

*Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*

Dir: Stephen Elliot

English; 1994

[Baidurya Chakrabarti]

*Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* is an Australian film that established the reputation of contemporary Australian cinema as strikingly original in their form and content. It has gone on to become not only a cult classic around the world, but has also received tremendous critical attention—both positive and negative—from scholars belonging to various disciplines. It is a film that is noted mainly for its frank and jubilant portrayal of transgender and trans-sexual people braving social oppression, rejection and outright violence. It became the most popular film of the year in Australia, was nominated for Best Picture award at the Academy Awards, and was screened under the *Un Certain Regards* category at the prestigious Cannes Film Festival.

*Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* is a comedy-cum-road-movie about three transgender men, Tick aka Mitzi (Hugo Weaving), Ralph aka Bernadette (Terrence Stamp), and Adam aka Felicia (Guy Pierce), who perform as cross-dressing dancers at a club in Sidney, Australia. When Tick gets an invite to perform at a resort in Alice Springs, a remote town deep in the desert outback of Australia, he persuades his two friends to come with him and perform there as a group. Bernadette is a trans-sexual rapidly approaching middle age, and is generally dissatisfied with the life of being a performer. Adam aka Felicia is on the other hand both irritating and flamboyant, and the youngest of the group. The three buy an old tour-bus, paint it lavender, and name it 'Priscilla', and begin a journey through the rural heartlands of Australia towards Alice Springs. En route, they meet with friendly and not-so-friendly people, while we are allowed to get a closer look into the anxieties, aspirations and despairs that define our three protagonists. They perform their routine for a group of aboriginals they meet on the way; they get physically and verbally abused by white homophobic men in a small town. Tick/Mitzi reveals that the invite to perform has come from his estranged wife, whom he still did not separate with. Although this revelation creates a friction within the group, they finally reconcile and decide to back Tick/Mitzi in his moment of truth. They also meet a stranger called Bob who joins them on the journey. Upon reaching the resort, it is revealed that Tick also has a son, who lives with his mother. Tick is apprehensive performing in front of his son. But his son already knows about his father's decision to live a transgender life, and is fully supportive of it. In the finale, the three perform their drag (the act of a cis-gender male dressing up as a female) routine in front of an audience including Tick's wife and his son. Tick and Adam leave for Sidney with Tick's son, while Bernadette stays behind at the resort to build a new life with Bob.

The outstanding quality of the film lies in its refusal to not simply make us empathize with, and perhaps pity, the conditions of transgender people. Instead, it makes these characters so joyful, so full of life and color, and so complex that we start to positively envy them and thus identify with them. It begins with every

stereotypical idea we have in our head about transgender people, and then proceeds to dismantle them in a fun way. While we do meet them as social beings with aspirations, familial longing, insecurities and anxieties, the film foregrounds the centrality of their 'gender choice' as central to their self-definition. The knowledge about the fluidity of gender identification and the gender spectrum is growing day-by-day in our world. But it is rare to find a film, or a book, like *Adventures of Priscilla* that shows us how one's choice of position within the gender spectrum is not simply a case of re-aligning one's gender against a possible mis-alignment, but a deeply felt, personal, experiential decision that can lead to an ethical life of great joy, and conviction.

On the negative side, the film has been criticized for its misrepresentation of non-white people, and for making sexual liberation white-men-only. While these critiques are interesting, and teaches us to look at cinema with greater sensitivity, there is no denying that *Adventure of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* ushered in a new era in the representation of trans-genders and gay people in global cinema as ethical, complex individuals with deep conviction and joie de vivre.