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My Brilliant Career

Gillian Armstrong, Australia 1979

Script by Eleanor Witcombe from
the novel by Miles Franklin

Judy Davis Sybylla Melvyn
Sam Neill Harry Beecham
Wendy Hughes Aunt Helen
Robert Grubb Frank Hawdon
Max Cullen Mr. McSwatt
Aileen Britton Grandma Bossier
Peter Whitford Uncle Julius
Patricia Kennedy Aunt Gussie
Alan Hopgood Father
Julia Blake Mother

The first novel by Australian feminist Miles Franklin, written when she was a teenager and published in 1901, launched more than a single brilliant career. There was her own: Franklin produced a bounty of acclaimed books and forged a legacy as one of the country's most influential authors. And almost 80 years later Judy Davis rose to prominence after starring in director Gillian Armstrong's fine 1979 adaptation.

Davis gives a rousing performance as bull-headed protagonist Sybylla Melvyn. The term "once in a lifetime" tends to be slapped around like a bumper sticker, but this meaty role



lives up to the accolade. Davis won a Bafta award for her troubles and went on to form a long and distinguished CV.

Here is the story of my career. My brilliant career. I make no apologies for being egotistical because I am, Sybylla intones in her opening narration, with a characteristically smug, holier-than-thou temperament that makes her one of the most memorable characters in Australian cinema. While a sandstorm erupts in the dusty outback around her she writes a diary entry reflecting on her desire to belong to the world of art

and literature.

With those sun-baked rural locations, it's obvious from the get-go that *My Brilliant Career* will be a quintessentially Australian story, set in a quintessentially Australian context. The themes of the film are broad (breaking free of the establishment, being true to yourself) and its message about the virtues and consequences of self-empowerment timeless.

From that opening moment it's unclear whether Sybylla's "brilliant career" is wishful thinking or an ambition destined to be realised

by the closing credits. Part of the strength and nuance of Armstrong's film (and the book on which it was based) is that the end result is both – and neither.

Sybylla's aspirations are realised in the sense that her independence is protected, her integrity maintained



and her creative voice given an outlet. But despite those virtues – or perhaps because of them – the people around her, constituents of an atavistic male-dominated hierarchy, remain unconvinced of her success and deeply sceptical of her intentions. "Useless, plain and godless" is how Sybylla's mother describes her early in the film, when Armstrong is still doing the heavy lifting to establish her protagonist as a maligned free spirit rubbing up against the established order of things. In the next scene Sybylla talks to her sister, below the stars, and asks her if she's dreamed of a better life – of adventure, books and culture, things beyond a farm-girl existence that oscillates between two modes: work and sleep.

A young woman dreaming of something greater than provincial life is a familiar narrative trajectory, but *My Brilliant Career* is the seminal work; the grandmother of feminist narratives, built around a character whose determination to live independent of societal expectations took place in a time well before the struggle for women's rights became a movement. Despite a touching romantic subplot

featuring a dashing Sam Neill as Harry Beecham – one of the rare people who don't talk down to, patronise or discourage Sybylla – the film doesn't replace the lonely dignity of its protagonist with rosiness and romance. She ends the film as she began it, writing pensive thoughts

into her diary, having refused Beecham's hand in marriage. The dignity of the film and its subject remains heartbreakingly intact.

There's no wonder *My Brilliant Career* is cited as a milestone in Australian feminist cinema. It is a powerful rumination on atavistic Australia, sexism and classism, and a sensitive portrait of a woman destined to think outside the box. Sybylla's artistic aspirations keep the film relevant and broadly accessible. Pressure from people around her comes in many forms, even in something as innocuous as playing piano. She is instructed "play the nice ones".

My Brilliant Career isn't "a nice one". Like its protagonist, it is staunchly unconventional. The film itself is a kind of free spirit, and one that has made an indelible print on Australian cinema.

NEXT MONTH'S FILM IS
ARARAT (Atom Egoyan,
Canada 2002)

Wednesday 23 November
(note changed weekday)

Gillian Armstrong



Born: December 18, 1950
Melbourne, Australia

Feature films

- 1979 **My Brilliant Career**
- 1982 **Starstruck**
- 1984 **Mrs. Soffel**
- 1987 **High Tide**
- 1991 **Fires Within**
- 1992 **The Last Days of
Chez Nous**
- 1994 **Little Women**
- 1997 **Oscar and Lucinda**
- 2001 **Charlotte Gray**
- 2007 **Death Defying Acts**
- 2009 **Love, Lust & Lies**

“ I got branded as a feminist director because it was a feminist story, but then that's all I was offered: women achievers – first woman to fly a plane, climb a mountain, ride a camel. I really fought against that labelling. I like to say my characters, male and female, are complicated, and not formulaic, and have depth and layers.

...The women that have got through over the years — Jane Campion and Jocelyn Moorhouse and so on — have worked 10 times as hard as the men. They're 10 times as good as the men. There won't be equality until there are as many mediocre women directors as there are mediocre men.

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