

The Dressmaker



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Produced by Sue Maslin. Directed by Jocelyn Moorehouse. Screenplay by Rosalie Ham, P.J. Hogan. Based on *The Dressmaker* by Rosalie Ham. Line Producer: Louisa Kors. Production Design by Roger Ford. Cinematography by Donald McAlpine. Art Direction by Lucinda Thompson. Original Music by David Hirshfelder. Edited by Jill Bilcock. Key Costumer: Julie Barton

Cinematic length: 118 minutes. Distributed by Universal Pictures. Companies: Apollo Media, Film Art Media, Screen Australia. Cinematic release: October 2015. Check for ratings. Rating ***** 45%.

All pictures are from the public domain

Cast

Kate Winslet: Myrtle Dunnage	Rebecca Gibney: Muriel Pratt
Judy Davis: Molly Dunnage	Barry Otto: Percival Almanac
Liam Hemsworth: Teddy McSwiney	Julia Blake: Irma Almanac
Sarah Snook: Gertrude Pratt	Gyton Grantley: Barney McSwiney
Kerry Fox: Beulah Harridiene	Genevieve Lemon: Mae McSwiney
Sacha Horla: Una Pleasance	Stan Leman: Edward McSwiney
Hugo Weaving: Sergeant Farrat	Alison Whyte: Marigold Pettyman
Caroline Goodall: Elsbeth Beaumont	Shane Jacobson: Alvin Pratt
James Mackay: William Beaumont	Tracy Harvey: Lois Pickett

Review

This film has many fine things in it – but.... It has proved to be extremely popular with audiences, being the biggest grossing Australian film of 2015 despite opening late in the year. In America it has earned a respectable twelve million dollars plus in a short time and has already won industry awards and much critical acclaim.

The fine, restrained performances by Kate Winslet, Liam Hemsworth and Julia Blake give this film a much needed anchoring. Judy Davis's performances are all fine and therein lies one of the film's problems – she has only one character to play and that character veers inexplicably between being an addled, crotchety old crank, a very lively and funny old eccentric and a sober, astute, if reflective sad old lady. This is not Davis's fault: the film itself continually veers in different directions,

styles and paces, going between extremes of tragedy and comedy and taking her along.



The town of Dungatar, almost in its entirety

The Dressmaker starts in the Australian realist style so common in our golden oldies. In 1951 stylish Myrtle Dunnage, an acclaimed dressmaker in Europe, returns to the tiny, decrepit country hometown to find her addled mother Molly (Judy Davis) more dead than alive in their filthy, dingy little cottage. Next morning she tells her mother why she has returned. She cannot remember if she committed a murder or not and she wants to investigate. *She cannot remembering murdering somebody?*

Up to that point the film consistently holds together but credibility has immediately been questioned and soon must be cast aside. The marvellous photography, costumes, sound, editing, brash biting humour and sets all fit together and fit the film's feel so far of Australian cinematic realism. That starts to change into

something more comically bizarre, with the revelation of Police Sergeant Farrat's obsessive and uncontrolled transvestitism. Then soon Myrtle experiences almost expressionistic flashbacks. It emerges that she has good reason to hate almost all of the townspeople and that she has come back to go on some comeback/revenge trail. This conflicts with the character she plays. She seems well balanced, calm and apparently is neither vindictive nor obsessive. Generically several other films have followed this idea almost exactly, depicting the return of the repressed. In the film version of Frederick Dürrenmatt's *The Visit* (1964), Robert Altman's *Come Back to the Five and Dime Jimmie Dean*, *Jimmie Dean* (1982) and Lars Van Trier's *Dogville* (2003) an enigmatic single woman comes to a stagnating small town full of secrets. By the time she has her catharsis and leaves, the town experiences its death throes. All that happens here, but with so many implausibilities, impossibilities, inconsistencies, holes in the plot and puzzles that if they wish a reviewer can forget everything else about the movie but those things and just sit there and note them, then wait for the next. You will not have a long wait.

