

Film Review: 'Storm Boy'

Shawn Seet's adaptation of Colin Thiele's treasured Australian children's novel is fine family entertainment.

By **RICHARD KUIPERS**



CREDIT: COURTESY OF KATHY MORGAN INTERNATIONAL

Director: Shawn Seet

With: Geoffrey Rush, Jai Courtney, Finn Little.

1 hour 39 minutes

Official Site: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3340446/?ref_=nv_sr_1

Colin Thiele's 1963 children's novel about a boy and his beloved pelican receives tender and touching treatment in its second film adaptation. Adding a contemporary wrap-around story to the 1950s-set tale, and wringing well-judged changes to Henri Safran's much-loved 1976 film, this version of "Storm Boy," directed by excellent Aussie small-screen helmer **Shawn Seet**, has the emotional heft and visual splendor to win the hearts of domestic and international family audiences. Sony will release the film Down Under on Jan. 17, during the summer school holiday season. U.S. theatrical release via Good Deed Entertainment is scheduled for April.

In purely cinematic terms "Storm Boy" has all the ingredients for commercial success. How well it performs will depend at least partly on public response to controversy surrounding top-billed star **Geoffrey Rush**, also one of the film's executive producers. Australia's Federal Court will soon deliver a decision on the defamation case brought by Rush against Nationwide News, a News Ltd. subsidiary and publisher of Sydney newspaper The Daily Telegraph. The case involving allegations of inappropriate behavior during a theater production has attracted headlines for several months, and its outcome will doubtless influence the ticket-buying choices of some viewers.

In present-day sequences set in downtown Adelaide and coastal surroundings, Rush plays Michael Kingley, a retired businessman whose family company is about to vote on a proposal to lease land in the remote Pilbara region of Western Australia to a mining company. Pushing hard for a yes is Kingley's son-in-law, Malcolm Downer (Erik Thomsen). Opposing the move is Downer's daughter, Maddy (Morgana Davies), a 17-year-old whose passionate concern for the environment will strike a winning chord with many young viewers.

An unexpected delay in the voting procedure allows Kingley to spend time with granddaughter Maddy at her family's fancy seaside mansion and tell her tales from his unusual and eventful childhood. At this point the film flashes back to the 1950s, when pre-teen Michael Kingley (**Finn Little**) was a motherless boy living with his reclusive, emotionally scarred fisherman father, "Hideaway" Tom (Jai Courtney). Home for the duo was an isolated beachside shack on the edge of Coorong National Park, 100 miles southeast of Adelaide.

While the present-day sequences are fine, "Storm Boy" finds its glowing heart and soul in the lengthy flashbacks. Spending his days helping dad and exploring the Coorong's magnificent environs, Michael is befriended by Fingerbone Bill (Trevor Jamieson, excellent), an aboriginal man forced to live apart from his community. In splendid sequences that illustrate important elements of aboriginal culture, Bill gives Michael the "Storm Boy" nickname and helps him rescue three pelican chicks whose mother was killed by nasty local hunters opposed to the proposed establishment of a local bird sanctuary. Though not expected to survive, the birds named Mr Proud, Mr Ponder and Mr Percival thrive under Michael's loving care.

After all three have been returned to their breeding ground by a tearful Michael, Mr Percival returns. The boy's renewed friendship with his loyal, funny and clever companion is delightful. Talented juvenile actor Little captures all the joy that comes with the special bond between a sensitive boy and his best animal pal. Though altered from how it unfolds in the novel and original film, Mr Percival's participation in a dramatic sea rescue is exciting and streams nicely into grandfather Michael's conversations with Maddy about child-parent relationships.

Seet, a highly regarded TV and miniseries director whose previous feature was the underrated "Two Fists, One Heart" (2008), and writer Justin Monjo ("Jungle"), elegantly weave details of Storm Boy and Hideaway Tom's tragic past into the tale. Themes of loss, grief and separation are pitched at just the right level to resonate with children and adults alike. Seet brings everything to a moving and meaningful conclusion with a lovely piece of magic realism.

Handsomely filmed in earthy tones by DP Bruce Young, and never once looking like a tourism promo reel, "Storm Boy" is crafted with care and class. Of special note is superbly detailed production design by Melinda Doring ("The Sapphires," "Berlin Syndrome"), and costume design by Louise McCarthy that understands perfectly how 1930s and '40s fashions would still be in vogue in 1950s rural Australia.

A very beautiful cameo by David Gulpilil, the great indigenous Australian actor who played Fingerbone Bill in 1976, is another of the film's many pleasures.

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Reviewed at Wallis Mitcham Cinemas, Adelaide, January 6, 2019.

PRODUCTION: (Australia) A Sony Pictures (in Australia/Good Deed Entertainment in U.S.) release of a Screen Australia, South Australian Film Corp., Piccadilly Pictures, Aurora Media Holdings, Salt Media & Entertainment presentation of an Ambience Entertainment production. (International sales: Kathy Morgan Intl., Los Angeles.) Producers: Michael Boughen, Matthew Street. Executive producers: Robert Slaviero, Geoffrey Rush, Christopher Figg, Robert Whitehouse, Justin Deimen, Sherman Ng. Co-producer: Paul Ranford. Co-executive producers: Jeremy Sim, Terence Kong.

CREW: Director: Shawn Seet. Screenplay: Justin Monjo, based on the novel by Colin Thiele. Camera (color, widescreen): Bruce Young. Editor: Denise Haratzis.

WITH: Geoffrey Rush, Jai Courtney, Finn Little, Trevor Jamieson, Morgana Davies, Erik Thomsen, David Gulpilil.

MUSIC BY: Alan John



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GEOFFREY RUSH

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STORM BOY

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