling, she's never really been happy—it's kind of a subtle, tertiary-educated equivalent to Fatal Attraction. When she cries no-one really cares, when she smashes things no-one moves, when her lover leaves her it's because she was 'too proud' for him to ever to get close. Na na na, Beth, you'll have to face your midlife crisis on your own.

It could be argued that this is simply a fair portrayal of the kind of nasty behaviour middle aged straight feminists have to deal with in their relationships with 'new' men. The film, however, veers towards the implicit view that it is all really Beth's fault, and that feminism has ruined women's lives. A striking example of this is the contrast between Beth and JP's relationship and that of another couple who have a baby in the course of the story. The couple appear for only a few brief scenes. In the first, the woman tells Beth that she's having a boy and Beth blithely responds, "oh well, better luck next time". In the next, JP is crooning over the baby in the distance while Beth dismisses the importance of marriage. The couple sternly tell her that it "doesn't look good" to say this, and when Beth argues the man responds, "what have you women done to yourselves? You're husks". Distraught look on Beth's face; silence: cut to next scene. The couple appear again towards the very end of the film for dinner, watch JP yelling at Beth, shake their happy hearts sagely, and then over a tense dinner hear Beth's declaration that Cheryl (a family joke character; a rough working class 'moll') is a better woman than she is —because Cheryl at least has heart and soul.

Or take young Vicki. She's weak, manipulative, not ambitious and not a feminist; she regrets her abortion, thinks men should protect women; and she scores the all time prize of JP's amorous attention. And of course it is she, not JP, that Beth hates for it. JP isn't exactly the hero of the piece, but he can't really help himself, and he smiles at Beth a number of times in a rueful kind of way. If he hadn't been French I'm sure they would have tossed in 'C'est la vie' as his parting line.

Now I wouldn't go so far as to argue that Buffy provides a complex or thoughtful treatise on the situation of
women in post-industrial society, but I do feel it offers a more positive portrayal of women's strength than Chez Nous. Like the earlier, and somewhat blacker, Heathers, it is part of a new genre of mocking hyper-American films, which sometimes feature smart-mouthed girls as unwitting heroes. Buffy, the central character, begins as an archetypal 'airhead' who is unbelievably rich, has unbelievably rich friends and handsome boyfriend. Ambitions? To marry Christian Slater and perhaps, if a career is unavoidable, to be a buyer—although of what she is not sure; she just liked the sound of it. Her parody of femininity is too complete to be truly offensive. She's a cheerleader, she sneers at non-WASP boys, she has vast quantities of blonde hair, will almost certainly be the prom queen, and won't buy a jacket because a friend scoffs that it is "so five minutes ago.

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The same questions were cropping up. Is this the way we want to be seen? Is this bad publicity for Australia? What will people think? Humphries was on the Sylvania Waters bandwagon immediately (rumour has it he received a full set of shows from the ABC within 24 hours of his arrival and watched the whole series three times)—proclaiming Noeline a possible successor to Dame Edna's Housewife Superstar mantle.

Like the latterday Humphries oeuvre, Sylvania Waters was more a British show about British perceptions of Australians (via soap opera) than it was about Australians themselves. Remember, that while Neighbours, Home and Away and so on seem extraordinarily daggy to almost anyone over 12 in this country, they're the height of escapist glamour to the Brits, a slightly-out-of-reach sun-drenched heaven.

Yet, inescapably, the real-life cast of the show was thrown into fame, and watching them try to grapple with it was a glorious sight. Mostly, for them, it seemed to centre around money—how they didn't get any for the show originally and how everyone thought they did, or how much they might possibly get from the show when it was screened in the UK. They insisted they were dramatically misrepresented in the final cut of the programs, something it is hard to doubt. Nevertheless, ABC TV's Lateline took defence of the Donahers to absurd extremes when it forced the program's producer to con-