

Revisiting “Love Serenade” in Australia

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Asia-Pacific Research, May 08, 2018

Region: [Oceania](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Australian life can seem defiantly absorbed, the defiance induced by insularity and isolation. The characters that inhabit the continent are mere specks of life before the enormity that is its nature, one bound, at any point in time, to swallow them up.

Those in the city are thereby invested with a certain transcendental life, the big smoke adventure energetic and lusty. In a place like Sunray on the Murray River, the town of Shirley Barrett’s 1996 *Love Serenade*, a person from a larger city famed in radio descends from Olympus, which is, in truth, merely the Queensland town of Brisbane. Two sisters, Dimity (**Miranda Otto**) and older sibling Vicky-Ann (**Rebecca Frith**) perform roles of catching the subject in question.

Is thrice divorced disc jockey Ken Sherry (**George Shetsov**) an exemplar of the other world? Hardly; there is not much to recommend him, a fairly nonplussed, passive character who plays the Barry White set (*Love Serenade*, *Never Never Gonna Give You Up*) and Van McCoy’s *The Hustle* in a hut that counts as a radio station.

The sisters think otherwise. His visitation might well be extra-terrestrial, or one induced by hallucinogenic import. Brisbane hardly counts as plumed exotic, but being “odd” or “strange” is entirely relative. The fantastic realisations, notably by the young Dimity, are striking. Gills appear on the lover she craves; a huge Marlin on Sherry’s wall starts moving, and in her preoccupied mind, she knows that he does not like fish. But to the few characters who matter in this production, all outside Sunray is peculiar.

The film projects two aspects of the same problem. There is the instinct to be predictable, dull, safe. Then there is the instinct to grow, to find things anew, to taste fruit newly available. To do so has its inherent dangers, the Promethean fire that may singe you, if not kill you altogether. Indeed, innocence, on being ruined, demands vengeance and its share of shallow retribution, something Sherry duly discovers.

The sisters plot, conspire and engage to be rid of the music aquatic hybrid who has bedded both of them. But he cannot, and will not be silent. The exemplar, dead or alive, lives in water, in a fashion. He might just as well have lived in space.

The film uses space to convey the lonely idyll of heat and dusty isolation, the routine that is interrupted by a person of flesh and blood needs. The wide street and faded Chinese restaurant, itself an isolated relic of discontent, conveys the solitary mightiness of the environment. There is total engulfing emptiness, with the exception of a few shots where people seem to have suddenly appeared, hidden hands otherwise lost in wilderness. All are inconsequential to the roles played by Sherry, Vicky-Ann, Dimity and the fabulously sinister

proprietor of the Chinese restaurant.

The oppressiveness of friendliness is also clear: the need to incessantly feed the radio personality to win favour; the simpleton compassion, the base need, the elemental desire. This is the primary approach of Vicki-Ann, though it is something that her younger sister also partakes in.

Finding himself between the sisters, Sherry plays to a traditional role of bonking with arid detachment, enjoying flesh without possession or commitment. Eerily, Sherry's character has a connection through Perspex – or at least some medium that disassociates his emotion. He pursues his catch, if only because the catch is so willing to be caught. Dry and impassive, his calm remarks are almost hypnotic: "Take off your dress." His encounters are devoid of the erotic spell.

There are delightful observations of resentment. The suspicion eventually comes in. Sherry the outsider keeps insisting on black bean sauce. He refuses to partake in the seafood, and certainly not the prawns. This tendency sparks suspicion, and it hardly matters that Sherry emulates aquatic tendencies. (Barrett [claimed](#) to have had "no respectable answer for that" other than to be inspired by a streak of magical realism, much of it with the cement and mortar of Cortázar.)

There are certain scenes shot as if in tribute. Even more striking than Hispanic magical realism in *Love Serenade* is the allusion to the flying fantasy of **Emir Kusturica**, whose films such as *Podzemlje (Underground)* are filled with rich distortions and plays of historical record and fantastic scenery. Vicky-Ann, dolled up in wedding dress under some mistaken impression Sherry wishes to wed, floats like a Kusturica dream figure through the town on being rejected. Such themes of float and flight can also be found at points in *Arizona Dream*. Given that *Underground* won the Palme d'Or in Cannes the year before Barrett won the Caméra d'Or at the same festival, the question of influence might well be asked.

Such a film would never be made today, when social media outrage counts for formed, if not uninformed activism, and where the threshold of offense is so low it has founded catacombs and build graveyards to expression. But Barrett's work is delightfully estranging, glassily so, a true minor classic worthy of its experiment.

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