

AUSTRALIA

A full-page background image featuring Nicole Kidman as Lady Sarah Ashley. She is wearing a dark olive-green military-style short-sleeved button-down shirt and a matching skirt with a black belt. She is running forward with a determined and urgent expression. The background is a blurred, chaotic battlefield scene with smoke, fire, and other soldiers in the distance.

In the days before World War II, Lady Sarah Ashley, an upper-class Englishwoman, journeys deep into Australia's remote and desolate Northern Territory to claim her inheritance — a vast cattle ranch called Faraway Downs.

Nicole Kidman as Lady Sarah Ashley in *Australia*

PRODUCTION PHOTOS: JAMES FISHER
COURTESY: 20TH CENTURY FOX

AUSTRALIA

When the ranch is imperiled, she reluctantly joins forces with a rough-hewn drover (cattle driver) and, along with a mixed-race child that has lost his parents, the duo embarks on an epic cattle drive across hundreds of miles of beautiful, yet unforgiving, terrain in order to save it. Sarah and the Drover fall in love, only to become caught up in one of the opening salvos of World War II when the same Japanese attack force that destroyed Pearl Harbor bombs the northern Australian port city of Darwin.

This heady concoction of drama, romance and adventure is *Australia*, the latest film from writer-director Baz Luhrmann (*Strictly Ballroom*, *Romeo + Juliet*, *Moulin Rouge!*). In a recent conversation with *Script*, Luhrmann described how the story for the \$130-million production—starring Nicole Kidman and Hugh Jackman and ready for release by 20th Century Fox at Thanksgiving—was created.

When embarking on a new film, “I always start with two things,” Luhrmann states. “The first is a genre that I want to explore.” In this case, that genre is the one commonly known as the historical epic—exemplified by big, broad-canvas films such as *Gone With the Wind* and *Lawrence of Arabia*, movies in which the characters get caught up in momentous, world-changing events. However, Luhrmann is quick to point out that he finds the term “historical epic” a limited one. “Those films had comedy, they had romance, they had action, and they had drama.” Because of these many layers, Luhrmann prefers to refer to the genre as action/romance/comedy/sweeping-epic drama. “These are films that take emotional, personal stories and use landscape and historical events to tell them, using those things to amplify the emotions of the characters.”

The second criteria Luhrmann starts a new project with is “something personal that I want to explore.” In this case, that something was his national identity. After *Alexander the Great*—the biographical film Luhrmann had originally planned to follow up *Moulin Rouge!*—was put on hold when director Oliver Stone launched a competing movie, Luhrmann and his

wife were living in Paris, where they had their first child, “and the issue of who we were—our Australianness—was very present.”

Combining these two notions, Luhrmann began developing “a rough feeling of the kind of piece that I wanted to tell. I knew I wanted to use my country as a canvas with historical actions and landscape. And I knew I wanted to treat my country as a faraway place. I was living in Paris, and Australia seemed on the edge of the world [and I wanted] to take that perspective.”

With that rough feeling in mind, Luhrmann and his wife moved back to Australia, and he began a four-year odyssey to develop an epic film about his native land. There were a number of issues that Luhrmann knew he wanted to explore, including those related to the continent’s Aboriginal peoples, as well as those related to Australia’s struggle to achieve self-determination and self-governance. “That turned into ‘how does one make a sweeping comic/drama/action/romance and have the underlying ideas present in that form?’ Because ultimately—and this is crucial—it must be an entertainment. And yet, it’s an entertainment with a larger point. So, that’s kind of the platform from which I began the journey.”

A People’s History

The first step in Luhrmann’s journey was to spend six months researching the entire history of Australia in order to determine in which time period to set his story. At one point, he thought he might do a film about the First Fleet: the 11 British ships that arrived in Australia in 1787 to establish the first European colony on the continent. Ultimately, however, he decided to set the story in the early days of World War II for a number of reasons. The first was, “For this country, it was a transitional period: a period when you could have cowboys and you could have modern war”—both traditional subjects of epics and both favorite genres of Luhrmann’s.

