

‘With our imagination, we make the world’

Escaping from Harsh Realities in *Bathing Franky*

With its difficult and uncompromising themes of palliative care, personal sacrifice, abusive sexual relationships and drug dependency, *Bathing Franky* is a bittersweet mixed bag, writes **Carly Millar**.

Bathing Franky (2012) is a low-budget first feature from director Owen Elliott and producer Michael Winchester. Made over many years, the project was a labour of love for the filmmakers, who are now touring their eccentric arthouse drama around the country. This intriguing film tells a difficult story about several troubled people in crisis. Steve (Shaun Goss) is a young man who has recently finished serving time in prison for accidentally running down and killing his best mate, Paulie, in a drug deal gone wrong. Four years later, still traumatised and guilt-ridden, Steve returns to his home town in the Hunter Valley and takes a job driving a mobile canteen to deliver meals to the sick and the elderly. One of his customers is Rodney (Henri Szeps), a backyard magician who is also the full-time carer

for his elderly invalid mother, Franky (Maria Venuti). Gradually, Steve is drawn into their surreal orbit and adopts their fanciful world view, which helps him to forget – albeit temporarily – the unsavoury truths of his past.

Escaping into fantasy

Rodney is a sad clown who lives in a fantasy world. Through make-believe he distances himself from the harsh realities of his truly melancholy existence with his ailing mother. In Rodney’s version of his family history, his mother was a famous Italian cabaret artiste and his father was a theatrical producer and circus entrepreneur. In the 1970s they toured across Europe, South





America and Asia, until his mother was struck down in Sydney by a mosquito bite. The world tour ended there, and Rodney's father travelled back to Milan. Decades later, Franky is still convinced that her husband will return for her.

Rodney and Franky live in their own world, with few connections to the outside, and Steve is bewildered at first by their outlandish, theatrical behaviour. Rodney vacillates between despondency and ebullience, and audiences may find his manic persona irritating. 'Don't you ever get tired of doing this stuff? You know, all these funny voices?' asks Steve at one point. Steve's girlfriend, Susie (Bree Desborough), puts it more bluntly: 'He's off his tree,' she says upon her first meeting with Rodney. Eventually, Steve discovers that Rodney's world is one of make-believe: he has never been on a real stage, his mother is not a singer or dancer, and he's been looking after her full-time since she contracted polio forty years ago. Feeling foolish and betrayed, Steve realises that he was the eager audience that Rodney and Franky both craved. When Steve confronts Rodney about his lies, however, he receives an unapologetic response: 'One man's bullshit is another man's fertiliser, Steven,' Rodney says matter-of-factly. He doesn't feel the need to justify his manner of coping to anyone.

Trauma, fear and forgiveness

Through several flashbacks, we learn of Steve's brutal incarceration, during which he was forcibly held down on a number of occasions to be tattooed or raped. In a surreal dream sequence, Steve describes his experience in prison as though it was a horrific fairy tale:

Once there was a young boy who found himself inside a vulture's lair because he had been very, very bad. At first, life for the boy was simply frightening. And then one day along came a bigger, meaner, nastier vulture than all the others. And the young boy forgot about his agony and wondered aloud if the nasty vulture might actually love him.

Troubled by the memory of his relationship with fellow inmate Raven (Michael Winchester), Steve has difficulty re-adjusting to life on the outside with Susie, who has drug problems of her

own. While she awaited Steve's release from prison, she had a relationship with Tommy (Brendan Madigan), who now appears to be supplying her with drugs and acting as her pimp. When Susie says, 'I lost both of you that night' in reference to Paulie's death and Steve's prison term, we gain some insight into the psychological pain and loneliness that she, too, has suffered.

Steve, who has Paulie's name tattooed across his chest, is struggling with guilt, psychological damage and same-sex feelings, all of which are mixed up with his own understanding of manhood and masculinity. At one point, Tommy goads Steve about his prison sexuality and cowardice in failing to save Paulie: 'You think I don't know how you stayed alive inside? What kind of man does that make you, eh? The kind of man who leaves his mate to die like a dog on the side of the road?' Later, in a conversation with Rodney, Steve says, 'I don't know what I am. You tell me, funny man, who am I? What kind of man am I?' To which Rodney replies, 'You can be whatever, Steven – with our imagination, we make the world.'

It is easy to see why Rodney and Franky become an adopted family of sorts for Steve: his mother is dead and he never got along with his father. Rodney and Franky know nothing of his past, and they offer – within the confines of their make-believe world – the tenderness, devotion, loyalty and love that Steve yearns for. Indeed, Steve begins to see a way out for himself in Rodney's world view: 'That's what I like about you. You get real situations, grab them, mangle them about until you turn them into something that suits.' He is charmed by Franky's eccentricities and Rodney's exuberant excess, but it is his close emotional bond with and attraction to Rodney that forms the catalyst for change.

There is a growing tenderness between the two men, until Steve finally tells Rodney, 'You want more. I can see it.' 'I'm not used to this kind of thing,' replies Rodney, referring to their budding sexual attraction to one another. 'It's not something I expected.' After they sleep together, Steve leaves Rodney and travels to Sydney to confront Raven – to face his fears and to resolve his confusion. Instead of killing

Raven as he had planned, though, Steve learns to forgive past injuries:

I just wanted to know if what he'd done – what we'd done – was important. But all I saw was fear. The same fear I saw back then. And for a moment, we saw each other, without any of the show.

While the many grim themes in *Bathing Franky* don't mesh seamlessly, there is at least an attempt to grapple with weighty subject matters that films don't often tackle in-depth.

