

Study Guide for Muriel's Wedding (1994)

Facts

1994, Australia/France, 106 mins

Director: P.J. Hogan

Producers: Lynda House and Jocelyn Moorhouse

Director of Cinematography: Martin McGrath

Themes

Family relationships, discovering self, female independence

Summary

Muriel, 20ish, unemployed, and by no means a Barbie Doll look-alike, lives in the small, tacky resort town of Porpoise Spit, Australia. She has only one aim in life - to prove that she's "somebody" and a "success" by getting married (to whom is an irrelevancy). Without a marital prospect remotely in sight, however, Muriel sits in her room, endlessly listening to ABBA songs, dreaming forlornly of being the "Dancing Queen". A fortuitous, if illegal, encounter with a series of her father's blank checks leads her to a vacation on Hibiscus Island, where she encounters the feisty Rhonda, with whom she escapes from her severely dysfunctional family (bullying, corrupt, local politician father, Bill: vacant, depressed mother, Betty, and various "hopeless" younger siblings) to Sydney. She changes her name to Mariel, has a riotous time with Rhonda and newly-acquired boyfriend Brice and stops listening to ABBA. When Rhonda gets a tumor on her spine, Muriel helps her friend recover from surgery and promises her they will never return to Porpoise Spit. However, when it is clear that Rhonda will never walk again, out come the ABBA tapes, and Muriel embarks on a serious mission to marry. She starts trying on wedding dresses all over town, and searches the personal ads in search of a likely candidate for husband. She finds him in handsome and rich David Van Arckle, an ambitious South African swimming star in search of a marriage of convenience so that he can swim for Australia in the next Olympics. Betraying her promise to Rhonda, Muriel marries David in a full-blown church ceremony. Inevitably the marriage is a disaster, and Muriel is left as miserable as she was in Porpoise Spit. With the suicide of her mother, Muriel comes to her senses (and to a genuine sense of self-worth), ditching the name "Mariel" and the "success" that it signified, refusing her father's demands to help him look after her siblings, telling David the marriage is over, and convincing Rhonda to return with her to Sydney. While all this may sound utterly bleak, the film is, contradictorily, an exuberant and utterly transporting comedy, brimming with energy and irony.

Cultural Context

The Deep North

Porpoise Spit is a fictional town on the non-fictional Gold Coast of the state of Queensland. To many Australians from other states, Queensland is still "The Deep North" (as in "The Deep South" of the USA), a moniker it earned during the 1970s and 80s, when the state was riven by extensive political and financial scandalism and, for at least some of this time, was run by a conservative (and essentially corrupt) government under the leadership of the red-neck demagogue Jo Bjelke-Peterson. The Gold Coast is one of the country's major tourist areas, attracting large numbers of both domestic and international tourists, the latter particularly from Japan. High-rise condominiums, malls, tourist hotels and resorts - many of which have been built with Japanese investment money, and to all of which Muriel and Rhonda enthusiastically bid farewell at the end of the film - dominate the landscape.

Bill Heslop, as the local government official who almost made it to State Government (as he regularly reminds all and sundry), is an hilariously stereotyped representative of the sleazy, corrupt Queensland politics referred to above. He mythologizes himself as "Bill the Battler" ("Been battling all me life" he proudly asserts), and as the mover and shaker of Porpoise Spit boosterism ("You can't stop progress!", he claims, parroting the town's slogan). However, the reality is far less seemly. Bill is adept at manipulating the "old boy network"; he saves Muriel from an arrest for shoplifting by blatantly bribing, with a case of beer, the young policemen whose fathers he knows. And a Federal inquiry into his activities uncovers bribes that he has both made - of immigration officials ("That's Charlie Chan. I got his father out here. Talked to Immigration.") and accepted - from the Japanese developers whom he wines and dines at Charlie Chan's Chinese restaurant. Furthermore, this same Japanese development project, we discover, wholly illegitimately took place on Crown (state) land - land occupied by Aborigines, no less.