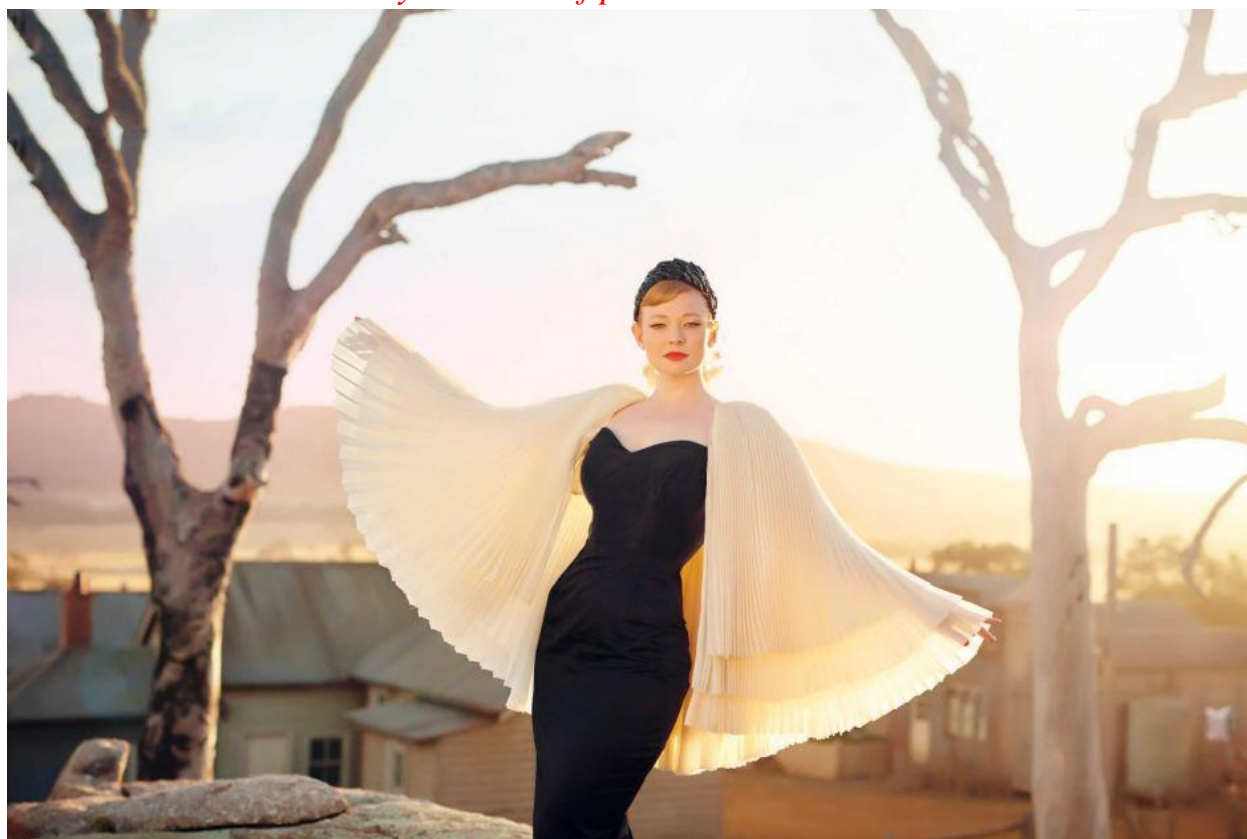


Hugo Weaving plays the sergeant with a secret love – women's clothes.

Alternatively *The Dressmaker* can be treated as fun, as an eccentric fashion parade: what characters wear appears to be more important than what they do. Against the most incongruous backdrop of the dry Australian countryside and a decrepit, apparently poverty stricken town, they continually pose for each other. This becomes more and more outrageous as the film slips into several different film genre styles or makes visual or verbal references to them, perhaps to accommodate the characters increasingly bizarre behaviour or the developing plot.



