

Throw another

The townsfolk of Bowen in North Queensland were delighted when Baz Luhrmann's workmen showed up and built a picturesque 'ye olde' pub and a Chinese shanty town along the main drag last year. About 20,000 tourists followed — just a foretaste of the boom if the movie, *Australia*, is a big hit.

You beauty — a ready-made tourist attraction to go with the planned Baz-themed walk of fame and audio-visual displays. Could be even bigger than the Big Mango.

Then Baz bombed the lot into a smoking ruin. "In one week it went from a beautiful scene to a completely destroyed version of World War II Darwin," Bowen mayor Mike Brunner says. "Full credit to Baz's team, they did a very efficient job of destroying it. But we were kind of disappointed."

Australia is the most expensive, ambitious and hyped movie ever made in this country. The hopes of not just Bowen but the entire nation rest on the perfectionist director, who is now seriously over budget and scrambling to make the November 13 launch.

Expectations are high that *Australia* — and two tie-in tourism ads Luhrmann has agreed to make — will save the slumping tourist industry, energise indigenous businesses, bolster Aboriginal pride, lure big-name expat filmmakers back home, tempt Hollywood studios down under, revive the romance genre, dominate the Oscars, save the necks of nervous Tourism Australia officials, justify the Federal Government's tax break of up to \$60 million, unite the warring states, make Nicole Kidman sexy and inspire Australians to fall in love with their country again.

No pressure, Baz.

When Keith Urban and his ex-band The Ranch — who had split in a flurry of accusations and crack cocaine — reunited to play at the Australia wrap party in December, everything seemed on track with Luhrmann's grand project, the first film in a planned trilogy of epics. But this is Baz and, eight months later, the film is still far from complete. With the original \$120m budget blowing out to \$200m and beyond, Luhrmann has recently flown to the United States to recruit more money from financiers, is still working on the soundtrack and has recalled cast and crew to the East Kimberley region for reshoots, following mixed responses from a test-screening at an American shopping mall. The

This Baz Luhrmann epic is more than just a movie — it carries the hopes of a country, reports Claire Harvey.



177-minute length tested the audience's patience and bladders, as did the multiple dramas, false endings and endless repetitions of *Some Where Over The Rainbow*, the movie's theme tune.

This is Luhrmann's crack at the definitive Australian picture. The Americans have *Gone With the Wind*, the Scots have *Braveheart*, but we've never managed to combine all the elements required for blockbuster success: gorgeous visuals, big stars and an uplifting story.

This seems to have all that and more — *Mad Max* plus horses; *Gallipoli* without the mud; a modern *Jedda*-with-explosions for the 21st century.

The story sees a buttoned-up Englishwoman, Lady Sarah Ashley, fly to 1940s Darwin after discovering her errant husband is being naughty on his giant Northern Territory property, Faraway Downs. She arrives to discover husband and mistress dead and must save the property by driving its cattle mob across the desert.

The only man who can help her is Hugh Jackman, a bad-tempered drover whom she discovers brawling in a pub. They fall in love, befriend a young Aboriginal boy (Brandon Walters), arrive at the station and have to deal with romantic troubles, kidnappings, spearings, shootings, revenge and, most inconvenient of all, the Japanese air force.

The scale is vast: hundreds of locations, a huge cast and 2000 costumes, including several different designs of moleskin to best display Jackman's assets in a variety of attitudes; seated on horseback, standing still, walking, brawling, sweeping Nicole into his arms.

Luhrmann's wife and co-producer, Catherine Martin, plays muse, enabler and, occasionally, creative handbrake on her husband's grand flourishes. "You've got to keep examining every idea you have, testing and re-testing it, tweaking it, and you've also got to know when to stop, because you can over-work something," she says.

The big questions: will the love story be convincing? Does the film acknowledge the ugly history of race relations and simultaneously avoid condescension? Can the plot avoid being drowned by the land-

scape — and Hugh's tight shirts? For Tourism Australia, the film is a godsend. Under massive pressure from government to recover from the disastrous *Where The Bloody Hell Are You?* campaign, the federal agency has seized upon the film as the potential saviour of its own reputation and the \$80 billion tourism industry, which is struggling with a global economic downturn, creaking infrastructure and chronic under-investment.

20th Century Fox, the Rupert Murdoch-owned studio that is funding the movie, first approached Tourism Australia in late 2006 to talk marketing deals.

Initially, TA was cautious. "The first thing we wanted to make sure was, is the film going to show something that's nice, something we want to promote globally?" says Nick Baker, TA's executive general manager of marketing.

It soon emerged that Luhrmann's key themes — romance, adventure, transformation — fit perfectly. "Also, for the first time we were going to have an indigenous storyline that's going to show Aboriginal people in a very proud, heroic light," Baker says, adding he hopes that brings a much-needed sense of "magic and mystery" to Australia's international reputation.

"We're in a good situation where Kyoto has been ratified and we've said sorry and they've been big items globally, and we're trying to create some fashionability and buzz now around that, and I think this film will do that, particularly around the sorry statement."