The visual and genre incongruity of having cowboys and Japanese fighter planes appearing together in the same film led the



Hugh Jackman as the Drover with Kidman



Clockwise from left: Richard Flanagan, Stuart Beattie, and Ronald Harwood



Writer-director Baz Luhrmann on the set with Kidman

production team to jokingly refer to the film as *Aloha Cowboy*. It also created a bit of a marketing problem. As Luhrmann explains: “[Having] cattle rushes and the Japanese attacking in the same film ... makes for a very interesting, rich movie. [However], for selling it, it’s very hard because the marketing machine really only knows ‘war movie’ or ‘cowboy film.’ But, I’ll leave [it for] the brilliance of Fox to solve that one.”

Another reason Luhrmann chose this time period was because it allowed him to shine a light on what he describes as “probably the most heinous and difficult part of our history”—a period that marked a low point in the relationship between Australia’s white

majority and the indigenous peoples with whom they share their land. In the time between the two World Wars, so many white Australian cattle stockmen were having relationships with Ab-

original women that the population of mixed-race children was causing a dilemma for those concerned about the country’s racial purity. A government policy was instituted in which mixed-race children were taken from their parents, placed in Christian monasteries, and, in Luhrmann’s words, “basically trained to be white. This decimated large sections of the indigenous population—you can imagine the spiritual decimation and the pain. So, it was an extremely dramatic problem that has haunted this nation for a very, very long time and it really began in that period.” Luhrmann wanted to deal with this issue in his film, not as its primary focus, but woven into the fabric of the piece in much the same way that

slavery—while certainly not the main subject of the movie—was an indelible part of the texture of *Gone With the Wind*.

Luhrmann spent six more months doing research and thinking “about the kind of film I’d like it to be.” Eventually, he put his ideas into a broad-strokes treatment and then went looking for someone to work with him to develop the screenplay because, for Luhrmann, collaboration is a key part of the creative process. “One of the biggest joys on every level is working with other artists. I love to collaborate. I can work on my own—there are other art forms that I do where it’s just you and a piece of paper and a pencil. That’s good, but it’s a little bit boring. What I love about [collaborating] is the relationships and the search for—within the given vision—the best execution. So, I provide a very clear vision ... of what the big idea is and, essentially, what the story should be, and then we go to work on it.” On all of his previous films, Luhrmann had worked with writer Craig Pearce, but when Pearce was unavailable, Luhrmann approached screenwriter Stuart Beattie.

Shaping Events

An Australian native, Beattie moved to the United States in 1991 and attended screenwriting classes at the UCLA Extension. After winning the Diane Thomas Award for Screenwriting for his script *Mayday*, Beattie embarked on a career in Hollywood, writing or co-writing the scripts for a number of films, including *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*, *Collateral*, and *30 Days of Night*. A huge fan of Luhrmann's work, Beattie readily signed on to the project.

In March 2005, Beattie traveled to Sydney where he and Luhrmann began two weeks of conversations about what the movie should be. For Beattie, this was one of the most enjoyable parts of the assignment, which he described to *Script* as being "long chats over tea and cookies out on the verandah, talking about what it means to us to be Australian

and what story we'd like to tell. Very rarely do filmmakers ask 'why should we tell this story?' Answering that question gets you through all the hard days ahead. You know what you're seeking before you ever put pen to paper. And that was a wonderful experience."

The writers then moved into a period of what Luhrmann characterized as "ice-breaking"—taking Luhrmann's original material and "testing, smashing and rewriting" it in order to develop a solid base for a motion picture. "If you liken it to sculpting," Luhrmann says, "it's like taking a square block and getting an initial shape."

Luhrmann found Beattie, with his strong sense of story, to be an ideal partner for this part of the process. "Stuart was a great first collaborator because ... the beginning of anything is extremely difficult. I always say writing is the most difficult part because it only takes a piece of paper and a pencil,

and, given that people are well-paid to do it, if writing were easy, everybody would do it. It's not like you need 300 crew members and \$50 million to sit down with a piece of paper. So, to initiate a story, to break the ice on structuring that story, to hammer out its fundamentals—is the most difficult part of the process without question."

