My Brilliant Career is the kind of film that makes you weep for lost opportunities. Beautifully photographed and transcendentally acted, what an immense pity that it isn't about anything very much ... or, to be more exact, anything very much Australian. Like many recent Oz films (Picnic at Hanging Rock, The Getting of Wisdom) it is picture-book pretty, but despite the glowing Australian countryside and deliciously rich turn-of-the-century colonial interiors, the film is famine rather than feast.

The psychological pseudo-feminism which the film's makers seem to think suffices for a plot simply cannot carry the whole, and it becomes clear that My Brilliant Career is simply the start of someone's brilliant career in international marketing: the film carefully packages those aspects of Australian which will travel best to overseas up-market audiences, insatiably demanding "history" as local color.

My Brilliant Career — like James Ivory's The Europeans — is in the same genre as television's "The Forsyte Saga" and "Upstairs, Downstairs". The "star" of these efforts is the historical period itself and its display of British taste, recreated with impeccable attention to detail and buckets of money, every dollar of which can be seen on the screen. In My Brilliant Career, for instance, we simply wallow in luscious interiors (watered silk, damask, and cut glass) and landscapes that are cinematic celebrations. MBC also suffers from what critics are content to call "the absence of good screenplays in Australia". But I would argue that in a genre grounded in the display of production values, something as complex as a screenplay would simply get in the way. Plot, in this genre, is of little interest. The narrative usually presents some strong characters involved in contests of will (Sybylla's headstrong pursuit of a writing career/rejection of marriage in My Brilliant Career, the fortune-hunting countess' encounter with New England canniness and obduracy in The Europeans) and this allows the often brilliant cast to get their teeth into what are basically extended cameo parts. Judy Davies (Sybylla) and Sam Neill (the rejected suitor) are superb in My Brilliant Career, so good, indeed, that the historical factors which are of such importance to the characters in the film's terms — the claustrophobia of colonial mores and conventions, the unremitting, draining barbarism of scratching a living in the outback — are presented in a mechanical way, lacking any real dynamic force or presence. History, in this film, is merely a backdrop, providing attitudes for the characters the way the property department provides local color.

But it is true to say that there is a little more to MBC than Cobb & Co. coaches, the shed dance, and the swagman on the trail, and the harsh realities of late Victorian Australian life are not totally ignored. The grinding outback life of Sybylla's mother who married for love — a baby a year in a bush shack — is grimly, but too briefly, portrayed. We see a good deal more, however, of Sybylla's well-off aunt, who also married for love but now, abandoned by her husband, lives a life of genteel suffocation in the beautiful colonial family home.

The ease, comfort and culture which this life offers Sybylla if she marries the wealthy and patient farmer is so beautifully presented (in more celebratory camera work), that her rejection of such an alliance seems downright perverse. Particularly after her sojourn as governess to the McSwats, an immigrant Irish family to whom her father owes money, Sybylla's dedication to a "career" is simply inexplicable. One would have thought that after the horrors of McSwat life (incidentally, this film's treatment of the ignorant and unlettered is almost gratuitously crude and unsympathetic), of teaching civilisation in a pigsty, almost anything would be better. Where, precisely, does Sybylla's dedication to a "career" and "culture" stem from?
REVIEW

The only answer available in the film is in Sybylla’s exceptional character, a quirk of her “individuality” and “genius” (Admirers of Little Women and Horatio Alger please note.) And Miles Franklin, the author of the autobiographical novel upon which My Brilliant Career is based, undoubtedly believed in her own special spark as well.

But we don’t have to, especially in a film which itself subterraneously argues a contrary determining factor for Sybylla’s life and aspirations: the all-pervasive impact of British imperialism on Australian colonial life. As the whole film is at pains to lovingly display, colonial Australia is shot through with British taste in fashion, in wallpaper, in manners, and in ambition. It is no surprise then, given the weight of this imperial presence, that at the end of the film Sybylla pursues her career by sending off a manuscript to a British publisher. Career, for colonial Sybylla, is not a disembodied daydream, the product of individual whims and fancies. Rather, it is structured — particularly within colonial upper-class life depicted in the film — in a society infiltrated and permeated by British values — values which not only regulated obedience (mores and manners) but resistance (Sybylla’s aspirations) as well.

It is ironic that the circumstance which provides so much of this film’s glory — British colonialism, and its cultural lodgement in the country houses of Australian gentry — should be so absent when we attempt to account for Sybylla’s “career”. But then the film’s makers aren’t really interested in insights into Australian experience. Instead, the view seems to be that young-girl-makes-good in an exotic (but not too exotic) locale will satisfy the overseas market nicely, the crypto-feminism will satisfy any trendy thinkers in the audience, and Australians will love it because it is set in Australia. Let’s hope that somewhere in the ranks of Australian filmmakers beats the heart of someone who actually cares about this country and its history.

— Kathe Boehringer.

ERIC BURHOP
AN APPRECIATION

The obituary notices in January paid tribute to Eric Burhop the distinguished Australian nuclear physicist. A Fellow of the Royal Society, and Head of the Physics Department at University College, London, Eric was also the President of the World Federation of Scientific Workers (WFSW) and was himself an indefatigable worker for the causes of detente and disarmament. References were made to his key role in the negotiations between Frederic Joliot-Curie and Bertrand Russell in 1955. These negotiations resulted immediately in the so-called Einstein-Russell Manifesto against nuclear weapons. The subsequent result was the setting up of the Pugwash Conferences, bringing technical experts from East and West together and, in the opinion of many, playing a major part in averting nuclear disaster.

Behind these impressive achievements were some deeply-held attitudes which must command respect even if not complete agreement. Eric was an experimental physicist who never lost his faith in two great experiments of humanity: one the pursuit of science and the other the social experiment inaugurated by the Russian Revolution in 1917. Consequently his two pet phobias in recent years were the irrationality and mysticism of the anti-science movement and the prejudice and hostility of the anti-Soviet