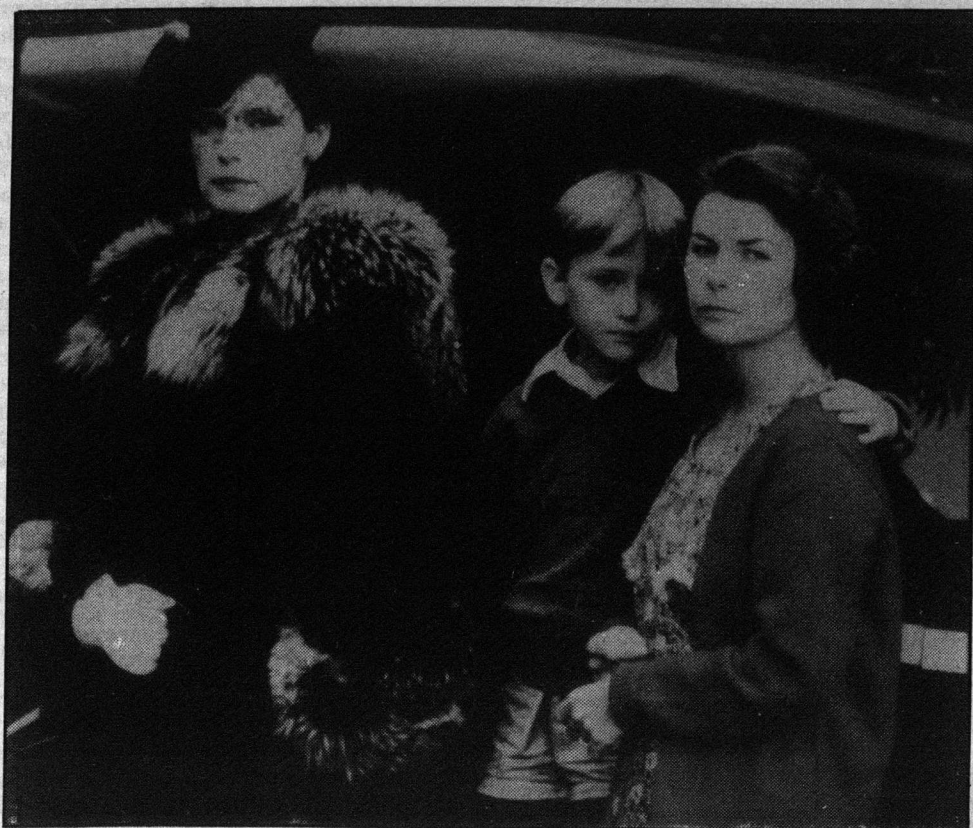


ENTERTAINMENT



Wendy Hughes, Nicholas Gledhill, and Robyn Nevin star in *Careful He Might Hear You*.

Boy finds aunts no picnic

PS I Love You

CAREFUL, HE MIGHT HEAR YOU
WESTMOUNT THEATRE

review by John Charles

For the first half-hour of *Careful, He Might Hear You* (Westmount) it looks like the new Great Australian Movie has overdosed on production values.

Each camera shot is set up with the elaborate self-consciousness of a *Vogue* fall fashion special. Beautiful — but it makes us go "ooh" and "aah," rather than being drawn into the story it should be showing us, and actually undercuts the emotional content of scenes.

And Ray Cook's gorgeously shimmering music score evokes the lush English countryside, all flowering trees and larks ascending, while remaining totally indifferent to the mood of the scenes we're actually watching.

The plot of *Careful* also puts you off at first. A seven-year-old boy archly named P.S. (Nicholas Gledhill) — his dying mother declared him a 'post script' to her life — is an orphan, and being raised by Aunt Lila (Robyn Nevin) and Uncle George (Peter Witford) in 1930s Australia. Enter Aunt Vanessa (Wendy Hughes), who's rich, elegant, veiled, even brandishes a cigarette-holder. She has decided she want P.S. for herself, and can do much more for him than Lila and George, who are just scraping by.

We're soon shown Vanessa writhing in a bed alone, crying out the name of P.S.'s father, Logan. And we realize she hopes to gain back that itinerant scallawag (whom she flirted with before P.S.'s mother knew him) by first gaining possession of his son. At that point you ask yourself if this is a movie you really need.

Fortunately director Carl Schultz and writer Michael Jenkins are up to much more than pretty pictures and sexual hysteria — though both are a real concern in the film. The movie is based on Sumner Locke Elliott's 1963 novel, and it's one of the most faithful adaptations of a serious novel I've seen in years, suffusing the movie with an unusual richness of detail and characters that make the movie so interesting.

The reason you want to leave after 30 minutes is that the plot looks so predictable. Vanessa is clearly a figure of power, and will somehow win — especially in the Australian cinematic world, which seems fascinated by the implacably grim ways of destiny (*Gallipoli*, *Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*, and *Breaker Morant* for starters).

Vanessa is successful at getting P.S. on weekdays, and is soon busily teaching him

how to be a little gentleman. ("Don't say serviette, it's common. Say napkin.") And P.S. does just as he's told, because he's a docile, polite boy. In spite of waist-high camera angles, which show us the world from his perspective, we don't know what he's thinking at this point.

But Logan suddenly turns up, lured by Vanessa from his ne'er-do-well wanderings and irresponsibilities. She tries to get him to assign P.S. to her, legally and forever, and her chances are good until he actually meets the son he's never seen.

It's a superbly shaped dramatic scene, as we watch P.S. step into yet one more elegantly furnished room, politely wondering what strange demands yet another strange adult will make of him. (The helplessness and vulnerability of children is shown quite movingly here and elsewhere, and always in a specific context.)