During that process, many of the details changed but the overall concepts did not. Luhrmann says, "What you'll find is—and this is actually endemic of all the pieces I do—that all of the characters who end up in the final film, pretty much, and all of the elements, pretty much, are in the original treatment, but they undergo many transitions. For example, there's a character called King Carney, and he's sort of the cattle baron. Well, at one stage, I think when Stuart came in, [Carney] might have been English, so there was this whole English/Australian thing

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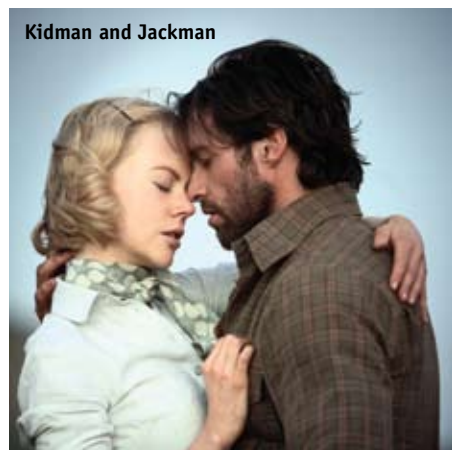
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Kidman and Jackman

which ultimately would have been folded in because there was way too much.”

As the story evolved, the outsider perspective Luhrmann sought was achieved by making Sarah a foreigner coming to Australia for the first time. The indigenous elements were addressed through the creation of the character of Nullah, the mixed-race orphan who accompanies Sarah and the Drover on their journey, and some of the issues of Australian identity were addressed through the Darwin sequence.

As Beattie explains, prior to World War II, Australia was still considered “just another British colony. During the Boer War, Australians fought in South Africa for the British and did the same in World War I. Darwin was the first time a foreign nation had attacked Australia—the first time Australians fought and died defending their home, and that gave birth to the idea that, for the first time, there was actually something worth defending. During Darwin, Australians came into their own—they created their own identity that I think still carries to this day.” The screenplay establishes that the Drover fought in World War I for the British and has sworn off fighting other people’s wars. “It’s only when war comes to his home that he gets into the fight,” Beattie emphasizes. “That the fight becomes his.”

Creative Concerns

Beattie and Luhrmann worked together until December 2005, initially in Australia and then via e-mail after Beattie returned to Los Angeles. By the end of this period, they had created a suitably epic tale that Luhrmann describes as follows: “A woman from a faraway

place by happenstance finds herself in a foreign environment. All she cares about is her physical possessions—she’s tired of spirit and tired of love. She goes on an *African Queen*-like journey and finds herself with the most unlikely man who she, by status, could never be involved with, or love in any way whatsoever ... and with a child who loses his mother. Together they go on an incredible quest and journey and, out of that quest and journey, she is transformed by the landscape and the experience. She finds love for all three of them. The rest of the film is when the world is spinning and changing: War comes and society says you can’t be together.”

With a solid draft of the script in hand, Luhrmann got on with “the struggle of getting the film made.” As pre-production moved forward, practical considerations arose, including the vexing problem that Luhrmann describes as “how to make the movie for the amount Fox wants to spend on it. Remember this—you never go and say ‘hey, I’m going to reinvent the romantic historical sweeping epic’ and Fox goes ‘hmmm, \$100 million. There’s a check, I’ll see you at the opening.’ I dunno, maybe it does happen, [but] not to me it doesn’t.” Creative concerns led to the need for rewrites.

With Beattie occupied elsewhere and with a desire to enhance Sarah’s “Englishness,” Luhrmann approached the Academy Award®-winning screenwriter, novelist and playwright Ronald Harwood (*The Pianist*, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*) in February 2006. Initially, Luhrmann asked Harwood to work on the sequence in which Sarah makes her journey to Faraway Downs, but this quickly expanded into the two of them doing a thorough pass of the whole script. Luhrmann was thrilled to be able to work with Harwood. “He is one of the grand masters of writing. He has a great sense of the classical and just of storytelling ... and had a couple of really cracker ideas [to solve problems] that I had been struggling with for a long, long time.”