Gertrude Platt (left above centre below) and fellow residents spend a fortune they did not seem to have on Myrtle's out of place creations.





With Myrtle's arrival Molly revives as they set up a dressmaking business.

To my amazement I was actually about twenty minutes ahead of the whacky off the rails plot when the thought came “What next? Someone finally going so mad that they will appear as Napoleon in costume ranting about their genius and the destiny of France?” That was very close, as soon Sergeant Farrat the transvestite policeman, was carted off to the nearest station or a lunatic asylum, dressed in the full regalia of a toreador while raving about his Christlike forgiveness for his arrest and his greatness. Mercifully he did not sing anything from *Carmen*.

After that it came as no surprise when much of the cast put on an eighteenth century baroque opera version of *Macbeth* in full baroque costume. That just made one more style of entertainment. Others in the film include:

Australian realism of the 1960s

Hollywood westerns

Melodrama

1940s Hollywood drama women's pictures a la Bette Davis, Joan Crawford and Norma Shearer in *Sunset Boulevard* (an excerpt from the latter was included)

Gothic (with aristocrats removed)

German Expressionism

Baroque Opera

Farce

Slapstick

Comedie del arte

Hollywood screwball comedies

Postmodernism

Shakespearean Tragedy

Altman's cinema

1940s film noir

1950s Absurdist theatre

Wagnerian drama (the fire at the end with blonde Myrtle centre stage)

Black comedy

American sit-com

Broadway musicals, while not fully incorporated, got a mention and some usage on the sound track.

A few styles *NOT* included were Japanese Kabuki, Tibetan sky burial chants and ceremonies, nineteenth century vaudeville, psychedelia, Indonesian Wayang puppetry theatre and soviet social realism. Why were these six missing? Are we making value judgements and saying the excluded styles are not as good as the many who were included?

The problem was not just that the film would be made in several different generic styles or would veer wildly between them. Errors such as discussing the American television show *Superman* in 1951 when it was not even made until 1952 and not shown in Australia until 1956 seem minor. The film's middle section with its memorably bizarre and vivid characteristics had merits which overrode such mistakes and the eye rolling acting. Soon after realising that there was no purpose in trying to correct, make sense or predict what would happen next, that it would

be best just to join the audience in uncritical enjoyment and laugh at the jokes, the film turned deadly serious again with four deaths, three of them by violence.

Nothing funny can be made of an old woman realising that her life has been filled with mistakes and sadness and then collapsing in the street, to die at home with a callous doctor doing nothing because as he almost cheerfully tells those present, she will be dead by morning. What is funny about the death of a child? Or a misused, manipulated wife finally killing her bully of a husband? When two happy lovers start to plan their future together one dies just as the other declares that life is wonderful and the curses on them have been lifted. If this is not tragic enough, we have a long, graphic scene set in a poverty stricken shack where the lover's mother and the lover prepare the body for burial.

Scenes such as this are as tragic as it gets. Almost as bad as this mixture of extreme opposites is the overacting from several minor players in either tragedy or comedy. Fortunately more subtle moments from the major players and some of the minor players are in these segments. About halfway through I was craving another appearance from Julia Blake, an island of sanity and subtlety in this mad movie where most of the cast loudly enact their lives in claustrophobic worlds.

Outside of black comedy, comedies that have tragic scenes and tragedies that have comic elements only work if they have *moments* of the opposite in them and if those moments are brief and resolved. With these tragic aspects too many implausibilities are not resolved. When the boy died his mother was told he fell out of a tree. In a flashback where we see the boy die no trees are in sight. He dies from one blow, not the many blows described in the coroner's report. How would a coroner make such a mistake? When the bullying husband is stabbed, instead of using his belt as a tourniquet he just bleeds to death. When the silo worker jumps into the silo, he does what silo workers know never to do because this kills.

Watching this movie was like being on a roller coaster ride that was going off the rails, before hurtling off in several different directions at once. That anarchic experience could have been great fun - except for the deaths.

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