So Baker asked Luhrmann's Bazmark Inc if the stars might participate in an ad campaign — but Luhrmann came up with a better idea — a cinematic ad with a modern-day story about a life-changing Australian visit, starring Brandon Walters. Even better, Luhrmann was offering to do it for mates' rates.



on the barbie

"It's not really like we need a job," Luhrmann says. "It felt like for us the right thing to do." TA has built a \$50 million campaign around the ads, including mini Australia-weeks, outback experience visits for foreign journalists, glossy magazines and websites.

It is a big gamble, and no wonder senior officials are suffering the odd 3am panic attack. Not only did the agency get a giant rev-up from its minister, Martin Ferguson ("we hope you've got it right, because we can't afford any more mistakes") but there are rumblings. Anxious Victorians are lobbying to have the Great Ocean Road included and Queensland tourist officials want guarantees there'll be beaches as well as deserts on show.

"We've lost our way, Australia has not been sexy enough in the markets," says Rob Giason of Tourism Tropical North Queensland.

"We need to be very careful about putting all our eggs in one basket, though — we've always been good at attracting attention, but we haven't been able to close the sale."

It's a risk but TA "needs to make some big, bold decisions like this to get cut-through," says Martin Winter of Gold Coast Tourism.

Ever since the Paul Hogan "shrimp on the barbie" ads, we've had "a cargo cult mentality, a messiah complex about when the next ad is coming to save us," says Chris Brown of industry lobby group TTF Australia, adding we really need better infrastructure and attractions — seven-star resorts, indigenous tours, luxury spas — to avoid disappointments. "Let's not make a liar out of Baz. He's turned the stopwatch on, this can't be another wasted opportunity."

On the vast Home Valley Station, East Kimberley, they're busy altering the maps to include Luhrmann's Leap, Jackman's Jump-Up and Kidman's Krossing — among the highlights on an eight-day Australia movie tour just launched by luxury agency Abercrombie and Kent, at \$12,500 per person. "Where the bloody hell are we?" says

Home Valley's Chris Fenech. "We're getting ready for the movie."

Perhaps one of those tourists might pick up a pair of spectacular yellow-diamond earrings still waiting for Nicole Kidman. The actress commissioned the jewels — with a total weight of eight carats — last year, but jeweller Frauke Bolten-Boshammer of Kununurra's Kimberley Fine Diamonds is still waiting for her to collect.

This month the crew is shooting at Faraway Bay, northwest of Kununurra. The site's operators have already bought the domain name farawaydowns.com and are planning Australia-themed adventures.

Faraway Downs was initially the film's working title — possibly a safer bet in focus group-fixated Hollywood. "This is a Hollywood film in all but name and Americans will embrace it as they think it's an American film," says critic David Stratton.

The film might provide some leadership at a time of "enormous flux" for Australian film, says analyst Sandy George, following the Rudd Government's launch this year of one of the world's most generous tax regimes for film. Under the "producer offset" scheme, of which Luhrmann will be the first major beneficiary, producers can claim a 40 per cent tax rebate, worth up to one-third of a project's total budget. The offset, and Luhrmann's big plunge, should change our tradition of making mainly small-budget films. Quirky tales of road trips, heists and moccasins might be fun, but they don't pay bills.

Already, expat directors Scott Hicks, Fred Schepisi and Roger Donaldson are following Luhrmann home to make the kind of \$20-30 million productions projects Stratton says are crucial to creating a viable industry, with wide release in mainstream cinemas.

"It's the medium-sized films we want to drag audiences back into the cinemas to see Australian films," he said.

Australia will change the industry on two levels, says critic Andrew L. Urban — demonstrating the possibilities for big-budget film finance packaging (Fox has lined up a swag of product placement and sponsorship partners including Qantas, Telstra and RM Williams),

as well as fostering young talent.

"Making a film like this here is crucial — there's a huge difference in the work practices and work culture on an Australian set and an American one. Here, the key grip might find himself giving direct input to Baz, whereas that would never happen on a Hollywood film," Urban says.

Everyone has heard the rumours about budgets and reshoots, but it's no cause for alarm, says former Film Finance Corporation boss Brian Rosen. "This is why the Americans make good films — they go back and change what's wrong."

He believes Luhrmann might return us to a golden age of epic and romance film-making.

"Why does nobody here make romances or romantic comedies? We could have Sleepless In Sydney, for God's sake."

So, what if the film falters? Its US launch is sandwiched between the new James Bond and Harry Potter films, guaranteed blockbusters.

"It's flop-proof," says analyst Sandy George. "I don't think it's a risk. Blockbusters are all about marketing and promotion, and this one will be available in every multiplex. Who cares if it makes \$300m or \$400m? It'll be up there."

For Tourism Australia, it might not really matter. Even if the critics hate it, they can't fail to be impressed by the landscape — and every cinema around the world will have posters advertising their product: Australia. "The film will be like a two-hour commercial for the country. We know the message will be right; we've checked and double-checked that," Nick Baker says, "and the thing with film marketing is they spend the money before the film's released."

"It's an attention-grabbing moment," Luhrmann says. "Whatever happens to the film — I was going to make a joke about straight-to-video but perhaps that's not a good idea — it's going to be launched on a global scale."

"That's an event in itself." This is not the first film with the chutzpah to call itself Australia. There was a 2004 American flick about a young man who dreams of magic kangaroos, and a 1989 picture about a Belgian wool dealer. Both sank into obscurity — but if Baz has his way, it'll be third time lucky.

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