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# —Entertainment—

## Social comedy first, feminism second, Hollywood last

by Frank McGinn

*My Brilliant Career* is not your standard, Hollywood fare. For one thing, it is an Australian film. Also, still rather rare, it is a women's film, which means one made by women and with the girl as the hero(ine).

A Margaret Fink production of an Elanor Whitcombe screenplay directed by Gillian Armstrong and starring the enchanting Judy Davis, *My Brilliant Career* has impeccable feminine credentials. Also feminist ones. It is based on a novel written in 1895 by a 16 year old girl, relating in the first person two years in the life of a rebellious, intelligent, young, female person whose circumstances were very much like her own. As the title suggests, the character is no wilter, and in fact holds a

tury novel of manners, and the exposition of character through the little scenes of domestic life is what it's all about. There are no battle scenes or even any bedroom scenes, but this is not to say that the film is without conflict and eroticism. Great themes are called upon here, principally the conflicting needs for love and personal freedom, and they are engaged with a sure hand and a delicately comic touch.

At the centre of the picture, but not without the expenditure of considerable energy on her part, is the girl with the big ideas, Sybylla Melvin. Plain of feature, which counted for a lot when looks were half a woman's worth, and mentally sharp, she is sent from her parent's drought-stricken farm in the outback to the more pro-

known not only her own mind but those of her family and acquaintances; and how to illuminate them through the description of social encounters. Her story is brought to the screen with wonderful economy and style by all the women involved, from director to production designer. Special merit, however, must be awarded to Judy Davis in the pivotal, compelling role of Sybylla. Not unsurprisingly, considering she portrays a vital, independent, not-conventionally attractive young woman, she has been compared to the young Katherine Hepburn. (Five separate times by five separate critics, surely a world record.) This seems to me to be missing the point slightly, the freshness and originality of her performance being what we respond to, but anyway it is



rather justifiably high opinion of her worth. Sybylla Melvin, for that is her name, does not see any contradiction between the fact that she is female and the fact that she will have a great, romantic career, probably in music or literature, although her Uncle J.J. (Peter Whitford) says she could go on the stage, the way she acted in the drawing room that night. In the male-dominated, tradition-oriented, rural Australian world of the 1890s, she is an anachronism and an affront. And, of course, a cultural sodbuster.

Pleasantly, this is not an oppressive or strident film. The politics are plainly there, but never at the expense of real characters. This is a 19th cen-

sporous, grazing estate of her maternal grandmother. The influence of gracious living is meant to refine her but, while she blossoms under it, her growth is not in the direction of tame. Her high style is attractive to some, however, and a taciturn, pleasant-natured young landowner (Sam Neill) begins paying serious attention to her. Their strange and wild courtship forms the main body of the film. (The accompanying picture is misleading and must be a PR trick to make it seem like a simpler move — I don't think they were ever in such a conventional, romantic pose.)

Stella Maria Sarah Miles Franklin, the 16 year old authoress, appears to have

meant as a compliment. Davis is not the only mean actor in the bunch but, in the choicest part, she creates a plucky, engaging and altogether rare screen heroine.

Ms. Franklin went on to write nine more novels, as well as serving with the Scottish Women's Hospital Unit in the Balkans during World War I and later joining with Alice Henry in Chicago to organize the Women's Trade Union League. But even before I was aware that *My Brilliant Career* was the true story of a pioneer feminist and remarkable lady, I knew it was the brightest, truest and most satisfying social comedy to hit the North American screen this year.