As they worked together in London, Paris, and Los Angeles, Luhrmann “learned a lot from Ronald. One thing is, my tendency is if you have a problem, to just keep working on it and argue it and debate it and keep going around and around in circles until the sun comes up. Ronald’s is, if you’re working on a

problem, no matter what, come lunchtime, you stop and you forget it and you have lunch and you don’t talk about writing during lunch. You talk about anything but writing—gossip, TV shows. We’d hang out with [Harwood’s wife] Tash, go and have a slap-up lunch down the road—and invariably, after lunch we’d both at the same time have exactly the same solution. Because you let your subconscious do the work.

“Ronald had this great expression that I love. When a scene wasn’t playing, he’d just go: ‘You know, dear boy, I think somewhere we’ve told a lie.’” For Luhrmann, the notion that something in the script wasn’t working because a false beat or idea had been laid down earlier was “a great lesson.”

A Few More Rewrites

Harwood and Luhrmann finished their work in May 2006 and pre-production continued. “At that stage,” Luhrmann recalls, “I really felt I needed to arrest back into the film an Australianness.” To that end, he approached historian and novelist Richard Flanagan (*Death of a River Guide*, *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*), whom Luhrmann describes as “The Bob Dylan of Australia when it comes to writing. He’s Australian through and through, and his novels are extraordinary.” Flanagan was amenable, and the two worked together from July 2006 to January 2007, an experience that Luhrmann found to be extremely beneficial. “Out of the collaboration, I think the film came back to its parable-like nature. The film is not naturalism—it’s meant to have a parable feeling about it. It’s really told from a little child’s perspective. So Richard and I went back up to the desert, we lived in the desert, and we did another pass of drafting. To me, he brought, amongst many things, the mythological to [the script] again, and this was great.” The mythological aspect of the script also benefited from input from a full-time Aboriginal script consultant, Sam Lovell, and a number of Aboriginal storytelling and song partners, including Richard Birrinbirrin and Frances Djulibing.


Stuart Beattie returned to the project in April 2007 and did some more rewriting during the first two weeks of production. Although the script was now in very good shape,

it continued to evolve throughout filming. As Luhrmann explains: "Look, I come from the theatre, so I like there to be a solid text going in, but once I've done a quick run-through of that, we do a lot of improvising and we do a lot of working with text and we do a lot of rewriting of text on set and a lot of rewriting in the morning and on weekends. This is not right for every process, by the way. If you take a *La Bohème* or Shakespeare, where it's so set, your job is to work within the constraints of it and illuminate it. But, when you're building a new story ... I see everything as part of the writing process because you're continually trying to find and improve the story. Some of the best things have been found in the moment."

The film wrapped in December of 2007 and then entered post-production, but even then the writing continued. Now available, Craig Pearce came in to do some uncredited work on the film's voiceover, and Luhrmann

also worked with some indigenous elders and writers to compose some of the voiceover and to develop bits of dialogue for some additional scenes which were shot in August 2008.

As Fox readies to ship out the final cut of the film, Luhrmann reflects on the number of talented writers it took to help him craft the screenplay for *Australia*. "The reason that I tend to work with a lot of collaborators is," he says with a chuckle, "because I wear people out. That is a fact and I'm aware of it. Look, this process ... isn't for everyone. I mean, I dream of one day not putting myself through this four years of hell and going 'Oh, my God—a perfect screenplay! Let me just point the camera.' But you know, that isn't what you have to do—there isn't anyone writing historical epics that are just sitting there in that period set in Australia that have comedy, romance, action and drama. You have to do it yourself."

When asked what sort of experience he hopes audiences will have when they view his comedy/action/romance/sweeping-epic drama, Luhrmann harkens back to the lessons that the characters in the film learn in the course of their adventures: "They all recognize at the end of it that what's most important above all in a world that is unpredictable, in a world that is changing so much there seems to be nothing you can own, is that there *are* two things you can own: You can own your story—so you better live a good one—and you can own the love you have for the people who really love you and who you love back. And, that is all there is. So, when [audiences] see the picture, I hope they have an immensely entertaining, joyous, fun, thrilling few hours in a cinema, and that they come out feeling that the people they care for and who care for them are the number-one thing. That's all you really need to worry about. Everything else is secondary." 

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