The personal is political

When we are first introduced to Rodney and Franky in the opening scenes, Rodney is assisting his mother onto the toilet. This sets the tone of the film: *Bathing Franky* doesn't pull any punches in its depiction of the indignities endured by the sick, the invalid and the elderly, and the patience and dedication required of their carers.

An underlying political issue in *Bathing Franky* is the status of the elderly in society and their treatment at the hands of a pitiless bureaucracy. Rodney is being pressured by the plain-spoken Peg (Kath Leahy), who runs the local community welfare agency, to place his mother in an aged care facility. The character of Peg hints at the havoc wrought by departmental budget cuts and excessive administration. 'C'mon, let's go and meet my boss, the filing cabinet,' she says.

Aged care outside of the family home is portrayed in an utterly negative light. Rodney describes nursing homes as 'a prison for unwanted mamas and papas'. 'Imagine!' he says. '[Franky] would rather be dead [than go to such a place]'. After a visit from the community health and palliative care officer, Rodney warns Steve to watch his back because 'the vultures are circling'. Though the film's criticisms are valid to a certain extent, it presents a rather simplistic view of aged care. Rodney has been unwise in his refusal to seek help with the care of his mother. It is this full-time occupation, after all, which has overshadowed his entire adult life, robbing him of friends and a social life, and preventing him from pursuing any other path. 'She was always the star, even when I was on stage with her,' Rodney tells Steve, and

PREVIOUS SPREAD
L-R: MARIA VENUTI AS THE FEISTY BUT INVALID TITLE CHARACTER FRANKY; RODNEY (HENRI SZEPS) USES THEATRE AND MAGIC TO COPE WITH HIS LIFE
FACING PAGE, FROM TOP: RODNEY CARES FOR HIS DEPENDENT MOTHER; SHAUN GOSS AS STEVE

this is an apt metaphor for his life with Franky. Rodney's mother takes precedence, and imagining that his mother is a celebrity makes his personal sacrifice all the more worthwhile.

Though in a lot of pain, and in and out of consciousness, Venuti's Franky is feisty, flirtatious and just as theatrical as her son, at one point kissing Steve full on the lips. In the scene that is referenced in the film's title, when Rodney invites Steve to bathe Franky, he says of his mother, 'She may be old and wrinkly, but she's never been ashamed of her body,' hinting at a proud woman who refuses to be invisible.

Budget constraints and commercial limitations

First-time screenwriter and producer Winchester is an actor (*Prisoner, Sons and Daughters*) turned organic beef farmer. He developed *Bathing Franky's* screenplay over seven years, from a monologue spoken by Rodney's character that he had written as an audition piece for himself. Rodney was based on a man whom writer and co-producer Michael Winchester saw living on the streets in the Hunter Valley region:

*What circumstances might have [led him] to this situation? And how quick are we to judge someone based on their outward appearance without knowing the story of their life? So this character became the impetus for the entire film.*¹

Winchester first met director and co-producer Owen Elliott at a filmmaking workshop in Newcastle. Elliott had previously made award-winning short films as well as directing and editing corporate films. Working within the confines of a minuscule budget of A\$60,000, the film was shot in just twenty days. Elliott describes this as a 'nano budget', with the crew using the equipment they already had because they couldn't afford to hire or buy anything else.² Director of photography Gavin Banks recalls that everybody on set 'was there because they really wanted to be there'. Most of the extras were from the local community, and many of the crew were university graduates, or had no previous experience in film. There were very few paid crew members, with many people in senior roles working for free. As Banks puts it, 'Four weeks for the love of it is a big ask.'³



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A work-in-progress version of the film was first screened at Dungog Film Festival in 2010, which is fitting, since the film was mostly shot in the Dungog, Gresford and Paterson areas of the Hunter Valley, with some scenes filmed in Maitland and Newcastle as well. In late 2012 – two years later – the finished product received a staggered release around the country.

While independent, low-budget films such as *Bathing Franky* are an essential training ground for emerging filmmaking talent in Australian cinema, one has to wonder whether these films will find an audience. To combat this problem, *Bathing Franky* is receiving a national release under the auspices of Screen Australia's Innovative Distribution program. This new initiative was developed to help small, indie films find ready-made and previously untapped audiences by providing funds for filmmakers to take their films to rural and regional Australia, where they are screened in such diverse venues as churches, art galleries and community halls.⁴ While *Bathing Franky* has, by and large, been positively reviewed and received at its regional screenings, this does not appear to have generated the buzz and positive word of mouth needed to make a splash on a national scale. In any case, it is reassuring to know that non-commercial film scripts are still being made and distributed in Australia by some dedicated and uncompromising people.⁵

Bathing Franky is a small and modestly made film that makes for an uncomfortable viewing experience for the most part – but it is also heartfelt

and honest in its depiction of people at risk and on the margins of society. Confronting and raw, it doesn't sugar-coat its difficult themes of sickness, death and emotional trauma. Despite some flaws, the film is a celebration of endurance in the face of adversity.

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<http://www.bathingfranky.com>

Endnotes

- ¹ Titan View, 'Bathing Franky Media Kit', p. 7.
- ² *ibid*, p. 6.
- ³ '20 Days of Franky', DVD extra, *Bathing Franky*, Titan View, 2013.
- ⁴ For more information on the Innovation Distribution model, see <http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/funding/marketing_funds/Innov_Distribution.aspx>, accessed 20 February 2013.
- ⁵ *Bathing Franky* has already garnered two awards at the 2012 Indie Gems Film Festival in Paramatta, Sydney, with Shaun Goss winning Best Actor and Maria Venuti winning Best Supporting Actress.