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Wisconsin Film Festival: The return of Ozploitation

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Special to the Capital Times

March 26, 2009



"Not Quite Hollywood," a documentary on "Ozploitation film," will show at the Wisconsin Film Festival at 11 p.m. Thursday, April 2, at the Orpheum Main Theatre. - Photo provided

In one interview in "Not Quite Hollywood," a documentary on "Ozploitation film" being shown at the Wisconsin Film Festival (11 p.m. Thursday, Orpheum Main Theatre), a director in a Hawaiian shirt is sitting in a dimly lit room. A stripper is dancing on a pole behind him, seemingly oblivious to the fact that someone is filming nearby.

The scene symbolizes what "Not Quite Hollywood" is all about, namely celebrating the outrageousness and vulgarity of Australian exploitation films in the 1970s. Directors, actors and critics talk frankly about chauvinistic sets, reckless stunts and even how awful some of the movies are without ever appearing apologetic. All seem to agree on the declining quality of exploitation film from the time it was made possible with the establishment of an "R" rating to its demise at the end of the decade, yet they never question its spirit of fun.

Indeed, the animated enthusiasm of avid Ozzie exploitation fan Quentin Tarantino seems to only increase as the movies discussed get worse and worse. To Tarantino and the pioneers of the Ozploitation movement, the purpose of exploitation film was not to make an artistic statement but to pump energy into its audiences, something it accomplished quite successfully. As Antony I. Ginnane, a prolific Australian producer, says in the documentary, "I wanted to wake people up."

"Not Quite Hollywood" seems to pursue the same fast-paced energy of its topical subject, switching rapidly from interview to interview, keeping viewers attentive and alert. Scenes of bare-breasted women, gory slashings and stunts gone wrong are liberated throughout, simulating the shock value of movies like "Mad Dog Morgan" or "The Adventures of Barry McKenzie."

Yet while the documentary ridicules these films at times, and the Ozploitation directors themselves admit to being driven primarily by commercial interests, "Not Quite Hollywood" also laments the way they've disappeared in the past, overlooked by certain critics and cinefiles in the decades after their fade-out. In a statement, writer and director Mark Hartley declared that "Not Quite Hollywood" "finally tells the tale of these often ... neglected films and their maverick filmmakers."

"Not Quite Hollywood" discusses the importance of exploitation film in establishing an Australian film industry in the first place, fueling it with profits and generating an audience for Australian movies. Ozploitation films were appreciated by movie-goers outside of Australia as well, whether in the United States or Italy (where the Oz movie "Patrick" was one of the top-grossing films of all time), and eventually Australian directors were making cinema for world audiences.

Despite these facts, "Not Quite Hollywood" seems very split at times over where the pioneering ends and tasteless begins. When talking about "Barry McKenzie," one director jokes about how racist the character is, while a writer explains how new and unique the film was. The most innovative thing about the movie, it seems, is its use of fake vomit. Ripped off by "The Exorcist"? So writer Barry Humphries suggests.

One is never quite sure when "Not Quite Hollywood" is being serious and when it is not, or whether the entire movie is a farce. The genuine appreciation of fans like Tarantino and Hartley himself suggest not, but perhaps the confusion stems from the variety of genre film itself. The documentary attempts to explore, in less than two hours, an era containing hundreds of different films of varying qualities. Some, particularly movies featuring stunts, seem to deserve the "inventive" tag, while others veer more toward the gaudy and overdone.

Either way, it's clear that "Not Quite Hollywood" is ultimately about having a good time. It's not for the faint of heart, but those who can tolerate X-rated images and appreciate satire in the offensive will enjoy its uproarious vigor.