Boystown


Shame is a powerful and empowering film. Its subject is rape — rape committed by “normal” men with the connivance of authority and the sanction of conventional prejudice, and the backing of physical terror and economic coercion.

Its heroes are a woman, and women: women as victims but also women in resistance. It tells some painful home truths about our society and, for men, our selves. And it does its work without the faintest tinge of propagandism.

Shame unfolds in Ginborek, a Western Australian country town where rape and sexual harassment are the standard amusement of the local lads. This is excused as “boys doing what comes naturally”, and as something that women bring on themselves through a combination of bad morals and bad management. And mostly it goes unreported; the few women who seek redress meet with malign indifference from the local cop, ostracism in the local community, and (the bottom line in Ginborek) the threat of losing their jobs at the local meatworks.

Into this rides a self-contained, wryly humorous female barrister, Asta Cadell, who has been forced to make an unscheduled stopover in Ginborek for motorbike repairs. Asta is doing well for herself. Her impressive legal knowledge and even more impressive physical skills serve her well against the local hooligans (in and out of uniform). But while Asta’s defensive efforts don’t go unnoticed, this sister is doing just that for herself. Once she’s fixed the bike, she can ride away from the town and its problems; for the women of Ginborek, there is no such individual solution and, seemingly, no hope.

But Asta’s compassion is aroused by Lizzie Curtis, daughter of Asta’s reluctant hosts at the garage. Pack-raped on the night of Asta’s arrival, Lizzie finds unlooked-for support and understanding from the older woman. Their friendship develops: Lizzie’s need, and their shared womanhood, draws a commitment from Asta. She engages with Ginborek’s women and their plight, and they appreciate it. Lizzie’s father, too, comes to terms with his complicity in his daughter’s situation. With Asta’s help, the wheels of justice, rusty from disuse, start turning again; and Ginborek’s women come to realise that they don’t deserve and needn’t put up with the sexual terror that is the town’s shame.

The silence, and the chains, are breaking, and the men don’t like it — “Something’s up with these women!” Ginborek explodes into violence (and counter-violence, led by Asta), but the town begins to be cleansed. There is no happy ending, no facile triumph: just a new, difficult beginning. But something has changed forever in the lives of the women on Ginborek. And Asta Cadell, too, is changed.

Shame’s message is all the more powerful because of its universality. Ginborek could be any town or suburb; its meatworks any workplace in Australia. Its characters are all familiar people — even the admirable Asta is a character of human dimensions and capabilities. And Ginborek’s men are all men I have known; men not so different, perhaps, from this reviewer.

Deborra-Lee Furness is in a class of her own as she brings to life a memorable character: the cynical and compassionate, threatening and endearing, gentle and powerful woman called Asta Cadell. She’ll change lives outside of Ginborek.

PAUL NORTON works in the Communist Party’s national office.