When Logan asks if he really enjoys his riding lessons and dancing lessons, and P.S. automatically responds: "Yes, thank you," Logan realizes what a little puppet his son is being turned into. From that moment on the film becomes a totally absorbing melodrama.

If Vanessa is sometimes powerful because she has money and influence, we're also aware of how lonely and insecure she is. So you can't just label her a villainess, because she's intriguingly unpredictable and complex. And when P.S. suddenly takes a stand while visiting Lila, and declares "I won't go back," we respond to his action as if it were extraordinary heroism. All the characters are capable of change and growth, which we take for granted in novels, but seldom find in recent movies.

The theme of the corruption of innocence is very strong in the new Australian cinema. Sometimes it's old, politically ruthless England using the naive colony for her own purposes (*Gallipoli*, *Breaker Morant*). Sometimes it's more the assertion of a primordial innocence that belongs to the ancient, mythic Australian landscape and its aboriginals, and which erupts after incidents of repression, upsetting Victorian attitudes of what's natural and nice (*Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*).

The acting is excellent throughout, and hugely entertaining too. The melodramatic form, which allows for larger-than-life events and emotions, is the most dramatic way to examine attitudes about life and relationships while remaining thoroughly entertaining. *Careful, He Might Hear You* goes way beyond TV soap operas in exploring the need to be loved and the need to become yourself. But it also delivers on the basic what'll-happen-next level that makes us go to movies in the first place.

Growing up in Britain

British Boys

KIPPERBANG

PRINCESS THEATRE

review by John Charles

"I don't really blush — I just go red in the face," Alan earnestly explains to the caretaker at school.

The caretaker looks blank. Who wouldn't?

Alan (John Abisny) is 14, and very much aware of his red hands and sweating feet — of there being nothing about him that someone could love. Nevertheless he's in love with Ann (Abigail Cruttenden), a schoolmate who drives him crazy. He wants desperately to kiss her. Not do "the other things," just kiss her. And he prays each morning, "Let it be today — or no later than early next week."

Alan is the likeable hero of *Kipperbang*, a funny, modest British comedy about growing up in the late 1940's, which ends its premiere Edmonton run at the Princess tonight.

British directors seem to find a lot more of interest in adolescence than Americans do these days. On one hand, you have Steven Spielberg's neurotic movies (*E.T.*, *Poltergeist*) which view children as celestial candy-box creations who are so special that growing up at all to become an adult is a tragedy. On the other hand are the endless series of comedies about getting laid for the first time which are so crude and banal that sleeping with a prostitute (*Risky Business*) or your best

man) assigns him to be in the class play, in which, on the final page, he has to kiss Ann.

If *Kipperbang* is highly amusing and vividly observed, it's also a bit too tidy, which is what kept me from joining in with the delighted audience's guffaws. Well-crafted movies should be rewarded in this age of excess and incoherence, but screen-writer Jack Rosenthal's work reminds you of other literary accounts of growing up as much as it reminds you of life. His characters are charmingly daffy, but he won't let them develop and wander as they want to. So the plot becomes all-important, at the expense of the movie's sense of spontaneity and life. (It's precisely on those grounds that Bill Forsyth's wonderful Glasgow comedy *Gregory's Girl* is such a triumph.)

Kipperbang was made for British TV by director Michael Apted, which partly explains its concern for rueful wistfulness and controlled shapeliness. Apted is best known for his American film, *The Coal Miner's Daughter*, and his style tends to be austere and documentary in its approach. But another film, in that same TV series about first love, proved much more quirky. It was called *Experience Preferred But Not Essential*, about waiters and waitresses at a seaside resort, and it played in Edmonton six months ago.

The tidiness I object to is conveyed in such things as the cricket match commentator whom we and Alan listen to in Alan's imagination, whenever he's alone — a commentary on how his life is going. "The player is interrupted again!" the voice says, as Alan fails to embrace Ann. And we laugh as



John Abisny, Mark Brailsford, and Chris Karallis in *Kipperbang*

friend's mother (*Class*) is just as much a triumph as sleeping with a girl you like. These movies are aimed at audiences of horny guys whose interest in getting laid is equally obsessive. Unfortunately horniness as a physical condition is of no more narrative interest than the common cold.

It's Alan's yearning romanticism which sets him apart from his chums — and from the adults as well. He thinks kissing is a special, intimate act that sets it apart from the messiness of "the other things." His chums, fascinated by "the other things," regard kissing as pointless and yucky.

So Alan (looking like a very young Steve McQueen) moves each day through a cloud of tremulous apprehension, fantasizing that he's a great cricket player, getting through the boring routines of school and the private boyish rituals of his pals, which are meant to bestow some dignity upon their adolescent condition. (Their secret greeting is "Batayan Kipperbang uhh!") And then one day his English teacher (Alison Stead-

though a button had been pressed. It's amusing the first few times, then becomes tiresome, since it's a lazy writer's way of achieving transitions and letting us in on Alan's own reactions.

The juxtaposition of adult and adolescent affairs (beautifully done in *Gregory's Girl*) is rather glib here. It would be more annoying if it weren't that Steadman, as the English teacher, is a radiant actress whose confusions over romance are even more engaging than Alan's dilemma. But the writer is more interested in her as a comic foil than as an interesting character.

The script's rigidity culminates in the final speech Alan makes to Ann, a totally implausible poetic speech which violates everything we know of Alan's sensibility and style. At this point, when the movie insists he become articulate, you can see this movie is another adult fantasy about what childhood should have been like, making it closer to Spielberg than you'd have imagined.