



Reviews

FILM REVIEW

Reviewed by David Bolton

BENEATH CLOUDS

d. Ivan Sen 2002

Amid an extraordinary crop of fine Australian films this year dealing with Aboriginal themes (*Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *The Tracker*, *Australian Rules*), Ivan Sen's *Beneath Clouds*, about two young kids on the road, stands out as the most intensely personal.

Lena (Danielle Hall) is fair-haired, blue-eyed and fine-boned: her mother an Aboriginal, her father an absent Irishman. Jack of life in Moree, where the only future is early (and frequent) pregnancy, Lena takes the bus to the city in search of her father, her only guides a terse postcard and an old photograph. Vaughn (Damian Hall) is a sullen teenager on the run from a work farm, headed to the city and his dying mother even though she never visited him all the time he spent inside. In a small central Western pit stop, Lena misses her bus; by chance they hook up and try their luck hitching to Sydney.

The world has nothing to offer that they can truly call their own. Vaughn and the tough, angry young men he hangs out with kit themselves out in Nike swooshes and gangsta gear; at the work farm a poster of murdered rapper Tu Pac adorns his wall. Virtually no-one picks Lena as an Aboriginal; her dream of Ireland is a hopeless fantasy and a Celtic escape. Both have everything to run from and nothing to run to. Out in the vast cotton plains of northern NSW it's easy to fall into fatalism, despair and cliché. Vaughn swears he can take on the White Man's world and beat it; Lena knows he can't.

Beneath Clouds avoids sloganeering and the obvious answers without ducking the obvious problems. Its beauty derives from the spacious landscape and unending skies of NSW around Moree and Rylstone; but even more so from the restraint of the two young leads, who are in every scene and who have never acted before. Initially guarded and mutually suspicious, they slowly drop their guard and open up. Yet Vaughn never guesses that Lena is Aboriginal too – only one other character, an elderly woman with no English, guesses that. Graced by a small cast, including the always dignified Arthur Dignam, nothing is ever quite as it seems. Which is fitting for a film as eloquent and as deceptively simple as this.

