



THE AUSTRALIAN

Printed October 02, 2008 04:45pm AEST

A subtle take on bereavement

David Stratton | October 04, 2008

Bitter and Twisted (M)

4 stars

Limited release

BACK in the 1960s, when I was often involved in bitter arguments with the chief film censor about some of his board's more outrageous decisions, he would express amazement that anyone would want to see this or to hear that as part of an entertainment.



Leeanna Walsman stars in the low-budget Australian film *Bitter and Twisted*.

He could never be persuaded that the cinema can, and should, be more than mere entertainment, that it can carry messages and tell stories as powerful and meaningful as any novel, and with more immediacy. It's true that the vast majority of people who go to the cinema, most of them young, do so to be entertained, to relax and enjoy themselves. But that doesn't mean films that set out to do something different - to educate, to inform, to probe the human condition - aren't equally valid. Hollywood pretty much corners the market when it comes to movie entertainment, while Australian cinema, on the whole, has always been more aligned towards Europe in that most locally made films, whether they are successful or unsuccessful, are about real people, not comic book characters.

These thoughts came to mind while watching *Bitter and Twisted*, a low-budget Australian film that shows evidence of enormous talent even as it deliberately avoids any element that most people would call entertainment. Even the title is indicative of its ultra-serious intentions (it could form part of a triple bill with Mike Leigh's *Bleak Moments* and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Despair*).

Like Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Three Colours: Blue* and the new Swedish film *Suddenly*, this is a film about bereavement, the toll the sudden death of a loved one takes on a family; not your average Friday-night popcorn movie.

The film begins with the sudden and (to the audience) unexplained death of a young man. Three years later, those closest to him are still suffering from the loss. His father (Steve Rodgers), a not very successful car salesman, has become a binge eater and as a result is embarrassingly obese; he can no longer give his wife (Noni Hazlehurst) the love and comfort she craves. Their surviving son, Ben, played by the film's talented writer-director Christopher Weekes, is, if anything, even more conflicted. On the one hand he's drawn towards his dead brother's girlfriend, Indigo (Leeanna Walsman), who lives next door and who has channelled her hurt and loss into a damaging affair with a married man (Gary Sweet), while on the other, his instincts are to hang out with his gay friend (Matthew Newton), a charming layabout.

Weekes's approach is subtle and understated. These people, who live in a southern suburb of Sydney, are largely inarticulate, unable to talk about the pain they feel. The father spends his lunch hours eating his sandwiches in the cemetery where his son is buried; the mother vainly attempts to improve her life with new clothes, a different hairstyle, even a trip to a bar where she meets a slightly predatory character closer in age to her son than to herself. There are long, pregnant silences, embarrassing small talk, clumsy attempts to come to terms with lives that are forever changed. Obviously this is not a film for everyone, and it was made without assistance from the usual government funding bodies. Yet on so many levels it is a better film than some of the more vaunted local productions we've seen recently, thanks partly to the consummate performances from a cast of actors who are accomplished enough to fill in the deliberate gaps in the dialogue with looks, glances and body language but also because of the outstanding cinematography by Sam Collins, which is so precisely lit and framed it evokes early Jane Campion.

It's probably true that Rodgers is too young to play the father, but after his first scene, his delicate, painfully good performance transcends any qualms on that score.

Films such as *Bitter and Twisted* have a very hard time competing against higher profile movies with advertising budgets that probably exceed the cost of a small, underfunded local production. But when a film is as good as this, it deserves to be supported and to be counted among the most positive achievements of Australian cinema. Certainly, it's one of the best locally made films released this year.

** Due to an editing error in a recent David Stratton review (September 20-21), it was incorrectly stated that Judy Garland sang "too old for toys but too young for boys" in The Wizard of Oz. In fact, Garland sang those words in the film Love Finds Andy Hardy.*

Copyright 2008 News Limited. All times AEST (GMT +10).