"Battler" is an emotionally charged Australian term, referring to someone (usually, but not exclusively, of the working class) who struggles continually and with great perseverance against heavy odds. (The current Australian Prime Minister and leader of the conservative Liberal government, John Howard, like many politicians before him, has made much of his attention to the country's "battlers", and cynically manipulated their none too liberal fears - of immigrants, of Aborigines, for example - to ensure his own recent re-election). The antithesis of a "battler" is a "bludger", someone who cadges off others and avoids responsibility. Although he never actually refers to them by this term, it is clear that Bill thinks of his oldest two children, Muriel and Perry, as "bludgers". Neither has had a job for a number of years; Muriel stays in her room listening to ABBA songs all day, and Perry is a couch potato who has apparently taken root, endlessly watching cricket on TV.

To return to Bill as the stereotypical denizen of the "Deep North", not only does he show a distinct lack of taste in conducting an affair with the excruciatingly insincere and over-adorned "beauty consultant" Deidre Chambers, but he also regularly demonstrates his crassness and insensitivity. The scene in Charlie Chan's restaurant in which Bill is talking up Porpoise Spit (and himself) to the two Japanese developers is a perfect example: when he is not insulting his

guests by referring to their wives as "geishas", Bill is belittling his family as "useless". But his behavior at Betty's death and her funeral exceeds even this. We discover, via younger daughter Joanie, that Bill and his physician, Dr Farrell, removed the pharmaceutical evidence of Betty's suicide, passing it off, instead, as a heart attack. At Betty's funeral, and entirely for the effect that it will have on the assembled journalists (who are there because of the financial scandals uncovered at the Federal inquiry into Bill's affairs), Bill arranges for a telegram of sympathy to be sent from the former and charismatic Prime Minister Bob Hawke and his wife Hazel. There is a delicious irony in this telegram for the antipodean viewer, for the Hawkes eventually divorced after a long-term affair that the former Prime Minister conducted with his biographer, the improbably-named Blanche D'Alpuget. Indeed, there is a further irony: just as Bill appears on TV to appeal emotionally to his daughter, Muriel, to return home, one of Bob Hawke's more memorable TV moments (and he had many) was his breaking into tears over an admission of his own daughter's drug addiction problems.

Sydney: "City of Brides"

This is the title of the middle of the film's three parts, and it is in this section that Muriel finds a new life in Sydney, changes her name to Mariel, meets boyfriend Brice, acts as nursemaid to Rhonda after the latter's cancer is diagnosed, and (significantly) starts listening to ABBA songs again. Posing as a blushing bride-to-be beset with a sick mother or a sister in a coma, Muriel begins trying on seemingly every wedding dress in town - and it is a BIG town. Sydney is Australia's largest, most cosmopolitan, most vibrant and arguably most progressive city. "City of brides" it may be, but it's also the gay capital not only of Australia, but of the Antipodes in general, hosting the annual (and world's largest) Lesbian and Gay Mardi Gras, an event which brings hundred of thousands of local spectators and participants out into the street of the city, and draws gay tourists from all around the world to witness a spectacle which is even broadcast on the national, government-supported television network, the ABC.

Unemployment

We learn that Perry and Muriel, both high school dropouts, have been unemployed for a considerable time, in Muriel's case for two years. While this might seem highly unlikely to North American viewers, it is in fact an accurate representation of the state of youth unemployment in Australia throughout the 90s and into the new millenium. Since the early nineties, the unemployment rate in the country overall has been running at around 10%, and for young people (aged 16-24), has been as high as a shocking 25% in some areas.

South Africa/Swimming

David Van Arckle, the film's South African swimming star wants to marry a local woman so that he can gain Australian citizenship and swim for his new country in the next Olympics. He has parents who are willing to pay up to A\$10,000 to "the right girl", as his coach confides to Muriel. Two pieces of cultural information help the viewer to understand this as more than mere plot mechanics. First, Australia, a vast island nation, 90% of whose population live within a hundred kilometers of a beach, has a proud tradition as a great swimming nation (and as sports-obsessed in general). Second, with the fall of the apartheid regime in South Africa in the

1980s, there was indeed something of a minor exodus of white South Africans to Australia, among other places.

