



Muriel's Wedding

Film

MURIEL'S WEDDING Director: Paul J. Hogan

Muriel, as played by the energetic Toni Colette, is gaucheness incarnate — a young woman with puppy fat, terminal freckles, a big toothy grin, and, to quote another recent Australian movie, a heart as big as Western Australia. She's a woman who has survived the bitchy barbs of Sydneyside suburbia by living a fantasy life that owes much to the bubbly power pop of ABBA.

For 80 or so of its 106 minutes, *Muriel's Wedding* is a hoot, a right regular little black comedy, a Sally Jessy misfit show come to life. Shriek with hysterics as the sun-bleached bimboes of Porpoise Spit get their come-uppance! Howl with laughter as Muriel and Rhonda do their ABBA turn! Roll in the aisle as a bean bag gets accidentally unzipped during a gormless seduction!

But, in the final count, the film stops rather short from realising its potential. Rhonda is suddenly wheel-chair-bound, the ironies of Muriel's post-marriage behaviour are hardly explored and one has the nagging feeling that, if the script was wanting to be 'serious', there was a lot more to be investigated in the character of Muriel's mother. Yes folks, it's another Oz feel-good movie that ends up being almost as bland as the supertoms you buy in Oxford Street.

WILLIAM DART

THE BANDIT QUEEN Director: Shekhar Kapur

The Bandit Queen is an extraordinary movie, relating the tale of the notorious bandit Phoolan Devi, tracing the indignities and cruelties she endured and her resilience in coping with them.

In many ways it's a classic 'revenge' film, in a style that mixes racy melodrama with blunt, singularly unstylised violence — there's no hip soundtrack with a cute sampling of 50s and 60s rock songs with this movie. It gains a lot of its considerable impact from the amazing Seema Biswas, as Phoolan. Here is an actor who has the enviable ability to look rustic one minute and *soignée* the next (uniformed, she rather reminded me of the elegant Yoko Ono in her Che Guevara phase). However, the intensity of her performance is never in doubt — Phoolan is emphatically flesh and blood, a woman determined to take charge of her own life, as in a tense scene in which she has sex with her lover Vikram on her own terms.

Kapur is a skilful film-maker. He catches the utter isolation of the young Phoolan, and cru-

cial scenes are handled with some subtlety: a gang-rape occurs mostly off-screen while we watch the traffic of men entering and leaving the building; we're shown the storming of a village from overhead; and when a group of men are slaughtered, Kapur introduces intensified lighting effects.

This is powerful movie-making, with its critique of the caste system and of India's generally unsympathetic treatment of women. Ironically, because of political repression and censorship, it is unable to be seen in the country in which it was made.

WILLIAM DART

BLUE SKY Director: Tony Richardson

The opening credits roll over glamour shots of 60s movie queens, while Dinah Washington and Brook Benton croon 'You've Got What it Takes'. *Blue Sky* is Tony Richardson's final film (finished in 1990, less than year before the director died of AIDS) and, ironically, his best for more than a decade.

Blue Sky is primarily a study of a psychologically harrowed wife and mother (one of the great performances of any year from Jessica Lange). Like a Tennessee Williams or William Inge heroine, she's trapped in inhospitable confines — in this case a military base in Alabama, where her husband (a stoic Tommy Lee Jones) is a solitary nuclear conscience amongst his colleagues.

Although there's an uncomfortable wrench when fragile heroine becomes stalwart activist — would that Richardson had been able to strip Lange's character as bare as Ken Loach does with Crissy Rock's in *Ladybird Ladybird* — the director's skill shows in the resonance of his images. Lange with scarf on a Hawaii beach reminds one of those final elegiac Bert Stern photographs of Marilyn Monroe, and the sheer tackiness of amateur dramatics amongst the airforce wives (which include Carrie Snodgrass and Annie Ross) is a chuckle and a half — Hernando's Hideaway will never be the same again.

WILLIAM DART

LITTLE WOMEN Director: Gillian Armstrong

After the contrived sentimentalities of *Legends of the Fall*, *Little Women* at least has literary credentials, being taken from the nineteenth century classic by Louisa May Alcott.

George Cukor, who directed the first film of the book in 1933, commented later that he

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FLESH FOR ALTMAN

Rossy de Palma is one of 38 major name stars in Robert Altman's latest film, *Pret A Porter* (*Ready To Wear*). She is joined by the likes of Julia Roberts, Tim Robbins, Lyle Lovett, Lauren Bacall, Sophia Loren and Kim Basinger, and more than 75 designers and supermodels (including Christian Lacroix, Jean-Paul Gaultier, Naomi Campbell and Christy Turlington). Altman mixes a murder mystery that isn't with a fashion show that is, and sends the whole caboodle up like only he knows how.

The finale sees the runway brimming with nude supermodels, in a sequence set to the Cranberries' 'Pretty'. Altman has nothing but praise for those who bared their all (and much more, in Ute Lemper's case) for the scene, and says: "Remember, these are girls who are not porno stars, and don't walk around naked in public."

Pret A Porter opens on April 7.