

The Proposition and family first

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Top of the ‘family values’ film recommendations ought to be Nick Cave’s strikingly violent Australian desert Western, *The Proposition*. It’s all about putting your family first. The story of the film revolves around Captain Stanley’s (played by Ray Winstone) proposition to Charlie Burns (Guy Pearce) of the notorious Burns brothers’ gang of rapacious Irish rebels. Having raided the Burns hideout in the film’s opening bloodbath, the Captain confronts Charlie: find your estranged elder brother, the sociopathic Arthur Burns, and kill him, or your younger brother, Mikey (a simpleton) will hang by Christmas.

The film explores the limitations of this family loyalty. Will Charlie do in his brother, a malicious criminal from whom Charlie has already broken free? Or will their blood ties, and shared hatred of the British, overrule? And how do you weigh the value of one life against another?

Arthur Burns, a slightly unlikely character who reads Irish literature in his impregnable mountain hideout, is all the more disturbing for his moral insights: “Love is the key,” he calmly instructs his maniacal sidekick, Sam Stote (Tom Budge). Stote later asks Arthur, “Are we misanthropes?”

“No,” Arthur replies, “We’re family.”

Like the Sopranos, the Burns family has just one moral index: being one of us. You can’t hate everybody, because some of us are irrevocably connected. Family first.

But the champions of ‘family values’ are (understandably) unlikely to take up my recommended viewing—the film concludes that neither family nor race nor nation come first. There are bigger issues than blood and caring for one’s own. There are deep, abiding things like seeking justice and peace, ending the cycle of retribution, and caring for the ‘stranger’ (cleverly in the movie, sometimes the aborigines, sometimes the convicts and sometimes the colonials).

Captain Stanley has some insight into this, but no power to achieve it. He is driven by a desire to civilise the land but tormented by the irony of the barbarity and torture required to do it. The film conveys the view that nation building is founded on violence (the red armband view of history?). Unlike his superior officer (David Wenham) who rules with Nietzschean power and mob psychology, Captain Stanley believes that “in the end, justice will be done”. It’s just that he can’t pull it off.

Which explains the enormous spiritual hole in the heart of the film. This is a film in which God is “hiding all away” (the title of a song from Nick Cave’s latest album) and the humans are left to themselves.

“Do you pray?”, Charlie Burns asks the booze-sodden bounty hunter, Jellon Lamb (John Hurt), his gun cocked at Lamb’s head.

“No, I used to” comes the reply. “I came to this beleaguered land and my belief in God just...evaporated!”

Lamb expresses the view that Australia is just too harsh a place for theological niceties. Religious pretensions won’t survive here in the desert. The Church of England can’t take the heat.

But Moses came from the desert. So did John the Baptist. St Anthony the Great shaped the monastic tradition from the merciless sands of Egypt. Then there’s the Australian aborigines, whose spirituality is never even on view in one of the film’s most startling omissions. Why, amidst such barren beauty and human need, did not God seem all the more apparent?

Some sort of an answer may be found in Nick Cave’s view of the absent God. In “Hiding All Away”, a seeker quests for Someone in all the usual places—the poets, the museums of the past, the courts of law—and finds nothing. ‘God’, surely the object of the quest, replies, ‘I was hidden, babe, hiding all away’. In its cacophonous final chorus, the song takes an unexpected turn:

“But we all know there is a law, and that law it is love

And we all know there is a war coming, coming from above”

At which point, a choir of wailing apocalypticists screams, “There is a war coming!” over and over again, guitars crashing and cymbals shattering the space around the words.

In Nick Cave's theology, love is a given. But God is an absent threat, "coming from above", a force weighing mightily upon us without so much as peeping out from the place of hiding. Cave is obsessed with Christ, too, but it is Christ hanging on the cross, crying, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" with no resurrection in sight.

Out in the Nick Cave desert of *The Proposition*, there are no wandering prophets. God has evaporated. But his 'stain' remains in words like 'love' and 'justice', and in the quest to break the cycle of revenge.

To my mind, the stain ought to be enough evidence of the presence, even if God seems hidden. If God makes sense anywhere, it is in the desert, when all values and morals have lost their support structures and the needs of the naked human heart are most obvious.

Jellon Lamb's faith evaporated, but God remains. We abandoned God, not God us.

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