ABBA

Australia has the curious reputation of being a country of ABBAphiles. Consider these facts, for example: The Best of ABBA album is still the biggest-selling album ever in Australia; Australians have bought more ABBA records per capita than any other country bar Sweden; the local ABBA tribute band, Bjorn Again, founded in 1989 and still going strong, has been around far longer than the original band, which broke up in 1982; Mamma Mia, a musical based on ABBA songs, has done great business in Australia; and both Muriel's Wedding and Priscilla, Queen of the Desert (another highly successful Australian film) are replete with ABBA songs - a fact that arguably contributes much to the campy appeal of both films (see, for example the hilarious appropriation of ABBA video clips in Muriel and Rhonda's performance of "Waterloo" on Hibiscus Island). Just what forges this empathy between Australians and ABBA? Bjorn Ulvaeus, one of the Swedish "Fab Four" makes this suggestion: "Swedes can be looked on as outsiders. Perhaps Australians saw themselves as a bit like that". Glen A. Baker, three-times BBC television's "Rock Brain of the Universe", and hence a man who obviously knows his stuff when it comes to musical popular culture, adds this: "Brits have had this snotty arrogance about European pop. They consider they are the natural royalty. It was intolerable to think that the biggest sensation after the Beatles was Swedish". "Perhaps the outsider feeling lingers", ponders Australian journalist Deborah Jones (see Resources). "Certainly it's a driving force in Muriel's Wedding, and [it's] the reason ABBA agreed to give P.J. Hogan rights to their music. They turned it down several times but the enthusiastic, unknown, relatively small-time film makers kept coming back." (Oh, by the way - Bjorn Ulvaeus loves the film).

Viewer's guide

Questions to consider while viewing this film:

The film is billed as an "hilarious comedy". Is this accurate marketing?

How can we read this film as an exploration of self-delusion and the role of the imposter (for Muriel and several other characters)?

Discussing the arranged marriage, David's swimming coach (Ken Blundell) stresses to Muriel that, "the important thing is to convince people that you two are really in love". In what specific ways is this film a scathing critique of Romance, Weddings and Marriage?

At the end of the film, Muriel could have ended up with the affections of David, after all, their disastrous arranged marriage notwithstanding. Instead, she chooses to return to Sydney with Rhonda. How can we read the relationship between Muriel and Rhonda "against the grain"?

The music in the film is used to very particular effect. What is that effect? What do the various ABBA songs underscore/comment upon within the movie?

How does Muriel's performance with Rhonda of ABBA's "Waterloo" (at the Hibiscus Island talent show) relate to her "performance" at her own wedding (to the unexpected strains of ABBA's "I do, I do, I do")?

What is the crucial point at which Muriel's search for self-esteem through getting married starts to collapse and a true sense of her self-worth begins to emerge?

Perhaps the most pathetic character in the film is Betty Heslop. What is the event that triggers her final emotional implosion and suicide? Why is it this particular event, when her whole married life has apparently been so utterly miserable?

What are the similarities between Muriel and Betty and between Muriel and Bill? Why are these significant to the outcome of the film?

What does the changing color scheme of the film signify?

Writing about the campiness of three recent Australian film (Priscilla, Queen of the Desert; Strictly Ballroom; and Muriel's Wedding), John Champagne (see "Resources", below) suggests that Muriel's Wedding may be the campiest of the lot. How accurate is this suggestion?

The film is simply a retelling of the tale of The Ugly Duckling. True or false?

Resources

www.urbancinefile.com.au

Champagne, John. "Dancing Queen? Feminist and Gay Male Spectatorship in Three Recent Films From Australia." *Film Criticism* 21 (Spring 1988) : 66-88.

Driscoll, Catherine. "Becoming Bride." *UTS Review: Cultural Studies and New Writing*. 4. 2 (Nov 1998) : 138-54.

Hogan, P.J. *Muriel's Wedding*. Sydney: Fourth Estate, 1995.

Jones, Deborah. "Mamma Mia! Here We Go Again." The Weekend Australian. Review Section (Feb 24- 25, 2001) : R6-8.

Mackey, Jill A. "Subtext and Countertext in Muriel's Wedding." NWSA Journal. 13: 1 (Spring 2001): 86- 104.

Contributor

Jo Seton, who has a Ph.D. in English from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, is Australian, but also lived many years in New Zealand. She has long had an interest in the film industry in both countries. She worked for the New Zealand Film Archive in its early years, along with various other national cultural institutions in New Zealand. Currently she lives in a small town in the United States. She gets nostalgic about the Antipodes on the rare occasions on which she gets to see a movie from that part of the world.