

## Characterisation in *Strictly Ballroom*

To keep us watching a film, a film maker must give us someone we can relate to, someone we can accompany on a journey, that journey being the film's plot. He or she must give us in short a sympathetic protagonist. It also helps if a film gives us someone to dislike – an antagonist. Characterisation is important in encouraging the audience to align themselves with the protagonist and against the antagonist and thus enhance their engagement in the film's narrative. In *Strictly Ballroom*, writer and director Baz Luhrmann, of the film gives us two sympathetic protagonists – Scott and Fran. As an antagonist Luhrmann gives us the detestable Barry Fife. In addition to enhancing our engagement in the narrative of a film, characterisation works to encourage an audience to accept the values or ideologies at the heart of the film. In *Strictly Ballroom* characterisation encourages us to endorse the values of non-conformity, individuality and self-expression represented by Scott and Fran and to reject the values of tradition, conformity and blind adherence to the status quo represented by Barry Fife.

How does *Strictly Ballroom* attempt to align us with its two protagonists, Scott and Fran, so that we become involved in the film? Well first of all, Baz Luhrmann has presented us with two classic underdogs, whom Australians especially like to support. The film takes pains to point out to us that Scott and Fran's backgrounds are not privileged: Scott is an ordinary middle class 'Aussie', as shown by the scenes set in his family home; Fran is from a migrant background and lives literally on the 'wrong side of the tracks' as the film takes pains to point out with the shots of rubbish bins and of the train passing her family's backyard. That shot incidentally was apparently the most expensive in the film, which shows how important it was to Luhrmann in achieving the response he desired. In addition, Fran is the proverbial ugly duckling, marginalised and scorned by other members of the dance studio to which she belongs.

Luhrmann has made Scott and Fran empathetic in other ways. Scott is a typical smouldering romantic hero. Although a dancer, he is traditionally masculine, as emphasised by the frequent shots of him in that iconic symbol of masculinity, his singlet. Furthermore, in many ways Scott and Fran are the only real people in the film – nearly all others are caricatures. Neither Scott nor Fran is classically good-looking in the usual Hollywood manner, making them more realistic representatives of 'ordinary' people. Scott in particular has faults. He has a short temper. He is initially arrogant and dismissive of Fran's potential to be his dance partner. It is Scott and Fran's psychological realism which enables the audience to relate to them as real people, representatives of the audience themselves, rather than fantasy figures.

Most importantly Scott and Fran are non-conformists driven by a desire to escape the status quo and dance their own steps. Their characterisation thus appeals to the audience's own desire to 'dance to the beat of a different drum', to break free from established traditions and find their own creative path in life.

Let us now turn to the antagonist Barry Fife. He is definitely not a sympathetic character. His florid face is unattractive, a quality emphasized on a number of occasions in the film through the use of extreme close-ups which construct him as a somewhat grotesque character. In addition his clothing is old-fashioned for the time-setting of the film, suggesting the anachronistic nature of his character and the forces which he symbolises – tradition, conformity and conservatism. Fife's obviously fake hair piece suggests qualities of pretentiousness and duplicity. His language is vulgar and he is given a somewhat 'sleazy' nature through his association with a younger woman, the rather cheap and aptly named, Charm Leachman. To top it off Fife is excessively dictatorial, refusing to let anyone depart from the established forms of ballroom dancing.

As the film progresses we discover that Fife is corrupt and dishonest, frequently lying to others and rigging the results of the dance competitions. Fife, the representative of tradition and the status quo, the film suggests, is interested in only one thing – maintaining and enhancing his own power.

Of course, it is Scott and Fran who in the end triumph over Barry Fife, thus suggesting that the values they represent are preferable to and more powerful than the values Fife represents.

