

Melbourne Cinémathèque

Wildflowers: Dancing, Desire and Freedom in the Films of Gillian Armstrong

2021

2 – 16 JUNE

One of Australia's most successful directors, Gillian Armstrong (1950-) has built a significant profile as a filmmaker in her home country, in addition to maintaining a career internationally. Entering the industry in the 1970s, Armstrong was more than just an important part of the Australian cinema revival – with *My Brilliant Career* in 1979 she was the first woman to direct a 35mm feature film in Australia for over four decades, going on to contribute significantly to the national landscape with some of its most impressive, brilliantly modern films. Spread across the realms of commercial and independent cinema, fiction and documentary, Armstrong's films exercise a consistently sensitive sympathy with women and issues that affect them. It is this emotional and feminist trajectory, continued throughout her career, that reflects the importance of her own role as filmmaker. However, with work that spans a number of genres, it is not only Armstrong's thematic insight that should be celebrated, but also her outstanding aesthetic skills as a director – she has a sharp sense of story, design, acting, music and rhythm. As Felicity Collins writes, her work "participates fully in the aesthetic force-field of Australian naturalism and arthouse realism". This season of mostly celluloid prints endeavours to pay tribute to the extraordinary breadth and longevity of Armstrong's career, and includes early shorts made while still a student, famous and underseen features, and a selection of documentaries.

WEDNESDAY 2 JUNE



7:00PM MY BRILLIANT CAREER

Gillian Armstrong (1979)
100 mins : G

Based on Miles Franklin's semi-autobiographical 1901 novel, Armstrong's first feature is a milestone in Australian feminist cinema. An unknown at the time, Judy Davis won a BAFTA Award for her portrayal of a headstrong, free-spirited girl who refuses to follow convention and dreams of a better life amongst the farmlands of sun-baked rural Australia. Also features Sam Neill and Wendy Hughes. Preceded by *The Roof Needs Mowing* (1971) 8 mins. Armstrong's breakthrough student film is a whimsical, surreal vision of everyday life and suburban boredom.¹



9:00PM CERTAIN WOMEN: THREE FILMS BY GILLIAN ARMSTRONG

Gillian Armstrong (1973-1980)
107 mins : Unclassified 15 +

A program of three early Armstrong documentaries and short fictions. *The Singer and the Dancer* (1977) is Armstrong's first long-form narrative and stars Ruth Cracknell as a lonely older woman, estranged from her daughter, who is finally able to find communion. In her student film *One Hundred a Day* (1973), a young labourer in the 1930s discovers she is pregnant. *14's Good 18's Better* (1980) is a sequel to *Smokes & Lollies*, a landmark documentary about three young girls from Adelaide. Armstrong revisits them four years later as they reach the cusp of adulthood.²

WEDNESDAY 9 JUNE



7:00PM HIGH TIDE

Gillian Armstrong (1987)
101 mins : M

Eight years after the trailblazing *My Brilliant Career*, Armstrong and Judy Davis collaborated once more on this emotionally rich multi-generational drama. Davis plays a back-up singer who, when left stranded in a seaside village on the NSW coast, re-encounters the daughter she abandoned years earlier. Skirting clear of any hint of cheap sentimentality, care of Laura Jones' (*An Angel at My Table*) penetrating script, this raw and affective film evocatively expresses the painful reality of fractured relationships. Davis and co-star Jan Adele won AFI Awards.³



8:50PM UNFOLDING FLORENCE: THE MANY LIVES OF FLORENCE BROADHURST

Gillian Armstrong (2006)
82 mins : PG

Armstrong's playful documentary-drama about the larger-than-life Sydney-based artist, socialite and wallpaper designer Florence Broadhurst. Along with writer Katherine Thomson, Armstrong fashions a visually flamboyant portrait of an impossible to pin down personality, as well as an account of her lurid life and unsolved violent death.⁴ Followed by *Gretel* (1973) 27 mins – Unclassified 15 +. This contemporary work, based on a story by Hal Porter, is the last of the three films Armstrong made at AFTS, which kickstarted her career.⁵

WEDNESDAY 16 JUNE



7:00PM STARSTRUCK

Gillian Armstrong (1982)
105 mins : PG

Jo Kennedy's debut role as an energetic singer who spends her days working behind a bar, entertaining dreams of becoming a big star. Fully embracing the category of Australian rock musicals inspired by the fantasies of classical Hollywood – with a kitschy punk twist – Armstrong's sophomore feature remains one of her most undervalued films. Armstrong embraces the spectacle of the genre, with dazzling choreography, location cinematography around Sydney Harbour, and a soundtrack by The Swingers and Tim Finn of Split Enz.⁶



8:55PM LITTLE WOMEN

Gillian Armstrong (1994)
115 mins : G

Armstrong's third American feature is the most successful filmic adaptation of the classic 1868 novel by Louisa May Alcott. With meticulous direction and magnetic performances from the ensemble cast including Susan Sarandon, Kirsten Dunst, and Winona Ryder as Jo, the film is a moving interpretation of a timeless classic; its subtle charms, intelligence and warmth remaining true to the story's heart. Preceded by *Satdee Night* (1973) 17 mins – Unclassified 15 +. Armstrong's observational short follows the mundane life of a man who gets lost in the rush of Sydney's Saturday nightlife.⁷

1. Both films courtesy of the National Film and Sound Archive, Australia.

2. Prints of all three films courtesy of the National Film and Sound Archive, Australia.

3. 35mm print courtesy of the National Film and Sound Archive, Australia. Rights courtesy of Anthony I. Ginnane © 1987 SJJ Productions Pty Ltd.

4. Courtesy of the National Film and Sound Archive, Australia.

5. Courtesy of AFTRS.

6. Courtesy of the National Film and Sound Archive, Australia.

7. Prints of both films courtesy of the National Film and Sound Archive, Australia.

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Curated by the Melbourne Cinémathèque.

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FILM CLASSIFICATIONS:

* Where a film is labelled "Unclassified 15+" viewers are required to be 15 years or older, unless accompanied by an adult.

† Where a film is labelled "Unclassified 18+" viewers are required to be 18 years or older.

Articles on many films in the program can be found in 'CTEQ Annotations on Film', online at www.sensesofcinema.com

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